

# HIS ONLY DESIRE #1

STOLEN HEARTS

JAS P. DANE



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine P. Dane pens dark & smutty contemporary mafia romance & erotic horror with dangerous MMCs and the objects of their obsession. *For upcoming works & exclusive pre-release content:*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*His Only Desire* is a dark mafia romance.

**Trigger warnings** include stalking, dubious consent, bondage, captivity, graphic sexual content, gore, murder, gun and knife violence, and knife play.



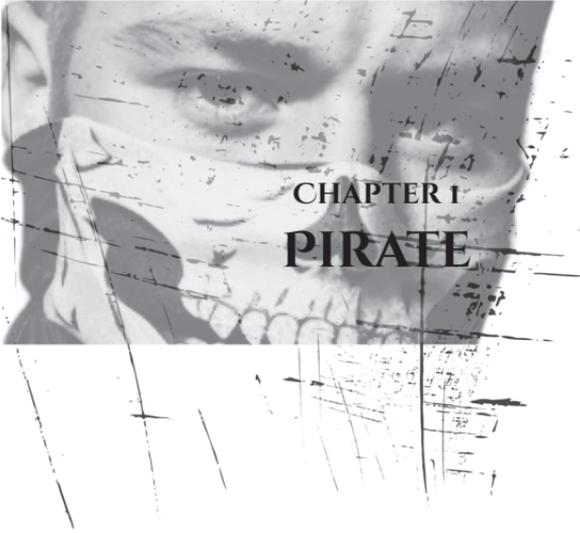


# PLAYLIST



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## CHAPTER 1 PIRATE

PINK TOOLS. Everything is labeled. There is a hint of vanilla scent in the air—no gas odor from the lawn mower that she never uses. A lawn maintenance crew comes twice per month. She isn't filthy rich, but she's doing pretty well for herself. Being a legal secretary for the mob pays well. She doesn't think of it that way. No, she's just a regular person working for a legitimate firm while finishing her law degree. Hard-working. Innocent. Squeaky clean. On the outside.

But I know a dirty little secret about Cherry Coleson, so I don't feel so bad about sullyng her prissy, tidy shed. Its location is convenient. I needed to quickly get my latest target out of the trunk of my Aston Martin and into a private space.

It's a lucky coincidence that Cherry, who goes by Cher, is Dipshit's ex-girlfriend, and she happens to live near a popular body dumping ground. She is the next target on my list.

So I figure I can keep things efficient and interrogate or

kill Dipshit—probably both—while I'm waiting for her to get home from work.

"I don't fucking know anything!" he pleads, muffled through the fabric, as I pull a blackjack from my leather jacket. Mm, this one's a solid beauty. Vintage hand-stitched brown leather, leather strap, about eleven inches long, and densely filled with lead shot. Police don't use them anymore.

Tapping the heavy rod against my palm, I admire the weight of it--*damn*. "I call this the 'bone breaker.'"

He grimaces, shaking his head. "Look, *man*. I told you—  
"I'm only going to ask once before I *strike*."

His panicked eyes flit around the room for an escape. He would much rather run than answer my question. The truth is painful to admit. But I've offered him the motivation of pain to outmeasure that. My cold blue eyes lock on him, and I speak in a low, firm tone.

"Where did you hide the money you stole?"

He hesitates, mouth twitching. I can tell he's racking his brain for a lie, a way out of this. But he's reached a dead end with me. I'm a one-way street to hell.

I raise the blackjack, and his small, dark eyes twirl. "I truly don't—"

"You *do*."

He's a liar by trade. It's my job to collect intel on targets. Often, that's done remotely. But sometimes, intel gathering gets physical. Deadly.

"I-I *swear* you've got the wrong guy, I'm—"

"A lying. Fucking. Shit!" I snap, raising the blackjack before swiftly striking down against his ankle. The bone makes a slight cracking sound, and he wails like he's dying as I let the blackjack slip to the concrete. I was going easy. It's a

minor break that will heal in six to eight weeks. I typically go for the ribs or fingers when interrogating, but I will need him to use his hands in a moment, and I want to keep him from running when I make him walk the cobblestone path leading inside Cher's trendy cottage with hardwood floors and painted brick. *Honey, I'm home.* The thought makes me smirk.

He cries like a baby, and it gets under my skin.

"You know what I hate about you, Dipshit? You're not just a skeezy liar. You're a pathetic fucking pervert."

Sometimes, after he leaves his law office, he likes to put on a hoodie and hang out at the arcade, hitting on underage girls and exchanging digits before meeting up at shady motels. Two of whom have gone missing. The HO doesn't care about that part, but I do. I'm going to find out where he hid them.

I step closer, bending down with my mouth to his ear. He reeks of alcohol and expensive cologne. "Last chance," I whisper, and a row of goosebumps forms along his skinny neck.

"B-bank, my fuckin' bank," he whines.

"Thought you'd say that."

I look up to the sound of a car pulling in. Going to the window, I recognize the white Volvo—*damn*. I've been watching her for weeks, enough to know she's home early tonight.

I untie his hands, not worried about him trying to fight or run since his leg is broken and his feet are bound. Pulling a laptop from my black bag, I unlock it before placing it into his lap.

"See that desktop note. That's the routing number where you will send the money you stole. Log in to your bank."

He nods, immediately getting to work as I look over his shoulder.

"Shit, I-uh...don't have my banking password memorized. I...can access it on my phone. In my pocket."

"Pull it out. Make one attempt at a call or text; I'll break your other leg."

He does as told, clicking on his banking app, logging in, and routing the money back to Sev Peters, the man he stole it from. Not just any man, but an associate of the H.O., aka Hellfire Organization. Named after the biker club the founder belonged to before his operation went corporate.

I fasten the cuffs around his wrists. "It's time to deal with your ex-girlfriend. Damn, your ankle is swelling like a balloon, son! If you leave here alive, you probably should have that looked at. Now *get up!*"

He hobbles to a standing position, and I grab him by the shoulder, hauling him out into the yard. We slip through the house's back door in less than a minute, and I lock the door behind us.

"This isn't my house," he whines, and I press him against the wall.

"Lower your voice, or she'll hear."

Confusion spreads over his pale face. He's getting paler by the minute. "How do you know...?" he trails off.

"It's her turn to talk, Dipshit," I explain. "If she plays nice, I might let her decide your fate once you confess where you put the missing girls. Now walk."

We pass through a mudroom, the kitchen, and the hallway. Cher's heels click over polished wood flooring from within the house as I push him down on a sofa in the sitting room.

"Call out her name," I order, standing out of sight. Her heels stop, and she gasps. "*Jason?* What the *hell...*"

I nod at him from behind a cabinet near the room's entry.

"Yes, it's me," his voice cracks.

Her hands shoot to her mouth upon seeing him bound on her sofa with a visibly swollen ankle.

*Goddamn.* Cher is even prettier up close. She has big, light brown eyes, an oval face, and wavy chestnut hair, and she's fucking curvy as hell. There is nothing skinny about this woman. No, she is deliciously thick in that floral dress that hits just above the knees. Even her ankles are sexy.

Before she knows what's hit her, I've got one arm around her waist and a hand around her mouth, tightening my grip over muffled screams. I force her across the room toward our reflections in the wall mirror. She tries to fight as I clutch tighter, my tattooed, muscled arm fully encompassing the curve of her waist, and pressing her white silk blouse tight over ample tits, hardened nipples visible. My cock smashes against her plump ass, my jeans getting tighter as my beast hardens at the ready. *Calm the fuck down, boy.*

I enjoy studying her flushed face in the mirror, the fear in her pretty brown eyes meeting my stern, ice-blue gaze. I want to believe she is innocent. But that's just my body talking. Hell, I wasn't expecting to be turned on by my next target while spending more time than is necessary stalking her. I could have been home or on the open road, enjoying my bike. But watching her through her windows at night became a new favorite hobby, and it took resistance not to turn that hobby into a sweat-inducing sport. I wanted to sneak inside. Take her in the pitch black on a moonless night. Muffle her screams while I fuck her.

It's not like she didn't know she was being watched. She'd made a bouquet in a vase on her dresser from the

pink roses I left on her windowsill. She started opening her blinds more, glancing toward the window as she undressed by lamplight. She liked being watched, and it turned me on even more. Like a juicy plum fallen from the tree before me, I wanted to pluck her between my hands and sink my teeth in.

But I resisted.

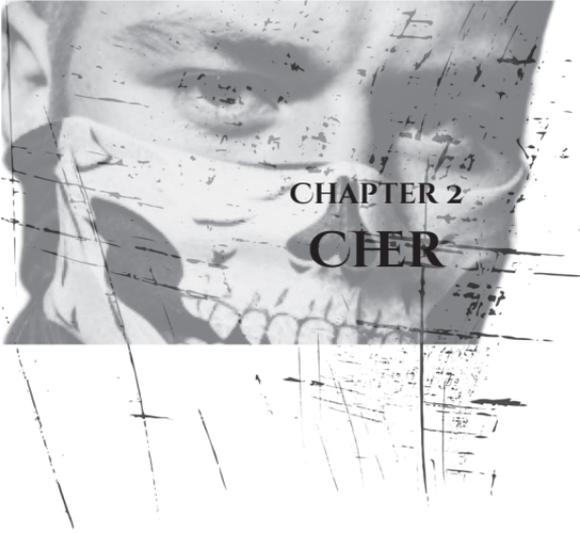
She whimpers as I pull cuffs from my pocket, and the simple act of clasping her wrists only makes my dick harder. *Fuck*. This is going to be more difficult than I imagined.

Pushing her into the chair, I resolve to focus on what I'm here for. This is bigger than me. My job is to get answers and decide who gets to live before the HO gets impatient, sends in the kill squad, and burns the place down. I don't get paid as much when that happens.

I step closer, lifting her chin as I look down at her. "Hello, Cher," I say, my deep voice steady and laced with the satisfaction I get from looking at her. She responds by crying, her full lips quivering in a way that makes me want to bite and suck them.

She yanks her chin from my hand, brows pinching in defiance. "Don't touch me!"

"You don't mean that," I smirk. She has no idea who I am or what I'm here for. But she sure as hell is about to find out.



## CHAPTER 2

# CHER

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?" I snap, ignoring the way my body reacted when he was gloving me from behind like an animal. The man's body is made of muscle, and that hard bulge between his legs pressed against my ass sent shock waves crashing through me.

"They call me Pirate," says the statuesque man commanding my living room like a one-person SWAT team. He's nearly as tall as the seven-foot ceiling, and his shoulders are like cannonballs.

"I gave you what you want," pleads Jason from the sofa. Ah, so *he's* the reason for this! I glare at the bastard. No matter how hard I've tried to avoid his trouble, it still comes back to bite me.

"What'd you do this time?" I snipe.

Pirate smirks, his hard blue eyes twinkling. "I'll ask you the same question, Cher," he says, dumbfounding me.

I blink, momentarily tongue-tied under the pressure of Pirate's penetrating gaze. Since when do psychopaths have a gorgeous face like his? He looks like the militant version of a male runway model.

I clear my throat, getting the nerve to speak. "Why am I being dragged into this?"

He lifts a black leather duffel bag onto the coffee table, sorting through it. I crane my neck, trying to see what it's full of. Tools? Weapons? *Oh, shit. Is this happening?*

"Good question, Cher."

"Is it?" My voice cracks as desperation pits in my gut.

He nods. "You have a habit of working with shady lawyers."

I shake my head, confused. "What?"

"But you're only one bar exam away from becoming a lawyer yourself."

*How does he...*

"Do we...know each other? Pirate."

"So why screw that up, love?" he continues. "You've been studying your ass off every night."

My mouth drops, and my heart skips a beat. "How do you--"

He smirks, shaking his head like I'm a naughty child.

"Yes. I've been watching you. But you already knew that."

"What?" Utterly baffled, I watch silently as he pulls a strange tool or weapon from his bag.

"I'm *sorry*," cries Jason, but I can tell by his tone that he isn't apologizing to *me* for dragging me into this or for all the insane shit he put me through last year. No, he's begging for his life! Perhaps I should feel guilty for not having more sympathy for him. But this is the ultra-jealous man who "accidentally" ran my college guy friend off the road and killed him! It's hard to believe that it wasn't on purpose, given that Jason is so possessive. He didn't like it when I talked to the mailman or elderly neighbor, or wore a two-piece bikini to the pool. The irony,

of course, is that Jason is a male-slut who cheated on me constantly.

"Why am I guilty by association here?" I ask the towering man with the foreign object in his big hand. "I mean, can't you just...take Jason elsewhere?"

The incredulous look on Jason's face! He can't believe I would throw him under the bus like that. But this whole thing is so shockingly crazy that his reaction almost makes me laugh. A mad sort of laughter fizzes inside me, but I suppress the feeling.

"*You* are part of this, Cher," Pirate says firmly as if reading my thoughts. His voice's low, deep register tingles the hairs on my spine. The recent memory of his cock pressed against my ass flashes through me like a red, hot warning, and my body betrays me, my panties dampening. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

My brows furrow in defiance. "I have nothing to do with him!"

"It's not just about him," he says, tapping a long black rod against his palm.

"What is that for?" I gulp, eyes darting to Jason. I can't stand to hold his angry gaze for long, and my eyes drift to his pale legs sticking out from hemmed shorts. His bloody sock is bunched around an expanding ankle—*ouch*. My stomach drops. Is Pirate about to beat the shit out of me, too? *Oh. God.*

"*Please*, don't!" I plead with my captor.

He looks at me quizzically, and the moment pauses as those fierce blue eyes penetrate me.

"You've been a naughty girl, Cher."

I shake my head. "No, I haven't."

His dark brow lifts into a disapproving line, making me feel like a sassy child. But I won't agree to lies!

"I've done nothing!" I spit out.

"Save your breath, love. You're going to need it," his smooth voice rumbles.

Tears flood my eyes as my mind races with thoughts of what this could be about. All the dirt I have on my current boss and my former boss. Same firm. Same bullshit. How I've kept all their secrets safe to keep my job. It was either that or—

"I'm just a legal secretary," I offer in defense. "I...can't control what my employers do. I'm—"

"Not so innocent," Pirate says sharply, annunciating his t's. My eyes widen in horror as he comes and stands between my legs with this thick, black, dildo-looking thing in his hands.

"Innocence didn't get you on a *hit list*, love. That's why I'm here."

"Oh. God. *No*. Please!" My face breaks into a horrified grimace as tears flood forth. Am I going to die? I'm going to...

Pirate grabs my chin, caressing it with his thumb. This only makes me cry harder. "Shh," he consoles.

He wants me quiet before he makes me scream. What a sick bastard. I should be begging for my life but all I can muster is, "Fuck you!"

"Gladly," he says without hesitation. "I'm willing to strike a deal."

"Huh?" I choke back tears, trying to get control of my emotions. I want to believe that there is a way out of this. I must keep calm and do what he says.

I shudder under his touch as he runs his finger along my jawline. He glances over at Jason, who is scooting toward the sofa's edge, attempting to stand. "Sit the fuck down!" shouts Pirate, and Jason falls back with a moan.

“You try to get up again, I’ll break the other ankle. Got it?”

Pirate turns back toward me. “What did you ever see in a loser like him?” he scolds. I yelp when he grabs me by the hair.

“Did you help him get the girls? Were you part of that, too, Cher?”

I blink my eyes, genuinely confused.

“You pretend to be so innocent,” he whispers, softening his clutch on my hair. “I want to believe that,” he frowns.

“I don’t understand,” I say, and he peers into my eyes, studying me.

He releases my hair. “I could turn that rat over to the police, but that’s no fun. My associates want me to kill him. But I’m thinking you help me decide the best form of torture for him if he doesn’t tell me what I want to know.”

“What...did he do this time?”

“He pissed off the wrong people,” says Pirate. “But that’s not the worst of it. It’s his luring of middle-school girls to dirty motels that’s earned him a special place in hell.”

“No,” I gasp, blinking my eyes as I process his words. Jason’s a murderous scoundrel, but I never thought he could sink any lower. I glance over at him. “Is it...true?”

When he diverts his eyes from me, it makes my stomach sick. How could I not know? What kind of woman dates a pedophile?

“You don’t still have a thing for him, do you, Cher?”

“Hell, no!” I snap back.

“Good. You help me follow this through, and I might let you off the hook.”

“By helping you...torture him?”

“And get more answers in the process,” he nods,

extending the object toward me. "You want to do the honors? I'll uncuff you."

Reflexively, I shake my head. As much as I hate Jason, I could never be part of hurting him physically. The only form of torture I could stomach would be... Making him so jealous that he'd want to explode. What would he do if, for once, he couldn't take out his anger on me or anybody else? What if he was forced to simmer until he was blue in the face?

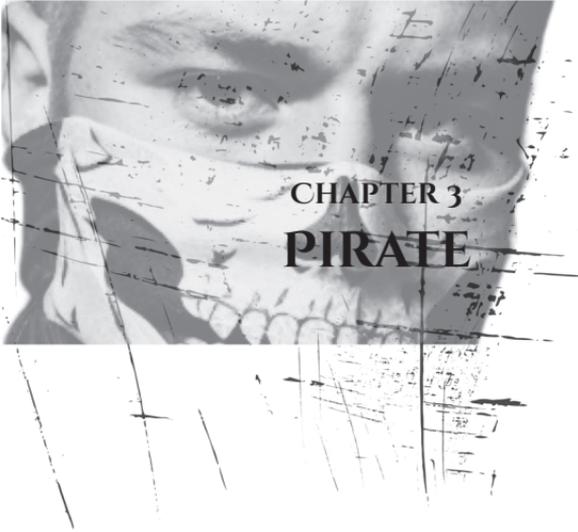
I remember all the times he flipped out, embarrassing me and others in public. Looking at a man and talking to him was enough to send him over the edge. He murdered my friend and got away with it. If Jason had to watch me be with another man, that would be torture for him. But what am I thinking? I can't fuck a stranger in front of Jason! If only I could think of something else.

Pirate sighs, glancing at his sporty wristwatch impatiently.

"Well, Cher?"

I clear my throat. "And...um... *After* I help?"

"Then I will remove your name from the hit list."



### CHAPTER 3

## PIRATE

"HITLIST?"

"That's right, Cher. 'Whom this concerns' would rather you be *dead*."

Her eyes widen another notch, making my insides tickle—how wide can she go? I want to test her limits. I can practically *feel* the chills popping up all over her sexy body right now. I want to feel her skin when it's like that, warming it with my hands until it's butter-smooth.

I try to ignore the part of me that wants to keep her alive purely for selfish reasons, the part that thinks killing her would be a waste of an intelligent, beautiful woman. Watching her for these last few weeks has come with the unexpected price of becoming infatuated, to the point that even after I got the intel I needed on her, I continued to watch her, learning her nightly rituals.

She has a habit of forgetting to shut the blinds completely when the house is lit from within at night, and some windows have no blinds or curtains, like the one in the mudroom or the small window in the kitchen where she stands at the sink. But then I left the first rose on her

windowsill, and she started paying close attention to her bedroom window.

She started turning off her front porch light at night and cracking the bedroom blinds. Not enough for a neighbor to see inside, but enough for a nearby prowler who leaves a long-stemmed rose for a nightly show—a risky, dangerous game for her to play.

"What do you...want me to do?" she asks, fear in her eyes. I smile softly. She still hasn't figured it out.

Not just fear in her eyes. Curiosity. She glances at the blackjack in my hand as if it is... *Hm*. A thought occurs to me, and I go to my bag and pull a custom-made black leather Billy Club from a case. It's never been used; it's more of a vintage-style collector's item I planned to put on a shelf. This baby isn't heavy like the blackjack, but smoothly solid and tapered; it looks like the dildo I caught Cher using one night in her bedroom. Or did she want me to see that, too?

I hold it up, and Cher's eyes widen another notch.

"No fucking way, man," whines Dipshit from the sofa. Heh. He's worried I'm going to have her use this on him. But I wouldn't defile a fine antique like that.

"Shut the hell up before I break your other ankle!"

He shudders, no doubt remembering the sound of his bone cracking in the pretty pink shed.

I return my gaze to my latest obsession, sitting wide-eyed and sexy as hell in the chair. It feels like a rite of passage to finally be standing inside her house rather than on the outside looking in. As much as I enjoyed our little game, I've been fighting a deepening hunger to come in. To come inside her house. To come inside her.

She crosses and uncrosses her curvy legs nervously. I step closer, and her eyes widen even more. I lean down to

her, and she quivers as my lips graze her ear lobe; her sweet and intoxicating scent wafts teasingly. Instantly my cocks twitches, and my jeans get tighter. Speaking of *torture*. Being this close to her and not ripping her clothes off is more difficult than I could have imagined.

She bites her lower lip, and it kills me a little inside. I want to be the one to bite her, suck her, make her cry and moan. I want her pussy wrapped tightly around my cock, clinging to me like her life depends on it. I want to fuck her all night and then throw her on the back of my bike and steal her away under the moonlight.

But, *damn*. I need to focus on my job here.

"So, what will it be, Cher?" I whisper, and she gasps, making me harder.

"I..." she hesitates.

"Yes?"

"I can think of..." she mutters, trailing off as her eyes dart to the couch cripple. I think she knows what she wants to do, but doesn't want to say it in front of him.

I bring my ear to my mouth, and her hot breath on my skin is nearly unbearable. "He's...very jealous," she whispers, and it takes me a second to realize what she is getting at. So, making him jealous is the idea of torture she's come up with?

"Is that so?" I ask, watching as her eyes dip to my mouth.

"Let's put your theory to the test, Cher," I say, and I'm about to smash my mouth into hers when I hear Dipshit fall forward and attempt hobble toward the hallway while bound.

Change of plans. I put down the billyclub and grab Cher by her cuffed wrists, following Dipshit as he clumsily hobbles into the hallway. He doesn't get far before he trips,

slamming against the wall with a thud. A glass frame falls, shattering, and Cher yelps.

"Good move, Dipshit!" I shout, jerking him up from the floor with my free hand. "Break any more of Cher's belongings, and I will break *you*. Back to the couch!"

I shove him forward, and he hobbles toward the sitting room while I contemplate how much enjoyment I'm getting from the feel of Cher's feminine hand in mine. God, she feels too good. I've got it bad for this girl. But I don't know if I can trust her.

Besides, this is work.

I'm not used to deriving much enjoyment from work, let alone life. The idea of pursuing happiness is an anathema to the organization I was born into. Those at the top pursue power, not happiness. I know from experience that the former does not equal the latter.

Though I rose through the ranks at a young age, I found pursuing power an empty endeavor. At least with the position I've settled into within the company, I get to achieve a bit of justice in a world of corrupt systems. Most of my targets have it coming.

"Stay put," I order when Dipshit reaches the center of the couch, visibly sweating. As he should be. I want him fucking feverish enough that he spills his worst.

"I am your priest, little man. You are at the gates of fucking hell. Only a deathbed confession can save your soul," I say with cold eyes. I laugh when his face drops, turning pale.

"That's right, Dipshit. Except your fate."

I turn to Cher, still holding her hand. "How much was the frame worth?" I ask her, and she looks up at me like I've asked the oddest fucking question.

I stop her just inside the archway, tugging her close

enough that I can hear her breathing speed up. "I'm serious, Cher. I'll make him pay for that."

A tiny hint of a smile edges her lips as if she's intrigued. She isn't sure what to make of me, and she still hasn't figured out who I am. I am the shadow outside her window at night. The one she teases.

"It was a gift from my mom. I'm not sure how much—"

"Priceless." But I'm not just talking about the frame. "Don't worry. He'll pay with his life."

"I returned the money!" he protests from the sofa. "You got what you wanted, man."

"I want more," I say, eyes on Cher. "Where did you hide the girls, Dipshit?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

*Liar.*

"Let's test your theory, love," I say, clutching her hands behind her back in my one hand to where her breasts jut out further from the thin fabric of her dress. I dip my gaze along her parted lips before smashing my mouth into her and lapping her tongue like honey. She tastes even better than I knew she would, and when a tiny moan escapes her relenting mouth, the sound lingers in my ears like a little melody. I'm fucking enthralled by her.

I tug her forward, wrapping my arms around her waist. Her body goes rigid momentarily before relaxing under my embrace, my hard chest pressing into her soft breasts. I nearly forget we are not alone when I hear a sound from behind and glance back at her ex. His face is deep red, and his nostrils are flared with anger. Holy shit.

"Seems you were right, Cher," I smirk, but the half-smile doesn't reach my eyes. Tension is building inside me like a hurricane; there is only one way to let it out. But I

know I should take my time—torture, if done correctly, is a slow process.

I trail my finger down her cleavage, gathering the tiny beads of sweat that have formed there before licking my finger. Fuck, she tastes good.

*I'm only just getting started.*

Her sweet taste lingers on my tongue as I pull my finger from my mouth. She attempts to glance at her ex but seems to catch herself and resist. She licks her lips as I hold her gaze and my hands slide down her ample ass.

"How far are you willing to go, Cher?"

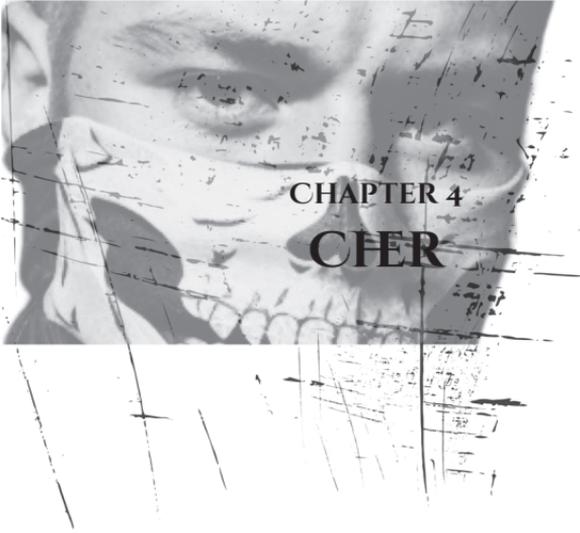
She hesitates to answer. She can't resist glancing at him. "Did you hurt those girls, Jason?"

"Fuck you, Cherry!" he spits out, and if I weren't enjoying my arms around Cher's sweet frame, I'd fucking punch him for talking to her that way.

When her eyes return to mine, there is a note of determination in her expression.

"As far as it takes," she says quietly, and I wink approvingly. A plan quickly forms in my mind.

"Go sit in that chair," I tell her before picking up the cuffs and then the billy club. I'm going to put it to special use.



PIRATE IS all muscle and predatory purpose as he slowly stalks my way, and my heart viciously thuds in my ears at his raw, sexual power. He is, without a doubt, the scariest and sexiest man I've ever met. He makes me feel like my life is ending and beginning simultaneously, like this is one of those pivotal moments that will change me forever. There will only be the time before I met Pirate and the time after.

