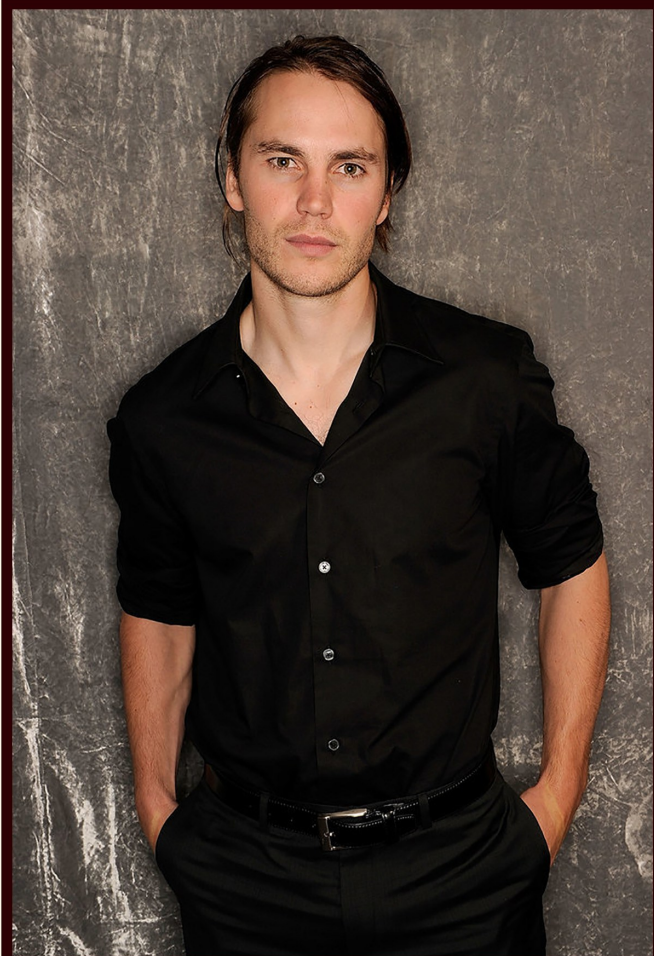




Execution



I leaned against the wall, massaging bloody knuckles as I looked down at Johnny Gale's unconscious form. He was battered and bruised, his once-pristine, white shirt spattered with blood. Drool dripped from him sagging mouth, and a few teeth lay in a pool of vomit and blood on the concrete floor. My own hands ached, but it wasn't an unfamiliar feeling. Nor was it unwelcome. It was the price I had to pay to do my job.

Johnny stirred, a pained groan escaping his split lips. It was almost time. I'd extracted all the information I needed. He tried to move, but the restraints held.

He lifted his head, and I could see the evidence of the beating I'd given him. One eye was swollen shut, a ghastly, purple bruise covering the entire side of his face. The other side hadn't fared much better. He looked like a man on the edge of death. And in fact, he was. He knew it. I knew it. There was no escaping it. Not after what he'd done.

Some men preferred a fair fight. Not me. I didn't care, so long as I won. And against an opponent strapped to a chair, I couldn't lose. But that didn't mean I enjoyed it. I didn't. I hated that it was necessary. But it was. He'd talked to the cops. End of story. There was no coming back from something like that.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," I said, stepping forward. As I drew closer, I drew a razor from my pocket. Flipping it open, I continued, "I wish I didn't have to do this."

"Then don't," he muttered, a gurgle of blood distorting the words. "Just let me go. I won't say nothin'. I'll go. I'll run away. Nobody'll ever know you didn't kill me."

"I'll know," I said, reaching out to grip his lank, sweaty hair. He protested as I pushed his head back, exposing his neck, but I ignored it. I'd heard it all before. It didn't faze me. It never had.

"I'll do anything," he said, his open eye wild with fear. "I'll do -"

A gurgle cut him off as I slashed the razor across his neck. It cut deeply. Efficiently.

He was dead in a matter of moments. Once, I might have felt a rush - of fear, adrenaline, or some other, more savage need - but that had long since passed. As I looked down at my latest victim, I felt nothing. No regret. No anger. No fear. Just an acknowledgement that the first part of my job was done.

I wiped the blood from my blade and put it back in my pocket before starting the cleanup. The body would be dumped in the bay, and like so many before it, the alligators would destroy any evidence. Besides, nobody would be looking for Johnny Gale. They knew better.

I sighed, resolved to finish my task.

I stepped into the apartment, tired, dirty, and wishing I hadn't just spent nearly six hours killing a man and disposing of his body. I didn't regret the act itself; it had to be done. But that didn't mean I enjoyed it. Quite the opposite, in fact. Shrugging my coat off, I tossed it over the arm of the nearby chair before going into the bedroom.

I knew she was there before I even saw her. Maybe it was her perfume, still hanging in the air. Or perhaps it was an errant sigh, drifting down the hall. Or maybe it was just hope. In any case, I wasn't surprised to see her lying naked on the bed.

"You shouldn't be here," I said, unbuttoning my blood-stained shirt. "You know that."

"I wanted to see you," she purred. "I needed you."

I sighed. I needed her too. But I knew enough to realize that whatever time we might share had to be carefully planned. If anyone found out, we'd both be as good as dead. No matter how many men I'd killed for them, they wouldn't abide that sort of betrayal. The Eason brothers weren't known for their understanding natures.

Not for the first time, I wondered why I'd let it happen in the first place. She was forbidden. Off-limits. And I'd never really hurt for female companionship. There dozens of girls down at The Landing Strip just like her. Impressionable girls with bottle-blond hair and big, fake breasts - the world was teeming with them.

But not just like her. Not really, at least. Nobody was like Kayla. They might have the same parts, but they weren't her. At best, they were poor imitations. Knock-offs. And I was never one for second-best.

It didn't matter that she was taken. I didn't care. Not when she was lying in front of me.

"I want you," she breathed. It was barely more than a whisper, but the sound echoed in my ears.

"I'm dirty," I said. "Bloody."

"I don't care," she said. "I want you to fuck me right now."

I wish I could have resisted. Or at least, part of me does. The other part knows it's impossible. And that part was in control.





"I heard you did Johnny Gale," Dominic said, massaging his knuckles menacingly. He didn't scare me. So few people did. In any case, we were partners, and he posed no immediate danger.

I nodded. "I did what I had to do," I said. "He went out like you'd expect."

"Then you did something wrong," Dominic said. "You go too easy on them. I've always said so."

I shook my head. "And you go too hard," I said.

He shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "But I'd rather do it my way."

"That's why you're you, and I'm me," I said. Dominic's "way", such as it was, was often overly violent and usually sadistic. It wasn't enough for him to get the information and dispose of a problem. No - he had to make them feel it. He wanted to punish them. And he enjoyed doling out that punishment.

"Thank God," he said. "Where'd you put him, anyway? Out in the bay?"

"Can we just talk about something else, please? Johnny was a good man," I said. "Until he wasn't."

"That's right - you used to look up to him, didn't you?" Dominic asked, grinning. "You were one of those kids who followed him around, right? Thought he was a real, live mobster. How'd it feel to find out that he was a glorified bag man?"

"Have some respect," I said. "He did his job for a long time."

"And then he turned snitch," Dominic said. He spat on the ground. "He deserved what he got. More. There's a special place in hell for rats like him."

"Whatever," I said. "Let's go. We've got to meet your old man in less than an hour."



One look at Noah Eason, and it was clear to anyone with half a brain that he wasn't a man to be fucked with. But I didn't have to rely on appearances. I knew from personal experience that he was an extremely dangerous man who fully expected – and probably deserved – deference. It said something that even in a world populated by criminal, thugs, and other dangerous men, he usually got it.

"Is it done?" he asked, his gravelly voice making the question feel more like a declaration.

I nodded. "Johnny's gone," I said.

Noah took a long draw on his cigarette. "Good," he said. "Rat bastard."

Dominic, Noah's son who looked absolutely nothing like him, smirked. "Abel here thinks Johnny was a good man," he said. "Good men don't rat."

"Nobody asked you, boy," Noah said, tossing the spent cigarette onto the pavement. "Johnny was a good man. 'Til he wasn't. He did a lot for this family. More than either of you. He was just put into a bad situation."

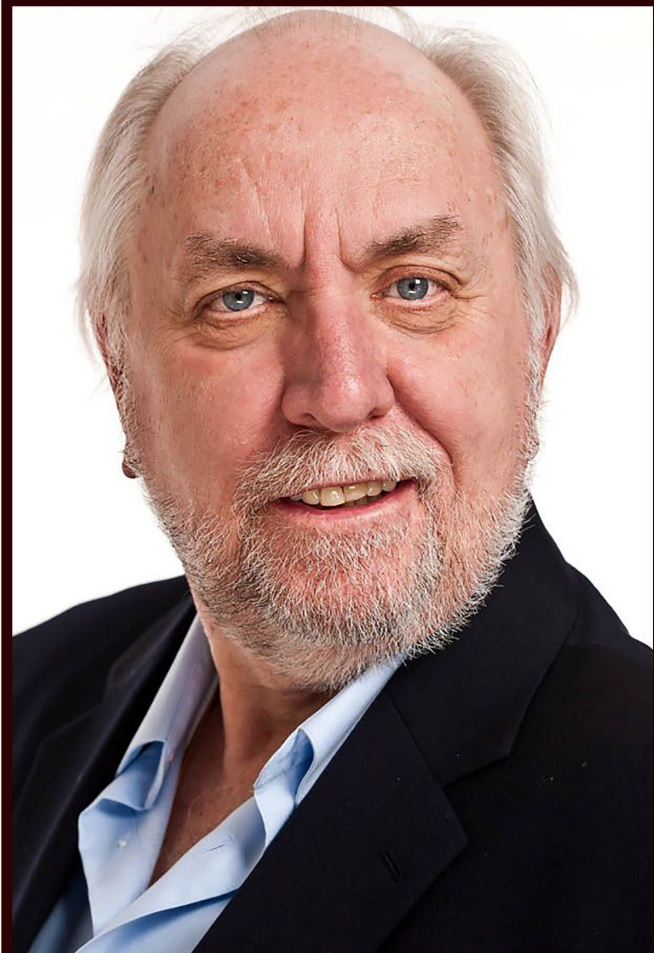
Dominic seethed at his father's rebuke, but he knew better than to argue. Over the years, he'd been on the receiving end of the old man's wrath on enough occasions to know what awaited that sort of disrespect. So, he remained silent. Angry, but silent.

I ran my hand through my hair. "Let's just move on," I suggested. "Johnny's gone. That's done. What else did you need?"

Noah smiled. "Always the peacemaker," he said. "Fine. My brother wants to see you."

"What does Judah want with us?" asked Dominic.

"Not you," Noah said, not even bothering to look at his son. "Just Abel."



"You've been with us for a while, haven't you, Abel?" the aging Judah asked. He was very different from his brother, both in appearance and demeanor. In fact, if I hadn't known the things he had done to claw his way to the top, I would never have suspected that he was a hardened criminal. I would have pegged him as a doting grandfather. But I did know his history, and I knew better than to underestimate his ruthlessness.

I glanced around the office, noting the details of my surroundings. It was a habit I'd developed after being ambushed one too many times, and over the years, it had served me well. It was unnecessary; the office was unchanged from the hundreds of times I'd seen it before. All dark wood, leather, and a deep sense of well-deserved entitlement. "Long enough," I said.

"Have a seat," Judah said, indicating a nearby leather sofa. I did, and he sat across from me. Leaning forward, he said, "We've got a problem."

I couldn't help but notice the gun strapped into his shoulder holster. Nor could I forget that I was unarmed. My senses sharpened as I felt the tension in the room escalate.

"What's that?" I asked, my voice even and calm.

"You know what I'm talking about," he said, his blue eyes glittering with menace. Or was it something else? I could never tell with him.

"I don't -"

He leaned back, smiling broadly. "Dominic's birthday," he said. "The party. You still haven't given me the guest list."

I let out a sigh of relief as my muscles relaxed. I'd been ready to spring into action. "Yeah," I said, trying not to reveal my own weakness. "Yeah, right. I'm still working on it. He's got a new girlfriend, but he hasn't said much about her."

"Get it done, Abel," Judah said. "His birthday's next week, and I want this to be a good one."

I should have known. As hard as Noah was on his son, Judah doted on his nephew. He always had seen him as a surrogate for his own son, who'd died very young.

"I'm on it," I said. "I'm on it."



I felt myself relax. We weren't at work anymore. I didn't have to be on high-alert. Even so, the previous day's activities still weighed heavily on my mind. It was always like that after I did a job. I'd be keyed up for a week or so, and then, I'd go back to normal.

Or, I'd get another assignment, and the process would start back over.

"You need to unwind, man," said Dominic. "What's going on with you?"

I shrugged. "Nothing," I said, collapsing onto the couch. I threw my arm lazily over the back of the sofa, propping my feet on my friend's expensive coffee table. "I'm fine."

"Good," he said. "I wanted to tell you something, anyway."

"What?" I asked.

"I should have told you about this sooner," he said. "I mean, you know I'm dating a new girl, right? Have been for a few months now."

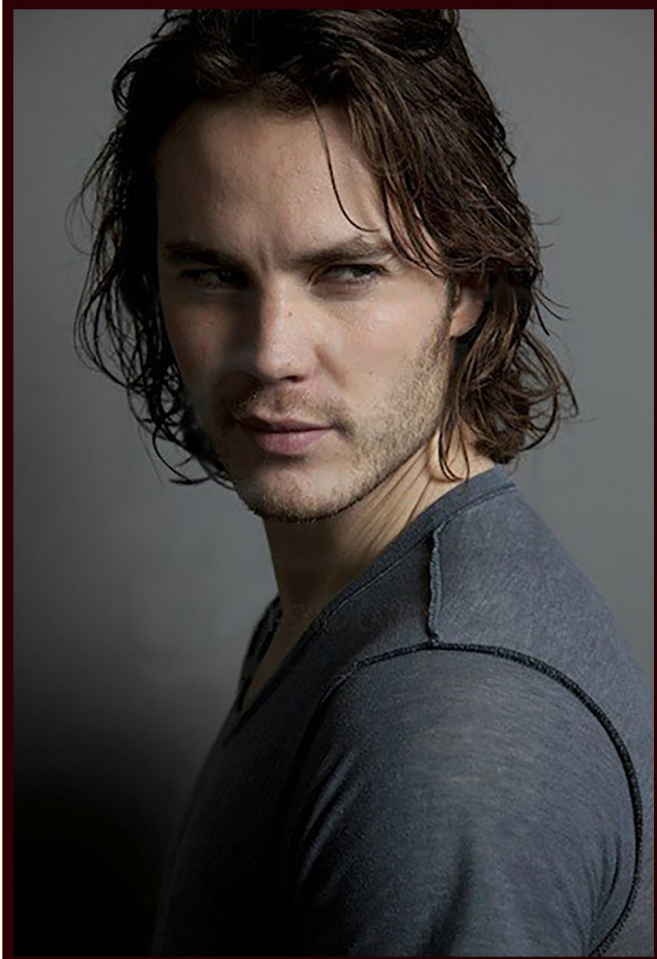
I nodded. "But you refuse to introduce me," I said.

"Well, that's going to change," he said. "Because she's not my girlfriend anymore. She's my fiancée."

I didn't let my surprise make it to my expression, but inside, I was on fire. Fiancée. That meant he'd asked her to marry him. That made sense. Dominic had always been a romantic. But it also meant that she'd said yes, which presented a set of problems all its own.

"Good for you, buddy," I said. "What's the lucky girl's name?"

"Kayla," he said. "Her name is Kayla Kennedy."



"I can't fucking believe you, Kayla," I said, looking back at her.

Though she'd been crying, her makeup smeared beyond recognition, she was still as beautiful as ever. It was difficult to stay angry at her. I wanted nothing more than to throw my arms around her shoulders and hug her tight. I wanted to protect her, even if it was from her own bad decisions.

"What was I supposed to do, Abel?" Kayla asked, sniffing loudly. She pushed her blonde hair from her face. "I couldn't say no."

I ground my teeth together. My anger was misplaced. I knew that. She hadn't had much of a choice. A girl like her couldn't say no to a guy like Dominic. That was more than a simple mistake. It could be a death sentence. He wasn't used to not getting what he wanted, and I knew from experience that his reaction to such a situation could be violently explosive.

"I don't know," I said, sitting next to her. "I just hate the sneaking around."

It was necessary, though. I was sleeping with my best friend's girlfriend and had been from almost the moment they'd gotten together. I had tried to break it off. I had tried to resist. But it had been a fruitless endeavor. I was drawn to Kayla in a way I couldn't quite describe.

"We could leave," she said. "Run away. No looking back. We could just go. You and me."

