



THE CAPE HAZARD DUET

KARMA'S

Rule

NIKO K.

Karma's Rule

THE KARMA SOCIETY

THE CAPE HAZARD DUET

BOOK ONE

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Niko K.

Karma's Rule

The Karma Society

Book 1

Cape Hazard Duet

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Trigger Warnings

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*To Shauna Mairead and Leila James, for holding my hand
while I wandered out into this unknown neck of the woods.
Thank you for making me feel like slightly less of a pussy.*

Niko

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Author's Note



First of all, I in no way condone the actions and activities that take place in this book, so please don't send the police to my house.

This is a STORY.

Now that that's out of the way, this story does contain elements that some may find triggering, and I have put a list of them towards the back if you feel you need to consult it.

Okay... safety squad... do your worst.

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Playlist



Dead in the Water – *Ellie Goulding*

Hazard – *Richard Marx*

Heads will Roll – *The Yeah Yeah Yeahs*

Blood in the Wine – *Aurora*

Softcore – *The Neighborhood*

Yellow Flicker Beat – *Lorde*

Look What You Made Me Do – *Taylor Swift*

Heathens – *Twenty-One Pilots*

We Own It – *2Chainz*

Power over Me – *Dermott Kennedy*

Playground – *Bea Miller*

You'll Get Yours – *X Ambassadors*

Darkside – *Neoni*

Dead to Me – *Chloe Adams*

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Prologue

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KATHERINE



The sun is beginning to set, making the denim blue water shimmer in its last, warm light. It's beautiful, almost enough to make me forget about doing this and giving life another try. I remind myself though, that just like the sun's presence in the sky, hope is temporary, and happiness is even more scarce.

The scrap of land I'm standing on at the edge of the cliff is starting to feel the sun's departure, and I pull the sides of my hoodie closer around me. I keep my back to the water, hoping it will make this easier, and also in the hopes of being able to see someone. This is one of the best scenic overviews in the best of Cape Hazard's parks, with trees that tunnel over smooth hiking trails. Although I won't look out at it right now, I know the water below is a dark blue, and on some days, a rich jade color if the sun hits it just right. Even though I'm standing at the edge of one of the less popular and more secluded turnouts, it's too beautiful an evening for at least one person not to come along. I don't want a crowd for this, but I do need just one person.

With each minute ticking by, it gets just a little darker out here, until dusk happens along. Still, I stay here, on this sharp edge of land that can't seem to decide if it wants to wear grass or sand. My beat-up sneakers feel loose on my feet as I shift my weight, getting tired of standing here, drawing out the anxiety.

This is scary, yet I'm not scared as I hear footsteps. They sound heavy, yet they're treading softly on the path of dirt and

sand as they come closer to the bend. Then around the corner he comes, dressed in the predicted hiking boots, loose-fitting blue jeans, and a puffy vest over a Henley. His Mariners ball cap shades his face, but I'm able to see the lower halves of his eyes, like two dark half-moons, as they regard me first with curiosity, quickly followed by realization and fear.

"Wh-" he falters, clearly taken by surprise. "What are you doing? Are you okay?" The space between his eyebrows pulls inward and he jerks his hands out of his pockets, his casual stroll forgotten.

I stare back, giving him a moment to log away the details of my face while trying to stare right through his. His strong jaw and full, parted lips are not something I should be focusing on.

"What's your name?" he asks gently, his voice low, making me think of smooth solid rock; one I might want to lay myself on top of on a sunny day.

I swallow as I look down at the ground. He needs to know my name, but I don't want to hear his. I cannot let myself know this nice human who looks so concerned for me.

"Katherine," I barely get out, still not letting my eyes meet his.

For the love of God, don't tell me yours, I silently plead, allowing my eyes to flit quickly to his face before back down at the ground. I can avoid looking all I want, but I've already seen he's got rugged features and dark eyes under the bill of that ball cap. The sharp breath he draws in tells me that while he's nervous, he's capable. He's gearing up to solve the puzzle in front of him and diffuse turmoil static that I'm sure he can feel in the air.

"I'm John."

Fuck.

No.

I don't want my mind to latch onto the comforting lifeline he's casting me. I can't let myself feel the safety I hear in his

voice. I can't look at the way he holds out his hand as if he wants to be the one thing I stay for.

“Are you okay, Katherine? Could you come away from the edge there? You're kind of making me nervous.” He gives me a chuckle that reflects as such, probably trying to lighten the incredibly tense mood. Another unintentional trap, the prospect of someone to relate to that would tether me to this life. And I can't stay in this life.

I don't respond, staring at a small pebble by the toe of my shoe as I try to build up my courage for what comes next.

“Okay, please step away from there?” He begs this time, as he holds a cautious hand out. “Whatever's not right in your world... you can get past it. You know what?” He cuts himself off with a sharp breath and readjusts his stance to steady himself. “Let's just take a moment,” he continues, trying to relax his face, “and just breathe. Breathe with me, can you do that?”

He expels the leftover oxygen from his words out from between his lips before placing the hand not stretched to me on his chest as he pulls in a deliberate breath, making it swell visibly beneath his hand. And as if his body is the fucking oracle, my body immediately responds in kind, like a reflex. I fill my lungs right along with him, the sweetest breath I've ever breathed. I close my eyes, and from behind my lids I swear I feel a sun bursting through the dark clouds in my mind.

And that's when Karma whispers in my ear.

“You know what to do.”

I feel everything slow down, just like in the movies. My hair floats around my head as I slowly shake my head and take a step backward, and then another. I watch as the kind stranger's face morphs into a painful expression of anguish as I bend my knees and push off, throwing all of my weight backwards off the cliff.

The wind is cold, blowing my hair in my face as I flail, falling towards the water; the sounds of the waves getting

closer before crashing against my back.

The shock of the cold water brings time screaming back to its normal speed as I feel my body submerge. My nostrils sting as the salt water shoots up my nose, and while my human instinct is to flail and kick against the cold and the current, I remind my body what it's here to do. Halting all my movements, I slowly deflate all oxygen from my lungs, letting it come out of my mouth in a stream of silvery bubbles that shimmer to the surface as I let my body slowly sink.

This is now. This is when Katherine Holland died, and Violet Steele came to be. When she died, I awakened. It's the end, and the beginning.

There's more to come... so much more. But to understand any of it, I have to tell you about *then*.

About how I met Karma.

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Chapter One

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KATHERINE



The semi-cleverly named Crow Bar is dark, with a dreary vibe both inside and out. On the outside, it looks like an abandoned pile of moldy bricks, and the inside has meager lighting with the floors and tables made from beaten-down wood that has paled to a depressing shade of grey. By the looks of the place itself - and the patrons, it is a place where people come to put themselves out to pasture. A brief look around shows me a handful of empty human shells whose souls have all been vanquished by the trials of life, leaving them to kill time, pickling themselves in alcohol until the Grim Reaper comes for them.

Depressing, right?

The good news is, this is the lowest point I was destined to reach. Little do I know, it will only look up from here.

What this place lacks in atmosphere it makes up for with heat, and I have to applaud the owner for prioritizing their obviously puny budget.

I feel my barely beating heart breathe a sigh of relief as my body starts to thaw, and I step in further.

I've come to join the hopeless loser crowd, and oh look, I've found my people.

After a brief inner debate over whether to sit at a table or take a seat at the bar, I surprise myself by choosing a stool, wanting to salvage my last remaining scrap of dignity that surely would have jumped out the proverbial shattered window if I sat at a table alone.

I pull my flimsy hoodie tighter around me as the bartender comes to stand in front of me.

“Drink?” he asks gruffly. It’s like even he has given up on such common things as words, like they’re a waste of his time. Good. That means he probably also can’t be bothered with things like ID’s.

“Whatever you’ve got that’s strong,” I nod weakly, not caring at this point what he will put in front of me, how bad it will taste, or how much it will burn going down. If it could just scrub my brain free of nineteen years’ worth of memories, it’ll do.

“Now that’s a bold choice,” a velvety voice floats over to me from the shadows. I look in that direction and notice another customer I hadn’t seen when I first walked in. How she escaped my attention is unknown, because she definitely stands out.

Her hair is a thick shock of silver with jet black lowlights. Her eyebrows and lashes are perfectly manicured and highlighted by dramatic, stormy eyeshadow that is on-point. She clearly has money to spend on herself as the indigo-colored trench coat with the fur trim that matches her hair looks undoubtedly designer - not that I’d know.

But what really makes her look out of place is not her impressive affinity for fashion, but the serene smile she wears on her face.

I’m too defeated to be embarrassed by my long perusal, and offer her nothing but a feeble shrug in response as I accept a shot glass of something so dark I immediately name it Liquid Death. Seriously, it must have come from a flat bottle with a cork that has nothing but skull and crossbones with X’ed-out eyes on it.

Amazing.

The sweet bartender is taking pity on me and putting me out of my misery.

Bottoms up.

I take in a deep breath and hold it while I lift the glass to no one, and quickly tip it back. I swallow as much as I can in one go and grimace as I choke back the whole pour, willing it to go down my throat and not come back up. I close my eyes and try to replenish the breath I just released as the liquid wreaks havoc on my insides. It blazes a destructive path down my esophagus, down through my chest, settling in the pit of my stomach.

“Uggghh,” I gasp, squeezing my eyes against the disgust and trying to keep my tongue in my mouth as I hear a sultry, amused chuckle from the alluring woman.

“Oh, Geo...” she shakes her head with mock disapproval, an amused smile, still faint but present, on her face. “When are you going to stop pulling that prank on new customers?”

“I have to get my kicks somewhere,” he reasons with a deadpan expression that I think probably lives permanently on his face.

“What was in that?” I ask, feeling my eyes water.

“Jager, sloe gin, and a splash of bitters,” he answers smugly.

Oh, that's just mean.

I came into this hole in the wall with five dollars to my name, and I really had hoped my last pennies would go to a drink that would pack a punch in a small package. Mission accomplished, just not in the way I wanted.

“Darling, come sit by me,” the mystery lady beckons, patting the stool next to her. “Geo, make her my special, please.” As Geo obliges, getting to work and grabbing a glass, I look to the drink in front of her. It's clear and fizzy on the rocks, rimmed with something blue, and garnished with a lime and three blueberries on a plastic sword.

“Thanks, but I wanted something strong,” I decline. “Besides, I'm broke.”

“Oh, looks can be deceiving,” she cocks her head and one of her eyebrows at me. “And the rest of your drinks are on me, sweet girl, so long as you come have a seat.”

I'm not exactly feeling chatty, but the offer to get drunk on someone else's dollar is too good to pass up. Getting up, I walk the eight feet around to the other side of the L-shaped bar, taking the stool next to her, just as a drink identical to hers is placed in front of me.

I wrap both hands around it as if it's the only lifeline I can cling to as she continues giving me that calm but interested smile.

"You don't look like you belong here," I mention, no longer seeing the point of manners.

"Again, looks can be deceiving." She waves a finger in the air. "Basic principles. And on the contrary, I'm right where I belong. My kind of place, and my kind of people," she muses, as she takes a drink of what is apparently her signature cocktail. "People like you," she adds on as she sets her drink down.

"You know nothing about me," I argue, tucking a strand of cold, wet hair behind my ear.

"I know enough," she states, "from what I've observed in just five minutes."

I scoff and roll my eyes at her as I take another sip of the intriguing drink, but that only spurs her to continue. "Don't believe me?" She raises a challenging eyebrow. "Fine. Just your exchange with my mixologist friend over here gave me a good start. You walk in here, looking worse for wear and don't even choose your own drink, which tells me making a simple decision isn't even worth your time right now."

I glance around the whole shitty establishment before turning back to her with an incredulous look.

"That could literally be anyone in this bar."

"Fair enough," she responds without missing a beat. "And just like them, you came in here wanting to forget, even if just for a little while. But I think the little stunt Geo just pulled on you may have given you a shred of hope that you still feel something."

“I don’t feel anything. I feel nothing,” I say, shaking my head and quickly dismissing her assessment.

“You don’t feel nothing,” she disagrees and shakes her head, her tone almost nurturing.

“Fine,” I grind out through clenched teeth, because I’m getting seriously irritated. “I *want* to feel nothing.”

“If I bought you another shot of what Geo served you, would you drink it?” she asks, tilting her head in curiosity.

“No,” I say, firmly, just as I begin to feel the effects of that shot of pure evil settle over my brain. At least it’s serving its purpose.

“What about that one?” She nods at the drink still sitting between my hands. I take my first sip of the beverage. It does have a strong taste, but with a hint of something sweet smoothing out the edges.

“Yeah, I’ll take more of these,” I say, swallowing.

“See?” She raises her eyebrows optimistically. “You’re still choosing pleasure over *displeasure*. All is not lost.”

She really does know nothing.

“Who are you?” I ask, taking another sip.

She looks briefly at the ceiling as if trying to figure out the best way to answer this simple question before looking back at me.

“I don’t have a name, really,” she says thoughtfully. “But... I’m a friend, and my friends call me Karma.”

I feel my face go completely deadpan, and if the place wasn’t already eerily silent, I’m pretty sure any sounds would be immediately snuffed out in my mind. I stare at her, waiting for her to tell me she’s joking, or at least elaborate on her very odd revelation. A few seconds tick by with her offering nothing but that calm and confident smile, and finally, I crack.

“Wow...” I muse, actually laughing as I shake my head and turn my body away. I’m so tired, and this day just doesn’t want to stop getting weirder. Or maybe I’m losing it. That

would be cool too. In fact, solitude in a padded room with silence sounds heavenly right now. Propping an elbow on the bar, I lean my head into my hand, still chuckling at the dark ridiculousness that has become my life. I take a hearty sip of Karma's little witch's brew concoction, desperately beckoning the hazy buzz to take me down deeper.

"Someone hurt you."

While Karma's statement is bold, it's delivered with a quiet tenderness. I offer her nothing; no indication that she's right or wrong or even on the right track, as I stare into the fizzy bubbles of the drink, letting them mesmerize me.

"Someone – or multiple someones, did you dirty," she continues, and the passion in her voice is growing with every syllable.

I clench my jaw in an effort to give nothing away, not wanting her to know how right she is. It's none of her business. As I feel my soberness start to slip away, I continue to stare into my drink as if I could make it explode by my sheer force of will.

"You want to give up," she continues. Right again, dammit. "But what if someone told you things could be turned around - and I don't mean in that empty, superficial consoling way. I mean what if someone told you things can and *will* be turned around?" She's presenting this concept with a firm affirmation, rather than as a question.

Fine, I'll play. Nothing better to do and all that.

"Could you be more specific?"

She sits back and lets out a loaded breath. Whatever she has to say must be major.

"Karma's a very erratic and ambiguous concept, isn't it?" she asks rhetorically, and I bite back my urge to ask if she's talking about herself or not. Instead, I wait for her to continue as she gets a thoughtful look in her eyes. "I mean, it's a nice sentiment; something for people to grasp onto when the world has done them wrong, in the hopes that wrongs will be made right and the balance will be restored. But..." she shifts

forward again, the fervor returning to her demeanor, “it doesn’t always deliver. Karma strikes when and if it feels like it. Sometimes, the maligned person has to wait years to see that spiritual justice served, and by then, the gratification isn’t as potent; it lacks the power it would have had if it happened to the abuser while the wounds were still fresh.”

“I said more specific, not cryptic,” I respond with acid in my voice, before downing the second half of the drink. I can’t get drunk fast enough. She watches me set down my empty glass before looking up at Geo and giving him a nod, which he returns, before grabbing another glass. At least she’s keeping the drinks coming. She looks back at me, and undeterred by my cynical disposition, continues.

“And sometimes, people have to wait until they are in their next life, which doesn’t even really count, because the souls that are involved don’t even remember; their slates are completely renewed. When people are wronged, they’re often too scared to retaliate, and sit back under the pretense that karma will take care of it for them, and they end up waiting the rest of their lives. Where is the justice in that?”

Her voice is so calm, yet the volume of passion residing in her tone is palpable.

“But what if you didn’t have to wait for karma?” she asks conversationally. “What if I told you, you could watch your enemies go down as you rise up?”

“I’d say you’re delusional,” I return bitterly as I reach for the fresh drink just placed in front of me.

“I’m not talking about that spiritual, positive outlook, moral garbage.” She waves her hands in demonstration, completely unfazed. “I mean literally. What if your life actually got better while theirs went to shit while you watched?”

“It’s a beautiful pipedream,” I agree with an eye roll to satisfy her enthusiasm.

“But what if it wasn’t a pipedream?” she whispers excitedly as she leans forward, placing both delicate hands on

my arm.

I shake my head as I pick up the drink and drain half its contents in one tilt. My brain is good and fuzzy at this point, but not in the way I'd hoped. This is all too much. I'm tired and fried and I can't take any more input.

"You know," I blow out a breath, setting the drink back down and turning to her. "I appreciated the free drinks and the weird attempt at conversation," I try to convey, but I feel myself shutting down, "but I don't think I can take any more sunshine being blown up my ass."

"Say no more," she gives me an understanding smile. Damn, nothing gets this woman down. What is she doing in here again? "How about you sleep on it?" she suggests, and I scoff out another sarcastic chuckle.

"Where?"

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Chapter Two

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KATHERINE



Karma's exquisite trench coat flaps mystically around her as she walks, making her look like some surreal, other-worldly person. I sluggishly lag just behind her, past the point of worrying about who she really is and what her intentions are with me. I've never been more done. I just want a place where I can respectfully pass out and close my eyes, and I honestly wouldn't mind if it were for the last time. Whatever this woman, the universe, has planned for me, just fucking bring it.

"You okay?" Karma looks over her shoulder at me, giving me an encouraging smile. She's so eccentric, how she looks like something out of an anime or fantasy video game, but speaks in such a friendly and relatable tone; how her disposition and wardrobe both contradict the seedy bar she seemed to feel perfectly at home in. "Come on," she prods with a wave of her hand, beckoning me to catch up to her.

I take a few quick strides, putting myself only about a half step behind her.

"You know, I'm not a vampire that's going to pull you into the closest alley and suck the life out of you," she continues.

"Shame." The word slips out of me with attitude before I can stop it, and she looks back again, quirking a sharp eyebrow. "Sorry," I say with a shrug. "That was the booze."

"You're not that drunk," she tells me, and both her voice and her face seem to be in on some secret.

“Please,” I guffaw. “You saw how much I drank back there,” I toss my head back in the direction of the bar. I had at least four drinks and I’m a small girl, I have to be drunk. I actually stumble a little, pulling my flimsy hoodie tighter around me as if to prove my point to myself.

“Only that nasty shot and the first cocktail had alcohol,” she reports, facing forward and not breaking stride.

What the fuck?

“Placebo’s are great,” she continues, digging in the pocket of her trench coat for something. “You feel better, but you’re not too fucked up to listen to the rest of my sale’s pitch.” She looks over her shoulder with excitement blazing in her widened eyes.

“You said I could sleep on it,” I remind her.

“And you can,” she promises. “But as you can see, there are no beds around here. I drive and talk, you ride and listen.” A set of keys jangle as she pulls them from her pocket, and I notice a flash of some pretty iridescent metal of her keychain in the street lights. I can’t make out the shape, but I’ve always had a thing for the subtle yet vibrant colors that mix together in the darkness, like what you would see in an oil spill on wet asphalt.

“So why the hell am I even following you?” I ask myself out loud for her to hear, ignoring the fact that I briefly took pleasure in something pretty. I don’t need to give her another miniscule indication that there’s hope for my eviscerated spirit.

“Well, as you so drunkenly spewed to me,” she looks back at me with a teasing glint, “the shelter is full up and gave you consolation in the form of a five-dollar-bill that you blew on a hearty shot of Death by Geo.”

She holds her hand out and squeezes her key fob, eliciting a sophisticated chirp. Some red taillights flash, just twenty feet ahead of us. I squint, trying to make out the sleek, dark vehicle. I don’t know my cars, but as we get closer, I notice the widely known Jaguar symbol. I didn’t even know they made a sports car, which this clearly is.

“This is yours?” I ask. I don’t know why I’m still letting her amaze me. “You park it in the street?”

She sweeps her hand quickly in the direction of the license plate.

KARMA-4.

“No one messes with Karma.” She tips her head towards me before opening the driver’s door. “Hop in.”

“Whoa, okay... no.” I stop in my tracks and cross my arms. “I don’t know you; I’m not getting in a car with you. Maybe you don’t want to drink my blood, but you could be the skin-suit type for all I know.”

She laughs again as she folds her arms on the roof of her car.

“See?” She points a finger at me. “You do still care about life.”

“*No I don’t!*” The words shriek from the back of my throat as the buzz burns right off my brain. Thrusting my hands into my limp, wet hair, I pull at the strands, willing the sting in my scalp to overpower the pain in my heart. I crouch down, squeezing my eyes shut. I want to make everything disappear; this dank and dreary street, this crazy woman who thinks she’s a spiritual belief incarnate; everything - except maybe her car. I wonder if it can outrun demons who get their thrills from luring young women into a false sense of security and happily ever after, just to see if they can, or trample backstabbing bitches with its magnificent horsepower.

“That’s the worst part, isn’t it?” Karma’s voice is quiet beside me. “Having no reason to care and every reason to give up... but something just won’t let you.” Her voice has a foreign sense of comfort to it, and I let myself wonder if that’s what it sounds like to have someone care about you. I can feel the energy shift around us as a soothing hand glides up and down my back. She’s temporarily abandoned her eccentric and cavalier persona to be attentive and understanding.

“I don’t want to care,” I whimper into the crooks of my eyebrows. “I just want it all to be over, to go away...”

I thought walking into that bar and blowing my last dollar on a shitty shot in the hopes of it putting me under was the low point.

Just kidding... *this* is the low point. Sobbing like a little girl in the middle of a darkened street, and telling some strange woman with cool clothes and hair about how pitiful she feels. She doesn't even know my name, but then again, I don't actually know hers.

Karma doesn't respond to my expressions of despair, but rather makes a suggestion.

"If you come with me, I promise there's a warm shower and a good night's sleep in your future... and more alcohol."

Getting intoxicated with a comfortable place to pass out?

Guess I can't argue with that.

"And all I have to do is listen to some *go-get-em* speech about how life really can get better?" I ask, pouring on the sarcasm.

"Pleeease..." She rolls her eyes comically as she stands and takes my hands in hers to help me do the same. "This is no cliché, motivational rant. This is the real thing." She wraps an arm around my back and continues to walk me towards her car as I let out another scoff, wiping my eyes. "And in the morning, if you don't want to join the cause, you can be on your way with no hard feelings, and hopefully, at least a renewed shred of hope."

She's gone back to her weird, happy character as she opens the passenger door for me and I resignedly slide in against the butter-soft leather.

"And what if you really are a psychopathic killer?" I ask flatly, and she leans her head down to regard me.

"Well then, you'll be no worse off." She slowly shakes her head as she replies, with that ever-placid smile before she shuts my door.

I hold tightly to the *Oh Jesus* handle while Karma weaves through late-night Seattle traffic before heading North on the

freeway. This is not boding well for the Liquid Death sloshing around in my stomach. The crazy thing is she's not out of control; she seems to know exactly what she's doing.

"Where'd you learn to drive like this?"

Seriously, Karma doesn't seem that old, maybe late thirties, but this still isn't how I expected someone like her to drive. Then again, she hasn't stopped surprising me.

"I know people," she supplies dismissively.

"People? Are they part of your cause?" I ask, chancing a look over at her to see her face calm as ever, as if she's out for a leisurely Sunday drive in the country.

"Tell me something..." She looks expectantly over at me.

"Katherine."

"Katherine," she says with a hard nod to herself, as if she's cataloging it in her memory. "In total confidence, of course." She gives me a pointed look. "Can you tell me, do you do good or evil in this world?"

Oh great, here we go. Now she's talking like she's from some old fable or the Renaissance or something. I let out a loaded sigh before answering, wondering how this is my life at the moment.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you try to do nice things, normally? Be good to people?"

"Well I always *tried* to," I explain, "a long time ago, until I realized it wasn't going to pay off."

"That's what I'm talking about." Karma huffs out a heavy breath and shakes her head at the road in dismay. "No rewards for being good and no consequences for being bad. So did you switch to the dark side when you realized doing good was a waste? Or did you keep trying?"

"I'm neither a good witch nor a bad witch," I fill in as I cross my arms and glance out the window to see absolute darkness. I'm not sure when we left the city or when her

driving settled down, but there's nothing much to see but the dark outlines of trees, and we seem to be sharing the highway with no other cars.

"But you could be *both*," she tells me, looking over at me with a mischievous smile. "By joining the cause," she adds with a shoulder lift.

"Is that what you are?" I ask, actually feeling my face relax. "Are you both?"

"Indeed I am," she muses, looking pretty proud of herself as she shakes her head in wonder. "And it is the *best* way to be *bad*," she purrs, as she takes the next exit.

I don't really want anything right now, not even to exist. But if I had to be something, bad sounds very inviting right now. I don't, however, let on that my interest is piqued.

The ramp is deserted; there are only the headlights on the asphalt ahead of us as she takes a right and drives us down a lone road with no other drivers. We snake through dark grassy hills and more lines of trees, and at this point, I'm wondering if she really is taking me to some foreboding cabin in the woods to slaughter me, possibly giggling with delight as she does so.

The scenery only gets more dark and ominous with each passing mile, and just when I'm about to ask how far we're going, she turns down a gravel driveway. The fancy car barely shakes or rumbles as the stones crunch beneath the tires, and I look straight ahead at our winding path, waiting for the big reveal. The car gets yanked left, then right, and left one more time before a house, much larger than I expected, comes into view. I only get a brief look at the color as the headlights flash across the paneling, but it appears to be some kind of dark purple or red with black and gold trim.

Karma expertly swings the car into a row off to the side, alongside three other cars and a motorcycle. While it's dark, I can tell they're just as tricked out and expensive as the one we're exiting.

My beat-to-shit sneakers do little to protect the soles of my feet from the hard, jagged gravel as I step out and try to get a good look at the structure. I can only discern outlines here and there, but it appears to be some kind of Victorian. Even with the limited lighting, I can make out the towers and dormers and a wrap-around porch. The thing is monstrous, and in the black of the night, it looks like something out of a Tim Burton film.

Perfect.

I actually let out a small chuckle, and Karma looks up at me with interest.

“Finally,” I explain, wrapping my arms around myself as I follow her up the cobblestone walk. “Something that actually looks like it suits you.”

“Happy to deliver,” she cracks, as she struts ahead of me.



I DON'T KNOW how long I spend in Karma's opulent bathroom, sitting on the floor of her stone shower that rains hot water down on my weary body, but with how good the steam feels wrapping around me as I tuck into myself, I don't care.

I don't want to admit to Karma that she was right; that one small act of kindness can create a spark of hope, but this feeling of being warm and clean makes me feel like a tiny meadow is trying to bloom in the dark, tangled forest of my soul.

Feeling my eyes get heavy, I reluctantly coax myself to stand and shut off the water. After combing my wet but now-clean hair, and dressing in a pair of pale purple satin pajamas that were left out for me, I open the door to let myself out into the hallway, the floral scented steam following me like a magical mist announcing my presence to the gloriously white, long-haired cat that sits on the cream and gold Persian floor runner. The silky coat on the creature looks like it was bought for him on Rodeo Drive, and as if to show me more of its

beautiful wonder, he stands and marches over to weave between my legs, brushing his softness against me.

I can't resist bending to scoop him up in my arms and cuddle him close to my chest, and he purrs as hard as Karma's car, as if telling me he's giving me something to love.

“Ghost.”

The deep tenor of a man's voice makes my heart slingshot up into my throat and my lungs instinctually contract, pulling in a gasp of oxygen. I turn sharply, gripping the loving cat to my chest, who seems unbothered by the tall, dark man who stands just ten feet down the hallway from us.

Everything about this man is dark, from his boots to his worn jeans. His hair is pulled back in a careless bun with a couple of sparse strands that hang over his black, bushy eyebrows, and his eyes are the same color as coal. My eyes flit from those eyes to the tattoo on his chest that his open black shirt reveals. A circle of arrows wrapped in thorns and ivy revolve around some complex, intricate symbol in black ink that seems to blaze against his olive skin.

“What?” I breathe between pants as my lungs try to resume their normal function, and my heart frantically tries to slow its rhythm. This man's presence was unexpected and intimidating, but he looks non-threatening, standing casually with his hands in his jean pockets.

“The cat's name is Ghost,” he supplies, and I look down at the still-purring feline in my arms and back up to the man. His face is expressionless as he speaks again. “Karma is down in the living room waiting for you.”

This night just keeps getting weirder.

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Chapter Three

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KATHERINE



“This is where it gets better...” Karma tells me from the other side of the cozy living room, “if you *want* it to.”

While I still want to be sour and snarky, this woman has given me the gift of a shower, and I’m now sitting in her living room under a plum-colored fleece blanket, Ghost in my lap, and a hot toddy in my hand.

“No offense,” I say carefully, “but this sounds a lot like the *life is what you make of it* speech you promised I wouldn’t get.

“None taken,” she tells me as she stands in her cozy robe that matches my blanket and walks over to turn on her gas fireplace. “I know it’s summer, but it’s such a chilly night,” she explains. She doesn’t have to; this is Western Washington. Summer doesn’t really mean shit here. “What I mean by *if you want to* is simply whether or not you want to accept a proposition.”

As she resettles herself in her chair, I look around the living room and try to catalog how I’m feeling right now - not two hours ago - but in this moment. I’m warm and comfortable, and I try to imagine what it would be like if things were different, if I lived in this house and had all the things Karma has. Would I care so much about the things that have happened to me if I had all this to come home to? Would I know what hope felt like if I was just given a boost?

“If you could get to the point of this proposition, that would be great,” I murmur, still trying not to punish her

kindness with rudeness. “Sorry, I’m just getting sleepy.” *This hot toddy is giving me the warm-fuzzies.*

“No problem.” She curls up and spreads a blanket over her legs. “I can get into all the nitty-gritty details another time. In a nutshell, this is not just my home.” She gestures to our surroundings. “It’s a society.”

“You mean other people live here?” I ask, thinking of the man I sort of met upstairs.

“A few,” she nods. “But the society is much larger than the ones that live under this roof. I guess you could just call this headquarters, and the core members are the ones that live and work out of the house. We run a cause that helps people that have been severely wronged, but as the saying of karma goes, what goes around comes around - both the bad *and* the good, which means we help each other right our own injustices, and then pay it forward into the world.”

“How have I never heard of this?”

She rolls her eyes towards her ceiling and lets out a sigh before answering. “We are a secret organization, moderate but vast. Our dealings, while well-intentioned, cannot always be accomplished by legal means. Sort of defeats the whole purpose of taking things into our own hands instead of waiting for our slow and pitiful justice system to do it, which often never delivers.”

“So you run around under the radar like a bunch of vigilantes?” I raise a skeptical eyebrow, not understanding how she could possibly be serious.

“Well, there’s a bit more order to it than that, but... essentially,” she confirms. “There are phases to go through, but you start off living here and are given everything you need to better yourself, followed by us helping you make those who’ve wronged you realize the consequences of their actions. In return, all you are asked to do is to continue to do your part for the cause, and you can do so by continuing to live here or somewhere else on your own.” She shrugs like this is some kind of university program or internship.

“What do you think?” she asks, eyebrows raised in curiosity, and I bring my warm drink up to my mouth while petting the cat to buy myself a little time before answering. Living here in this house while I get back on my feet sounds amazing compared to my plan to curl up in some forgotten corner of the city and wait for nothingness to overtake me. But being a part of some kind of avenging secret society?

“I think it sounds too good to be true, and super sketchy at the same time,” I finally say, going with honesty as I swallow and lower my mug. This makes Karma give a demure smile and nod.

“I know it does, but I promise it’s the real deal. If you decide to stay, you’ll see what I’m talking about.” She tilts her head in an encouraging nod and gives me a conspiratorial wink. “But you are allowed to sleep on it, as promised. In the morning, if you decide you want no part of this, we’ll take you back to the city and you never have to give any of this another thought.”

“So you’re giving me a place to stay the night,” I start, stating the facts out loud.

“Breakfast too,” she adds, picking up her own mug.

“And tomorrow, if I decide not to join your ongoing justice crusade, I get to leave with no debt or expectations?”

“You’ll find that in this business you have to give a little trust first in order for a potential member to put any in you. And besides, the very few people that have turned us down and have blabbed to the press didn’t get far,” she shrugs. “You alone are not totally convinced at this moment, so you can imagine how hard it is to sway the general public.” She shakes her head with an eye roll and chuckles into her mug as she takes a sip. I set my own mug down, feeling my eyes start to burn and my head start to spin with this ludicrous information.

A throat clears from the archway that leads to the stairs, and I see Mr. Dark and Ominous man-bun guy leaning against the wall. Karma gives him an endearingly warm smile before introducing us.

“Coal, this is Katherine,” she tilts her head in my direction. “Mind showing her to her room?” she asks, and he offers nothing but a soft nod as his eyes flit to me and then back to her.

Still clutching Ghost close to me, I rise out of the overstuffed chair and follow Coal to the stairs. He waits for me to reach his side before ascending, the steps giving nary a creek under both our weight.

“So... you’re one of the core members Karma was talking about? That lives here?”

“Yes,” he nods, the front strands of his black hair that hang loose, brushing the scruff along his face. His face is thoughtful and his voice quiet as he adds, “There’s four of us, total, including Karma. She’s obviously the ringleader, and the rest of us have our focused parts to play.”

We turn the corner to the right of the landing and I continue to walk alongside him down the hall, Ghost seeming to have no problem being schlepped around in my arms.

“What’s your role?” I ask, as we pass a door painted a dark sea green, and he looks over at me, smirking with a quirked eyebrow.

“You’ll see... if you stick around,” he murmurs, before pausing at a door that’s painted a very dark grey, almost black. “This is me.” He taps on the wood. “If you need anything...” he adds, leaving that notion open-ended as I take in the color of the door. It’s charcoal, like his eyes. Wait...

“Coal...” I breathe out loud, removing a hand from Ghost and running my hand down the wood of the door.

“Again,” he zaps me out of my space-out, “you’ll see. Come on.” He shifts his weight to continue our journey down the hall until we stop in front of a door that’s the same pale shade of purple as my pajamas. “You’ll be sleeping here tonight,” he tells me as he turns the knob and pushes the door open. He hits a light switch, making two cozy lamps flick on, each resting on a nightstand that graces either side of a

heavenly-looking bed. It's got a satiny-down comforter in a pearly white, and it's stacked with several plush pillows.