He said he's been watching me--for how long? How much does he know? My mind jumps to the shadow I've been dreaming about. Always there in the back of my mind. It began with a dark, mysterious shape outside my window when I was alone at night. I thought it was just the trees or my imagination until I saw the first pink rose, one of several.

Pirate lifts my hands above my head and cuffs my wrists.

"Ouch," I complain as they snap shut. Jason snickers.

"Shut your filthy mouth!" Pirate shouts at him.

"Too tight?" asks Pirate with a hint of satisfaction in his tone over my discomfort. This may be about getting

answers from Jason, but it seems Pirate wants me to pay for my associations, regardless of how little I know.

He lowers my cuffed hands into my lap. "You didn't answer my question, Cher." Black lashes form a dark ring around his eyes, accentuating his piercing blue gaze. His wavy dark hair, secured with a black headband, has sun streaks along the edges. It's easy to imagine him outdoors on a bike or a boat. A ship, even. *Pirate*. The name is fitting.

"They are very tight," I answer.

"*Good*. I wouldn't want to be too easy on you," he winks with a hint of charm in his stern eyes.

"Because of who my ex-boyfriend is?"

"This isn't just about him."

"Because of my employers?"

He nods. "They want you dead. I'm giving you a way out. You owe me. Understood?"

It's as I thought. But at least my punishment pales in comparison to Jason's. Over there, pathetically slumped on the couch. How could he hurt innocent girls? *How?*

Pirate goes to his bag and produces a rope, which he ties around Jason's feet. "Look, I gave you the money," Jason pleads. "Can't we just call it good?"

"Where did you hide the girls?"

"What girls?" he shrugs. "I truly don't know—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Pirate sneers in disgust. "You say another word; it better be to confess."

Jason huffs, his shoulders slumping. He shakes his head, saying nothing. Either he doesn't know, or he's afraid that admitting the truth will dig him a deeper hole. I'm not sure which.

Either way, I can't stand to look at him. I'd much rather stare at my captor, the *pirate*. He goes around closing blinds and curtains and turning off lights. He lights a large candle

on the white mantel above the electric fireplace. Seeing him in the shadowy light reminds me of my stalker. My nightly visitor for many weeks. That shouldn't be a positive thing. Somehow, in my loneliness, it was. The pink roses helped. It was hard to imagine the mystery lurker wanted to hurt me. That's probably naive. Predators like to play with their prey. Lure them in before the kill.

Pirate suddenly peels off his shirt in the low light, and I gasp in awe. His entire torso is tan and solidly cut, like a statue of a Greek God—and those *shoulders*. His long, corded, tattooed arms hang languidly at his sides as he walks to me, pinning me with those sparkingly menacing eyes. I've never seen eyes like his, as blue and treacherous as the sea.

I take a deep breath, calming my nerves as best I can, but my heart races. Is he the one who has been watching me? I didn't stop it, didn't seal the blinds tight, or call the police. No, I encouraged it. I gave him a show and got off afterward because I was so turned on by something I couldn't see. But I knew it was something powerful. I sensed it in every fiber of my being. I wanted that dark shadow to want me so badly that it slipped through the barriers, forcing itself into my life. But I know it's just a fantasy! The real thing is nothing like the fantasy. The real thing is cruel, selfish, and full of pain. There is no pleasure to be had in a true violation—

“Oh, the things I've wanted to do to you, Cher,” he drawls with that leather, dildo-like object in his hand.

My eyes widen in disbelief. “Since when?” I whisper. Was he referring to the short time span of tonight, or has he known me longer? His tone was weighted like he'd been building up to this moment.

*God, is this him? Is this my shadow?*

"Spread your legs for me," he says in a low voice that sends chills over my body. My jaw slackens. "What....are you going to do?"

He pulls a black strap from the pocket of his jeans. "If you promise to be good, I will only tie one foot to the chair."

I nod in compliance, reminding myself that this was my idea. To torture the truth out of Jason via his murderous jealousy.

Slowly, I spread my legs as he drops to his knees. I try to control my breathing as I process the inevitable. It all makes sense. He was watching me because he had plans—for me and Jason. This was all calculated, and I fell for it.

He removes my heels before taking my right ankle in hand, and then he fastens the strap tightly until I'm connected to the chair leg.

"Too tight?" he asks, but I don't answer. It's uncomfortably tight, but I know he wants it that way. This is punishment. I'm paying off a debt.

For years, I turned a blind eye to illegal practices that may have sometimes scammed innocent people, and now it's come back to bite me. If only I'd never met Jason. He introduced me to my current boss. Jason runs in shady circles. But that's just an excuse. I'm a big girl, and I could have walked away. I finally broke up with Jason, but I kept the job connection because it looked great on my resume and paid well. I was so close to being free. Just a little longer, and I could start my law practice. Do it my way—a fresh start.

"What are you gonna do to her?" Jason mutters from the couch.

Doesn't he remember what Pirate said? He wasn't supposed to speak unless he was ready to confess.

Pirate initially ignores him, letting him think he's

gotten away with it. But after Pirate places the black object in my hand, he stands, suddenly lunging at Jason and punching him in the face. "Fuck!" cries Jason. Pirate responds by punching him in the gut. Jason grunts, "You fuck—"

Pirate punches him again. "Silence! You wanna know what I'll do to her, Dipshit? Watch, learn, and keep your fucking mouth shut! You talk *only* to confess. Nothing more. Got it?"

Jason nods, and Pirate returns to me as I clutch the leather. My palms are sweating nervously.

"Whatever it takes. Right, Cher?" he says in a low, deep, sexy voice that slinks between my thighs, making my panties wet.

*Whatever it takes*—my words. The truth is nothing would give me more pleasure than making Jason's skin crawl, even if I am all mixed up inside over what's happening. My body might be excitedly confused, but my brain hurts. My sense of reality is slipping.

Pirate grabs something from his bag before stepping between my legs with his hard, half-naked body. I trail my eyes along the prominent bulge in his jeans between his muscular thighs, swallowing thickly as heat floods my core at the thought of that beast coming out to play. I'm not sure I could handle it. That and... Well, it's been a while.

"That is a weapon, Cher."

It takes me a moment to realize he's talking about the object in my hands and not his big fat cock.

"But, I will let you use it as a toy. It looks remarkably like your vibrator. Don't you think?"

My eyes pop wide open as he finally confirms my suspicions. He is my shadow; come to life in the flesh! I blink at him stupidly as satisfaction gleams in his crystal blue gaze.

"I'll remove your panties for you, and you can try it out," he says, dropping to his knees before brandishing a switchblade. I gasp at the sight of it as he reaches under my dress, tugging at the silk. I bring my free leg inward as the undies reach my thighs. He grabs my panties in the middle, clasping them tightly with one hand. I yelp as he slices the knife upward through both sides of the fabric with his other hand. Candlelight glints off the sharp blade as silk falls.

"Shit," mutters Jason from the couch. He couldn't resist, could he?

Pirate shakes his head with a frown. "I'm just getting started," he snaps his head toward Jason with a ferocious glare that chills my bones. He raises the knife at him. "Want to know how this blade feels inside your veins?"

Jason shakes his head, mouthing, "No, no."

Pirate returns his gaze to me, and I squirm, wishing I could close my legs. My pussy feels exposed, damp, and vulnerable. He puts the knife under the chair before grabbing my wrists and freeing a hand as he leans into my ear. His hand comes between my legs, cupping my sex. "You're moist for me," he growls, sucking my lobe before biting it. "Mm. That makes you even wetter. Fuck, that's sexy, love."

He grabs my free hand and closes it around the leather before bringing my hand between my thighs. He guides my hand until I'm pressing the leather against my pussy, pushing the smooth round tip inside myself.

"Tell me who you think of while you fuck yourself, Cher," he whispers into my mouth while kissing me. Liquid heat makes my pussy cramp with need as I push the leather deeper, thrusting back and forth while Pirate sucks my tongue; his breathing gets heavier as I pant. I almost forget Jason is watching this; I'm consumed with Pirate's

command over my body. His hand closes around my hand, and now he's the one thrusting the leather dildo, fucking me while lapping my mouth. He tastes as good as he looks and feels, overwhelming me entirely. I've wanted this. But I didn't imagine it would be with an audience.

"Tell me," he repeats, reminding me of those nights we spent separated by glass. His fingers replace the dildo, thrusting inside me while he brings his other hand between my thighs, circling my clit. "Tell me, love," he demands.

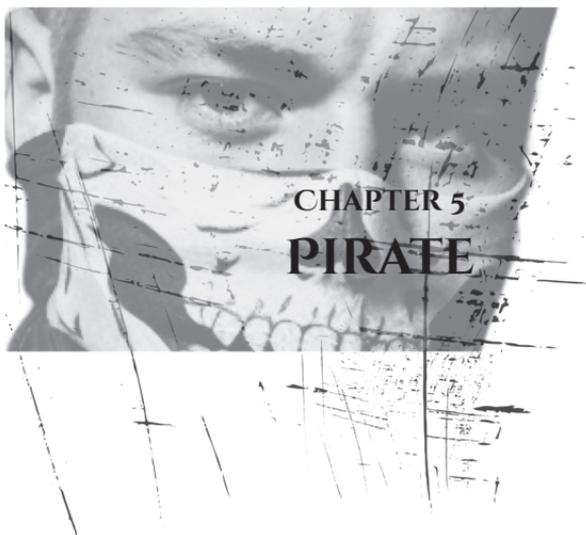
My head knocks back as I near the edge of orgasm, my face flushed hot. My heart speeds as he finger fucks me. Teasingly, he slows his pace to a stop, staring into my eyes. Oceans of blue lined in black, staring into my soul like a maelstrom, ready to suck me in. "Tell me, Cher," he whispers.

So this is to be my torture? I want him to finish what he started, but I don't want to admit the embarrassing truth. Tears flood my eyes as a subtle smile edges his masculine mouth. He's enjoying this.

"*You*," I mutter, humiliated as teardrops hit my cheeks.

"I thought so," he says before pulling his fingers from me. Did I say something wrong? I stare at him, confused.

He half-laughs. "You didn't think I'd let you get off that easily, love?" He slowly licks his fingers.



## CHAPTER 5

# PIRATE

EFFECTIVE TORTURE REQUIRES DISCIPLINE.

I won't admit to Cher that this is hard on me, too. I want to have her to myself without him watching, and I don't want to have to take my time. But I learned long ago that controlling my urges is rewarded in the end. I play the long game.

I remember my first lesson as a thirteen-year-old boy seeking revenge on the scumbag who molested my little sister. He worked inside the HO and thought he could get away with going after her. For a time, he was right. I told Mom, and she told Dad, and he reported it to human resources, but nothing happened. My parents were beholden to the system. Children are easily preyed upon when a system is run in this way.

So, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I followed the scumbag. Watched, waited, and finally, one day, I pounced. Beat the shit out of him and threatened to kill him if he didn't leave her alone. He told me what I wanted to hear to my face. But then he went behind my back and reported me. I was naive to think I had power

back then. Turns out the scumbag was an essential member of the HO. I have some nasty scars from the slow, methodical torture I learned to endure. I kept myself calm by studying their methods; I knew it would be my future job someday.

Speaking of scumbags.

The one sitting on the sofa is bright red in the face, and I don't think it's just from the pain in his ankle. He can't stand me touching her, and I know another little secret of his. I wasn't the only one watching Cher over the last few months. He kept tabs on her.

I pick up the knife from under the chair and go to him. "

*Why* did you do it?"

His brows shoot up. "I didn't do it!"

I shake my head. "Why were you keeping tabs on Cher?"

He stares at me dumbly. "I...wasn't."

Within seconds, I've got the knife at his throat, pulling his head back with my other hand.

"You'd think you learned your lesson not to lie to me."

"I-I don't know why," he whines as I press the blade into his skin, drawing blood. I trail the knife down, forging a crimson-colored river running the length of his neck.

"Stop!" pleads Cher. I pivot around to face her.

"I know why," she says, coming to his defense. "Because...he thinks he owns me. He's all about mind control. That's his kink," she explains.

I don't like the sound of that. I know what he does to females he thinks he owns. Maybe he planned to make Cher disappear like he did those missing girls.

Instantly, my knife is at his throat again. "*Nobody* owns, Cher," I grit.

At least, not her mind. I desire mastery over her body.

"I'll give you more money!" he pleads. "Just let me go. Name your price."

He doesn't understand me at all. "Let's get one thing straight. I make millions hunting down enemies of the HO. But that's not why I do it. I hunt for the love of the sport of catching scumbags like you."

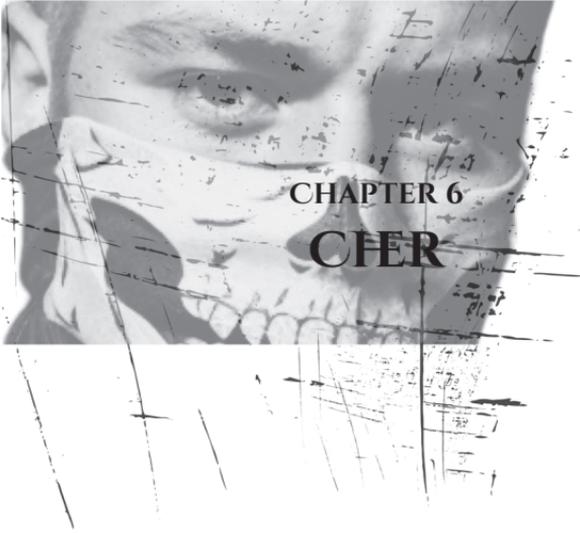
He responds by crying pathetically. Heh. I know why. He realizes he can't weasel out of this, which is the scariest outcome he can imagine. There is nothing in that little psychopathic brain of his that's prepared him for this moment. Facing me, his priest, at the edge of his deathbed.

"Maybe he's been through enough now," says Cher from behind. The tinge of sympathy in her voice reminds me of her role.

After setting the bloody knife out of reach on a table, I return to her. I step between her legs, and my cock twitches, knowing full well what's hiding in plain sight under her dress. I gently cup her chin with my hand, looking into her eyes.

"Cher, the *enabler*," I whisper, watching my words cut into her mind, slicing away at her notions of innocence. Is that...*guilt* I see in her pretty brown eyes?

Her chin quivers as I run my fingers up her jawline before sliding my hand into her hair and palming the back of her skull. "Don't worry, love," I console. When I'm done with you, you will be a changed woman. I promise."



## CHAPTER 6

# CIPHER

LEANING BACK IN THE CHAIR, I try not to cry. I don't want to seem guilty. I don't want to do anything resembling Jason. Pirate has put me and Jason in the same boat, but we are different. I didn't know what he was up to, and I'll be damned if I am accused of things I've had no part in.

"I haven't spoken to Jason for months! We live separate lives," I explain. But that doesn't seem good enough for Pirate.

I feel like I'm drowning under the weight of his ocean gaze, darkened by shadow, like the Atlantic when hurricane clouds roll in, hellbent on destruction. He holds my face in his palm, promising to make me a new woman like he's some god. What does he want from me?

"Look at me," he demands when my eyes trail to the dirtbag sitting on the sofa. Why won't Jason admit what he did so we can move on with our lives? I think I've had enough now. Fantasy over. Reality is setting in.

"Okay," I say to Pirate, wanting to get this over with.

"Yes, Sir," he corrects.

I stare at him.

"Say it, love."

"Yes...*Sir*," I mutter, swallowing thickly under his command.

The way he traces the bones in my face while cupping my head with his other hand is alarmingly soothing. He is not my savior. I don't want to be saved.

He steps closer between my legs and leans his knees on the chair between my inner thighs, dangerously close to my naked sex —arousal clashes with defiance inside me. I've never felt so mixed up in all my life.

I feel strangely disappointed when he reaches down and unties my leg. "We're moving to your bedroom," he declares.

He grabs the bloody knife before yanking Jason up from the couch.

"Lead the way, love. I'm *trusting* you," he says, and I quickly think of what a reasoning victim might do now. I could try to run. Adrenaline courses through me as I contemplate my course.

The front door.

When I pass through the hall into the foyer, my eyes dart to the remaining vase on the accent table. It's the heavy, blue, and white twin to the now broken one from my dead aunt. I could throw the family heirloom at Pirate and try to get through the front door before he catches me.

But he's so fast, athletic, and strong. Seeing his body in motion when he grabbed me before lunging after Jason was like watching an action hero from a movie. But he's no hero. He's...a vigilante. I'm on his hit list. He's offering to save me. People want me dead. The only way out of this alive is through him.

Part of me wants to help him deal with my "Jason problem." I have a restraining order against him, but that

doesn't stop him from harassing me at a distance. I've been afraid to date after what he did to my old friend, *poor* Billy. He was a good person. He didn't deserve to die.

But these aren't the only reasons I pass the vase without making my move.

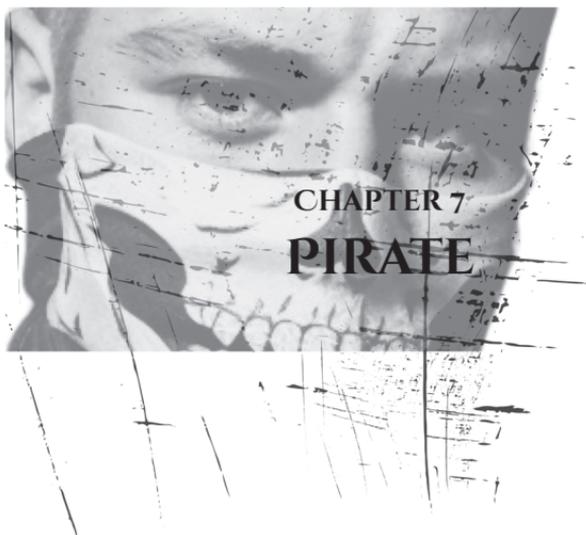
I hate admitting this to myself, but deep down, something inside me wants to surrender to Pirate. To please him and atone for my sins. If that can be done.

For many weeks, I felt him watching me at night, and it's been a secret thrill I looked forward to after a long day at my soul-sucking job. Though I methodically locked the windows and doors every evening, I fantasized about him finding a way in after I turned off the lights. I wondered what he might do. Was he armed and dangerous? The terror in the mystery brought me erotic chills and made me hot with dark and twisted desires. I guess I'm fucked up in the head. Maybe I do need to be saved.

At least, I do need to get off this god-forbidden hit list. This isn't the kind of thing the police can help a girl with. This is mobster shit. I worked in law long enough to know how unsafe the average citizen is from the underworld once you're on its radar. I am, after all, an average citizen. So, Pirate's my ticket to freedom? Then, I have no reasonable choice but to stay aboard his crazy ship.

"Good girl," he says as I pass the entry and turn the corner into the next hallway. He delivered that pleasing affirmation as if he knew what I was debating. It makes me want to earn his trust even more. Get on his good side. Reap the rewards.

Like a blessing and a curse wrapped in a blood-red bow, his big, dark energy follows me inside my bedroom. And the twisted fantasy finally comes full circle.



## CHAPTER 7

# PIRATE

THE WOMAN IS INTO PINK.

Her bedroom is grey with mauve accents, like the leather chair at her white vanity. I consider parking Dipshit there, but then he might bleed or sweat all over her pretty spot where she likes to sit to put on her earrings. When I think of punishing her, this isn't what I had in mind, and I don't want his fluids on her things or anywhere near her body ever again. The thought puts a sick feeling in my stomach.

I can't even stand seeing him in her bedroom, but like every grown-up, I must do things I don't like to reap the benefits. Discipline is rewarded in the end.

He hobbles forward, and I shut and lock the door before yanking him into the corner near the walk-in closet. I'm tempted to make him stand all night until his legs buckle, but he'll be less of a distraction sitting. Cher has enough trouble not feeling self-conscious with him watching. Knowing how uncomfortable it is for her and how anger-inducing it is for him makes my torture more bearable.

"Sit on the floor," I order, and he slides down the wall

with a thunk. I hogtie him, so I don't have to worry about his ass for a few minutes.

Cher averts her eyes while fidgeting with her hands at the center of the room. Countless times, I've imagined being with her here, sans the third-wheel spectator. She said he thinks he owns her, and I think she's right. I don't know precisely what makes Dipshit tick, but a man who preys on kids isn't the kind of sicko one can fully understand. All I know is I will enjoy stripping him of his claim of ownership. I want him to feel as pathetic as I know he is.

"Unbutton your dress, love," I order, and her brows raise. Her fingers twitch hesitantly, and I can tell she's breathing heavier now. Her eyes dart to Dipshit before returning to mine. She subtly shakes her head as her watering eyes plead with me not to humiliate her in this way. I suppose the act of covering her body with my own while fucking her with the leather dildo and my fingers was more intimate than this. Now, it's like she's exposed on a stage, ordered to commit the vulnerable act of undressing.

I dim the lights and then step toward her. "Imagine yourself on a regular night, love," I say in a low voice. "I'm outside. You're in here."

Her lips part as she glances at the window, imagining our nightly ritual. Her eyes return to mine, and I can tell she's getting up the nerve to confess her darkest little secret to me.

"What do you normally do on a night like that?"

"I...put on a show," she mutters, and I nod approvingly, enjoying the confirmation that she knew I was watching. And she liked it. But I wanted to make sure she didn't confuse me for that dirtbag slowly driving past her house every week, keeping tabs on her despite the restraining order.

So, I left little pretty clues. That slender, clear vase full of roses she keeps on her dresser proves this game could be real.

"Who have you been putting on a show for, Cher?"

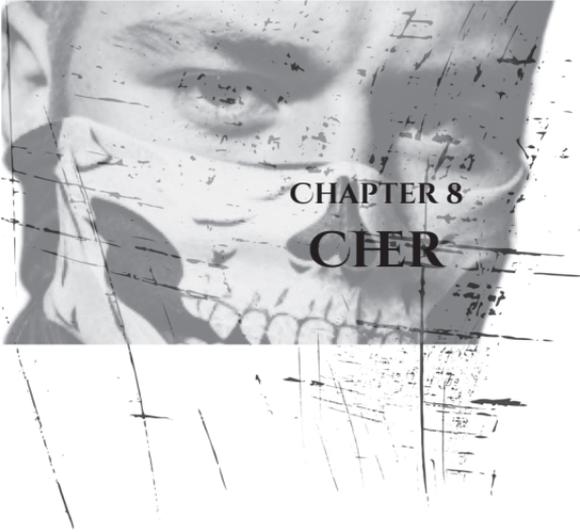
When she lifts her fingers to the buttons of her dress, she shifts her body in my direction. The message is clear. She holds my gaze as she unfastens a button. "You," she whispers.

When I smile this time, I can feel it reach my eyes. It occurs to me that I haven't felt this in a long while. I've been like a machine, operating purely for function. But tonight, I'm fucking eager for satisfaction.

"Keep going, love," I say, encouraging her.

When she reaches the last button, I drape the black rope around my shoulders and set down my bag before going to her. I spread the top of her dress open, exposing her heavy, lace-covered breasts. "What did you imagine?" I ask, delighting in watching her mind race with possibilities. But I bet she didn't imagine *this*...

I grab each side of her parted dress and tear the rest of it from her curvaceous body in one swift, downward motion. She yelps; this time, when her skin is suddenly covered in goosebumps, my hands are there to feel it.



## CHAPTER 8

# CIPHER

I WANT to forget that Jason is in the room with us, but he's making huffing noises. I glance at him, fuming in the corner, and Pirate frowns.

"Stop looking at him."

My heart thuds in my chest as I try to focus on only one set of eyes--steely pale blue and closing in on me. I step backward until the back of my knees hit the bed. It's not like he told me to; he didn't even step forward. It's his eyes pushing me backward where he wants me.

He reaches up, and the hard muscles in his naked chest flex as he tugs the black rope dangling from his neck. He smooths it between his hands as he nudges his head at the bedpost.

"Stand there, facing forward."

I do as he says, my heart quickening as he approaches. Jason makes a thumping sound against the wall, and this time, when I look at him, Pirate grabs my chin. "Tell me what you imagined when I watched you last night."

I bite my lip, unsure how to find the words. Maybe...it's best to show him. I reach behind my back, unfastening my

bra and letting my breasts fall forth before dropping my bra to the ground.

Undoubtedly, the deepening hunger in Pirate's expression turns me on, sending heat waves down my core. He steps forward, cupping my breasts with his large, strong hands as he smashes his mouth into mine. There is so much ravenous need in his kiss that I'm rendered to jelly as his tongue laps me. His hand finds my naked sex. "You're so fucking wet, love," he rasps before leaning down and sucking my tits, just as I imagined he would.

But I didn't imagine him biting, making me wince while keeping his eyes on mine as if trying to catch me in the naughty act of looking at my injured ex. There in my periphery, staring me down hatefully. But when Pirate suddenly thrusts his fingers inside me, and I moan, my eyes flick to the huffing anger in the corner.

Pirate comes to a sudden halt, his warm touch leaving my body. I'm standing here cold, wet, and naked before the bed as he stares down at me disapprovingly.

"I warned you, Cher."

"I'm sorry."

"Do you deserve a spanking, love?"

Thinking it will please him, I nod.

A hint of satisfaction flickers in his black-rimmed blue eyes before he goes to his bag. I glare at Jason while I have the chance. I want him to stop looking at me, stop watching us, and I hope he can see it in my spiteful eyes!

He shakes his head in disgust as if this is all my fucking fault.

"You bitch," he mouths at me, and Pirate cocks his ear.

Jason recoils, shutting his eyes tight, and I sigh in relief. I forget that the whole point is getting him to confess. He's supposed to watch and simmer to the point of exploding.

But it seems like this is a little more than that for Pirate and me. Fantasy has collided with reality in the most twisted of ways.

I return my eyes to Pirate just in time. He has a brown stick-like thing in his hand. *God, another weapon?* Oh, that's right. I agreed to a spanking.

"This is a *litupa*. Used by the South African police. I came across it on eBay. It's made of animal hide. Tapered. Perfect for whipping."

A strange laugh escapes Jason's mouth, and Pirate wastes no time lunging at him. "What did I tell you, Dipshit?"

He raises the whip into the air before striking down against Jason's ankle, making him cry out in pain. As much as I hate him, it's not easy to watch him being beaten.