"They won't let me go," I said. "And Dom won't let you, either. Not now."

"So, what are we supposed to do?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," I admitted, massaging my temples. "But I'll figure it out. I promise."



“She’s cheating on me,” Dominic said.

“What? Your girlfriend?” I asked, my expression calm. However, beneath that placid façade was a roiling storm of turmoil. I could feel my muscles tense as I focused on the fight I fully expected.

“Fiancée,” he said. “I told you I asked her to marry me. But yeah. I think Kayla’s cheating on me. I don’t know with who, but I’m almost positive it’s happening.”

“Why?” I asked, sure that I’d been careful.

“A feeling,” he said. “Nothing solid. If there was, I’d have already done something about it.”

“You’re probably imagining things,” I suggested.

“No,” he said. “I know something’s wrong. And I want you to help me figure out what it is.”

“I’m not a private investigator, Dom,” I said. “I don’t –”

“You’re my friend,” he said. “And you’re good at this sort of thing. Just help me out, Abel. I need to know.”

I sighed. “Fine,” I said. “But if I don’t find anything, you drop it. Deal?”

“You’ll find something,” he said. “I’m not imagining this. I know she’s up to something. You’ll see.”



"He knows," I said. "I don't know why you're not taking this seriously."

"He doesn't know anything," Kayla said. Even in my distress, I was drawn to her. She was gorgeous, wearing only lingerie as she sat near the window. "You said so yourself. This actually worked out better than we hoped."

"Please explain to me how this is a good development," I said, sitting next to her. I leaned forward, my head in my hands. "This is going to get us both killed."

"You'll protect me," she said, her hand on my back. Even through the leather of my jacket, I felt the electricity of her soft touch. It sent a shiver up my spine that was hard to ignore.

"Maybe," I said. "From Dominic, sure. I could kill him. It probably wouldn't even be difficult."

It wasn't a boast. In that particular area, I'd always been my friend's superior. We'd fought enough times to make the outcome all but certain.

"But I can't take them all," I said, referring to his father and brother's criminal empire. They ran the city, and for good reason. A veritable army of thugs were at their beck and call. And while I'd take a fair few with me, I couldn't stand up to those odds. For a lone man, it was impossible.

"We could run," she said. It wasn't the first time she'd made that suggestion, and I knew it wouldn't be the last.

I rose. "That's not an option, either," I said. "There are others like me. Big Leon. Little Tony. Frank Hart. The list goes on. And that's not even considering outside contractors. If they want to find us, they will. And when they do, we'll have to pick up and run again. Or we'll die. Those are the options here."

"It'll be okay," she stated. "Just tell him you didn't find anything. We'll figure something out."

I sighed. There were no other options. "Fine," I said. "Whatever. But he's not stupid, Kayla. He'll figure it out eventually. And when he does, I'm going to have to kill my friend. When that happens, everything's going to change."

"Just act normal," she advised. "We'll go to the party. We'll act like we don't know each other. And in a couple of weeks, you'll tell Dom that you couldn't find any evidence of an affair."

"This isn't going to end well," I muttered to myself. But I agreed. It was the only option.



I pushed the door of Judah's study open, but I didn't make it past the threshold. I stood in the door, staring at the scene before me, my rage mounting. Kayla was on the floor, the hem of her dress ripped up the side, rubbing her jaw. Judah loomed over her, a shadow of the man he'd once been, but an imposing figure nonetheless.

"What do you want?" he barked, his teeth bared in a challenge.

I didn't hesitate. I barely even thought. In an instant, I forgot that I was in his house. I didn't think about the fact that dozens of his thugs – dangerous men, all – were in the party's attendance. I didn't care that he was my boss. Or that he'd pulled me up from the gutter, that he'd given a orphaned delinquent a job, a purpose. I didn't care that he'd been more of a father than my own had ever dreamed of being.

No – as I covered the short distance from the door to the crime boss, I didn't think of any of that. I couldn't. All I could see was Kayla – the woman I loved – lying on the floor. As I cocked my fist, I couldn't think of anything besides the fact that he'd hurt her. And as I swung, the entirety of my might behind the blow, I was overwhelmed by murderous rage.

When I finally came to, Judah's face was a bloody mess. My own fists were covered in gore – some of it mine, but most of it his. Scrapes from teeth and bone dotted my knuckles. And Judah lay still. Unmoving. Unbreathing. Dead.

Vaguely, I remembered him trying to block my blows. He was no match for me. Even with Kayla futilely trying to tear me away from the man, he was no match for my youthful strength and righteous fury.

"W-what did you do?" she asked.

"We need to go," I said, cold reason slowly taking rage's place. "Now."

"Too late, boy," came a familiar voice. I turned to see Noah standing in the doorway, flanked by a pair of goons I didn't know.

"He tried to rape her," I said, rising. I stepped in front of Kayla, shielding her.
"He deserved what he got."

"Maybe," Noah said, shrugging. "But it doesn't matter. You know I don't have a choice here."

"Neither did I," I said. Without another word, the two thugs rushed, and I launched into motion.



I reached up, wiping blood from my split lip. It was one of a multitude of minor injuries I'd sustained. One of Noah's thugs had smashed my knee with a particularly heavy lamp, my face was bruised and swelling, and my hands were so swollen they didn't really want to cooperate with my mind's instructions. But the fight wasn't done.

The two thugs lay on the floor, unmoving. One was dead. The other was unconscious. But Noah remained upright. No matter what else happened, the old man had earned my respect. Age had robbed him of much of his physical ability, but there was still enough there to let him stand toe-to-toe with me.

"Just let us go," I said, crouching in a fighter's stance. "I'll disappear. You can take over. You and Dom. And nobody has to know what happened here."

"Let you go," the old man mumbled, his sweaty, lank hair falling over his eye. He pushed it back. "You know I can't do that."

"And you know you can't beat me," I said.

Not for the first time, I was grateful that Judah had insisted that everyone come to the party unarmed. If any of the men had had guns, I would have been dead on the floor. So would Kayla. The thought brought with it a swell of rage. She didn't deserve any of it.

"Maybe not," he said. "But that doesn't matter, kid. You know it doesn't."

"Let her go, then," I said. "And do what you want with me."

Kayla found her voice. "Abel, no!" she said. "You can't -"

"Save it, whore," Noah said. "The men are talking. I let her go, and you'll surrender?"

I nodded. "Fine," he said. To Kayla, he said, "Get out of here. I won't tell Dom what happened here."

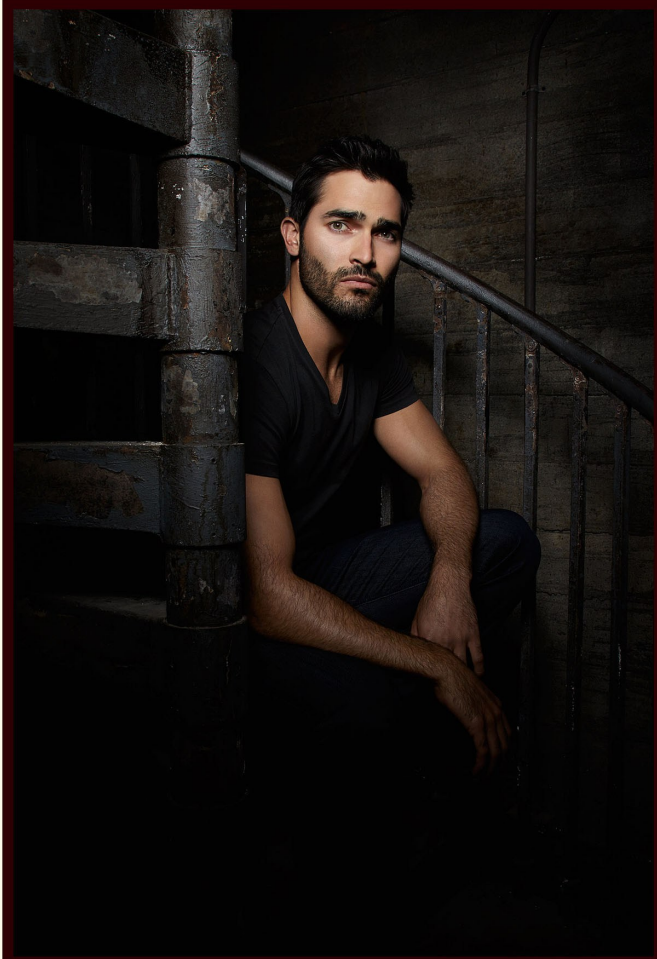
"But -"

"Go!" I barked. "Just go, Kayla. It'll be alright."

After a few moments' indecision, she left the room. "Noble," Noah said.

I relaxed. "Let's just get this over with," I said. "I don't -"

I saw the blow coming, but I didn't bother to block it. Instead, I surrendered to the inevitable, letting his fist connect with my jaw. I welcomed the blackness of unconsciousness.



I didn't struggle against my bonds. I knew it was useless. In any case, I'd come to terms with my fate the moment I'd seen Kayla walking out of that study.

"Why?" asked Dominic, sitting on a rusty, metal stairwell. I recognized it, of course. I'd seen it often enough to know that I was in a warehouse near the docks. It was a useful location for interrogations. For disposing of unwanted people.

"You wouldn't understand," I mumbled, my swollen jaw making speech difficult. One of my eyes was swollen shut, and I could feel a couple of loose teeth. My entire body ached enough that the thought of my end was almost welcome.

"Try me," he said. "I know something happened. One of the guys said there was a girl. But dad won't tell me any details."

"The old man tried to rape one of the caterers," I said. "He hit her. So I hit him. A lot."

Dominic rose, his footsteps metallic as he descended the last couple of stairs. He looked genuinely disappointed in me. "For a girl you don't know?" he asked, approaching me. "I knew you were crazy, but I would never have expected that."

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you thought," I stated, spitting a combination of blood and saliva onto the floor.

"I think that's obvious," he admitted. "He gave you everything. When he found you, you were half-starved and on the run from -"

"I know," I said, interrupting him. I didn't need him to recount my own history. The old man had rescued me from homelessness and starvation. I'd spent the majority of my young life bouncing from one foster home to another, and when Judah had found me, I'd just escaped from the latest in a long line of abusive homes. I owed him everything. And I had just beaten him to death.

"Then tell me why," he said, barely a foot away. "Tell me why you did it. Tell me why you killed him."

"Because he's a noble idiot," came Noah's gravelly voice as he stepped into the room. I hadn't even heard him enter. "Soon to be a dead, noble idiot. I hope it was worth it."

"It was," I spat.



I hung my head, fully expecting the killing blow. I looked up, "Just make it quick. You owe me that."

"I don't owe you anything!" Noah growled, wagging his finger at me. "You killed my fucking brother. You'll die slow. I don't care if you were a good soldier. I don't care if you had good reasons. I can't let that slide. You don't get special treatment."

I sighed. I knew it was coming. I was a traitor. I'd betrayed men who couldn't afford to allow that sort of thing.

"Fine," I said. "But -"

He launched his fist toward my face, and it connected with a sickening crunch. My head spun as stars danced at the edges of my vision. The old man could still pack a punch.

And then he hit me again. And again, alternating between my face and my unprotected torso. It was a beating I deserved. I knew it. He knew it. So did Dominic.

And then, suddenly, there was a curious sound, and I saw Dominic fall to the concrete floor. A figure - a female figure - loomed behind him, holding a pipe. It felt like it was happening in slow motion.

Noah wheeled around to see Kayla standing over his unconscious son. Even as he raced toward her, I realized he wouldn't reach his destination. She bent down to retrieve the gun. She aimed. She shot, the sound echoing throughout the warehouse. She shot again. And Noah fell.

"Oh, God," Kayla whispered. "Oh...oh, God. L...I h-had to...I had to do it."

"Untie me," I said. "We have to get out of here. Now."

She was in shock. Clearly, she'd never killed anyone. But we didn't have time for her to process it. We had to use whatever head start we had to get away. We had no choice but to run.

"Kayla!" I screamed. "Untie me! Now!"

With glazed eyes and fumbling fingers, she obeyed. And so our lives as fugitives began.



"Where are we going?" asked Kayla.

I looked up, pulling on a fresh shirt. "First," I said. "Dallas. I have some money stashed there. Then, we go North to Canada. After that, we get new identities from a guy I know in Montreal. From there, wherever you want."

It had been less than two hours since she'd killed her first person, and aside from a miniature freak-out in the car, she seemed remarkably calm. It was good, because after spending the past twenty-four hours being beaten to within an inch of my life, I didn't have the energy to do much besides put one foot in front of the other.

"We should have killed Dom," I said, grabbing my bag. I opened it, checking to make sure nothing was missing. It wasn't. There was a roll of hundreds, the keys to an unregistered car, a pistol, and a couple of changes of clothes inside. "He's going to come after us."

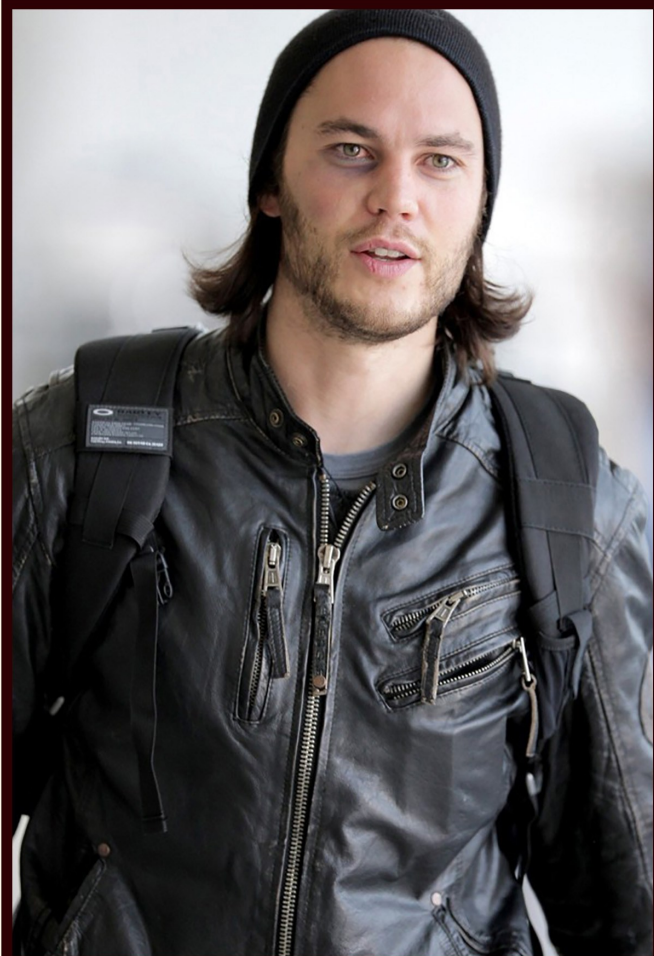
"L...I couldn't," she muttered.

"I know," I said, silently chastising myself for leaving my friend alive. It might have been asking too much for her to finish that particular job, but I should have known better. "But it's done now. We just have to move on. If we have to deal with it in the future, we will. With any luck, he'll be too busy running the business to worry about us."

Such a scenario wasn't completely out of the question. Dominic had hated his father for as long as I could remember, and for good reason. The man had never gone easy on him, and his version of discipline had usually involved beatings of varying severity. And though his relationship with his uncle was markedly better, Dominic didn't really think in terms of familial relationship. To him, family was little more than an obligation. He didn't love them.

"Let's go," I said. "We'll swing by your place, let you grab some clothes, and then we're leaving Tampa forever."

"Good," she said. "I always hated this city."



"Everything's ready," I said, walking toward Kayla. It had been almost a week since our escape, and my wounds had started to heal. But more importantly, everything had gone according to plan. After a brief stop in Dallas, we'd made our way north and over the Canadian border, ending up in Montreal, where I'd just acquired our new identities.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Where do you want to go?" was my responding question. "We could go to Mexico. Europe. Asia. It doesn't matter. I don't care where we end up, so long as I'm with you, so long as we're together."

It was a strange feeling, leaving my life behind. For the first time in my life, I felt free to make my own choices, to choose my own path. And what's more, I was with the woman I loved. Despite the bumps along the way, it finally felt like things were looking up, like we might actually escape.

"I've always wanted to see Italy," she said. "You know, Rome. Florence."

"Italy it is, then," I said, handing her the new passport I'd just acquired. "Evelyn."

"Evelyn," she said, rolling the name over her tongue. "And you're Mark, now."

"Your husband," I pointed out.

"What if I don't want to marry you?" she asked, a playful smile dancing over her lips.

"Too late," I said, stepping close. "You're stuck with me. For better or worse."

"Through sickness and health," she added. "Til death do us part."

"Until death do us part," I said, leaning in and kissing her passionately.