Something about seeing this inviting, luxurious bed when I'm so down-trodden, weary, and exhausted seems to make the buzz from my delightful nightcap drink return to my mind, making me feel drowsy and uncaring that a very grown, appealing, but strange man is watching. I gingerly set Ghost down on the mattress before crawling on myself and hugging one of the silky pillows to my body. I feel the comforter being pulled back and drawn up around my shoulders as Coal whispers, his breath fanning over my cheek.

"Sweet dreams, Katherine. Sweet dreams of *staying*," I hear, as my eyelids begin to float closed, and I swear I feel a warm set of lips press against my forehead.



I DON'T KNOW how much time passes, but the blackness turns to grey, and I wake up to find myself walking through a mist, like a field of storm clouds.

What the hell was in that toddy?

I look down as I walk, and I'm surprised to find I'm not hugging myself in discomfort or fear. Rather, my spine is straight and my shoulders are square as the clouds part to reveal the inside of the flashy neon underworld of the strip club. The bass that I would normally feel pulsing through my bones is still present but muted, muffled, as if coming from outside a fishbowl.

I don't know what on earth would make me come back here, but I seem sure of myself as I approach the back booth to find Allen, the only slightly older guy who convinced me he was in love with me, moved me into his home and worshipped me like a princess, only to kick me out while he fucked someone close to me, is seated and decked out in his knock-off suit that he always tries to pass off as designer. With his hair slicked back, he puts on his usual front that aims to convince

the ladies that he's a high-up executive and not an errand bitch that just moved up out of the mail room.

I had never cared about his status, only that he seemed to be a decent person. With his clean, professional look paired with his sweet puppy dog eyes, he had made my heart skip a beat whenever I saw him from my place on stage. Now, he looks pathetic.

I don't even know what I'm doing when I stop in front of him, popping a hip out and planting my hands on my waist, but I feel powerful, towering over someone who once looked down at me – once with love, and then later with mocking cruelty. He's the one looking up at me now from his spot in the horseshoe-shaped booth, and the look on his face is not one of amusement. No... this is a look of fear.

I glance from him up to the stage to find the traitorous bitch I once called a sister. Her red hair swishes around her like fire, giving her an alluring presence until she stops dead in the middle of her dance moves to take me in, and the look of shock on her face is too precious for words. She looks as if she knows this is her day of judgment and hell has come for her... and it feels good.

Chapter Four

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KATHERINE



“Let’s take a walk,” Karma decides, as she hands me a steaming coffee encased in a steel travel mug before leading me out the front door of her beautiful house. The soles of the beautifully warm and comfy UGG boots she’s given me thunk softly down the front steps before crunching on the gravel as I follow her to a trail.

The morning is grey and bleak, the air crisp and cold, but the coffee warms my belly as I cradle it between my hands that I’ve pulled the sleeves of the cozy new North Face hoodie down around. I’m struggling with my pride at this moment, not wanting to admit that the small but prominent acts of generosity have given me some semblance of hope. That even if I were to leave here this morning and not come back, I’ve at least seen that this sort of kindness is possible. Would it be enough to make me want to turn over a new leaf when I was back on my own?

The thing is, I want to feel the hope... which is more than I could say for myself last night. I’m just trying to get my head around how I would return to the shelter and smile, turning the other cheek when they turned me away again.

“How’d you sleep?” Karma asks me, tucking a strand of her perfectly straight silver and black hair behind her ear.

“Coal told me to have sweet dreams, and I did,” I inform her before taking another sip of the hot, hazelnut flavored goodness. “And it was good sleep.” I nod appreciatively.

“And how do you feel this morning?” she asks, pushing her hands into the pockets of her long purple cardigan.

“I’m still trying to figure that out,” I admit in a murmur, looking down at the gravel path, letting myself be oblivious to what is probably very beautiful scenery on this nature walk.

“Katherine, no one will force you to do a thing,” Karma levels with me, her tone as warm as ever, but with a new adamancy. “But once you’re in, you’re in. It won’t always be easy, especially not at first, but it will be rewarding, starting with a safe and warm place to rest your head.” She tilts her head at me warmly. “Joining the society means taking those that have hurt you and bringing them down a few pegs before you continue your work in the community, because it starts with *you*, stopping those who did you harm from doing it to another.”

I nod, looking ahead at a hand-crafted wood bench on the path just in front of us that looks so inviting. I wonder if Karma and the others I haven’t met use this property to find their peace; if they just sit out here for hours, listening to the silence, save for the gentle sounds of nature. The bench seems to beckon me, and I sit down without a thought, taking in the morning mist that rises off the grassy clearing.

I see Karma take a seat next to me in my peripheral, her movements soft and non-invasive. Setting my now empty travel mug down, I place my hands in the pouch of my hoodie and rub them together as I focus on a small clover peeking out from between a few blades of grass, as if it’s there to greet me and let me know this is a safe place.

I feel my lungs relax from their constricted state. My heart beats a little softer, and the tension in my shoulders eases marginally.

“My foster sister, Caroline, was all I had,” I begin abruptly, hoping if I just start talking, I’ll be able to get it all out and not have to talk about it again. I continue to focus hard on the clover, hoping that maybe if I zone out into another state of mind, I won’t really be reliving this as I tell it. “She was my best friend, and we clung to each other through the last three

years we lived in the same foster home. It was a bad place with a sleazy foster dad that was always looking at us in this disgusting way and making vile comments. Our foster brother, Ryan, wasn't much better, always looking at me just a little too long. But it was better than some places I'd been and it was the same for her, so we stayed strong and got each other through it. We kept our heads down, helped each other through school work, and most importantly, we banded together when we got ridiculed in school for being unwanted orphans or system kids. We stuck up for each other, fiercely, to the point where no one messed with us, and we stood up to our revolting foster dad whenever it looked like he was drunk and getting ideas."

Karma makes a pensive face, looking disgusted at that last part, but nods for me to take my time continuing my tale.

"There was one night in particular," I say on a cleansing breath, trying to quickly get through the rest, "when our foster brother snuck into our room late at night and tried to touch me under my covers while I slept. Caroline jumped out of bed and chased him out. She wasn't afraid of him. She threw herself at him and drove him right out of the room, meager pajamas and all. It was a while before she returned and I heard heated arguing. I couldn't believe she did that; how much she cared about protecting me. I couldn't imagine myself trusting another single human being besides Caroline, and where that got me, was stabbed in the back... literally and figuratively."

"What?!" Karma's face shows shock for the first time since I've met her. Her eyes widen and her mouth opens, a little slack-jawed. She gestures for me to turn away, while stammering, "M-may I?" For some reason, I feel okay with showing her. I don't know if I'm ever going to see her again anyway, and if I stay here, I'm damn well going to have to show her some trust.

I scooch away, pulling my hair to the side while she gently, almost in a nurturing manner, raises the back of my hoodie, trying to keep her movements from being too brash as she works it almost all the way up.

“Oh my God,” she laments on a hard breath when she sees the dime-sized wound right between my shoulder blades. She softly glides a soothing finger across the scar tissue that’s been forming there for the last month. “This doesn’t look like a blade, though.”

The idea that she’d know what a blade wound looks like doesn’t escape me, but I don’t comment.

“It wasn’t a blade,” I confirm her suspicions. “It was a stiletto.”

Karma gasps and takes another moment to look at the scar, probably trying to put the pieces together in her mind before she moves the material of my sweatshirt back down, shrouding my back in warmth against the cold air. She’s shaking her head, her jaw clenched tightly as I turn back around to face her.

“That disgusting cunt,” she grinds out, and I let out a surprised guffaw at her verbiage.

Unbelievably, even after everything, I’ve still had trouble letting go of all those years of bonding, trust, and comradery, and thus have been reluctant to think badly of Caroline. I’ve tortured myself plenty the last month, running through every possible scenario that would make her feel so threatened by me that she did everything she did. My heart kept insisting that she must have been forced, or temporarily insane. I guess one’s mind will do that when you have nothing and no one. You’ll hang on to any little shred of hope that the one person you did have will come running back in tears of apology - or in this case, the two persons.

“What was the figurative part?” Karma asks me, as she reaches in her pocket and pulls out a vape pen. “In a nutshell,” she clarifies, her expression frank, and I feel a small relief of the burden of delving into more painful details.

I inhale a long, loaded breath, the cold air coating and soothing my lungs as if its purpose is to serve as a balm for the words to come out.

“Got me fired, fucked my boyfriend, Allen, convinced him to kick me out, and then... she stabbed me,” I finish with a feeble shrug. Everything that happened seems to hit me all over again. And now I’m right back where I was last night when I wanted to dull the thoughts and the feelings with alcohol, and then sit back and pray to fade into thin air.

I had nothing, and then everything, and now nothing again.

“How would you like to not only make Allen realize how it feels to have everything taken from him and show Caroline how it feels to have a spike in her back, but to also help others realize the same justice, over and over again, for the rest of your life?”

By now, I’m wondering just how many deep breaths of fresh air I have to take to replenish the toxic garbage I keep expelling with each exasperated one I blow out.

“Okay, how?” I ask, rolling my eyes in her direction and huffing out a breath of immense exasperation. “You keep telling me all about this fantasy avenger operation you have going, but you have yet to tell me any logistics.” I wave my hand, frustrated at how long she’s drawn out this big-ass long riddle.

“I mean exactly what I’m saying.” Karma lowers her voice as her blue eyes darken a shade. “That you will be equipped with everything you need; physically and mentally, to go back and do to them exactly what they did to you. You’ll get to live here, train, prepare, and be given everything you need.”

To the cynic in me, this sounds like a crock of shit. In fact, it has to be. There’s no other explanation.

“This is some kind of scheme.” I shake my head, feeling disappointment at coming to terms with it. I didn’t even realize that I’d latched onto a pebble of hope in the last twelve hours.

“Because no one just offers another person a better life out of the goodness of their hearts,” she nods with a knowing smirk, completing my thought as if she’s in my head. She really is a witch, that’s all there is to it.

“Well, come on,” I try to reason. “There’s no one in this world that would be that giving.”

“But being in the society *makes* you that way,” she counters. “It fills your cup to the point of overflowing, and not only does it feel easy to pass it on, it feels good.” She pockets her vape pen and stands. “But I get it. You can’t just take me for my word that I’m not luring you into a cult or recruiting you for some kind of confederated pyramid scheme,” she sighs out with understanding before tilting her head back to the trail, indicating to me to continue our walk.

“If it makes you feel better, what I’m offering isn’t just *freely* given.” She bobbles her head with her words. “You have to commit to the cause in return, but it’s endlessly worth it.” She looks up to the bleak sky as if sunshine were raining down on her face from it. “And it’s also only fair for you to see the proof of what I’m singing and praising. What do you say to one more night here, meeting the others, and following one of them on a mission?”

I’ll be damned if I say no to one more night off the street in Karma’s beautiful house, and the beautiful, clean, warm clothes. Hopefully meeting the others will be worth it, but the mission part sounds sketchy.

“What’s the mission? It’s not to kill me is it?” I ask, only half sarcastically, and she belts out a melodious laugh into the cool morning air.

“*No!*” she laughs as she turns to face me, walking backwards, obviously knowing this trail like the back of her hand. “That part comes later,” she finishes with a playful grin, before turning back around again.

But of course. That’s only what I’ve been suspecting all along.



KARMA and I continue the rest of the walk around the trails of her property. There were plenty of benches and clearings along the way, making this place almost double as a nature retreat.

When the house comes back into view, I'm struck again by how vast it is and that it's actually like a dark mauve - or plum color - maybe. The black and gold trim gives it a charming character, and the window sills are a bright white, giving just a pop of contrast.

As we near the back door that I believe leads to the kitchen, it swings open and Coal comes out, dressed in joggers, a grey t-shirt, and his hair is back in the bun again. I wonder how long it actually is. Behind him is a stunningly beautiful blonde in black leggings and a matching Calvin Klein hoodie. Her platinum hair is in a bumped-up ponytail that bounces behind her as she descends the back steps with the grace of a fox.

"Silver," Karma says, smiling at the vision maneuvering her way out from behind Coal. "This is Katherine." She gestures to me and Silver comes closer, taking me in. I'm nervous and intimidated for some reason. She looks like a Greek Goddess with her amazing muscle tone and statuesque physique, and her eyes, I realize when I finally tilt my chin up to meet them, match her name. They are an enchanting, shimmering shade of the color, and I realize she's wearing contacts. That color isn't humanly possible, and I recognize the outline of the lens.

"Hi," I say shyly, and resist the urge to look at Coal to see if he's wearing contacts too, or if his eyes are just a dark enough shade of brown that they look black.

Silver takes me in for a moment, not with scrutiny, I don't think, but curiosity, before finally holding out her hand.

"Welcome," she says, and her smile follows. It's actually compassionate and friendly, even if she is of few words.

"Coal," Karma addresses him, and he raises his eyebrows expectantly. "Do you have something planned for tonight that Katherine could accompany you on?"

He creases his forehead a moment while he thinks.

"It will be a little intense, but we might as well see what she can handle." He casts his gaze over to me, as if looking for

my concession. I look away nervously, because I don't know what I want to do. I know I want to stay here, but all this mission and cause business... I'm not sure I can handle yet. It sounds so farfetched, dangerous, and obviously, not all legal. I'm not even sure if it's moral yet.

I stuff my hands into my hoodie pouch as my shoulders shrink inward.

"I'll keep you posted," Karma says in my stead, and leads me up the back steps. Before entering the house, I chance a last look over my shoulder, wanting to get another look at the people that live here, that work this cause every day.

Silver's stance is legs shoulder-width apart as she stretches an arm across her shoulder, as if preparing for a workout that has a sudden and impromptu start when Coal pulls the hair tie from her ponytail, letting her luscious waves fall all around her head, and runs backwards, teasing her by dangling it for a moment before turning and hightailing it down the trail with her running after him, laughing.

"You know," Karma makes me jump and I let out a startled shriek. I look over to see her standing in the doorway, waiting for me. "If you decide to stay, your life begins today," she admonishes, before her eyebrows go up in realization and her head drops back with a laugh. "Ha! That rhymed!"

Oh dear lord.

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Chapter Five

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JOHN



“I need to get going,” I try to hint subtly to the dark brunette wrapped in my sheets that the party’s over.

“That’s fine.” She turns her head in my direction and gives me a sleepy smile that I’m sure is meant to give off the sexy-yet-vulnerable vibe. I’m sure it works on other guys, but to me, it just looks desperate and juvenile. “If you leave me a key I’ll be sure to lock up.”

What... in the actual...FUCK?

This stranger, whose last name I don’t even know, is asking a cop to leave her alone in his house. These badge bunnies are just getting dimmer the longer I stay on the force.

“Sorry,” I say awkwardly, as I secure my grandfather’s watch around my wrist. “I don’t give people I’ve known less than twelve hours a key to my house. Security 101.” I shrug with a playful smile that I hope is softening the blow.

Her lips curl into a pout that I can tell she doesn’t mean for me to see as she sits up, letting the sheet fall from her chest to pool in her lap. She’s got great tits and all, but I’m not such a simple creature that flashing them at me is all it’s going to take for me to give in.

“Anyway, my shift starts in half an hour so I need to get to the station.” By acting completely unfazed by her nakedness, I know I’m coming off as a prick, but sometimes that’s what it takes to get the message across. I don’t even work today.

“So where’s your uniform?” she asks, half challenging my story and half wanting the visual that will help make her little

fantasy somewhat real. She leans back on her hands and waits, not making any moves to go anywhere.

“I change at the station,” I lie, holding what is actually my gym duffel up as proof. “And I’m sorry, I don’t mean to run you off,” actually, I do, I’m just trying epically hard not to look like a dick here, “but I can’t be late.”

She huffs but pulls the sheet back and scooches to the edge of the bed. She takes her time standing in all her fantastically naked glory, and makes a point of bending over with her back to me to retrieve her purple thong from the floor.

“Well, when are we going to see each other again?” she asks, shimmying into them. “This was fun, right? You should give me your number so we can do it again.”

“We’ll see each other when we see each other,” I mumble, sitting down on the bed to lace up my boots. The thing is, I would be up for hooking up again, except I thought we had an understanding last night when I met her at Pints and Pockets, the pool hall I’m probably never going to go to again. “If we’re meant to hook up again, we’ll run into each other,” I add, trying to remind her as I switch to my other boot.

Last night, when she was draping herself over me, I tried to be frank with her; that’d we’d only be having fun - and nothing more. She seemed to be completely on the same page at first, but then when I offered to take her home after our third fuck-round, she pretended, very badly, to be asleep. To me it was sad that she’d give up her dignity, just to secure a sleepover, but I was too fucking beat, and so I made peace with the fact that I’d just have to be an asshole in the morning. I don’t get it. I try to be a nice guy by being up front and not the bastard that leads a girl on just to devastate her the next day by ghosting her. This has to be something like the fourth time it’s blown up in my face though.

I turn and look over my shoulder to see if she’s made any progress, and am frustrated to find her still only in her bra and panties.

“Look, I’m not trying to be a dick here,” I say, losing my patience, “but I’m about to be late.”

“So go,” she mumbles bitterly, holding up her shirt and pretending that turning it right side in is going to take some time and serious concentration.

“Marissa, you can’t just expect me to go and leave someone I barely know alone in my house.” I stand, exasperated, wondering if from now on I should just be a lying asshole that tells girls what they want to hear just to get in their pants. It’d probably get them out of my house quicker in the mornings.

“It’s Karissa,” she snaps, whipping her head in my direction.

Shit. Well, normally I’d feel a little foolish for not even getting her name right, but in this instance, it can probably only help my case.

“Kicking me out and not even getting my name right,” she mutters as she pulls her t-shirt over her head. “I wouldn’t have come home with you and fucked you so many times if I’d known what an asshole you actually were.”

“I’m doing nothing other than what I told you to expect,” I reason, holding my arms out as she jumps into her tight-ass jeans. “You seemed totally fine with that predetermined outcome.”

“That was before we had sex,” she snipes and places her hands on her hips. “Then when you called me baby while I was blowing you, I thought it had turned into something more and that you felt it too.”

I felt something alright, but it wasn’t this fucking magical connection that she’s imagining because I fucking called her baby. *Baby?* That was the magic word that put some kind of obsessive clinger spell on her? Good to know. I’ll be avoiding that word in the future.

I shake my head and rub nervously at the back of my neck.

“That’s just something I say, alright? It’s something a lot of guys say,” I try to explain, but she’s now engrossed in her phone, tapping away at the screen. I push my ball cap down on

my head and carry my bag out of the bedroom, hoping she'll follow my lead.

Dropping my bag by the door, I snatch up my wallet and keys in time to see her emerge from the bedroom, looking all kinds of pissed off.

“Look... Karissa,” I remember to get her name right this time as I try to make one last attempt to end this on a good note. “I’m sorry for whatever miscommunication we had...” there was none. I couldn’t have been clearer, “but I had a great time. I hope you did too, and I’ll give you a ride back to your car.”

“Don’t bother,” she snarls as she sits down to pull her ankle boots on. “I was lucky enough to find an Uber four blocks away.”

As if to reinforce her statement, I hear a car honk outside and it may as well be an angel’s trumpet. Hallelujah.

Karissa storms past me and out the door. I let out a sigh of relief, heavier than the early morning fog. I had a big day of going to the gym, the shooting range, getting some takeout, and heading to the library, but I think I’ll allow myself a few minutes to decompress from that hellish exchange. I brew a cup of coffee and seriously consider throwing a shot of whiskey in it when I decide I shouldn’t let that run-in ruin my plans for the day.

It might be time to take a hiatus from these nights of fun. They’re proving to be more stress and hassle than they’re worth. With all the hours and energy I’m putting in right now to try and make detective, I have nothing left over to put into a relationship. Having casual encounters seemed like a good alternative; just something to scratch the itch. It’ll have to be my right hand for the foreseeable future, at least until I get my shield. After that, it will take a while to prove myself and settle in, but maybe at some point I’ll get to a good place to give dating another try. For now, nothing’s coming between me and that shield.



KATHERINE

PROS

Live in a nice house

Don't have to worry about money

(Side note: Ask Karma exactly how that flies)

Get back at Allen and Caroline

CONS

Get into some sketchy shit

And...

NOTHING. There are no other cons. It's stay here and live the life with the only trade-off being whatever debauchery Karma has planned. It can't be all bad... she's gone on and on about how the society is about righting wrongs, and though it doesn't sound like it's all done by legal means, is the legal system always the right way to go?

The cops couldn't right my wrong. I was shit out of luck because my name wasn't on the lease with Allen, and all my money from the week before that he and Caroline kept was cash that I didn't think I had to put in the bank in a hurry because I thought I could trust him, that we were in love.

So many bad things happen in this world without the victims ever receiving justice. These people work to help those like them. I could be part of that; it could give me purpose.

Earlier, I tried calling the shelters to see if they're still full up, and of course they are. After that, I borrowed a notepad and pen and retreated to the beautiful guest room I spent the

night in, and here I am – sitting on this bed with Ghost sprawled on his back and trying to decide if I want to be a miserable bum on the streets, or have a home and something to live for.

“Trying to decide if you want to go back to your old life or fight crime?” a new voice says from the bedroom doorway. I look up in surprise to see another beautiful person. This one’s a badass looking woman with black hair, black jeans, black motorcycle boots, and a black crop top... It’s like America’s Top Model banged The Matrix in this house.

Apart from her hair and her attire, this girl’s eyes are a striking green, and sure enough, just like with Silver, I can see that they’re contacts.

“How’d you guess?” I ask, looking shyly away and trying not to stare.

“If you’re new to this house, then you are a stray Karma brought home. Plain and simple,” she explains, and I give a facetious nod as she steps forward, holding out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” I say quietly, giving her hand a shake. If my mind wasn’t so fucked up right now I’d play a fun guessing game with her name, going off the color of her eyes. I know a theme when I see one. Coal... Silver...

“I’m Jade,” she supplies.

“I was going to guess Sage,” I murmur, fiddling with the cuff of my sweatshirt uncomfortably. Now I’m back to feeling like I don’t belong here.

“Damn, that would have been better!” she exclaims jokingly, as she sits down on the bed and gives some attention to the cat. “Sorry I’m just now introducing myself, I’ve been in my bat cave.”

“Do I get to know anyone’s real names?” I ask. Since she’s making herself comfortable, I might as well make an attempt at conversing.

“No, sorry,” she answers, pursing her lips apologetically, “but you’ll get your turn to keep your name under wraps when

the next potential recruit comes later on down the road,” she consoles. “And if you stay, you’ll get to see us all without our contacts from time to time.”

I nod thoughtfully, looking back down at the notepad.

“Hey,” she says softly to get my attention, and I look up to meet her green eyes again. “If you have any questions, go ahead. I know the rest are probably driving you crazy being all vague and aloof. They’re just trying to protect our operation, aka, life as we know it. But you need a little more before you cut ties and commit.” She holds her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “So come on, hit me.” She curls one leg under the other, clearly settling in for a chat.

“I actually don’t have any ties to cut,” I mutter sadly. Less than twenty-four hours with this bunch and I’m letting it all hang out. I’m guessing it’s because any semblance of an ego I may’ve once had has been eviscerated.

“Well, in theory, that should make your choice easier,” she says, ignoring the sad note in my voice, which I’m grateful for. “But there’s still so much you don’t know, which keeps you at square one.”

I nod, looking back down at the notepad, not indulging her. Her eyes flutter down to the notepad.

“I see you already have a question about finances,” she muses, and I have to admit, I’m itching to know.

“It’s just...” I puff out a breath and sit back against the pillows. “How do you all live under the radar but are still able to pay for all this?” I wave a hand around at the beautiful room.

“Money is not so much of a commodity in the society.” Her black bracelets jangle as she runs a hand through her raven hair. “We have our ways, but if your curiosity is insatiable, let’s just say most of those who we’re trying to take down a few pegs have money - I actually have a lot to do with that part - and not to mention the society is generations old and has a pretty lofty foundation.”

“I see,” I say feebly, feeling overwhelmed. “So, what do you do? Take them down in dark alleys? Hang them upside down and shake out their pockets?”

Her eyes light up as they crinkle at the sides in a knowing smile.

“Silver delights in that tactic once in a while, but no, not usually. We typically go about it by more subtle, undetectable means. That’s where I come in. I’m something of a... cyber specialist?” She squints one eye in thought. “Cyber expert? I haven’t come up with a clever title for myself yet,” she admits, letting out a chuckle.

“So you, what, digitally extract money from their bank accounts?”

“I’m afraid I can’t admit to anything just yet,” she smirks.

“You need me to commit first,” I say, stating rather than questioning.

She opens her mouth to respond before Coal’s body fills the doorway.

“I’m leaving shortly,” he informs us while leaning a forearm against the frame. “Will you be joining me?”

I nervously look to Jade, for what, I don’t know... Some kind of encouragement or reassurance, perhaps? She stares back at me hard, but I don’t miss the way the corners of her mouth are slightly tilted, almost undetectably. I look around at the comforts of the room, at Ghost, who looks perfectly at peace, purring away between us.

I finally look to Coal and give him a nod.

“You’ll need to get changed,” he tells me.

“Into what?” I ask, looking down at the same comfy designer clothes Karma outfitted me with. The leggings and hoodie are extremely casual but in the way a celebrity looks like they pay thousands of dollars to look like they don’t care. Not hating it.

“I’ve got you,” Jade supplies, hopping off the bed, and as she scurries around the corner past Coal, he gives her ass a

light smack which immediately prompts her to turn and swat his shoulder. “Coal, don’t be a dick!” she shouts, her voice slightly fading down the hall.

“Meet me downstairs in five.” Coal throws me a wink before backing back into the hallway.

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Chapter Six

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KATHERINE



A heavy-duty black truck awaits in the expansive garage a half-acre off the house. Clad in warm black leggings and boots, and a just as warm outdoor black jacket with a hood and gloves, I reach up to open the passenger side door and am surprised when I feel Coal's large presence behind me and taking hold of my thighs, just below my ass, boosting me up into the cab.

The gesture is like a long awaited embrace around my soul. It gives me a sense of security and comfort. It felt natural and familiar, like I've belonged here all along.

After the truck is warmed up, Coal backs us out of the garage and into the night.

Every organ in my chest is tightening and twisting around each other in anxiety of what I'm about to witness; what I'm about to take part in, and I ignore it as what Karma would probably see as another sign that I care about my life.

Okay, so I don't want to go to jail as an accomplice to murder, destruction, genocide, or whatever the hell Coal has planned for his mission tonight.

"So... do I get to ask where we're going yet?"

"A fighting ring," he says plainly in his low tenor, not taking his eyes off the deserted road.

Oh.

Great.

This is already off to a promising start.

I close my arms around myself, trying to keep my nerves contained.

“What are we...” I trail off, hesitantly.

“We’re going to break one up,” he explains vaguely, and I assume he means a fight.

Well, that sounds like a good deed, I think to myself. Dangerous, but not as bad as I thought.

Coal, I notice, is dressed incredibly similar to how I am - head to toe in black. This is all very Mission Impossible. Not to mention uncomfortable with all the silence.

“So...” I weakly attempt a conversation, and I don’t know why. Just last night I was perfectly content to be left the hell alone, but the nerves and anxiety of all this uncertainty is a bit much. “Are you and Silver... together? Or... you and Jade?” I ask, remembering the subtle but confusing hints at the house.

“Neither. This lifestyle isn’t very conducive to relationships. They’re hard to come by within the society and forbidden outside the society or the Reach.”

I’m so confused.

“The Reach?”

“They’re normal civilians on the outside but whom the society trusts to help carry out certain orders of business,” he explains.

“So, everyone is just single?” I ask.

“Not necessarily. Relationships are possible; they’re just not very easy to get into, so members tend to... turn to each other for affections.”

Got it.

So part of being in the Society means kissing relationships goodbye. No argument here.

We drive a good forty minutes or so, never getting on any freeways or main roads, and I’m wondering if that may be the key to the length of the drive. When we finally pull down a dirt driveway, Coal kills the headlights, making us bump

around in almost frightening darkness for about an eighth of a mile before we come into a clearing where a dark, ram-shackled house sits. The God-forsaken place is tiny and looks more desolate than the Crow Bar.

The place looks deserted with its dark windows, random car parts laying in the yard that is more dirt than grass, and rotted plywood along the sidings. Though the house itself is the size of a postage stamp, it's got dangerous, wicked-looking fencing extending outwards from both sides that looks like someone simply twisted together some chain link, barbed wire, and tin paneling. I can't help but notice that the only meager light around this place is from a floodlight over that back fenced-in area.

Coal turns the truck around so that it's facing away from the sorry excuse for a house before turning to me, pinning me with his charcoal eyes.

"Get in the driver's seat and keep the engine running. You stay here, do not get out, no matter what you think may be going on." He reaches between the seats behind us as I gawk in fear, and retrieves a big black shotgun-looking thing that has to be an assault rifle.

"Jesus!" I can't help but yelp as I shrink back against the window, holding my hands balled together at my mouth.

"Shhh..." Coal leans over, switching the offending firearm to the other hand and reaching over to place a hand on my arm. "Relax. This is just to scare people, we're not killing anyone. Not tonight, anyway," he adds.

Oh. How nice. I feel much better.

I tremble, my head in a daze, feeling like I'm going to pass out from fear before he snaps me back to the moment, his voice gruff.

"Hey. In or out? Tell me now." His eyes are intense, letting me know this is a do or die moment. My mind flashes through a montage of Karma's comforting hand on my back as I broke down on the street, the warm, soft bed I slept in with Ghost, the cat, curled up on my pillow, the smiles and laughs I saw

between Coal and Silver this morning, and Jade with laughter in her eyes.

It all comes together and forces me to nod, despite my inability to form words.

“Alright then,” Coal grumbles. “Get behind the wheel but don’t strap in, and as soon as you see that passenger door open,” he nods at the one I’m leaning back against, “drive.”

I nod again, swallowing hard before he exits the truck, slamming the door behind him.

Shaking, I unbuckle and ease myself over into the driver’s seat. My heart is galloping, making it ring in my ears as I fumble for the controls to move the seat so I can reach the pedals. Damn, Coal has long legs. I feel like I’m going to slide off the leather and fall into an abyss. I finally find a switch on the left and tilt it forward to move the seat closer. The wheel still feels hard to reach, but at least I’ve got a hold of it, and my feet can reach the pedals. I look around to get my bearings, and I’m relieved to find an automatic gear shift on my right.

I take in a deep breath, once again, trying to cleanse all the toxic mojo from my lungs, but it catches in my throat when I hear the blast of a gun being fired, followed by two more. I jump in my seat, unable to keep in a yelp and a shriek. I tuck into myself again, trying to hold all my parts together so they don’t fall out and run away at the sound of more shots being fired.

Frantically, I look around outside the truck, but I see nothing. I look to the back that’s facing the house and yard and see the silhouettes of several people scattering, heads ducked. They disperse like cockroaches, as if parting to reveal the larger figure coming up behind them all. The large, backlit figure gets closer and closer to the truck, and then I hear a loud thump before a smaller, but still large figure retreats back in the direction of the light.

I feel a bead of sweat roll down my temple, courtesy of my heart working overtime, and I’m on the verge of hyperventilating when I see another figure as large as the first coming my way again. There’s another loud thump that shakes

the truck before the tailgate gets slammed upwards. I look around for Coal, never feeling more freaked out or confused as to what's happening right now.

The passenger door behind me opens, and I frantically turn forward and reach for the gear shift when I suddenly remember that that wasn't the door Coal indicated I should start driving when I saw it open. I feel a buzzing in my cheeks, a signal that I'm about to pass out, and I lower the window just enough for some fresh air.

"Back window, too," I hear Coal's voice instruct me suddenly from just outside the back seat, accompanied by some whimpering, whining, and scratching. The back door slams, reminding me I'm a beat behind here, and I fumble for more window controls until the back windows go down.

The side passenger door pops open and I jump, trying to get the truck and myself into gear.

"Drive!" Coal barks as he hoists himself up on the running board and I lay on the gas, gripping the wheel like it's my lifeline. The truck is moving before Coal is completely in the cab, but this doesn't faze him as he expertly maneuvers himself into the seat and slams the door. I reach for the headlights, but he stops me. "Keep the lights off, don't worry about seeing. Just go completely straight until I tell you to turn left."

"Okay," I squeak out and frantically nod, more to reassure myself than him. I can do this. I can operate a giant monster truck along a dirt road in the pitch darkness.

"Gun it!" Coal growls again and I put my foot to the floor, making us bounce and bump and the tires grind against the dirt and gravel. I welcome the cold breeze that sweeps my hair away from my forehead, as if Mother Nature is trying to give me a cool compress. "Left!" he yells suddenly, and I jerk the wheel sideways, making us slide and screech against the newfound pavement.

"Whoa, easy!" Coal hollers as we both lean right, and to my surprise, he starts laughing.

Laughing.

What the fuck...

“What?” I ask, voicing my confusion.

“You could have taken it normally; you didn’t have to turn so hard,” he says, still chuckling.

“Oh... yeah,” I respond sarcastically. “This is all fun and games. You just disappeared and fired a gun that you said you weren’t going to fire,”

“They fired at me first,” he interjects. “And I never said I wouldn’t fire it. I said I wasn’t going to kill anyone. Warning shots and returned fire don’t count,” he finishes, satisfied with his defense as he reaches into the back. I hear scuffling and whining, reminding me that we’ve got company back there.

“What’s back there, anyway?” I demand, still freaking out. This little shadowing Coal on a mission was supposed to clear up some questions, and I’m more confused than ever.

“Just a couple of adorable pit bulls we just rescued,” he supplies, before turning back to me. “Alright, you’re safe to turn the headlights on but don’t slow down, and let me take over.”

“What? How does that work?” My forehead furrows as I try to figure out how I’m not supposed to slow down but let him take over. It’s then that he reaches a leg over the console and shifts next to me, his boot replacing mine on the gas. Then he grabs hold of my waist and pulls me across his lap. It would be a swift maneuver if not for the steering wheel digging into my thighs during the moment of transition. I catch a whiff of spice and sage as he guides me across his lap and into the passenger seat.

“Fuck, how short are you?” He grimaces as he adjusts the seat, and I feel my eyes roll.

“So what happens now?” I ask, thankful I’m actually able to see the road now, even though I’m not the one driving.

“On to the fun part,” he replies, and I can just barely make out a small smirk on his face in the dash lights.