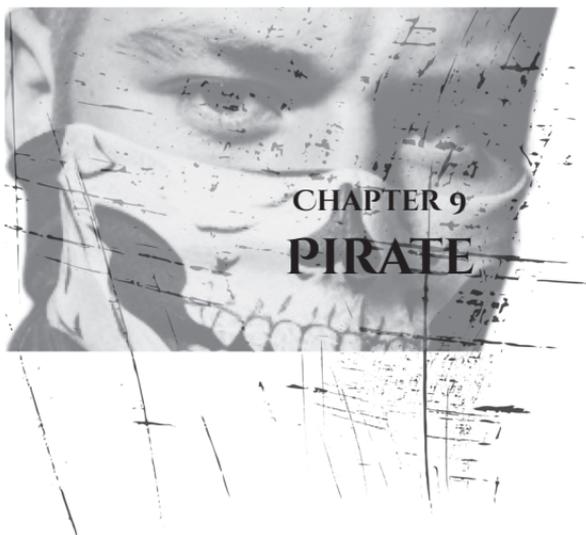
"Where did you put the girls, Jason?" I say, hoping he'll finally divulge.

"I didn't do shit!" he shouts.

When Pirate turns around, my eyes are stuck on sniveling Jason.

"Naughty," scolds Pirate, grabbing my arm. "I told you to ignore him. He's no longer your problem. Turn around."

He doesn't wait for me to do so; he spins me around before grabbing my wrists and tying them above my head. I don't know if he plans to hurt me or fuck me, or both.



“SPREAD YOUR LEGS,” I order.

Her plump, naked ass is mine for the taking, and all I want to do is pull my hard-as-hell dick out and ram my hips against her bouncing, thick ass while I fuck her juicy pussy. *But.*

I sigh, shaking my head. That would be rewarding her too soon.

She wants my cock. She's been wanting it badly. If she didn't want me to fuck her, she wouldn't have teased me through the window when she knew I was watching in the dark of night. Yet she took a dangerous risk—*anybody* could have been out there. She stripped her sexy body, exposing her luscious curves as she got off with a vibrator for the very man who was hunting her down to make her pay.

On paper, I check some bad boxes.

Hit Man.

Murderer.

Stalker.

Weapons expert.

She took a risk, but she got lucky. She has no idea how much I have to give. And *take*. I'm dying to show her.

I lift the whip in my right hand, smacking it against my other palm. Startled, she jumps, and I smile. This time when the leather whip makes the snapping sound, it's accompanied by a long, hard sting right at the center of her left ass cheek. She bonks her head against the bedpost with a yelp.

A red mark appears across the curve of her ass. I think for the sake of symmetry, she needs a matching one on the other side. I step slightly closer before lifting the whip and striking her other cheek, and this time, she grunts, bearing the pain much better.

"Good girl," I say, my eyes trailing to the clear fluid dripping between her thick thighs from her wet pussy. *Fuck, that's hot*. My cock is far too tight inside my jeans now; it isn't healthy. I unzip all the way, but even that is still too confining.

I pull my cock out as I come up behind her, letting my big fat erection spring forth against her ass. "Bring your legs together," I tell her, and she lets out a little moan as I thrust between her thighs, gliding my cock along the folds of her soft, wet pussy. The friction of my cock pushing between her thighs feels so fucking good, and by how much she's panting, I know the feeling is mutual.

"I think punishment made you even wetter for me, love," I say in her ear before sucking and biting her lobe. "Isn't that right?"

She nods, arching her back like a cat in heat.

"Have you been taking your birth control?"

"Yes," she pants urgently, like she'll die if I don't fuck her now.

"Do you deserve to be fucked, Cher? Or should I punish

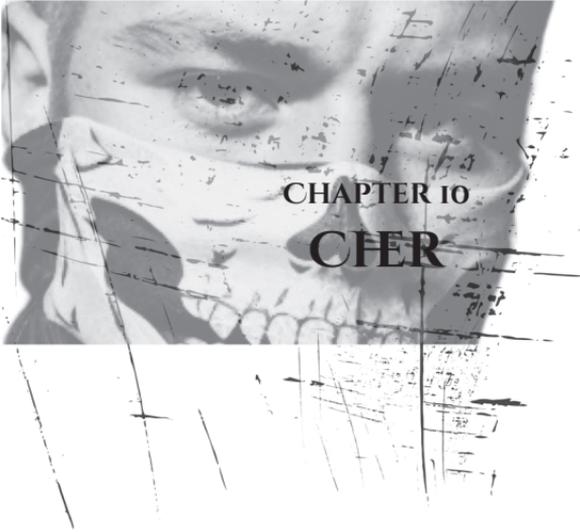
you more? I've got so much I want to do to you. But time is short."

She clamps her thighs against my steely cock while thrusting backward. "Fuck me," she pleads.

I'm about to tell her *no* when she tilts her hips, causing the head of my cock to dip just inside her sweet spot, and all the blood in my body goes into fucking overdrive. My cocks throbs with violent need.

If I give her what she wants, she had better not think she got off too easily. I grab her hair firmly, forcing her head back until she whines. I raise my other hand and smack her thigh as I plunge myself into her heaven. I slap her thigh again, fucking her even harder, pounding her pussy like there's no tomorrow. My thick, meaty tip smashes against her cervix before I pull back, slowing my rhythm teasingly just as she seems to be near the edge of orgasm.

I grab her tit, thumbing her nipple as I slow-fuck her, gliding along her g-spot with my pulsing erection. When her pussy clamps hard around my manhood, I painfully force myself to stop. She cries out in agony before I finally resume fucking her at full force. When she cums on my dick, moaning so loudly it sounds like she's dying, a feral groan escapes me, and I lose my breath as seed bursts from me like a fucking super volcano. *Mm. I'm just getting started.*



HE PULLS his big dick from my pussy, and fluids rush out of me. My arms hang from the ropes as I lean against the bedpost for support while catching my breath. He smacks me on the ass.

“Such a tight little pussy,” he growls, palming my sex as blood rushes to my center. I haven’t had enough yet.

His hand slides from between my thighs when his phone rings, leaving me.

God, he was so rough in how he handled me, and yet I’ve never orgasmed so hard in my life. He fucked me so hard that the bed frame crashed loudly into the wall, but there was another sound in the room. I was too busy being claimed by a Pirate to realize that the thumping noise from behind was coming from Jason.

“Knock that off!” orders Pirate, and I turn my head to see Jason repeatedly tapping the back of his head against the wall in angered frustration. His reddened face is twisted in pure disgust.

Did he watch Pirate’s ass flexing as he rammed into me, or did he divert his eyes? Even if he had, there would be no

escaping the moaning and groaning of our sex in the air, no escaping the scent of sweat and semen as our bodies furiously slapped together. My room hasn't smelled like sex in a long time.

Pirate taps his phone and zips his pants before tapping Jason upside the head. "What's wrong, Jay-Jay? You didn't like watching me get my dick wet inside Cher's delicious, juicy *cunt*?"

"I don't FUCKING WANT HER!"

Pirate laughs. "She was never yours to begin with."

I crane my neck, wishing I could be untied, and put some clothes on so Jason would stop glancing at my wet pussy and naked ass. That and having two men talk about me like I'm an object to be fought over while I'm tied naked to a bedpost is nothing short of humiliating.

*How has my life come to this?*

Not in a million years could I have predicted that the man bringing pink roses to my bedroom window would be the man to make Jason finally pay for his crimes.

"Just let me FUCKING GO!"

"I'm going to *kill* you."

Pirate's deep voice is so severe when he says the word kill that I have no doubt he knows the act intimately. I get chills at the thought of what he is capable of.

"Option B. *Confess*."

"Can I please be untied?" I ask.

Both sets of eyes shift in my direction. Jason's hatred burns into me as if this is my fault. I rip my eyes from him. I have had enough of his face for one lifetime.

Pirate's phone rings, and he walks to the edge of the room instead of untying me.

"Stop looking at me!" I hiss after catching Jason's eyes on my ass like he wants to rage-fuck me.

He's violently jealous. He never could fuck me with genuine passion and get me off so good that I screamed in pain and pleasure. That wasn't us, and it never will be. He's a weasel, not a man. That must be why he's into underage girls. That I didn't know this eats at me.

But now it makes sense. He likes the advantage he has over them mentally. It doesn't make me feel great that I am somebody who dated him. I've been too busy pursuing my goals to worry about my habit of being in the orbit of weasels. Law firms are full of them.

Pirate called me "Cher the enabler." But I don't think he's being fair. I won't blame myself for Jason's crimes. That has nothing to do with me. I got a restraining order and tried to forget him.

"*Fuck*. Change of plans," Pirate says after getting off his phone.

He comes to the bed and unties me, and my wrists are as red and sore as my swollen pussy.

"You're letting me go?" says his nasal voice, hopeful.

"Change of location."

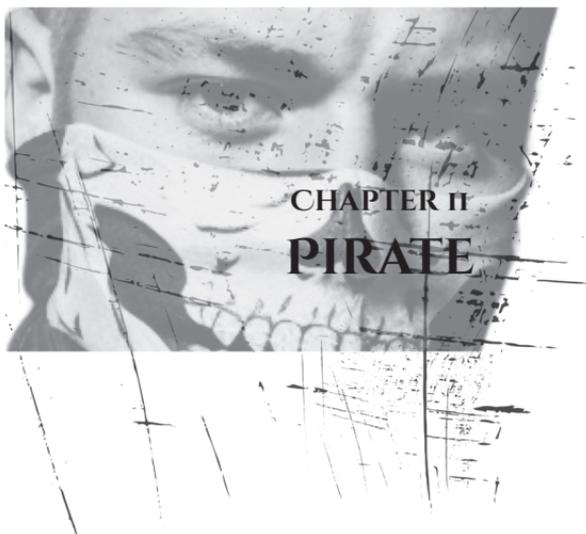
"*What?* Where you gonna take me, man?" whines Jason.

Noted that he said *me* and not *we*. Naturally, he's only concerned about his own ass.

"Cher, get dressed and pack an overnight bag."

"Where are we going?"

"To my place, love."



## CHAPTER II

# PIRATE

I'M LOOKING FORWARD to being done with this punk, but my work here isn't done. I cover his mouth with tape before leading him to my work vehicle, a matte-black Aston Martin Vulcan, backed into the garage. The exterior house lights are off, and the shade of a large oak tree provides further coverage from neighbors.

“Lie down and hold still,” I order before shutting the trunk. Modified to be street-legal, the former racing car's trunk is small, and he can't possibly be comfortable. *Good.*

But then again, I can relate to wanting open air. I would have preferred riding my Harley-Davidson motorcycle if I hadn't needed the trunk and a quiet motor. That would have made for a better night. The only thing good about this evening is that beautiful mess of a woman staring back at me with watery eyes, bright from orgasm.

God, I want to take her again. Right now. But no, I need to get the fuck out of here. Ignoring the twitch of my overeager cock, I lift the door open on the passenger side, assisting Cher into the black leather seat. Her mouth is

taped, her hands are cuffed, and her duffle bag is slung over her shoulder, making it impossible to buckle her in.

I frown, thinking of a quick solution. This contract has run out of time. My boss just informed me that the plot has thickened regarding the case of my latest targets. This goes higher than the H.O., which means I have until midnight to report them dead, or the case is being passed to a privately hired outside hitman.

I unfasten Cher's cuffs before shutting the door.

Quickly settling into the driver's side, I start the engine. Cher mumbles from under the tape, and I glance at her.

Though she looks sexy, her mouth covered, and with pleading brown eyes, I'd rather see her pretty mouth and hear her voice.

I reach over and rip off the tape.

"Ouch," she complains, bringing her hand to her mouth.

I chuckle. "Don't even think about opening that door and jumping out," I warn as I exit the drive, quickly picking up speed.

"I'm not that stupid," she says, looking over her shoulder at the banging sound from the trunk.

"Can he breathe back there?"

"Somewhat," I shrug. "Maybe he'll do us both a favor and run out of air by the time I arrive at my place."

She frowns. "Where is your place?"

"Near the beach."

I watch the road with a sigh, taking the highway North from Boston. "I don't normally bring targets to my house. But...tonight, I have no choice."

"I'm just a nameless target, now? What is happening, Pirate?"

“I’m not killing you or leaving you to be killed. That’s what’s happening.”

“But what does that mean?”

“It means that my boss isn’t the only one who wants you dead. I’m taking you off radar.”

“Oh *my god*. I don’t understand how it’s this bad. I’m just a legal secretary. It doesn’t make sense!

“It does if you understand the clientele of the law firm you’ve been working for. I bet one associate in particular—Dipshit back there—knew what he was getting you into when he recommended you to them.”

“What, exactly?”

“The *mob*, Cher. You’ve been working for a faction of the Bratva crime syndicate. But deep down, you knew that, right?”

She gasps, bringing her hands to her mouth as if she does not even have a hint of a clue. How does this information not ring a bell with her? How is she this naïve?

“I mean...I knew they had some shady dealings with the mob, but—“

“They *are* the mob, Cher. One hundred percent. Your law office represents a vehemently loathed competitor of an important H.O. client. Do you understand?”

“So then...H.O. is mafia, too?”

“Not exactly. It rides a fine line. Hellfire Organization is a private security company and arms dealer.”

I exit the coastal highway toward Salem, glancing at Cher. Her chestnut hair frames big brown eyes under knitted brows.

“Rides a fine line? Hiring a hitman is illegal.”

“Depends on who is hiring and what for,” I shrug. “Governments and corporations do it all the time.”

“Then what’s the difference between them and the mob?”

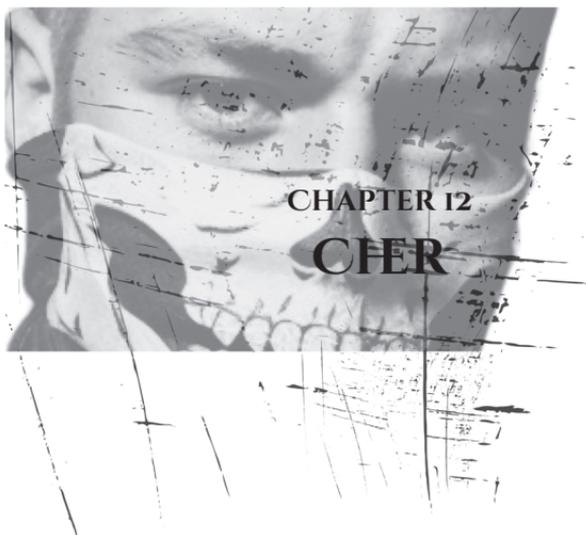
I smile. “Legitimacy. Other than that, not much. I was born into this, and I learned long ago not to try to find clean lines in a morally grey world. I focus on finding justice where I can, in my small ways.”

“And large ways,” she says, and I look at her for meaning. Her face is noticeably flushed, and she presses her lips together as if she regrets her choice of words.

“What precisely are you referring to, Cher?”

Her lips part, but she hesitates, the flush in her cheeks deepening.

“Are you referring to my cock?” I ask, and the memory of being inside her makes me instantly hard. “Not my usual means of interrogation. But I loved every minute of it. As did you, am I right?”



## CHAPTER 12

# CHER

“NOT TOTALLY,” I lie, turning my head toward the view of the moonlit ocean.

Right now, I hate how damp my panties get thinking about what he did to me. Crossing my legs in defiance, I pull up the zipper on my pink velour sweat suit. It’s not my first choice in clothing for a captive getaway, but I didn’t exactly plan for this! I grabbed the first thing in my sweat-suit drawer. I should have gone with grey. Pink is peppy, loud, attention-drawing, and more so on a full-figured gal like me. Attention from prying eyes is the last thing I need right now.

Of course, my outfit isn’t the only thing bothering me. If I were sane, I would consider my ability to orgasm while my captor fucked me a severe case of Stockholm syndrome. But it’s more complicated than that. I’m not so innocent. I was turned on by knowing he was my mystery stalker.

But it begs the question. Did he know the pink roses would convince me this was an innocent game rather than a twisted, dark romance? I’ve never been so wrong or so confused in my life. I’m using so much brain power

processing all this that it's hard to imagine what is coming next.

"Don't play coy with me, love," he winks, jarring me from my thoughts.

"Huh?"

"I think you lied when you said you didn't enjoy yourself."

"I said...not completely."

"Don't lie to me."

"You can't read my mind."

"I read your body. You were all in love."

"Under force."

"Ah, but that was an added benefit."

I puff out air. "If that's what you need to believe."

"Enough games, Cher. I have little to no tolerance for it."

When his cool eyes meet mine, there is a hint of a twinkle in the hardness, like a secret promise of pleasure wrapped in pain. I want to argue and tell him I'm not lying or playing games. But I also want to answer his question honestly. I did let a dirty joke slip from my mouth. He was merely calling me out on it.

"Yes," I sigh, cheeks slightly flushing. "I was referring to your cock, sir."

Fleetingly, the twinkle in his eyes deepens before his attention returns to the road.

"I was being relatively easy on you, Cher. You're used to weasels. I am far more man than you can handle. But I'm willing to...train you because..." he trails off.

"Train me?"

"Yes. Because I'm into you. *More* than a little."

My heartbeat jumps as I stare at him, mesmerized by his words.

“I thought...I had a secret admirer,” I say. “But you were hired to kill me. So, why the roses?”

He shrugs. “I don’t normally mix business with pleasure. But I enjoyed watching you. I...wanted to give you something as a reward and to ensure you didn’t mistake me for *him*.”

“Jason,” I frown.

“Yes,” he sneers.

I’m afraid to ask what he has planned for Jason, who has stopped thumping in the trunk. Is he alive? As much as I hate my ex, I wouldn’t wish death on him. I can’t believe it’s come to this. Then again, I can’t believe many things since Pirate entered my life two months ago.

After another exit and a few turns down dark roads, he speeds up a hill before entering a parking garage full of expensive, shiny motorcycles. The doors lift on both sides of his supercar. He comes around and offers me his hand, and when I take it, he pulls me into his arms so quickly that I gasp. His spicy, masculine scent and muscular, solid arms fully envelop me. It’s overwhelming. I could get lost in him if I let myself, and that’s a scary prospect. My life has already been turned upside down. I must cling to my sense of self and stay strong.

He holds me against his chest a second longer before letting me go. I wonder what he was thinking during that embrace. Is this all part of his plan, or is he improvising? The look in his blue eyes is conflicted, which makes me lean toward the latter.

He clears his throat, crossing his arms.

“I have rules for you to follow here. Trust doesn’t come easy.”

Loud banging and muffled sounds rise from the trunk, and I’m partly relieved Jason is still alive. But being alive

means he'll be subjected to more torture. It almost seems more humane to rid this world of him while ending his suffering. Kill two birds with one stone.

"What about *him*?" I ask as Pirate turns, leading me to the garage door.

"What *about* him?" He shrugs, and my brows furrow with concern.

"I haven't decided," he sighs. "I should kill him."

"Don't," I plead.

Pirate tugs me suddenly closer, and a little yelp escapes my mouth. He clutches my chin between his fingers.

"Let's get one thing straight, love. I have a job to do. And I give the orders around here."

He pins me with a steely gaze that hints at anger. Not the hot-headed kind of anger that's hasty and tends toward outbursts. Pirate's anger is cold, slow-burning, and calculated. There is something fiercely unstoppable inside this man. He epitomizes danger and is not to be taken lightly.

"Okay," I say, and he releases my chin to caress the hair from my face.

"Please do not mistake my feelings for you as a bargaining chip on your part. You'll have to earn my trust."

His dead-serious tone is full of warning, sending goose-bumps over my body. I think this man has been wronged before and is not messing around. I don't think he wants to hurt me. But I think he could be persuaded to do so if I'm not careful.

"Okay," I nod, swallowing thickly as a tear runs down my cheek.



HE THROWS A SNIVELING Jason to the ground before an oversized, throne-like chair, wing-backed, red leather with skulls carved into a wood frame, like something you'd see on a pirate's ship. Beside the chair is a large model of a pirate's ship on display alongside a collection of old-world swords. More and more, I'm understanding how he got his nickname.

The statuesque man sits in his chair, proving it perfectly fits his impressive frame. He pulls the bandana from his head, and his dark hair falls along the edges of his face, accentuating his piercing blue eyes, striking cheekbones, and chiseled jaw with a chin divot. The man is a work of art.

"Three rules, Cher. Rule number one: You can only use the rooms I've permitted. All other rooms are off-limits. Rule number two: You do not leave this house without me. *Ever*. Rule number three: if somebody knocks on my door or rings the bell, you *hide*. Unless I permit you to show your face, you stay hidden when I have a visitor in the house."

I stare back at him, dumbfounded. Is this to be my new life? What kind of people does Pirate have as visitors? The kind that thinks I'm dead? How am I safer here than I was at my own home?

"How long will this last?" I sigh.

He raises a dark brow. "Having second thoughts?"

"I didn't ask for this."

"Don't blame *me* for your mistakes, love."

"I'm not!"

"I can see it in your eyes. If you want to earn my trust, be honest."

"I don't deserve to live like a prisoner."

"You made bad choices. But you're lucky I found you. Be grateful. I know I am." There is that twinkling charm in his pale blue eyes again. It's comforting when he smiles at me

like that, even if he's speaking in riddles. He said he feels lucky to have found me.

Jason interrupts this would-be touching moment by sneezing and shooting bubbles of snot all over his face like a child. He raises his shirt and wipes himself.

"Get a fucking grip!" scolds Pirate. "One broken ankle and you'd think your life was over. I've scaled a wall in far worse shape than you. If you were truly dead, you would feel *nothing*. Is that what you want? Because I can make that happen in a heartbeat."

"No, fucking way, man! I'll do what you say," whines Jason.

Pirate shakes his head in disgust.

"I've got only one rule for *you*. Don't make me want to kill you sooner than I have to. See that big cage over there? Belonged to my pet tiger. It even has a bed, which is more than you deserve. Go make yourself at home and stay quiet as a fucking mouse."

Jason struggles across the grey stone floor, reaching the massive cage, which takes up the living room corner. He goes inside, fumbling to shut the gate before hobbling to the bed, where he collapses. He's too tired to notice that beside the cage are floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking an infinity pool with an ocean view. It's ironic. He is caged in the lap of luxury. Undoubtedly, a cliffside home with a view near Salem is costly. Being a Pirate pays well.

I'm his prisoner, too. What will he do with me?

There is a knock at the door, and Pirate snaps his head toward the foyer. "First test, Cher." The urgency in his voice fills me with nervous doubt. I have trouble understanding how I'm safer here than at home.

He points to the first door down the hallway, past a bar area, and my heartbeat quickens furiously as I run and hide,

closing myself in what appears to be a guest bedroom. The space is minimally decorated in shades of grey and light blue, and a large conch shell sits atop a dresser—a beachy prison.

I lock the door, go to bed, and sit down, and my mind races with the possibilities of who could be visiting and why they aren't supposed to see me. I feel like a fugitive on the run—the kind the police don't know about yet, but the mob does.

I focus on the muffled male voices. Is it another mercenary? A friend or work associate?

Why else would Pirate insist that I hide? Whoever is visiting, Jason is out there for them to see. Why doesn't he have to hide? Pirate must truly have different plans for him. I don't know his fate, but it can't be good. Pirate hasn't killed him yet, though. *God, what has come of my life?*

*Bratva?* I'd be lying if I said I hadn't heard the term before, tossed around at the office with weighted significance. I just hadn't put it all together in my head, or didn't want to, maybe a little of both. Denial is a tricky thing. Being a legal secretary is even trickier. On the one hand, you are privy to all kinds of inside information.

On the other hand, it's none of your damn business. So you learn to handle the work from a mental distance, like a banker dealing with other people's accounts and money. It's not your business to know where the money truly comes from. In this way, it's easy to look the other way.

I put my ear to the door, trying to listen. Silence now. Did they go outside? I sit on the bed, jumping at the sound of the tap on the door. I hold my breath as the door slowly opens, and the delicious scent of hot food wafts. My stomach growls.

“Hungry?” half-smiles Pirate, and I bite my lower lip with a nod.

“Very.”

“Follow me,” he says.

He’s taken off his shirt, and the muscles in his back are a sight to behold as I saunter across the living room like a gladiator between fights. He stops and locks the cage gate before leading me outside, where food packages are on a table near lit hedges and several lovely, potted plants. The lit swimming pool shines blue in the moonlight.

“Did you really have a tiger?” I ask as he opens the enchiladas and side dishes and arranges them before two chairs facing the starry-skied ocean view.

He nods. “His name was Jin. I fucking loved that crazy cat. I sent him to a zoo when he got older, where he could have a better retirement. I visited there often before he died.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, sitting in a padded chair at the wrought iron table.

“Don’t be. He lived a long, healthy life. I wish I’d had the time to take care of him later, but my job is demanding, and I didn’t trust a sitter with him for more than a few hours at a time.”

There is that word again. Trust. *Who* does this man trust? Anybody?

“You’ve been a mercenary your whole life?”

“More or less,” he shrugs, pointing at my food. “Do yourself a favor and dig in. You’ll need your appetite.”

“For what?”

His blue eyes darken, making my body clash with alarm and desire.

“For *me*.”

I press my lips together. Under ordinary circumstances,

this might be considered a date. But this situation is far from ordinary, and I'm too hungry to think.

So hungry that it takes effort to eat politely. The enchiladas are no doubt tasty, but my brain is chewing in unison with my teeth over thoughts about what Pirate may have planned for me. Sure, he made me orgasm harder than I ever had before, but he wasn't easy on me.

He said he plans to *train* me. What the hell does that mean?

"Good?" he asks, and I nod, wiping my mouth. I take a drink of water.

"Will *he* get to eat?" I ask, hoping I won't get in trouble for caring.

Pirate looks at me with a cold, blank expression. "Depends."

There is that predatory calculation in his eyes again. It's a rare gift to have the ability to be so cold and yet still human. He's more human than Jason could ever be.

"Enjoy your meal," he says in a low, almost melancholy tone.

The way he watches me think makes me self-conscious, and I distract myself by eating. We eat silently, and each time he looks up at me from his plate, his expression is thoughtful and conflicted. I don't think he's made up his mind about me yet. He said I needed to earn his trust. He wants to trust me, and I find that flattering.

I also haven't made up my mind about him. But I don't think he's a happy man. I get the feeling he secretly wants more out of life. There's almost a repressed longing in his eyes. Or maybe I'm just imagining it, hopeful that there is more to this twisted trauma-bond between us. I don't know.

“You said you’ve been a mercenary more or less your whole life. What do you mean by that?”

He wipes his mouth and takes a swig of water.

“I was born into it.”

“So your father was a mercenary or military?”

“Military, yes. Mercenary, no. He was a biker. The Hellfire Club started as a motorcycle club, and my old man was a full patch member. He was one of the loyalists who stuck around when the H.O. went corporate, and money was no longer small-scale and under the table. Hellfire merged with a mercenary arms company, and the rest is history.”

“The Bratva is an enemy of your company?”

“Certain members are.”

“Like the members of my firm.”

“Correct.”

“Are they all...dead, now?”

A pointed look enters his eyes, and I know the answer.