"Give it to me!" she moaned. "Fuck me! Fuck me!"

I did, thrusting myself deep inside of her, grunting with each movement. In and out, for what felt like hours, until we were finally both exhausted. I collapsed onto the bed, breathing hard, as I thought about the events of the past few weeks.

It had been almost a month since we'd disappeared, and we had spent it living like we were on a weeks-long honeymoon. It was, to date, the best time of my life. I almost felt like relaxing.

But I knew I couldn't. We couldn't. Dominic, or more importantly, the organization he now headed up, had a long memory. And eventually, he would catch up to us. I knew it. So did Kayla - or Evelyn, as I had to remind myself. We had little choice but to keep moving.

"I think I'm tired of Italy," she said, lying beside me.

"We've barely left the hotel room," I responded. "But we can go somewhere else if you want. But eventually, we're going to have to make some decisions about where to settle. The money isn't going to last forever."

"I know," she said. "I miss home."

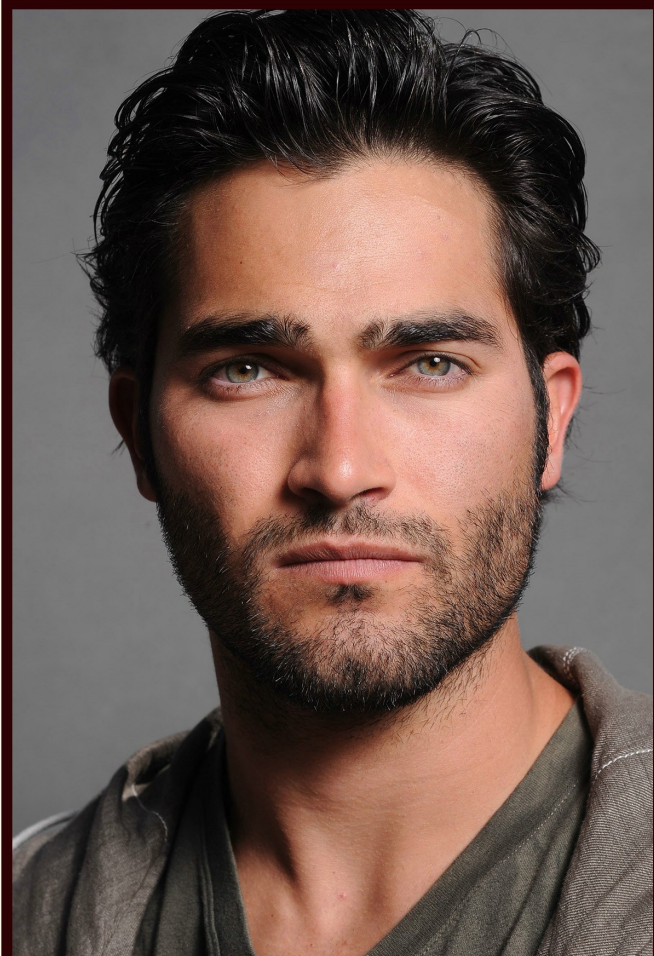
"I don't," I said. "Not many good memories back there."

"No - not Tampa," she said. "My real home. With my parents. My mom and dad. In Tennessee. Sometimes, I wonder what my life would've been like if I'd never left."

I didn't really know how to respond. I hadn't had much of a childhood to speak of, and I couldn't really relate to that sort of regret.

"What about Thailand?" I asked. "We could go there for a while. They have nice beaches. And we'd be hard to find."

She shrugged, her breasts heaving. "If you want," she said. "I'm fine with Thailand."



Dominic found us almost two months later, in Australia. Or rather, he almost found us. Through sheer, dumb luck, I saw him before he saw me. I was following him, fully intending to end the chase right then and there, when he met up with a half-dozen men. Upon further inspection, I saw three others who were clearly waiting on me to do exactly what I'd been planning to do. It was a trap, and I'd almost jumped headlong into it.

We had been careful, but I knew that there were people who could find just about anyone. I'd been on the other side of the chase on far too many occasions to think we could really disappear. I could change my name a dozen times, but at some point – maybe a year down the road – someone would find me.

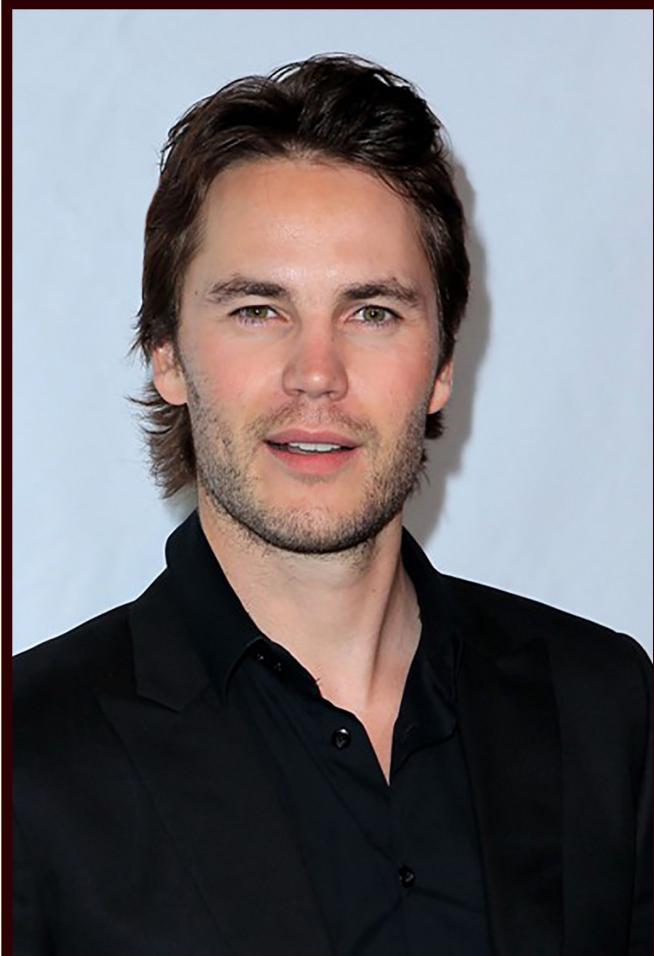
In truth, I wasn't so worried about myself. I could fight most people off, especially if I saw them coming. And if I didn't, so be it. I'd made peace with my own mortality a long time ago. But Kayla was different. I couldn't risk her life. I couldn't let anything happen to her.

The smart plan would be to separate. Clearly, I was the target. Kayla was just a girl who'd disappeared. And though Dominic may have thought he loved her, he wasn't so attached that he would have pursued her around the world. That wasn't his character. That wasn't who he was. No – he'd mope around for a few days, and then he'd visit his father's strip club, The Landing Strip, and he'd find another beautiful, busty girl to obsess over. It had happened before, and it would happen again.

But me? He couldn't let me go. I'd killed his uncle. And as far as he knew, I'd killed his father. That sort of betrayal couldn't go unpunished. So, he would chase me around the world. He wouldn't stop so long as there was the faintest trail to follow.

But I couldn't leave Kayla. Perhaps it was selfish. Or maybe I didn't think she'd make it without me. But I couldn't tear myself away.

So, we continued to run, bouncing from one place to another. But I knew we had an expiration date. One day, we'd make a mistake. And when that inevitability came to pass, I wondered if I would have the courage to lead the chase away from the woman I loved.



"You threw everything away for me, didn't you?" asked Kayla. "Why?"

"I didn't throw anything away," I said. "And I did what I did because I love you. I have since the moment I saw you."

"Lots of guys fall in love at The Landing Strip," she said, looking away.

I didn't respond. I didn't know how. After months on the run, we had pushed past the honeymoon phase and into real couple-hood. We had spent so much time together than the insignificant personality quirks I'd once found so adorable had started to rankle on my every nerve. Most notable among those was her propensity for self-pity. Sometimes, she couldn't get past the fact that she had worked as a stripper. In her mind, that's who she was. And she hated it.

"You know that's not what I mean," I said. "Look, I haven't had much good happen in my life. I've been a criminal for just about as long as I can remember. And when I wasn't, I was running away from whichever abusive asshole was collecting money from the government to foster me. But you - you're good. No matter what happens, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She laughed harshly. "You can't mean that," she said, looking around. We were stuck in the middle of Eastern Europe, in a place neither of us could pronounce. Our money was running out, and we'd been accosted by locals twice in the past week.

"I do," I said, wrapping my arms around her. I hugged her close. "You know I do."

"We need a new plan," she said. "What we're doing isn't working."

"I know," I said. "But I don't know what else to do."

"M-me neither," she said.

"He'll give up," I said. "At some point, he has to go back to the business."

"Would you?" she asked.

"No," I said, knowing that Dominic's answer would be the same.



"This was nice," Kayla said, her hands on her hips. She looked amazing, wearing a figure-hugging, light, blue dress. What's more, I had to agree with her. After spending a couple of months traipsing through the word parts of Eastern Europe, we'd spent the past week in the Caribbean.

"We can't stay," I said.

"I know," was her response. "But I wish we could."

"Me too," I answered. I'd spotted a few familiar faces in the nearby market, and I knew Dominic wouldn't be far behind. I still had no idea how they were tracking us, just that they were getting closer and closer with each narrow miss.

"We can't keep doing this," she said. "They're going to catch up to us."

"Me," I said. "They're not tracking you."

I'd confirmed that by capturing and interrogating one of the men who'd followed me into a dark alley. Dominic believed Kayla had simply gone back to Tennessee. She'd talked about it often enough that he wasn't even surprised by her disappearance.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked. Suddenly, it dawned on her. "You're leaving me, aren't you?"

"I...I've considered it," I admitted. "It seems like the only way you can be safe. I can give you what's left of the money, and you can go home. Open that beauty shop you always talked about."

"No," she said flatly. "No. I didn't come back for you so that you could leave me now. I can't go on without you."

"You might have to," I said. "One way or another."

"No," she said. "We'll figure something out. I know we will."



"I don't like it," I said. "I just don't, Kayla."

"Don't call me that," she said. "Not where anyone can hear, at least. You need to use my other name."

I sighed. "Don't change the subject," I said. "Going back to the states is a bad idea, and you know it."

"So is running around in third world countries," she argued. "We've proven that over the past few months."

I didn't respond because I didn't want to admit that she was right. It seemed like wherever we went, Dominic or his men weren't far behind. It didn't matter what we did, how we tried to stay off the grid, or how careful we were, our flight had clearly become little more than a delaying tactic.

"I can go back," I said. "I can go back to Tampa, clear them out, and -"

"They have hundreds of men working for them," she said. "It's suicide and you know it."

"Not if I get Dom," I said.

"You know that's not true," she responded. "You kill him, and someone else will take his place. Everyone in that organization knows what we...what you did."

She was right, but she wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. It didn't matter who was in charge. They'd hunt me down just to prove a point.

"No," I said. "Not until we have a better plan than just 'blend in' to fall back on. Until then, we keep doing what we're doing. We'll slip them eventually."

"You're the boss," she said, but I could clearly tell that she hated my decision. And just as clearly, I didn't care. As long as she was safe, I wouldn't.



"What's wrong?" asked Kayla.

I looked up, stone-faced. "Nothing," I lied.

"Don't do that," she said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Act like I can't tell when something's bothering you," she said. "I can. We've been living together for almost a year now. I know you. And I know something's wrong. Just tell me what's going on."

I sighed. She was right. Most people would look at me and see a blank, emotionless face. But Kayla could see beneath my stony façade. To her, I might as well have been sobbing in a corner.

"Fine," I said. "But it's not a good story."

"They never are," she said.

"Before I met you, there was another girl," I said. "Jacie. We grew up together. Or at least, we had the same foster family for a little while. I thought I was in love with her. You know, there's me, fifteen, full of hormones. And she was a year older. Cute, too. And she was right here in the same house. It was bound to happen."

"She was your girlfriend," Kayla said.

I nodded. "For a while," I said. "It was never going to work. If either of us took a step back to look at it, we were both way too damaged to make something like that work. But we did love each other. Or we wanted to, at least."

"What happened?" she prompted.

I shook my head. "We got split up," I said. "I went to juvie. She got sent to live with a cousin down in Miami. Got wrapped up in drugs down there and overdosed. Seven years ago today."

"Shit," Kayla said. "I'm sorry. I didn't...I didn't know."

"Nobody does," I said. "Before I met Dom, she was the closest thing to family I'd ever had."

She wrapped her arms around my waist, and I hugged her close. "I'm your family now," she said. "I'll always be your family."



"I have an idea," Kayla said, leaning against the door frame.

"And I'm not going to like it," I said.

"What? Why do you say that?" she asked innocently.

"You're wearing lingerie," I said. "You want me distracted. Or at least in a good mood. That means you want me to do something I'm not going to want to do. So, let's just skip the crap so you can tell me what it is."

She sighed, and her posture completely changed as she stood up straight. She was still beautiful, of course; nothing could change that. But she didn't ooze sexuality like before. Apparently, her time as an exotic dancer had taught her more than a few tricks about getting what she wanted.

"Fine," she said. "But it would have gone down better if you'd have let me convince you."

"I'm sure it would have," I said, grinning as I leaned back on the bed. Propping myself up on my elbow, I said, "Spit it out."

"I think you should get plastic surgery," she said. "I know this guy. He works out of Miami. He can do some truly amazing things."

"Amazing things?" I asked. "Like what?"

"My nose, for one," she said. She gripped her breasts. "And these."

"You want him to give me tits?" I asked.

"No!" she said. "But the way I figure it, Dom and his guys are looking for you, right? Well, what if you weren't you? Or at least, what if you didn't look like you?"

"No," I said. "I'm not getting plastic surgery."

"Just -"

"I said no, Kayla," I repeated. "Just drop it. We'll figure something else out."



“How would it work?” I asked.

“How would what work?” Kayla asked innocently. We had just narrowly escaped capture for what felt like the hundredth time, and I was absolutely fed up with running. And she knew it.

“This plastic surgeon,” I said. “What does it cost? How much would he change?”

“Everything,” she said. “You would be a different person. But he doesn’t come cheap. It would take almost all of our remaining money.”

“All of our money,” I echoed.

“But we wouldn’t have to run anymore,” she stated. “We could go back to my hometown. We could be a normal couple with normal jobs. And we wouldn’t have to look over our shoulders anymore.”

I sighed. I’d already decided my course of action, but I needed her to say it. “Is this what you want?” I asked. “Because if it is, I’ll do it. No more questions. No more hesitation. I’ll let this guy cut my face up.”

“I think it’s the only way,” she said.

“Then it’s what we’ll do,” I said. “I’ll make the arrangements to get back to Florida. We’ll have to be really careful once we get there, but if this guy can do what you say he can do, we’ll be free.”

“He can,” Kayla said. “I promise.”



I looked down at her, the combination of spit and my cum trailing down her chin. She'd never looked sexier, but I couldn't get the upcoming surgery out of my mind. I'm not the sort of man who fears much, but there was something about putting my fate in someone else's hands that sent shivers up my spine.

Kayla wiped her chin, rising. I couldn't help but admire her perfect body as she turned to walk away.

"Are you nervous?" she asked, reaching down to fetch a robe. She slipped it over her shoulders. "About tomorrow, I mean."

We had only been in Florida for a few hours, but we couldn't afford to hesitate. I'd spoken to the surgeon, Dr. Gaynor, and he had cleared his schedule. With what we were paying him, he couldn't afford not to. Moreover, he had assured me that he was the best surgeon money could buy.

"A little," I admitted. "But you trust him. And I trust you."

"Oh, I don't trust him," she said, tying the robe's belt. "He's a fucking creep. I wouldn't be surprised if he molested my while I was sedated. But he doesn't ask questions, and he does phenomenal work. He'll do the job, and he'll do it right."

I sighed, leaning back on the couch. "I really don't want to do this," I complained.

"As far as I can see, we don't have much of a choice," Kayla said.

"I know," I said, rubbing my jaw. "If this is the cost of our freedom, then so be it. I just hope he doesn't fuck up my face."

She laughed. "I don't think you have anything to worry about there," she said. "He's not exactly known for making people ugly."

I shrugged. "First time for everything," I said. "In any case, it's going to be strange, seeing another face looking back at me."

"I think we'll adjust," she said, sliding onto the couch next to me. She leaned close, kissing my neck. "I think we'll be okay."



“Really?” I asked, incredulous as I stared at the door at the end of the alley. It couldn’t have looked less like a place I wanted to have surgery.

“It’s better inside,” Kayla said, gripping my hand tightly. “It’ll be okay. I promise.”

I hated my own fear. I’d spent my life doing horrible things to terrible people. I wasn’t afraid of any man. But the prospect of back-alley surgery scared me to my core. As much as I tried to suppress that fear, it simply wouldn’t relinquish its grip on me. And looking at that heavy, metal door, my misgivings seemed well-founded.