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Chapter Seven

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KATHERINE



I don't know the area well, but I'm pretty sure we've driven past the vicinity of the house and in the opposite direction, as I can just make out the city lights in the distance. It's making me wonder if I failed tonight's mission and Coal is taking me back to town to dump me on a random corner. But instead, he takes a turn down yet another road I've never heard of, and then down two more that aren't even marked before approaching another secluded structure. I see houses in the distance but they are spaced far apart, and the closest one is at least a quarter mile away.

There's a large parking lot that's completely empty, its lamps not even on; probably not even working. Still, Coal pulls around to the back. After putting the truck in park, he turns to me.

"You ready?" he asks, his gaze intense, letting me know I'm about to see something serious; hopefully something that will clue me into the inner workings of the society. Looking to the back seat, I see the two dogs scrambling around, still scared and unsure of what's happening. I look back at him, sure of my answer.

"Yeah."

"Get your gloves on," he says, grabbing his own from the console and nodding to mine that are sitting on the armrest. He pops his door open and I follow his lead, walking around to meet him on the other side of the vehicle where he's opening the back door, two leashes in hand. He's met with more scrambling and growling.

“Hey, hey, it’s alright,” he chides the two dogs that I still haven’t gotten a good look at. “Calm down, you’re safe now,” he continues in a soothing tone I’m betting he reserves just for animals - like these dogs. “Hey,” he looks over his shoulder at me. “Go to the glove box and grab the big Ziploc bag in there would you?”

I nod and go back to retrieve what he’s asking for, finding a large Ziploc bag full of some kind of meat. I can barely see with how dark it is, but it looks like cooked chunks of steak. I circle back around to Coal where he now has the two pit bulls, one red, one brown and white, on their leashes.

“Take a few pieces out, and take one of these,” he instructs holding one of the leashes out.

So this is how I go out, I think. I’m going to have my face bitten off by an abused fighting dog. Even so, I trust Coal and reach for the leash he’s holding out to me. I take a few morsels of steak out of the bag and hand the rest to Coal as the brown and white creature jerks and yanks on the leash.

“Get down to his level and hold a treat out to him, palm open,” Coal says, squatting down to the red dog to demonstrate. The dog fearfully advances, and carefully takes the treat from his hand. Coals fingers, miraculously, are still attached however.

I hesitantly crouch down, trying to keep a tight hold on the leash as the dog lurches against it. I hold a piece of steak out in my palm, keeping it flat. The dog snatches it out of my hand and turns away from me, still lunging away while trying to chew.

“Do it again,” Coal encourages. “Hold it out and wait patiently. I do it again, and again, until I run out of treats. This dog is no closer to trusting me, but he’s not trying to run either, clearly wondering if there’s more food.

“Take this,” Coal holds his leash out to me and I hesitantly grab it. One dog is one thing, but I don’t know if I’m strong enough to hold back two. I wrap both straps around each of my hands, praying I’m not about to be dragged helplessly down the road. He heads towards the back of the truck and I

gingerly follow, seriously scared to make one false move with these feral creatures. I watch as Coal lowers the tailgate, and I'm shocked at what I see.

Even in the darkness, I can see two dog cages – with humans inside them. Completely folded and scrunched, the two men are groaning and shivering, no doubt from the chilly, open-air ride they just had.

“Evening, gentlemen,” Coal greets before ducking back to the extended cab to retrieve his gun. He comes back around to the now struggling men, his shotgun resting on his shoulder. He casually opens each of the cages with his free hand. “Welcome to justice.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, you crazy son of a bitch?!” one of them shouts as he savagely tries to escape his enclosure, looking more like an animal than the dogs I have leashed. Coal simply watches, amused, as the man wriggles free from the cage, dropping to the asphalt in a heap. With his head towards me, I can see a patch of dark blood matting just at his hairline. Damn, Coal is a beast.

“What?” he asks, in mock defense. “I’m just treating you the way I’ve seen you treat these animals the last two weeks.”

“Fuck off!” the guy yells back as the other one continues to squirm and struggle, trying to get out of his cage. For the most part, this is scaring the shit out of me and making me sick to my stomach, but one tiny, twisted voice in the back of my mind thinks it’s pretty clever; Coal having these guys ride in cages in the flatbed while the dogs get seats inside the cab.

“I don’t know what the fuck you did with my phone, asshole, but someone back at the pit has called the cops on you by now!” the vocal one threatens.

“Doubtful,” Coal returns, calmly.

“You came onto my property with malicious intent!” the man yells, getting to his feet. The movement makes Coal cock his gun, the ratcheting sound making me jump, and it echoes off the brick walls of the building. In one fluid movement, he’s got the gun up against his shoulder and aimed at the man.

“*You* are the one with malicious intent,” he corrects the man in a low voice that seeps out from between his clenched teeth. “*My* intent is completely righteous. And just how, exactly, would any of your spectators report me to the police? They can’t exactly report me without giving an address, and seeing as how yours is a hot spot for animal cruelty and God knows whatever other illegal activity...” he trails off, leaving the men, who now have their hands up, to fill in the blanks.

“Violet,” Coal utters the word, and I look to him to see what made him say it, only to find his eyes dead set on me, both black pools sending a hard, profound message. I keep my eyes focused on his, trying to receive it, as the dogs get restless and start pulling on the leashes. “Reach in my jacket pocket and grab the key,” he orders, tilting his head slightly at the building.

Switching both leashes to one hand, I approach Coal, trying to ignore the giant gun he has locked and possibly loaded, and reach into the side pocket of his jacket until I feel my fingers close around jagged metal. I pull the key out, and don’t wait for him to instruct me further. He probably doesn’t need these animal abusing assholes to know he’s basically training a newbie tonight. I fit the key in the lock and turn it over, unlatching the battered metal door. As it swings open, Coal jerks his head in my direction, motioning for the men to enter.

After the door closes behind us all, Coal has me retrieve two food and water dishes that were set up here beforehand. I pour food and bottled water into the bowls and release the dogs, letting them chow down. They’re so hungry, and again, without being asked, I decide to take the rest of the steak bites and use them as a garnish.

This place appears to be an old rest area or community center. By the propane lamp Coal has lit, I can see dingy, tiled walls with rusted shower heads lining the top, and the air smells old and musty.

“Now,” Coal announces like a ringleader with his gun propped on his shoulder again. “While these dogs enjoy a

square meal for once, they're going to watch the two of you fight."

The looks on both men are terrified; stunned silent. The chatty one is speechless all of a sudden as his eyes look wildly around the room, from Coal, to me, to the dogs, to who I'm guessing won't be his buddy much longer. Speaking of, his gangly friend of few words swallows hard and looks to his friend, assessing him, knowing he can't take him.

As for me, I'm standing, taking it all in. My heart is pounding, sending my blood cells careening through my veins like chaotic, speeding cars on the freeway. Every limb is pulsing, and despite the fear dancing with adrenaline in my chest, my breathing is remarkably slow and steady.

"Come on," Coal gives them a verbal nudge. "It's only fair right? You make them fight," he nods at the happily eating dogs, "for nothing but your own enjoyment and to make a little cash you're going to blow on drugs and alcohol. It's your turn to entertain us, by fighting like the dogs you are." His voice gets lower and more menacing with every word, making me picture a cunning cobra, uncoiling and preparing to strike. "Oh, and what do you do with the dog who loses?"

I actually hear the quiet one whimper, and he's obviously trying to contain it, but it bursts out of his throat in a wail. The one with the mouth begins to sweat and shake, though neither of them makes a move at each other.

"I could stand here all night, but I really don't feel like it, so let me give you a little more incentive, guys," Coal says, his eyes looking heavy in a bored expression. "Just like you do with the dogs, if you refuse to fight, you're going to be punished, which means I'll be using this bad boy," he pats the butt of his gun. "But I won't be making it quick or going for a kill shot if you know what I mean." He pauses, looking intently between the two men, letting that idea sink in for them. The quiet one falls to his knees, crying like a scared child while his friend stares back at Coal in anguish.

"You sick son of a bitch," he says, his voice quivering in his throat.

“No, that would be you,” Coal corrects with finality. “I’m simply a messenger of Karma, carrying out what’s coming to you. This is your day of reckoning, gentlemen. What goes around... comes around.”



WE ROLL up to the beautiful house just as day is breaking, and I have an immediate sense of home. Though my endorphins from the night’s events are coursing through me, I’m thinking things like how I can’t wait to go up to *my room* and fall asleep in *my bed*. I feel at home.

Coal puts the truck in park and I immediately hop out, welcoming the slight sting of the soles of my feet hitting the dewy grass. I straighten up and draw in a deep breath of cold, humid morning air. For the first time in weeks, my lungs feel cleansed. I feel like all this time I’ve done nothing but tell myself to breathe, trying to expel the toxic energy to no avail, and at this moment, everything finally feels clear. I feel charged, energetic, excited, and healthy. It’s like the exhilaration is making my blood pump harder and faster, flushing out all the garbage.

Everything that transpired even took my mind off of Allen and Caroline. It was only briefly and the pain is still there, but it’s... dulled somehow. Adrenaline is one hell of a drug, I guess, but I’ll take this high.

“You look damn good for being up all night,” Coal observes, coming around from the other side of the truck. I look up to see his expression is not one of lust, but of appreciation and encouragement. “In fact, you look better. There’s some color to you now. Maybe a night of illicit do-gooding was what you needed.”

“Oh my God,” I blow out on another therapeutic breath. “That’s crazy, but...” I shake my head, unbelieving of what’s happening to my body and mind right now. This moment feels so pivotal and rejuvenating. I feel renewed. “I don’t know, I

just feel... alive,” I explain the best I can, still trying to fill up my lungs with this delicious air.

“You did good, too,” Coal compliments. “I mean, you freaked out of course, but that was only natural for your first time at this, but you stayed on track and even took initiative a couple of times. I think this is a good fit for you, at least in comparison to your previous plans.” He smirks, and all I can do is nod as I flip through my memories of the night; how those two despicable men could only handle twenty minutes of pummeling each other to bloody pulps until they fell to their knees at Coal’s feet, begging him for mercy... mercy they had no intention of showing their dogs. Coal showed none at first, making them continue another five minutes before making them crawl back into their crates and driving us all to one of the most incredible places I’ve ever seen, next to Karma’s house.

The animal sanctuary sat on what had to be at least six acres of land. Run by a pretty young woman named Allison and her husband, James, this place had the coziest kennels with plenty of room, comfy dog beds, and gourmet food that was made right in their kitchen.

Assholes one and two were forced to make a vow to volunteer their time under the couple’s - who I soon learned are members of the Reach - watchful eyes, understanding that they’d be reporting to Coal. They didn’t need to be told that Coal knew how to find them if they strayed.

The whole experience was noble and spiritual, and though unlawful, felt so just. The conflict I felt before last night has all but faded.

“I think this may be breathing life back into me,” I breathlessly muse out loud, before my body receives the shock of Coal colliding with it, backing me up against the truck. Warm, firm lips are working up my neck, and his strong hands are groping up the sides of my body.

“Coal?” I sputter, trying to get my head around what’s happening. It’s sudden and unwanted... or is it? I can’t decide. I wasn’t expecting it; I hadn’t even given it a thought. But my

mind is spinning and my pheromones are awakening at his touch, his closeness. It's primal, yet it feels intimate. "What are you doing?" I manage to squeak out, gripping his biceps through his jacket, unsure if I want to push him away or pull him closer.

"I'm just feeling it right now," he growls into my neck. "You're feeling it too, aren't you?"

I'm definitely feeling *something* here. Complete bewilderment, oddly aroused, and a steel pipe digging into my hip as Coal presses into me harder. A traitorous moan escapes me as he peels back the opening of my jacket to run his lips along the small patch of exposed skin on my chest.

"I... I don't know," I moan out, sounding pathetic and not at all convincing. I won't deny this would be a good way to wipe Allen from my sexual memory, being that the traitorous asshole is the last guy I was with, but I'm seriously blindsided, not just by this happening, but how I'm responding to it. "I don't know if this is a good idea," I choke out in a hurried stream of words, just as I feel his tongue sneak out to taste my skin.

"It's a great idea," he says in my ear as he suckles on my lobe. "This is the best time to do this, while the adrenaline is still making your blood rush."

He has no idea how right he is. My mind is telling me this is wrong but it can't come up with a good reason why. Meanwhile, my body is loving every incremental sensation.

Coal's hand travels down my back to my ass, squeezing my right cheek before gliding around to the front. His large hand cups my sex through my leggings, and the warmth I feel right through the material seems to draw all the blood from the rest of my body to right where he's touching, and I can't help the wanton moan it elicits.

My mind and my body are on polar ends of the spectrum. My body sure as hell wants to go as far as Coal wants to take this, but my mind doesn't want to... or does it just think it *shouldn't* want to? I don't fucking know.

I find my hips involuntarily rolling, trying to ride his hand for about a second and a half, before I decide I don't want to hate myself later and push Coal away. I take several steps away, trying to give myself some space.

"Are you okay?" I hear him ask behind me as I thrust both hands in my hair in frustration and embarrassment.

"I just... I'm confused, and... I don't know you. We shouldn't be doing that."

"Katherine, it's okay."

"It's not okay!" I protest, whipping around to face him. "I hardly know you, and I let you touch me!"

"What's bothering you more is that you liked it." He tilts his chin up with a knowing confidence that makes me want to scream. "Don't think I didn't notice."

I stare him down trying to think of a way to tell him he's wrong, but that would be a lie. I did like it. It felt good and I wanted the relief following through would have given me. Not wanting to admit it, I break eye contact and look down at the damp grass.

"Katherine, I told you last night that Society members often look to each other to fulfill certain needs. That's all this was," he reasons again.

"Well I'm not used to that," I respond, twisting my hands into my hair again.

"You've never had sex just to do it?"

"No," I begrudgingly admit, and I hear him huff out a sigh.

"So it was too soon for you. I'm sorry." I can hear just a hint of remorse in his voice, just enough to humble me, and I turn back to face him.

"It's okay. To be honest you were right, and I feel a little foolish."

"Don't," he tells me as he takes a few steps towards me and I let him. "You're fresh off your first mission, and it was too much too fast."

We stand a few feet apart from each other for a few moments before I get antsy and uncomfortable.

“I hate this,” I lament. “I probably can’t stay now because things are so awkward.” I rub a hand across my forehead, still feeling embarrassed, confused, and tired.

“There’s no need for it to be awkward unless we make it so. The best way to avoid that is to not disappear right after the deed. That makes the next time you see each other uncomfortable and weird. Sticking around and hanging out for a while helps dissolve that tension, so talk to me, ask me something, or tell me your favorite animal or color. Anything that will help you relax around me again.”

I actually chuckle at his attentive offering to make me comfortable, and take just a few steps away, not in offense, but just to give myself a little personal space while we get back on the same page.

“Well, there’s one thing I’m curious about. Back at the place we took those men... you said the word ‘violet’. What did that mean?” I look over to him for an answer.

“I was afraid of putting your identity in danger,” he says, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “I know it was dark and there’s more than one Katherine in this world, but anonymity is something we take seriously in the society.” I nod, considering this as he continues. “And those pajamas you wore the other night that Karma gave you seemed to suit you. Despite how dark your energy was that night, that color on you... I feel like it helped me see what you could be if you were happy; if things could be right in your world.”

“That...” I pause, taking in all the words that I truly believe he means, “feels really good to hear, actually. Thank you.”

“Yeah,” he nods.

“And everyone in the society has the name of a color,” I muse out loud, feeling a small smile crack the corner of my mouth.

Violet.

I'm interested to know who she is... and if I could be her.

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Chapter Eight

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KATHERINE



We vow
With our people, to unite,
To work together
To make the wrong things right

We do wrong
Only to those
Who do wrong

We help those that help us
Our code knows no bounds
What goes around,
Comes around

I hadn't noticed the plaque above the fireplace the other night, nor the symbol at the top of the words that is identical to the tattoo I'd seen on Coal's chest. The sentiment correlates with what I saw Coal carry out last night.

I continue to stand here in the spacious, light, two-story living room, reading those words over and over, trying to decide if I can live by this code or not. I've always been a rule-follower. I've abided by laws. What this society is about is morally just by what I've seen, and the way I felt this morning was very telling as to what I could do in good conscience. I

guess it's the idea of getting caught doing this shit that scares me most at this point.

"I get the feeling if your choice was to leave you would have by now." Karma's voice interrupts my thoughts and startles the living daylights out of me. I slam a hand to my chest, trying to keep my heart inside my body as I see her standing in the entryway that leads to the kitchen.

"Do you have to do the whole creepy lady thing?" I ask, making her laugh as she steps further into the room.

"Coal said you held your own last night," she mentions. "This is definitely something you could do if you wanted to."

"Did you start the Society?" I ask, turning to her. I know my question is abrupt, but I feel like some invisible clock is ticking and I want more answers before I decide.

"No," she says with a calm seriousness that quickly disappears before her eyes brighten. "I'm the fourth Karma."

"What was your name before?"

"Ocean," her smile continues. "I wore bright blue contacts," she says. Her eyes widen like she's trying to get me to picture it.

"What about your name before that?" I ask. Clearly she was a regular member before she became the leader known as Karma.

She quirks a playful eyebrow at me as if to say *nice try* and I relent, moving on to the next question.

"So how does no one get caught doing these things?"

"Coal told you about the Reach," she states instead of asking as she walks over to take a seat on the couch.

"People on the outside that help with the cause?"

"Very elite and trusted individuals that function as normal civilians in the community," she nods. "People that can help and that wouldn't turn on the Society. There are doctors, a club owner or two, a lot of lawyers, and even a judge."

“Wow...” I muse, seriously impressed. I have to admit it makes me feel more secure. “How do you know none of them will turn; expose the Society?”

“Because each one is someone we’ve helped,” she explains solemnly. “If they expose us, they go down with us as accessories at the very least. The concept of karma would come to them immediately,” she explains casually as she shifts around to get comfortable. “All the questions tell me you’re considering it.”

“Why do you want me to?” I level her with a serious stare. “I’m not committing to anything without knowing the truth. Why are you so hell-bent on recruiting me?”

She draws in a breath, probably trying to find a way to best explain it.

“I was looking for someone to help, as we often do. A big part of what we do is simply do what we can to help those who have been wronged, and we do it quietly without requiring any reciprocity. Our reward is simply knowing that the scales have been tipped back closer to even for the time being. But when I saw you, it was like looking in a goddamn mirror. I didn’t jump to any conclusions, I was going to help you either way, but somehow it felt like simply getting you back on your feet wouldn’t be enough. It feels like a whole new life may be called for here.”

A new life.

And maybe something called purpose?

Before, my purpose in life was simply surviving it. And then almost all of my will was taken away to do even that.

“So... this new life you’re talking about,” I take a shuddery breath, trying to even fathom it. “Is it like Coal, and Silver, and Jade? New name, anonymity... new eye color?”

Karma looks down as she slowly nods.

“There are a few steps in the process that come first, but yes.”

“Like what?” I ask, not wasting time getting all the answers I can.

“First off, you need to tell us your whole story, painful as it might be to tell. And then that will be followed by a contract that reflects your commitment, as well as serving as an NDA of sorts.”

“That all makes sense,” I murmur, nodding, as I look up to the plaque again, trying to absorb the vow it represents. “Anything else?” I ask, just as Silver appears in the doorway, a giddy and mischievous smile lighting up her silver eyes as she leans against the frame.

“You have to *die*,” she fills in with a tinkling giggle.

I blow out a breath and close my eyes as the statement hits me hard in the chest.

I knew it.



“CAROLINE WAS MY FOSTER SISTER,” I recount, trying not to pay attention to the scratching needles on the grid paper, or my heart rate being displayed on the monitor that Jade is watching.

The core members of the Society have shown me an immense amount of trust for not knowing me, so when they asked that I tell my story under lie detection, I had to agree. It’s time to show them that they can trust me, too. I only hope that Jade is taking into account my nervousness and mortification at telling my difficult tale to her, Silver, and Karma all at once.

“Just after graduation, she met a guy, Nick. She moved in with him across town. I found a job in a coffee shop and moved into this cramped one-bedroom apartment with two co-workers. Caroline and I still talked about once or twice a week, but I got busy, pulling extra shifts, trying to save up to get my own place, which was hard to do with my paychecks spent before I got them.”

I chance a sideways glance up at Karma, who has now pulled out a vape pen and places it in her mouth. She looks up at me over the end of it with interest; patience. She doesn't rush me to continue, but I do anyway, looking back down at the floor.

“After about six months, she came and found me in the café, and told me all about how she and Nick had broken up over her new job. She was wearing nice clothes and she looked incredible. In fact, she looked only mildly upset over the breakup. She told me how she'd found a job as a stripper and was making an unbelievable amount of money as a headliner on the weekends. She talked me into taking a job at the club she worked at, vouching that in just two nights I could make more there than I did waitressing at the café. Not as much as I would if I were to take my clothes off, but still, really good money.

“While it didn't feel like my scene, the money appealed to me and I gave it a shot. I was amazed at what I made in tips just working Thursday through Saturday night, and it left me free to keep my job at the café where I met Allen one morning when he came in and ordered an Americano. I was helpless against those dangerous good looks and that heart of gold. We fell in love, hard and fast, and within a week, he moved me into his apartment with him, professing that he wanted to keep me safe, comfortable, and cared for.

“He looked so polished, with a good head on his shoulders, so unlike the male figures I grew up with in the homes. And his personality seemed to be more than in accordance with the warm, dimpled smile he always gave me. He was okay with my job at the strip club, even though there were rules in place for the strippers and waitresses not to have their significant others come around. He'd occasionally show up inconspicuously, stating that he wanted to make sure I was safe.

“I loved him for that. I loved him for everything from his smile that I thought he only brought out just for me, to his protective arm around me when we slept.

“As I mentioned, Allen would sometimes come in and spend some money and I would feign not knowing him as anything more than a customer. One time I even got away with giving him a quick lap dance. In the beginning before she knew who he was, I noticed Caroline using her moves on him, but I didn’t worry too much. I figured she was just trying to get his patronage, and besides, from what I could see, he brushed her off.

“I was on top of the world for three months, and then one night, one of the headlining strippers got sick just a half hour before she was supposed to take the stage for her last dance of the night. Caroline had this crazy idea for me to fill in, that it would be just for the night and it would be an amazing cash cow. I’d watched all the other girls’ shows and felt like I could maybe dance, but I didn’t know the first thing about the pole. She assured me that a seductive dance and stripping down to my panties during a four-minute song was all it would take. She didn’t know how right she was.”

I go on to tell them how I’d texted Allen from across the room to see how he felt about it. He wasn’t crazy about the idea, but since he happened to be there, said he’d feel okay with me trying it out. I was shy, but a couple glasses of champagne helped loosen me up and I strutted on stage. Dancing while I stripped out of a flight attendants’ uniform, I tried to have fun, pretend no one was there, and that I was somewhere else - all the things Caroline suggested for me to get through it.

“When the song was over, I opened my eyes to dollar bills everywhere. The stage was littered with them, as well as 5’s 10’s and even a couple of 20’s. When all was said and done, I made two hundred dollars in just four minutes. Now I understood why Caroline did it. She congratulated me backstage with hugs and high fives, but looking back now, there was something about her smile... it didn’t quite reach her eyes. There was an intense look of concentration about them; like she’d gone to some other place in her mind.

“After excitedly jumping Allen in the parking lot after the show, I let him know that they wanted me to dance again the

following week. The money I brought home was enough to get Allen on board. So the next week, on a Friday night at peak hours, I returned to MINX, only this time, I went to the dressing room instead of the bar. I'd do my one dance, and then hit the floor to wait tables."

As I get closer to the turning point in the story, I can see Silver shifting in her seat and Jade pressing her lips into a thin line. I don't know how long they've been in the Society, but clearly they aren't completely immune to hearing these grim stories.

"Caroline was nowhere to be found, which was odd," I continue, my heart beginning to hurt as I close in on the pivotal moment where it all went sideways. "She lived for working Friday nights because she made bank. Allen couldn't drive me that night either, claiming he had a poker night with his friends. My nerves were in overdrive not having my two favorite people with me that night, but after a couple of shots I powered through, just like I did the first time, only better."

Afterwards, I had tucked my earnings into my black sequined clutch and stored it in my locker while I changed into the black rubber tank dress monstrosity I had to wear while serving drinks. After tying my hair up in a sexy-messy knot, I texted both my friend and my boyfriend before tucking my phone in my apron. Working the rest of the night was agony, going over every possible reason I wasn't hearing back from either of them.

After my shift, I anxiously begged a coworker for a ride home, and when I got to Allen's apartment building, I almost threw up when I saw Caroline's car in the lot. I knew what I was going to walk in on, but I couldn't exactly wander away somewhere and pretend it wasn't happening. I used the pain and impending heartache to power myself up the stairs, getting my key out and ready so that I could quickly storm in and catch them.

I heard the moaning before I even put my key in the lock, and sure enough, when the door swung open, I found the only two people I'd ever loved in this shitty world fucking each other on the couch. She was riding him and I could tell,

exaggerating her moaning and screaming. Then she looked up and saw me... and kept right on going. This was what she had wanted.

“I felt like I had been stabbed in both the heart and the stomach simultaneously,” I admit, the tears finally starting to fall down my cheeks. “And I couldn’t think of a single reason *why*.” A hand clasps mine in my lap, and I turn to see that Silver has come to squat down by my chair. She gives my hand a squeeze and looks up at me, encouraging me to continue and letting me know that she’s got me through this.

“When Allen looked up and saw me, he startled, stiffening momentarily with an unsure expression on his face, like he didn’t know if he wanted to stop and save face or just keep going because the damage was done. Caroline, on the other hand, looked over her shoulder at me, giving me an effortlessly devious smile before tilting her head to something just to my right.

“My stomach churned and my lungs still refused to inflate, I felt dizzy as I followed her gaze to find several of my own bags, along with a couple of trash bags stuffed haphazardly with my belongings.

“I felt the blood drain from my face and my stomach lurched. I took a few hurried strides to the sink where I involuntarily emptied my stomach. The sight is literally sickening, and the reality feels like bitter death.

“With my head still spinning, I looked up to see Caroline now standing beside the couch, throwing a pillow over Allen’s crotch before pulling on his t-shirt.

“Way to ruin a good moment, you pathetic cunt,” she spit out with an eye roll.

“What the fuck is going on?” I whimper from the back of my throat before choking on a sob. “What’s happening, why are you doing this?”

“Oh, sweetie,” Caroline mocked her remorse as she strode up to me smugly. “All I can say is this was a long time coming.”

“Confused and destroyed, I looked over to Allen who was pulling his sweats on and forcing himself not to look at me. He had nothing to say, nothing to offer; he was simply content to throw me out so he could fuck my sister.

“Afraid of vomiting again, I grabbed for the bags, feeling my eyes sting with tears, my face and my insides twisting in pain. As I made my way to the door, Caroline was still standing by with a satisfied smile on her face. With her arms crossed, she looked completely justified, and I still didn’t understand. I didn’t even know how to ask her what she was doing or why. Tears streaked down my face as my mouth quivered open, unable to find any words when she decided to speak instead.

“How does it feel?” she had asked with acid in her voice.

“Wh-what? What are you talking about? Why did you do this?” I’d asked her, pleadingly.

“How does it feel to have something taken from you?” She elaborated viciously with narrowed eyes, and her voice ominously low. “I’ll just enjoy my new man while you enjoy your new job.”

“I still don’t understand it,” I voice out loud, sobs racking my voice. “How she encouraged me to do something and then turned on me when it paid off. After all those years we stuck together, how could this one thing make her do something so traitorous and cruel?”

“Did you make more money than she did that night?” Karma asks, and I nod as Silver hands me a tissue. “I found out later that I had.”

“Just for one-upping you,” Jade replies as she shakes her head.

“With Allen already passed out in the bedroom from the night’s imbibing, I had proceeded to storm out on Caroline when she stopped me. I was actually foolish enough to be hopeful that she was immediately regretting what she’d done, but she immediately popped that bubble.”

“Oh wait, Katherine?” she’d called in a patronizing tone. “Actually, about that job? I’m pretty sure you don’t have that anymore either,” she informed me while grabbing her phone off the table and tapping on the screen. “At least not after Vic sees the photos I sent to him of you and one of the patrons spending time together outside the club,” she finishes, making one last tap before holding the phone up for me to see a photo of Allen and I snuggled on a picnic blanket in the park. We both knew our boss, Vic, would recognize him as a customer, and know I was breaking a rule the whole time I worked there.

“In ten minutes, she’d broken my heart two-fold and taken what was everything to me. My love and my job; my livelihood,” I state for the record as Karma sits forward.

“And when and how did she hurt your back?” Her question reminds me of Caroline’s parting sentiment.

“I was in the hallway of the apartment building when I heard Allen’s door open. I knew it was Caroline and I did my best to ignore her, to face forward and keep walking. And then I felt a sharp pain between my shoulder blades. It was excruciating, and I fell to my hands and knees as it shot through my body. As I screamed and cried there on my hands and knees, Caroline knelt down and spoke in my ear.”

“You forgot something,” she’d said, tossing a pair of purple pumps on the floor in front of me.

Chapter Nine

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KATHERINE



Two weeks later

I've spent the last couple of weeks trying to come to grips with whether I can stand up for myself in the most lethal way possible. I've been letting Silver and Coal put me through the wringer during the day and barely sleeping at night, my rest being plagued by memories in the form of dreams.

"Look what she did!" I plead with a trembling voice as I turn and let my button-down fall off my shoulders to reveal the bandage between my shoulder blades. "She's the one you should be firing, not me."

"Katherine, you've been deceiving everyone this whole time. Why am I supposed to believe you now?" Vic argues, not even attempting to examine my wound.

"That was a mistake," I admit. "I was in love, and when Allen told me he wanted to look out for me, I didn't tell him no. We kept it completely private so no patrons had any idea! I thought it was harmless. Caroline, on the other hand-"

"Caroline follows the rules!" Vic snaps and I shudder, pulling my shirt back up and turning to him.

"Well, technically not anymore since she's now fucked Allen too," I mutter bitterly.

"She's told me he's not coming in here anymore so he's no longer clientele, making that point completely moot."

Unbelievable. Caroline has already been here, covering all her bases to make sure she comes off as the one in the right.

Too bad I was busy at the free clinic getting my stab wound sterilized and bandaged.

I stand there in his office, wrapping my arms around myself, trying so hard not to accept this is over, but when the silence only gets more deafening and painful by the moment, I can put it off no longer.

“Then I guess there’s nothing left to say,” I murmur before turning to pick up my duffel that holds every possession to my name.

Exiting his office, I finally let the tears spring free from their ducts.

I push down the hallway past all the scantily-clad employees that still have their jobs, and just as I exit out the back door, I see Allen, sandwiched between his car and a red-headed bitch. I falter for a moment, not knowing what to do while my heart shatters for the hundredth time since last night.

I want to scream at them both while I tear them apart. I want to slap Allen’s face, knee him in the balls and spit on him while he’s crouched over. I want to rip Caroline’s ponytail right off her head and beat her to death with one of her own shoes.

As much as I want to do all of this, I don’t have the strength... or the will. I don’t have the energy or the gumption. Every scrap of hope within me has been destroyed, and I just want to get out of here. After quickly looking both ways for the best direction to avoid interaction, I cut a line to the left towards the street, trying to keep my shoes quiet against the pavement and my eyes forward.

“Oh, the walk of shame,” I hear a voice sneer, one I used to associate with comfort, but now feels like acid in my face. I try to ignore her as I hear the engine of Allen’s car turn over. “Hey!” she snaps, and I hear her heels clicking faster behind me. I should have known. One thing Caroline does not appreciate is being ignored. “I’m talking to you!” I finally stop walking, ready to get this over with because she’s crazy enough to chase me down the street if she has to, but even that is a mistake as she proves by slapping the spot on my back

she'd stabbed only last night. "How's the back?" she cackles when her hand makes contact. The pain strikes like lightning, branching out across the rest of my back and shoulders, making my spine shoot straight up and more tears appear in my eyes.

"Leave me alone," I grit out between my teeth that are clenched together in pain. "You got what you wanted, now run along and take your clothes off for all those horny sleazes in there," I'm cut off by pain - in my scalp this time - as she rakes her hand into my messy bun, her nails digging into my skin.

"I got what was rightfully mine," she snaps, pulling my head back, forcing me to look her in the eyes. "You took everything from me, and I'm simply taking it back."

I scramble and flail, trying to keep my balance while also trying to break free from her grasp without losing a chunk of hair in the process.

"What are you even talking about?!" I desperately shriek, having no idea what's going on or how we got here. "You told me to do the dance!"

"You were supposed to fail! For once in her life, perfect Katherine was supposed to fail at something and look like a complete fucking idiot with Allen watching! To know what it feels like to not be so fucking desirable!"

"This is all because you wanted Allen?" I sob, feeling my face twist with a whole new pain. "And because I did too well at your job?"

"I'm also talking about Ryan, you clueless idiot!"

"Ryan?" I gasp out in disbelief. Ryan was our foster brother that lived with us for the last six months we were in that hellhole. I never got close to him because he gave me the creeps. He tried something with me once but Caroline had come to my rescue... because we always had each other's backs.

"Yes, Ryan!" Caroline gets in my face and rolls her eyes like I'm the asshole here. "I was in love with him... I wanted him. I fucking threw myself at him!"

“Ryan was vile! You and I both knew it! You even saved me from him, you drove him out of our room!” I desperately argue.

“That’s what I let you think,” she says in a tone so calm it’s unnerving. “Really, I just wanted him to choose my cunt over yours. And he wanted shy, boring little you,” she says the last word as if tasting it leaves a bitterness in her mouth. “That’s why I ran off after graduation; I had to get away from you and the heartache you caused. It gutted me that he didn’t love me back.”

I continue to struggle both with her cruel, clutching hold, and also how I missed her feelings for Ryan. That night he tried to sneak into my bed, she furiously pushed him away and all the way out of the bedroom door. I don’t think I have to ask if that was for a different reason than I thought.

“The crazy thing is, after a few months, I missed our bond and tried to let the whole thing go when I came to find you. Then I saw you with Allen and I thought... why not?” She shakes her head dreamily and it’s sickening. “So don’t even think about trying to get back at me, because you’ll lose. In fact, don’t ever come back here again, you little bitch!” she spits out as she releases me with a vicious thrust of her hand, sending me flying towards a bright white light.