“Certain members of your firm have been taken care of. But I don’t have all the details. I was tasked with two lower-level members.”

“Does the H.O. always kill off its enemies?”

He shakes his head. “Not when it can be avoided.”

I glance at his Olympic-sized infinity pool overlooking the sea.

“I guess it pays well,” I smile.

He nods. “Indeed, it does.”

“And does it make you happy?”

His brows furrow. “Odd question.”

“Is it? I’m just wondering if you like your job. That’s all.”

His eyes dip to my lips. “Some days, I like it more than others.”

He stands, holding out his hand. I nervously take it, but his firm, warm hand wrapped around mine is a nice feeling,

even if it shouldn't be. Under the guise of protection, he's removed me from my home, my life, my sense of identity. I should hate him, not love him. I *could*. Love him. That's the scariest part of this whole thing.

He leads back inside, where Jason is snoring. I shake my head at the sight of him in that tiger cage. He's injured, probably in a lot of pain. It's difficult to feel an ounce of sympathy for him, given the suffering he has caused—god, I can't even think of all that right now—the missing girls. I already know he's capable of murder. Eh, it's too much to bear in an already overwhelming situation.

I sit on a leather sofa while Pirate takes a phone call. He glances between Jason and me, and butterflies fill my stomach. Is he making or breaking a deal? After all, this man was hired to kill us both. He hates pedos, but he has a thing for me. The woman he was stalking turned out to have a kink for spying eyes.

Yep, that's me. Embarrassing but true.

Thirteen Pink roses—that's how many I collected from him before he showed up inside my house with Jason. I kept them all in the same vase. Half of them are dried, wilted, and a paler shade of pink but still preserved in a tilting, bell-like shape. I think the wilting rose represents lost love. But what if that love was lost to begin with? Every moment with Pirate feels like sailing toward a distant shore, my old life fading in the distance. Reality is no longer grounded but floating at sea.

"Wake the hell up!" he shouts at Jason, and I jump with a yelp.

Pirate slams his phone on a table before rattling the cage loudly.

"That missing girl was found *dead*. No doubt, *you* are the fucking cause. Time to die, asshole," he rumbles, pulling

his knife out and flicking it open. It isn't a little pocketknife; it has a very long blade.

"WAIT!" I shout, panicked, and Pirate turns to me, his grey eyes as fierce as a wolf. He looks at me like I've interrupted his kill. For which the punishment is to be killed.

"I give the orders, Cherry Coleson," he grits, jaw clenching.

Wide-eyed, I shake my head. I can't watch a murder happen. What the hell do I do?

He turns away from me and opens the gate. Jason jumps backward as Pirate steps forth, the blade at his side. Jason backs himself into a corner, balling up like a scared child. This is the man who killed a girl? Did he do that?

"Can't we just...*torture* him more?" I cry out, desperate to stop this from becoming a blood bath.

Pirate stands there broad-shouldered and towering over a cringing Jason. "What do you think, Dipshit? Should I fuck your ex-girlfriend in front of you some more? Or should I just fucking kill you? How about...*both*."

He turns around, and Jason shocks me by lunging at Pirate's back with a giant bone in his hand. Just as Pirate turns around, Jason slams the bone against Pirate's neck. Pirate doesn't flinch; he squeezes Jason's hand until he drops the bone.

Pirate grabs his shirt and drags him forward, parking him at the front of the cage. He smacks him upside the head.

"You move. You *die*. Where is the other girl?"

"I promise, I don't know, man!"

"BULLSHIT!"

Pirate locks the cage before disappearing into the hallway.

"Quick! Call the police!" urges Jason.

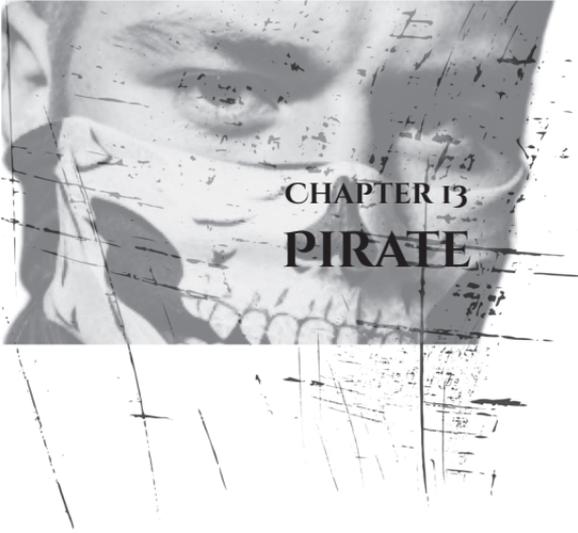
I put my palms in the air. "I don't have a phone!"

Pirate reappears with a big silver bowl. He opens the cage.

"What...are you gonna do with that?" Jason flinches as Pirate lowers the bowl onto his lap. Jason looks down.

"Popcorn?" he says, surprised.

"That's right, Dipshit. Enjoy the fucking show. Triple X rated for your viewing torture."



## CHAPTER 13

# PIRATE

WHEN I TURN AROUND and catch Cher looking at Jason, I shake my head at her.

“That rule about not making eye contact with him applies here, too. Take off your shirt.”

She hesitates briefly before doing what she’s told. As much as she hates him watching us together, she’d rather that than the alternative. So, I’m letting her have her way. Maybe this will motivate that sicko to tell me where the other girl is. Then, I can finally rid myself of his filth.

When she drops her shirt to the floor, I delight in the bounce of her heavy breasts through the nude lace bra and the way they shade from pink to red in the cool air, hardening into suckable cherries.

Ignoring the tinge of regret I feel over sharing this moment with that rat in the cage, I reach down with my free hand and unfasten my military belt before pulling it off.

I stick my knife between my teeth before wrapping the belt around Cher’s eyes and head. She stands motionless

with her arms at her sides as I tighten it at the back. I grab the knife from my mouth.

“Can you see, Cher?”

“No.”

I trace my tongue along her lower lip. “Good. Forget about him and focus on how I make you *feel*.”

I raise the tip of my knife, sliding it just under her bra strap, and she shudders as the dull back of the cold metal blade touches her skin.

“You came so hard last time my dick was inside your wet pussy. It made me wonder. Have you ever gotten off that good before? Be honest.”

She hesitates a second when I flick my wrist and slice the tip of the blade through the strap, making her yelp as the fabric falls, exposing her full, supple breast.

She sharply inhales. “No, I haven’t.”

*Didn’t think so.*

I trace my tongue around her nipple before sucking and biting it. Her breathing is suddenly audible, and I notice her mouth is slack when I look up at her.

Sliding the blade under her other strap, I pause. “Seems to me like you are turned on by *danger*, love. Yes?”

Her chest heaves under the feel of my knife resting on her chest, and I lower my hand, slinking beneath the fabric of her sweatpants until I find her pussy. Just as suspected, she is deliciously wet for me.

“Answer me, baby.”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so? That’s not an answer,” I say, slicing her other strap with one quick flick of the blade.

She gasps as the other breast spills forth, and I lower my mouth, sucking and biting until her nipple is firmly

bright red. "Take off your pants," I order, lowering my knife to my side as she bends and tugs.

She stands there in nothing but black silk panties, and I trail my gaze along her curves, pausing on her thick, sexy-as-hell thighs. The memory of her jiggling thighs and bouncing ass as I fucked her from behind flashes into my mind, making me instantly rock hard. *Mm. I need more of that.*

"Those panties must come off," I demand, but when she lowers her hand to her waist, I tell her to stop. "I will do the honors. But first, I want you to answer my question properly."

I peel off my shirt and grab her by the waist, luxuriating in the feel of our naked chests pressed together, her pillowy tits smashed against my hard, muscular chest. "Answer me, Cherry baby."

"I...never thought about it before."

With our bodies tightly together, I slide the blade along her hip bone and under her panty line.

"But you know that I'm right," I tell her. "You liked me watching you. That was risky behavior. You didn't know who I was. And when I busted into your house and finally tied you to your bed, your pussy was dripping wet for me."

I slice the blade outward, cutting away at her panties. She doesn't yelp or gasp this time, but her breathing gets loud, and her chest heaves against me.

"I was rough with you when I fucked you. You came all over my dick in a heartbeat. Ramming myself so deep inside your hot cunt, I filled you up. You couldn't get enough. Admit it, love."

"When you put it that way, yes," she mutters before I flick my blade again, slicing another strand of fabric from

her hip. I reach down, testing her pussy with my other hand. *Oh, fuck.* My girl is drenched. She's so ready to be fucked by me I can hardly contain myself. My dick is so swollen with need now, it's painful.

I feel hasty as I slice the remaining fabric from her hip. Startled by my sudden onslaught, she yelps, but that only makes me more urgent. I fucking *love* the sound of her yelping.

I flip her around. "Reach out your hands to the chair."

She bends, grabbing the upholstered arms while her panties still cling to one hip.

Unzipping my jeans, the weight of my erection springs forth as I pull aside the fabric still clinging to Cher, exposing her ass and right between her thighs, her beautiful vulva, pink and moist and supple for the taking.

Setting my knife on the table beside the chair, I clutch her thick thighs in my hands as she spreads her legs, arching her back.

"Do you want me to fuck you hard, love?"

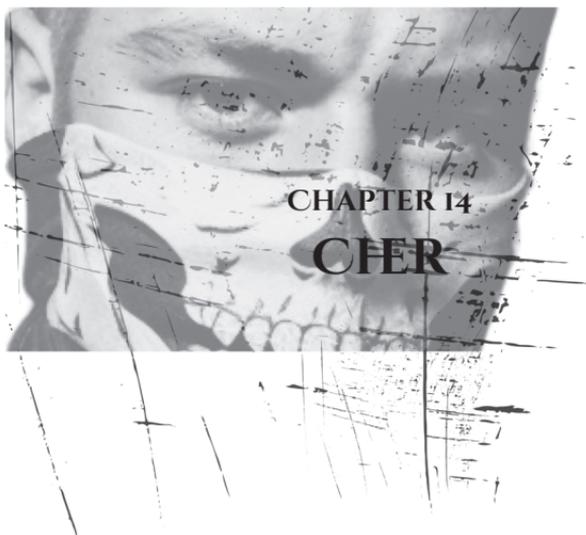
She nods, and I instantly thrust my cock between her thighs, pumping myself inside her wet heat. Her pussy wraps tightly around my dick—*oh...fuck...yes-s-s.*

She pants and moans as I ram my hips against the soft flesh of her ass cheeks. I push harder, and she arches her back, matching my thrusts like a good girl. My urgency builds quickly, fucking her more deeply with each thrust. I reach around her thigh with one hand, cupping her swollen pussy as my fingers find her clit. I fucking love the feel of her sweet, little sensitive spot between my fingers, caressing her there while I fuck her. Her moans get louder and louder as she nears the edge. This makes me insane, and I groan as I fuck her harder and deeper.

I grab her hair tightly in my hand, bringing my mouth

to her ear. The tip of my cock hits her cervix, spasming with release as she tips over the edge. I lose my breath, coming hard deep inside her to the sweet sound of her moaning.

My lips find her ear again. "I'm *all* the danger you'll ever need, baby."



JUST AS MY heart pounding in my ears starts to quiet, I hear the rattle of the cage. Then I remember. We aren't alone, and this isn't just the best sex I've ever had with a man so wrong he's right. For a fleeting moment in the throes of orgasm, I felt like I was his—just him and me. But now, it's back to reality.

Pirate pulls the length of his thick cock from me, smacking me on my sore ass before releasing his grip on my shakey thighs. He hands me something. A towel.

"Turn around and sit," he orders, catching his breath.

Thankful for the towel, I spread it over the leather chair before falling back into it. The cage rattles again, and I lift my hand to the belt around my eyes, turning my head toward the sound.

Peeking at Jason from under the fabric, I catch a glimpse of a man I barely recognize. His face is red and twisted into an ugly scowl. I've never seen him so miserable. His eyes are full of hate.

My eyelids feel itchy from the fabric, so I pull the belt from my head while I can.

Jason spits in my direction. “You fucking *whore*.”

“Fuck you, Jason!” I hiss.

He puffs out air, then spits on the ground.

I shake my head in disgust. “Did you do it, Jason? Did you hide that girl? Did you hurt her?”

He drops his gaze to my tits, and his mouth slants into a crooked smirk. I get this visceral urge to go over and smack him across the face. I’m not usually a violent person.

“I’m just getting started,” I smile. “I could let him fuck me all night and make you watch. Or you can tell him where the girl is, and this ends. It’s that simple. Stop being pigheaded!”

His eyes dart around the room like he’s considering his options.

“The only way out is through admission, Jason. Where is the girl?”

The hate returns to his dark eyes, and his mouth cracks into a villainous snarl. “You’ll never find her,” he hisses, and my stomach drops. I stare at him with a lump in my throat. *Pure. Evil.*

“You make me sick,” I cry, and he snickers as if this is his revenge on me. It occurs to me that maybe Pirate was right. Perhaps he should put Jason out of everyone’s misery.

Suddenly, I regret taking off the blindfold. It was to help me ignore that piece of shit. Instead, I’m sitting here naked in this leather chair with a wet pussy, and thoughts of violence.

Then again, I just orgasmed so hard; it’s shocking. God, Pirate has the thickest cock, and he wields it like a pro, and the way he adeptly caressed my clit while he ruthlessly fucked me—I have *never* been fucked so hard. I’ve never come so hard.

But how will this end? I wish I knew.

“Dirty, dirty, *whore*,” Jason spits again, shaking the cage with a rageful gaze. He’s finally showing me the unfiltered version of himself, which chills me to the bone. I think he’d kill me if he had the chance, just like he killed my friend and probably that poor, innocent girl.

I divert my eyes from him, crossing my legs and covering my breasts with my arms. He’s dead to me. He’s Pirates’ problem, not mine.

“Nasty, disgusting *cunt*,” he continues. “Piece of *TRASH!*”

Pirate appears in the hallway with a phone to his ear.

“The kids are fighting,” it sounds like he says, which digs deep under my skin. Did he really say that? His lumping me in with Jason makes my skin crawl. It’s insulting. Sure, we both worked for Bratva, the connection between us. But we are not the same in any other way. I must have heard him wrong.

As he approaches, Pirate holds out a black robe, tossing it to me.

“Put that on. I don’t want Dipshit deriving enjoyment by looking at you. He’s only allowed to see you when I’m fucking you.”

I take the robe with a frown. I’m done doing anything in front of Jason, but I won’t say it aloud. He still needs to confess. I frown at Pirate as he watches me cover myself with the soft, oversized robe.

He cocks his head, studying my face. “What’s wrong, love? Didn’t I fuck you good?”

I sit in the chair, crossing my arms and saying nothing.

His eyebrow slants. “Pouting, huh? I suspect this has something to do with *him*. I can’t leave you two alone for five seconds—”

“Do *not* equate me with that bastard!” I snap, and Pirate stares at me, surprised.

He leers at Jason as if he’s to blame for my outburst, and with the flick of his fingers, the blade of the knife appears at his side. He approaches the cage, and Jason’s eyeballs bulge as he shuffles backward on his ass.

“Not like this!” I cry out.

“Too much blood? I’ll use a gun, then.”

Pirate sighs in frustration as he turns around and faces me, shirtless and menacingly beautiful in his towering, muscular stature. But did he say what I think he said? Is he just pretending to regard me as more than a target? Is it all a calculated game in which I’ll be discarded after he gets his confession?

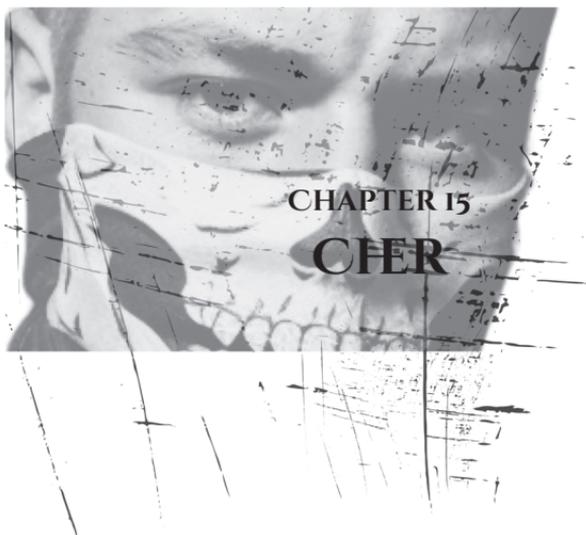
“He *is* going to die, Cher. The sooner, the better.”

“What about me?”

“I will keep you safe.”

“As your slave?”

He smiles darkly. “You will have to earn my trust. I can keep you and *not* fuck you. But I don’t think that’s what you want, love. Is it?”



HE'S NOT WRONG, but...

I'm suddenly embarrassed to admit it. I shouldn't be into him, just as I should never have played games with his shadow or offered myself up as a form of pain inflicted on Jason. What was I thinking? This didn't even lead to an honest confession. What is the fucking point, now?

I wouldn't be in this position if I had never gone against my instincts and dated Jason. Yeah, I did all these things that led to this moment, and now I'm stuck in a conundrum. Wanting Pirate may be just as wrong as wanting him to like me in return. But that's the tricky part.

He knows I want his bittersweet medicine as if I need it for survival. In a way, I do. The same man holding me captive is the same man keeping me alive. Hired to kill me. Then, saving me instead. That is, if he's telling the truth about his intentions toward me.

"You going to answer me?" he says with a cocked brow before reaching into a mini fridge at the bar. He sure doesn't let a girl off the hook. I'm pathetically temporarily

distracted by how his jeans hug his muscular ass as he bends down.

“Well?” he says, standing.

How can I admit to my captor that I’m along for the ride? Not that I have a choice.

But I do have a choice in how I feel about it.

I’m grappling with this as Pirate brings two water bottles, hands me one, and then chugs the other. I bet Jason is dying of thirst. I’ve never been a believer in actual torture. Dying of dehydration fits that bill. I am part of an evil man’s torture, and I can’t feel good about it, even if he deserves it.

I look down at myself with a sigh. This robe smells like the man who just hungrily consumed my body—is it wrong to crave the scent of him so damned much, and the feel of his body commanding mine as he fills me up inside, violating me like a dark dream?

I look up, and Pirate watches me intently as if he wants to pick my brain. He’s so thoughtful and conflicted, and maybe that is because he has been lying to me. Maybe he did plan to kill me all along.

His blue eyes lock with mine, and the cold twinkle in his gaze gives me chills. Icebergs lit by the sun may sparkle, but that doesn’t mean they have any warmth inside them. He smiles softly.

“Don’t worry,” he says, as if reading my mind. I want to cling to this glimmer of hope, this small comfort. But I can’t let myself fall for a stupid illusion. I won’t survive if I can’t outthink my captor. I’m at his mercy and have never felt so out of control. It could feel liberating if I truly trusted my life in his hands. He says that bad people want me dead. But what if that is just what he wants me to believe?

“What are you thinking?” asks Pirate, seeming genuinely interested. Does he care, or is he just a good liar?

I shake my head, puffing out air. Spilling my heart out won't keep me alive, but continuing to show him I'm vulnerable might. I need answers. Proof that he's telling the truth.

"How will I..." I trail off, allowing the tears to well up in my eyes.

"How will you what, love?"

"How will I ever...start over?"

He nods at me as if that is a valid question. Then he walks over and reaches his hand to me, and when I give him my hand, he pulls me from the chair into his naked chest. He runs his thumb down my jawbone, and my breathing thins under the tingling power of his touch.

He kisses me once. "Follow the rules."

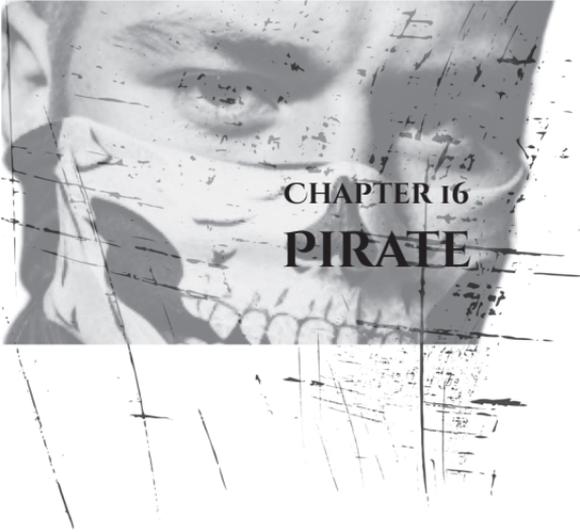
He kisses me again. "Earn my trust."

He gently sucks on my lip. "Can you do that for me?" he whispers.

Tears flow down my cheeks as he peers into my eyes. I want to believe that he is as straightforward as he seems.

I nod at him. "And then what?"

He brushes my hair from my face. "Then, I will help you start over."



## CHAPTER 16

# PIRATE

AFTER CHECKING that the house is secure, I turn down all the lights and lock my bedroom door before showing Cher to my suite's bathroom. She can take a hot shower while I prepare the bed.

I commonly sleep and work odd hours, often on my laptop, processing case files and doing intel research. So, I may not be here to babysit her all night. Until I can trust her, she must sleep tied to the bed via hospital limb restraints. At least, that's my excuse. She doesn't know I have cameras all over the house.

I pull the restraints from a duffel bag. I keep a few sets on hand for interrogation purposes, which are usually conducted at a private storage facility. Luckily, I had a spare pair here.

Bringing targets to my residence is a risk I've never been willing to take, and changing my protocol is not a habit I intend to keep. This is an unusual situation that I could not have predicted. Everything changed the night I spied on Cherry Coleson.

I waited until after nightfall, about an hour after she got

home. I'd planned to get a quick close-up to snap some pictures, but I watched her longer than intended. I *liked* watching her.

Watching Cher didn't feel like work because I enjoyed it too much. Then, after I tapped on her window one night and left a pink rose, we reached a turning point. At first, she looked stunned. I half thought she might call the police. But instead, she returned to her room with a vase.

Now, it was my turn to be stunned.

I was a mere shadow to her. She toyed with the mystery of that shadow, letting me see far more of her body than I'd intended, far more than I needed to conduct my surveillance. She fed into my fantasy just as I fed into hers. She made me covet her more than I should.

Playing with shadows is dangerous business.

Knowing what she knows now, she might choose otherwise if she could turn back the clock. But it's too late.

She's mine.

I could have carried out my mission and killed her, or I could have left her for the hitman that was inevitably coming in my stead. But I didn't. She got lucky.

When she exits the bathroom, she is wearing my black robe. The clothes she had on when she arrived are still on my living room floor, as is her luggage.

"Can I please get my things?" she says. Her tone and manner have been different since I left her alone with Dipshit.

I shake my head. "You aren't free to move about the house alone yet. I'll get them in the morning. You don't wear clothes for sleeping."

Her eyebrows lift. "Together in this bed?"

"For a few hours. Or you can sleep in here on your own.

But if you get thirsty or need to use the bathroom, I might not hear you call my name from the other room.”

She looks at the restraints attached to the bed, seeming to get my meaning.

“Do you want me to sleep here with you, Cher?” I ask. She frowns, seeming conflicted.

“What is it? What did he say to you that was so upsetting?”

“It wasn’t what he said as much as what *you* said.”

“When?”

“On the phone. It sounded like you said ‘the kids are fighting.’ But I thought I was a secret. That, and...you equated me with *him*.”

“Yes, you are a secret. No associates of mine know that I’ve brought you here.”

“Then who was that?”

“Well, I was speaking to my Mom.”

“Your *Mom* knows...?”

“About my work? Yes. She’s a survivor of a lifetime married to the H.O. She’s in protective custody now.”

“From the H.O.?”

“No. From bad guys who might target her to get to me.”

She glances at the bed and then tightens the robe around her waist. She’s still feeling unsure.

“I didn’t mean that comment about the kids the way it sounded,” I explain.

“How would your mom have interpreted that?”

I nod, getting her meaning. A strange feeling washes over me. Why does she care what I say to my mom? It’s the response you might expect from a legitimate girlfriend. I haven’t had one of those in years.

“Yes, I was talking about two targets. But she knows...” I trail off. I hadn’t planned on divulging everything I said to

Mom. But I don't like how Cher is looking doubtful about me. Trust is a two-way street. But it's more than that. I care because she cares. I wasn't expecting to give a shit what Cher thinks. But I do.

"My mom knows me pretty well," I explain. "She knew something was up with me at the first mention of your name. My tone gave it away."

"Gave what a way?"

I wasn't planning on admitting this to her, but here goes.

"That I'm into you. More than a little. Mom knows it's not like me to mix business with pleasure. I've always been stoic, not making much time for my personal life. But...you make me want to change that."

"I do?"

She tightens her lips like she's holding back a smile, but I can see in her eyes that this is good news. Maybe only because she thinks it means I'll keep her safe and alive. She's not wrong, but I'd like it to be more than that. I've admitted enough for now, though. Can't have her thinking she has more leverage than she does. No matter how much I'm into her, I need her to prove herself. There are limits to my affection.

I won't keep what I don't trust.

Seeming satisfied, she goes to the bed and slips out of the robe before climbing in. I meet her there to fasten the cuff around her left wrist. The strap is attached to the bedpost and is long enough to allow her to move in her sleep. Next, I fasten her left ankle to the longer strap attached to the bottom of the bed.

I pull the sheet and blanket up to her waist, and she grabs on with her right hand, pulling them up above her chest.

"I'll be in the shower," I say before stripping off my jeans. My hard-on springs out. *Damn, son.* After so many years of interrogations, I never knew that tying somebody up could turn me on. But this is what it's like for me with Cher.

Her eyes dip to my manhood, and her lips part, followed by a noticeable rise in her chest. Maybe before I shower, I should...

"What do you *want*, Cher?"

She bites her lip. "I want...to know your real name."

This catches me by surprise. "Why does it matter?"

"You know mine," she says.

"I know many things about you that you don't know about me. That's the nature of how we met."

"That can't change? I can't know you better?"

"Trust and information are intertwined, love. I give neither easily."

She frowns, and I sigh, looking down at her.

"I'm going to start a rewards program with you. In exchange for my earned trust, you will be rewarded certain freedoms and information."

"Okay. How do I start?"

Her eagerness is ticklingly cute. I repress a smile. All I want to do right now is pull the blanket from her and claim her in my bed. But I need to give her a chance to prove herself to me.

"I could have tried to run," she offers. "I mean, at my house. But I didn't, not just because I was afraid. I...wanted to play along."

"For revenge?"

She nods. "Jason's been a problem in my life. You seemed like a solution. But that's not the only reason. I..."

she sighs, cheeks flushing. Whatever she's trying to say, she's embarrassed about it.

"Wanted to please me?" I offer.

When the pink in her cheeks deepens, and she nods in confirmation, my dick gets even harder.