But I didn’t have a choice. I wouldn’t have been there otherwise. And I couldn’t turn back. I’d already transferred the deposit. I’d already committed. And the logic of my decision remained as irrefutable as ever. No – I couldn’t back out.

“Are you okay?” Kayla asked.

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Let’s get this over with.”

I strode forward confidently and banged on the door. A few moments later, a stocky, bearded man in a lab coat opened the door.

“You must be my patient,” he said, stepping aside. “Come on in.”

I took a deep breath and followed the man into the building, wondering all the while if I was signing my own death warrant.



"Why do you do this?" I asked, sitting on the examination table. I wore only a short, thin hospital gown. "From what Kayla tells me, you're a genius with this plastic surgery thing. Why aren't you giving overpriced boob jobs to trophy wives in L.A. or something?"

Dr. Gaynor looked up. "I used to," he said. "Not in California, but well...I had some issues with my medical license. It's not a bad thing, though. I have a freedom now that I never could have envisioned."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Oh, it's technical," he said. "But I can accomplish things most surgeons wouldn't believe. I've gotten pretty creative in my techniques, which is something lacking in the current climate in the medical field."

"Okay," I muttered, glancing at Kayla. She shook her head. Apparently, that wasn't a line of conversation I wanted to pursue. "How does this work?"

"I put you under, I do my work, and then you pay me when you wake up," he said. "Recovery will be handled by a colleague who does this sort of thing."

"How long does it take?" I asked.

"For you? A couple of months," he said, preparing a syringe. "Maybe three. Four before you're completely healed."

"F-four months?" I asked.

"You'll be under for most of the first month," he stated. "After that, you'll have to reacclimate yourself to consciousness. The bandages won't even come off until the end of the third month."

"I...I see," I said. "And where will I recover?"

"At a facility in the panhandle," he said, hefting the syringe. "You'll be transported there after a week. If there are no other question?"

I shook my head, and the doctor jabbed the needle into my arm, depressing the plunger. "Good," he said. "We'll get an I.V. started, and we'll get this ball rolling. When you wake up, you'll be a completely different person."



I could feel the drugs coursing through my system. I hated the loss of control as I was wheeled into the operating room. Almost as soon as Dr. Gaynor had injected me with what he said was “something to help me relax”, a cadre of nurses appeared. Within moments, I was laid out on a gurney with an I.V. sprouting from my arm.

That’s when things started to get fuzzy. However, I felt a vague sense of panic when I saw what passed for an operating room. It looked like something out of the fifties, and in my groggy thoughts, I could easily imagine all sorts of horrific procedures being carried out in the room.

I wanted to call it all off. I tried to speak. But the only sound to escape my mouth was an unintelligible moan. I felt as helpless as I ever had.

A trio of female nurses stripped me of my gown, one of them saying, “Such a shame to waste such a pretty boy.” She fondled my manhood before helping the other two to heave me onto a metal table. “Such a waste,” she repeated.

And then Dr. Gaynor’s face appeared above me. “We’re going to put you under now,” he said, the outline of his grin evident beneath his green surgical mask. “And when you wake up, you’ll be beautiful.”

I moaned a response, but he ignored it. Instead, he placed a rubber mask over my face and turned a nearby nozzle. The hiss of gas reached my ears, and a sense of panic gripped my mind. But I couldn’t do anything. I was all but paralyzed. And soon, unconsciousness began to overtake me.

As I drifted into a dreamless sleep, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d made a huge mistake.

The woman cradled my head as she pushed the straw into my mouth. I still couldn't speak. In fact, I could barely make an intelligible sound, my throat was so sore. My entire head was wrapped in a series of bandages that were changed once a week. I wasn't allowed to see anything of what was underneath, but in the three weeks since they'd brought me out of the induced coma, I'd caught sight of a few errant locks of red hair.

I hadn't seen Dr. Gaynor since the actual surgery, and Kayla had only been permitted into my room on a few occasions. However, she had assured me that the doctor had been pleased with the results, and he was optimistic that I would make a full recovery.

I wasn't so sure. My entire body hurt almost all the time. And I knew I'd lost an incredible amount of weight. The last part wasn't terribly surprising, giving that I'd barely been allowed to eat more than a few bites of solid food.

"That's it, sweetie," said the nurse as she withdrew the straw. She hadn't introduced herself, so I didn't know her name. "You'll be up and on your feet in no time."

My eyes flicked up questioningly. I was terrified that something had gone wrong and that no one was telling me.

"You don't have to be concerned," she said, almost as if she could read my mind. "You're going to be fine. You'll see. Dr. Gaynor is a genius. I've seen him do things you wouldn't believe."

She stood. "You'll see, sweetie," the nurse said. "You'll see."



"We're almost ready," the nurse said. "Are you excited?"

I nodded. The three months which comprised my recovery had passed excruciatingly slowly. However, it would all be worth it when I was reunited with Kayla.

She reached down to feel my throat. Smiling, she said, "I think your vocal cords are fully healed. We'll free those up when we remove the bandages."

I smiled, still relieved that, for the first time in months, the expression didn't hurt.

"So," she said. "Are you finally ready?"

I nodded excitedly as I sat up. It wasn't as easy as it once had been, but I'd regained enough strength to walk and move on my own. The nurse assured me that the rest of my strength would return before I was allowed to go on my way.

The nurse gripped the gauze, unwrapping it slowly. I practically shivered in excitement, and when she was finally finished, I reached up to feel incredibly smooth skin. As I ran my fingers over my once-square jaw, it felt wrong. Strange. Soft.

The nurse produced a small, handheld mirror and handed it to me. "Don't get too excited," she said as I raised the mirror. "If you do, we'll have to sedate you."

For the briefest of moments, I thought that her warning was a strange one. And then I saw my reflection, and I understood. If my vocal cords hadn't been paralyzed, I would have screamed. But as it stood, I could only stare.

"You will notice quite a few changes," the nurse said. "The jawline. The eyes. The hair, of course. Red suits you. The lips. The nose. We've changed so much." She consulted her file. "Oh, and Dr. Gaynor removed a tracking device from your hip. That stayed in Miami."

I felt a tear fall down my cheek as I looked in the mirror, and the unmistakable face of a beautiful, redheaded woman stared back at me.





I'd almost gotten used to my face. After all, I'd been living with it for almost six weeks. I'd gone through the entire spectrum of emotions associated with my transformation. I'd started with fear. I was sure I'd gone crazy. It couldn't have been me in the mirror. But it was.

And then came the anger. I tried to lash out at the nurse, but I was still weak.

She slapped me aside like I was little more than a child. As soon as she un-paralyzed my vocal cords, I pleaded with her to turn me back. But it was impossible, she said.

That's when I noticed that the register of my voice had risen quite a bit. To put it bluntly, it matched my face quite well. When I calmed down, sinking into a hopeless malaise, the nurse explained that the surgery was irreversible. I was how I'd be for the rest of my life.

After that, and over the next few weeks, I sort of accepted it. Or at least, I thought I had. Until I was reunited with Kayla. Seeing the surprise and the lack of recognition in her eyes was more difficult than anything I'd ever experienced.

It had been almost two weeks since I'd finally been released from the nurse's care, and it hadn't gotten any easier. Even as I applied the medicated gloss to my lips, I struggled to fight back tears. Everything I'd lost – my identity, my masculinity, my life – raced through my mind. And finally, it all exploded.

I let out a primal, yet feminine, scream.

Kayla raced into the bedroom, asking, "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" I echoed. "What's wrong? Look at me! Fucking look at me, Kayla! Listen to my fucking voice! What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I don't...I d-don't even know what the fuck I am. And I'm tired of pretending I'm fine. I'm not. God...I'm not. I don't...I don't know what to do."

I collapsed, hugging my knees to my chest. "I don't know what to do," I sobbed.

She didn't respond. Instead, she simply wrapped her arms around my too-narrow shoulders, hugging me close as I wept.



"I know it isn't easy," Kayla said. "We could cut your hair. Maybe that would help."

"Cut my hair?" I asked. It had been a little more than six weeks since I'd had my last breakdown, and I'd spent the bulk of that time sequestered in my room. Or that's how I thought of it, at least. Kayla and I had moved back to Nashville, where she'd grown up, and she had started working as a hair stylist at a local salon. But me? I just cried. Hour after hour, day after day, I wept. Until I didn't have anything else left.

"It might help," she repeated.

"It won't," I said. "Nobody's going to believe I'm a guy. I mean, look at me, Kayla. Really look. It's not just my face. It's not my hair. It's my body, too. I don't know what he did, but I've got curves I didn't think possible. And they're getting worse."

She looked away. "What do you want me to do?" she asked. "I can't change any of this. Neither can you."

"You ask me like I know how to deal with this," I said. "I don't. I really don't. I thought I was strong. I did. I thought I could take anything. But this? I look like a fucking girl, Kayla. A girl. How am I supposed to deal with that?"

"By accepting it," she said.

"W-what?" I asked.

"You can't change it, right?" she asked. I shook my head. "So go with it. Try to be what you look like. Nobody said you have to wear dresses and put on makeup. But you can just -"

"Be a girl," I said. As much as I hated it, she was right. I think I'd known it from the moment I first saw my new face. And I'd slowly begun to accept it as an inevitability. "H-How would I even do that?"

She grinned. "I can help," she said. "We can do it together."



"You really are pretty," Kayla said, touching up my makeup. I smiled until she said, "He did an amazing job."

The mention of the doctor who was responsible for the loss of my masculine identity made my smile fade. "If I ever find him, I'm going to kill him," I said. "No questions. No accusations. Just me with a rifle putting a bullet through his brain."

"You shouldn't talk like that anymore," she admonished. "You're supposed to be my cousin, Amelia, from Orlando. Not a hitman working for the Eason family."

"I know," I said.

"Just try to forget that life," she said. "You'll never have to think about it again. And they definitely won't find you now."

"Are you sure Dominic's not looking for you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I called him last week," she stated. "I explained that I had freaked out about the proposal. I told him that I just ran. I don't think he even cared, to be honest. He wasn't even looking for me."

"I thought he loved you," I said.

"That man doesn't love anyone," Kayla responded. "I don't think he's capable. Sometimes, he confuses lust with love, but that's it. He's broken inside."

I nodded. Her assessment of my old partner was spot on. I'd thought much the same on numerous occasions. Dominic simply wasn't built like other people. He didn't feel connections. For him, there was pain, there was pleasure, and he didn't care about anything in between. It was sad, but that's just who he was.



There were growing pains, both physical and mental. As my body reshaped itself, it literally hurt. When I wasn't experiencing cramps, I felt bloated. And on the rare occasions when my stomach was cooperating, my muscles ached. Kayla figured that it was just my body adjusting to a new chemistry, and I had no reason to disagree. But knowing what was causing it didn't really help the pain itself.

And then there was the emotional stress of learning to live as a woman. I cried more in a given week than I'd cried in the rest of my entire life. It's not easy, changing gender - especially when it's against your will.

But I've never been a weak person, so I pushed through it. I learned to walk, to talk, to move and dress like a woman. I learned to shave my legs, to put on makeup, and to manage my ever-lengthening red hair. In short, I learned to live as a woman. What other choice did I have?

"I think you're ready," Kayla said, pulling on a pair of sweatpants. Our sex life - and her dedication to looking presentable around me - had all but deteriorated. So, on more nights than not, her sexy lingerie was replaced with old, ratty sweatpants.

"For what?" I asked. For my part, I didn't exactly dress to the nines, but I hadn't completely given up, either. I wore a pair of plaid shorts and a navy, blue tank top.

"I think you need to get a job," she said. "A real one."

"A job? Like what?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "What are you interested in? I can get you a job at the salon. You won't be cutting hair or anything, but we can always use someone to wash the hair, sweep the floors and such. If you like the environment, you can go the beauty school."

I hesitated. I had no interest in working as a hairdresser. I didn't even like doing my own hair, much less someone else's. "Thanks," I said. "But I think I want to do this on my own. I'll look around tomorrow."



"Why did he have to give me red hair?" I asked, pulling it up. "I mean, I could have been blonde, brunette. I could have had black hair. But no. He gave me red hair."

"I like it," Kayla said.

"Me too," I answered. "But it's so noticeable. And you know, I can't even dye it? I tried, and it just wouldn't stick."

"Is this really what you wanted to talk about?" she asked. "I'm not trying to be rude, but I talk about hair all day."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. But no. That's not why I asked you to come down here. I wanted to tell you the good news in person."

"What good news?" she asked.

"L...um...I got a job," I said. I nodded toward a nearby boutique. "Over there. Yeah. Miriam's Closet. I wasn't even applying. I was just shopping. And the manager offered me a job. She said she'd seen me in there a lot, and she liked my taste."

"W-wow," Kayla said. "I just...I mean, that's great. Really great, Amelia."

I hesitated for a moment. Sometimes, I still didn't recognize my adopted name. Like so much of my new life, it felt alien and uncomfortable. But I had no choice but to adapt. I was stuck, and there was no going back to being the man I once was.

"You don't sound that excited," I said, a little disappointed. She had been harping on me for over a month about getting a job. And when I finally did, she acted like it was no big deal. I didn't understand it.

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, no. I am excited. I'm just tired is all. I've been working a lot lately. You know, all those night appointments."

"Right," I said. "Well, maybe now that I have a job, you can cut back on some of those, huh? That'll be great, right? We can spend more time together. You know, we could be like we used to be."

"Yeah," Kayla said, her tone distracted. "Sure. I mean, yeah - that'd be nice." She rose, leaning over to give me a kiss on the cheek before saying, "Look, I've got to go back to work. I'm proud of you, okay? I really am."



"Jesus," Kayla said, pulling her tee-shirt over her head. "Are you in one of your moods again?"

"How do you know what my moods are even like?" I asked. "You're barely ever here."

Over the previous month, I could count on one hand how many times Kayla had spent the night at the apartment we shared. Most of the time, she'd claimed that she had had to work so late that she didn't see the point in coming home. Instead, she had slept at her boss' house. However, there were a few times when she'd been out with friends, and simply hadn't bothered coming home.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, grabbing her jeans. She slipped them up her shapely thighs.

"It means what it means," I pouted. "But I don't want to argue about this right now. I really don't."

"Then what's got your panties in a bunch?" Kayla asked, pulling on her work shirt. "Did another guy hit on you at work?"

I shook my head, wishing I'd never told her about the time when a college boy who worked at the nearby coffee shop had asked me out. But that damage was done. She knew how embarrassed about it I was, and she was quick to point it out whenever I brought up an uncomfortable subject.

"No," I said. "It's just that it's been three years now since I killed Judah and Noah." I looked down at the floor. "So much has changed. I'm a different person now. But I can't shake the guilt."

"You didn't have a choice," Kayla said, trying to sound sympathetic. But she came off as annoyed.

"Maybe not," I said. "But you have to understand that Judah saved me. He found me on the street. Literally. He gave me a job. A purpose. He saved my life. And I killed him."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

For a moment, I considered it. I wanted to tell her that I felt empty inside. Going to work at the boutique was satisfying in its own way, but it wasn't fulfilling. I didn't have anything - not really. I was just living because I couldn't accept the alternative. But I didn't tell her. I just shook my head.

"Good," she said. "I've got to go. I'm going to be late getting home. I might end up staying at Jessica's place. I don't know. It just depends on if we have any late-night clients."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. But she was already out the door.



"I think they're done growing," I said, turning sideways to look at my profile. My breasts hadn't gotten any bigger in the past month, and it seemed like they'd settled into a comfortable B-cup. Moreover, there was almost nothing of my masculinity left.

"Good," Kayla said. "I was smaller than that when I got my implants."

I turned to face her. "You want to fool around a little before I go to work?" I asked, smiling. We hadn't had sex in what felt like months. And even when we had, it had been largely unsatisfying. Whatever inner workings had transformed my body had rendered my manhood useless. I hadn't been hard in over a year. That made sex a bit of a challenge, and we normally just ended up cuddling.

"I've got a headache," she said dismissively as she looked at her phone. She typed a message, then smiled. "Maybe you can take care of yourself."

"Who are you texting?" I asked.

"A friend from work," Kayla stated. "You don't know her."

"Oh," I said. "Okay, I guess. I was just hoping we could...you know..." I sighed. "Never mind."

"Oh - I meant to tell you," she said. "I'm going out of town next weekend. A friend of mine from high school is getting married, and I wanted to go to the wedding."

"Do you want me to come with you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I mean, I do," she said. "But I don't want...I mean...everybody would think we were lesbians. You don't want that, do you?"

"No," I said. "I guess not."