I’m tumbling and falling, completely blinded before my body jerks awake. A scream escapes my throat as I shoot up straight. My back is coated in sweat, my t-shirt clinging to my skin as my heart gallops in my chest, ringing in my ears. My stomach continuously flips over making me nauseous, and I’ve barely gotten reacquainted with the surroundings of my room when I startle again at my door flying open and Coal rushing through it.

His black sweats hang low, and his bare chest displays his tattoo. His black hair hangs in long strands around his panicked face.

“What is it, are you okay?” he asks, coming over to sit on the bed. His strong, warm hand rests on my leg and brings a comfort I don’t think I’ve known since what I thought I had

with Allen. Is this real? Am I really cared about again? I don't have the answers, but finding out if I'm wrong will leave me no worse off than I was before. I've spent almost two weeks learning and training, and that dream freshened the wound just enough. I can't put this off anymore.

"I'm ready," I shakily announce as I look up into his dark eyes. "I'm ready to die. I'm ready to do this... *today*."



JOHN

"AND THE LAST order of business on today's agenda..." Sergeant Hughes reads off of his clipboard at his podium. "We've been enlisted to infiltrate the Greek Roofie case on the SU campus."

Yes... more undercover work. I need this to help pad my portfolio. I'm just about to raise my hand and ask where we're at in the selection when he continues.

"Officer Brigman will be taking today's shift to prepare for his undercover role in this operation."

Fucking-A... I think to myself as my head rolls in the direction to meet the cocky smirk of one of our youngest officers while he gets congratulatory smacks on the back.

When our morning briefing breaks, I stand and stride straight over to the sergeant.

"Sarge, with all due respect, why wasn't I considered for the Greek Roofie case?" I ask under my breath as my fellow officers continue to shuffle out of the room.

"Well, we thought about it briefly, but you're maxed out on overtime," he informs me calmly, tucking his clipboard under his arms that are folded in front of him.

"That's it?" I ask, trying not to sound too petulant.

"Okay, fine, you're *over* your overtime," he elaborates. "I know you're gunning for the UC hours, but I'm afraid the

department just can't allow it. Don't worry," he pats my shoulder as he turns for the door, "another one will come up."

I go through my shift in a foul mood, writing tickets and answering calls that turn out to be bogus and ridiculous as fuck. By the end of the day, I'm ramped up and about ready to blow.

I slam my locker shut and give it a good pound with my fist for good measure. I don't even want to think about how much this sets me back. I fucking needed those hours. The exams are just around the corner and I'm more than ready for those, but I need almost a hundred more hours of investigative experience towards my certification. I'm off this weekend, and I was more than willing to give up the free time just to put a dent in that deficit.

"That locker owe you money?" I hear the familiar voice of my buddy, Hundt, ask as he strolls in. I give him a quick, acknowledging look over my shoulder, but don't have it in me to laugh at his lame joke. Instead, I plop down on the rickety bench and start pulling on my boots. "Seriously, man, you need to chill." He shifts gears as he moves to stand in front of his own locker, untucking his shirt. "You can't expect all of it to just land in your lap with no hurdles."

"I'm not married, no kids," I reason gruffly from my bent position as I lace up the boots. "I've got nothing but time and dedication to give, so why don't they fucking take it? Why give the job to some young shithead barely out of the academy?"

"Because it's a frat they're infiltrating," he laughs out incredulously. "They need a young pup who still knows how to party, not an old man."

"I'm only twenty-fucking-eight! I could have pulled it off," I argue, only half-believing myself.

"Not with those soulful eyes, those hard lines," he says, trying to sound all whimsical until he catches the glare I'm giving him over my shoulder. "... and your resting bitch face," his expression falls into a deadpan. "My point is, they need a happy-go-lucky partier and he fits the bill," he says, turning

back to his locker to finish changing. “Besides, you should hold out for something that has more investigative work rather than just undercover policing. You’re in too much of a damn hurry.”

“So I’m driven,” I defend myself, standing and pulling my jacket on.

“Which is fine, but you don’t have to speed through it. It’s not like your dad and your gramps are up in Heaven, tapping their feet and waiting on you to follow in their footsteps. Take your time to do it right.”

“Dude, I’ve been doing nothing but playing it straight!” I retort as I whip around to face him.

“And life’s not fair sometimes.” He shrugs with a heavy sigh while he pulls his t-shirt over his head like he doesn’t know what to do with me. “Some people get the breaks while others have to wait. Don’t burn yourself out in the meantime. Save that for when you actually make detective,” he turns, arching a smart eyebrow at me.

“Are you saying I’m too motivated?”

“I’m saying you’ve got a real problem with instant gratification. You want it all and you want it now. You’ve been non-stop, full speed ahead, for long enough. It’s your weekend off, first one in two months I might add. Why don’t you use it to reset? Lying off the gas for two days won’t hinder your progress.”

“You know I can’t do that,” I grumble. The sooner I make detective and gain access into the inner sanctum of this precinct, the sooner I can get answers to the questions I’ve carried around for the last sixteen years. I unconsciously rub a finger over the scar on my eyebrow, as if to needlessly remind myself.

“You can, you just don’t want to,” he corrects, and I feel my jaw clench down tight, trying to ignore the truth in his words. I’ve been impatient as fuck, wanting to get moved up to intelligence so bad I can taste it. With my grandfather and father having both been detectives, critical thinking, problem

solving, and cracking cases is in my blood, not to mention, a certain motivation. To me, the moment I lay off the gas is the moment I stall out and end up going nowhere. I've been fast-tracking myself, afraid to take a break. I've been waiting too long as it is, definitely no need to draw it out.

"I'm afraid of losing my drive, man," I reason more quietly, and it makes him chuckle.

"Trust me, it's not going anywhere. Resetting your brain so that you don't burn out will not make you lose it."

I nod to myself, considering what he's saying for a moment. Deciding I've got no argument, I sling my duffle over my shoulder and give his shoulder a friendly slap on my way out.

Outside, I open my truck door and toss my bag on the passenger seat as I climb in.

Reset.

How the fuck am I supposed to do that without losing momentum? I don't want a fucking weekend off! I need to keep moving, making progress...

All my frustrations revolve around my mind as I start up the engine.

As I'm pulling out of the parking lot, it hits me.

I haven't been to the cabin in months. The small, quiet structure in Cape Hazard is another Kopa family legacy left behind, but this one I've been neglecting in favor of training, studying, and all the overtime. The cape is a hidden gem; quiet, majestic, peaceful. It's a good middle ground where I can relax without being totally idle. Not to mention it's only a forty minute drive from here.

The more I think about it, the better the idea sounds. As I turn in the direction of my house, intent on packing a bag, I'm already craving the seclusion of tall evergreens with the sound of the ocean just beyond.

Chapter Ten

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KATHERINE



Coal pulls the truck over alongside the road just a short walk down from the park, and my heartbeat picks up speed in my chest. I hug the backpack closer to me in the back seat as Karma turns to me.

“I’ll be in your ear the whole time,” she assures me with affection in her eyes, but I know it won’t be the whole time... Just until I hit the water, and then the radio will cut out. All I can do is nervously nod. This was never going to be an easy thing to do, not even with all the planning and training. Two weeks ago, I committed myself to the Karma Society, vowing to take part in the mission. Since then, I’ve rescued a Husky with Coal while he put its owner on a chain and left him outside for twenty-four hours in the hot daytime sun, followed by the cold night with no food or water. Afterwards, Coal reminded him that had only been a small taste of what he’d put his dog through, and that we’d have our eye on him. The whole thing gave me as much of a thrill as the first time.

I’ve also logged several hours with Jade in her bat cave full of computer monitors while she hacked into cyber bully emails, sending them threatening messages of her own, undetectable of course. She’s able to locate these cowardly assholes by using GPS, and says there’s been an occasion or two where she’s had to pay them a visit in person. Being a foster kid, I had my share of cruel, threatening emails, and would do anything to go with her on one of those missions, just to see the look on the culprit’s faces when they can’t hide behind their screens.

I've had some training with Silver as well, which was... difficult but necessary. And once I start my transformation, I'll only be spending more time with her. That's only one of the reasons it's taken me this long to pull the trigger on getting my own justice. Becoming an entirely new person that's tough and unflappable means going through quite a lot, and I didn't think I was ready until I woke up this morning with the emotional agony rushing back and stoking its flames in my soul. I thought I couldn't bear it while it was happening, but somehow, that dream proved it can definitely grow over time... and I'm ready to extinguish it.

Of course, that does very little to quell my nerves in this moment, and I put off getting out of the truck for as long as I can.

"Why does someone need to see me again?" I ask, wishing there was a way out of that part. I feel like it would be so much easier without a strange audience, no matter how small. "Isn't the note enough?" That part was surprisingly easy. Karma instructed me to keep it to the point, yet believably emotional. I think I understood the assignment pretty well.

"Your body won't be found, which means it could be weeks before you're declared dead on your public record," Silver explains from beside me. "If someone at least sees you do it, it will be a little more open and shut."

"Okay," the word whooshes out on a breath. I'm already sold, already committed.

"Time to take the plunge!" Karma smiles back at me excitedly like I'm about to go make a presentation. And I didn't miss her play on words.

"Not funny." I shake my head incredulously at her, which only amuses her more as I pull the latch on the passenger door and force myself out of the truck.

The backpack I sling over my shoulder is just for show, and so are all the things in it, save for a notebook that contains, well, the note.

As the truck drives away, I start the half-mile hike up the road towards the park I chose among the beautiful few that Cape Hazard boasts, making it a hidden gem in the Pacific Northwest. All this I learned while preparing to end my life. Karma and the rest of the members brought me to several places that before, I never would have known existed. Growing up in the system, you don't usually get taken anywhere nice.

I continue to walk alone in the grey summer afternoon. If there are any straggling witnesses when this is done, they need to be able to report seeing no more than a girl walking alone towards the cliffs and the water.

I'm in thin sweats and a hoodie, yet I'm sweating to death underneath and welcome the breeze that gets marginally cooler as the sound of ocean waves beyond the tall trees gets louder. Upon entering the park, I hit the trails, only bothering with one. I pass an occasional hiker, dog walker, and family, and do my best to keep my head down until I get to the breathtaking view of rippling water and scattered boulders that peek out from under the grey water. The sound of the waves flowing and churning and seagull cries sprinkled in from the sky above was enough to hook me to this place, and made me want to come every day for the last two weeks. Karma and Coal discouraged that though, stating that I didn't want to become recognizable to the regulars. Jade would occasionally sneak me here, so long as I promised not to venture down this particular path and make my visits sporadic. I remind myself even now, that this peaceful place is part of what will come with my new life.

The tiny clearing is exactly that, and tucked just out of sight of the main paths, making it impossible for too many people to come to this lookout at once. I take one view at the ocean before turning away.

"I'm in position," I murmur.

"Perfect," Karma responds in my earpiece, "so are the rest of us. All there is to do now is wait, and you'll know when the time is right."

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Chapter Eleven

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JOHN



After making the drive up the coast to the Cape, I stopped at the diner in town to grab a late lunch, the trusty hardware store where I loaded the truck bed up with lumber, finishing stain, and all the other things needed to do some house projects, and the grocery store so that I could grill myself a steak and have a beer later.

I drive all of it down the familiar winding roads through the woods to the family cabin that's not so much a cabin as it is a small, two-bedroom house with one bathroom and a small kitchen. But it's a sanctuary on a six-acre plot close to the ocean and the parks, yet secluded in the woods for privacy and peace. Most of its square footage is vertical, making it two stories with a cozy loft that overlooks the open floor plan, and as I pull up to the small structure with its grey paneling and white trim windows, I breathe a sigh of contentment at my decision to come out here. It's been so long that the place seems smaller than I remember.

I'll get started on fixing up some things tomorrow morning, being that it's already pretty late in the day once I get everything unloaded. Wanting to get a good look at the ocean while there's still daylight, I throw on my ball cap and jump in the truck, knowing just where to head.

I'm pretty sure I was still in school the last time I let my dad drag me out here, and at the time I was a grumpy, disinterested pre-teen that didn't know how to appreciate the serenity nature can bring. I wonder if the park will look the same or if it will seem smaller too; if the trees will still tower

over me like a wondrous tunnel of branches, or if it will be less impressive.

The city has a waterfront, and sometimes on a lunch break I can see scraps of water and maybe hear a seagull or two, but it's been a long time since I've actually spent time with the ocean.

I have to follow the signs to the park, not quite remembering well enough to get there completely by memory, but eventually I pull up to the lot where there are very few cars. There are a number of trailheads, and though I plan to explore them all, I start with the one on the far right. The incline is hardly a challenge, the path well-worn and even planked with wood in some places, but it's secluded, like being on some adventure in another world.

For a moment or two I pretend I'm on a case, looking for shoe prints or tire indentations, even animal scat. My grandpa would always take me on nature hikes when I was young, and with both him and my dad being detectives, he would show me clues to look for that would show me what may have been where and around what time. It was fascinating and fun, like putting a story together as a puzzle. It stuck with me through adulthood, becoming not only a family lineage, but a passion so deeply rooted it feels like a true part of me.

Over the next hour, I cover every bit of ground on every trail I can, stopping at every overlook, my eyes scanning the distance for orcas or dolphin fins. I'll never tell Hundt that he was right; that slowing my roll for a day or two was the right idea. Up here, I realize making detective will still happen; I can tell just by the way I leisurely take everything in, cataloging every detail of my surroundings. It doesn't stress me so much as grounds me, even relaxes me. It's in my blood and it's going to happen, I just need to quit being so damned impatient.

Too bad the day is too overcast for there to be a vivid sunset, still, I can tell when the sun has made its descent into the water by the way the land starts to shroud itself in a grey haze. I'll have to head back to the truck about now if I don't want to be walking in the dark.

I start down the path that's on the opposite side of the hill I started on, trying to think of a way to cross over to the side of the lot I'm actually parked on when another turnoff catches my eye. The path is narrow and I can't see where it leads, but it's well-worn and obviously frequented. Deciding I can spare a minute, I follow it, thinking there'd better be one hell of a view for my detour. Fortunately it doesn't wrap too far around, and when I pass a sharp bend of trees and shrubbery, surprise slams into me at what I see.

While it's just a young girl who appears non-threatening, I thought I was alone out here and so much about the sight sets me immediately on edge. She's facing me, not even looking at the view. Her shoulders are hunched inward with her arms around her narrow middle. Her brown hair hangs loose, partially covering her face, and she's dressed in loose, drab-looking sweats, but nothing unnerves me more than how close she is to the edge, especially without even facing it. Nothing about her says that she's out on a relaxing hike like myself. She's here for some other purpose... and it can't be good. She looks like she's been through something awful, maybe even soul-destroying.

"Wh-what?" I catch myself stammering, and it doesn't even sound like my own voice, probably because this doesn't even feel real. I feel like once I turned that last bend, I was thrust into some other universe. It almost feels like a bad dream, with the dark grey of the sky, and the wind blowing the troubled girl's hair around. Even the crash of the waves has lost its calming effect, and now provides more of an ominous soundtrack. With barely any light left from the day, I can scarcely make out her features, just enough to tell that they are laden with a myriad of tormented emotions. "What are you doing? Are you okay?" I ask, still not feeling like it's me speaking the words.

Though she's staring right back at me, it's hard to tell what color her eyes are in this light... A light hazel-green maybe? I just know they're staring right back into mine, but without actually seeing them.

After making some semblance of peace with my life at the moment, and finally relaxing into my weekend plans as a civilian, I was not prepared for this. I haven't quite registered what's going on, but I know it's not good and I want to get out of it, stat. Actually, I want to get us both out of it. This girl is clearly hurting on the inside and is about to do something drastic to make it stop. She's given up, but there's something off. I can't put my finger on it, other than it looks like there's too much concentration in her expression. Either way, my instincts are kicking in, albeit sloppily, but they're here, and I start to talk more, hoping it will stall whatever she has planned.

"What's your name?" I ask. Not a real genius way to start, but hopefully it will help her to engage. Her vacant stare finally wavers as she lowers her head, looking at the ground.

"Katherine," she feebly murmurs. Her voice is soft, with a slight tremble.

"I'm John," I introduce myself, hoping that by making this personal I can figuratively rope her in and away from the edge. She's still not looking at me, but at least she's still standing in front of me, so hopefully that's a start. "Are you okay, Katherine?" I ask, using her name again, still trying to interact, and when she still refuses to look up, I try to control my panic.

"Could you come away from the edge there?" I ask, deciding to cut more to the chase. "You're making me a little nervous," I chuckle, trying to come off as relatable. She still doesn't respond, just stares at the ground, and I feel my blood pressure begin to rise back up to its usual baseline. "Okay, please step away from there?" I ask, a little more urgently. Some cop I'm making at the moment. I try to tell myself I'm just a human trying to help another human as I reach my hand out to her and start grasping at straws. "Whatever's not right in your world..." I ramble, trying to think of any words in the dictionary that would be helpful in this situation, "...you can get past it... with help."

I'll get you help I hear my inner voice say, as if trying to connect with hers. *I'll help you.*

Though it only grows darker by the minute, I can still make out some vague expressions on her face that she keeps angled down to the ground. She looks lost and confused yet oddly focused, like she's actively trying to tune me out. I don't know the first thing about Katherine except that she looks sweet, or at least she was once before it was beaten out of her. So young, yet aged. And though it's the last thing I should be taking notice of right now, she is pretty, despite her disheveled appearance.

I suddenly see her head tip slightly to the side, the focus in her eyes flashing for just one second before she finally looks back up at me. Her eyes are suddenly set in some kind of finality and before I know it, she slowly shakes her head at me... then she starts to step backwards.

I feel my heart rate shoot up like the meter at a carnival when someone brings the heavy mallet down on the plate and I step out to her, unconscious to the fact I'm putting my own life in danger by trying to stop her. The pain and the terror shoot through me and swiftly twist my insides together as her feet leave the dirt and her hair blows backwards into her face.

I fall to my hands and knees in time to see her limbs flailing in the wind before her body crashes down in the water. I don't think I hear the splash or even my own voice screaming. I look frantically around for a safe way down, not sure what I'd be hoping to accomplish by that. Nothing but completely vertical ledges and jagged rocks surround me on either side. There's no way to get down other than the one she chose.

My breath is coming in heaves and my head feels light for a moment, my body threatening to protect my mind by passing out, but I take a steadying breath and grip onto the grass to ward it off. I continue to stare right down at the spot in the water that's still rippling outwards from the splash, hoping to see some kind of movement, or better yet, her head re-emerge. In training, I've heard that flight-or-fight response can kick in whether you want it to or not, and maybe she'll come back up.

She doesn't.

I don't know how long I sit there on my knees, panting, but I finally pull out my cell phone and stand up, hoping to find a signal. I'm afraid to leave this spot, but the cop in me is finally catching up to me and I need to call this in, while trying to ignore the inner voice that's speaking inside my head once again. The one that makes me realize that dead or alive, I want to find her.



KATHERINE

I CONTINUE TO SINK, reluctantly letting the air I had drawn in with the sweet stranger slip through my mouth as if that particular breath was different from the millions of others I've taken in my life, and I wish to hold onto it a little longer.

Although we went over this countless times in the pool, like Coal warned me, it wouldn't account for how cold this water is now, nor how rough it is as it jostles me left and right beneath the surface.

The wetsuit under my baggy sweats helps keep the freezing chill at bay as I try to focus on resisting the urge to thrash to the surface. I feel a literal glimmer of relief when I detect a slight shine of a light beyond my eyelids that are squeezed shut against the salt water. Just as I feel the last molecule of oxygen leave my lungs and my abdomen constrict, I feel a gloved hand brace on the back of my head and the rubber of the familiar mouthpiece being placed in my mouth. I secure my lips around it and suck in the coveted oxygen from the small tank that I can feel Coal securing to my back.

Grabbing onto his utility belt as we rehearsed, I let Coal pull me along for a long underwater swim, far away from the scene where hopefully no one is searching for me.

Other than the cold water pounding and swooshing against my ears, it's so incredibly quiet in the dark depths as we clip along. Quiet enough for me to stew and fume about the less-than-perfect execution of my performance back there.

John... why the hell did he have to tell me his name?

It wasn't in the plan to jump so abruptly, but that kind bastard was trying to connect, and I needed complete detachment in order to go through with this. I needed to remember that there was no one left in that world, that life, for me to stay in it.

Pushing that thought away, I keep my hold on Coal's belt as he paddles, trying to absorb what I just did and how I got to that point in time.

My chest is tight, my lungs squirming and quivering inside, threatening to take a breath despite my best efforts. The squeezing hot pain in my sternum is getting to be too much, and I know that at any second, I'm going to give way and inhale about a half pint of chlorinated water. I bring my arms up and thrash them downward simultaneously. It takes about three strokes to get me to the surface where I emerge, sucking in a long, guttural breath. Several more sputtering gasps follow as I weakly make my way to the edge of the pool where I grip onto the tile and lay my forehead against it, trying to catch my breath.

"Thirty-nine seconds," Silver's voice recites as she crouches down, taking a knee in front of me and clutching a stopwatch. "That's not going to do it."

"No shit," I sputter out between coughs. "I'm not fucking Aquaman."

"Look, I know it's hard, but you've got to remember you've only got one shot at this. If it goes wrong, not only does your only chance at this go out the window, but then you'll be dealing with a whole slew of other shit you don't want."

"I know," I huff out, still trying to replenish the breath in my lungs.

"I know it's hard to believe, but you can condition yourself to go longer. And really, Coal should only need about twenty to thirty seconds to get to you, but you need to be prepared for the worst. We don't know what the conditions will be like that day, and the current could make him take longer."

“I know,” I breathe again, this time looking up at her as water droplets run down my face and drip from the tips of my hair to the tile.

All that shit Silver put me through was brutal and I hated every minute of it, but I did it. I did it because there was seriously nothing better to do in my life but stop living it.

I did it. I fucking did it! And though it didn't go perfectly, I followed through. I jumped off that terrifying cliff, and now I'm sailing underwater to a secured location up-shore, against the current where the authorities won't think to look. By putting my mind to the task and my body through hell, I accomplished something I never thought possible. I ended my life as I knew it.

I ended Katherine's life.

And when this swim is over, I'm leaving her in the ocean and emerging as a new person; one with a new life and a new purpose.

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Chapter Twelve

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VIOLET



I t's surreal... shedding one life, one identity, for another.

Every person in the house has been addressing me by my new given name, magnifying the reality that Katherine Holland is gone. I'm Violet Steele now, and the room behind the light purple door is now my permanent residence. I'll soon be getting my new ID, courtesy of the contact at public records that, of course, is a member of the Reach.

I still have to stay in hiding for a while before making my debut in public. There's still training to go through and changes to make. While minor plastic surgery is an option, I've decided to forego it with the exception of the scar on my back. Not only is its absence imperative to pulling off my revenge against Caroline and Allen, but it feels like my last tie to Katherine that I want to sever, literally.

"Would you listen up instead of staring off into space like some kind of vacant twit?" Silver snaps, and jars me out of my thought cloud, something I've had a hard time doing since throwing myself off a cliff the other day.

"Sorry," I mutter, shaking the fog from my head, but it only makes her drop her head back in a frustrated sigh, and I realize my mistake. "Oh! I mean, uh... fuck off."

"Not buying it," she mutters, returning her eyes to the road.

"I know, I need to work at it," I mumble, looking down at my hands.

“Yeah,” she scoffs with a head tilt. “Like a lot, if you want to have that Caroline cunt by the balls she thinks she has.” I try not to cringe at her name, and am snapped quickly out of that too when she throws in, “Chin up! Don’t look at your lap!”

“Geez, you’re such a frickin’ tyrannical bitch!” I roar, snapping my head upwards and looking at her, just to see her smirk.

“Weird. I insult you, and you mutter an apology. I irritate you about your posture and that gets results,” she shakes her head.

Learning how not to drown in the pool is behind us, and now the training will be aggressive and defensive driving on some nights, general strength and fitness training every morning, self-defense and mixed martial arts some afternoons, and hacking for beginners on others. The trash talking and toughening up my outer shell training with Silver, however, is ongoing. She’ll go along throughout the day, mostly being nice, and then out of nowhere, just to test me, she’ll wield some venomous, uncalled for bitchery at me.

“I can’t tell you how much I’m enjoying this little outing of ours,” I volley sarcastically. “Think we can stop for a Happy Meal on the way home?”

“Ooh, points for smart assery,” she smirks, and looks over at me approvingly.

“So…” I tread carefully, looking over at her. “Do I get to know any of your stories? How you came to be part of the Society?” She looks over and quirks a warning eyebrow at me. That would be a no, I take it; at least for now. “Okay, how about how you became such a badass?” I try instead; because it’s no secret the girl is seriously hardcore. “Or how you learned to drive like one?” I offer, and that seems to put just a hint of a sentimental smile on her face.

“I grew up in the life,” she supplies. “I was raised by a single dad who was a racecar driver, so I grew up on the tracks.”

“You liked it?” I ask, deciding not to ask about her father. Chances are he’s not around anymore, or I have a feeling she wouldn’t be part of the Karma Society.

“I did,” she nods. “Later in my teens, I dropped out of school and fell in with this underground street racing crowd. Between the two racing worlds, I learned everything there is to know, and I’ve applied it abundantly to my life in the society, including teaching a lot of the members.”

“Not that I don’t want to learn, but why is it such an important part of the training anyway?”

She lets out a heavy breath, settling in to explain.

“The thing about serving up karma, the bad kind anyway, is the people you’re retaliating against often don’t like you doing so,” she scrunches her face into a mock cringe, “sometimes it comes *back* around, for a variety of reasons. Like they don’t believe they were the ones in the wrong in the first place, or don’t see the score as even now. Sometimes it’s because they are just plain volatile, hateful people that will never accept that what was done to them is what they deserved, so... you have to be ready for when they come at you again.”

“You mean... when justice is served, it doesn’t end there?” I pull my eyebrows together, trying to understand.

“Not always,” she answers, her face turning thoughtful. “You can’t stop the cycle. What you can do is make sure you’re always behind the enemy.”

“So you have to, what, stalk them the rest of their life?” I ask in distaste, not finding the appeal in that at all.

“Not quite; more like stay a lap and a half ahead, to use my favorite racing analogy.”

“So how does that work?”

“Say you’re on the standard, circle racetrack,” she begins, and I shift in my seat to face her more to get into the lesson. “You and your opponent are head to head but you manage to gun it past them, and get so far ahead of them that you come up behind them again; you *lap* them.”

“Okay,” I nod, feeling like I understand so far.

“Now, you could stay right on their ass but that gets old after a while, you’re not actually living your life which defeats the purpose, plus, it can tend to piss them off even more. So you keep going past them again, only this time you’re not going to go a full lap, but rather half a lap, which puts you directly across the track from them. You’re not right behind them, and more importantly, they’re not right behind you. But they are *always* in your sights,” she finishes.

“Got it,” I say firmly. It makes perfect sense.

“So you’re going to learn some basic getaway moves and we’ll go from there,” she informs as she downshifts her wicked black muscle car. I have no clue what it is. We approach a twelve-foot chain link fence, and Silver flashes her headlights in a specific sequence. Barely a heartbeat goes by before it separates in the middle, automatically opening for us. Silver puts the car back in gear and pulls forward into what at first looks like a giant black void until several posts of bright lights come on with an audible bang, to reveal an expansive training course.

“Let me guess...” I muse, letting out a nervous breath.

“Members of the Reach,” Silver fills in smugly.

Figures.



JOHN

I CALLED all units out to the cliff while I continued to look for a way down to the water, even though she was long gone as soon as her feet cleared the edge. I guess it just made more sense to me than just standing there, doing nothing.

I managed to make it down to some large rocks, but I was still about twenty feet above the water and a good sixty from where I saw her splash. My eyes frantically scanned the water, looking for any trace of human life between the peaks and the caps of the choppy waves. With the sun having just set, it’s

hard to see anything beyond about four inches deep, unlike if the sun were high in the sky.

Now, a week later, I'm still going nuts at the station, checking in with the search and rescue teams only to find out the same damn thing: they haven't found her. Not her body, not a trace.

Had I not been on the scene when it happened, this would just be an open-and-shut suicide case. But I was. I was off-duty and not in cop-mode, at least not at first. I was an ordinary human out for a nature walk and looking for some peace and quiet to balance out the stress of the job, and then there she was; the sad but beautiful young woman, standing way too close to the edge of the lookout.

On the job, I'd never dealt with a jumper before, but I'd been through the training. All that I'd learned went out the window when she and I locked eyes though. I followed the protocol, sure, but there was something about stumbling upon her so unexpectedly. With the wind blowing her hair back, I could see the beautiful contours of her graceful neck, and the light color of her eyes. And it was those eyes that are still haunting me a week later. They were sad and downcast, like anyone would look if they felt any chance of hope had evaporated - but there was something besides the sadness laying there in those depths. There was a look of concentration, as if this wasn't just simply her way out of this world... it was a mission.

I don't want to be this person.

I don't want to live this life anymore.

Goodbye,

Katherine.

The note found in the front pocket of the navy blue backpack that had been tossed in the brush nearby was so short and all too easy to memorize before it was submitted to evidence. No loved ones were addressed, and as intelligence found out in the following twelve hours, it was because there were none.

As predicted, the death was ruled a suicide, and because there was no next of kin to bring her body home to, the recovery mission slowed and is sure to come to a halt any day now in the interest of working cases that would be more fruitful and productive.

On the force, they tell you until they're blue in the face that you can't get emotionally invested or you'll never survive the job, especially if you want to make detective. Up until now I thought I'd been doing pretty damn good, acting like nothing but a law-enforcing cyborg on the job, and keeping my relationships off the clock minimal.

With the case closed and me still a beat cop, what I'm doing can land me in seriously hot water. But there is something about that encounter that won't let go of me, and it's quickly turned into an obsession. I keep telling myself that it was because I wasn't on the job in that moment that this felt personal, and why I have some driving need to make sense of the whole thing. Something inside me desperately wanted to know why such a young girl would throw the rest of her life away. Sure, on paper it was cut and dry, but being in that moment with her... something just didn't add up.

In a bold moment, I dropped by the intelligence unit and prodded the detective that had taken the case for a few answers, under the guise of just having a casual interest having been the first one on the scene. The paper trail led back only as far as the last two foster home addresses and her two most recent places of employment: a coffee shop and MINX, the well-known gentleman's club down by the docks.

From there, I began conducting my own off-the-record investigation when off the clock. Walking into the strip club in plain clothes and flashing my badge before quickly re-pocketing it before anyone could tell it wasn't a detective shield is not considered a bright idea. I reassure myself, however, that I'm not hurting anyone, and I'll knock it off as soon as I get enough clarity to be able to sleep at night.

According to the manager that I interviewed, Katherine was mainly a waitress and had only actually performed twice before he canned her for sleeping with the clientele. Losing

her job, not to mention being shunned and shamed would certainly play a key part in any motive she had, and I practiced full restraint with that manager, stuffing my hands in my pockets to keep from punching him in the throat.

“So what’s going on? Why are you investigating her?” he’d asked as I went to take my leave from his office that he’d clearly furnished from a discount store but arranged just right to make it look like he runs his operation with class.

Breaking another serious regulation, I throw him a bone. It’s not like I gave him my real name anyway, and I’m curious to see if this motherfucker is any bit the remorseful type.

“She’s dead,” I bite out gruffly over my shoulder, and only allow two seconds to watch his reaction. His eyebrows shoot up in surprise before he pretends to recover by shuffling papers around on his desk.

“That’s... that’s too bad,” the idiot stammers. “Um... let me know if I can be of more help,” he weakly offers as I exit his office.

I think you’ve done just about enough, asshole.

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Chapter Thirteen

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VIOLET



I'm sure a lot of people think the idea of showering before a workout is ridiculous, but for me, I've found it's a necessity. Some things haven't changed in my transition from Katherine to Violet, and one of them is that before a shower, I feel stagnant and capable of nothing, let alone a training session. So in the interest of getting my blood flowing, I take to the spray of hot water and take my sweet-ass time in doing so.

I'm tired. I'm physically weary, and starting to get there mentally as well if I'm being honest. With each passing day, the urge to see Caroline in the same agony she imparted on me isn't waning, it's only growing. Katherine may have jumped off that cliff, but I feel like I can't completely put her to rest until Caroline pays.

But also, with each passing day, that fifteen second reel in my head plays at least one more time than it did the day before.

The innocent bystander named John, trying to coax me from the edge. I couldn't see his eyes too well under the bill of his hat, but he had a hard jaw that betrayed the gentleness in his voice. The hand he reached out to me looked strong and capable, and though it's insane to be imagining what it might feel like on my skin, here I am... imagining it.

Fifteen seconds, and he fucking imprinted on me, keeping the abandonment of my old life from being the clean break it was supposed to be. The heaviest reason tipping the scales on my decision to do this was that there was nothing I was leaving behind... so why the hell don't I feel that way now?

I've lain in bed at night, trying so hard to force the thoughts of this stranger out of my mind, but they come storming right back in. I wonder if he's married or lives alone, why he was out on his own that day, how he takes his coffee, how he spends his evenings - so many stupid things, and I swear to God, if a lobotomy is an option for scrubbing the thoughts from my brain, I will gladly take advantage so that I can move the hell on.

I shut off the water and pull the shower door open, reaching for a towel. Securing it around me, I step into the steamy room. My nakedness makes me feel vulnerable in a way that's yearning. It's been a good six weeks between my life falling apart at the hands of Caroline and Allen, and finding a new start with the Society. I in no way want Allen back. In fact, the next time I see him I plan for a smile to be nowhere near his face. But I do miss how I felt for the few months I had with him. The absence of intimacy is poignant, not just in my soul, but every part of my body; my skin, my bones, my bloodstream.

With Allen, I never orgasmed. I lay back and let him do what he felt like because I was just happy to be wanted. He was never rough or uncaring - he just didn't go out of his way to pleasure me either. I told myself I didn't need to climax, that I just enjoyed the closeness, the kissing and the touching.

Standing on the fluffy bath mat, I close my eyes and wrap my arms around myself. I'm experimenting, seeing if I can fill that void on my own; bring comfort to myself. I long to be held, and while my own slender arms can't compare to the strong, protective embrace of a man, I don't seem to want to give up on it either. I rub my hands softly up and down my arms, and though I tell myself it's a lost cause, I bring my fingertips up to graze over the bare skin of my chest that is aching to be touched. I want to be touched. Wanted. Held. Desired.