As I pull the blanket down, followed by the sheet, the draft causes her nipples to perk. My mouth salivates, and my cock pulses in eager anticipation. I want to see her front side bounce this time.

I grab her legs, parting them before sliding her free leg upward into a bent position, allowing me full access to her glistening pussy. I climb between her thighs on my knees.

"I'm glad you shared this with me, Cher. After I fuck you, I'll reward you with some information."

Hiking her free thigh, I slide my steely shaft over her soft folds before striking her damp pussy with the head of my cock, and thrusting myself hardness inside her softness—*mm...fuck-yeah.*

"You're fucking perfect," I thrust deeper and deeper as she moans.

I lower myself, sucking on her her bouncing tits while I pound my hips against her clit. My big dick spasms, swelling stretching her pussy to accommodate every ounce of my cock as I pump inside her.

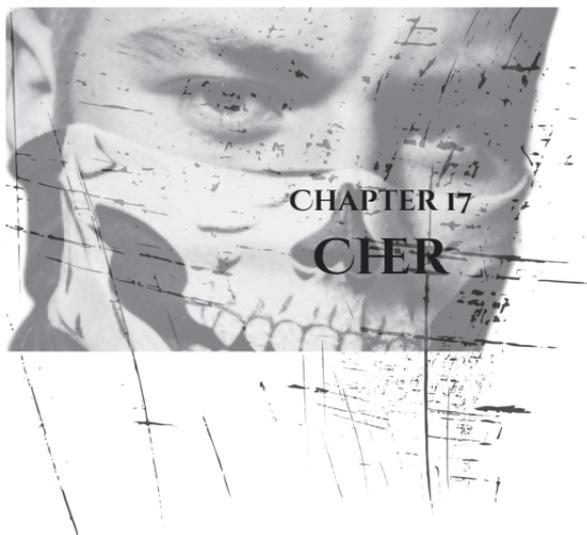
She matches my thrusts with her hips, and her free hand clutches the muscles flexing in my supporting arm as her nails dig into my skin with a moan. She's already so fucking drenched when I release a torrent inside her to the sound of her nearing the edge—*oh...fu-u-ck...grr.*

I fuck her slow, deep, and hard as I finish coming to the delicious sound of her orgasm. Her clinging pussy begins to relax its hold over my cock as I kiss her, lapping her mouth and feeling like this woman is something I didn't know I

was missing in life. Damn, I can't get enough of her. The sound of her breathing and the feel of her heartbeat fills my ears as I suck her lip. I get this feeling like this is all I need.

I study her smile like it's a work of art. I promised her information for good behavior. Before I have time to second-guess myself, I can feel the regretful words slipping from my mouth.

"My real name is Bastion," I rasp before pulling myself from her body.



I WATCH him in the moonlight.

He looks less edgy when sleeping, and his handsome face is relaxed.

His wavy, dark hair hits just above his shoulders. His face alone could make him a model in a men's magazine, let alone his muscular, statuesque body. *Bastion*. His real name is Bastion.

I earned his trust enough to get that out of him. Now, if I can get him to stop tying me up—at least when I sleep. I rotate slightly on my hip. The straps are long enough to sleep on my side or back, but turning over on my belly is impossible. Luckily, I'm not a belly sleeper.

I heard Jason yell something in the other room a few minutes ago. That woke me, but it wasn't enough to wake the sleeping giant beside me. Bastion-the-pirate has burned many calories in the last twelve hours—wrestling with Jason, binding and transporting him, and wrestling with him more.

Then there is the workout he's gotten with me. Lord, have mercy.

His words circle in my mind. He said he'd never brought a target to his home before. That it was risky to do, that he wouldn't make a habit of. He did it for me and has kept Jason alive this long because of me. But that won't last. He plans to kill him. He also plans to keep me safe. But I must earn his trust.

When he wakes, I need to discuss the issue of my friends and family, who will soon realize I'm missing. They will call the police unless they don't hear from me via text, our typical communication method.

Would it be a good thing if they reported me missing?

The police would conduct an investigation, and they would learn about my work connections to the mafia. They would tell my parents. My disappearance would be ruled suspicious. My parents would be overcome by grief, and they would want to go to my home and look through my things for clues to my whereabouts. What if the hitman hired to kill me showed up and hurt them? Killed them?

No, this is a terrible plan! I must get permission to send out texts and let everyone know I'm taking a little vacation with a new boyfriend nobody knows. Yeah, that's what I'll say.

Bastion opens one eye, looking at me. He reaches out and puts his hand on mine.

"Close your lids," he whispers, then falls asleep with his hand still on mine. His hand feels protective, and part of me hates this attachment I already feel for him. It can't be healthy. I've had some fucked-up relationships in my life, but never anything as insane as this.

My attachment started back when he was still a nameless mystery.

But I was convinced the shadow tapping on my window was the strange, beautiful man I had caught a glimpse of

one night. Tall, broad-shouldered, athletic, and leaving my yard just before the whole thing started and before the first rose. I watched him walk, and I fell in love with his swagger. Even from behind, I knew he was something special.

When my shadow came at night, I imagined that strange man. His dark hair, broad shoulders, and that purposeful, powerful swagger. Who wouldn't want a guy like that stalking them? Call me crazy.

In retrospect, I might not be alive if I hadn't played along the way I did.

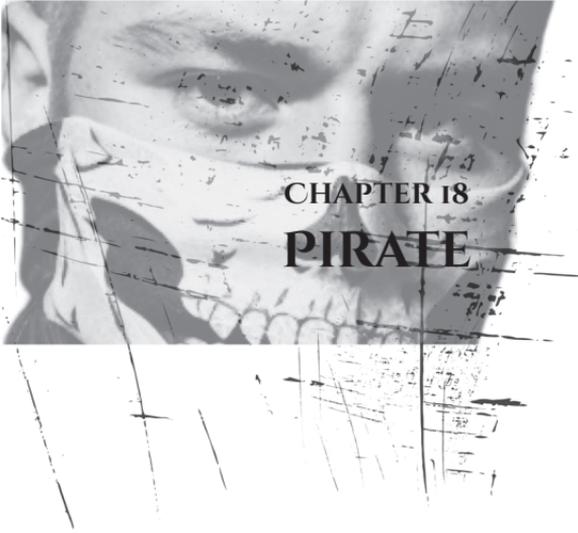
I watch my pirate, Bastion, sleeping in the moonlight, trying to decide if he would have killed me otherwise. Has he killed other women? Women like me who got entangled with the wrong people?

He says he was born in hell, as in the Hellfire Organization. This is what he knows, what he's good at. He must have worked hard to climb up the ranks. Speaking of...

I have a bar exam coming up. I've worked my ass off to get to this point, and my law career is only a test away—another thing I must discuss with...what do I call him? I think Pirate is his work name, and that is how he identifies. But I want to get to know Bastion. I doubt he wants me to call him by his real name around Jason. He seemed to regret telling me at all. But when we're alone together, I'm going to try.

"Cherry," he mutters in his sleep, closing his hand gently around my wrist. This simple act warms me as I close my eyes with a yawn. Nobody calls me Cherry. But it rolls so nicely off his tongue. Maybe we can strike a deal with what we call each other.

I'm thinking of that as I doze off, his hand still clasped protectively around mine.



“I’VE GOT a new investigative contract that may interest you, Pirate.”

I glance back at Cher before exiting the room. The tantalizing image of her beautiful body in my bed is overshadowed by the dirtbag passed out and drooling inside my pet tiger’s old cage.

“I’m listening,” I tell Connor with a scowl as I exit onto the patio before shutting the sliding door.

Today, I plan to get rid of the pedophile so I won’t have to see his pathetic face anymore. Once he’s dead, Cher will no longer worry about him like she does. She may feel guilty for helping me, but she can’t blame herself for his death. That task will fall to me, and I will bear no burden.

Though most of my contracts don’t require killing, there have been enough, starting with the man who gave me my nickname. After what he did to my mom, he thought that boarding a superyacht and heading out to sea would keep me away. I appeared suddenly on deck with a jagged bushcraft blade in hand. He called me a fucking pirate

before I slashed his throat from ear to ear and fed him to the sharks.

“It pays twenty thousand. You’ll have to travel to Miami for a few days. I know you love a good ride on the open road.”

“Not in the mood to travel,” I sigh, stretching my free arm overhead before reclining in a lounge chair by the pool.

“Since when aren’t you itching for a change of scenery? *Shit*. Is it a girl? Well, bring her the hell along, son.”

Matter of fact...it is. But I won’t tell him that, especially considering she is supposed to be dead.

I sigh, flicking my hair back while running my hand along the stubble on my chin.

“Send the specs to my email, and I’ll review it,” I say.

“Of course. One more thing. You left something behind at the Coleson girl’s house. Tanis sent a picture of it to the H.O. Antique weapon. I knew immediately it belonged to you. The weird thing is, he said it was sticky and that the leather smelled faintly like pussy. Did you have yourself a little fun on the fucking job?” he laughs heartily.

I shake my head, pissed off that I left that behind. “All due respect, but shut the fuck up, sir.”

He snickers. “Well, it got me thinking. You took a liking to Coleson, yes?”

I don’t like where this is going.

“What of it?”

“Just confirming you finished the job.”

“She wasn’t the important player in this.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that Jason Fischer was the main liability. She was ignorant and didn’t know much about the Bratva operation.”

“Mm-hm. But you did her in, right?”

“Why do you care so much? They wanted her to disappear. Done.”

He sighs, long and drawn-out.

“You’re keeping her, then?”

“I don’t like the fifth degree. It’s not like I need the money anymore, and I have little tolerance for bullshit.”

“It’s never been about the money with you. You work because it’s what you do. You are a *machine*, Pirate. Born and bred. An asset to the organization for that reason. You’ve never kept a personal life; it would get in the way of your purpose.”

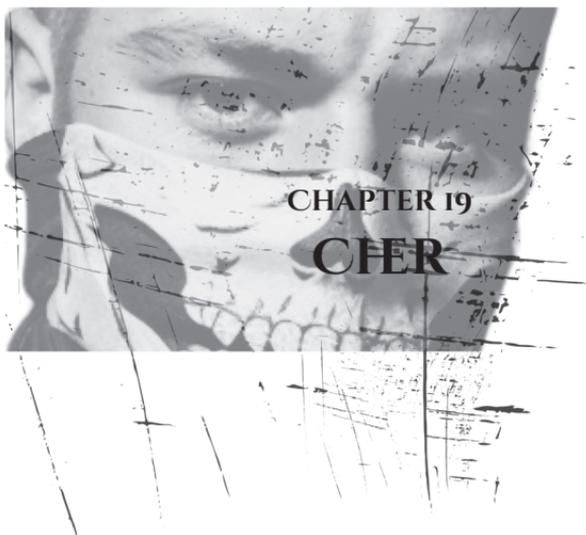
“So why would I change my habit now? Send the email, and I’ll get back to you by tomorrow.”

“Will do.”

Irritated, I toss my phone on the table. He knows me too well. I’ve been in this game for too fucking long.

*Why change now?* Good question.

I peel off my clothes and jump into the pool. I should hurry and rinse off and then check on that sexy woman tied to my bed. She’s the reason things are suddenly different, and it feels like I’m somehow on a new trajectory. It’s unnerving. But I must keep in control. Control is my middle name. I let that slip, and I’ll lose myself. I can’t and won’t let that happen for her or anybody.



## CHAPTER 19

# CHER

I WAKE to the tickle of his lips on my foot.

He's hidden under the sheet as I squirm my free leg. He grabs that ankle firmly in his hand while focusing his mouth on my tied leg. I don't like to be tickled, so I continue to resist. But the more I resist, the more firmly he squeezes my free ankle in his strong hand. *Ouch.*

With a sigh, I stop moving, and he relaxes his grip.

A trail lingers from his soft kisses, reaching my upper thigh. God, that tickles, too. I reach my free hand down, pushing on his head. "*Stop.*" But it's only half-hearted. My pussy eagerly knows the reward at the end of this soft torture.

But then again, I'm so damn thirsty; my throat is paper dry, and my eyes are itchy.

"I need *water,*" I croak with a cough, and he stops. But I can feel his hot breath on my inner thigh as he lingers a moment before sliding out from under the sheet.

He stands beautifully shirtless, his sculpted, tanned torso a sight for sore eyes. The tattoos on his arms are tropical and exotic: a tiger peaking predatorily between ferns, a

black sail with a skull and bones on it, and the letters H O scrolled in cursive. This organization he works for isn't just a job to him. It's his identity. How can any girl ever compete with that?

He turns and grabs a bottle of water from the edge of the nightstand.

When he turns to face me, our eyes lock—and there it is! That charming twinkle surfacing like a polar sun seems to be what I live for these days. Knowing it's fleeting, I gaze at him while I drink.

"How does a shower and breakfast sound?" he says, and I smile with a nod. But then, the worries occupying my dreams last night move to the front of my mind, and I frown.

"What is it?" he says, sitting on the bed.

"I have to tell my family and friends that I'm away, or they—"

"Yes, I've thought of this. You can contact them today."

I sigh in relief, and he takes my hand.

"Is that it?"

"Well..." I look away briefly, listening for *him*.

Pirate—*Bastion*—shakes his head at me disapprovingly.

"Even with a wall between you, you still obsess over him!" He yanks the sheet from my body. "I'll get him off your mind," he says firmly.

His threat makes my heart speed up as he lowers his black sweatpants, exposing his thick, hard erection.

"That's what you want, isn't it, love? To learn to forget him?"

My lips part, and I faintly nod. I can't deny it's true.

"I'm going to keep punishing and claiming you until I've fucked all the memory of that weasel from your body

and mind. Until it's only me who occupies the dark corners of your heart and soul."

His words reverberate through me as he climbs between my legs and spreads my thighs.

"Your pussy needs breakfast, too," he rasps, licking his lips as he grabs his thick cock in hand, pumping it twice until it swells red with veins. Blood floods my core as my pussy aches with need.

"But I'm not giving you what you want quite yet," he teases. He inches forward on his knees until that thick beast is before my mouth.

"I want you to suck my balls before I put my cock inside your pretty mouth."

He scoots closer, and I duck my head, sucking his balls into my mouth and enjoying the manly taste of him and the way he growls in the back of his throat.

He grabs my hair in his hand and guides me upward before sliding the tip of his cock past my lips. He's already so swollen that my mouth can barely contain him as he thrusts, grazing along my teeth.

"Good girl," he rasps, thrusting deeper until I gag on his fullness.

Pulling out, he lowers on his knees before grabbing my thighs and gloriously shoving his cock inside my wanton pussy. He clutches my throat with one hand while he fucks me, deep and hard.

I'm instantly panting, my heart beating in my ears as his pelvis slams my clit, and each forward thrust of his powerful hips fills me inside with his tumescent morning erection—*oh, god, yeah.*

I'm burning hot near the edge of release, and my thighs clamp as my pussy spasms around his swollen cock. Grunt-

ing, he grows more urgent, and his hand tightens around my throat as he pounds into me.

I clutch his hand around my throat as I climax with a moan. He groans deeply, coming hard inside me before his grip loosens on my neck, and the rhythm of his thrusts slows to a stop.

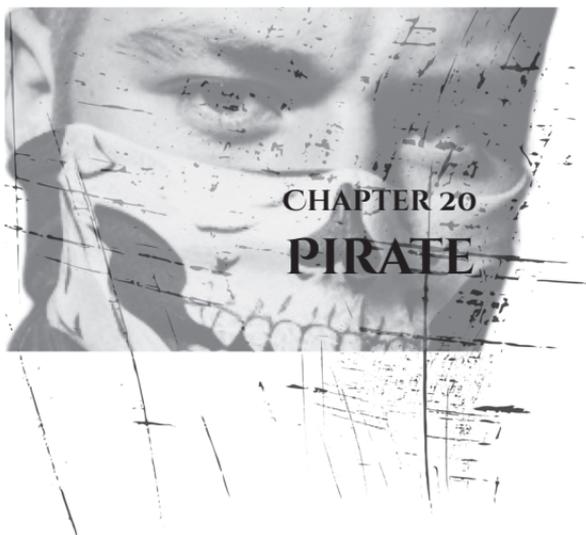
He pulls out, catching his breath as he unties my ankle and my wrist, freeing me from the bed. But I know that my freedom is both temporary and conditional. For the foreseeable future, I'll be proving myself trustworthy.

He helps me from the bed and leads me to the shower, turning on the hot water. "I'll be back in a few," he says, walking off.

"Thank you, *Bastion*," I say, and he abruptly stops. He turns back; his brows pinched over a conflicted gaze as if he half regrets sharing this part of himself with me. His real name. Not his earned mercenary name, but the name his parents gave him when he was born.

But he can't put the genie back in the bottle.

"Enjoy your shower," he mutters before leaving me.



PACING THE ROOM, I wait for Cher to finish her shower.

I stop at the window, running my hand along the curtain's edge as I process the strange sound of my name on her lips and the soft feel of her delicate throat still lingering on my palm from when I necklaced her. My hand fit perfectly around her neck, tight enough to feel her racing pulse. But choking her while fucking her was more than I could bear.

The way she knocked her hips forward, sending me deeper inside her—I've never come so hard before. Just when I thought I was done spasming inside her, her delicious pussy finished me off by swallowing my dick whole. Her moans reached a cacophony. I bet that dirty bastard heard us loud and clear, but the thought of it doesn't give me much satisfaction.

With a sigh, I look out at the tree tops descending downhill. I've given her a bit of privacy so she can shower. It dawns on me the ironic nature of taking her captive. In doing so, I've made myself a prisoner, too. Even with Dipshit locked inside my tiger's old cage, I can't move

about freely. At least, that is, not when I don't have Cher tied to the bed. As sexy as fuck as it may be, I can't keep her bound 24-7. But what if she does something stupid and tries to free her ex?

Adding to this complication, I can't resume my work outside the house until Dipshit is out of my hands for good. He must be dealt with. He'd be dead by now if it weren't for Cher. At first, I thought her resistance to my hurting him was due to her still having feelings for him. But the repulsive look she gets when his eyes meet hers makes me think otherwise. It seems her humanity drives her to care about someone as lowly as him. A fucking pedo, no less. I cannot relate to Cher's compassion, yet part of me admires it on some level.

Also, she pointed out the need for me to let her contact her family. I must allow her to check in with them before they report her missing and instigate police action. Her concern was how her family might be told she was presumed dead, and how distraught they would be, added to the danger of them becoming targets by going to her house, which is under watch by elements of the Bratva mob.

Her family needs to know that she is alive and away from town for a bit, on vacation. Speaking of vacations, I'm unsure about taking Cher to Florida with me. This current arrangement cannot be sustained. I must devise a longer-term solution to the difficulty I've created. Cher is supposed to be dead. As is that ex-piece-of-shit boyfriend of hers. But I've chosen to take Cher under my wing, and now I must mitigate the consequences as much as possible.

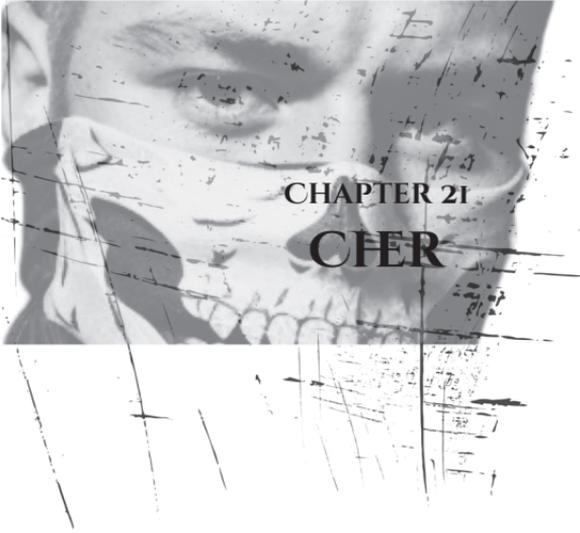
Besides all this, the thing weighing most on the back of my mind is how hard it hit me when she called me Bastion. To say I have mixed feelings about it is an understatement.

Nobody calls me Bastion anymore, save a few family members. I've been married to my work for so long that Pirate is the me that I know. Pirate is damn near immortal. Bastion is merely human, a relic of my past.

Why did I share this with her? So she could use it against me? No. That's a silly thought. A name can't have power like that unless I let it.

Still, hearing it from her lips stung. It felt like I bled a little inside, the name twisting like a summer rose with sharp, cutting thorns. I realize that this woman is more trouble than I predicted, and I have this nagging sensation that if I don't keep control, she could ruin me, breaking down what I've built.

I shake my head with a laugh. That will never happen. Control is my middle fucking name. She thinks I've been tough on her. She has no idea how tough I can be. Pray, she doesn't have to see that side of me.



WHEN I EXIT THE BATHROOM, I'm not expecting to be alone. I glimpse his back as he shuts the door behind him, leaving me. He didn't like me calling him Bastion; that much is clear. I don't want to push my luck by calling him something he doesn't like.

So, Pirate it is.

Relishing in the private freedom of the moment, I'm happy to see my bag sitting on the dresser. Pirate is a thoughtful man. I suppose that comes with him being so calculating, but it sometimes feels like more than that, as if he enjoys thinking about me.

I slip on a pair of black silk panties, a matching bra, jeggings, and a pink-and-white striped blouse. I don't know why I bother wearing my black leather flats as if I'm going somewhere. But it feels nice to get fully dressed. I even put on the few items of jewelry I managed to pack before we left my house in a rush—a pair of rose-gold earring studs and a matching rose-gold bracelet.

Perhaps if I dress the part of a lady, he will treat me as such and not just his idiotic captive who he enjoys fucking.

Maybe that's being harsh. He did, after all, tell his mom about me. Or that he's into one of his *targets*. But I guess in his world, that's sweet talk.

*Curls*—that's what I need! I grab my curling iron from my tote bag and head to the bathroom to plug it in when I hear screaming—*Jason*.

Dropping the curling iron, I rush from the room and into the hall, where I see Pirate pulling Jason like a child by the ear through the living room and into the garage. Again, he's left me alone. If I genuinely wanted to get out of here, I could find a phone and call for help.

Deciding the smartest thing to do is to continue earning his trust, I follow his path into the garage, where I see him close the trunk. He opens his bloody hand when he appears in front of his sports car. I blink at the battered chunk of flesh comprising the center of his large palm. It takes me a moment to realize that it's Jason's ear. Shit, it's his *entire ear!*

I raise my hands to my mouth with a gasp, slowly backing away.

"Oops," Pirate shrugs.

"What the?" I stare at him in shock. I'm so in shock that I let out an awkward laugh.

"Easy mistake," he says, bursting into laughter.

I shake my head in disbelief. "What?"

"It only takes seven pounds of pressure to pull off a human ear," he explains, sobering me.

"Why is he in the trunk, Pirate?"

"See that short shovel in the corner," he points, and I turn my head. "Put it in the backseat while I get my go-bag and lock up."

With shaky hands, I follow his instructions. When I open the car door, I see a blanket across the backseat,

where I put the shovel. *Oh, God, is this happening? Is Pirate about to kill and bury Jason?*

I open the front door to see if the keys are inside, contemplating making a run for it. The garage opener is in plain sight, attached to the sun visor, but I see no keys. When I hear Pirate coming, I rush to the other side and get into the passenger seat.

“Where’s your luggage?” he asks, surprising me.

“Huh?”

“Guess I forgot to tell you to bring it. Go get your things, Cher.”

“Okay. Where are we going?”

“Errands. Time is pressing.”

I nod, hurrying inside. I grab my bags and shove my sweatsuit inside before returning to the car. Though he pulls the car quickly from the garage and speeds down the road, the tires make no sound. The car hugs the road as he adeptly veers around each curve of the hill in descent.

Bright morning sunshine crowns the horizon over the big blue sea as Pirate cracks the windows, letting the cool, ocean breeze in. It’s the kind of day that makes you want to be outside, walking in a park or on the beach, not racing away with an earless criminal stashed in the trunk.

I catch Pirate in my periphery, glancing at me, and I shift my attention to him with watery eyes.

“I don’t want to be an accessory to murder.”

“Don’t be afraid,” he says.

“He’s going to die?”

He returns his eyes to the road, entering the highway Southbound.

“Yes,” he says.

“We were supposed to...I was going to tell my family today—”

“Yes. I’ve brought your phone. We’ll take care of that once we get to the airport. You can tell them we are going on a little vacation to Miami. If they happen to track your phone location once it’s turned back on, it will confirm that you are in Florida.”

“I doubt they would do that. We only speak every month or so. No reason to worry yet. My parents probably don’t even know about the phone tracker.”

“That would be the wrong kind of information to tell a serial killer who has abducted you, Cher.”

I stare at him. “I thought I was earning your trust.”

His cunning blue eyes briefly lock with mine.

“You are.”

He sounds almost melancholy when he says that.

“And...what about you, Bastion?”

His brows furrow, and he goes quiet, except for a heavy sigh that lingers. The man is troubled, and I seem to have something to do with it. If I’m careful, I can wield this to my advantage. I’m not the only one earning trust here. I still don’t know what he has planned for me long-term.

He drives silently, and I let myself get lost in the scenic views, enjoying myself until we pull off onto a lonely dirt road—the road forks, ending at a small white house surrounded by wooded acres.

“Is this yours?” I ask, and he nods.

“One of many. Get out of the car, love. Follow along.”

I now know he has my phone in this vehicle, and I’m thinking of this as he pulls a groveling Jason from the trunk. I could find my phone and call for help. But then, his earlier warning interrupts my thoughts. That the Bratva was hunting me, but they think I’m dead. Dead equals no longer hunted. If I’m rescued by the police and resume my old life, I’m a dead woman walking.

“Get the shovel and walk toward the house,” he orders. His tone is grim, and I know it isn’t just the road ending in this neck of the woods. Jason’s time is ticking.

“I’ll give you all my fucking money, man. Just let me go,” whines the dead man.

“I don’t want your filthy money. Now, walk!”

I glance back at a hobbling Jason. Pirate taps him in the ass with the tip of his boot. “Faster!”

I hurry my steps, stopping when I reach the house.

“Go around back,” orders Pirate, and I follow the stone path between trees until I reach the backyard with a small stream running through it. Branches crunch as a deer takes off running.

It was peaceful out here until we showed up.

“Over there, where that hole is,” orders Pirate, and I look around until I see a recess in the ground just beyond the stream.

I navigate a haphazard path of larger stones to cross the water before arriving at a small, narrow ditch.

Pirate shoves Jason, sending him tumbling downward. When Jason hits the bottom, he’s motionless at first. Then he lifts his head, spitting out dirt.

“Admit what you did to that girl, and I might let you live,” shouts Pirate before taking my hand in his as he stands by my side. We both watch Jason settle into a sitting position at the bottom of the hole.