She stumbled as she came into the house, almost falling over before she plopped herself onto the nearby column. She wore an insanely short, black dress that barely covered her ass and a pair of heels so high that, even if she were sober, she might have struggled with. But I didn't care about that. I'd seen her wearing similar outfits on enough occasions that I barely even noticed it. What I did notice when she sat down, however, was the fact that she wasn't wearing any panties - a marked change from when she'd left that evening.

"It's late," I said. "And you're drunk."

"I'm just a little buzzed," she argued, her words slurred. "And I didn't drive. I took an Uber."

I shook my head. "You can't keep doing this," I said. "All the partying. The late nights. You need to slow down."

"W-why?" she asked. "Seriously, why? Why do I need to slow down?"

"Because you're -"

"I never had a chance to just live," she said. "I went down to Florida to go to school, but when I flunked out after one semester, I was too embarrassed to go back. So, I got a job at The Landing Strip. I never got to just go to clubs. I was always the entertainment. Well, I'm not now. And I'm going to enjoy it."

I looked away. "I just wish you'd stay home sometimes," I said. "With me."

"Or you could come out with me and my friends," she suggested. It wasn't the first time.

"You know I can't do that," I said. As much as I wanted to spend time with the woman I loved, I was deathly afraid of losing control. I had never had much of an alcohol tolerance, and that had only been exacerbated by my transformation. And I couldn't afford to say the wrong, drunken thing.

"Then quit whining," she said. "And let me have my fun, okay? I'll be safe."



"I wonder what everyone would say," I said, lying in my bed. I had been all but kicked out of what had become Kayla's room and had taken to sleeping in the nook - a small space built into the wall. It was cozy and comfortable, but it wasn't lost on me that the end of our cohabitation meant an end to our status as a couple. No one said it, and I certainly didn't want to think about it, but Kayla and I had drifted far apart.

"What?" Kayla asked, looking up. I'd just finished painting her toes for her, and she was about to climb out of my nook.

"Back home," I said. "I wonder what they would all say if they could see me."

"Get him!" she mock-screamed. "If they recognized you, at least."

"Yeah, no - that's not what I mean," I said. "It still feels kind of surreal. I didn't think it was possible. But I kind of feel like a girl now."

"And it only took you eighteen months," she said. "Seriously, though - it's not like you were close to any of them anyway, right? Dominic was your only friend, and we both know his idea of friendship is way different than anyone else's."

"I had a friend once," I said. "Back when I was a kid. I'd just started working for Judah, and we did a lot of jobs together. Little stuff, you know? Breaking and entering. Stealing radios out of cars. Nothing big. But me and Rory, we were good. We talked about moving up the ranks, about running the whole thing."

"What happened?" she asked.

"The same thing that happens to almost everybody in that line of work," I said. "He died. Got shot climbing through the wrong old man's window. Blew his face clean off."

"Jesus," she said.

I shrugged. "I hadn't thought of him in a while," I said. "I bet he'd hit on me if he saw me now. He always did like redheads."



I pulled a thick lock of hair over my face. “No,” I said, grinning broadly. “Don’t take my picture!”

“Come on,” Kayla said. “You’re beautiful. You should have some sort of social media presence.”

I shook my head. “You don’t think that’s dangerous?” I asked.

“How could it be dangerous?” was her responding question. “Nobody from your old life would recognize you right now. You could walk past Dominic, slap him in the ass, and he’d just grin like a horny idiot.”

My smile faded as something occurred to me. “What if they find the doctor?” I asked.

“You couldn’t,” she said. It was true. I’d spent almost three months obsessing over finding the doctor, but to no avail. He’d simply disappeared. “What about the nurse?”

“She doesn’t know who you are,” Kayla stated. “And neither did the doctor, by the way. You were just a guy he operated on. He has no idea why you were there.”

“I guess,” I said, accepting her explanation.

“So? What do you think? Instagram? Twitter?” she asked.

“What about Facebook?” I asked, citing the only social media platform I knew anything about.

She laughed. “Nobody does Facebook anymore,” she said. She was about to go down to the community pool and was dressed appropriately in a bikini. “How about Instagram? Yeah. That’ll work. Instagram.”



"You know we're in this together, right?" Kayla said. "You and me. No matter what else happens, I'll always love you."

I didn't know how to respond because, lately, she hadn't been acting like it. More than lately, really. It had been so long since she'd treated me like a romantic partner that I'd begun to think of her as something like a sister. A disengaged, disinterested sister.

"I know," I said. "I appreciate it, but why are you saying this?"

"Because I know how hard this has been for you," she answered. "And I know I haven't been a good girlfriend for a long time."

"I...I understand," I said. "It's hard on you too."

"It is," she admitted, sitting beside me on the bed. "But I am proud of you. Not many people are strong enough to do what you've done."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't even see a man anymore," she said. "When I look at you, I mean. I know you've still got that thing between your legs, but when I look at you, I have a hard time remembering who you used to be. You're a girl, now. A real girl. No pretending. No acting. That's just who you are now. There aren't many people who could switch gears like that."

"I'm...I-I'm not sure what to say to that," I admitted.

"You don't have to say anything," she said. "I just wanted you to know that I'm proud of you, and I love you. That's it."

"I...um...I love you too," I said.



“You got a promotion?” Kayla asked.

“Yeah,” I said happily as I looked back at her. “You’re looking at the new assistant manager of Miriam’s Closet. It’s official tomorrow morning.”

“Wow,” said Kayla. “I mean, wow. I didn’t expect this.”

Neither did I, if I was honest. But it was strange, working at the boutique. I’d always taken pride in my work ethic, even going back to my days as a juvenile delinquent working for Judah. But I had never really enjoyed my work. Whether it was stealing, strong-arming, or killing, it was just what I did.

There was never any joy in it.

But at Miriam’s? That was different. When I’d first gotten the job, it had mostly been an effort to get Kayla off my back. But as I dove into the work, I realized how much I’d come to enjoy fashion. I never would have admitted it to Kayla, but I was happier doing that than I’d ever been as a hitman.

“Me neither,” I said. “But Miriam thinks I can one day manage a store. You know she wants to expand, right? She wants to open a new store in that mall across the interstate.

And maybe that can be mine.”

“That’s awesome,” Kayla said. “It really is. I’m glad you’re doing well. And you look cute. I like that nighty.”

I blushed. “Thanks,” I said. “I got it from work.”

“It suits you,” she said. “It really does.”



"Does my butt look big?" I asked, cupping a cheek in one hand. I let it fall, feeling the jiggle. "It feels big."

"It looks great," Kayla said. "Very fuckable."

"W-what?" I asked, my jaw dropping. "What's that mean?"

Kayla looked up from her phone. "What? What'd I say?" she asked.

"You said that my ass looked 'fuckable'," I said. "What the heck does that mean?"

She sighed. "It's just an expression," she said, rolling her eyes. "Don't take everything so literally."

"But you know I don't -"

"I know you inexplicably have no interest in having sex," she said. "I know. You made that perfectly clear on Valentine's Day."

I looked away, embarrassed. But I shouldn't have been. She should have asked me before buying that strap-on. If she had, she would have found out that I had no interest in what she'd planned. As feminine as I felt, I didn't, under any circumstances, want to feel a rubber phallus inserted into my ass. It just wasn't natural.

"It's not that I'm not interested in sex," I said. "I'm just -"

She raised her hand. "I know," she said, interrupting me. "I'm not going into this again. You don't want to do it, and I respect that. So, just drop it. Your ass looks great. Not at all fuckable though. Never that."

"Kayla, I -"

"Stop," she said. "Just stop. Just leave it alone. For once, just leave it alone."



I should have expected it. In hindsight, all the signs were there, and they had been for months. More than a year, really. But even so, when I walked into the house and heard the telltale sounds of flesh slapping against flesh, I couldn't believe it. And then, when I went into her bedroom to see her bouncing up and down atop some other guy, I flipped out.

I screamed. I threw things. I called her all sorts of names. And I slapped the guy in the face. My tirade went on and on until, finally, I wore myself out. By that point, the man was gone. Kayla had gotten dressed. And my voice was all but gone.

"Why?" I asked, tears streaming down my face. "Just tell me that."

"You know why," she said.

"I want you to say it," I stated. "Just tell me."

"I'm a woman," she said, her eyes glued to the carpet. "You're a woman. Neither of us is a lesbian. Do the math."

"L...I don't...I'm not..."

"This, whatever it is between us, doesn't work now," she said. "I still love you. I want to love you. I want to be with you. But you're just...you're just not what I want. What I need."

"So it's over?" I asked.

"I've tried, Amelia," she said. "I really have. I wanted to adapt. But you...you're so hung up on being whatever it is you think you're supposed to be that you won't even try to adjust to what you are. You did it with everything else, but you can't do it with what really matters. You can't do it with our relationship. That's why I fucked Jack. And it's why I've fucked a dozen other guys over the past year. Because they have what I need."



“W-what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“What do you want to do?” was her responding question. Kayla and I were both naked, and though we’d made love on hundreds of occasions, it felt like the first time. After a long talk, we had decided to try to make our relationship work. We both wanted to truly work at it. And if it wasn’t enough, we’d both vowed to be honest about it.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ve never...you know...done this kind of thing as...well...I mean...”

“This is your first time as a lesbian,” she said. “Believe it or not, I’m not very experienced either. There were a couple of times I played with other girls at The Landing Strip, but other than that, I’ve only had one experience.”

“What did you do then?” I asked, hoping for ideas. I’d watched lesbian porn, but I’d never imagined myself as one of the participants. The idea felt alien. Wrong. But I wanted to be whatever it was that Kayla needed. I wanted to satisfy her.

“It was a long time ago,” she said. “Me and my roommate in college. You know, before I left. We were both so drunk that I barely remember it.”

“That’s a lot of help,” I deadpanned.

She shrugged. “It’s all I’ve got,” Kayla said. “But why don’t you just come over here? We’ll start with making out, and then we’ll just see where it goes? How does that sound?”

“T-that sounds good,” I said. “That sounds good.”

"Lick me," she said, spreading her legs. Her sex, which had once excited me more than just about anything in the world, just looked like a meaningless slit. And I knew why. Oral sex was all well and good, and there was a part of me that enjoyed giving fellatio. But without the prospect of intercourse, it just seemed pointless for me. Even when Kayla returned the favor, it was more titillating than pleasurable because I couldn't achieve the release of orgasm.

But I was committed. I wanted it to work. And I'd convinced myself that somehow, we could achieve that goal. So, I knelt between her legs, and I dove face-first into her pussy. But even as I licked, kissed, and fingered, I couldn't keep my mind from wandering.

Was this my fate? To be a chemically-castrated carpet-licker for the rest of my life? I could live without sex. I'd done it for a while, and I barely felt the lack. But I couldn't live without Kayla in my life. She was everything to me.

I stopped licking.

"I...I can't do this," I said.

"What?" she asked as I pulled away.

"This," I said. "I can't do this. I love you. That's part of why I can't do it. I can't give you what you need. I know you're trying. So am I. But this just isn't going to work."

I could feel the tears running down my cheeks, but my sadness didn't change reality. She wasn't a lesbian. And I'd rather go without sex than live my life kneeling between her legs. It was like hanging a steak just outside of a starving man's reach. It was cruel and I couldn't take it.

"So," she said, closing her legs. "What do we do now?"

"I wish I knew," I said. "I love you. I do. And I think you love me. But we're just...we're just not compatible. Not anymore."

"W-we'll figure something out," she said. "But I won't lose you. I don't care what else happens, I can't go without you in my life."

"Me neither," I agreed.





I felt a sense of hope. I don't know why. The driving for behind my every decision over the past three years had just been stripped away from me. I should have felt alone. Or, at the very least, angry. Frustrated, maybe. But I just felt calm. At peace. And cautiously hopeful for the future.

I should have known better. I really should have. But I'd convinced myself that the past would never catch up to me. To us. So, when I looked across the street, and I saw Dominic sitting across the patio table from Kayla, my breath caught. My heart might have stopped, right then and there.

I couldn't look away. She'd been waiting for me. We were going to have lunch. We were going to talk about our relationship. And now, she was sitting across from the man who wanted to kill me. I'm ashamed to admit that my first thought was that she had betrayed me. I thought she had called him, that she'd told him who I was. But that didn't last long.

She was terrified. I could see it in her wide eyes. And her fear was justified. From my vantage point across the street, I could see the gun nestled in Dominic's lap. He'd come to kill her. She knew it. I knew it. And he knew it.

He drew the gun, and I froze. Time seemed to stand still as Kayla pushed away from the table. She turned, thinking to run, but Dominic coldly, casually, raised the gun. He pulled the trigger. The gunshot, once such a familiar sound, seemed so loud. So ominous. A bright red spot appeared on Kayla's shoulder, and she was thrown to the ground.

Dominic stepped forward. He said something as she tried to crawl away. Two words. I could read his lips. He said, "I'm sorry." And then he shot her again, the gunshot echoing down the street. And again. Again. Six times, he pulled that trigger. By the time he turned to walk away, she was dead in a pool of her own blood.

Vaguely, I was aware of the bystanders' screams. The approaching sirens. The mayhem of a panicked crowd. But none of that mattered. All I could think, all I could see was the dead body of the woman I loved.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the cop said. He looked young. Probably a rookie. "But is there anything else you can remember about the assailant?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. I'd told them as much as I dared, but I didn't identify Dominic. Whatever else happened, not talking to the police had been deeply conditioned into me. "That's it."

I was still shaking.

Death had never really bothered me before. It was just something that happened. People died. It was the natural order. And when I'd started killing people for Judah, that detachment from the emotions of mortality had intensified. Before I'd gone on the run, I barely even thought about it.

That was gone, now. Maybe it was all the time that had passed. Or perhaps it was how much I'd changed. Or maybe it was because I'd cared so deeply for Kayla. But her death, her violent, bloody death had hit me as hard as anything had ever hit me. I wanted to cry. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to punch something and scream about the injustice of it all.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

"Do you have somewhere to go?" the cop asked, his hand on my trembling arm.

I nodded. "I live a few blocks from here," I said.

"Some advice," he said. "You probably don't want to be alone tonight. Go stay with family. Friends. Whatever. Just don't be alone."

I nodded again, though I had no one to go to. I was alone. Completely. Irrefutably. Undeniably. Alone.



I lay in my nook, unmoving. I'd been there for three days, leaving only to go to the bathroom. I'd missed Kayla's funeral. I'd missed my chance to say goodbye. But I couldn't bring myself to get up. I didn't sleep because every time I closed my eyes, I saw her dead, lifeless body lying on that sidewalk. I didn't eat because every time I considered doing so, I felt like I was going to vomit. Instead, I simply lay in my bed, wallowing in my own depression.

Until I couldn't. Suddenly, after the third day, I made myself get up. I made myself take a shower. Eat. Get dressed. And with that activity came an idea. A plan.

I knew what to do.

Immediately, I found my phone and made the call. When the woman who'd nursed me back to health after my surgery answered, I said, "I need to see the doctor."

"I've told you before," she said, obviously recognizing my voice. "He's unavailable."

"I don't care," I said. "I want to do it again. I need more. I need his services. And I'm going to hunt him down, one way or another. If I have to do it the hard way, he won't like it. So, either he makes some money, or he ends with his dismembered body being eaten by alligators in some remote swamp. It's his choice. Or rather, it's yours."

The line was silent for a long moment. And then she said, "He's in New Orleans. I'll text you the address. But you'd better have the money. More than before."

"I'll have the money," I said before thumbing the "end call" button.

Possessed of manic energy, I immediately went to the cubby where we'd stored the remainder of the cash we'd taken when we left Tampa. It wasn't much. Just a few thousand dollars. But it was a good start. I knew I'd have to sell almost everything Kayla and I owned - our cars, the furniture, her jewelry - and I'd have to steal from my boss. But I would have the money necessary. One way or another.

I went to work, secure in the knowledge that I was finally doing something about my situation.



The second time was easier, though the surgeries were far more extensive. The doctor was just as creepy, but his premises were far more advanced. He'd obviously been doing well. I didn't care. He could cut me open with a rusty pocket knife if it got me to where I needed to be. I'd moved well past caring about my own well-being. It just didn't enter my mind.

The surgery itself went smoothly, as did the recovery. However, it took five months instead of four. And it cost almost twice as much. Thankfully, I had enough. If it hadn't been, I would've had to do something rash. Something desperate.

The recovery took place at the same facility as before, and I even had the same nurse.

"I didn't think I'd ever see your pretty face again," she said, spooning applesauce into my half-open mouth. I swallowed it without thought. "You were so angry when you saw what he did. I was convinced you'd be a security risk."

"Do you know who I am?" I asked, my voice muffled because I couldn't completely open my mouth. My jaw was too swollen. "Or who I was."