I can't decide if this pathetic indulgence is even worth it, but I keep going, willing to find out. The more of myself I touch, the more of my body seems to wake up, and I'm beginning to understand what Coal was trying to do that

morning he came onto me. It was too soon, too new a concept to me at the time, but I'm beginning to get it. This is a need, and right now, as my traitorous mind flits once again to the dark, heroic-looking figure with the kind voice, I recognize it as a need I badly want fulfilled, regardless of what the next day would bring.

Keeping my eyes closed, I tug at the knot in my towel so that it comes loose. Why the fuck I'm picturing John standing before me, his hands replacing mine, I don't know. I tell myself it's the lack of men I've been exposed to in the last month and a half, a lack of imaginative options, essentially.

I allow my hands to glide up the skin of my stomach to finally cup my full breasts and let my head drop back. Just as I'm getting lost in my little world of make believe, the bathroom door bursts open, making a sudden draft rush across my skin and jar me out of my warm cocoon.

"Violet, what the hell? We were supposed to leave ten minutes ago! What's going-"

The low timbre of Coal's voice is cut off by my startled shriek as I quickly crouch down and retrieve my discarded towel.

"Shit! Sorry!" he exclaims, while I frantically wrap the towel around me and turn my back to him while I secure it.

"What the hell is your problem?!" I demand, turning back to face him and raking my damp hair out of my flushed face. "Don't you knock?"

"You've been in here so long I figured you had to be about done and were just fixing your hair or something," he reasons, still in the doorway, not looking the least bit uncomfortable.

"W-well, I'm tired, and I'm moving slow," I sputter through my explanation, as my eyes nervously dart between his and the floor.

Coal looks at me with a cocked eyebrow, conveying he knows what he saw as he leans in the doorway, tucking a hand in his pocket.

“Do you mind?” I ask, getting more annoyed and uncomfortable.

“What’s your favorite movie?”

“What?” I ask incredulously, feeling my eyes narrow at him.

“Diffuse the awkward, remember?” He raises both eyebrows at me expectantly, and I realize what he’s doing. As much as I don’t want to admit it in this humiliating moment, it did help last time.

“I never got to watch any,” I answer, because whatever foster home I found myself in, the TV was always ruled by whatever deadbeat father figure lived there.

“TV shows?” he tries.

“No.”

“Well, we’re going to have to fix that when we get back tonight,” he announces quietly.

“You’re going to make me watch TV?” I ask, raising a cynical eyebrow at him.

“You seriously need to relax and unwind,” he observes with a nod. “And I know that’s partly our fault; you’ve been going through the gauntlet.”

I’ve gotten sleep and downtime, obviously; it’s not like this is some hardcore boot camp. There’s just been so much to do and learn, not to mention my past is still plaguing me, leaving me completely unsettled. It’s true I haven’t taken time to just unplug.

“Okay,” I nod, letting out a relaxed breath.

“You good?” he asks, and I know what he means.

“Yeah,” I nod, confidently. I’m oddly relaxed now, despite the fact I’m half naked and dripping wet. How the hell does he do that?

“Great, see you downstairs,” he says, tucking his hands in his pockets and backing out of the doorway.



“GLOVES UP!” Coal shouts as he jabs at me, completely half-assed. Clearly there’s a gentleman deep in there, despite his claims that he’s training me to fight against the worst. Far be it from me to call him out on it though; I’m too tired to test my limits. Hell, I’m almost too tired to care that I’m sparring with a shirtless, ripped, sweaty man specimen - *almost*.

Disguised as a regular fitness center, the facility I’ve been training at with Silver and Coal is owned and operated by members of the Reach. It’s deserted at the moment, I’m guessing, because we’re the only crazies training instead of sleeping in on a fucking Saturday morning.

Still, I weakly hold up my arms to block his little taps, only giving as good as I get.

“What’s up with you?” he asks. “You were more into this before you did the jump, but now you’re practically shutting down before my very eyes,” he observes.

“I’m just tired,” I feebly respond.

“Well that’s not going to work,” he informs me as he straightens up and stretches his neck side-to-side. “You’re going to lose momentum.”

“I think that happened somewhere in the middle of last night,” I quip.

“How can you be so tired when all you do is sleep?” He jabs, literally and figuratively.

Say what, now?

“Are you kidding me?” I feel my head snap up. “All I ever do is come here with you while you put me through weight training, cardio, and boxing. And when I’m not doing this, I’m on the racetrack with Silver, either in the passenger seat while she whips us around at eighty miles per hour, or in the driver seat while she yells at me for not getting the progression of a Rockford or a drift down pat!” I snap as I add a little oomph to

my punches and Coal starts blocking my blows. “I need a break! I need to recharge my batteries!”

“You do that every night when your head hits the pillow,” he smartly reasons.

“And then I wake up, and you all throw me back at it again!” I shout as I try to go for his stomach and he blocks me. “I don’t even get to absorb the respite! Not to mention nothing’s come of it yet...”

“Ohh...” he taunts, causally blocking my assault in a way that’s infuriating. “Your life is all work and no play,” he nods. “And nothing’s come of it? What about the roof over your head and the bed you sleep on?” he points out and I freeze, staring back at him. I didn’t even realize how hard I was working my body until just now, when I hear myself panting in the silent gym.

“You’re right,” I drop my gloves, feeling ashamed. “I didn’t mean to complain... I’ll take this life over the last a million times over.” I rest my gloves on my hips and start to lazily pace. “I’m just...”

“Frustrated,” Coal finishes for me, relaxing his own stance. “It’s normal. And it’s going to happen many times during this process. You just have to push through it, now come on,” he rallies, putting his gloves back up, and I reluctantly follow suit.

We’re back to Coal delivering the blows and me blocking them as he continues his trash talk.

“Come on, Violet! You can’t just hold your arms up in front of your face the whole time!”

“What am I supposed to do, just let you hit me?” I ask, exasperated.

“You’re supposed to be blocking my hits while landing your own,” he corrects, his voice rising with authority.

“You’re not giving me a chance!” I gripe, as he starts slowly advancing, forcing me backwards.

“Neither will the person you’re fighting,” he returns calmly. “Would you rather I got Silver in here to do this with you?”

Oh God, no.

I feel my jaw clench and my lips press together as I try harder to punch through his dance space as my back gets closer to the wall.

“Or maybe Caroline?” he adds, making me see red very suddenly. “I bet she’d love to jump in and pummel you while you do nothing but hold your arms up, futility shielding yourself-”

Coal is cut off by his head snapping sideways as my right gloved fist connects with the left side of his jaw, a primal scream ripping from my throat. It almost sounds foreign, like it came from someone else as it echoes through my ear canals.

I feel my shoulders heave up and down with my ragged breathing. My blood bubbles like acid through my veins, and every one of my muscle fibers is alive, vibrantly pulsing beneath my skin. My teeth grind together as I watch Coal’s face slowly turn forward again, and while I don’t know what I was expecting, it was not the cocky smile he’s wearing with shiny bright-red liquid dotting the corner of his lip.

“What do you know...” he tilts his head patronizingly. “All you needed was the right motivation.”

Just when I was starting to feel an incremental shred of remorse for splitting his lip, I feel the backs of my eyes start to prickle at his words and it’s gone. I step forward as I reach back and plow my glove forward, intent on giving him a black eye or busted nose to go with it. All it took was a spark of rage to ignite the surge of adrenaline coursing through my system, and I start hitting Coal over and over, whichever body part of his I can get to while he has the nerve to just stand there, beaming with pride as I take my aggression out on him.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” he nods approvingly as he finally throws me a real punch and I block it with my right

arm, bringing my left fist forward into his gut that gets a grunt out of him on a heavy *woosh* of air.

We begin properly sparring, with me seriously trying to hurt him and him being okay with it since he's totally welcoming it.

"Good," he praises, starting to get breathless. "Put your weight behind it." Sweat is beading across my forehead and making the fine wisps of hair that hang loose from my ponytail stick to my neck. My heartrate is sky high and my lungs are protesting, demanding I go back to taking regular breaths, but I'm on a high; feeling like a warrior for the first time in my life.

I'm getting tired and starting to grunt with each jab as Coal starts to advance on me, backing me towards my friend, the wall, again. To my surprise, he yanks his gloves off one at a time while stalking forward, his gaze penetrating mine, his eyes turning impossibly blacker. It makes me falter, but he doesn't let me let up.

"Keep going, come on!" he coaches. "Hit me." The last two words come out with a strange undertone to them; like he's no longer just coaching me. Nevertheless, I listen and follow through, thrusting my gloved fist forward into his bare abs. The look in his eyes and his relaxed mouth give off the impression that he's enjoying this, and oddly, it sends my rapidly flowing blood to the region between my legs.

Endorphins are charging through my body from the sparring and are now starting to mingle with the pheromones coming off of Coal's body, dewy with sweat, and it's making my skin prickle. I can feel the adrenaline level in my body slowly start to deplete, but the euphoric effect is still running strong as each strike that Coal demands gets weaker.

"Gloves off," he grumbles down at me and I oblige, my breath coming out in huffs as I detach the Velcro and pull each one off, chucking them to the mats. My back is flush with the wall now as I stare up at him and he stares back, the meager space between us filling up with our harsh breathing until he

finally braces a hand above me on the wall and leans in, his other hand gliding up the bare skin of my abdomen.

I start at his touch, letting out a gasp, but I don't move, nor break the intense eye contact.

"I'm proud of you," he huffs out, taking my attention off his touch for a moment. "You put up one hell of a fight when you thought you were at your weariest," he explains to my questioning expression as his hand journeys down to grip my waist. As confusing as this moment is, I beam at his words. I feel proud of me too. I feel powerful; maybe even a little confident... and very, very heated at my core. I'm aroused and it's so mind boggling as I look up at Coal, taking in the proximity of our sweaty, breathless bodies.

"Hands up," he orders, and without knowing why, I lift my hands above my head, only to have my breath ripped from my lungs again when Coal takes both my hands in one of his and pins them against the wall.

"What are you doing?" It comes out in a high-pitched whisper, but I don't do a damn thing to resist. Maybe the question is *what am I doing?*

Chapter Fourteen

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VIOLET



“It’s like you said,” Coal grumbles, leaning in to whisper it in my ear, and I quiver. “You’ve had nothing else going on but training, and no enjoyment. Let’s change that... let me do something for you.” He places his lips softly to the skin next to my ear and travels downward. My pussy warms and begins to throb as his tongue sneaks out to taste my skin. I’m about to protest when my mind flashes back to the morning outside his truck. Did I really push him away because I didn’t want it, or because I thought I *shouldn’t* want it?

My body definitely wants what he’s doing. It wants closeness, touching, pleasure. It’s my mind and my heart that doesn’t want the strings that are often attached to those things.

“Coal...” I squeeze my eyes shut, so uncomfortable and awkward to be having this interaction, knowing that no matter which way it goes, I will continue to be living under the same roof with him. “I can’t. I can’t be with anyone right now, let alone someone I live with.”

“Who said anything about us being together? You don’t have to commit to the white picket fence to have a little fun with each other.”

My breath hitches before picking up speed as I take in his powerfully bare chest and follow the smattering of hair that leaves a trail down to the waistline of his sweats that hang low on his trim hips. My eyes travel back up the contours of his body and land back on the tattoo of the circling arrows.

“This is simply something I enjoy doing,” he continues, nuzzling my neck, “and from what I saw this morning, it’s something you could enjoy, too,” he inches closer and gently takes hold of the side of my face. “This is the phase of the process where you better yourself, remember?” he whispers in my ear as he suckles on the flesh of my lobe, making my blood pound harder in the tender place between my legs.

“Coal...” I whimper this time, “it can’t be anything...” I don’t even know what I’m trying to say. I’m attracted to this man in a monumental way, but that’s all I feel. I feel the lust, and after everything I went through, putting my trust in him under that water and letting him guide me through training, I even feel a strong sense of security. But that’s all. There’s no feeling of infatuation or love. I think that particular circuit in my machinery is irreparably busted.

“I know,” he whispers, melding his lips to the skin where my neck meets my shoulder. “This is me empowering you, making you feel like the goddess you need to be to pull off the rest of your work within the Society. Violet, you are worth pleasuring. You need to see that any guy not willing to put forth the effort is nothing more than a waste of your fucking time. Let me show you what you are capable of feeling; of receiving. What you should expect no less than from now on.”

My breasts are swollen and aching, my skin flushed, and my pussy pulsing with need. Without meaning to, I let my head tilt against his, leaning into his seductive affections.

Coal releases my hands and continues to kiss down my cheek and my neck, all the while wrapping a strong arm all the way around me and kneading the skin on my back with his deft fingers.

This is completely different from what I felt all those times lying beneath Allen. I feel switched on; every cell in my body is completely alive and buzzing. I don’t even feel in control of my own movements as I grab at Coal, pushing my body against his, rolling my hips, squeezing my legs around him. Thousands of hormones that have seemingly lain dormant deep down inside until this moment have come to life, guiding my muscles faster than my brain can synapse them.

“Relax,” he whispers when his mouth makes its way back up to my ear, and I obey, because I want to. I close my eyes and as he instructed, I relax into him. “Good girl,” he praises me when he feels my muscles release.

Pulling at the zipper that holds the front of my sports bra together, Coal releases the material, baring my breasts, my nipples feeling vulnerable to his gaze in the best way. He takes one in his strong hand and squeezes as he flattens his tongue against it. Wetness floods my panties and I cry out with the pleasure. This is so bad and so good, making it delectable, and I bite my lip with a whimper.

Coal switches to the other breast and I drop my head back, writhing against him, shamelessly moaning into the air. I grip onto him, trying to ease the feeling that’s almost too good to handle as I feel his hand roam down my hips to the waistline of my pants, pulling them down with my panties. His hand seeks out my sex, finding my slippery wetness.

“Ah, that’s what I’m talking about,” he rasps out, sounding pleased as his fingers work in circles a few times before venturing inside me. Two fingers dart in and out of my entrance as Coal mauls my chest with his mouth, his breath hissing urgently in and out of his nose. I grip onto his bare shoulders, my own breath coming in rapid pants as I thrust against his hand. “That’s it, take what you want,” Coal growls against my skin, reminding me not to concern myself with things like modesty, and to just accept all the good that is coming my way in this moment.

I can feel the pressure and the momentum building, all the pleasure threatening to boil over when Coal removes his hand and crouches down, pulling my pants further down my legs. I feel his breath against my mound at the same time I feel the swipe of his wet tongue against my folds.

I look down to see his head nodding between my legs, his tongue licking and lapping at my sex like it’s his favorite treat.

“Ah!” I moan out helplessly, dropping my head back as I let my hand thread into his hair and grip the strands.

“Such a perfect little pussy,” he moans his approval, as I see his hand reach inside his pants.

God, this is so dirty and something I never before thought myself capable of... when I was Katherine. Violet on the other hand, just wants to feel good, and since that’s who I am now, I’m going with it.

Unable to help myself, I roll my hips, making my pelvis meet Coals tongue in a flawless rhythm, chasing my building climax. My breathing comes quicker, shallowly gasping from my chest and I arch my shoulders into the wall behind me as the orgasm hits me like a shock wave, violently rippling outward from my core through the rest of my body.

I cry out as my body throbs and Coal’s tongue lightly flicks against me in time with the pulse, bringing me down slowly and carefully as a new batch of sweat breaks out across my skin. I feel him gently replace my panties, followed by my pants as I lean limply against the wall, my breathing slowly returning to normal, and all my shattered pieces slowly reconnecting with each other. I feel incredible. Relaxed. Satisfied. Carefree. And for once, as Coal had intended, empowered.

I feel a tender kiss to my forehead before Coal shifts gears again.

“Let’s grab take-out on the way home,” he suggests. “Chinese or Mexican?”

“Chinese,” I exhale, opening my eyes.



JOHN

“KOPA, I’M SORRY,” the Sergeant reasons. “It’s been over two weeks. There’s no body, not even a possible sighting of Katherine Holland. Intelligence has to focus their energy elsewhere now.”

He means cases like missing persons, and serial killers and rapists still at large, instead of exhausting their efforts looking

for a dead body. It's what makes sense, and if I were the detective with no ties to this case, I'd be doing the same.

"Have they looked into next of kin? Last address? Friends, last place of employment..." I rattle off all the different avenues, not letting on that I've already tried those. Turns out I don't have to.

"Martinez checked into all of those and they turned up a bunch of dead ends, which you should know, seeing as how he reported to me that the owner of that strip club told him it was the second time he'd been questioned by our precinct. He gave a name Martinez didn't recognize, but I bet you know who it was," he gives me a stern, knowing look.

I give him nothing back. I simply stare back at him with my arms crossed over my uniform. When neither one of us budes after a moment, he sighs, letting his stern mask fall.

"Look, Kopa, I know that was a hard thing for you to witness. Being a cop doesn't make you less human. Have you gone to the department therapist?"

I stiffen, looking away nervously. "No."

"Kopa, it's time to move past this if you want to keep being a cop. That wasn't the most traumatic thing you've seen in this field, and it won't be the last. Your chances at detective will be pretty fucking bleak if you're going to let one event control your day-to-day."

I still don't respond, but this time it's because I know he's right. Instead, I cast my eyes down to the floor.

"See the shrink or don't, do what you gotta do. But this is going to be closed by the end of the week and a record of death officially filed. Find your closure, and get back on track."

I nod at the linoleum as he dismisses himself. Deciding to take fifteen minutes to reset myself before I head back out on patrol, I head to the men's room and splash cold water on my face.

Resting my hands on the porcelain, I drop my head, allowing the droplets of water to fall from my face as I allow

myself one more wallow in the memory of that day.

I keep wondering how long she'd been there before I arrived, and why she waited for me to do so before she made the jump. It was like she needed someone there with her to follow through, which makes so much sense and none at all at the same time.

And why would she answer me when I asked her name? Why bother with indulging a stranger's questions when you're seconds away from ending it all?

She was trying so hard not to look at me, and when her eyes did flash to mine, I could see her painful loneliness, but I could see so much more. So many wheels were spinning in her mind, and the look she gave me before she abruptly jumped was like she was committing my face to memory; one last thing to take with her as she dropped down to the bottom of the ocean.

So many questions. So many holes and blanks that will never be filled in... fuck.

That's it. This is my anal, obsessive tendency to have every 'i' dotted and 't' crossed, and that's what's holding me hostage from continuing down my track, and the hard reality of it is that it's not always going to happen. In this field, there are plenty of unsolved cases and plenty that don't add up. It comes as part and parcel with the job, and while it's likely to drive me to insanity at times (like now), I need to learn to roll with it; accept it. This is one of those cases.

I really do need to get some perspective. Before I saw Katherine Holland throw herself into the ocean, I was so determined and driven I was like a machine. Spending the last fifteen seconds of her life with her has fucked me up and stopped me dead in my tracks. Sarge is right. If I can't get past one incident, I'm not cut out to be a cop, let alone a detective.

Exiting the men's room, I head to the break room to refill my travel mug with some shitty coffee before heading out to my cruiser, hoping to put Katherine in my rearview.

Chapter Fifteen

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VIOLET



Knock, knock, knock...

“Go away!” I moan into my pillow.

While I’ve eased more into my new life and gotten more comfortable with my routine, it’s still been grueling. With TV and take-out nights, I’ve gotten to see the rest of the household members in more of their natural states, giving me some semblance of a family for the first time in my life.

“Vi-o-let!” Karma sings through the door.

How the hell is she always so damn perky? The world is full of dark, twisted bullshit, so much so that she runs a shady, underground society just to keep it at bay.

“I’m not training today!” I yell, like a petulant brat, only because after Coal and Silver have been working me over it’s made me tough enough to put up at least something of a fight if one of them tries to come in and drag me out. That said, I’m fucking beat.

“No problem,” her voice is louder as she pushes my door open and flounces in, buffed and fluffed and completely decked out in a sleek black halter jumpsuit. She’s completely put together with the front strands of her black and silver hair pinned back to show off her shadowy eyes and large hoop earrings. “It’s fun day!” she announces with her arms spread out, and I swear to God it looks like she’s about to burst into song.

“What do you mean?” I lift my pillow off my head and peel one eyelid open.

“You’ve tossed your used, battered, former shell in the ocean - and in case I don’t say it enough, good for you - you’ve got a new name and a new, cute, buff bod...” she lists my achievements off on her manicured fingers, “and *now*, it’s time for the fun part!”

There’s truth to her references of my partial transformation, however, there still seems to be piss and vinegar running through my veins. Despite the earth-shaking orgasm from Coal and the aforementioned family experience, I still haven’t faced off with Caroline, nor do I feel like a real member of the Society yet. Plus, I think I’m getting my period...

I have no response except to blink my other eye open and groan some more.

Karma clasps her delicate hands in front of her and brings her shoulders up to her ears, her expression giddy.

“The rest of your transformation!” she squeaks, trying and failing to contain herself. “Clothes! Colored contacts! Tattoo! Car!” She fires them all off when she sees I’m still not conscious enough to catch on.

“Whoa!” That last word does the trick and I sit up. “Car? Karma, no...”

“You need a car,” she drops her arms and pops her hip out, looking at me like I’m ridiculous.

“But you don’t need to be the one to get it for me,” I argue, pulling the covers off my lap. “You’ve been generous to the point of being unrepayable, and I can’t keep taking advantage.”

“Violet,” she says, firmly taking my hands in hers and leveling me with a no-nonsense glare. “We all have our place in society; a role we play, and for that we are compensated for the expenses of merely living. *We have* a place in an *alternate* Society where currency doesn’t come in the form of *money*, necessarily. In lieu of income, you’re directly given the things you need - and deserve - for your contributions. You’re not getting any of this for nothing,” she finishes with a head shake

and convincingly raised eyebrows. “Think of yourself as an investment, and if it makes you feel better, it’s not all coming out of my pocket,” she winks, and I remember what Jade told me about the Society’s funds coming from rich, entitled bastards that have no idea they’re being taken down by their bank accounts emptying too slowly to notice.

This was all explained to me in the beginning, but it’s still hard to get my head around.

“I know you’re uncomfortable right now,” she explains, “but once you get into your work in the Society you’ll get used to it, and believe me, it will feel more justified.”

I sigh, nodding my head, letting it go.

“Great!” she brightens, taking that as my approval. “Magenta is waiting downstairs! Get dressed!” She pats my arm and dashes out of the room.

Ten minutes later I shuffle down the stairs, cradling Ghost in my arms, and enter the kitchen to find Karma seated at the island with yet another stunning human. This one has luscious, wavy hair in a shade of dark black that brings attention to the dark shade of pink in her eyes that light up when I walk in.

“Violet!” she exclaims, as if she’s known me all my life, jumping up from her stool. She rushes over to hug me and I get a strong whiff of roses and sophistication. She has to live in the city, probably in a high rise. Her wide-legged trousers sport a black and white paisley design, and her tan skin is highlighted by her perfectly white tank top. Her sandals sparkle and her outfit pops, courtesy of the turquoise pendant around her neck that matches her earrings.

Standing in the kitchen with these two, I look down at my yoga pants and slouchy t-shirt. My hair is a mess and the cat I’m holding is the perfect accessory, giving me the look that I’ve really given up on life. I should just go straight back upstairs.

Karma and Magenta are having none of that, however, and once I’m on my second cup of coffee, I relax into the conversation while looking through some albums of fashion

options. I've never really gotten to choose my clothes before. I always wore what I was given, and even when I was out of foster care, my choices from Goodwill were pretty limited. I'm not even sure what my style is, having never had the chance to explore it. Since I've been living in the house with the others, I've mainly been dressing for comfort in the athletic clothes that Karma's had on hand.

Black seems to be the theme in this house, at least for when any of the core members go out on missions. I've seen Silver in jeans and a red sweater and I've seen Jade in a white or grey top occasionally. Both of them dress like badasses when they leave the house, and Karma seems to like her metallics.

As I flip through pages, I seem to gravitate to solid colors rather than prints and patterns, although I see a pair of black and white tartan slim-fit pants I like. I think I might also be the type to show a little skin, also. I seem to like the tops that are cropped, or off-the-shoulder.

Magenta takes some measurements so that she can get some things ordered for me, but leaves me with a few garments that she brought with her that were either already my size, or easily altered on the spot. Finally getting excited, I run off to immediately change into a pair of black jeans with horizontal rips that trail down the legs and a blue collared shirt that ties in the front, showing off a little cleavage and midriff.

I like what I see in my bedroom mirror. In fact, I love it. For once I look like someone with their shit together; confident, comfortable in my own skin, and even a little sexy.

"You know," Jade's voice makes me turn towards the door where she stands, leaning against the frame. She's in a black lace top today, and her hair's in a sleek ponytail. "For never having actually known you, I have to say... you look like *you*."

I nod my appreciation as I look back to the mirror again. As screwed up as that sounded, it made perfect sense. I look and feel like *me*, after so many years of feeling like I've been navigating this life in the wrong pod.

“You look like you’re feeling ten times better than you did five minutes ago,” Karma observes, as she waltzes in, holding a small, white case in the palm of her hand. “Now let’s see how you look through new eyes.” She opens the case to reveal two contact lenses, sitting in tiny individual pools of solution.

It takes about six tries, one of the contacts folding and getting lost behind my lid, a lot of poking and blinking, but Karma finally gets the lenses in my eyes, and I rise off my bed to get a look in the mirror.

My pupils are the palest of purple, glistening behind my lashes, and I look... like a wonder; a fantasy. I had no idea I could look so stunning. Sure, I once took my clothes off on stage, but that was with a good dose of alcohol in me and the mindset that it doesn’t take a lot for a bunch of horny idiots to empty their wallets.

Right now, however, I’m looking at my reflection, reassuring myself it’s not a trick mirror. After weeks of Coal and Silver whipping me into shape, I seem to have acquired something called abs, and I cannot get over the touch of magic my violet eyes bring to my new packaging.

“I like it,” I sigh out, nodding at myself as Karma beams. It’s a pathetic exclamation, but I can’t come up with anything better. I just know I want to stay this way; to keep feeling about myself the way I do now.



JOHN

I STARE DOWN at the tile floor of the locker room, my blood pulsing palpably through my veins as I hold my hands balled together at my lips.

I run down criminals, I’ve kept a cool façade while on undercover cases, and I’m supposed to have nerves of steel for when... *if* I do interrogations. Any way you slice it, I’m supposed to be unflappable.

Yet here I am, swaying in place like an awkward high school senior, hoping he just got the acceptance letter to the school of their choice.

Ever the friend, Hundt holds my cell phone, tapping on the screen to open the email that's been sitting in my inbox since last night.

That's right; I've been too much of a chicken-shit pussy to open it alone. The results of my detective exam, the fate of my future, sits in that tiny scrap of cyberspace.

"Dude," he looks up at me annoyed. "Look at it this way: either way we're going out and getting fucked up tonight. If you passed, we're celebrating. If you failed, we're going out to help you cope."

"Alright, fine, just get on with it," I wave my hand in a circular hurry up motion.

For the last couple of weeks, I've been a machine. I've worked my ass off during the day and studied it off at night. I haven't gone out, and I've pushed a certain, troubled brunette into the farthest corner of my mind to the point that I can soon see her becoming nothing other than something difficult that happened to me once. Maybe not quite yet, but I can see it. Regardless, I knew the material backwards and forwards, and there's no way I didn't ace that exam. That said, I don't bank on anything until it's hot in my hand, and I always stay prepared for the worst.

"Officer Kopa," my buddy finally reads out loud, trying to make his voice comically formal. "Congratulations on passing your exam, you pansy-ass little bitch."

"Yes!" I whoop, punching a fist in the air and snatching my phone back before he can read on and do anymore improv. My eyes dart back and forth as I read the email's text on the screen, confirming what Hundt just read.

I made it.

I feel his hand clamp down on my shoulder, almost jarring me out of the moment, but not completely.

“Your dad and your pops would be proud of you,” he murmurs, and I absently nod, feeling a slight twinge of bittersweet that they aren’t here to actually see it. But Hundt doesn’t let me wallow in the moment for long.

“Come on, and get your shit,” he says, turning to grab up his own duffle from the bench. “Go home and get ready and meet me at Grotto.”

“That stuffy place on 3rd where the high rollers go out?” I ask incredulously, wondering why in the hell he’d want to go there, and why he’d want to spend that much.

“Yeah, I got a Groupon. And besides, I won three hundred dollars at poker night this week, so shut your mouth and let’s roll.”

He turns, not waiting for me to protest any further and... fuck it.

I just fucking made detective.

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Chapter Sixteen

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VIOLET



“You’ve done a lot of changing,” Karma applauds as I squeeze her hand in my own. “Do you think you’re ready for your first mission?” she asks over the buzzing of the needle.

“I don’t know,” I squeeze my eyes shut tight against the burning sting. “I love how strong I feel, physically,” I demonstrate by giving her hand another squeeze, wincing when the needle penetrates the scar tissue on my back. “But I don’t know if I have the wits yet. It’s going to take some seriously impenetrable armor to go up against Caroline and not flinch.”

It’s what I always envied about her; her fiery personality was untouchable. No one could touch her with their words, or at least she managed to at least look like it. I’ve never been quick-witted or good with the burns, or at the very least, able to play off like I don’t give a fuck.

“Well,” Karma starts in softly, “as much as I know you’re not looking forward to it, maybe putting in some more time with Silver will help get you there. And,” she adds before I can pout, “hopefully your newfound strength and these next steps in your transformation will help build your confidence.”

Today didn’t just end with new clothes and colored contacts, though that did light a small fire inside me. I was also taken to the spa where Reach members turned my drab, light brown hair to rich shades of chocolate and gave me eyelash extensions. We then bought them out of makeup

supplies, so much nicer than the drugstore kind I would use when waitressing at the club.

Finally, Karma brought me to see Miguel, the Society's trusted tattoo artist. I'm not getting my Karma Society symbol today; that will happen after I've completed my fateful first mission. But speaking of that, I do need to cover my scar.

"Maybe I should have gotten some plastic surgery," I murmur out loud, resting my chin on my arm. "What if the tattoo isn't enough and they recognize me?"

"Well, we'll color your hair again," Karma calmly reassures me, "and the eye color will help. And honestly, you'll be carrying yourself so differently; comparing you to Katherine will not be the first thing on their mind."

I nod, scrunching my facial muscles together as the needle stings again. "And if you're really worried," she adds, "some of the makeup artists back at the spa can do some clever things with skin putty to change your face just a little bit."

I nod again, and open one eye. "How's it look?" I ask, and Karma leans over to check out Miguel's progress.

"It's coming along nicely. You made a good choice," she smiles, referring to the design I selected of a bundle of exploding violets to cover the hole some crazy bitch made with her size 8 heel. "It's a good way to embrace your new life, and I think it's good in a way that you decided to hold onto the scar. It's a reminder of what brought you to this new life in the first place."

"Well, I don't actually want that reminder," I scoff, "but Silver said I would one day," I sigh. Silver confided one night that she never got rid of the scars of what happened to her. She wouldn't show me, nor tell me how she got them. I suppose that's privileged information that I'll have to earn with time and loyalty. But she did tell me that though she may have left her old life behind, it's the very reason for her new life.

"Silver makes a good point," Karma muses, giving my hand another squeeze. I don't ask her if she still has her scars, if she even has any, or what they're from. I wonder, though,

what her life was once like, what she did for work, if she ever fell in love... all the things. But I don't voice it. If she wants to tell me, she'll tell me.

I also wonder if I dare think of her as something of a mother figure. In this short time, she's shown me more care than any other woman I've ever lived with. Whoever my biological mother is, she didn't want me, as all I know of my history is being left at a fire station, followed by a string of different shady homes with even shadier people.

Karma draws a cleansing breath and straightens her spine. "Let's go out tonight," she says, more by way of declaration than suggestion, and I give her a questioning look. "It will be part celebration of your new life, and part soft, test run. Acclimate to being in public under a new identity."

It sounds scary, but I know I won't get anywhere in the society by hiding in the house. I have to break the ice sometime.

"Let's do it," I rattle off tightly before I can talk myself out of it. I'm so happy in that warm cocoon of a house, but it's time for me to move forward and start pulling my weight.



UPON OUR RETURN to the house, Karma and I break to get ready for my inaugural outing. Before I headed up the stairs to my room, she gave me the task of alerting the others of the plans for the night: a fancy dinner followed by drinks at an even swankier club.

On my way down the hall to my room, I stop at Coal's door, raising my hand to knock but stop myself before my knuckles can make contact with the wood. I swear I just heard a female voice from beyond the door. I still, listening hard to make sure I'm not fooling myself and am treated to the sound of several very hard thumps interloping with the sound of Coal grunting and growling.

"Oh, God," I hear Silver's voice on a feral cry. "Yes, give it to me! Harder, I want it harder!"

I feel my body lock up and freeze as my heart jumps from my chest to the base of my throat where it proceeds to pound like a jackhammer.

Speaking of pounding...

Several fragments of emotions quickly come out of nowhere to swish together in my stomach. I'm hit with a flash of jealousy that gets poured into the mix when I remember my experience with Coal in the gym. It makes me feel sick for a fleeting moment, but fizzles out when I remember the understanding we had, as well as how I can't even register the idea of being with him on any deeper level.

The initial shock, too, wears off, albeit not as quickly, leaving me with the predominant feeling of total awkwardness.

Feeling majorly uncomfortable - and a little dumb - standing here, listening to Coal make Silver's wishes his command, I forcefully shake myself out of my stupor and do an about face, heading back the way I came, and down the stairs.

I find Jade in the living room, curled up in one of the overstuffed chairs with some kind of true crime show burbling on the TV. I plop down on the end of the wide, plushy sofa where I've spent many an evening just casually hanging out with the very people I just heard sticking it to each other upstairs.

"I hear we're going out tonight," Jade says, eyes still on her show as I pick up a magazine and start nervously flipping through it.

"Uh huh," I mutter, not looking up.

"What's the matter?" I see her head turn my way in my peripheral.

"Nothing, I'm good," I respond a little too quickly while I keep flashing pages.

"Okaaay... well... I should get ready, I suppose, and make sure Coal and Silver do the same," she ponders out loud as she moves to stand, and my head snaps up.

“No... uh... they’re busy...” I stammer. I really, really need to do some work with Silver. Regardless, Jade stops in her tracks and swings her head in my direction, an all-knowing smile on her face. And it’s now I realize she doesn’t have her contacts in. Her eyes are a dark brown, making her almost look like a different person.

“They’re busy? Or they’re *getting* busy?” she asks, snarkily.