“Okay, okay. I...took her. I took her, okay? Just let me fucking go.”

“Took her where, Dipshit?”

“To...to the motel, for sex, and—“

“Where did you take her after the motel?”

“I...she...wasn’t breathing, so...”

“Where did you take her!?”

“To...the dump. In a...duffel bag. I-I tossed her in. Please, let me--”

“Oh, god,” I gasp in horror over what he’s done. I hold my hands over my face as a pile of dirt hits him in the head. He spits with a moan, looking up at Pirate holding the shovel.

“Okay, there’s more!” cries Jason as more dirt hits him square in the face. “I stashed the other girl in a fucking trash can.”

“Monster!” I scream, feeling sick in the stomach as the bitter taste of bile hits the back of my throat. Holding back puke and tears, I stare at the evil worm covered in dirt beneath my feet, down in a hole where he belongs. We have a horrible confession, and this man should be going to jail.

But Pirate has other plans.

I watch in numb shock as Pirate quickly removes earth along the edge of the ditch, lowering its height by slicing away measured chunks in a circular motion. It isn’t just dirt he drops on Jason, but rocks. Big rocks.

I’m so consumed with rage over what Jason did that I do not shed one tear when his muffled, garbled pleas finally turn to silence beneath what has become his grave. There is comfort in the quiet finality of his absence. Only after Pirate covers the burial site with hay and branches and a small iron bench, do I realize what I’ve done. “I’m an accessory to murder,” I mutter.

Pirate dusts his hands in a satisfied way before coming to me. He takes my hand, and when he looks into my eyes, his expression is softer than I’ve seen before. He doesn’t look like a murderer; he looks disarmingly peaceful.

“You are *innocent*, love.”

I shake my head. “I’m *not*.”

“You didn’t come here willingly, and you didn’t help.

This was my doing and mine alone. Now, we have to hurry.”

“But...where to?”

“We’re going on a little vacay, just like you’re about to tell your parents.”

I glance again at the fresh grave before Pirate takes my hand, leading me back to the car.

“Exactly where are we going?” I ask, trying not to freak out. Jason is dead now. Dead and gone. I can’t believe I just saw that.

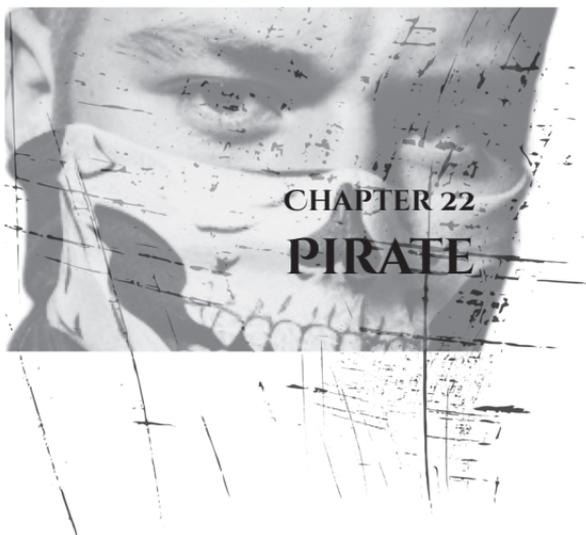
“To somewhere with palm trees. I think you need a break.”

“I think so, too.”

“Margaritas on the beach and a ride on my boat.”

“But you still haven’t told me where that is.”

“To the Port of Miami, love. We have a plane to catch.”



EN ROUTE to my private airplane, dust rises from the dirt road in the background where the body is buried. With a frown, Cher watches the scenery out the window, her thoughtful silence weighing on my mind. I could do without her mournful energy.

Usually, I feel satisfied after the rare occasion of killing, but it seems she's robbed me of that. It's not that I feel guilt or regret regarding taking out a murderous pedophile. It isn't him, his death, that is bothering me; it's *her*.

The irony of her situation has become blatantly clear to me. Rescuing Cher from the fallout of the Bratva crime ring has only brought her closer to crime. I may have saved her, but I'm no saint, and my lifestyle is anything but wholesome.

Her robbing me of my moment feels like revenge for what I have stolen from her. Before I came along, she was a legal secretary who had the misfortune of seeing too much—the wrong numbers and names on paper. But she lived a comfortable life. She spent her days tucked away in a tidy

office, her nights in the safety of her private bungalow, where she studied for the bar exam.

But then, unbeknownst to her, things got sticky in the background. Her office became a target, and everyone in it. She wasn't that important in the scheme of things, but they wanted no trails left behind. The order was served. She would be killed along with her boss and his associates. Hellfire got hold of the boss, and dealing with the lesser players was up to me.

Because of her, I didn't follow orders this time. Because of me, she is alive. She played a seductive role in that outcome, gambling by flirting with danger, putting on a show in her bedroom window for me, her secret admirer.

We played a little game and got stuck together, for better or worse. But is there another way?

I look over at her, studying the silken tendrils of chestnut hair running along her cheekbone, which point to pouty lips. The memory of kissing, sucking, and biting those soft, sexy lips and the feel of my manhood penetrating her mouth is fresh in my mind. The woman makes me feel like an addict. But I want to punish her for robbing me of my post-kill satisfaction.

I sigh, resenting her power over me while pondering my options. Do I want to take her to Miami with me? What other choice do I have?

"Where would you go, Cher?" I ask, and she turns her head toward me, confused.

"If I let you go," I explain.

The distance between her raised brows and jaw widens in disbelief.

"I..." She clears her throat. "Not the police. I'd probably be arrested."

"Possibly," I agree. "You could cut a deal. Rat me out."

She stares at me. “I’d rather do it another way. I’d like to go home--”

“No. That isn’t safe yet. In time, this will blow over. You won’t be on the run forever.”

She nods, sighing with tears in her eyes.

“I can’t go to family or friends,” she sniffles. “I’d be worried about endangering them. But I’m a little fish in a big pond; I can’t see how the bad guys would find me.”

“You are a little fish that got caught in a net. This put you on ‘the bad guys’ radar. The good news is, they think you are dead. You’ll soon be forgotten.”

She presses her lips together, visibly holding back tears. When she looks at me, something has changed in her eyes.

“Where do you fit into all this, *Bastion*?”

My jaw tightens, clamping down over the sting my real name brings.

“Why do you cringe when I say your name?” she asks gently.

I shrug, turning my attention back to the road.

“It’s an old name. The old me. Dead and buried.”

Or so I thought. Hearing it from her awakens something inside me that I honestly didn’t know I still had access to after all this time. But I can’t stand it. It feels like a false hope, a lie to taunt me into believing that life could be different.

“That name...takes me back to when I still believed in fairytales. You can’t understand.”

“I want to understand,” she says, and I glance at her. The earnest, heartfelt expression in her bright brown eyes softens the sting a little, and I shake my head with a sigh.

“What’s the fucking point, love?”

“If we’re going to be stuck together, I want to know my captor.”

"I'm not your captor anymore. You're free to go. I want to be rid of you."

"Fine, then let me go," her voice cracks, knowing that isn't an easy option.

"Nah. I won't let you die," I whisper.

"Why not?"

"Because. I'm on your side, Cherry."

"But I thought..." she trails off.

"You thought I wasn't on anybody's side? That I'm all about my work. No feelings. Just a fucking robot."

"Something like that," she shrugs.

"You aren't wrong. I am a machine for hire. It's what I'm good at, it's what I do. But... You remind me that I'm still a human. For better or worse."

"You resent that?"

"Yes."

Her brows pinch with confusion, and I hate how she makes me want to explain myself. I sigh, shaking my head as I drive.

"Just because I resent something, doesn't mean it isn't good for me," I admit, already regretting it.

I ignore the thoughtful weight of her eyes upon me as I light a cigar, listening to her stifled cry. Surely, she's overwhelmed. I've brought her into my world, and it can't be easy.

Part of me wants to stop the car and kiss away the tears. I laugh at myself for having such a sappy urge. I must focus on getting to the airport promptly. My eyelids are heavy from lack of sleep, and I look forward to a long-overdue sleep on that private airplane.

She wipes her tears and drinks from the water bottle. When the weight of her stare finally nags at me, I look over.

“Thank you for helping, Pirate. I won’t use your real name anymore if it angers you.”

“Not angry. Just... Bastion is the name given to me by a woman who didn’t yet know what was coming for us. I... became Pirate the day I killed the man who gave her permanent scars and left her nearly dead.”

“That’s terrible. You’ve...had a hard life,” she says as I turn down the airport road, blinking my tired eyes.

“Is what it is,” I shrug, dialing the code on the gate before entering. I turn left, driving around back to the open hangar where the pilots wait. “The seats fully recline for sleeping, on my plane,” I say, changing the subject.

When I stop the car, I look at Cher, who has a bewildered expression.

I reach out and take her hand without thinking. I give it a little squeeze, enjoying the sensation.

“What is it, love?”

“This is your plane?”

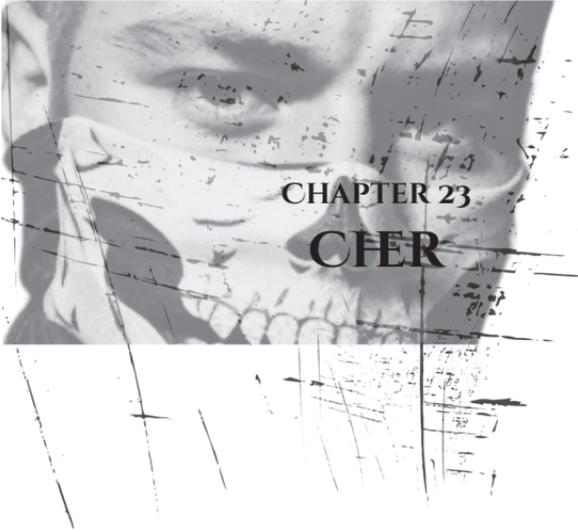
“Yes. I own it.”

Her eyes widen. She knew I was wealthy. But she didn’t know how much.

I get out and go around, helping her out of the car. Her expression hasn’t changed. “Why can’t you just walk away from all this? You don’t need the money.”

I smile at her naivete, pulling her into my arms. She doesn’t understand organized crime. It isn’t a lifestyle you walk away from, no matter how wealthy. I’m in too deep. But all I’m thinking about now is how deep I want to be inside her body and mind.

“I’ve made my bed, love. Now, I’m sharing that bed with you and intend to take *full* advantage.”



## CHAPTER 23

# CIPHER

LIKE AN IMPRESSIONIST ARTIST trying to capture a fleeting moment, I cling to the memory of his body all over mine as I study the changing colors in the skyline out the airplane window.

I can't believe I'm arriving in Miami with Pirate aboard his private airplane. For one, it's gorgeous...

The late-day sky is deep blue with a single, pink cotton candy cloud. White yachts line the calm blue waters. The sun drops a little lower, and suddenly the skyscrapers along the beach are smattered in irregular patterns of light, black towers with gold that imitate the streaking sunset behind. It occurs to me that you can't watch the sunset over the beach on the West coast of Florida; only the sunrise. But from the sky and water, the skyline glows along the cityscape as darkness seeps around it. Yeah, it's beautiful, but... God, what the *hell* am I doing here?

Staying alive, but it's more complicated than that.

Turning from the view, I study his handsome face. Pirate. Bastion. Jekyll and Hyde? I'm slowly getting to know the man I've been enthralled with since he was only a

shadow, a dangerously sexy threat. I played with fire. But will I get burned?

It's hard to think ahead, and impossible to plan. I've always been a planner and an organizer. But my existence has been upended. I am in his world now, biding my time. After the unthinkable happened—after he killed Jason—he seemed to have second thoughts about keeping me captive. Said he wanted to be rid of me, but then he wouldn't let me return home. Too dangerous. For now. Until the bad guys forget me, which should be soon enough, I'm just a pawn on a board of real players. But enough time needs to pass to convince them that I'm dead. Then I can be free. But will I be? How can I return to my old life after what has happened? I feel I'll never be the same again.

For one, I don't have a job to go back to. Everybody I worked for is dead. But changing jobs is the least of my problems. I stood and watched my ex-boyfriend be murdered. How will I live with that?

Sighing, I gather my hair aside and fasten my seat belt as the pilot announces landing. Pirate opens one eye. When he sees me, the satisfied lift of his sexy mouth makes me crazy inside. I like pleasing him, and I like how that goes both ways.

When we began our twisted interrogation of Jason, Pirate didn't have to concern himself with my feelings. But he seemed so aware of how I was feeling, intensely attuned to me. The way he deeply studies my expressions and the look in my eyes. That intensity plays itself out full throttle when he's commanding my body. He makes me feel like he's been just as obsessed with me as I have been with him. Starting with him stalking me.

This unhealthy obsession has led to this point, but it's

so much more than I could have ever bargained for. I'm in over my head, but I think so is he.

He broke his own rules because of me, like sharing private information. He regrets sharing his actual name. The first time I said, *Bastion*, he cringed. His shoulders tensed, and he breathed deeply through his nose before leaving me. The second time I said his name, he was a tad calmer. He even briefly gave me some insight into his past. But it wasn't much. It still feels like he is more comfortable being my shadow, knowing far more about me than I do him.

I suppose that's what he's used to. Being in the background, being in control, and having intel on others. He doesn't like that going both ways. At least not with me. Not yet.

Part of me wants to get closer. Part of me is scared as hell.

I expect him to feel relaxed when he wakes and his chair lifts—quite the opposite. Whatever moment of relief I saw in his blue eyes after he came hard inside me is gone. He looks as if the world's weight is on his shoulders, reminding me that this trip isn't what I told my family it was. A mere vacation. No, this is *work*.

"Do you...regret bringing me?" I ask just before the plane hits the runway.

He looks at me, running his hand through his mess of dark hair.

"What's done is done," he shrugs, his tone heavy.

Is it because he killed a man? No, I don't think so. He's done it before, and he said he has no regrets.

"Just get your things," he orders, unbuckling his seat belt before the plane has come to a complete stop.

“My bag is right here,” I say, feeling the sting of his dismissive tone.

“You might not have enough clothes,” he says, glancing at the tote bag as I lift it from the ground. His thoughtful observation softens the blow.

“How long will we be here?”

He shakes his head. “As long as it takes.”

“So, I’ll do some shopping,” I smile, trying to be positive. I don’t know when I’ll see the rest of my wardrobe again, nor anything else at my abandoned home. Every day since my abduction, I’ve thought of new things I’m missing and wish I had brought, like my favorite hand cream and my other purse.

“Are we staying at a hotel or do you have a place here in Miami?” I ask as we exit the plane.

“I’ve got a place. Maybe not what you’re expecting.”

“What could I be expecting? I know nothing about... your life.”

“You know some,” he says, his tone softer than before.

He studies my eyes a moment before reaching his hand to my face. The caress of my chin between his fingers is soothing.

“But you want to know *more*. Don’t you, love?”

Butterflies flutter madly in my chest as he reads my reaction. It’s like he enjoys putting me on the spot. I press my lips with a nod as the edge of his mouth lifts.

“Come on. Let’s go,” he half smiles, taking my hand.

When we descend the steps, a black SUV is waiting.

I expect the driver to take us into the city, but we coast along the beachfront highway until the sky rises and falls back, and a natural area with palm trees and mangroves appears.

“Biscayne Bay,” the driver says, motioning toward the sea. I gaze across the bright blue waters, landing my sights on a narrow island in the distance.

I want to ask about Pirate’s job and where we are going. But he probably doesn’t want to talk about that in front of the driver. So I watch the changing scenery in silence. When Pirate claims my hand for the second time today, part of me hates how good it feels.

Since he came into my life, he has terrified and comforted me nearly every hour of the day. So what the hell is this between us? I can’t wrap my mind around it. I highly doubt that a normal or healthy relationship can come from these twisted circumstances. All I can do, for now, is play along and make the best of things until I’m free again. If I’m going to be in captivity—or *protective custody*—I might as well enjoy what moments I can. Right now, his big, strong hand holding mine feels good.

He winks at me, nudging his head toward the window. I follow his gaze to where boats are docked along a pier.

“Black Point Marina. That’s where I keep my ship.”

My eyes widen. “Your ship?”

“A sailing yacht, to be exact.”

“We’re going boating?” I smile, liking how this feels less like a mercenary work trip than a real vacation. The driver pulls into the marina.

“After we settle in, I can take you for a spin.”

“You mean we’re staying—“

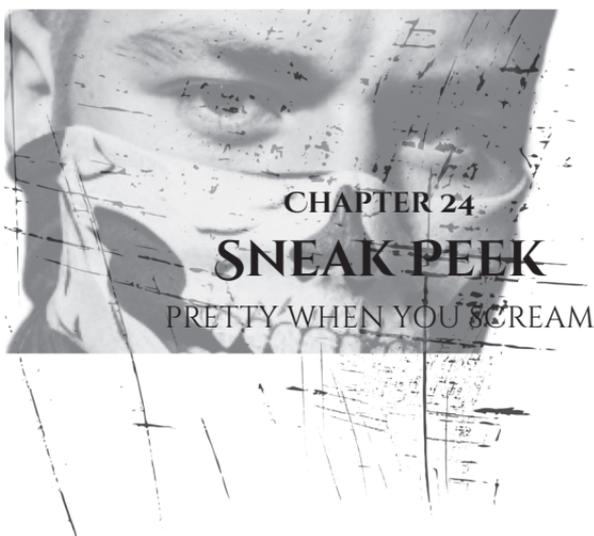
“Aboard my ship, yes.”

He seems to take satisfaction in my surprise. Now I know what he meant when he said his “place” might not be what I expected. So, the Pirate has a ship. He continues to live up to his name.

JAS P. DANE

*...to be continued...*

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I WAS in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that's when I saw him in the act. Worse, he saw me, too.

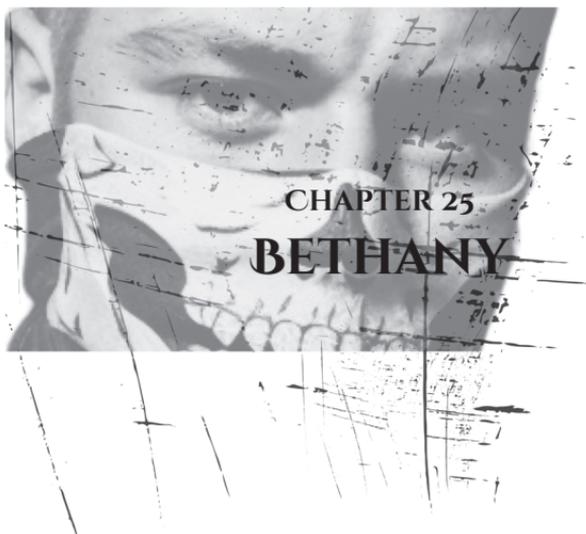
His dark gaze burned into me from behind his white skull mask.

He's the reason I've been afraid to sleep at night. You could say I became obsessed with the killer. I couldn't get the image of him slashing that guy from my head—one of the town assholes, but to see him get sliced up like that? So much blood.

When I close my eyes, I see the mask. When I open my eyes, I see the mask—in the shadows, watching. Towering, broad-shouldered, and dressed in black. He is there and gone in an instant. Or is it just my imagination?

There are theories about who he could be, but the worst theory is *mine*. It's a dark secret, and I haven't told a soul.

Around Halloween, I attended a costume party and did something I'd never done before: I had a one-night stand. The thing is, I never saw his face. His one condition when he stole me away into a dark room? That he kept on the white skull mask.



## CHAPTER 25

# BETHANY

HE'S WELL over six feet with round, solid shoulders, long arms, and long legs, and dressed in black. He has a distinctive swagger—confident and athletic but unruly, as if he doesn't like staying between the lines. He seems to need space, as if maybe he's angry about something.

I walk, gawking en route to the party at the Hollow Inn, wondering who he is. He looks back several times, piercing me with stormy eyes that cut through the holes in his white skull mask. It's Halloween, so that part isn't weird. But everything else about him is strange, and goosebumps tingle my spine when he looks at me again.

I reach the rope leading to the party inside the old Victorian, a popular B&B venue for costume parties near the old lighthouse on the Hudson River.

Skull motions me ahead.

"Ladies first," he says in a low, deep, slightly graveled voice.

"Thanks," I mutter, avoiding eye contact. I pass him and look back after the security guy lets me inside. Skull is gone.

Did he come inside? I look around, but it's hard to see beyond the wall of machine-induced fog.

I'm supposed to stay near the entrance to meet my girlfriends, but after coughing in a cloud of smoke, I search for cleaner air, leading me to the red-lit patio area at the back of the building. I text Albi and Mary to let them know my location before ordering a blood-orange-pomegranate sangria.

I check my phone, but no reply. Maybe they hit traffic. They're traveling from New York. I'm the only one in my friend group who returned to Sleepy Hollow after college. I just wasn't cut out for the major city. As a borderline autistic, New York was overstimulating for me. Too many people, cars, colliding smells, and dizzying buildings block the sun and fresh bay air.

I always felt a bit better when I was in Central Park or near the water, looking toward Brooklyn. I thought that I could get used to it there. But the architecture, history, and endless array of places to see still weren't home. Even the jaw-dropping libraries and bookstores weren't enough to keep me, and that's saying a lot for this bookish girl. I guess I'm just not one of those make-a-new-home types of people.

My phone beeps. Finally, a response from Albi. But, shit... It's bad news. There was a big accident, and they won't be here for at least two hours. The outlook of them making this party with me is not good. My shoulders slump with disappointment. I guess I'll people-watch while sipping my drink and then go home.

Scooting back in the chair with a sigh, I observe the costume-clad groups of people quickly filling the patio. My costume consists of smoky eye shadow, a black baby-doll

dress, and thigh-high stockings. I turn my head toward the already drunk and loud people to my right, dressed like characters from Beetlejuice. One has a shrunken head whipping from his wrist on a string as he makes dramatic hand gestures, laughing hysterically.

Speaking of overstimulation.

When I hear the show announcement over the speakers, I remember why I paid extra for tickets. Jumping up from my seat, I sift through the crowd until I reach the striped walls of the sitting room converted into a theater with a “show time” sign hanging above the open door. I shuffle between shoulders, facing the pop-up stage at the back near an antique piano. Most chairs are already taken, so I stop behind the first row. The lights dim, and my eyes widen in disbelief as a hand slides over my mouth. I gasp, startled as hell.

“Shh,” he says with hot, minty breath, his lips grazing my ear.

I jerk my elbow backward into his firmly muscled torso. “Let go,” I hiss, muffled under his large hand. His fingers are warm and strong.

“Somebody is going to die tonight, Bethany.”

He knows my name, and his dead-serious tone sends my heartbeat racing. I thrust my elbow into him. “Get off!”

“With you? Gladly,” he whispers. His voice is sexy enough to make my body respond in ways that it shouldn’t. I guess it’s been too long since a man touched me possessively—never this possessively.

“You need to leave this room, Beth. It isn’t safe.” He kisses my earlobe, sending heat through my core. Damn, get a grip, girl.

“There will be a lot of *blood*. Understand?” I nod my head.

“Good girl,” he whispers in a deep tone that manages to make my panties damp. It defies logic, but he has a sexy, commanding voice thick with male prowess. With a voice like that, it’s hard to imagine that he isn’t drop-dead gorgeous.

His hand releases my mouth as the stage lights filter brighter, and the show begins. I turn around and look up, and the man in the white skull mask nudges his head toward the hall. He takes my hand, and I follow him just far enough to get some answers before yanking my hand away.

“What the hell is going on?”

He cocks his skull head like a predator eyeing its victim. “There’s a killer on the loose, Bethany.”

The coldness in his tone sends a chill down my spine. “What? How do you know my name?”

At first, when the screaming begins from behind, I think it’s part of the show. But then people start running from the room, and I almost get knocked over. Skull grabs me by the wrist and tugs me away from the rush. He leads me upstairs, and I resist, trying to pull away, but he grabs hold of my arms and pivots me forward with a push. “Move,” he orders.

At the top of the stairs, he drags me into a room where he shuts the door, locking it. From there, he orders me into another room, using a key to open the door.

“We’ll wait it out in here,” he says coolly.

I pull my phone from my pocket, and he snatches it. “Calling the police won’t help,” he snickers. “Not in time.”

“Hey, give that back! What is going on?”

He places my phone high on a shelf out of reach between storage boxes. “Trust me.”

“Tell me what the hell is going on!”

“Where’s the fun in that, Beth?”

Screams rise from downstairs, and I bring my hands to my mouth, horrified. "Oh, god. What...is happening?"

"What needs to be done." He takes my hand and leads me to the bed. "Sit. Relax."

"They sound like—"

"They're being slaughtered? Not all of them. Just the important ones."

"Are you fucking kidding me? How do you know?"

"I know things," he shrugs. "But I want to distract you from the chaos."

He sits on the bed beside me and turns me to where we are facing each other. I reach for his mask, but he snatches my hand and kisses it.

"No looking," he warns.

"What are you hiding?" I mutter as he trails his lips down my hand. His kisses are slow and deliberate.

When the gunshots ring out, I begin to cry. He gently pushes me back on the bed. "It's going to be okay," he says in a low, soothing voice.

He throws off his black hoodie, exposing his muscled chest under a fitted tee. Then he climbs between my legs, kissing slowly up my ankles through my black stockings. Wanting so badly to tune out the horrid noise, I let myself get lost in the soothing feel of his lips on my skin when he lifts the lower part of his mask, exposing his squared jaw with the divot at the center and a perfectly masculine mouth.

He trails up my legs but stops before his masked head is within reach of my hands. I realize he has a black rope when he gets up on his knees.

"I can't take the risk," he says, scooting between my legs and gathering my hands above my head.

“What are you doing?” I say, tugging my wrists, but it’s already too late. He has me tied to the bed as he grabs my knees and lifts my legs into a bent position. There is a loud banging commotion downstairs as he ducks down between my legs. Ignoring the alarming clatter, I close my eyes as his mouth caresses my thighs, and a moan escapes my lips when he pulls my panties aside and slowly circles my clit with his tongue, gently sucking.

“I knew you’d be wet, baby,” he rasps, the vibration of his mouth tickling my pussy as his tongue slips inside me. My head knocks back against the bed frame in startled pleasure. Oh, damn, that feels...so good as he thrusts his tongue back and forth inside me—am I getting off while people are dying? No, people aren’t dying. It’s just part of the show. I want to believe that.

I greedily rock my hips against his mouth as he fucks me with his tongue, pressure building in my pussy with each stroke. Getting close to the edge of release, I wish I had free hands to hold his head in that perfect spot while I—*oh, damn. Yeah, just like that.*

“*Mm.* You taste so fucking good, Beth. I knew you would.”