She nodded. "I do," she said. "Some men came through here a couple of years ago. They were looking for you and the girl."

"What did you tell them?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I know better than to talk. Our clients expect a certain level of discretion."

"Thank you," I said.

She waved away the comment. "It was nothing," she said. "They were rude, anyway. The old man even threatened to kill one of my orderlies."

"W-wait," I said. "Old man? What did he look like?"

She went on to describe a man I was sure was dead. "What was his name?" I asked.

"Noah," she said. "Noah Eason. He made sure we all knew that."





It had been six months, but I was ready. Finally.

As I looked in the mirror, I was struck by how much I'd changed. Certainly, my breasts were bigger. And I'd gotten rid of the thing between my legs. I'd explored it more than a few times, and as far as

I could tell, it was indistinguishable from the real thing. Those changes were dramatic. But my face was slightly different as well. As unlikely as it might seem, I couldn't risk someone recognizing me as Kayla's cousin, Amelia. Not where I was going. Not with what I had planned.

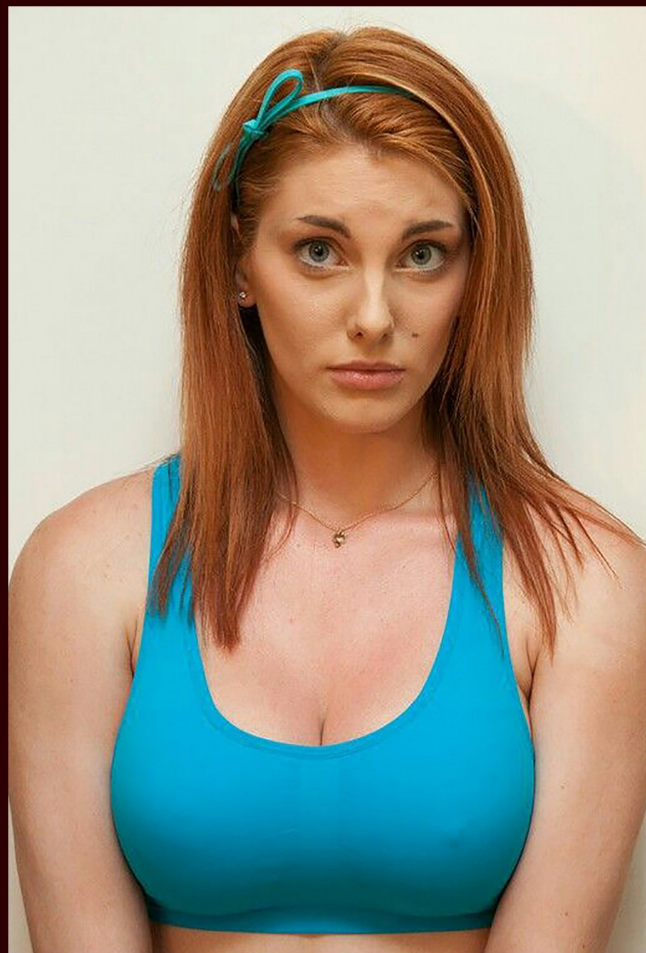
The plan was simple enough, though it had required an incredible sacrifice. I'd given up every last ounce of my masculinity, but I didn't regret it. Because I'd had Dr. Gaynor mold me into a Dominic's perfect woman. He wouldn't be able to resist me. I knew it as well as I'd ever known anything. And when I gained his trust, when I got close to him, I'd take my revenge.

And then I'd move on to his father, who should have already been dead.

I didn't know the details of his survival. Perhaps the bullet had missed his vital organs. Or maybe he was just a tough old bastard who wouldn't succumb to his injuries. I didn't know. And I didn't care. I would kill him as many times as it took to make him stay dead.

But first, I had to go back to Tampa. I would debase myself. I would humiliate myself. And I would do things I would hate. But I'd get what I wanted. I'd get what I needed. And in the end, I'd have my revenge.

Would Kayla approve? Maybe. Maybe not. I didn't care. I couldn't allow myself to think like that. She was a gentle person. She wouldn't have understood. But I did. I was a killer. And it was time I remembered that fact.



"Why do you want to work here?" asked Dirk Emerson, the manager of The Landing Strip, as he adjusted himself crudely. He wore a simple, white button-up shirt, which he left open at the chest so everyone could see the thicket of dark, curly hair sprouting from his chest. A prodigious belly lapped over his belt, partially obscuring his polyester pants. In short, he looked just as sleazy as one might expect the manager of a strip club to look.

But I couldn't let my disgust show. I needed the job if my plan was going to go smoothly. So, I said, "I need the money and I like the attention."

"Can you move?" he asked. "You look the part, but if you ain't got the rhythm...well, we run a high-class establishment here. Our patrons have a certain expectation."

"I can dance," I said. I'd spent much of the last month practicing vigorously in preparation for my new endeavor. I was confident that I could hold my own with any of the other girls who worked at The Landing Strip.

"You better not be lyin'," he said. "But if you are, you won't last anyway."

"I'm not lying," I insisted.

"Good," he said, repositioning himself in his chair. "Now take off your clothes."

"W-what? Here? Now?" I asked.

"I gotta see what you got, doll," he said. "Getting naked won't be an issue, right?"

I shook my head. It had to happen sooner or later. I was trying to become a stripper, after all. Eventually, that meant I'd have to take off my clothes.

Without another moment's hesitation, I stripped off my top.

"The bra too," Emerson said, mopping his sweaty face with a well-used cloth. I tried not to let disgust show on my face. I'd never liked the man. He was sloppy, rude, and treated the girls of The Landing Strip like they were his own personal harem. "And the panties. I gotta see what you're working with, babe."



I dragged my sports bra over my head, exposing my surgically-enhanced breasts. If I was honest, I preferred them the old way. They were more comfortable. And though they weren't huge, I thought they were perfectly attractive. But for my purposes, they needed to be bigger. Rounder.

That's what my prey expected, and that's what I would give him.

"Nice," said Emerson, standing up. Before I knew what he was doing, he'd reached out to grab me. "This is good work. Who did it?"

"A doctor in New Orleans," I said, enduring his molestation with as much stoicism as I could muster. Knowing the fat, lecherous man, I had expected it, but that didn't make it any easier to stomach.

He gave my breast a small slap, smiling as he watched it bounce. "Good," he said, reaching down below my waist. I bit my lip as his fingers probed my almost brand-new vagina. He withdrew, pausing only so long to sniff his fingers. "Very good."

"Do I have the job?" I asked.

"That depends," he said, unfastening his slacks. He had to move his overlapping belly to get at the button. He unzipped his pants and removed his short, stubby cock. It, too, was buried in a thicket of what I assumed was foul-smelling hair. "You know what to do."

I did, and though it disgusted me, I didn't hesitate before dropping to my knees. I gripped his cock, pumping it a couple of times. It grew faster than

I would've expected, and before long, it jutted from his groin like a flesh-colored rocket. I took a deep breath, leaned forward, and enveloped the thing with my mouth.

Going into the interview, I'd known it would be the price of being hired.

Emerson had bragged about getting blowjobs from his girls on enough occasions that I expected it. And I thought I was prepared. But as I bobbed my head up and down, trying not to gag, I realized that I wasn't.

God, I wasn't.

But I endured. I persevered. And in the end, the taste of his cum fresh on my tongue, I got the job.

I wanted to imagine that I was somewhere else. With my tits hanging out, with nothing concealing my pussy but a thin strip of purple cloth, and with some douchebag reaching for my chest, I wanted to think of anything else but my chosen profession. But I couldn't.

I hated being a stripper. No matter my rock-solid commitment to my goal, I couldn't stay in that mindset forever. That's not how the human mind works. So, unless I actively forced myself to think about my eventual revenge, I had little choice but to act like the stripper I was. And I hated it. The men. The dancing. The embarrassing nudity. It was demeaning and humiliating. But it was necessary.

Almost six months had passed since I'd started at The Landing Strip. And while I'd seen Dominic a couple of times, I had yet to catch his eye. He always seemed distracted. Disinterested. He was there, but he wasn't. Clearly, I'd have to force the issue, and as I looked across the club, seeing him sitting in his normal booth, I convinced myself that there was no time like the present.

I disengaged from the suddenly disappointed club patron who'd been grabbing my tits and made my way to the booth. When I got there, I said, "Can I get you anything, Mr. Eason?"

He looked up, and immediately, I saw the lust blossom in his eyes. He wanted me. "Monica, right?" he asked, citing my adopted name.

I nodded. "That's me," I said. "Can I do anything for you?"

He cocked a crooked smile. "I can think of a lot of things I'd like you to do," he said.

"I bet you can," was my response as I slid into the booth next to him. I felt a shiver run up my spine as I snuggled close, my hand caressing his manhood through his pants. "How about we get out of here, then? We can have some real fun."

"No," he said, surprising me. "Not like that. How about we do this right? I'll pick you up tomorrow at six."

"Oh...o-okay," I said. "Okay."





I had been living as a woman for almost four years, but I had never felt more girlish than when I was out with Dominic. In the club, I felt like an object, so it was easy to divorce myself from the reality of my gender. It was just a job. And at home, it was easy to think of my body as just a body. It didn't affect who I really was. But with a man like Dominic treating me like a princess? That drove it all home in a way that nothing else had.

"You seem a million miles away," he said, reaching out to take my hand. I gripped it. "What's wrong?"

It was a side of Dominic I'd never seen before. He was caring. Kind. Understanding. And though I knew it was an act – I'd seen his real face on enough occasions to know better than to be fooled by his mask – it was easy to lose myself in it. It was easy to believe that he wasn't as bad as I'd made him out to be.

But then I'd remember watching him gun down the woman I loved in broad daylight. I'd remember all the times I'd seen him do similar or worse to other people. Innocent people.

I wasn't any better, of course. I'd done the same, and on more occasions than I could easily count. But I wasn't interested in comparing our respective morality. I didn't care if I was evil. Or bad. Or immoral. I had a mission, and I was going to see it through.

"I'm fine," I said, letting him lead me along the sidewalk. "Just a little distracted is all."

"Is it Emerson?" he asked. "Did he make you do things?"

I shook my head, knowing better than to tattle on my boss. If I had, Dominic would kill him. And as satisfying as that might be, it wouldn't make my mission any easier.

"No," I said. "It's not that. I was just thinking of a friend who died a little over a year ago."

"How'd it happen?" he asked.

"She was caught in the crossfire of a shootout between gang rivals," I said.

"I'm sorry," he responded. "It's a terrible thing when civilians get caught up in that kind of thing."

"Yeah," I said. "It is. But let's not talk about that. We're on a date. Let's just have some fun."



"I've got something for you," Dominic said, holding a light green bag as he stood in the sliding glass doorway.

"A present?" I asked. "You shouldn't have."

"I wanted to," he said, stepping forward. "Six months deserves some recognition."

Six months. It had flown by, and I admit that I had gotten comfortable in my role. Dominic, for all his faults, knew exactly how to treat his woman. And as much as I hated to acknowledge it, I was almost happy with him. Certainly, those feelings never lasted. The knowledge of what he'd done was never far from my mind. But in an effort to sell the relationship, I let those emotions drive my actions. And they almost felt real.

He pulled a small, velvet colored box from the bag and opened it to reveal a silver pendant. Smoothly, he fastened it around my neck.

"It...it's beautiful," I said, looking down at it. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me for doing something I enjoy," he said. "I like spoiling you because it's exactly what you deserve."

I blushed slightly, but I ignored my embarrassment as I stepped forward. I wrapped my arms around his neck, looking up at him. "Oh, but I do want to thank you," I said. "Properly."

He grinned down at me. "I like the sound of that," he said before kissing me deeply, passionately. I lost myself in the feel of it as I felt the rumblings of desire deep in my mind. We'd had sex many, many times. I couldn't have seduced him so effectively without the promise of intimacy. I'd come to terms with that. But what I hadn't expected was to enjoy it so much.

Dominic was an attentive, generous lover. And the doctor had given me all the sexual capabilities of a real woman, including the ability to orgasm. And with Dominic, I almost always did. I suppose it should have been on great surprise that I had begun to look forward to our coupling.



"I don't like you," the Noah said.

"W-what?" I asked, trying not to launch myself at the old man. It was the first time I'd seen him since he'd tried to kill me almost five years before. I wanted to scratch his eyes out, but I maintained my composure.

"I said I don't like you," he repeated. "It's not personal. I'm certain you're a perfectly fine stripper. But you are just that - a fucking stripper. You're not good enough for him."

I looked back and forth, wishing Dominic was around to rescue me from the awkward situation. He wasn't, which left me to fend for myself.

"I'm not a dancer anymore," I said. I had quit my job at The Landing Strip soon after moving in with Dominic. "And I think he can judge for himself who's good enough for him. We love each other."

He barked a harsh laugh which turned into a wet cough. I'd learned that, after he'd been shot, he had been rushed to the hospital, where the doctors had saved his life. However, he hadn't escaped unscathed. The gunshots had done irreparable harm to his lung, and he still had trouble breathing from time to time.

Once he composed himself, he said, "You and I both know that that kid doesn't love anything. And I think you're the same way."

"You don't know me," I said, furrowing my brow.

"Keep telling yourself that," he said. "But we monsters recognize our own. You might not be a killer, but I can see the coldness in your eyes. I can recognize the calculation there. I can see the drive. And I respect that. I don't want you marrying into my family, but I do respect it."

I stared at him, wanting nothing more than to beat him to death. I knew that fantasy was pointless; one swing, and he'd turn the tables on me. But that reality didn't do anything to assuage my anger.

"Like I said," I stated calmly. "You don't know me. I'm nothing like you."

He shrugged. "Maybe not," he said. "I've been wrong before. But not often."



“Are you sure you want this?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t,” Dominic said, still holding the box aloft. I could barely even look at what was inside. It wasn’t just an engagement ring. Certainly, it was that. But it was so much more, especially to me. It was the turning port in my plan. The signal that it was almost over. But I couldn’t seem too eager.

“What about your dad?” I asked.

“What about him?” Dominic replied. “You’re not marrying him. You’re marrying me.”

“That’s a simplistic way of putting it,” I argued. “He hates me. He said so a few weeks ago at that party. He practically called me a gold-digging whore. Is that really the kind of girl you want to marry?”

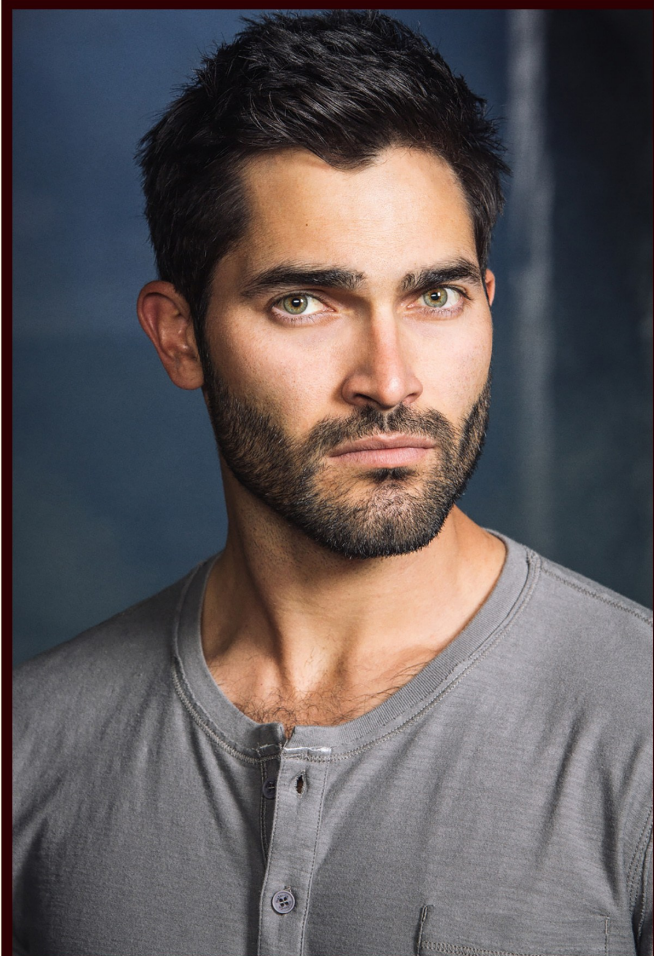
“Again, I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to marry you,” he said. “I just need to know if you want to marry me. Yes or no. That’s what I need to know.”

I took a deep breath. “Yes,” I said. “I’ll marry you.”

He grinned broadly. “That’s all I needed to hear,” he said, removing the ring from the box. He grabbed my hand, slipping the jewelry onto my finger.

It had all been so easy. Easier than I’d expected. I had fallen into the role without a backward glance, and I’d manipulated him into doing exactly what I wanted. And aside from his father’s hatred, there hadn’t been a single bump along the road.