Oh yeah, I forget I’m the only newbie that isn’t used to the format around here yet.

I’ve got nothing. I toss an indifferent hand in the air with a shrug.

Jade waves a dismissive hand in response as she continues past me towards the stairs.

“I’m sure you’ve figured out by now that Coal’s a giver,” she calls over her shoulder. “Get used to it.”



JOHN

NEON LIGHTS, pulsing bass, writhing bodies wearing next to nothing... But hey, they’re all paying sixteen dollars a drink so that makes it classy, right?

I take a swig of my top shelf whiskey and shrug it off, trying not to be a cynic, and instead bask in the vibe of the evening. I can’t let anything destroy the high of finally realizing the dream I’ve been working so hard for; that I’ve been aspiring for all my life.

Besides, this place isn’t that bad. There’s a crowd limit which leaves plenty of breathing and elbow room, not to mention the ability to get a drink at the bar without having to wait for the second coming. So this is how people at the top of the food chain live large.

While there’s plenty of plush, velvet furniture to sit and converse on, Hundt and I, along with a couple of other buddies

from the station, are content to occupy a high-top table where we partake in many a celebratory shot.

“So are you going to leave us in the trenches now while you go off to another precinct to join the big kids?” one of our friends, Johannsen, asks. “You know there are no detective openings at twenty-nine, right?”

“Actually, Sergeant Hughes tells me Larsen might be transferring out,” I mention, setting my glass down. “He’s moving to the east side with the family and doesn’t want the commute. It’s not a done deal yet but he’s house hunting, so I figure I can hang out on the beat a little longer if it means I can go up for his spot. Better than transferring to another precinct,” I shrug to convey my logic.

“I thought you were in such a balls-out hurry,” Lycock mentions with a skeptical look from over the rim of his glass.

“I am, but I’m not an idiot,” I defend, sitting back in my seat. “I’m not going to change districts just because I don’t want to wait a few weeks.” Now that the hardest part is over, I find myself relaxing a little.

“Wouldn’t surprise me if you did,” Hundt jabs, and I whack his shoulder as I pick my drink up again. “Man, you need to unclench!” he barks as he rubs the spot I hit. “When was the last time you got laid, anyway?”

I’m pretty sure it was that Karissa chick. That had me wondering if hooking up was actually worth it, and then my world got fucked sideways by a mysterious, pretty girl that jumped off a cliff instead of letting me help her.

Yeah, that series of events kind of threw a monkey wrench in my sex life.

As if on cue, a waitress stops at our table with a tray of shots. Her tight body is tucked into tight leather pants and a just as tight tank top, and while my dick takes notice, the rest of me doesn’t seem to follow. Casual sex or not, I’m not the kind of guy that can think solely with his cock. My mind has to be in on it too, and right now, nothing’s clicking as I look at

the leather clad ass of the waitress as it sways in the opposite direction.

It's alright. Another shot or two and my mind will be on board. I clink glasses with my brothers and down the shots of Jack.

Another round and a visit to the Men's room later, and I'm finally in the mood to hunt. This is my night off from my tightly-wound routine, after all. But this time, I'll be damn sure there won't be any sleepovers.

I wander back over to my table and sit down, ready to peruse the layout of the club for any prospective, willing participants when I hear the shattering of glass behind the bar. I don't know if someone bumped into a busser or if the bartender dropped a bottle. The cause of the noise is the last thing I care about as my entire body locks up in defense against the impending time warp coming to sweep me back in time. I feel my heart twist against itself in my chest as if it too, is resisting its own demon. It beats rapidly, sending blood pumping vigorously through my body, and I mentally ward off the band of sweat trying to surface at the back of my neck.

In this life, I've worked harder than no other, overcoming triggers from that night. With the aspirations to be a cop I had no other choice. To accustom myself to the sound of gunshots, I spent endless hours at gun ranges and going to sleep to violent action movies playing in the background until it was no longer nerve-wracking but practically comforting.

But the sound of shattering glass is one trigger I haven't quite been able to kick, although I handle it better than I used to. Since I was twelve years old, it's as if the devil used that very sound as his signal to take me out of a little box and play with me; taunting and tormenting me. That doesn't happen anymore. I've worked too hard, practicing coping mechanisms and exposure therapy, but he sure as hell still tries, and the best I can do is keep him at bay with methods like grounding exercises. I've gotten so good at it, however, that even in public places - like now, no one around me is the wiser. The main thing I need to do is pick one thing in the room and stare at it, to keep me in the present. Normally that would be

something simple, like an inanimate object that doesn't move to keep me in this place and time so that the devil doesn't whisk me back to that night. But for some reason, that doesn't happen this time.

My eyes, instead, find another set across the room, as if they have found their life-mates. In this dim lighting and with the distance, I can't tell what color they are, but something about them is almost ethereal; alluring. They belong to a breathtakingly beautiful brunette, and I swear I feel like I've seen a ghost. I don't know if that's a good thing to see right now, but I hang onto it, letting it ground me to this spot so that I don't spiral under the tide.

I don't know her, yet a sense of familiarity slams into me like a train; that light that flickers on inside you when you recognize someone... only I don't recognize her. We've never met, yet I've known her all my life, and I let her comfort me with those gorgeous eyes of hers carefully bringing me home until I feel safe enough to let my sights slowly zoom out, allowing more of my surroundings to come back in. I only focus on her however, and everything about her in this moment.

Dressed in some expensive-looking, silky black dress that belts at the waist and falls off one shoulder, she sits on one of the soft couches next to a blonde that's talking to her as if she's schooling her. With a leg tucked under her, she unconsciously lets a shiny black high heel dangle off her foot, popping it on and off her heel. She holds a fizzy-looking drink in one hand, and leans her head on the other as she listens intently to the blonde. Her back is straight, exuding confidence, yet her facial expression looks thoughtful with a side of uncertainty.

She looks like she belongs right where she is (in other words, out of my league), but I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm sitting on weeks of celibacy and several shots of liquid courage, and I fucking want... I don't know what the hell it is I want from her. I just know, whatever it is, I want it.

As if by divine intervention, the beauty's eyes flit back to mine, her black lashes fluttering as she blinks. I stare back at

her, having no shame. I can see the small space between her eyebrows wrinkle slightly as if she's trying to figure out what she's looking at, but I don't care what she thinks she sees. She sees me, and that's all I need to move forward.

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Chapter Seventeen

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VIOLET



Don't get me wrong, I've been well-fed since living in the Karma house. That said, dinner was like no meal I've ever had. Every bite and sip was so decadently perfect it was almost uncomfortable, though I didn't let that stop me from enjoying it.

Since my new wardrobe isn't coming for a little while, Silver dressed me in one of her fancy frocks, did my makeup so that I almost look lethal, and pinned the front strands of my hair back while keeping the rest down, sleek and straight. The point was to get me over the fear of showing my face, I suppose.

After dinner, my roommates brought me to an upscale club for drinks that is open to the regular public but is run by Reach members, making my age a non-issue with the alcohol.

Silver sits next to me on the velvety black couch, keeping her body partially turned towards me, much like she has for the most of the night. It's like she's taken on some self-appointed protector role so she can swoop in if she sees me get uncomfortable.

Karma sits on the couch opposite us with Jade and Coal on either side of her. Tonight, she's in another jumpsuit, only this one is long-sleeved with a deep V-neck, and a shiny silver color that compliments her hair. Jade, dressed in black slacks and a shimmery, gold backless top that makes her green eyes look brilliant, is quiet for the most part, but doesn't seem uncomfortable or anything. She's just content in her own space. Coal, on the other hand, looks like Coal in his black

pants and matching short-sleeved button down, with his hair up in its bun.

After what I heard coming from his room this afternoon, I'm still trying to figure out exactly how the fuck I feel about him. I feel safe with him, like he's a good friend that I can depend on. And of course, I think about the epic orgasm he gave me with his tongue quite frequently. Yet I sit here, trying to conjure up feelings of jealousy towards Silver, or some kind of longing to sleep in his arms at night, but they just aren't there. It doesn't even bother me that while Silver's attention is on me, he keeps staring across at her like he's determined to penetrate her soul and blow her first line of emotional defense to smithereens.

Still, I feel the need to ask...

"So..." I start, trying to come off casual and not awkward as fuck to my new comrade who, while is very nice, also scares the shit out of me sometimes, "you and Coal...?" I trail off, leaving Silver to fill in the blank.

"Oh please don't tell me you're jealous," she gives an eye roll while bringing her drink up to her lips. I slowly lift my shoulder to convey I don't know what the hell I am as she swallows and licks her glossy lips. "You have no reason to be, honey," she gives me a charming wink before pulling her eyebrows back together. "But you also have no reason to think there's any kind of romantic future there. Society members are not encouraged to exclusively date each other. It gets messy - from what I hear, anyway," she tilts her head and looks to the ceiling. "But we all have to have our needs taken care of so that we don't go insane in this secret bubble," she gives a hearty chuckle while giving my bare knee a shake.

"So," I turn to her more and lean into my hand, "how does anyone have any kind of romantic relationship?" I ask, strictly out of curiosity and not out of desire for myself. That train went off the tracks, tumbled down an embankment, and crashed in a fiery blaze as far as I'm concerned.

"Well, obviously we can't get involved with normal civilians that don't know about us," she imparts as I nod,

because it *is* obvious. “You can have a fling, sure, so long as it remains a *fling*,” she raises her eyebrows for emphasis. “Make it a point to not see the person again, and if by chance you do, give no inkling that you know them from anywhere and let them think they’re crazy. That part’s fun,” she laughs over the bumping music. “It’s just easier with a fellow Society member because they know not to come after you for anything more than that.”

By the way Coal’s stare at her has become white-hot, I wouldn’t be too sure, but okay.

“When Society members do settle down, it’s often with a member of the Reach. That way they don’t have to hide who they are,” she finishes her explanation, taking another drink.

“Why not just date another Society member then?” I ask. “Why does it get messy?”

“Reach members are predominantly focused on their life in the real world. All they are needed for is to keep our secret, look the other way in certain situations, and smooth out a wrinkle here and there. Society members however, are almost always on the job, always focusing on a mission. A relationship with another member, especially one that lives and works alongside you clouds your focus. Actually, it fucks it into the mud.”

I nod, finding an element or two of sense in this logic.

“So, does Coal... *give*... to everyone in the house?” I ask uncomfortably, and it makes her toss her head back, cackling with laughter. I think I like drunk Silver.

She continues laughing, slapping the sofa before composing herself and dabbing at the moisture that’s formed at the corners of her silver eyes as Coal huffs out a grunt and rises from his seat, venturing off in the direction of the bar.

“Don’t worry, we’re not his harem,” she muses between dissipating giggles. “But no, not Karma, I don’t think, ever. Jade he’s been with a time or two, but it’s been a really long time.”

“So just you,” I state more than ask, as I take a hefty drink from my own glass.

“And now you,” she playfully nudges me. “I mean... if you want...” she snickers and I give an uncomfortable eye roll. She knows.

“You’re weirded out,” she says with a firm glare.

“Yes!” I burst out in exasperation, tired of trying to play it cool. “This is different for me, living with people under these circumstances.”

“You’ll get used to it,” she calmly assures me. “The best way is to dive right in.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean start *living* this new life. It’s time for you to take control of what you want instead of going along with what others expect. You went along with what Caroline and Allen wanted. I don’t think you once stood up and told them no, or professed what you wanted instead.”

I down the rest of my drink, trying to drown her words from my mind, and I see her signal to a waitress in my peripheral. “Two shots please,” she asks sweetly. The waitress smiles and nods, and just as she turns, a very attractive blonde man appears.

“And another round of the group’s drinks on me,” the blonde Adonis adds, as Karma beams and gets to her feet to hug him.

“Oh, Grey, it’s so good to see you,” she marvels, her voice warm and endearing as Jade’s eyes dart up at the man and then focus back down on her drink.

“Who’s that?” I murmur to Silver.

“Grey owns this place. He’s a Reach member,” she explains.

“His name is a color,” I point out, confused.

“He was a Society member and kept his name,” she supplies dismissively.

“Nice to see you, Jade.” He looks fondly down at her, and she forces herself to return the acknowledgement.

“Grey,” she subtly nods.

Grey takes another moment to look at her, something resembling remorse passing over his light blue eyes before nodding with a tight smile and putting his hands in his pockets and walking away.

“Anyway,” Silver continues, as if deliberately trying to snap my attention away from that weird interaction. “As I was saying, you’re in charge of what you want now, and I expect you to demonstrate nothing else from here on out,” she firmly declares. Scary mentor Silver is back.

“Okay,” I concede, sitting up straighter.

“Starting tonight,” she adds as our shots arrive, as well as our regular refills.

“What?” I ask, as she hands me my shot and immediately clinks it with hers.

“Cheers,” she spouts off before downing it and I follow suit, feeling the burning sting of whatever the fuck she ordered excavating a gnarly trail down my throat. The aftertaste is surprisingly good, though.

“What do you mean, tonight?” I ask between coughs as I take a swig of my regular drink, willing the cool fizziness to put out the flames. That shot being my third drink, I’m relaxing into the evening, and just slightly open to what Silver could be insinuating.

“Tonight’s a test run,” she reminds me, “a chance to see how you conduct your new self in public with your loving fellow members here as your safety net. As a side test, I want you to go take what you want from the guy that’s been eye-fucking you across the room for the last five minutes,” she tells me plainly, and I follow her gaze to a man slowly walking towards the bar area where the high-tops are.

I quickly look away not wanting him to catch me staring, even though that’s exactly what he’s doing.

“But then I’d be doing what *you* want,” I point out. “Isn’t the point to not give in to what others tell me to do?” I bite down on my drink’s small cocktail straw as my eyes dart over to the man again, and I get a potent shot of déjà vu.

“Nice try,” she fires back with narrowed eyes. “But the point is to get you there, and for that, you need us to push you a little. You clearly don’t disapprove, so I think it’s a good place to start.”

“And do what?” I challenge as I look at him again. She’s not wrong. I’m extremely attracted to his dark hair and strong features. He’s got dark eyebrows with a distinct scar running through one of them. He’s in a light-blue Henley that seems to love the contours of his broad chest. And God, what the hell about him has my heartrate quickening? Looking at him gives me some kind of feeling of excitement mixed with uneasiness. I feel warm all of a sudden, especially between my legs, and my head is starting to feel fuzzy in a happy and relaxed sort of way. While I wonder what it is about him that’s making me crazy, I can only bring myself to care so much in my buzzed state.

“Anything you want,” Silver says plainly, as our waitress reappears, holding a shot out to me.

“Courtesy of the gentleman in the light blue shirt by the bar,” she informs me, handing me the small glass of amber liquid. I look over to where she points and see the very man Silver is urging me to go have my way with.

“Oh my God,” Silver laughs at the coincidence before whispering, “eye contact as you drink it.” I look the man in his dark eyes as I tip the drink back. Wanting to impress him, I down it in one go, licking the excess liquid from my lips as I set it down. It tastes like some kind of spicy apple cider with a kick to it.

“There’s your opening,” Silver continues. “Go to him and take what you want. I don’t care if it’s a kiss, a fuck, a high-five - just do what *you* want for a change,” she fiercely instructs, as I feel another delightful haze settle over me as the drinks stack up.

Deciding I at least want a closer look, I stand.

“I’m going to the Ladies’ room,” I inform Silver. I don’t know if I actually want to approach this guy, but I want to get closer, to see if I can place him, and actually...

Silver said to get what I want from it. And what I *want* is for him to come to *me*.

Besides, I really do have to pee.

“Uh huh,” she nods, picking her cocktail back up. “If you don’t come back with a satisfied look on your face, you’re in for it.”



JOHN

AS THE MYSTERIOUS brunette stands and starts walking through the throng of patrons, I feel my skin come to life, yearning to touch hers.

That’s it, come this way, baby. Come see me.

I lean against the bar, watching her walk towards me, and I envision casting an invisible lasso her way; catching her and pulling her to me. She watches where she’s stepping for a moment, and then her eyes finally come up to meet mine. Finally, I can see the color and it’s... some kind of light purple. What the hell? That can’t be possible. Yet that’s definitely a pale shade of the color glittering back at me from behind her thick lashes.

As she gets closer, her eyes quickly flit up and down my body, taking me in. The subtle parting of her pink lips tells me she likes what she sees. Just when I think I’m mere seconds from running the next move in my game however, she veers away towards the restrooms. That doesn’t get me down, though. If she wants to play cat and mouse, I’m game.

When she disappears behind the door of the Ladies’ room, I head in that direction and park myself against the wall by the door. Several minutes tick by, and then a few more, but finally,

what feels like my destiny emerges from the bathroom and I quickly snake an arm around her waist, swinging her in my direction in a graceful, non-threatening motion. Backing her against the wall, I lean in close, a hand above her head. Her close proximity still gives me the eerie feeling of knowing her from somewhere, and I try to not let that be the part of her that drives me mad.

“Did you enjoy your drink?” I ask in a low husk.

She nervously licks her lips, looking up at me, and I get a good look at those pale purple eyes. I know enough about contacts to know she’s wearing them, but I don’t give a fuck. That’s her prerogative, and it looks fucking amazing on her.

“It was good,” she coos in a charming voice, “although, I could’ve handled something a little stronger.”

“Is that so?” I ask, flirting heavily as I let my hand come down to her waist and rest it possessively on her hip. She raises her bare shoulder in a shrug, giving me a demure smile. I give her another once over, wanting to put the nagging feeling of knowing her behind me. “Have we met before?” I ask, sounding more cavalier than I feel.

She stares back at me, like she’s trying to figure out the same thing. “No... I don’t think so,” she says in a sexy murmur, those beautiful lips begging for mine to take them in.

Just as I’m thinking of acting on that very thought, she looks me up and down one last time, her violet eyes looking like they’re making a last-minute decision before she pushes off the wall and melds her mouth to mine.

While it’s unexpected, I definitely welcome it. It’s soft and her lips are closed, and after a moment she pulls away, as if all she wanted was a taste. I won’t let it end there, though. Leaning into her again, I give her soft bottom lip a lick before placing my tongue inside her mouth, massaging against hers.

I kiss her harder by the stroke, my lips pressing against hers as my tongue sweeps deeper, like I’m trying to make us one. I get a whiff of her perfume which emits a strange

combination of sophistication and comfort. Whatever it is makes my dick throb, and so does the soft moan she releases.

In less than sixty seconds together, I want to do everything to this woman. Consume her, kiss her, fuck her, touch her, and make her forget every other guy that's been inside her... but what I can't bring myself to add to that list, is turning around and forgetting her.

“Want to go somewhere...” I breathe against her lips, prodding her to fill in the blank with her name.

“No names,” she says breathlessly. “And yes.”

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Chapter Eighteen

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VIOLET



We are greeted by the crisp night air as we fumble our way through a back door of the club that leads out into an alleyway. The air is cool and damp, indicating a possible rain shower soon. That's the last concern on my mind however as the handsome stranger presses me against the brick wall next to some wooden storage crates.

His strong hands grip and knead along my rib cage as his devilishly full lips kiss down my throat. My breathing comes in shallow pants as I lean into every touch. I pull at the hem of his shirt, wanting to touch him back, feel his skin. My hands find rippled abs beneath the material and I can barely take a breath before his tongue is plunging into my mouth again. Blood is flowing straight to my sex, making it pulse with need as I let out a feral moan into his mouth, uncaring who could come out here and find us.

I grab at my sensual stranger, pulling him into me, and he rewards me by slamming his rock-hard erection into my pelvis, letting me feel his arousal through his jeans. It makes another wanton moan escape me as I grip his shirt, exploring his jawline with my mouth. His skin is cool and smooth, and for a moment I wonder what it would be like to just lay across his bare chest and fall asleep.

I'm just disinhibited enough to let my body take the wheel, letting it do what it will; grabbing at his arms, nipping at his neck, and letting a low growly purr escape my mouth when he reaches down to squeeze my ass in both hands. The act is primal and arousing, possessive and claiming. It's so sexual,

that when he lifts the back of my dress to do it again, palming my bare flesh in his hands, I feel a flood of arousal rush out of me, soaking my thong.

His tongue snakes out to taste the skin of my neck before sealing his lips over the spot and I let out a desperate cry. I need release more than I ever have with anyone before, and I'm buzzed enough to grind against him, rubbing my pelvis against his at a sharp pace. Both our breathing matches the rhythm of my movement as I reach for his belt, pulling at the leather.

He takes this moment to reach in his back pocket, producing his wallet. Taking out a condom, he tears it open with his teeth at the same time my hand finds his dick in his briefs; hard and throbbing in my hand.

"Aww fuck," he groans out as I start to stroke the smooth skin. Tossing the wrapper on the ground, he moves to sheath his cock while I hike up my skirt in search of the waistband of my panties, intent on pulling them off, when he stops me. "No," he growls, as he gets the condom rolled down to the base of his shaft. Placing his hands on mine to stop me, he gently pulls them away and takes hold of my dress himself. "I get to do that part."

I drop my hands to my sides and look up at him as his hand ventures down my front, stopping to cup my pussy through the silk. I finally notice his eyes are a dark grey, like gun metal; so dark, yet so dimensional. They penetrate mine as he gathers my dress in one hand and slowly reaches under it with the other. Then, in a motion that contradicts the time and care he was showing, he yanks hard at the lace, tearing it from my body. The force makes me feel a quick bite of the material on my skin, and just as quickly, it's gone as this man pockets the shredded black remains.

The moment felt almost ceremonial, but now it's over and we resume our rapture, savagely grabbing hold of each other, our mouths colliding again. I'm writhing against him, desperate to come as he releases me to push his jeans down just enough to completely free his cock.

“Mmmm, how do you want it?” my momentary lover groans in my ear, letting his impressive erection tease around my entrance, making me tingle and quiver.

“Hard,” I say in a desperate mewl. “Just fuck me hard.”

My order is met by him grabbing my waist and whipping me around to face the brick wall. I feel my dress being pulled up and then the cool air on my ass. He grinds his dick between my cheeks, teasing me a few more seconds before lining the head up with my opening.

I feel a cool drop of water fall with a pat in my hair as he pushes through my folds, tunneling through my channel. The delicious feeling of his cock stretching my walls makes me sigh with relief and then moan like a porn star when he withdraws and pushes in again with a growl. I feel more drops of water on my face and my shoulder as he works in and out of me with shallow thrusts at first, and just when the friction makes me feel like I’m about to explode, he slams into me hard, the clap of our skin echoing off the alley walls.

The smell of wet pavement mingles with his musky mountain spring scent as the droplets come down more steadily. He slams into me again with a grunt and it makes me cry out and tilt my head back in ecstasy as the rain turns from a pleasant sprinkle to a drizzle. I welcome the cool relief on my searing hot skin as he plows into me again, his hips slapping against my ass. He’s so deep, his thrusts bruising, as the rain comes down in a pour.

I feel mystical and untouchable; powerful. I’m getting just what I want in this moment, and it feels so perfectly right. It feels so good to get such pleasure from a man and not have my mind totally crowded with thoughts of how to keep him around afterwards. My sexuality is liberated, and just when I’m about to think to myself that this man is giving me everything and all I want, a small bubble of thought forms and floats around in the air around me.

This might not be enough... I want more.

I blow out a ragged breath of air, envisioning myself blowing the bubble away, trying not to think about the peculiar

urge I'm having to crawl inside this man and stay there.



JOHN

“YOU JUST WANNA BE FUCKED, HUH?” I ask my mysterious little stranger as I invade her over and over again.

This is what I'd been wanting: no-strings-attached sex with no sleepovers and no complications, and she's handing it to me on a silver platter. So why the fuck is a voice in the darkest, smallest corner of my mind telling me this doesn't feel right?

The rain is a full-on downpour, soaking us both, but neither one of us seems to give a fuck. If anything, it's making this whole rendezvous more intense with the way the silk of her dress is clinging to her tight little body, her perfectly styled hair becoming a wet, matted mess, and the slapping of our skin together more audible.

She lays her head back on my shoulder, moaning and keening while meeting each of my punishing thrusts as I play with her firm tits through the wet material of her dress; squeezing and massaging.

“My cock feel good inside you?” I ask rhetorically, just to hear how much she's getting back.

“Oh, yeah,” she pants breathlessly and it makes me crave more of her ecstatically pleased noises. Reaching down, I find her clit and start rubbing it in a fast and furious motion. “Oh my God!” she cries to my unbelievable satisfaction. I can feel by the wetness seeping between us that she's close. I'm right there myself, but I don't want this to be over. I want to draw out what time I have with her body melded to mine so perfectly.

I fuck into her hard, giving her what she wants as her cries make my dick swell harder, filling her up.

“Oh yeah, take it,” I growl in her ear, spurring her on as she rides against my strokes.

I bring a hand up to sweep her soaked hair off her neck so my mouth can have access, and it's then that I notice a patch of white gauze just barely peeking out of the top of her dress. I'm suddenly blindsided by the urge to know why that's there; to know more of her story.

Out of nowhere, I start to feel frustrated as I start to sober. I have no room in my life for connections right now. This was meant to end with getting off and moving on, but I can't shake this feeling of knowing this young woman from somewhere. And I've been fucking her from behind for long enough that I'm fearful of forgetting her face. It would seriously do me well to not give a fuck, but before I can stop myself, I pull out of her, eliciting a protesting yelp from her throat as I swiftly turn her, backing her against the wet brick.

Reaching down to cup her ass, I lift her up and slide into her again. I want to face each other, to study her face in between kissing the hell out of her.

"Tell me your name," I plead, picking up the pace.

"No," she wheezes out on a breath as I rapidly pummel her, and I don't push it, as I'm approaching my peak.

By the way her chest is rapidly heaving along with her labored breaths, I think she is too.

"Oh shit," she cries out, her voice hoarse.

"Are you going to come?" I ask, and she nods vigorously. "Look at me," I command. "Look at me when you come."

She obeys as I feel her walls clench and squeeze around my cock, making me go off right along with her. My grunts join her cries as we explode together, holding tight to each other as we both ride the high. I see paradise in her eyes just before I crash my mouth to hers again like I'm trying to brand her with it.

My cum shoots out of me and into the condom as I groan into her mouth, and she whimpers in response. I jerk inside her a few times as I feel my lungs replenishing their oxygen supply. The rain continues to pour while I lean my forehead against the cold, wet brick by her head as I remain inside her,

catching my breath. Her body is limp and feeble in my arms as her breathing continues to come out in shallow gasps, each one trying desperately to catch up with the one before it. I'm overcome with a need to slow it down, to help her body calm and be in sync with mine.

Cradling her neck I press my cheek against hers so that I can speak in her ear.

“Slow your breathing down, baby. Take just a couple of deep breaths like mine. Just breathe with me, alright?”

Her response is not the one I expect. Instead of obediently following my lead, her body jolts against mine.

I've barely absorbed the moment before she swings her legs downward, forcing me to release her ass and let her stand on her own. She pushes her wet hair off her face with both hands, and looks everywhere but at me as she tries to straighten the wet, clingy material of her dress. She lets out a frustrated huff when no matter what she does, it clings to her ass. She's clearly using the task as an avoidance method as I yank the condom off and tuck myself back in my pants.

“Are you sure we don't know each other?” I venture to ask as soon as my jeans are buttoned up again. She stiffens and quickly tries to recover while continuing to mess with her skirt.

“Yes,” she finally huffs, and it's just barely audible over the pounding of the rain on the pavement. She straightens up and looks around. “How do we get back inside?”

“Yes, we do, or yes, you're sure?” I ask for clarification, ignoring her question.

“Yes, I'm sure,” she responds, brushing her wet hair away from her face again. She takes an elastic off her wrist and pulls her dark, wet mane back into a knot at the nape of her neck. The tendons of her neck call to my lips, but I try to stay on subject, lying to myself that it's for the sake of moving on.

She pushes past me and tries the door, giving it a jerk only to be met with no give.

“Fuck,” she mutters, while I inwardly celebrate. “How do we get back around, then?”

Damn, she cannot get away from me fast enough. So this is how that feels... I didn't expect something to shift in the middle of our covert tryst.

She brushes right past me again and I put a hand on her elbow, turning her to face me.

“Look at me,” I command, and I can almost hear her heart pound over the rain as her mouth hangs open, not knowing what to say.

“Can't we just leave it alone?” she pleads in a rasp. “We agreed no names or any of that shit,” she shakes her head and looks away from me, trying to walk away down the alley.

“Where are you going?” I charge after her.

“Back to my... people, so I can go home,” she stammers. “Leave me alone!” she exclaims, exasperated when she hears my footsteps close behind her.

“I'm not letting you walk down a dark alley in the rain alone,” I insist. I follow intently right behind her, and when she reaches the street, she turns right, where the entrance to the club presumably is. When we reach the sidewalk, I reach out and turn her to face me again.

“Look at me,” I softly order again. She stands, staring back at me, her shoulders rising and falling with her breath; only she's staring right through me. Her eyes are on mine, but not actually looking at them, and I'm hit with a memory of a girl on a cliff, doing her best not to connect before she killed herself.

It chills me to the bone more than the wet shirt clinging to my skin. I search those violet eyes as she blinks droplets of water from her lashes.

For fuck sake, she's dead, Kopa I mentally scold myself, disbelieving that after two months, I'm still so fucked up over that shit that I'm looking for traces of girl in someone else.

Fuck it. If I'm not going to see her again, might as well go for broke.

"Katherine," I try, and I see it... just the slightest twitch of her shoulders and a shift in her eyes.

"What?" she questions, actually looking convincingly confused. "No. Stop trying to guess my name," she shakes her head, turning away again.

She's good, but not good enough for a detective. Even one that's fucked enough in the head to think the woman he just banged is the same girl he watched die.

"Violet!" A man's voice calls through the night, farther down the sidewalk and I feel my back muscles tense in jealousy. This is fucked up.

She tilts her chin and starts heading his way, and I notice he's standing with three other women, all of them under a massive black umbrella.

"Violet?" I echo, and she turns slightly while still moving away. "Like your eyes," I observe out loud, like I have the IQ level of a newt.

"Bye," she murmurs before turning fully away from me. She takes a few steps before stopping and bending her leg behind her to remove one shoe and then the other before running the rest of the way to the group where the man wraps a jacket around her and puts an arm around her shoulders.

Meanwhile, I stand alone in the rain, watching Violet fade into the night.

Chapter Nineteen

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VIOLET



“You just took a major step in assuming your new life; your new identity!” Silver exclaims from her cross-legged position on her bed. “You took control of what you wanted. So what are you freaking out about?”

“He knew my name... I think,” I tremble as I pat at my wet hair with a fluffy white towel. “He called me Katherine.”

Silver’s mouth forms the shape of an ‘o’ as she squints her eyes in thought. “Why would he call you that? You didn’t actually know him, did you?” Her voice gradually rises as she’s asking her questions.

“I had a weird feeling, like I knew him from somewhere, but I racked my brain and came up with nothing,” I defend. “Didn’t help I was sitting on a few drinks. And when he said the name, I tried really hard not to startle, but it’s still a reflex.”

“Looks like we need to work on that some more,” Silver sighs.

“I’m just praying he was throwing out a random guess, but somehow, I don’t think Katherine would be the first name he’d come up with.”

“Okay, let’s just pretend he is someone who knew who you were,” Silver sits up straight and rests her hands on her knees. “Maybe he’s some nobody you used to wait on in the coffee shop or something.”

“That’s... possible,” I murmur, letting it light me with a small spark of hope. At the coffee shop I had plenty of people

coming through, and I definitely didn't memorize all their faces.

"Or he could be a member of the Reach that we don't even know about," Karma adds from the doorway, cloaked in a blue silky robe, but the rest of her is still glammed out from our night out. "There's more of them in the world than you'd realize. Even I don't know them all because some of them are from before my time as Karma."

Shit.

"Don't worry." She shakes her head and walks towards me to lay a reassuring hand on my arm. "On the rare chance you see him again, we'll handle it. If you do, just get out of his sight as quickly as you can, and don't forget... we can still change your appearance; you haven't done that yet, so that's still an option."

"I'm a natural brunette, my nose used to have a small bump on the end of it, and I wasn't always a C-cup," Silver raises her hand, and I feel the cold pressure in my gut release just a little bit.

"Nothing's blown or ruined," Karma continues, looking back to me. "This actually happens all the time. The key is to keep our interactions with the normal citizens fleeting, and yes, they may know us from somewhere, but it ends there. Worst case scenario, they know us as 'that eccentric person that likes to stand out and express themselves with impressive clothing and weird eye color'." She gives a playful eye roll, echoing the exact thoughts I had when I first saw her from the eyes of a clueless civilian.

"Okay," I concede, letting out a heavily weighted breath, nodding my head and willing her words to convince me.

"And like Karma said, he could be a Reach member and won't say a word."

"How do you know if someone is a member of the Reach, or the Society, for that matter?" I ask, looking between them.

"If an interaction gets tense, they will show you that tattoo," Karma explains, and I know she's referring to the

symbol I've seen inked into Coal's chest, as well as just below Silver's shoulder blade. I haven't seen where Jade's is.

"It will be in plain view, or it may be in white ink," Silver supplies, answering my unspoken question. "Some prefer to be more discreet than others, but for some, it's easier to quickly flash it if we're in a precarious situation so that the other member knows immediately they can trust us."

"Makes sense," I murmur.

"You'll get your tattoo after your personal mission," Karma adds, giving my arm a comforting stroke. "Just focus on that, and let us worry about your mystery man," she says as Silver drops her head back in a jovial laugh. "We've got our eyes open for him."

"I'm so proud of you," Silver chimes in, shifting to the lighter side of the subject. "You were a dirty little whore tonight! Own that shit!" she cheers me on.

"Well," I relax my shoulders and roll my head and my eyes in her direction. "I learned from the best."

"Good one!" She raises her eyebrows and points at me. "You're getting there!"

Karma rolls her eyes disapprovingly and turns to take her leave from the room, while waving her hand in Silver's direction.

"Try not to let this one corrupt you *too* much."



"YOU SURE YOU want to do this?" Silver asks the next morning, with a skeptical eyebrow raised as she finishes wrapping her wrist.

I nod nervously but with determination. "No more distractions, no more bullshit."

"There was nothing wrong with the break you took from reality last night," she eyes me, firmly. "We all need it from time to time, and it was as important a lesson as any."

“Lesson learned,” I dismiss, as I continue to pace and bounce on the balls of my feet, trying to stay warm and loose. “It’s not happening again, not until all this is behind me,” I insist, referring to my initiation mission.