“Oh, god...yeah,” I cry out, my body flushing hot as I tumble over the edge of climax, my pussy spasming with release. The man behind the mask goes quiet. He cocks his head, watching me as I catch my breath. Is the part where he kills me?

I gasp when he lifts to his knees and pulls out his thick, beastly cock. “Now suck my dick like a good girl,” he says, tapping the fat tip of his erection against my lips.

I want to grab his hard, swollen cock in my hand, but all I can do is open wide as he shoves himself inside my

mouth. He ruthlessly thrusts back and forth, his shaft sliding over my tongue and hitting the back of my throat until I choke.

“Do you want me to fuck your pussy, Beth? I promise to pull out,” he rasps.

I hesitate, wishing I didn't want so badly to say yes. I'm about to ask him to free my wrists so I can wipe my mouth, but he doesn't wait for an answer. He hikes my legs up, supporting his weight with long, strong arms as he lowers his hips between my thighs. I moan as he penetrates my pussy with one hard thrust. My jaw drops, and my eyes roll back in my head as he fucks me slow, deep, and hard. *God, yes-s.*

The frame of the bed slams against the walls as he pounds inside me, each thrust gaining in urgency as his huge cock fills me up completely. I can see a hint of his muscular ass in the moonlit mirror across the room, thrusting back and forth.

The frustration of being unable to grab onto his strong arms only adds to the desperate need building inside me as I reach the edge again. This time, it feels like I will fall so hard that my whole body burns hot with pressured angst. I try to muffle my scream as I come so hard I could die. But I can't stop myself from screaming as his pelvis slams my clit, and the tip of his swollen erection knocks against my cervix. The high pitch of my release fills my ears, and I gasp for air, barely catching my breath as he pulls his cock from me. He comes all over the bed with a deep groan.

I stare up at him with mixed emotions. This is so far out of my character that I'm in shock. I don't even know his name.

“We need to hurry,” he rasps, untying me.

He puts on his hoodie and takes my hand, helping me

out of bed. I change clothes, and he hands me my phone before rushing me into the hall, where another set of stairs leads down to a mudroom.

We escape out a back door, and I try to keep up with his pace. My heart races amidst the sound of police sirens as he firmly holds my hand for the two blocks it takes to get to my townhouse.

“How did you know where I live?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer.

He lifts the mask just enough to kiss me, then bites my lip as he looks into my eyes through dark slits. His stormy gaze is cold and unreadable as he pinches my chin between his fingers.

“You’re fucking pretty when you scream,” is the last thing he says before leaving me alone in the night.



I LOCK every door and window in my house and turn on the radio, listening to the news about the “murder spree” at the Hollow Inn.

Three people were killed: males who attended the party together. The skeleton-masked assailant in dark clothing used a curved, claw-like dagger, a cross between a knife and a sword. Somebody shot at him, but he got away.

My stomach drops as I fall back into a chair, bringing my shaky hands to my face. People were murdered while I was having sex with a stranger in a room upstairs! He knew what was about to go down and warned me about it before forcing me upstairs.

When I asked what was happening, he replied, “What needs to be done.” Which means...he’s likely an accomplice to murder.

Everything happened so fast that I barely had time to think. I let him convince me that I deserved a distraction. I'll never get the image of him while he fucked me from my mind. Half cast in shadow and moonlight, his stormy eyes were fixed on me through the slits of his mask, the muscles flexing beneath his fitted tee as he thrust his body into me, and the visual tease of the corded muscles in his solid arms that I couldn't even touch as I came.

The sight of him in that mask, grabbing his huge dick in hand and spurting his semen all over the sheet and red bed quilt, I'll never see anything like that again.

Unless...

My heartbeat speeds at the thought of him knowing my name and where I live. Will he visit me, expecting sex? Should I report this to the police?

I should.

But the thought of telling a cop what I did is mortifying, and I can't bring myself to do it. I need time to think it over.

So, I take a hot shower and try to sleep. When I close my eyes, I see the mask, and when I jolt up in bed in a hot sweat, I see the white mask just through the cracked blinds outside my window.

I jump from bed, my heart racing as I part the blinds, peering into the darkness. He's not there now. Did I imagine it? It dawns on me that he had a key to a room inside the Hollow Inn—a big, brown, historical-looking skeleton key. Where did he get that?

I throw on a robe and head to my small desk. If there is one thing I'm good at that can help me get out of panic mode, it's doing research. I majored in research in college while working as a local librarian.

I type in Hollow Inn on my laptop, reading about its history in search of any possible clues as to why Skull

would have a key. The room was only accessible from another locked room off the main hall, which seemed to be being used for storage. There were boxes stacked near the bed.

He could have stolen the key. But...what if there's another connection?

I've named this dark riddle "Skeletons."

A skeleton mask and a skeleton key. What is the connection, and why did people die? Is this the start of something or the end?

Then, that memory I tried so hard to forget from a year ago flashes into my mind. The murder. The man in the mask. Blood. So. Much. Blood. The killer looked right at me before I ran.

No, I can't think of it!

I look up with a jolt to a tapping sound at the window. My stomach jumps as I get up, and my heart thuds in my chest when I reach the window. Slowly, I open the blinds to find a piece of paper taped to the glass with red writing.

*Shh. I'll be watching you, Beth.*



I FLIP the window sign to Open and unlock the front door, then look around with a sigh. Beth's Books could use a makeover, but my little "new and used" bookstore is on a limited spending budget. It's my first year in business, and my profit margin is relatively low.

A woman appears outside the door, and I head to the counter and open my powder compact to check my face in the mirror. I have bags under my hazel eyes and should have put on some mascara or maybe a dab of eyeshadow.

It's too late now. At least my mess of dark hair is tied into a neat ponytail.

April ducks in wearing a wet raincoat, letting the door slam shut. I need to fix that door. A waft of cool air gives me a chill, and I tighten my grey cardigan over my chest.

"Morning, Beth," she chirps, far more awake than I'll ever be today.

"Morning," I say, stifling a yawn. I don't do well without sleep, and today will be rough.

Three things kept me awake—coffee, anxiety, and adrenaline.

The anxiety came from knowing people were dead and that I was indirectly involved. The coffee, of course, facilitated my research, which was the source of my adrenaline. I always get a buzz when researching, but the topic was on a whole new level this time. As tired as I am now, I was wide awake until four a.m. Life has never been more disturbingly exciting or excitingly disturbing—either way.

Mostly, I'm mortified over what happened, but somehow, I don't feel my life is totally in danger. But maybe I should. In the meantime, for my sanity and coping, the research scientist in me has made this into a project. I will find answers.

April meets me at the counter, looking both ways before she speaks.

"Can you believe it?"

I shake my head, averting eye contact while sorting through a box of books. The last thing I want to discuss is what everyone will be going on about forever.

"Like clockwork," she says, and I look up. "What do you mean?"

"Oh. Forgot you were away at college. But didn't your mom mention the serial killer?"

Chills tingle my spine as I return to sorting, trying to keep cool.

“She...mentioned an uptick in crime,” I say.

She puffs out air. “I think it’s more than that. Last November, two guys were cut to pieces on the riverwalk. Then, a few days later, they found that guy up at Tower Hill outside the Rockefeller Preserve. His neck was nearly severed.”

“Yeesh, that’s terrible. You think it’s all related?”

She nods. “I’m not the only one who thinks that. Sara Luton’s husband is a cop, and he thinks the dead victims were killed with the same weapon. The wounds look like they were gashed with a meat hook.”

I cringe, making a face.

“Whoever this guy is, he isn’t using the typical slasher weapon. The news said one of the survivors described it as a claw-shaped dagger.”

“Yeah, I heard. Long and curved; a cross between a knife and a sword.”

So, everybody thinks this is a one-person job. But I know otherwise. When Skull said, “There is a killer on the loose,” he wasn’t just talking about one person. For all I know, they operate as a group, maybe even a network.

God, did I have sex with a serial killer?

If he’s a serial killer, why did he force me away from the scene of the crime? Just because he wanted to fuck me?

He was forceful, but he wasn’t violent. He didn’t hurt me; he made me orgasm so hard that I screamed. It felt like I was outside myself listening to the high-pitched sound, and I was too overwhelmed with coming all over his giant cock to stop myself...

I hear his deep, gravelly voice on repeat in the back of my mind. “You’re pretty when you scream.”

But I wasn't the only one screaming that night. People screamed in pain while I screamed in pleasure. People died while I was getting off upstairs with a masked stranger.

I feel like I'm guilty by association.

I've never been the kind of girl to have many skeletons in my closet to feel ashamed about. I follow the rules and live a quiet, bookish life.

But now.

Now, everything has changed. I have the worst kind of skeletons imaginable, and they aren't the kind that stay hidden in the dark confines of locked-up secrecy. These skeletons jump out from the shadows when you least expect them. One of them knows where I live, and one is watching me.

It darkens outside, thundering, and big drops of rain hit the windows as the lights flicker inside my shop. It's getting late, and the shop will be closing soon. Only a dozen people have come in today. Each time it's a tall or tallish male, I analyze him a little too much, looking for any resemblance to Skull.

After reheating a cup of coffee in the microwave, I return to my laptop, which is open on the counter near the cash register. I sit on a stool and finish the article I was reading about the local legendary mansion. I don't think it has anything to do with my research; it only popped up in the search results because it has "skull" in the title.

The Greylinn estate is known locally as "Skull Hill" because its massive 45,000 sq ft old-world mansion sits on the hill by that name. A large skull-shaped boulder is at the bottom near an old well where people would get water back when.

Stretching over one hundred twenty acres, the Greylinn estate is legendary. We used to go there when I was a kid,

and we'd walk the lush, perfectly manicured grounds for hours. That was before they closed it to visitors. The Greylinns moved to Calabasas, California, and their kids, all adults now, moved out. But the estate is still in the family and closed to visitors. Seems crazy to maintain a palace like that with nobody living in it. At least, I don't think anybody is still living in it. I can't begin to understand what having that much money is like.

But what does this have to do with the murders? Nothing. I'm more interested in the history of the Hollow Inn and why Skull had a key if he didn't just steal it, which he may have.

But wait a minute...

At the end of the article, it says that, like a few other historical buildings in town, the Greylinns also own the Hollow Inn. Hm. Weirdly, this adds another skull or skeleton to this dark riddle--how many skeletons are there to find? This...can't get any more surreal.

Jarring me from my thoughts, the thunder cracks loudly, startling me. The lights flicker again, dimming. I sure hope the power doesn't go out. I reach into a drawer, find the flash-light, and flick it on to ensure it works.

When the front door opens, I look up. A tall guy in a black hoodie ducks his head, comes in, and briefly nods in my direction before disappearing down an aisle. The way he walks straight back suggests he knows where he is going, but I don't recall seeing him before.

"Can I help you find anything?" I call out, but he doesn't answer. Maybe he came in to find a bathroom with no intention of looking at books. People do that sometimes, as if my shop is a gas station. But I guess when you gotta go, you gotta go. I haven't bothered keeping it locked. Seems rude.

I hear his words: *There's a killer on the loose*. Maybe April's right and the murders are connected, which would mean the killer(s) live nearby.

"Just let me know if you need anything," I call out again, trying not to feel suspicious about the unknown man I'm alone with.

I shouldn't be paranoid, but how can I not be? He's not the only operator; these guys could be anybody.

With a sigh, I turn to grab my water bottle from my bag when a book slams down on the counter behind me, making me jump before spinning around.

"Jeez, that was loud," I say, and the hooded guy on the other side of the counter smirks at me. Despite his attitude, he has a gorgeous face, even if it's half-shrouded by a hood.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he says in a low voice, causing me to pause, my heart quickening. His voice isn't as deep as Skull's and not as graveled, but it's similar enough to creep me out. He has intense eyes—bluish-grey. Maybe in the moonlight, they look stormy like Skulls.

I nervously fumble with the book on the counter, *The Damnation Game* by Clive Barker.

"Horror books are half on right now for Halloween," I say.

He taps his finger on the counter. "Yeah. I saw the sale sign."

His tone isn't friendly, but it isn't quite unfriendly. He has an aggressive edge about him. He's so tall, with intense eyes looking at me directly, it makes my cheeks flush. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be so easily flustered if I had slept last night.

I straighten my posture, smiling professionally. "Did you find everything you were looking for, or may I help you with something else?"

“You may help me with ringing up that book,” he says in a low, measured voice, handing me a crisp, new hundred-dollar bill. But his book only costs \$2.99. Most people pay with credit. Luckily, I always start the day with some change in the drawer.

I open the register, gather his change, and start counting it back to him on the counter.

“So, who do you think did it?” he interrupts, and I pause, looking up at him. He must be a local if he's talking about the murders. Or maybe he's an out-of-town journalist. His poker face is unreadable, his grey eyes intent upon me. I swallow thickly.

“No idea,” my voice nervously wavers. I return to counting.

“A lot of rumors,” he interrupts again. This time I don't look up. My heartbeat speeds as I continue counting.

“I...don't know anything,” I say, feeling defensive. “You sure about that?”

Is it just me, or does his tone hint at being accusatory? I look up, and our eyes lock for a few long seconds. He's vaguely familiar--*oh, god. Is it him?* The thunder crashes, and the lights flicker.

“Do I...know you?” I mutter, my heart beating in my ears.

He shrugs.

I hand him the book, and his thumb slides over my hand as he takes it, raising the hairs on the back of my spine and sending a shot of heat through my pounding chest.

He slightly bows his head before turning away.

I watch him leave in silence. A familiar swaggle to his walk sends chills down my spine. No. I'm just imagining it. Not him.

God, my mouth is dry. I chug my water bottle before

going to the bathroom to splash my face with cool water. It's time to go home.

I pass through the horror aisle on my way back from the bathroom, and that's when I see it. A message written in red letters on a big white piece of paper stuck to the spine of a book.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears as I pull it down. Without reading it, I rush to the front of the store and grab my things before locking up. I want to get safely into my car before it's dark. My car is right out front, and the moment I sit in my seat with the doors locked, I pull the paper from my bag and read the letters written neatly in the shade of blood.

*Be a good girl, Beth.*



AFTER LISTENING to the news and learning that some of the survivors of the “murder spree” are in the hospital due to being trampled in the commotion, I turn off the radio and attempt to go through my normal evening routine.

I'm so tired that I feel like a zombie as I go through the motions: eating, showering, and brushing my hair and teeth. I water the plant, tie the trash bag off, and put a new bag in the can. I'm too afraid to take the trash out in the dark, so I set it by the front door inside the small foyer. It can wait until morning. Being afraid of the dark is part of my new routine.

Over the next hour, I continue doing routine things, but mentally, I'm somewhere else, the memory of the night of the murders piercingly pinned to my brain like a Polaroid picture. It's all I see, and the repeating mantra of the riddle is all I hear: *skeletons. Skull.*

The idea of sleeping seems like a sick joke. But I already feel like shit from pulling an all-nighter, and if I don't get some sleep tonight, I will become physically ill.

I check the locks on the doors and windows and then recheck them before turning out all the lights. Normally I find the dark peaceful. Not tonight. I turn on the kitchen light before finally going to bed, where I try in vain to clear my mind enough to sleep.

The only thing that makes me feel better also makes me feel worse. That I was protected from the scene of the crime. I wasn't trampled or killed because Skull insisted that I leave the room before forcing me upstairs.

I try to focus on the part of that equation that makes me feel better: that he didn't hurt me then, and so why would he hurt me now? This means that even though he might be out there stalking me, I can safely sleep. I tell myself this as I take deep breaths, imagining a peaceful meadow where deer are frolicking.

I think I'm asleep when I see something lurking in the shadow of the woods like a predator. The deer don't seem to notice—why don't they notice? A tall, dark shadow appears at the meadow's edge, but they don't hear it. What is wrong with these deer? When the shadow lunges forward, they all look up, but it's already too late. The menace descends, flattening over the scenery like an inkblot. When the shadow retreats, only skeletons remain.

Jolting up in bed, I try to calm my pounding heart. "Shh," hums a distinctively male voice. Low, deep, and steady.

"Who is it?"

"You're dreaming," he says, and I lie back down, confused. I'm delirious, that's all. I must sleep.

I wake again in a cold sweat and check the time on my

phone. It's 3 a.m., and I crashed around nine, so I've been sleeping a fitful six hours—at least, that's something. I try to go back to sleep when a thought occurs to me, and my research brain is activated.

So, I get up and go to my desk, looking for more articles on Skull Hill. I want to know more about the family, especially the kids. They didn't go to public school, and I never saw them around.

I do some more digging on the family and learn that Lindsay and Landon Greylinn are twins, three years older than me. They went to Groton boarding school near Boston, which would explain why I never knew them. I zoom in on a picture of them together. They are identical twins: tall, dark-haired, with greyish-blue eyes. Their parents, Charles and Blythe, were known philanthropists. But when they relocated to the warm beaches of Southern California, they stopped allowing the public to visit and use the lower part of their acreage as a community park.

The twins are heirs to their parents and grandparents' billion-dollar oil fortune. Lindsay Greylinn is engaged and lives in Manhattan, but Landon...lives at the family estate in Sleepy Hollow! He's twenty-five years old, unmarried, and has no kids. Wow, so somebody is living up there alone on the hill all this time?

Skull Hill.

It's only called that because of a stupid rock, so I need to focus on other details.

Skull had a key. He could have stolen it, or...

How tall is Landon Greylinn? I do some more digging before learning that Lindsay is 5'8, and Landon is 6'3.

God, what is the probability that the tall, slate-blue-eyed, billionaire heir, Landon Greylinn, is part of a murder

gang? Practically nil. He has everything in the world he could ever

WANT and would have no reason to kill people. I mean, unless he's just crazy and doing it for the thrills.

I zoom in on a picture of him at a charity event with his parents when he was seventeen. It's a garden party amongst the hedges, flowers, and perfect lawns of the Greylinn estate. Everyone is wearing white and bright colors—except for him. He wears a dark blue shirt rolled at the sleeves, a Rolex on his wrist, and black jeans. He doesn't smile for the camera, and his intense eyes stand out. He has the kind of intriguing look in his eyes that makes you want to know what he's thinking. He's probably thinking something very different from the people around him.

He reminds me of that guy at the store who reminded me of--oh, hell. Did I have sex with Landon Greylinn?

No freaking way. It cannot possibly be him. That's crazy.

When my phone suddenly rings at 5 a.m., I jump, startled. Shit.

Why is April Fetzer calling me this early? I didn't know she had my number, but our moms are friends, so that's not hard to come by. This has to be about recent events.

I gather myself before answering. Just play it cool.

"Morning, April."

"Oh, hi. Sorry to bother you. Did I wake you?" "No. It's okay."

"I just wanted to give you a heads up. Sarah Hamilton said the police were doing rounds with any locals who attended the party. Tiff said you were there, and I just wanted to check in with you."

My stomach drops. “Yeah, I was there.”

“Why didn’t you tell me when I came into the shop? I guess you’re okay, then.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay, well. Just letting you know that the police will probably come by your house or shop.”

“Thanks for letting me know, April.”

“NO PROBLEM. If you ever need to talk to someone about what you went through, I’m here. Just putting that out there.” Even though she’s probably already heard it from so many other people by now, I can tell she wants me to tell her my version of that night. But there is no way I’m getting into that

with her or anybody else.

“Thank you, April. I...should go.” “Okay. I’ll talk to ya later, hon.” “Bye.”

I go to the kitchen and make myself a fresh cup of coffee, nearly dropping it when I hear a door slam shut. I freeze, my heart thudding. Okay, calm down. All the doors are locked, so it must have been an inside door. The heater may have kicked on and caused a draft or something.

Listening for any more sounds, I turn on the lights around the house and recheck the windows and doors. Everything is as it should be--how long will I be living in a state of paranoia?

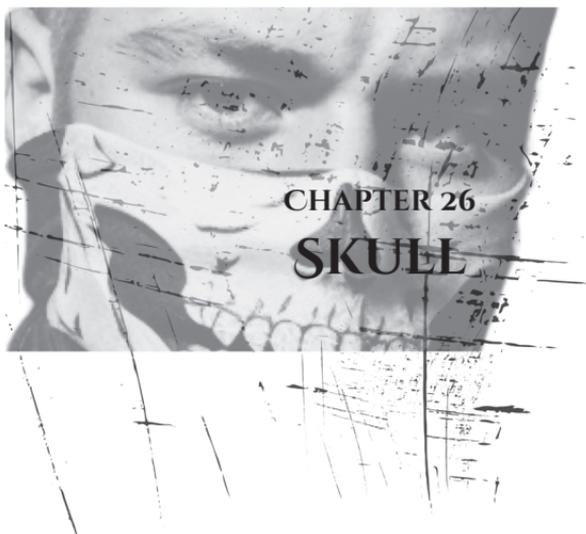
When I get to my room, I audibly gasp, bringing my hands to my mouth. A piece of paper with red writing is attached to my laptop screen.

Holy fuck. It’s him. In my house!

The blinds rattle over my bedroom window, and I realize it’s open. That’s how he got in! I rush to the window,

slamming it shut and locking it. He might still be out there. The dream of the deer flashes into my mind. I woke up, and a voice lulled me back to sleep—a man's voice. Oh, god. Was he here the whole time?

With my phone in my hand, I pace the room, deliberating if I should call the police. My head is spinning so fast that I fall into the chair. The blood-red words stare back at me like a vital warning: *Good girls never tell.*



WHEN I EXIT my silver Mercedes Humvee, the moon is low, and the ocean downhill looks flat and grey, with a hint of light on the cloudy horizon.

Ace cocks his head, pinching the tip of his blonde beard. “Your parents ever fucking home?”

I leer at him. “Funny. And this isn’t my home.”

He and Banks look at me like I’m crazy, but they already know that about me.

“What about the gardener?” jokes Banks, pulling his mask off and running his hand through his dark curls.

I crack my knuckles. “Landscape is in dreamland. Now get the fucking body out of my vehicle before it starts to smell.”

“Sir, yes, fucking Sir,” Banks drawls over his shoulder as they disappear around the back of the vehicle.

Ace has the black body bag slung over his shoulder when they reappear. “He’s a lightweight. I’ve got this.”

“They finally reported him missing,” scoffs Banks.

I shake my head. “Interrogating a druggie rapist isn’t

my cup of tea. He was too numb to feel pain. At least we got the names.”

“Three dead, and they call it a massacre?” snickers Ace.

“They like to exaggerate,” says Banks.

The guys follow me down the trail to the old family cemetery, surrounded by hedges and massive oaks, where a freshly dug hole awaits the dead bastard inside the body bag.

Ace squats before he lugs the limp body from his shoulder, tossing it in. It hits the dirt with a heavy thunk, and I step forward, looking down into the hole. An image of the last time he was alive flashes into my mind, with deep, red gashes on his chest and arms.

“It’s nothing but maggots for this one,” says Banks, grabbing one of three shovels, and we all pitch in until the grave is covered. Next comes the sod and rocks sprinkled with twigs. This no longer looks like a grave but a stretch of grass between headstones.

I crack my neck. “I need a fucking whiskey.”

Banks gives me a hard stare. “What about...that girl?”

My jaw tightens. “What about her?”

“You deviated from the plan,” he shrugs as if that means something needs to be done about it.

I narrow my eyes. “My plan. I can’t deviate the fuck I want. Remember who pays you.”

“Shit, I don’t need the money,” Banks spits on the ground, and I crack an evil grin.

“I know you do it for the love, you sick, preppy fuck.”

We smirk at each other.

“Are we staying over? I’m tired as shit,” yawns Ace.

I run my hand through the back of my hair. My scalp is sweaty, and it’s time for a hot shower.

“Whatever,” I say. “Just don’t touch anything that’s not in the kitchen. I’ll be in and out before dawn. Let’s go.”

Bank’s eyes me suspiciously, getting under my skin.

“Where you off to, Skull?”

“None of your fucking business.”

We return to my Mercedes, and I drive up the paved road until I reach the sprawling mansion. This place was never a home for me. Now, it’s just somewhere to bury the bodies.

Inside the marble foyer, I head to the nearest walk-in shower.

As the hot water pours down my back, I think of that nice, innocent girl named Bethany and how much I enjoyed defiling her. How could I not? When I saw her walking to the party, I was already making plans for her. Then when I came up behind her and grabbed her pretty mouth in my hand, her reaction made my cock so fucking hard.

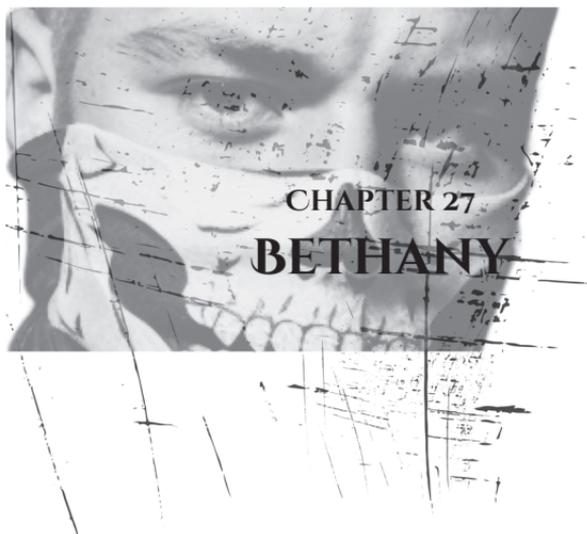
She was alarmed, and she fought back a little. But just before she delivered a few blows of her pointy elbow into my muscled stomach, I felt her mouth relax under my hand as my lips grazed her soft earlobe, and a delicious little moan vibrated against my palm. I knew her pussy was already getting wet for me.

I’m thinking maybe, just maybe, Bethany gets aroused when she’s scared. That is... So. Fucking. Hot. Yeah, I want to scare her some more.

I smile as I wash myself, thinking she is a neglected little thing. She may not have admitted to herself when I first touched her skin, but she needed somebody to finish the job I began. When I got her upstairs, she was putty in my fucking hands. God, I loved the taste and feel of her sweet hot pussy, and when I got my dick wet inside her--mm--yeah, fucking her juicy cunt was pure heaven.

Without a doubt, I am not done with that pretty little thing.

If she only knew the savage things I had planned for her, Oh, I'm going to make her scream again; she just doesn't know it.



I LEAVE my house two hours early because I'd rather talk to the police while I'm in work mode at the bookshop than inside the privacy of my home, where I'll feel more vulnerable. If I'm going to be lying through my teeth, I should do it with confidence.

There is no way to interpret Skull's notes and breaking into my house as anything other than a threat.

*I'll be watching you, Beth.*

*Be a good girl.*

*Good girls never tell.*

Because of him, I know certain things that others do not, and he wants me to keep my mouth shut.