Soon, I thought, admiring the ring, I’d have my revenge. So, so soon.



"What's wrong?" I asked. "You can tell me. You know that, don't you? We're together in this. I'm here for you."

He looked up. It wasn't difficult to recognize that one of my fiancée's moods had set in. He hadn't smiled in a few days, and no matter what I did to try to cheer him up, he was unresponsive to my efforts. And that wouldn't do. I wanted him happy. Blissful. I wanted him to feel what I'd felt. And then, I wanted to take it all away.

"You wouldn't understand," he said. "Nobody does."

"Try me," I countered. "I might understand more than you think."

He sighed, signaling that he'd abandoned his resistance. "Everybody acts like they know me," Dominic said. "But they don't. You know what I do. You know who I am. But that person...the criminal...the killer. That's not who I wanted to be."

I didn't say anything, so he continued, "I just wanted my dad to be proud of me. Is that so wrong? But he never was. No matter what I did, he was always so disappointed. That's why I didn't care what he thought of you because it had nothing to do with you. It was me. He would have hated anyone I fell in love with."

"You don't have to worry about what he thinks," I half-whispered, startled by Dominic's vulnerability. I'd never seen that side of him. "He's just an angry, old man."

"He almost died a few years back," Dominic said, ignoring my statement. "It was my fault, too. It was my best friend that did it. Or my girlfriend. I'm not really sure. But it was definitely my fault. And he's never let me forget it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"They were sleeping together," he explained. "My friend was fucking my girlfriend. They killed my uncle when he found out. My dad caught them, but they escaped. But Abel tried to murder him in cold blood. It's a miracle my dad survived."

"That's not your fault," I said.

"You don't understand," he said. "I vouched for both of them. That means that whatever they did is on me. And it's up to me to make it right. Abel, my friend - he's in the wind. He's gone. But I was forced to take care of Kayla. I had to kill the last woman I loved. And every time I look at you, I can't help but wonder if history is going to repeat itself."

"It won't," I said. "I won't ever betray you."



I leaned forward, bobbing my head back and forth on Dominic's cock. He gripped the back of my head, forcing it down my throat. I liked it. The rougher the better.

I wasn't born attracted to men. As much as I kept repeating that to myself, I couldn't deny that my sexuality had completely changed. I

barely thought of women in a sexual way; rather, they were contemporaries. I could acknowledge beauty. I could objectively see when a woman was sexy. But I didn't imagine doing anything about it. Men, on the other hand, were different.

Part of it, I think, was simply a side effect of me adopting a new identity. The woman I was pretending to be was straight, and so I had to be as well. And the lines between my adopted persona and my innermost thoughts had blurred to the point that I could hardly tell the difference anymore. And while that made it easier to live my life, such as it was, it also rendered my old identity nothing more than a hazy memory.

But it was more than that. When I was aroused, it wasn't just a mental state. It was, but it was more as well. It was physical.

Emotional. It was a combination of learned behavior, mental conditioning, and physical response. I liked being fucked. I enjoyed it, both emotionally and physically. And it felt more real than anything I'd ever felt with Kayla.

That, I think, was the scariest part. I could feel the memory of the man I'd once been slipping away. I'd long moved past being him. I knew I could never go back. I was resigned to my feminine fate. But increasingly, my time as Abel felt like a dream. Or like he was someone else.

Even as I sucked my fiancée's cock, I had to keep telling myself that I had a job to do. I forced myself to remember what he'd done. I made myself think of my task, my mission. But even with my vigilance driving my every thought, it was easy to forget.

"Give it to me," I moaned, spreading my legs as wide as I could as Dominic plunged deep inside of me. Each thrust elicited a tiny, high-pitched moan. I couldn't help but beg for more. For him to go harder. Faster. And he gave me what I wanted.

I loved the feel of it, sliding in and out of me. The orgasms were great, of course. Full body tsunamis of pleasure that left me feeling simultaneously exhausted, satisfied, and craving more. But even without them, I would've loved being fucked by Dominic.

But eventually, the orgasm did come. My entire body tensed as arcs of pleasure spread throughout my body, one after another as my pussy contracted, squeezing his cock for all it was worth. I screamed. He grunted. I squealed. I bit my lip. My toes curled. I came, and so did he, sending thick jets of semen deep into my pussy.

When he finally withdrew, I collapsed, limp and satisfied as his seed leaked out of me, dripping down my ass to collect on the sheets.

Suddenly, I was rocked with guilt. I didn't want to do what I'd come to do. I didn't even know if I could. I just wanted to live my life by Dominic's side. I didn't want anything to change.

And then, as suddenly as the guilt had come, it was overpowered by my quest for vengeance. He had killed Kayla. He had tried to kill me. He wasn't a good man. I didn't love him. I wasn't his real fiancée. Nothing about our relationship was real.

But it didn't feel that way.

I felt a tear fall down my cheek.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I lied. "Just happy, I guess. I'm happy. I love you."

He kissed me. "I love you too," he said. And I believed it.



We were married on a June Saturday – eighteen months, almost to the day from when we'd first met in The Landing Strip. It was a beautiful ceremony, and there were enough people present to hide the fact that I hadn't invited a single member of my family. When Dominic asked about it, I simply told the truth. I am an orphan, and I don't have family. He knew better than to press the issue.

"Mrs. Amelia Eason," I said, leaning topless against the railing. "It's got a nice ring to it."

Dominic grinned at me. "It does, doesn't it," he said, stepping close. He slipped his arm around my waist. "Sometimes, I still can't believe you're mine."

He kissed me deeply, and I practically melted in his arms. It was the sort of thing every girl wants to hear on the first day of her honeymoon.

But I wasn't a normal girl. And I didn't consider our marriage real. Or at least, I didn't want to. But what I wanted and what actually happened were two very different things. I might have set out to punish Dominic, but I couldn't deny that our relationship had affected me deeply. I didn't love him. I couldn't.

But maybe I didn't hate him as much as I once had.

An image of Kayla's dead body cropped up in my mind, accusing me of betrayal. And I felt it, too. I knew I owed her more than that. I couldn't let myself forget why I'd come so far. I needed to keep it at the forefront of my mind.

I pulled away. "I feel the same way," I cooed, my hand creeping down to his bare groin. I gripped his hard cock; it felt very familiar in my hand, and it fit perfectly. I kissed him. "Fuck me. Right here on the balcony for everyone to see."

"You are so bad," he said, spinning me around. He shoved his cock inside of me, and I moaned.

"You have no idea," I whispered as he fucked me. "You have no idea."



"I know what you are," Noah said, leaning over his desk. "And I know what you want."

My heart jumped into my throat. If Noah knew what I had planned, he would kill me without a moment's notice. He was a vicious man who didn't hesitate once he knew the proper course of action. But I wasn't afraid of death. I'd made peace with the prospect. And even though I had begun to enjoy parts of my life, I wasn't exactly keen to see it prolonged.

No - I wasn't worried about dying. I was worried about failing in my goal. If I died, if Noah killed me, there would be no one to enact my revenge. And I couldn't have that.

"What's that?" I asked with far more confidence than I felt.

"A gold digger," he spat. "Just like his last girl. I got rid of her, and I'll get rid of you, too."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"He never told you, did he?" Noah said, straightening his back. I shook my head, and he laughed. "Of course he didn't. He killed his last fiancée. And he loved her just as much as he claims to love you. But one little whisper in his ear, and he put her down. That's what I can do. That's who I am to him. You? You're just a piece of ass. Remember that."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"Because I'm going to give you a choice," he said, standing. He wasn't a tall man, but he could be imposing when he wanted to be. He reached down, unzipping his pants. He gripped his penis, pulling it from his pants. "Suck my cock."

"No," I said flatly.

"A slut like you wants it," he said. "I know you do. But more than that, you want to live, don't you? Here's the deal, slut. You do what I want when I want, and I'll let you stay with him. But if you refuse, you'll be dead within the month. Make a choice."

If I didn't have an ulterior motive, I might have slapped him. I might have refused and run to tell my new husband. But it was easier to simply give the man what he wanted. And in fact, it might just work in my favor. After all, I'd just learned that I had another target in my sights.

So, without a word, I rose from the chair, planted myself in front of him, and got on my knees.





“What’s wrong?” I asked, knowing the answer to my own question.

Even if I didn’t know the cause, I could have easily seen that Dominic was sick. He looked pale. His eyes were watery. And he clearly had a fever.

He sniffed loudly. “Just a cold or something,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

I knew he wouldn’t be. I’d spent the past month poisoning him. And soon, he’d pass the point of no return. Soon, his organs would start to shut down, and he’d have only hours left. And in those few hours, I would tell him everything. That was my plan for him.

Each day, when I put the poison in his morning coffee, I’d hesitated. I knew I would kill him. My need for revenge was too strong to be ignored. I’d come to terms with that. But he didn’t need to suffer, did he? He had been manipulated into killing Kayla. I knew that now. I could kill him quickly, and in his sleep. The goal would still be accomplished.

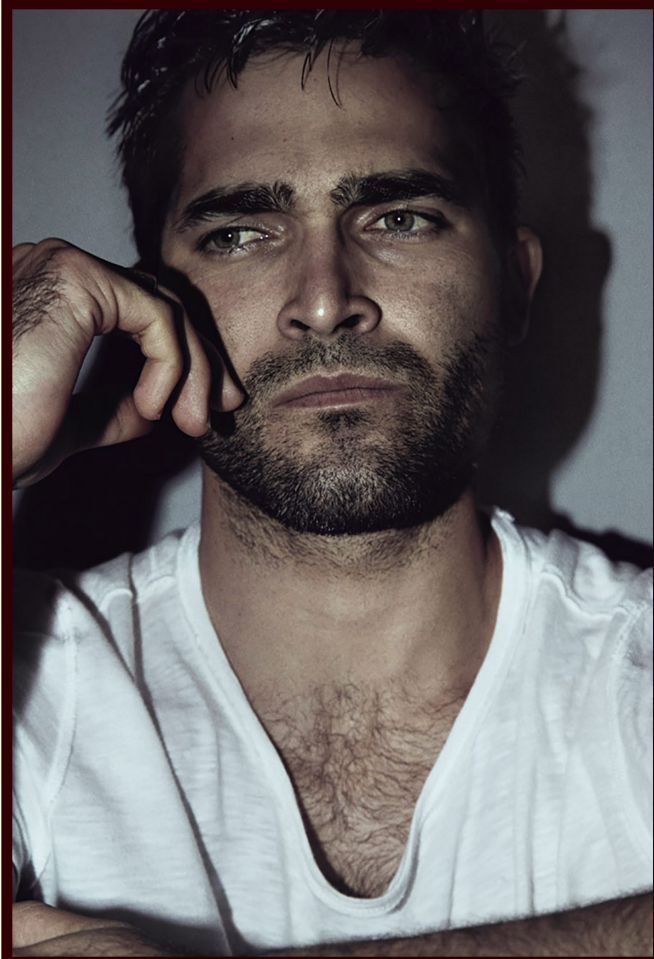
But I couldn’t. In the end, I needed him to suffer because, no matter who pushed him into it, he had still killed Kayla. He was still responsible for everything that had happened to me. To her. He deserved to feel that betrayal. He deserved to feel that pain.

“I’m sure you will be,” I said, handing him his coffee.

He sniffed it, breathing deeply. “Smells good,” he said. “This will definitely help my sore throat.”

I almost laughed. I almost cried. I hated myself for doing it. But I would have hated myself more if I was too weak to do what needed to be done.

“Probably,” I said, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. “I love you.”



"You're dying," I said, kneeling beside him. "I think you realize that now."

He had actually hung on for much longer than I had expected. He was a strong man. But with the doses I'd given him, no one could survive forever. It was simple biology.

He glanced over at me, his movements languid and without any sort of strength. "Did you do it?" he asked. I nodded. "Why?"

"You truly have no idea who I am, do you?" I asked. "It's not surprising. I've spent six figures changing my appearance. Admittedly, I'm not the man I once was."

"M-man?" he muttered.

"Man," I echoed. "Still, as much as I've changed, I half expected you to recognize your oldest friend."

After a moment of hesitation, his eyes widened. "Abel," he whispered.

"I'm glad you got there," I said.

"W-why?" he asked. "Why did you do it? Judah. My dad. Now me? Why?"

"That's complicated," I said. "But it all goes back to the night Iran. Your uncle tried to rape Kayla. I didn't let him. You and Noah were just caught in the crossfire."

"Were you sleeping with her?" he asked. "My dad said you were. I didn't believe him at first. Not until he showed me these texts you sent her. And even then..."

"I loved her," I said. "And she loved me."

He hung his head, and for a second, I thought he'd finally succumbed. However, he hung on for a few more seconds. "Promise you'll kill him," he said. "My dad. He deserves it at least as much as me."

I reached out, placing my hand on his ice-cold neck. "I promise," I said before watching my oldest friend die.

As I lay back on the bed, I kept telling myself that it was just another day. Certainly, my husband had just died, but I couldn't allow myself to lose focus. I was a grieving widow. I wasn't supposed to be a murderer.

But I was. The look on his face kept running through my mind. He hadn't felt betrayed. He wasn't angry. And he didn't plead for his own survival. He'd simply accepted his death.

"It's okay to cry," said Lena, one of the few people I might have considered anything close to a friend. We'd met at The Landing Strip where we'd both worked, and I hadn't immediately hated her. So, she had become the closest thing to a confidant I'd had since Kayla. Still, she didn't know me. No one did. She saw what I wanted her to see.

"What?" I asked, turning my head to see her standing in the doorway. I wanted to ignore her.

"I know you must be hurting," she said. "It's okay to let it show."

"I know," I insisted.

"You just lost the man you loved," she said. "You need to talk about it. You need to cry. You need to -"

"What the fuck do you want me to say, Lena?" I asked, staring at the ceiling. "That he was gone too young? That last night, I had to get a pillow to hug while I tried to go to sleep? That I want to hear him tell me that he loves me, just one last time? It's pointless. I can't...I can't change...I can't change anything."

I wiped the tears from my eyes. As much as I was ashamed to admit, they were real. I truly was sad. And angry. "I can't change anything," I said. "And crying isn't going to help. He's gone, and there's nothing I can do about it."





I have needs, and as uncomfortable as I initially was with meeting them, I became used to sexual satisfaction during my time with Dominic. And I saw no reason to deny myself. So, in the wake of his death, I took more than a few lovers.

I think part of my newfound promiscuity stemmed from a need to distract myself from what I'd done. When I was having sex, I wasn't thinking about the fact that I'd killed a man who loved me. I'd abandoned the idea that he was incapable of love. I had seen his eyes. I had seen the way he treated me. I knew that he was in love with me. And I'd killed him. Most of the time, I couldn't escape that fact. But when I was with one of my many lovers, I didn't have to think about how horrible of a person I had always been.

Killing shouldn't have been difficult for me. And the act itself wasn't. Not really. But the aftermath? That was the hardest thing I'd ever experienced, and I needed the distraction sex provided.

But I knew I couldn't keep going. I knew that, soon, I'd have to move forward with the next part of my plan. Not only did I owe it to Kayla, but I owed Dominic, too. I needed to kill Noah. He had to pay for his actions, and I was the only person equipped to make that happen. I was convinced that it was my destiny.

But in the meantime, I just wanted to drown my very real sorrow in carnal release. And I did. Over and over again for over a month. I didn't want to think about who I'd once been. I didn't want to think about Kayla or Dominic or the hundred other reminders that I wasn't just a stripper named Amelia. I just wanted, more than anything, to be the person I'd long pretended to be.

But I wasn't. And I never would be. Eventually, I realized that. Eventually, I got back on track.

"You turned it down?" asked Lena.

"I wasn't with him so I could get his money," I said, sorting through my belongings. I'd just moved out of the condo I'd shared with Dominic and back into my old apartment. And I'd gone back to work at The Landing Strip. "I don't want his money."

"But you were his wife," she said. "That was your money."

"I didn't want it," I said. "I don't need it."

"I couldn't have turned it down," Lena said, unwrapping a lamp. She placed it on a nearby nightstand. "I'd have taken it and moved to Cancun or something. I'd be sitting on a beach drinking umbrella drinks."

"That's the difference between me and you," I said. If I hadn't had other plans, I might have done just what Lena described. But I couldn't get to Noah from Cancun. I needed to be front and center. I needed to get close to him. I needed him to trust me.

She shook her head. "I don't get you," she said. "Most strippers are all about the money. We need it. That's why we do what we do. But you? With you, it's almost an afterthought."

"Money isn't everything," I said.

"If you tell me money can't buy happiness, I'm going to slap you," she said. "Because it's really hard to be happy if you're homeless. Or if you don't know where your next meal's coming from."