I faltered when the intriguing, heroic man tried to save me on the cliff. I did it again last night, with the man from the club. No matter how hard I tried to play it cool and detached, he got to me and I damn near blew it again. No more fucking around with my head in the clouds. From here on out, I eat, sleep, and breathe training and determination.

“Just remember, you asked for this,” Silver warns as she gets into a fighting stance, hands up, knees slightly bent, feet apart.

“Don’t hold back,” I order, reaffirming my request as I push my nerves as far down in the basement of my soul as they will go.

We begin to dance and circle each other; both of us trying to read the other so that we can strategize our attack and counter-attack. After several nerve-wracking moments, I decide to go with the *no guts, no glory* tactic and step forward, throwing my fist towards Silver.

A profound realization hits me as hard as her fist: Coal’s definitely been going easy on me.

I fall to the mats and roll to my side, my hand coming up to the welt Silver just left on the side of my face, and try not to tremble as I realize how far I really do still have to go.

“Get up!” Silver growls like a lioness as she paces just like one in front of me. She looks down at me in disdain, not because that’s what she feels, but because she’s in training mode. In this bubble, she represents the world - my world. And my world is a cruel bitch, and therefore, so is she.

I suck in a long breath, envisioning it as a vapor of strength and stamina, before rolling to my stomach and pushing to my knees.

“Here, you’re going to learn to get up; to fight; to show the world it can’t fuck with you anymore,” Silver echoes my very

thoughts in a deeply empowering voice as I remain on all fours, still trying to collect myself after her introductory blow.

It's now that I feel the energy shift as I feel her sneaker press into my back. A trigger, it sends a bolt of lightning barreling up my spine.

“This was a long time coming, Sweetie,” Silver mockingly taunts, using Caroline's very words. “Is shy, boring little Katherine going to just lie there and take it? Sit there and cry?”

Like the most powerful, electrical surge rushing through my body at the speed of light, I rear up, rolling to the balls of my feet. I throw my body at Silver, rushing and plowing her several feet back to the padded wall where my forearm against her throat pins her there.

“The name is Violet, you dimwitted little cunt,” I snarl in her face as a faux anger flashes in her steely eyes, trying to mask the pride she's feeling toward me in this moment.

“Ooh...” She squints her eyes and purses her lips in amusement. “That's what I'm talking about,” she praises as I drop my arm and back away towards the mats again.

“I want to go again.”

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Chapter Twenty

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VIOLET



Three months later

“Everything is still looking good for tonight to be the night,” Jade tells me from her stool in the kitchen where she’s parked with her laptop. “Are you still feeling good about it?”

“Yep,” I nod, opening the fridge to retrieve a bottle of water. I have zero reservations about the plan tonight. I laid out Coal in our workout today, I’ve been through the gauntlet of verbal abuse with Silver, not to mention all the practice I’ve had with-

“Katherine!” Silver shouts from the doorway and while my ears register the name, I don’t react. Not even a blink. As I was saying, I’ve been practicing ignoring my former name. That near slip with my fleeting hookup really shook me up, and I doubled-down on everything - the training, the missions, more test runs out in public; all of it, to ensure I sever all ties with my old, shitty life... after tonight.

Tonight, I’m ready to shake things up; to light the match and walk away while that world explodes behind me.

I absently graze my fingertips over my chin that has since been reconstructed to something more soft and elegant. I never minded that it was slightly pointed before, but it was one of the few options that remotely appealed to me when going to the aesthetic surgeon to alter my appearance. That and a slightly daintier nose was all I was up for, but hopefully it’s

enough for Allen and Caroline not to recognize me - along with my new demeanor, posture, and eyes.

“Let’s just go over it,” Jade suggests, and I come to stand on the opposite side of the island from her, giving her my full attention. “I’ve hacked into the security monitoring system, so I’ll be able to see what’s going on from every camera they have. I’ll be watching from the van with Karma. We’ll be parked only a block away, and we’ll be in your ear the whole time.”

“The eyes in the back of my head,” I affirm.

“As well as outside,” she adds. “We’ll also have the police scanner on, just in case you need to get out of there, but even if you do,”

“Our Reach member on the police force is in the loop,” Karma fills in, strutting into the kitchen, decked out in what I call ‘mission gear’. The slim black leggings and weather-proof black jacket with the hood. “He’s made sure to be on duty tonight, and will be the first to jump on any calls coming from the club.”

I nod, feeling good about this run-through, no matter how many times we go over it.

“And Coal and I will be blending in on the inside, being extra eyes and back up if needed,” Silver adds in.

“You already got the ball rolling with Vic,” Jade states out loud, in the interest of checking all the boxes. She’s referring to the visit I paid him yesterday when I strolled into his office, dressed to the nines, claiming I was a long time stripper from MINX’s highest competition, Friday Fantasy, and was looking to make the change. The idiot jumped at that chance like a bear to honey and did the rest of the work for me, advertising the shit out of a surprise newcomer all over his website. That’s going to blow up in his face. “And we’ve been watching Caroline and Allen’s routine to know what time to show up in the parking lot.”

I nod again, trying to hide my impish smile. Starting with Vic, the smallest, then picking off Allen, and then saving the

biggest beast for last. It's going to be so sweet. It's hard to believe I was once a person that didn't want any harm to come to anyone, not by my own hands. But I'm not Katherine anymore. I'm Violet Steele, and I'm going to make them pay for what they did to her.

"Then you'll head inside, make the rounds, go through your big performance, and we'll all talk you through getting Caroline alone and putting the final nail in the coffin," Jade finishes, sounding satisfied. She loves a good plan.

"You good?" Karma asks as she looks at me hopefully.

"I'm good," I affirm. I don't have a single nerve, thanks to my new family. Tonight, I take my revenge and pay it forward in my lifetime commitment to the Society.



"YOU READY?" Silver asks as she turns from the front seat of Coal's truck. Her hair is up in a coiffed ponytail which I know is to serve a more functional purpose than vanity. Her dress is sexy, but loose and flowy to allow movement, if needed.

"Ready," I give a curt nod, feeling completely calm and at ease. My heartrate thumps along at a perfectly steady beat, my breathing soft and serene. I'm not completely devoid of nerves; my skin and my bones are alive and buzzing with them. But I'm confident in my abilities and my team that everything will go off smoothly.

"There's Allen's car," Coal observes, resting his wrist on the steering wheel where the parking lot lights pick up the glint of his fancy Rolex. His hair is pulled back neatly in his usual man bun, and the rest of him is decked out in the nicest suit Armani can make. He absolutely looks the part of a high rolling big spender, and Caroline's going to shimmy her fat ass straight to him. Too bad he'll be shutting her down in favor of another dancer.

My eyes follow Coal's when I see Allen's second-hand Audi that he got a lucky deal on. The doors on either side open simultaneously, and I finally feel my pulse quicken at the sight

of both of them. Caroline steps out in a hoodie and yoga pants and reaches in to pull out her duffel full of skimpy thongs with matching bustiers, makeup, and probably a couple pairs of trashy six-inch heels. Allen is trying to pull off his ‘slummin’ it’ look with his dark blue jeans and leather jacket. They meet in front of the hood where Caroline goes up on her toes and pulls him in for a kiss. He grabs her ass and gives it a swat before she turns, strutting toward the back entrance, duffel thrown over her shoulder and a smug smile on her face that’s going to be wiped off it in about two hours’ time.

“Showtime,” Coal announces and we all exit the truck. I duck behind him, momentarily hiding my presence as Silver pulls out her phone. Wrapping an arm around her waist, they veer right, looking like a glamorous couple about to enjoy a naughty night out while I make a beeline for Allen, walking confidently in my black, lethal high heels.

Contact lenses in, hair styled in sultry waves, smoky makeup on-point, not to mention my upright and confident stride, the dimwit is sure to be clueless.

His back is to me as he opens the driver side door, but halts at my voice as I approach with my hands casually tucked into the pockets of my black leather jacket.

“Where do you think you’re going, sexy?” I purr and he turns in surprise before quickly trying to school his expression into a sexy smirk. His confidence is that low that he’ll entertain any female initiating any kind of flirty attention.

“Just dropping someone off,” he confesses, trying to act cool, and I don’t miss that he didn’t mention who.

“And you’re not sticking around?” I ask with a playful head tilt and my voice a couple octaves lower than how I usually speak.

“Uh...” he stutters uncomfortably, trying to keep his smile in place. “Nah, I uh, know one of the dancers, so it’s against the rules,” he informs me, avoiding the actual truth so that he can get an ego boost, working his game. Unbelievable.

“Oh, I get the feeling a whole bunch of rules are going to be broken tonight,” I nod thoughtfully, fluttering my lashes at him as I take a step closer to him. He swallows hard but still makes no move to leave. He wants this. He wants to enjoy the self-validation of a woman coming on to him. God, I was a moron all those months.

“Why is that?” he asks as he quirks an eyebrow.

“It’s going to be one hell of a show tonight,” I respond, and try to ignore the sound of Silver giggling in my hidden earpiece. “One you wouldn’t want to miss.” I pull my hands out of my pockets and place them on his chest, sensually stroking the leather of his jacket, symbolizing what I’m doing to his ego. Without waiting for a response, I close in, pressing my lips to his.

Of all the times I’ve kissed Allen, you’d think it would be no big deal. I wondered over and over what this moment would feel like, slightly afraid that it would make my feelings for him return. Instead, I find myself trying not to vomit in his mouth.

He allows it for about three seconds before pulling away just enough to speak against my lips.

“I have a girlfriend,” he finally admits, but I don’t waver.

“Somehow, I get the feeling you’re the type who doesn’t give a shit about that,” I point out before pushing my mouth against his again, this time pushing my tongue inside. He moans against my lips and I moan back, keeping up the act of being into him.

“This is great, I’m getting it all,” Silver tells me in my ear, and for good measure, I boldly reach down, palming Allen’s crotch, trying not to cringe when I feel his dick, hard and pressing against his jeans. He groans again and then fully gives in, reaching around and pulling me against him. As soon as his hand makes its way down my back to cup my ass through my tempting red tank dress, I push away.

“What’s the matter? he asks, flustered, looking at me with a confused expression while I look him over as if I’m

scrutinizing his very being.

“On second thought...” I say slowly, drawing out my statement so that he can hear every note. “You taste an awful lot like a cheap whore and desperation.”

I stand in front of him, watching the gravity of my words fall over him like a ton of bricks, relishing in the sight of his face falling and going pale. His cool façade is completely obliterated, and even if there weren't more coming his way tonight, just this moment would be more than enough satisfaction for me.

“What the... *fuck?*” he bites out as he reaches down to adjust himself.

Gross.

“Sorry,” I patronize, crinkling my features like it just pains me to say it. “A guy who cheats on his girl for any bone of female attention tossed your way?” I *tsk*, even though I clearly don't give a shit about the person in that role at this time. “I guess pathetically inadequate isn't my thing after all,” I finish, and turn on my freshly sharpened heel to make my leave.

“Nasty fucking bitch!” he snarls behind me as I stride away.

“Oh, honey, you have no idea,” I muse as I make my way to the back entrance of MINX.



JOHN

I SIT on the locker room bench, lacing up my boots and feeling lighter than I have in years. I've spent the last two months hitting the gym, and shadowing the detectives in the precinct as they analyze evidence. I spent a few days driving myself mad over the girl in the alley and her similarities with the one I tried to save on the cliff.

One morning it hit me that I was letting this get in the way of focusing on my lifelong dream. It's finally coming true and

I've been putting it in jeopardy, obsessing over whether or not Katherine is actually dead, and if she's not, if she could be the girl in the alley. Both did one over on me in their own way, yet there is something so cohesive about how each made me feel.

Nothing got in the way of becoming one of this city's greatest detectives - nothing. That had always been my code; my mantra. It's kept me on the road to uncovering the answers I've wanted for sixteen years, no matter what I have to stoop to in order to get them when I get there. Yet, here I was letting some girl I banged outside a club monopolize all my mental energy. It was pathetic, and I was done - or rather, I *made* myself be done. It doesn't matter either way. I've thrown all my focus at working hard and staying sharp by taking any overtime shifts I'm allowed, including night shifts - like tonight - as they were down a couple of officers.

I go through each shift from start to finish with a positive, driven attitude, and tonight is a special case as I've just gotten the word: in two weeks' time, my dream becomes a reality. Larsen found a house for him and his family in another district and his offer was accepted. He put in for his transfer, and I went through all the motions and formalities of applying for the open position, wanting to fully earn it. And I did. There will be a probationary period of course, but I was chosen as the 29th precinct's new detective. All that's left is getting through two more weeks on the beat.

I stare myself down in the mirror as I button up my uniform shirt for close to the last time, my dad's steel-colored eyes staring right back at me. It takes me back to the days when I'd watch him put the uniform on before he moved up to detective.

I give myself the same look of determination he always did before a shift, like an inward pep talk. Grabbing my hat as I head out of the locker room and out to my shop, I'm ready to start tonight's watch, thinking nothing can get me down. Nothing will throw me off track again.

Chapter Twenty-One

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VIOLET



With my eyes and ears wide open, I step into my past. It's more haunting than it was yesterday when I came to see Vic during daylight hours. This feels like I've literally been transported back to that night.

That's okay, I think to myself. It can be that same night, only with a different ending.

I stride expertly in my impossibly tall heels over to Vic's booth, passing Coal and Silver as they find a seat on a chaise lounge along the way. None of us give so much as a look of recognition towards one another and I continue on, under the flashing neon lights.

As if the universe timed it perfectly, I'm right in the middle of the room, with the most advantageous view of the main stage when the music lowers and the DJs exuberant voice booms through the speakers.

"Alright, get those dollar bills ready, because here comes our top headliner! Always sexy, always sensational, always slaying! Give it up for Roxy!"

I keep heading towards Vic, but slow my pace as Caroline pulls the shiny silver curtains open to reveal herself in her pink and black teddy. She throws herself into the sultry track that's now playing, working the audience that is indeed going crazy for her. Her confident smile and over-the-top performance is stoking the flames blazing inside me, and I consider it a good thing. It will only make this easier.

Vic sees me and smiles excitedly as I approach. Standing from his table of fellow suits, he greets me, taking both hands in mine. As he tells me the drill that I already know full well, my eyes dart up to the stage to catch a glimmer of concern pass over Caroline's face. She tries to continue with her routine, but her face has fallen slightly and her eyes are clouded with confusion as she keeps looking back to Vic and me.

A seed of insecurity has been planted. Now to make it grow...

I head for the dressing room and strip out of my dress, replacing it with a black lace bodysuit and fishnet tights. Putting everything else away in my newly assigned locker, but grabbing my leather jacket in hand, I bang the door shut only to find Caroline on the other side, leaning casually in her sheer black cover up with her arms crossed over her chest. She's not getting to me with the assessing look on her face, and I show it by giving her one right back.

"Hi," she clips out with curt bitterness.

"Hi," I throw back, casually.

"Who are you?" she snaps and arches a scrutinizing brow.

Your worst nightmare.

"Violet," I give her a charming smile that makes her sneer in return.

"Nice name," she comments, not hiding her disgust. "I wasn't aware Vic had hired anyone new."

"Well, now you are," I fire her acid right back at her as I move to walk past her.

"Wait," her voice rises and I detect the tiniest hint of anxiety she's trying to hide. I turn slowly on my heel, rolling my head back and looking as if I'm bored with this.

"Yeah?"

"You look disturbingly familiar." She turns around, arms still crossed. "Do we know each other?"

I blow out an amused breath. “Trust me, sweetie,” the words seeping from between my lips like vapor. “You’ve never met me before in your life.” This time, I leave no chance at a rebuttal as I turn to walk out of the dressing room, sliding my leather jacket on as I go. Time to get to work.



I SASHAY around the tables in my sexy and lethal getup, relaxing my hips so that my ass swings just right. I flirt, pout my lips, playing to the predominantly male patrons until I hear Coal in my ear.

“She’s headed our way.”

“Copy that,” I return, and I make my move to get a good view of the sofa he and Silver are parked on. I move to the music as I walk, tempting all the men I pass by, playing the part. Their position comes into view just in time for me to see Caroline rest her hands on Coals knees, and as she leans in, I can hear her perfectly in my earpiece.

“Tall, dark, and handsome,” she addresses him in a low purr. “How would you and your lovely lady like a dance? Or a private party in the back room, maybe? Just the three of us and a bottle of champagne... we could have a lot of fun.” I watch, as she tilts her head at Silver, giving her a wink.

Coal leans back, grabbing his drink off the side table and resting his other hand on Silver’s leg.

“Actually, we saw on the website that an exciting newcomer would be here tonight,” he informs her as Silver smirks at his side. “We’ll be saving our notes for her.”

In the dark room, one of the flashing lights crosses over Caroline’s face at just the right moment, as if only for me to see it briefly turn green. She tries to regulate her expression into one of indifference, but it’s too late, all three of us saw the dismay.

“Your loss,” she tells him with a shrug as Coal looks away, taking a swig of his drink. Caroline walks away at a pace that’s

just a little too fast to be sexy, and that's when I move in and make a show of shimmying my ass into Silver's lap as Coal and the immediate surrounding customers howl in approval. They put on a show of making it rain dollar bills all over me while I play off that this is something that happens every day.

When I'm done, I graciously thank them and meander my way through the crowd towards the locker room to get ready for my stage performance.

"She's headed after you," Silver tells me in the earpiece, giving me time to psych myself up for an encounter that's sure to be less pleasant than the last one. I keep my locker door open as I change into the clothes I'll soon be taking off, watching in my peripheral for a certain pissed off redhead.

I hear the slamming of her heels against the tile before I see her round the corner, just as I'm securing the front clasp of my skimpy black bra.

"You and I have a problem," she growls like a bear in heat.

I press my lips together and briefly look to the ceiling like I'm thinking.

"Mmm... nope, I don't have a problem. I think it's just you who has one."

"This isn't a game!" She slams her hand against a locker on the last word. "I fucking run this place, and getting in my way is not what I'd call a good idea."

I pull my lips into an 'ooh' expression as I narrow my eyes at her, feigning very sarcastic fright, before I reach in my locker and retrieve my black trousers.

Seeing that she didn't get to me she gets flustered, her mouth hanging open and devoid of any words. Instead, she tries to intimidate me by continuing to stare as I get dressed. After a while, I briefly glance sideways to gauge her expression to see it's turned to one of concentration and disbelief.

"What's the matter?" I ask dismissively as if I really couldn't care less. This night could have come along sooner, but I'm glad I waited; put in more time with Silver verbally

tearing me down over the weeks until I was fully ready to throw it right back without blinking. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” I add afterward, baiting her.

“You might as well be, considering who you remind me of,” she says, finally finding her tongue, and I look up to see her blow out a breath and relax her shoulders like her confidence has come back. So we shook her up, but didn’t knock her down, which is fine. I’m far from done here.

Caroline casually lazes her head back on her shoulder as she walks past me. “The poor little loser of a cunt did the world a favor and offed herself,” she imparts, in a soft, satisfied tone. “Just something to consider,” she offers sweetly in conclusion, and I chuckle, securing my suspenders over the white button down I just put on.

“I’m going to go ahead and guess that death was a better option for her than being on the same planet as you.”

“Go fuck yourself, skank,” she huffs out as she takes a seat on the bench in front of her own locker.

“God, were you not hugged enough as a child?” I retort, acting exasperated but knowing I’ve pressed a very large button. The proof is all over her face which has flushed scarlet, and there’s a storm brewing behind her eyes.

I slam the locker closed and swiftly click past her.

“Well, time to get out there,” I sigh, like it’s a tough job, but somebody’s gotta do it, and I turn, resting a hand on the lockers. “Feel free to come out and see how it’s done,” I suggest, and she looks up with the most menacing look I know she has in her arsenal; one that used to make me shake in my boots before I transformed, growing a bulletproof outer shell. With that, I turn and head backstage, not needing a single shot of anything this time.

“Gentlemen, and lovely ladies!” the DJ belts out over the speakers in his bold baritone. “Make sure you get a seat up close to the stage, because MINX has a new face to introduce you to! Put your hands together for Fury!” He draws out the

stage name I gave him, cuing up my track and... background footage.

Fury... because Hell's got nothing on me.

I put a confident smile on my face as the electrifying, opening guitar riff to Thunderstuck blares through the speakers. I emerge from the curtains to a roaring applause, pretty much winging this without a care. I strategically build anticipation like every good exotic dancer does, dropping my ass to the beat of the bass drum that joins in with the adrenalizing music. Strobe lights flash across the stage like lightning, adding to the edgy and dangerous vibe I'm playing to the audience. I do a quick carousel spin on the pole before going back to my sensually sharp dance moves, and when I finally go to the first button on my shirt, I see an entire room full of eyes not sure where to put their focus - on me or the screen behind me.

Unlike most dancers, I decided to use the screen behind me for something other than the neon lights flashing in artistic designs that normally add a little flavor to the routine. Instead, I opted for some raw footage that had been shot in the parking lot mere hours ago.

I let the clientele take it in as I pop each button open, perfectly in time to the slamming drum beat. There's a collective 'oohh!' signaling that they must be seeing the part where I grab Allen's crotch, and a scorned shriek, presumably when he grabs my ass. I don't even try to hide my smirk as I work one suspender strap down and then the other.

A brief glimpse up and to the side treats me to the view of Caroline with mascara running down her face while she screams hysterically into her cell phone. I'm guessing part two of Allen's karma is in the works.

The video clip plays on repeat as dollar bills fly up on the stage by the handfuls, the customers continuing to cat call and holler at me. Ripping the rest of the buttons on my shirt before swiftly shrugging it off, I'm left in the black slacks and bra. As the song goes on and the money piles up, I reach down and grab hold of my tear-away slacks, ripping them off, soon

followed by the bra, which I tear off to the sounds of more cheers. The money shot, as they call it, and it's the truth as I see more dollars being waved in the air.

Grabbing onto my own ample breasts, I continue to work my body around, gyrating my hips, before finally ending with a back hook swing on the pole.

The applause is deafening as I release a satisfied breath and make my exit from the stage.

Stopping at the DJ booth and taking the cover-up he holds out to me, I lean in to speak in his ear.

"That's for the other dancers," I point at the stage where barely any spots of the sleek and shiny floor can be seen due to being covered by pale green paper. "Make sure they get that." I recognized a lot of the same faces here tonight from when I worked here before, and though they have no clue who I am, I remember that a lot of them are here with not much of a choice, just trying to keep their kids fed.

He looks surprised, but nods as I walk back to the dressing room.

On the way, Vic finds me and steps out to stop me, a smug smile on his face.

"That was magnificent," he praises, arms open wide. "You generated about a week's worth of revenue in one night! You've got to stay on as a regular Thursday through Saturday. You could maybe even be a big enough hit to generate some business on Wednesdays."

I twist my mouth, as if in thought, as I tie the sash around my little cover-up.

"Mmm... I don't think so, Vic. I'm not really feeling it."

"What?" His face goes white and drains of color. "I've got you all over the website! Thousands of patrons are going to be coming in expecting to see you!"

"Well that's not my fault," I shrug incredulously. "I didn't tell you to do that, and sorry, but I don't like it here. I'm done."

He looks like he's about to throw up as I walk away toward the dressing room.

I change back into my little red tank dress, pulling my leather jacket over it, and exit the dressing room for what truly is the final time.

“Back hallway,” I hear Jade whisper in the earpiece. “She’s headed to that corridor and good news... she’s alone.”

“Perfect,” I murmur quietly, looking around to make sure I am too. “Any cameras?”

“There’s one, but I think this is the perfect time for it to, oops, have a little glitch,” she muses warmly.

“On my way,” I smile calmly, heading for where Jade just directed me.

Time for Caroline and I to face off for the final time.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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VIOLET



The dressing room has two entrances, the front one has access to the main room, and it's the one used mostly while a dancer is coming in and out between working the floor or the stage. The other is the back entrance that leads into a long dark corridor - the one Jade indicated - that leads to the back offices, but also has two other doors, one leading to a restroom, and another to the back parking lot.

I stand near the back entrance, waiting to hear someone coming, and sure enough, it's not long before I hear stomping heels, accompanied by sniffing and sighing. I come all the way out of the dressing room, the door closing softly behind me.

As I see her coming, I cross in front of her under the guise of heading to the restroom and I'm oblivious to her approach. With the hallway so dark, she doesn't see me step out of one of my heels, leaving it in her path. Pair that with the fact that she's ferociously storming towards me on a mission, it's the perfect blend for what I have planned.

As hoped, she stumbles over my shoe, sending her teetering unsteadily on her own. She pitches forward, trying to get her legs under herself as her arms flail, but she makes the clumsiest crash to the floor. I hear her breath wheeze out of her as she lands on her stomach, and I stop and turn. With how much she's struggling to get her hands beneath her to push herself up, I'm given ample time to draw out the drama of this delicious moment.

I lower myself down to the floor, resting my knee in her back.

“What the fuck? Get off me!” she snarls, wriggling beneath my weight.

“Oh, I’m so sorry...” I say with heavily mocked remorse. “I’m so clumsy. These things are hard to walk in, right?” I say conversationally, leisurely reaching for my discarded shoe and holding it in front of her face so she can get a good look at the long, spiky heel.

“Shut the fuck up and get off me, you stupid skank!” she shrieks at me again.

Well now, that wasn’t very nice.

“Sure thing, sweetie,” I answer instead. “Just let me get this back on,” I tell her, placing the shoe in place on her back as I straighten up on my knee. Placing my foot back in the empty stiletto, I push it in, standing to my full height, using my weight to both get it back in place, and drive the heel into the middle of Caroline’s back.

A long, drawn out, blood curdling scream that I will remember for the rest of my life rips from her throat but only gets so far down the hallway, not enough to pierce the barrier of thumping music that keeps the club alive. When playing this scene over and over in my head before tonight, I would remind myself that I truly had no idea how it would make me feel until I actually followed through. I prepared myself for the possibility of being surprised by regret or remorse.

The sound Caroline makes from her prone position on the floor is riddled with agony and terror, things I never thought I could inflict on another person. Turns out... I can.

Right now, an evilly cruel person is finding out that she’s not invincible, that the rules do, in fact, apply to her. It’s a marvelous moment, so fucking sweet.

My utter delight in this moment almost scares me for a flicker of a second. The worry that I’ve become some kind of a monster flashes through me quickly, but then it’s gone in a blink when I realize she made me this way. I may have taken

the jump off that cliff, but she killed Katherine; beat her soul down to nothing but dust.

When Caroline's screaming hits its peak, and withers down to pathetic crying and whimpering, I relent. With little effort, I pull my heel out of her back and step to the side, giving her space to come to terms with what's happening here.

She weakly pushes herself up, staggering to her feet. When she lifts her face to meet mine, I can see even in the dark hallway that it's completely flushed with wet mascara streaks, making it look like cracked porcelain. She heaves for a moment, looking me up and down with shock and disbelief before putting her game face on. Her eyes go dark before she lunges at me.

"You fucking cunt!" she screams so passionately it sounds like a war cry. Her body collides with mine and a slim hand weaves into my hair, but before it can pull at the roots, I take hold of her wrist and turn it outwards, spinning her body away from mine. Her little aerobic routine is no match for the training regimen I've become accustomed to.

"Oh, honey," I tsk, holding her arm behind her back with complete ease. "No hair pulling. That's girl fighting 101. I'm disappointed."

"You assaulted me!" she protests, trying to pull free from my hold. If she only realized I'm merely fighting back, just a little late. "I'm going to fucking call the cops!"

"Now, that's a good idea," I respond patronizingly as I pull my phone from my cleavage. I dial 9-1-1 and hold it out to her. "Go ahead, I already dialed for you. You just have to hit send," I encourage.

She freezes, and while I can only see the side of her face turned towards me, I can see the stunned expression as she ceases all resistance.

"Go ahead," I prod with an eye roll. "You've got one free hand, you can do it. Go on, tell them some crazy bitch stepped on you and is now restraining you. Come on." I act bored, like I haven't got all day. Besides, I'm not worried in the least.

She's either not going to go for it; too confused by my urging her to do so, or she will call, and a trusted member of the Reach who happens to be on the force will show up. Either outcome is fine with me, and I'm pretty sure by the way Caroline has gone quiet and is no longer fighting me that she's leaning towards the former. I take that as my cue to release her and tuck my phone away.

"What... is *wrong* with you?" she groans miserably, her voice trembling.

"Not a thing," I answer casually, dusting myself off and straightening my clothes as she leans into the wall like it will wrap around her, bringing her comfort.

"Then why would you..." She trails off as she gets a far-off look in her eyes. She's still shaking and trying to catch her breath, but I can see it, the second she knows.

I shrug one shoulder. "I get the feeling you're just an ugly human being that had it coming," I say flippantly as I strut away down the hall, leaving her to wallow behind me.

"Karma is one spiteful bitch," I mutter under my breath.

"Yes, I am," she says in my ear. "And so are you. Good job, lovely."

I exit out the door and into the back parking lot, immediately breathing in a lungful of the cool night breeze.

"Oh my God," I let out once the door is shut. I'm elated and exhilarated. It's a fucking high if I ever had one. Justice was served and I not only got to see it, I got to carry it out myself. Karma was so right the night she met me. If I had stayed in that life and waited for the concept of karma to do its thing, it very likely would've taken years without me getting the satisfaction of seeing it. I just as likely would have stayed miserable and poor during that time as well.

"Coal, Silver," I speak breathlessly, still so amped up from what just happened. "I'm in the back lot whenever you're ready."

"We're trying to make our way out of the crowd," Silver updates. "We'll swing around to get you as soon as we can."

“Okay,” I huff out with a nod and push my hands in my hair in total relief that is short lived when I hear Jade’s voice.”

“Guys, we have a problem.”

“What?” I choke out, still not on top of my breathing.

“Police scanner just reported an assault at the club,” Jade continues. “Caroline dialed 9-1-1 as soon as you were out of sight.”

“Okay...” I pant. “So that was a possibility but it’s all good because-”

“Hughes called me on his Bluetooth that he got called to a shots fired at a bar on Occidental,” Karma joins in, “not even five minutes ago, and he was the closest unit so he couldn’t ignore it. He’s not coming.”

“Shit!” I yell out into the night.

“Violet, you need to stay calm,” Jade demonstrates in her own tone. “Just go along with whatever happens when an officer shows up, and Hughes will be able to meet you at the station later and clear you. Coal, how close are you to her?”

“We’re almost to the exit,” Coal responds.

“Okay, Violet, walk naturally back to the main lot. Alone by the back entrance won’t be a good look,” Jade tells me.

“Okay,” I obey, trying to make my way calmly to the main parking lot, praying to God I’ll meet up with Coal and Silver at just the right time.

The lights of the main parking lot come into view, and just when I think I’m rounding home plate, a police cruiser roars into the drive. I veer to the side, trying to avoid it and in the direction of Coal’s truck when I hear Caroline’s vile shriek.

“Her!” she cries, and I look over my shoulder in time to see her stalking towards me, wrapped in her meager cover-up, at the same time the driver’s door of the cop car swings open. “It was her, she fucking stabbed me!” she screams, pointing her finger at me while a few club goers stop and turn to gawk at the scene.

As the officer turns, I briskly compose myself, determined to stay in character, at least while Caroline is around or she'll think she got the last play, making this whole thing mostly for nothing. He's wearing his hat, partially shielding his eyes, and ironically, that's the key element that makes recognition slam into me. I'm immediately transported back to the cool, breezy cliff at dusk... the man in front of me with the ball cap only showing the lower half-moons of his dark eyes. Like now, I could see the outline of his sharp jaw clearly, and when it's put together in this context, it clicks.

John...

The man who tried to literally talk me off the ledge is a fucking cop.

He looks in my direction and holds up a hand, signaling me to halt.

"Miss, don't move," he says firmly before turning to Caroline who's still squawking and waving her arms.

"It's the man from the cliff," I say softly so that only my people can hear.

"What?" Karma asks. "Who?"

"My witness from the cliff," I explain, trying not to shatter into dust. "The cop is John."



JOHN

MY GOOD, optimistic mood stuck with me for the first four hours of my shift, until dispatch called in a report that contained a word that I didn't realize had become a trigger for me.

MINX; the place Katherine Holland had been fired from a couple weeks before she killed herself. The girl that monopolized my thoughts during the day and starred in my dreams at night for weeks; who haunted me in the form of

assuming the persona of a random club beauty turned one-night-stand.

My palms dampen against the steering wheel and I feel my pulse start to beat in my neck. I draw a breath in and hold it, gripping the wheel for a few beats before letting it out and putting my game face on.

“Shop 22,” I identify myself on the radio as I turn my vehicle in the appropriate direction. “Show me responding.”

Hopefully the owner won’t recognize me in uniform and realize I came by investigating Katherine’s background. For good measure, I grab my hat from where I discarded it on the passenger seat earlier and slip it back on.

When I arrive on the scene, some redheaded, barely dressed drama queen immediately appears by my window, ranting and raving so much I can’t even understand what she’s saying, except the word *her* as she points past me. I turn in the direction of her finger and see a pretty brunette. While I can’t make out her face from here, I get that surge of familiarity again. I barely have time to take in her tight red dress and black leather jacket before the redhead starts getting hysterical again. Raising a hand, I tell her to stay where she is, lest she get away before I can question her.

“She stabbed me,” the redhead wails, laying on the theatrics, and I can hardly concentrate with all the bystanders that have come out to watch the show, and I’ve never liked an audience.

“Alright, move back inside people, or I’ll be forced to call for backup!” I announce loudly to the crowd, most of whom begrudgingly turn to head back inside. “Now,” I turn back to the two women that remain in the parking lot. “What went down here tonight?”

“She,” the redhead points at the brunette, gnashing her teeth, “assaulted me!”

“Hey, you came at me first,” the brunette shrugs at her.

“For being an insufferable bitch!” she screams back, drawing my attention back to her.

“So you admit to provoking the incident?” I ask, and her eyes go wide and she sputters.

“I... I walked towards her, I wasn't going to do anything but yell at her and she tripped me, and then stepped on me!”

“I felt threatened,” the brunette retorts coolly, but the redhead is undeterred as she keeps screaming her accusations.

“You fucking stabbed me!” she yells.

“You came at me and I merely immobilized you,” the brunette defends.

“Unit 22, I'm going to need some backup,” I say into my radio mic. “You,” I point at Red, “stay there a moment. You,” I motion to the brunette to follow me, “come with me.” She blows a kiss to the redhead before falling in behind me, making her growl out a stream of vulgar curse words.

“Am I under arrest?” she asks from behind me, and it's now that her voice is setting off some bells in my head, but I'm having trouble figuring out why.

“Not yet,” I answer, staying cool as I open the back door. “I'm just going to have you sit here in the car until another officer shows up to calm her down so that we can get a clear statement and then we'll go from there.”

I turn to acknowledge her and am stopped in my tracks by two hypnotizing violet eyes, eyes that I looked into from across a crowded nightclub; eyes that have a way of staring right through me.

I'm thrown off by seeing her in a different context, not to mention there are some subtle differences about her that only someone with my training can scrutinize in the span of half a second. A couple of her features appear different but not enough to fool me - not with those eyes.

If she's experiencing the same shock of recognition I am, she doesn't show it as she stares me down, unwavering. I, on the other hand, can't help but break my professional disposition.

“Violet...” I say her name in disbelief. In the blink of two pale purple eyes, everything I worked for weeks to shove out of my mind and out of my life comes roaring back.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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VIOLET



“Wait a minute...” I hear Jade’s voice sounding as confused as I feel in my ear as I stare back at John, the kind stranger from the cliff. “You weren’t Violet yet, on the cliff.”

Unable to respond, I stare back at him as if the answer will reveal itself in his gunmetal eyes.

“Violet,” he says my name again, only with a harder edge to his voice that makes a bell go off in my head.

He’s the guy from the cliff... he’s the guy from the cliff... but...

“Oh my God, were you that wasted that night?” he asks, sounding irritated.

Wasted... I wasn’t drunk on that cliff, and I wasn’t Violet either. What the hell is going on?

The only time I’ve been drunk since becoming Violet was... at the Grotto.

I narrow my eyes, trying to look closer at him, which I know isn’t helping my case here, and at that same moment, he takes his hat off and runs an annoyed hand through his short dark hair. The action reveals the scar on his eyebrow, making every blurry puzzle piece from that night snap into place.

“The guy from the alley,” I finally say, my heart fluttering erratically from the shock. For the first time tonight, I’m unable to keep up the cool façade and I feel myself start to shake.

“What?” Silver exclaims over the earpiece. “I thought he was the guy from the cliff.”

“Yeah, the name’s John by the way,” the cop brings me back to Earth with his sharp voice clipped with a hint of bitterness, likely from his denied request to trade names that night. Before I can respond, he straightens, setting his jaw. “But I’m Officer Kopa to you tonight.”

“Got it,” I murmur.

“Hell-ooo?!” Caroline nags from the spot he left her and starts marching towards us, clearly done waiting. John turns in her direction, just as I see another cruiser pull up just behind her.

Caroline pulls at the sash of her cover up (I can’t believe she wore that out here), and turns her back to him to drop the back of it down to show him my handy work. An angry, bloody hole sits right between her shoulder blades, identical to the one she left on me.

Fuck, I just made us twins.

John is just leaning in to look at it at the same time the other officer gets out of his vehicle. And that’s when hell breaks loose.

“Kopa, what do we got?” he asks, just as I hear heavy footfalls and panting coming from farther down the lot.

“Possible assault and battery,” John answers before Allen appears behind the second officer, almost running past our whole pow wow before stopping in his tracks when he sees Caroline and clumsily scrambles over to her.

“Caroline! You hung up on me before I could explain! What’s going on?”

His question is cut off by the resounding clap of her hand smacking him across his cheek.

“You piece of shit!” she screams, and I choke down the words I would just love to say in response.

“Hold it!” Officer number two hollers, stepping between them and gently turning her while reaching for his cuffs.

“Looks like a *double* assault and battery,” John muses with an eye roll, as Caroline screams in protest while her hands get joined behind her back and a small line of blood starts forming just below Allen’s eye and the fucker just watches, stunned. He starts to back away slowly, as Caroline adds resisting arrest to her list of charges.

“You,” the other officer stops him. “You’re going to have to meet us at the station, and don’t try blowing us off or you’ll have a cop at your door.”

Allen looks ready to piss himself as he backs up two more steps and turns to bolt.

“Fucking hell,” John grumbles and leaves my side to go help the other cop get Caroline in the back of his car. I see the two of them grab onto her using the minimal force possible, but finally, they maneuver her to the other side of the car where I can no longer see her, but still hear her pitiful sobs and wails.

“Karma, you should see this,” I whisper, so that only she can hear.

“I wish I could,” she says warmly in my ear. “I bet it’s a beautiful sight.”

“Get a full statement about tonight’s prior incident at the station,” John instructs the other cop as he climbs in the driver’s seat.

“If he arrests you, go willingly,” Karma continues. “Hughes will meet you at the station and take care of everything. He’ll clear your record when it all dies down.”

The second squad car’s engine turns over, and as they slowly glide past us, I catch Caroline’s splotchy, tear-streaked face in the window. I give her a wiggly-fingered wave as she disappears from sight.

John resignedly walks back over to me and stops just a foot away.

“Alright,” his voice is soft with warm notes of understanding. He sounds just the way he did on the cliff.

“You’re under arrest,” he informs me, reaching for his handcuffs.

Well, fuck.



JOHN

“TURN AROUND, HANDS BEHIND YOUR BACK,” I instruct Violet as her face falls and her eyes roll skyward like this is a mere inconvenience.

“Fine,” she concedes, turning around. I step behind her, closer than I need to, and take hold of her hands. In this position, I get a flash of thrusting into her from behind in the rain. Joining them behind her, I hold her wrists with one hand and a fantasy of holding her hands above her on my bed assaults my mind.

I try to shake the thoughts from my head as I secure the cuffs around her delicate wrists. Her scent floats off of her as she shakes a few strands of hair off her face. She smells exactly the way she did that night, the sweet perfume mixing with the rain droplets. My heart thuds hard in my chest and my cock comes to life in my pants as I search the pockets of her jacket with both hands.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for your weapon,” I answer, taking my hands from her pockets and brushing them up under her jacket. “If the other girl is telling the truth, you clearly stabbed her with something and I’m relieving you of it before I put you in the car.”

She sighs with a nod as my hands continue their perusal of her body under her jacket. Her warmth seeps right through the material of her dress, heating my hands as they glide up her rib cage. She continues to face forward as I pat my hands down her hips, while I lose the fight with my mind when it fantasizes about lifting the back of her dress and taking her against my

vehicle, cuffed and all. I'm painfully aroused and a heartbeat away from showing her that fact.

"It's funny," she remarks.

"What?"

"The man who committed a misdemeanor with me is a cop," she answers, referring to our lewd act of indiscretion in a public place, the very one I was just reminiscing about, and it's just enough to push me. I grab hold of her around her middle and yank her body back into mine, making us flush with each other.

"So you do remember," I grumble in her ear and she gasps in response. My actions caught her by surprise, not fright. I can see it in the one violet eye I can see with her head turned slightly my way.

"I remember," her voice is sultry but reluctant.

We stare, daring each other to blink first. Our gaze holds for what is both the slowest and quickest time before she finally breaks it; blinking and facing forward again.

I clear my throat, composing myself as I continue the pat down.

"Do you have any inside pockets?" I ask, when I come up empty.

"One, on the left side," she answers calmly.

I reach for the side of her jacket she indicates and do indeed find a small pocket with a slim black wallet inside. I flip it open and find her I.D. in the clear, laminated slot.

Violet Steele, her name reads.

I fold it back up and start steering her by her elbow towards the back seat. She stays quiet, and about six blocks go by of me glancing in the rearview mirror at her; her head resting back as she watches the city lights go by.

"Do you work at MINX or were you just there for a scandalous night out?" I ask, unable to take it anymore. This

woman and her mousier twin on the cliff are destroying my competence as a cop.

She turns her head slightly to regard my reflection. “I have the right to remain silent,” she says simply.

“That you do,” I nod, wishing this one time that wasn’t true. Normally I’m thankful for that particular Miranda right when I’m taking in a perp. I don’t need to hear about their drama, their shit. But I want to know everything about Violet. I just wish to hell I didn’t feel that way.

First, seeing Katherine jump off a cliff in front of me fucks me up, and now this woman... she seems to like to pull the rug out from under me every time I think I’m on solid ground again. She resembles Katherine in so many ways, but in so many others, she doesn’t.

Katherine was lonely, timid, and feeble. She’d given up.

Violet is fiercely confident and doesn’t seem to be bothered by anything. Yet her height, her skin, and the way she can look a person in the eye without actually looking at them as a means of avoidance makes me feel nothing but what I felt out on the cape, no matter how fleeting it was. It left one hell of an imprint on my soul.



AT THE STATION, I help Violet out of the back seat and walk her through the parking garage, holding onto her arm. This whole thing has been a mindfuck, but I apparently haven’t seen anything yet. I’ve just gotten Violet to the back of the precinct for booking when Sergeant Hughes strolls up, clearly on a mission.

“Kopa,” his dark eyes regard me with a certain authority that I normally know better than to question. “I’ve got this, I need you back out on patrol.”

“I’m the arresting officer,” I calmly argue as Violet looks curiously between us.

“And I’m still your Sergeant,” he rebuffs, “and I’m taking it from here.” He squares his shoulders, almost daring me to defy him.

I’m beyond confused. I’ve never seen the Sergeant do anything like this before, and the first time just happens to be when I’ve arrested Violet. The detective in me sees nonstop red flags where this girl is concerned, while the regular man inside pleads with me to let it go and move on.

“Sir, you’re not up to speed on the arrest, it will be quicker if-”

“I’m plenty up to speed on the arrest,” he interjects, turning his brawny body to face mine. “You are two weeks away from taking your seat in intelligence. This is not what I would call a good time to develop a problem with authority.”

I clench my jaw, looking away while I tamp down my frustrations so that they don’t erupt before turning back to him and swallowing my pride.

“Sir,” I give a curt nod, and turn to walk away.

Chapter Twenty-Four

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VIOLET



“Violet Steele,” the Sergeant voices out loud like he’s simply trying to see how my new name tastes on his tongue.

“Sergeant Hughes,” I casually toss back in salutation as I follow him down a very stationary hallway lined with scuffed linoleum that was likely once white.

“In the flesh,” he quips, leading me into a glassed-in, but otherwise modest office. “Have a seat.” He motions to a chair in front of his desk while he moves to the one behind it.

I do my best to get comfortable in the indicated chair while he folds his hands over his midsection. A shiny silver watch stands out against his dark skin as he regards me with a calm smile from the other side of the desk.

“Karma tells me tonight was your initiation,” he calmly converses. “How did it go?”

I take in a breath, but no words come out as I stare back at him, feeling a twinge of uncertainty until he lets out a small humorous breath and moves to pull the short sleeve of his uniform up his arm. Sure enough, beneath it lays the symbol, etched into his skin. I feel myself relax and sit back in the chair to fill him in. It looks as if we’re just killing time while other law enforcers think he still has me in booking.

“It went unbelievably well,” I say sincerely, but I know he sees the hesitant eyebrow I’m trying not to arch.

“Until a non-society police officer showed up instead of me,” he adds for me.

“Well, that wasn’t so much a big deal as-”

“As who it was,” he jumps in for me again, and this time, his words take me by surprise. What does he know about my interactions with John? If he knows about the club alley, I’m going to die. I open my mouth again, ready to question what he knows before he continues. “It’s rare when your witness turns out to be a cop,” he clarifies, and while I search his face, I don’t find any indication that he knows we had a second encounter at the club.

“Yeah,” I mumble at my lap and sigh in relief to myself that John only remembers me from the latter scenario. That is, before Hughes decides to burst my bubble.

“Violet, I’m going to level with you. He’s been a goddamned dog with a bone over Katherine’s death,” he informs me, and the revelation makes my heart jump up into my throat.

“What?” I huff out an exasperated breath.

“He continued to investigate it for a while until I told him to back off,” Hughes continues, still calm and level-headed. “Something about meeting Katherine... you... shook his world. He was hardcore driven to become detective, and that experience just threw a monkey wrench into his ambitions,” he shakes his head. “I can only hope I’m wrong and that it’s the contrary; that it made him more determined to perfect his skills and learn how to investigate mysterious deaths, which despite how cut and dry yours seemed, is what he considers it.”

“So he’s been looking into it? Trying to find me?” I fire off questions, trying not to let my nerves make me sputter.

“Not recently,” he leans forward, resting his folded hands on the desk. “Like I said, I put a stop to it. But Violet, he has not been able to get you out of his mind,” he says, abandoning his efforts to separate me from Katherine. “I can see it,” he reiterates, and I believe him. He’s likely known John closely and for a long time. “And in two weeks’ time, he’s going to move up to homicide where he will have a whole new array of resources at his disposal.”

“Shit! What do I do?” My voice rises as I get anxious for the first time tonight. “He’s going to keep looking for me then? And do what? Expose me? Put me in jail for jumping off a cliff in front of him?”

“I don’t know why it’s taken hold of him so hard, Violet, but if we can satiate his thirst to make sense of this, it certainly won’t hurt. I’m hoping he’ll have more pressing cases that will capture his interest when he moves up, but I think it would be better for you if you two didn’t cross paths again.”

I nod in agreement, not wanting anything to get in the way of my new mission in life, all the while shoving any romantic feelings or attractions I have for John down low in the deepest compartment of my soul.

“Absolutely,” I assure him, although I don’t know quite how with John trying to enforce laws while I’m out there running around breaking them. I’ll have to figure out a plan with Karma and the rest later. Right now, all I know is that I need to make sure I stay out of John Kopa’s sight, or I’ll return to the life of Katherine, which is no life at all. Besides, knowing that John’s had these big detective dreams for so long and that the trauma I caused him has been monopolizing his life like that... it makes a myriad of dark, wrong feelings twist inside of me.

“It would probably be good for him, too,” Hughes laments out loud as if reading my thoughts. “To move on, you know?”

“Yeah,” I nod again, feeling remorse, despite all the training I’ve had learning not to.

“Jade left your car in the visitor’s lot for you,” Hughes tells me, referring to the black Lexus SUV I reluctantly accepted from the society. “Good luck in the Society.” He hands the keys to me, signaling the end of our meeting.

“Thank you,” I squeak out in a tired whisper, reaching out to take them.

After a couple wrong turns in the sprawling police station, I finally find my way out the front to the visitor’s lot. I push through the door, searching swiftly for my vehicle. The night

has caught up to me; I'm tired and weary, and ready to get out of here. Not to mention, far, far away from a certain cop.

My eyes find my car with the 6-0-LET license plate, but just as I step off the curb, I hear a familiar voice that haunts both my dreams and my fantasies. Only... I don't like what it says.

“Katherine!”

Apparently, my night doesn't get to end just yet.



JOHN

MY DEDICATION and work ethic has gone right out the fucking window since meeting Katherine on that cliff. I was told to return to my patrol by my superior, but here I am, sitting in the parking lot, waiting to have a last word with Violet. In all fairness, I'm listening to the police scanner in case there's a call.

When I finally made detective is when I finally let Katherine go, or so I thought. Then I met Violet who knocked me right back off my game, invading my thoughts, twenty-four-seven. Her physical resemblance to Katherine is nothing compared to how just thinking about either one of them makes me feel. And I know I saw her react when I tried calling her by that name outside the club that night.

It doesn't matter which one flashes through my mind - all it makes me want to do is grab onto her and never let go; to keep her protected in my arms for the rest of our lives.

But I can't let something as fleeting as love derail my life plans that I've worked so long and hard for.

When I finally see the glass door of the station swing open and the lithe brunette walk through it, I cut the engine and push the driver's side door open. I'm going to get to the bottom of this so I can move on, for fuck's sake. It rang her bell before; I'm going to see if it does again.

“Katherine!” I shout her way, but she doesn’t so much as turn as she crosses her arms on her way to a dark Lexus.

She’s been practicing. Too bad that’s not enough to deter me. I start striding towards her across the lot and say what I know is her real name again.

“Katherine,” I say with an even firmer delivery than the last, but with a lowered voice. This time she lets out an irritated sigh and finally slows her pace before coming to a stop. She takes a beat before turning to me, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s trying to school her veneer. When she finally swivels her upper body in my direction, her expression is tired. Maybe I can get that to work in my favor.

“Boy, whoever this Katherine is, she sure has your nuts on a chain,” she snarks, before turning away again and heading for her car.

God knows I should just let her go right here and now, but if I do, I never truly will in my mind.

“Are you still trying to tell me you’re not her?”

“*Who?*” She whirls around again, her eyes wide in exasperation. “Who the hell are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” I snap as I continue advancing on her. She won’t be intimidated though. She turns and continues walking towards her car, making me follow her. “You know her, you’re related to her somehow, or you *are* her, but you’re not going to fool me into thinking you don’t know shit about her.”

She circles her car, making her way to the driver’s side that faces the opposite side of the parking lot and station. When she reaches the door, she turns on me again.

“Why don’t *you* tell me who she is?” she challenges, her violet eyes narrowed fiercely. “Why the hell is this Katherine so damned important to you?”

“Because she killed herself in front of me,” I retort with a growl in my voice, and the expression on her face takes me more by surprise than I thought it would. There’s not a hint of

shock to be found anywhere. Instead, she raises a knowing eyebrow.

“*Killed herself* in front of you?” she asks.

“That’s right.”

“Like you *saw* her do it,” she states, rather than asks, both her voice and expression patronizing.

I nod, knowing where she’s going.

“In other words, she’s fucking dead, but here you are, thinking I’m her?” she asks incredulously, her voice getting louder. “I’m not doing shit to fool you, Officer. You’re doing a pretty good job of that on your own.” She gives a humorless laugh and rolls her eyes. “Excuse me,” she says by way of dismissal as she separates her key fob from the other keys on her chain.

She opens the driver’s door just in time for me to reach out and slam it shut. I keep my hand where it is, my arm in front of her as I lean in close.

“You know what? Yeah, that experience fucked me up,” I admit, leveling with her unabashedly, even though I’m close enough for her perfume to torture me. “I saw a lost, lonely, and absolutely beautiful girl on a cliff. She looked scared and alone, but I saw something else in her eyes that I couldn’t quite nail down. That’s what haunts me about her,” I blow a sharp breath out of my nostrils as I look away for a moment, clenching my fists against the torment inside. Swallowing hard and taking a deep breath, I turn back to her. “That, and I can’t help but wonder if I’d just had two minutes longer, could I have been her one reason to keep her feet planted on the ground,” I say, revealing a truth I don’t think even I knew until this moment.

My voice is a menacing grumble, the words coming from between my teeth, and as I drop all this truth on her, I see a flash in her pale eyes. And though she blinks it away, I recognize it right away as sadness.

She’s done well to put on a façade and mask her emotions, I’ll give her that. But she can’t hide from me.

“What does any of this have to do with me?” she questions, and I can hear her voice getting the slightest bit weak.

“The fact that nothing has *ever* thrown me off my game, sweetheart, but her and *you*...” I let that sink in, and I can tell by the shift in her eyes that it does.

I lean in closer, knowing I can’t intimidate her as she indicates by the upward tilt of her chin.

“I’m an intelligent, galvanized, unwavering man who is driven and focused, and Katherine, Violet, whoever the fuck you are, you cause real problems for me when you keep popping up in my life like this.”

“What?!” she bites out, her features hardening and her stare penetrating. “I’m sorry; did I just hear you correctly?”

I say nothing, staring back at her and not backing off. I don’t know where she’s going with this but I won’t show weakness or compromise my dominant position. I didn’t think it was possible for her eyes to darken behind those purple contacts, but I swear I see it, and her brows crease just slightly with a strange mixture of sadness mixed with fear, before she quickly blinks it away and continues with her interjection.

“What makes you so sure you’re not the one that keeps barging into *my* life?” she challenges. “Did you ever stop to think that maybe you’re the one that keeps fucking up *my* world when you just happen to turn up wherever *I* am?”

I clench my jaw, unwilling to entertain her point.

“No, I don’t think it did ever occur to you that you’re the moth in this scenario, and that you’re the one getting in *my* way. If you’ll recall, I’m the one that ran from *you* outside that club.”

The finality of her statement isn’t in her words so much as in the way she pulls an elastic from her jacket pocket and pulls her long wavy hair back in a low ponytail. She made the same move the night outside the club when we had finished fucking. I can’t help but wonder if it’s her signal that we’re done here, and it lights a fire in me. The memory of how she made me

feel that night and her efforts to control the conversation... not to mention the exposed skin of her neck; it all comes together to do what she does best - makes me fucking snap and lose all control.

Bending my arm, I let the rest of my body fall against her, pinning her to her car. I can tell by the muscle tone pressed against me that she's strong enough not to let me, but she's not fighting me, at least not at first. I grab hold of her waist with a bruising grip and my lips immediately seek out hers, and when I push my tongue between them, she opens for me briefly; just long enough for our tongues to glide against each other for a few languid strokes. She releases a whimper into my mouth that speaks of completely undisguised need. Fury and desire chase each other through my veins and come to an explosion as I feel her stiffen before a sharp piercing pain penetrates my tongue, making me growl as I jolt away from her.

Licking her lips, she crosses her arms and pulls out her signature move: staring right through me. I don't know what riles me up more - that it's a haunting memory from the cliff or that she's still very much in control here. Both enrage me and reinforce the notion that this has to fucking stop. I need for this woman to not be around to fuck with my head or my life anymore.

"Tell me I'm never going to see you again," I ask of her, regretting my cruelty only slightly. I don't want to be this way, but it may be the only way to keep us away from each other. "That I can just keep my memory of you being a nice fuck in an alley, because I swear to God, if I see you again, I may very well end up hating you for fucking up my life once again, Katherine."

She licks her lips, looking up and setting her eyes on me as she steps forward.

"Stop... fucking calling me... Katherine!" she bites out. "And I can't *tell* you that," she responds, and then almost as cruelly, "I can *promise*," she hisses. "And I'll go without that memory, thank you," she tags onto the end with spite. "Have a shitty life, Detective Kopa."

She spares me no more words as she climbs behind the wheel of her ridiculously expensive vehicle and wastes no time turning the engine over at the same time as she slams her door shut. Then, lifting her cold eyes to mine once more, she puts the car in reverse and peels backward out of the parking slot, before knocking the gear shift into position, spinning her forward in a full Rockford before screeching out of the parking lot, on-looking officers be damned.

And like I've been tending to do when she's around, I disregard protocol by not going after her. Instead, I stand back and watch her break several traffic laws as she hauls ass as fast as she can out of my life.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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VIOLET



The house is quiet when I come home. I saw Coal's truck in the driveway signifying that he's at least here, and possibly, Silver. I have no idea where Karma and Jade are. Save for a few nightlights in the hallways and the light above the stove, the place is dark. I'm actually okay with the eerie silence and the promising solitude. Despite the harrowing accomplishments of tonight, my last human interaction didn't leave me feeling much like celebrating.

In the laundry room, I finally free myself of the binding dress and bra, stripping down naked before bending down in search of something clean and comfortable to retrieve from the dryer. Finding an oversized t-shirt and a pair of modest cotton bikinis, I slip them on and wander to the kitchen in search of some much-needed alcohol.

While a shot of something hard would be a quick, easy way to a buzz, I want to savor this alone time and feel it slowly settle over me. This calls for a bottle of Pinot Noir that rests in the wine rack with its friends until I grab it, making steady work of the cork. After grabbing a piece of stemware from one of the white cabinets, I take both bottle and glass with me to the living room and ignite the newspaper resting between the logs waiting for me in the fireplace.

When the flames begin to dance, I take a seat on the white faux fur rug and curl up, pouring myself a glass of the red wine. My eyes drift between the liquid swirling in my glass, and the orange flames, both calming and mesmerizing me in their own way.

I take my first sip and relish its journey down my throat to my belly as I try to process all that happened tonight. It was like a lifetime of events crammed into just a few hours, and though it only ended roughly an hour ago, feels like it happened years ago.

I try to think calmly about what I need to do from here, to forget John and focus on my life; my mission in the Society. Unfortunately, I don't get far before I hear proof of other bodies in this house with me.

“Coal, dammit! No!” I barely jolt when I hear Silver's brash yelling from upstairs. “How many times have I told you?!” I hear her demand, as I hear a bedroom door swing open, briefly bringing more volume and clarity to her voice. “I'm done, I'm not doing this anymore,” I hear her proclaim before the slam of another door.

I feel a slight pang of anxiety in response to what could be happening up there, but it's muted by the buzz of the red wine that I take another hearty sip of to further quell the sensation.

I don't look up; instead I continue to stare at the mesmerizing flames as heavy steps descend the stairs. There's a slow and defeated march to the footfalls before I sense Coal's presence in the entryway, hearing him blow out a heavy breath that sounds just as resigned.

“You're home,” he observes in a low voice, and I look up to find him sauntering into the living room wearing grey sweats and no shirt. His hair is down from its bun and hangs in messy strands just below his scruffy jawline. I nod, and turn back to the fire, reaching for the wine bottle and busying myself with topping off my glass while he heads into the kitchen.

He reappears a moment later, carrying a glass of his own and crouches down next to me in front of the fire, getting comfortable and holding his hand out for the bottle.

“Everything go okay at the station?” he asks, as the dark red liquid splashes into his glass.

“From a technical standpoint,” I mutter into another sip.

“How do you feel?” he asks, ignoring my cryptic response to his previous question.

How do I feel?

I expel a lungful of air, trying to clear my fuzzy head for the long, convoluted answer to that one.

“I feel... amazing,” I start off, raising my eyebrows and trying to pull back the feeling I had when I first exited the back of the club tonight. “Liberated,” I continue, deciding I can’t bother with articulating. I just let my mind come up with the simple words and voice them all. “Empowered... untouchable... and so, so scared about what to do now.”

“About the cop?” he asks attentively while crossing his bare arms over his knees.

“I... felt something out on that cliff, but I ignored it, afraid it would deter me from following through,” I carefully explain. “I dismissed the feeling and tried to move on, even though I couldn’t get him out of my head. And then when I felt it again at the club, I just thought I was going crazy. He felt so familiar, but I wrote it off as the booze and tried to do something Katherine had never let herself do.”

“Both times, you never thought you’d see him again,” Coal helps the conversation along, and I nod in agreement.

“And not only did I see him again, but the third time, both encounters from both lives came together in the form of a cop,” I feel myself start to shake and I bring my glass up for another drink, trying to steady the unnerving feelings that are brewing a lethal potion inside of me.

Coal lets out a loaded breath before taking a drink from his own glass, silently conveying his solidarity in my warring emotions.

“But it doesn’t end there,” I announce ominously, and I see him turn towards me in my peripheral. “He’s a detective,” I pause, allowing the gravity of that word to fall over Coal. I can see the moment it hits when he looks around while his mind absorbs it. His eyes finally roll towards the ceiling as if asking a higher power to give him strength.

“He’s a detective that hasn’t let Katherine’s death go as easy as we had hoped,” I conclude, letting Coal finish putting the very big pieces of the puzzle together. Not exactly a challenge.

We’re quiet for a moment, me recovering from all I just divulged, and him trying to process and get it all straight in his head.

“Violet,” he finally utters, and I know what’s coming, but I muster up the courage to finally look up at him, the orange flames reflecting in his eyes and revealing their true hazel.

“I know,” I try to cut off his statement and the pain it is sure to bear. I can’t forget each touch of John’s hands, the feel of his lips... but I know Coal is about to tell me I have to. “I can’t be in love.” And I don’t want to be. After letting myself love not one but two people in the world of regular civilians... it nearly ended me. Falling for someone that has that training, resources, and quite possibly the motivation to get to the bottom of my existence is just unthinkable.

It’s not possible.

Like John and I both furiously concluded earlier, we’re each a colossal detriment to each other’s lives. Coming together would eviscerate everything we’ve each worked for. We’re on opposite sides, making anything between us forbidden.

“You can’t be in love,” Coal murmurs, but I detect more than just an affirmation that applies to me. The far-off look in his eyes as he watches the flames tells me he’s struggling with this particular barrier within the Society.

He sits there a moment longer, as if allowing himself to feel the weight of this unfortunate reality before slowly turning to face me. And then, not so slowly, leans in at the same time I do, our lips colliding in a flashing explosion. We reach for each other, grabbing on and exploring; feeling.

My hands move over the smooth planes of his shoulders, before lifting to allow him to pull my t-shirt briskly over my head. I feel the heat of the fire kiss the skin of my exposed

breasts before Coal's mouth comes down over one, his mouth moving in frenzied motions around my nipple. My jaw drops open as the feeling of his swirling tongue makes my pussy swell from the blood pulsing through it.

Coal's hands desperately grip my flesh as we both give in to our separate hungers. His mouth devours my skin as he pushes my body down to lie on the furry rug as I close my eyes and will myself not to see John's face; not to see anyone's face. I just want to feel, to drown in ecstasy and forget the detective that has twisted my heart and soul together in what feels like barbed wire, causing pain when I try to get past it.

After yanking my panties down to my knees with one hand, Coal does the same with his sweats, releasing his cock to brush against my skin while his tongue licks its way up my throat in one long stroke. I groan and press my pelvis into his as his hair falls in my face.

Bringing his lips to mine again, he growls into my mouth as he reaches between us, getting his thick length in place to enter my tight heat. He growls again as he pushes inside, and I let out a whimper against his tongue. He glides himself in deeper and deeper until he reaches the hilt before starting to move in furiously hard strokes. Each thrust is punishing, the slapping of our skin mingling with the crackle of the fire.

I take each hit, letting it pull me down deeper and farther away from my painful reality. Whatever isn't there between me and Coal doesn't matter, so long as it can vanquish what *is* there with John.

Coal's dick swells tightly inside me, stretching me to the limits as he drives it into me over and over. The heat emanating off our bodies rivals the flames that pop and crackle in the fireplace. He ruts into me, grunting, like he's trying to fuck away his feelings just as much as I am.

He pummels me deeper, each pass harder than the last. Our breathing has taken on an erratic, animalistic rhythm as I feel sweat break out across my skin, making our bodies slide together. I rake my nails against his back as I get close and it seems to spur him on, the pain distracting from any emotion

trying to take over him. I arch my back and moan like a whore, not caring who hears as I give myself over to it, and Coal grunts his approval, giving my nipple one more lick before I explode.

My body is no match for the tsunami-worthy waves washing over me as Coal pounds my pussy, milking every drop of my orgasm out of me before pulling out of me and grabbing hold of his shaft, pumping it. His jaw clenches as he jerks out his own release, landing in warm splashes on my stomach while I reach down to rub myself, riding the last of my orgasm.

Coal collapses on his back next to me on the soft, shaggy rug as we both try to restore our breathing.

Daylight is just starting to peek through the crack in the curtains at the same time the flames become embers in the fireplace. It's like the ending of one chapter and the start of a new one in the same room, at the same time.

Staring at the ceiling, I wait, for both my breathing to normalize and for the promise of a new start to come over me. But as my breath settles calmly in my chest, the feelings I was hoping to extinguish are far from gone.

Though the bright flames in the fireplace have dimmed, every memory of John still burns bright behind my eyes.

And I can't breathe...

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Epilogue

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JOHN



9 Months Later

My .9mm is cradled in my grip with my other arm crossed over the top of it, clutching a Mag light, and though my arrival is met with silence, I'm not sold. There's a certain stillness in the air, so thick I can feel it.

Someone's here.

I set my Mag light down and reach for my cell so that I can call for backup when my ears pick up on a soft shuffle somewhere from the hallway to the right. Likely taking advantage of the few seconds of darkness I provided them, I make out the dark outline of three figures, ascending in size, hurrying through to the kitchen, headed for the garage.

Snatching the flashlight back up, I bring my gun back up to position and get to my feet in pursuit.

"Freeze!" I bark in a booming shout as my eyes come back into focus with the light. My gut feels hollow and I can hear my breath in my throat and my blood rushing through my ears as I continue hauling ass to the darkened kitchen.

"Freeze!" I yell again at a black jacket with the hood pulled up, just in time to stumble into a chair and send it skidding across the hardwood. Once I right myself and bring the light and gun back up, a shock about the strength of a million volts stops me in my tracks like a nuclear blast when two violet eyes meet mine, just behind the black barrel of a Beretta that's pointed right at me.

Violet Steele stands across the table from me, mimicking my pose with her arm held up and locked in front of her, aiming her weapon at me. In all fairness, mine's aimed at her too. Her shoulders undulate with her rapid breaths as she takes in who stands before her. Her eyes are wide with likely the same amount of shock she's dealt me, and I don't know whose gaze is holding whose hostage. Our eyes are locked, clasped onto each other like iron to a magnet and playing the staring game like a couple of kids - only at an accelerated level. The first to look away will lose a very, very big game.

"Katherine," I throw her real, given name out into the space between us, but she holds steady without a flinch, those mystical eyes piercing mine. "Katherine Jane Holland," I try again, trying to get any kind of reaction I can go on. Again, not even a blink.

She's well versed in ignoring her given name, but I doubt her training and practicing taught her to withstand the way I'm breaking her down.

"You've come a long way since that scared, defeated girl on the cliff," I continue, feeling my heart constrict painfully at the memory of that night and the reminiscent look in her eyes right now

"Kopa," she grinds out from between gritted teeth. "Get on some damn medication. See a therapist, visit a Buddhist temple, I don't care what. Just get it out of your fucking head that I'm some girl you're obsessed with that died in front of you!"

"You don't have a lot of time left; back up is coming," I warn, trying like hell to both ignore her outburst and contain my own, despite how badly I want to run to her, shake her, demand she admit she's Katherine before I lay her down and fuck her on this kitchen floor. "I know damn well your cohorts aren't going to leave without you, so they'll be the first to get shut down when mine show up. And as for you... you're in here with me, and it's going to be sweet as fuck putting those cuffs on you again."

Our standoff continues, guns pointed at each other across the dark surface of the heavily scratched table, watching as the other's shoulders heave up and down from the desperate breaths our lungs try to replenish - almost completely in sync. I'd be willing to bet even our hearts are beating rapidly in unison in this heavy silence. We stare, neither of us blinking first, and whether we like it or not, in this moment, we're connecting. That is until she finally plucks up the courage to respond to my last uttered words.

"Not tonight," she informs me, her voice firm, but I don't miss the slight waver. I don't, however, get a chance to call her on it or push the issue further as the next sound I hear, before the words are barely out of her mouth, is a loud blast echoing off the walls and ringing in my ears.

NOT THE END by a long shot...

Find out how Violet and John got to this fateful moment in [*Karma's Law*](#)

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Trigger Warnings



- Suicidal Themes
- References to dog fighting
- Domestic Abuse
- Violence
- Child abuse is touched on but not detailed

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