"I know," I said. "I grew up on the streets. I know what it's like to be hungry."

"Then why did you turn down his money?" she asked. "It was yours. You were his wife."

"Because it makes me think of him," I admitted.





I smiled, but it was all I could do not to vomit as I looked at Noah, lying naked on the bed. His stocky, squat body wasn't appealing to look at. Nor was he gentle. Loving. Caring. He looked at me as a means to an end. I was a walking orgasm. Nothing more.

"Were you ever married?" I asked, looking back at him.

"I don't see how that's any of your business," he said. "But yes."

We'd been sleeping together, off and on, for months, but he still didn't trust me. I was beginning to think he never would. He wasn't really my type. But I was convinced that if I could just get him talking that he'd open up, that he'd show his soft, vulnerable underbelly.

"What was her name?" I asked.

"Why so interested?" was his responding question.

I turned, putting my own naked body on full display. He liked that, the idea of a woman without a hint of modesty. That's why he liked strippers.

"Because I am," I said, walking toward him. I could see his cock stirring. Even only minutes after we'd finished having sex, he was ready to go again. No doubt, he required some medication to achieve that sort of stamina.

"What was her name? Tell me about her."

He sighed, turning to lie on his back. I climbed atop him, feeling his cock slip into my pussy. I bucked my hips. "Tell me," I cooed.

"She was...she was Mexican," he said. "I was young. Stupid. I got her pregnant. She kept it. So, I married her."

"Is that it?" I asked, still riding him. "No love?"

"Love is for fairy tales," he said, gripping my hips. He twisted, pushing me onto my back. I spread my legs wide as he said, "No more talk."

And then he fucked me again. I endured, trying to pretend it was someone else.



"What are we doing?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Noah answered.

"I mean to ask what this is," I said. "I know you don't love me or anything. I don't love you either. But you like fucking me. So, what is it?"

"It is what it is," he said. "You said it yourself. It's just fucking."

"But do you ever want more?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Why? Do you? I was under the impression that you were content with our arrangement, such as it is. You've never complained."

"And I won't," I said. "I know who you are. I know what you do. You're the last person I want to piss off."

"Just say what you want to say," the old man said. "Quit beating around the bush. Stop trying to drop hints. Just tell me what you want."

"I want to move in with you," I said.

"What?" he asked.

I repeated the statement, adding, "I'm late on my rent. I don't want to move into somewhere cheaper. And I don't care if this makes me a whore. You like fucking me. I like living in a nice house. It's a win-win."

"Win-win," echoed Noah. "You might have a point."

He buried his face in my pussy, eagerly licking my slit. I don't know why, but it struck me as incredibly odd that a man as powerful as Noah enjoyed eating my pussy so much. But I wasn't going to complain. With him behind me, it was so much easier to pretend that he was someone – anyone – else.

I was on the verge of orgasm when he suddenly stopped. I looked back, asking, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, spitting on my ass. Before I knew it, he'd slipped a finger into my virgin hole. I wanted to pull away, to scream at him that that was off-limits. But I didn't. I was committed to giving him exactly what he wanted, lest he end our arrangement. As he fingered my asshole, he asked, "You're a virgin back here, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said.

"Good," was his response. "This is going to hurt."

And then he pushed his cock inside of me. I let out an anguished scream as it felt like it was ripping me in two. "Oh, God!" I cried.

"I'm your God," he said.

I whimpered, burying my face in the pillow as he thrust himself in and out of my tight ass. I hated it as much as I'd expected to. Even without the pain, it just felt wrong. Not like when he fucked my pussy; that was normal. Natural. But my ass? That just wasn't right.

But even if I wanted to stop him, I couldn't have. And I didn't. I took it, the pain sending tears cascading down my cheeks. That was the point, I think. He wanted to hurt me. He wanted to feel the tremble as I wept. And I didn't disappoint.

It served another purpose, though. It reminded me how sadistic he could be. When it came time for him to pay his price, I wouldn't feel conflicted. I wouldn't feel guilty. I would do the deed without an ounce of regret because I knew in my heart that he deserved any punishment I could mete out.





"You can clean yourself up now," Noah said, fastening his pants. I could feel his semen dripping down my chest. I could still taste his cock. He slipped his shirt on. "I'll be back tomorrow."

I didn't move. "I'll miss you," I said.

He laughed. "No, you won't," he said. "I know you don't like me. You might even hate me. But you know where your bread's buttered. I've known women like you before. You attach yourself to a powerful man. You don't care what he does. You don't care how he treats you. You just want to be taken care of. I can appreciate that sort of practicality. But don't for a second think I don't know what you are."

I shrugged. "Think what you want, baby," I said, mimicking the tone I'd heard so many of my colleagues at The Landing Strip use. "If you want me to be a whore, I will be."

He laughed again. "You are what you are," he said, buttoning up his shirt. "And nothing I can say or do will change that."

When he was dressed, he left without another word, and I finally let myself relax. It had been all I could do not to bite his cock off mid-blowjob. As soon as he'd figured out how much I hated anal sex, it was all he wanted to do. He reveled in it, in causing me pain. And it made me hate him all the more.

The day was coming when I would have my revenge. It wasn't enough just to kill him. I could have done that a hundred times over. But I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to lose. And when he had nothing else to lose, I wanted him to die knowing that I had taken everything from him.

Thoughts of my revenge kept me going. It kept me sane. And ultimately, it hardened my resolve. I would endure anything I needed to endure to get my revenge.



"I wish I understood you," said Lena.

"Me too," I muttered. If she did, I'd have someone to talk to about my plans. But as it stood, I couldn't tell anyone that I'd used my living situation to give me access to enough incriminating evidence to bring Noah and his entire organization down. I'd found detailed files concerning their every interest, from racketeering to arms deals to drugs and so, so much more. And I'd forward them all to the proper authorities. Anonymously, of course. I fully expected the cops to come down on Eason in the very near future.

But I couldn't tell Lena. She wouldn't understand. She couldn't. She was just a dumb bimbo.

"I can't believe you're actually fucking that old man, though," she said. "Of all the guys -"

"I don't want to talk about my sex life, Lena," I said, interrupting her. "In fact, I don't want to talk at all. I just want to be alone."

"W-what? Did I do something wrong?" she asked. "I thought -"

"I said to leave me the fuck alone," I hissed. "Can't you take a hint? We're not friends. I don't even like you. Just leave me be."

"You don't...you don't mean that," she said. "We've been friends for years. You're just -"

"I'm not grieving," I said. "I'm not angry. I'm just tired, Lena. I'm tired of pretending I care about you. I'm tired of acting like I want you around. I don't. I just want you to go. Now. Please, before I'm forced to do something I'll regret, go."

"Fine," she said, already crying. Had she truly thought we were friends? In the entire time I'd known her, we hadn't bonded. She was just around. An acquaintance who wouldn't leave. "But don't expect me to come running the next time you want to -"

"Just go," I said. "Just fucking go."

"I'm going to figure out who did this," said Noah. I could practically hear his teeth grinding together in frustration. "I want to find the rat bastard who talked to the cops."

Noah's lawyer, Heath Drake, shook his head. "They've been on you for years, Noah," he said. "I'd be very surprised if this was just one person. It's probably a dozen people. Maybe more."

"That's not possible," the old man said. "My men are loyal."

"Maybe they aren't as loyal as you think," suggested Drake. "You might want to start preparing for the fact that your business is -"

"I can run the business from somewhere outside of the country," Noah said.

"No," Drake said. "You can't."

Noah slapped his hand on the desk. "You don't tell me what I can and can't do, boy!" he screamed. He wheeled on me. "And what the fuck are you doing skulking about? Don't you have some dicks to suck?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt," I said, backing out. I knew he could never conceive of me being smart enough to betray him. To him, I was a piece of meat. An object. I wasn't worth his attention, except when he was horny.

If he'd thought about it rationally, I was the obvious culprit. I had access. I wasn't loyal. And he didn't know me. Not really. But he was incapable of considering me a threat. It was the perfect camouflage.

I walked down the hall, secure in the knowledge that soon, Noah's criminal empire would collapse. Even if he somehow dodged the charges, the investigation would make him an underworld pariah. No one would do business with him or his lackeys. They couldn't be trusted.

I smiled, knowing that I only had to wait for the next phase of my plan to being.



"Why were you outside my office earlier?" Noah demanded, his barrel-like chest thrust out. He might have intimidated some people, but I wasn't afraid of him. I had nothing to lose. If he hit me, hurt me, or even killed me, it wasn't a big loss. "What were you doing?"

"I wanted to see if you wanted to fuck me before I went into work today," I lied, continuing to casually powder my face. "But you probably have other things on your mind."

"What did you hear?" he asked.

"Everything," I said. "Someone's been talking to the police, right?"

"Yeah," he said, running his hand through his hair. "They have."

"If I heard something at work, would you want to know?" I asked.

"At The Landing Strip?" he said. "What did you hear?"

"Not much," I answered. He gripped my arm. "Honestly, it wasn't much. I didn't think anything of it, but one of your guys - I think his name was Roland. Or Ronald. He was talking about taking over. I thought it was just him bragging. A lot of your guys do that. But I overheard him talking about giving some files to someone. I knew I wasn't supposed to -"

"You heard him talking about files?" he asked, his eyes wild with suspicion. I nodded. "Fuck!" he screamed. "Fuck. It was him. I knew it. I fucking knew it!"

It was all a lie, of course. But I knew the mere mention of disloyalty amongst his people would send Noah into a rage. He'd kill anyone associated with Roland, one of his lieutenants, without asking a single question. That, in turn, would further destabilize his business. Soon, he would be ready to be put out of his misery. Soon, I'd have my revenge.



“What’s wrong?” I asked, looking back at Noah as he furiously yanked on his still-soft cock. I glanced down at the flaccid thing with a knowing smirk. “Not in the mood?”

He grunted some unintelligible reply before releasing his manhood. Reaching for his fly, he zipped it up. “No,” he said. “I’m not. Maybe it’s because your ass is getting too fat.”

“Maybe,” I said, gripping it. I pulled one cheek up, then released it. It jiggled pleasantly. “Maybe not.”

“I’m going down to the docks,” he said, ignoring my insolence. “I’ve got some business.”

“What kind of business?” I asked.

“The kind that a slut like you wouldn’t understand,” he barked. “I’ll be back later.”

I knew it was a lie. His business, such as it was, had all but disappeared. He’d been arrested, arraigned, and he was out on bail. He couldn’t leave the city without incurring a country-wide manhunt. In short, his entire life had fallen apart in the space of a few weeks. And I was the author of its destruction. It gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling deep in my stomach.

But even that paled in comparison to the knowledge that he was at least as frustrated with his inability to get an erection. I’d done that too, switching his little blue pills with placebos.

I sat up. It was time. I knew it. I could do little else to ruin his life, and if I waited too long, he was going to do something stupid – like try to escape. I couldn’t let that happen. I had to make my move soon.

Tomorrow, I thought. One more day, and it would all be over. One more day, and Kayla would finally be avenged. I’d already waited six years. What was one more day?



The day had come, and I admit that, as I spiked his scotch with enough poison to kill a rhino – slowly and painfully, of course – I was nervous. But I was also determined. If anything went wrong, I was prepared to scratch, to claw, to do whatever it took to bring him down. I was ready to die. A part of me wanted it, I think.

But that didn't happen. In fact, it couldn't have been easier. No scares. No last-second detours. I just poured the poison into the bottle, and I settled down to wait for him to get home.

With Dominic, there had been an element of guilt. I didn't feel bad about what I'd done, but I did regret the necessity of it all. I think I did love him, at least in a roundabout sort of way. Before my transformation, we had been friends. Partners. And after, we'd been lovers. We had been a couple. Husband and wife. I had committed to that role wholeheartedly, and I bore the scars of killing my husband.

But with Noah, it was different. He was an evil man who had spent his life hurting people. Killing people. He enjoyed causing pain, emotional and physical alike. I knew that firsthand. He was a monster. I was sure of that. Killing him was as much a public service as a personal vendetta. I was at peace with my actions.

He came home – presumably from the docks, where he'd been struggling to salvage what he could of his business – in an angry mood. I could see it in the way he walked, the way he held his shoulders. I knew him that well. He wore a green shirt and red suspenders and didn't look nearly as in control as he would have liked. He practically collapsed onto the couch, exhausted.

Topless and wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy, purple panties, I stood before him, glass in hand. I handed him the glass of scotch, which he downed in without a word. I poured another, which he promptly drank. I knew his fate was sealed. In a few minutes – maybe as much as an hour – he'd be dead.

I smiled. "I think we need to talk," I said.





He coughed, doubling over in pain. And I smiled. "Is something wrong?" I asked, my hand on his shoulder. "Do you not feel well?"

"W-what did you...what did you do?" he croaked.

"You're kind of slow, aren't you?" I said. "But you got there eventually. I poisoned you."

He coughed again, splattering blood on the floor. "W-why?" he asked, looking up at me. I could tell he was in enormous pain. As it should be. A man like him didn't deserve to die a painless death.

I laughed. "I had this big speech prepared," I said. "I was going to tell you how it all happened. I was going to talk about how I killed your brother, about how I killed your son. I was going to talk about how I ruined your business.

But it all seems pointless, now. If you haven't figured it out yet, I'm Abel Kent. I'm the man who's killed everyone you ever cared about. I'm the one who took everything from you. And now, I'm the man who's killed you."

He didn't respond. That wasn't his way. Instead, he lunged at me, his movements languid. The poison had robbed him of whatever strength still remained in his body, and he ended up falling to the floor. I stood over him, laughing as he crawled away.

"You can't do anything, Noah," I said as he made his way into the kitchen. I followed. "You can't win."

I was actually surprised when he managed to drag himself to his feet. He was stronger than I'd expected. He clumsily grabbed a kitchen knife; he could barely even move his fingers.

"I'm going to kill you," he growled, his voice distorted by the blood filling his lungs.

"No," I said calmly as I stood in the doorway. "You're not. You're going to die right there."

And a moment later, he did, collapsing. The knife clattered to the floor, and then, silence. I had finally done it.

At last, I was finished.



The aftermath of Noah's death was hectic. But what surprised me the most was that nobody really seemed to care all that much about him. In his quest to find the leak, he had alienated just about every single one of his men, and they weren't eager to seek revenge. Most were more worried about carving up his territory. And I was perfectly willing to let them do just that.

So, after stealing Noah's emergency fund - a half-dozen gold bricks he kept in a safe in his basement - I went on my way. No one even thought to stop the former stripper Noah had been fucking. Like the old man himself, they didn't think I was worth noticing. I used that to my advantage.

"You're not even sad, are you?" asked Lena. No matter what I did, I couldn't seem to shake the girl. She must have been a glutton for punishment. Or maybe she was just lonely. Maybe she just needed a friend, and I was the only one who fit the bill. But even after I'd said what I said, she had come back.

"No," I said. "I didn't even like him. There's nothing to be sad about."

"But you've lost a husband and a lover in the space of six months," she said. "That must affect you in some way."

I shook my head. "If you think that, you don't know me at all," I said. It was one of the more truthful things I'd ever said to the exotic dancer.

And then I saw it. The gears turning in her head, clicking together at just the right moment. I saw recognition dawn, and she said, "It was you. You did it. You killed them both."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said with the slightest smile. "But if I were you, I wouldn't pull on that thread. Because if there is someone responsible for the deaths of two of the most powerful people in the city, you probably don't want to mess with her."

"I...I don't..."

"Leave it alone, Lena," I said. "If you know what's good for you, leave it alone."

"W-who are you?" she asked after a long moment.

I smiled. "Just leave it alone," I repeated.



I wish I could say that, after accomplishing my goal, I figured it all out. I didn't. I was rich enough that I didn't have to work. But I did. I kept going back to The Landing Strip, night after night, because I just didn't know what else to do.

Moreover, I didn't have anyone to do it with.

There are times when I wish I'd never intervened. I could have simply ignored what Judah had done to Kayla. And in the end, everyone would have been better off. She would have been damaged, certainly, but she'd have been alive. Dominic would have lived. And I would've still been a man. I would have still been with the woman I loved so deeply.

But that was never an option. I couldn't have done it. I couldn't have looked the other way. I'm just not built that way.

In any case, what's done is done, and I don't know that I could go back to being a man, even if I wanted to. I've moved past that. I've changed. Evolved. I've gotten used to being a woman.

Sometimes, I wonder what my life has in store. I'm not even thirty yet. I have my entire life ahead of me. But I've been through so much. I'm so very damaged. I don't know if anyone can love me - not after the things I've done.

But I did what I set out to do. That has to mean something, right? Getting my revenge has to count for something, doesn't it?

I just wish I knew what to do next.