I know that the killer didn't act alone. I know that more than one of these guys wears a skull mask. Even though it was pretty dark in the room that night, and Skull kept his shirt on, hiding any tattoos, I know his dimensions. He's over six feet tall and built like an athlete. His eyes are greyish.

God, why the hell did he bring me into this? Now, he's

watching me like a hawk and has no qualms about breaking into my home. This shit is whack.

Nerves rattle my gut as I close and lock the front door to my shop. The store doesn't open until 9 a.m., so I don't bother flipping the sign yet. I've never lied to a police officer before, and I'm not looking forward to it.

If I tell the truth, I'm afraid it will make me an accessory to murder. I could tell them that he forced me upstairs. That part is true. But I can't claim innocence over having sex with Skull while knowing that people downstairs were being hurt and that he was a part of it, which makes me part of it.

This isn't the only reason I must lie. I'm afraid of what Skull will do to me if he learns that I ratted him out. He didn't hurt me that night; he protected me. But that could change if I don't do what he wants. Was it really worth it to him to tip his hand in this way just so he could fuck me? Now I'm this problem on his hands that he must stalk and scare into submission? Or...is this his idea of a game?

If I could go back, I wouldn't have gone with him. Then again, I could have been one of the ones trampled or killed. Hindsight is such a bitch.

I busy myself finding solace amongst the stacks of books piled haphazardly on the book cart, reading the spines and placing them on the proper shelves. The scent of books and the sounds they make when I flip the pages, shut them, and stack them are always calming. Being surrounded by books is my idea of heaven.

I always linger the longest in the mystery aisle—it's probably the most organized section in the store because it's my favorite genre. The next aisle over is horror, which reminds me of *him*.

I stop at the gap between the spines, a missing book below where I found the taped note. This must be where that strange guy got the Clive Barker book he bought, near where the note was left. Coincidence?

Maybe he just bought it to buy something, as an excuse to ask me a few questions, see if I'm keeping his secrets safe. There is no way to know why he bought it or if that was even *him*.

Sighing, I grab a misplaced book lying flat atop the row. I flip it over. My heartbeat picks up as I read the title: *The Damnation Game* by Clive Barker. *What the hell?* There shouldn't have been another. I looked it up in my records after that guy left. It's an old book that I got in a shipment bundle. So, where the heck did this one come from? Did that guy slip it back in here? There is no sticker price on the back.

Admittedly, I get so many used bundles dropped off from locals that my inventory records aren't always accurate. Either way, I've decided not to sticker this. Since I'm highly suspicious that the strangely gorgeous, hooded guy who came in here is my masked stalker, I will keep this copy to read, hoping to pick his brain a little, whoever he is.

Somebody knocks on the door, startling me. I take a deep breath, preparing myself to speak to the police. But it's only April here *before* the store is open. She's becoming a new fixture in my life, not in a good way.

Begrudgingly, I unlock the door and let her inside. A cold draft follows her in, giving me the shivers. I pull my black cardigan tighter around my chest.

"Morning, hon," she smiles.

"Morning. Mind locking that," I say before heading to the counter perpendicular to the large window near the

entrance. I lift a box onto the counter, pulling out books. Maybe she won't stay long chatting me up if I appear busy.

"So, have they talked to you yet?" she asks, getting straight to the point.

I glance up at her. She's wearing a burnt orange sweater, a collared shirt underneath, and dark curly hair frames her overly curious facial features. I can tell she's utterly engrossed in this mystery, same as me. But it feels like we are on two different sides of the coin. It's an isolating feeling worming deeper inside me by the day.

"Not yet," I say, wiping a smudge from a book cover.

"Well," she sighs. "I went ahead and stopped by the police station this morning."

I look up, brows pinched. "Thought you weren't at the party."

"I wasn't. But Maddy Johnson was. I helped her with the catering menu. She told me something that rang a bell with me. She thinks copycat murders are going on. We have two weeks left in October, and so many people are wearing these skeleton masks, it's hard to tell the real killer."

I put down the book and stare at her. "You don't think they've already thought of that?"

"Well, Sarah Hamilton said she'd be at the station this morning, so I just dropped in to talk to her about it. Her husband's--"

"A cop. Right, I remember you said that." I sigh. "Well, I have much sorting to do, so..."

"Yeah, I should go. I have a hair appointment."

"Thanks for dropping in," I lie.

"Feel free to give me a call anytime," she says over her shoulder.

When she leaves, I lock the door behind her and turn

down the lights. I'm going to give myself one hour of peace before opening. If the police come, I'll ignore them. They won't know I'm here.

I head to my reading chair tucked away behind the counter. I open the horror novel by the light of my small, portable reading lamp. I get one page in before I stop cold, heart-jumping from my chest. Red ink is splattered inside the cover around the words *Damnation Game*, and underneath, scrolled in ink, are the words: *Good girls play by the rules*.

I study the warning in red, wondering how I got unlucky. Something tells me that I should read the book—I mean, what if the rules he's referring to are inspired by it? Or maybe I'm reading too much into it, and this is just another way of telling me to keep my mouth shut.

I don't make it past the first page when somebody knocks on the front door. I snap the book shut, grab my phone, and check the time. Thirty minutes until opening. I wonder if April told the police I was here.

I rise just enough from my chair to peek at the door. Whoever is on the other side is wearing dark clothing. I sit back down, ignoring it. When the person knocks again, anxiety rattles my nerves. I don't want to know who is on the other side.

Determined to hold my ground until opening hour, I settle back into the chair and flip past the threatening words to the first chapter.

The story is set in war-ravaged Eastern Europe. The main character is a gambler hellbent on beating this rumored, ominous champion who has left a trail of victims. Gambling against him is like a Faustian type of deal with the devil.

This reminds me of something I glimpsed when I was

researching the Greylinns. I pull my laptop from my tote bag and open the labeled “Skulls” folder with the saved articles. I click on a few until I find the one about the Greylinn fortune. Early on, the family made money in oil, real estate, and later casino hotels. The current generation is among the wealthiest casino chain owners in the U.S. Wow.

My phone beeps, letting me know it’s time to open the doors. God, can’t I hide out all day reading and doing research? At least it’s raining again, so today will probably be slow. Then again, it isn’t customers whom I’m avoiding. The dread I feel over speaking with the police is only slightly less than seeing him again, here in my store, leaving me another message to find.

I think of the guy who bought this book. But is he Landon Greylinn, and is Landon Greylinn *Skull*? My instincts are leaning toward yes.

When another knock hits the door, I jump with a yelp before getting up and heading that way with a sigh. I hold my breath as I unlock the latch, realizing that the closed-and-open sign is facing the wrong way. How did that happen? That explains the early knocking.

Whoever it was is gone now.

My phone beeps inside my pocket, and I read the text from the National Hurricane Service. So, the Hurricane Watch issued yesterday has now become a Hurricane Warning, with expected high winds and heavy downpours to hit in a couple of hours, followed by a severe storm surge. Great.

There will be zero business today, and I could get stuck in the weather if I don’t leave now. Looks like I’m going home.

After grabbing my bag and locking up, I catch a tall,

dark figure out of the corner of my eye as I get into my car. He disappears into the alley, and my stomach takes a deep dive over fears that it's *him*.

Not just fear. Or I should say, it's not the kind of fear that others may have over a masked man linked to a murder spree. My fear is rooted in my mixed emotions. Curiosity, awe, and shameful arousal are among the feelings that I shouldn't have but do.

Regardless of the context of how we met, he made me feel so...well...

When he tied me up and filled me up inside fucking me so hard, and I came all over his big, thick cock, it was the most intense physical pleasure I've ever had in my life. I can't just forget that part of the equation.

As deranged as it may be, Skull took me to a place I didn't know existed. I hate the part of me that wants to feel that way again. My mind knows it can't be healthy.

If only my body felt the same.

WHEN I GET HOME, I push through the wind gusts and heavy rain, hurrying inside, drenched to the bone. After tying my hair with a towel, I peel off my clothes and put on my warm grey robe. Then, as has become my new habit, I check the locks on every window and door. All secure.

Or so I tell myself.

After answering Mom's call regarding my "safety plans" for the storm, which consist of a battery-operated radio, a nearly empty box of matches, two candles, bottled water, and blankets, I turn on the living room space heater and look out the window with a sigh, hoping this hurricane dies out fast and that I don't suddenly see a tall man in dark clothing lurking behind the sheets of rain. I think of that

man I saw going into the alley. He still can't be out there in this weather. No way.

I scan the small, puddled front yard and the street, water streaming fast beneath parked cars. Nobody sane is out there. Everybody who hasn't left town is hunkering down.

The thunderous sky is darkening fast. Leaving the window, I turn on the lights and the radio to listen to storm updates. The sky cracks, and right on cue, the lights flicker before going out. *Damn.*

I get up from the sofa and open the blinds, letting in streaks of cloud-filtered grey light. The treetops bend severely in the heavy wind as the rain pummels the windows.

Grabbing my tote bag, which still has my packed lunch for today, I settle into a corner of the sofa, listening to the "Category Three" announcement while eating my turkey and kale sandwich. "Winds of 111 to 130 mph... storm surge 9 to 12 feet above normal tide...structural damage to small buildings...mobile homes may be destroyed."

*Same-ol-same-ol,* I shrug, pulling out my laptop and checking the internet connection. My shoulders slump with disappointment at the zero bars. No bars, no research. I wanted to read more about the casino business that the Greylinns are into. It's too much of a coincidence that this horror book has a gambling theme. As hard as it is to believe, Landon Greylinn must be Skull.

Nobody would ever think the killer(s) are connected to the wealthiest family around. I can hardly believe it myself.

Pulling the paperback book from my bag, I stare at the red ink, imagining Landon's hand scrolling it. Is this sharply slanted horror movie font his usual writing style, or

did he do this for effect, part of his game? A game I am unwittingly caught up in.

It's so dark in the room now, the grey streaks of light mottled with deepening shadow, that I get up and light both of my candles before settling back down and covering with a blanket, ready to read. I turn off the radio, and the relentless backdrop of wind and rain only seems to serve the creepy vibe of the book. I get lost in the slow-burn, classic literary style for a few pages, but my stomach starts to turn when I get to the part about the woman with no lips.

There's a weird noise coming from the attic. Is the roof falling in?

I try to focus on the book, but when I think I hear the fridge open and shut, I jump up, startled. *What the hell?*

I grab my phone, trying to ignore the din outside the house so I can hear the strange noise from within. It can't be the fridge. That makes no sense. The power is out, and the home should be silent.

When I get to the kitchen, I feel a dark energy, and this needling feeling crosses my scalp like static electricity raising my hair. I blink at the surreal sight of two foreign, black-colored wine glasses, half-filled with liquid, sitting on the counter. *Whose?*

I jolt my head, my panicked gaze finding the strange, large picnic basket on my dining table. A dizzying, dissociative feeling flashes through me like I'm in somebody else's house or like I'm dreaming that I'm awake, but I'm not.

Blinking my eyes, I gasp when a warm, masculine hand slides over my mouth.

"Remember this, Beth?" he whispers, with a familiar voice, his lips on my ear as he pulls his body tightly against mine from behind.

The hard bulge pressing against my ass is unmistakable, and it's like I'm back in that Victorian house again, feeling a rush of fear and arousal. He holds my waist firmly while he reaches his other hand around, sliding down my thigh before cupping my private place thinly covered by cotton leggings.

"Did you miss me?" he rasps, sucking my lobe while rubbing my dampening sex as he grinds his erection against my ass.

"Why...are you in my house?" I pant, attempting to twist out from under him. He surprises me by letting me go, and when I quickly turn around, he silently towers, staring at me with grey eyes through the skull mask. He cocks his head slightly to the side, reminding me of Jason from the movie, Halloween. I can't decide if he wants to fuck me, kill me, or both.

THE THUNDER HAS DWINDLED while the wind continues to rage, shaking the rain-beaten boards of the house. A dozen black candles light the kitchen—not my candles. He planned this right under my nose during a goddamn hurricane, and now he has me right where he wants me. Trapped. Again.

It takes me a moment to realize that my hand is empty. The bastard took my phone.

He takes one step toward me, and I match his step backward, my heart racing. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want." His Hollow eyes twinkle darkly, and I imagine him smirking beneath the mask. But he could be sneering viciously, for all I know. Is that Landon Greylinn beneath the mask? Oh, god... This is fucking insane.

He takes another step forward. “Just as I know what *you* want, Beth. Admit it. You’ve been quietly waiting for me like a good girl. Isn’t that right?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. He holds my gaze with such intensity that I feel transfixed. His eyes are like a beautifully violent maelstrom coming at me, sucking me in, threatening to tear me to pieces.

“People died,” I frown.

“Happens,” he shrugs.

“And you’re...part of it?”

“I merely said I know things, and that’s all *you* need to know, Beth.”

“You...can’t just take over my life,” my voice cracks, and he cocks his head again.

“I’m in the habit of doing whatever I want in this town.”

“Why’s that?”

Because you are the billionaire who owns half of it? I want to confirm this by asking, but I don’t think tipping my hand will do me any favors. This crazy guy doesn’t want his identity known, and I don’t know what he’ll do to me if he knows that I have him figured out.

“It’s just the way it is, Beth. Would you like a glass of wine before I fuck you?”

My mouth and eyes widen in unison as a heated alarm courses through me. I can’t believe he just said that to me. I resist the rogue memory of him inside my body and how good he made me feel.

Buying myself time, I answer with a nod.

He nudges his head toward the table. “Then, sit.”

I walk a few steps, pull out the chair with a shaky hand, and then sit. He hands me a glass of wine, then sits kitty-corner from me, head wrapped in thick black and white

fabric, white bones and teeth, black where his nose should be.

“Petru, Pomerol,” he says with a convincing French accent. “It’s a fine Merlot. Over four grand per bottle,” he adds.

“You must be very wealthy,” I say, and he shrugs.

“No. But my *enemies* are,” he says sharply.

Admitting that he is filthy rich would blow his cover, but he can’t contain the unfiltered violence in his tone when he says the word *enemies*. There is no doubt in my mind that his enemies are real.

He lifts the mask above his mouth before holding up his glass. “To my Lady Luck,” he says with a wink, his tone lighter around the edges as he taps my glass before sipping.

My brows furrow. “This is all a game to you.”

“I’m just getting started. Drink your wine, Beth.”

I stare at him, feeling unable to move.

“Go ahead. It’s delicious,” he says with a velvety, encouraging tone, just like he had that night in the bedroom when he convinced me to let him distract me from the chaos. His words.

The fruity, silky wine goes down smoothly, warming me inside.

“Good?” he says, a smile beneath the mask just reaching his eyes.

“Yes, very,” I admit.

“There is more in the basket for you, Beth.”

I jump, nearly spilling my wine, when something crashes against the exterior wall, and the window above the kitchen sink cracks, folding around an intruding branch. “Shit, the tree fell!”

“This house is made of fucking tin,” he says, standing and towering above the table. His piney masculine scent

wafts as he reaches into the basket, pulling out a roll of black tape.

My heartbeat quickens. "What is that for?"

"Presently? The window. Where are your trash bags?"

"Huh? Oh. Under the sink," I point.

"Don't worry. I'll let you finish your wine before I tie you up," he snickers before going to the sink.

I feel outside myself as I finish the wine, watching him break the branch with his bare hands between glass shards and adeptly tape the plastic bag tightly over the window gap. Has he done this before?

He turns toward me, and my breathing pauses.

"You want to know what else is in that pretty picnic basket?"

I swallow thickly. "Not so sure about that."

"But I want to play with you, Beth. You've been reading that book I left?"

"Was that *you* in the store who bought the other copy?"

He slowly shakes his head, then returns to the table.

"Nope," he says, bending and taking my free hand.

My heartbeat thuds anxiously as he tugs me from the chair.

"Finish your glass," he says, impatience thinly veiled. "I want you in your bed."

My glass is nearly empty, but I stall.

"What if I say no?"

"You'd be lying. Tell me. When you fantasize about what I did to you, what do you call me in your mind?"

I shake my head. "Nothing."

"Don't lie to me, Beth."

He takes the glass from my hand and presses it gently to my lips until I tilt my head back to finish it. When he sets

down the glass, his arm wraps quickly around me, spinning me until my back is to him. He holds me there.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh,” he says, grabbing something from the basket. I slam forward into the chair as I try to pull away, but he quickly tightens his grip on my wrists, binding them. I twist, shoving past him, and he doesn’t stop me. I get halfway across the kitchen, looking at the black zip ties tightly around my wrists.

“Dammit! This isn’t fucking necessary!” I yell.

“I can’t trust your roaming hands.”

“I’m not going to take your stupid mask off!”

“Such a pretty little liar,” he says, blowing out the candles.

He follows me into the living room, where dark grey wavering daylight streams from the open blinds, and the two lit candles pool with hot wax. Under the weight of the storm, a pinned branch repeatedly taps the window behind the sofa.

“It’s not letting up,” I say with a shiver. The heatless house is getting cold fast, and my shoulders are chilled.

He pinches the two flames of candlelight between his fingers, extinguishing the remaining flicker of light in the room. Now, it’s just us in the dark of the storm. He looks out the window.

“The water is rising fast. *Damn.* A fucking car is floating away.”

“And you’ve trapped yourself inside my little tin house. This is no mansion on the hill,” I snipe.

*Shit.* I shouldn’t have said that.

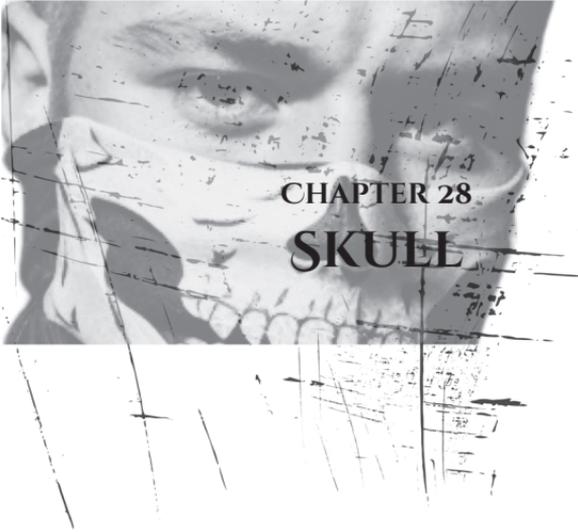
He turns around and stalks toward me.

“True. But aren’t you glad you aren’t alone in this night-

mare, Beth?” His voice is low and graveled, making my heart speed up.

“You are the nightmare,” I mutter as he reaches me, clutching his hand around my bound wrists. He tugs me toward him, then grasps my chin firmly between his fingers.

“But I’m the kind of nightmare that makes your pussy wet,” he rasps.



## CHAPTER 28

# SKULL

I PULL my prize by her bound wrists, leading her out of the living room, down the hall, and into her dusky bedroom, which is decorated in shades of lavender and floral accents. I'm looking forward to sullyng her in this feminine room.

Releasing her wrists, I shut the door behind me. She goes to the chair by her desk and sits in it as if it will keep her safe from reach. It's cute.

"Have you ever had a man in here before?"

She shakes her head, and that warms me a little inside. My mouth cracks a tiny grin beneath the mask.

"What's that on your desk?" I ask, and she picks up the object beneath her hand. Ah, it's the book. So, she brought it home with her then.

"You've been doing your homework," I say approvingly.

"Why did you give me this?"

"Mm. You'll have to figure that out. How far have you gotten?"

"Far enough to know that the main character is a billionaire who sells his soul."

I bring my hand to my skeletal-looking chin. “Yes, but he’s not the most interesting player.”

“The villain, the one that he sells his soul to—”

“Is more like me,” I say.

“So, you’re the villain in this game,” she mutters, and this time, I fully smile beneath the mask.

“What do your instincts tell you, Beth?”

I walk to her and step between her legs, parting her thighs with my knees. I grab her chin, tilting her face upward to look into her pretty eyes. Her breathing gets deeper as her lips part, and I’m betting right now her pussy is getting moist for me.

“Yes,” she hisses defiantly.

“Your instincts aren’t wrong.”

Her eyes water. “You’re going to hurt me?”

Peering down at her through the mask slits, I nod.

“I’m going to make you bleed a little, Beth. I want to mark you because you are a treasured game piece I’ve claimed.”

I pull a zip tie from my pocket before dropping to my knees, and when she tries to kick me, I grab her ankles before binding them.

“Why?” she cries out.

“Shh,” I tell her, lifting her bound ankles into my lap as I sit on my boots. I slide off the sock on her right foot, admiring how delicate her toes are, before I pull out the razor blade.

She gasps, tugging her legs, but I tighten my grip on her ankles.

“Just a few marks. Hold *very* still so I don’t mess up your pretty foot.”

“You’re fucking crazy!” she cries, and I snicker.

Lifting her foot in one hand, I hold the blade like an ink

pen in the other, creating a red line as I slash a thin diagonal mark deep enough to leave a scar.

“*Ouch!*” she whines.

“Almost done.” With a flick of the wrist, I slash another red line.

“Please, *stop*,” she grimaces.

“X marks the spot.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I release my grip, and her ankles drop into my lap.

“You are my found treasure. Don’t forget that.”

Putting away the blade, I stand and pick her up from the chair, cradling her in my arms with her bound wrists and ankles. Her face is pouty and tragic.

“It wasn’t even that bad, baby. I’ll make you feel better now.”

I lay her on her side on the bed with her back to me, and when I lay down behind her, tightly spooning her body, she shudders before relaxing into me.

“See, I’ll keep you warm during the storm,” I say, lifting my mask enough to kiss her neck. The scent of her skin and her hair on my face makes me fucking wild inside, and my dick instantly fully hardens. I shove down my jeans and then tug on her leggings until her ass is fully exposed. Spooning her, I slide my dick between her thick thighs, holding it there to see how she responds.

I can already feel the moist heat radiating from her pussy, and it’s fucking maddening to not shove inside her. I continue kissing her neck with my dick resting between her thighs. When I start sucking her lobe, she loses composure, thrusting her hip backward, creating much-needed friction over my wanton cock.

I respond by thrusting deeper between her thighs,

sliding back and forth over her pussy and clit until she's drenching wet.

"What do you want, Beth?" I say, forcing her to beg.

She rocks her hips without responding, but I retreat my dick.

"Answer my earlier question. What do you call me in your mind when you're imagining me fucking you?"

She lasts a few seconds before relenting. "I call you... Skull."

"What do you want me to do to you, baby? Say my name when you ask me."

"I want you to..."

"Yes?"

"...*fuck me*, Skull."

I thought my dick was fully hard, but I was wrong. Now, I'm so painfully swollen that I'm ready to unleash inside her. I'm going to give a new meaning to the term *skull-fuck*.

"Raise your wrists above your head," I say, giving her warning before I rock her onto her stomach, then lift her ass into the air until she's on her knees. I spread her thighs wide and grab the sides of her plump ass cheeks firmly in my hands before seating the tip of my head inside her juicy cunt, hitting her g-spot.

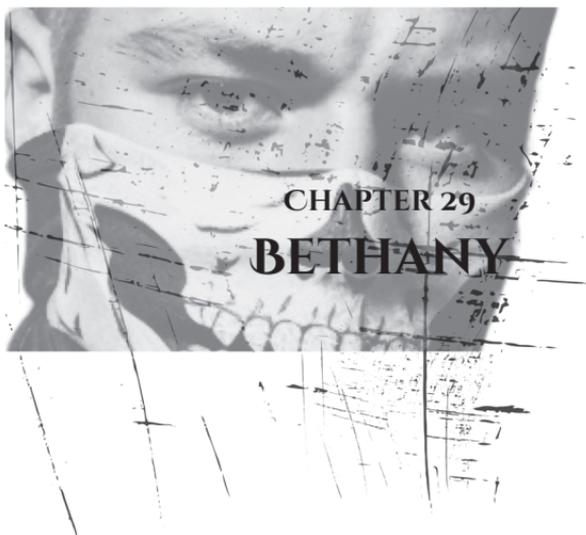
"Oh, *fuck...yeah*," I groan, with a forceful thrust, shoving deep inside her tight heat.

Her face hits the bed between her bound wrists, and her muffled moans make me swell even more inside her. Her pussy clamps around my shaft as I fuck her so deeply that the head of my dick repeatedly smacks against her cervix.

The sound of her panting and gasping emboldens me. I squeeze her sumptuous thighs in my hands as I stroke inside her pussy, growing more urgent with each forceful thrust.

Her thighs begin to tremble as she screams into the bed, and her pussy clamps tighter, sucking and swallowing my cock as she comes all over it. This sends me over the fucking edge, and I barely pull out in time to spray white cream over her ass cheeks. I grab my dick in hand, finishing myself until every last drop has dripped down over her supple flesh, like vanilla icing on a pink angel cake.

Her knees buckle, and she collapses onto the bed before rolling herself over. I spread her thighs until they fall flat, exposing her red, swollen pussy, and with her ankles bound, her legs form the perfect shape of a diamond—my newfound treasure.



“AREN’T you going to untie me now?”

He doesn’t answer. The wind howls in the background as he towers over the bed, in black clothes with his head slightly cocked, his grey eyes framed in shadow, and his white, skeletal mouth seems to smile at me in the darkness, but I know it’s only the illusion of a lipless face.

I push off my feet, moving backward like an inchworm until I’m at the bed frame, then shoving myself into a seated position. I lift my half-clothed legs to my chest and drop my bound wrists over them.

Skull raises his phone to his ear, listening. He goes to the window, muttering something. When he turns around, he pulls something from his pocket. I recoil when he sits on the bed and has that little blade in his hand again.

The power comes back on. A light appears in the hallway, and the radio is playing.

“...crime spree...this sleepy community...”

“Hold still,” he says, taking my feet. He lifts the mask over his chin and mouth, reminding me that a handsome

face is hidden under the scary mask as he kisses the sore spot on the top of my foot.

“X marks the spot,” I repeat, disbelieving his words.

He looks up, and the edge of his mouth lifts. He has a divot on his chin.

“That’s right, baby. I made my mark.”

“You’ve...branded me. You think I’m yours.”

He flashes perfect white teeth framed by an uneven grin.

“I *know* it,” he says with an ironclad conviction that tightens around me like a chain. I blink my eyes, baffled. His conviction is to be my imprisonment.

He runs his finger down my foot before gently massaging it with his fingertips. He kneads my foot so adeptly that my lids grow heavy. He moves to the other foot, singing to me.

I open my eyes, watching his mouth move.

“Hush, little Bethany...don’t say a thing; Papa’s gonna steal your diamond bling. And when that diamond bling don’t shine...Papa’s gonna steal your heart and mind.”

I shake my head. “You’re crazy,” I mutter.

“The winners always are,” he says, lowering the mask with a nod before sliding the blade between my ankles. I yelp as he cuts upward with a jerk, releasing my conjoined limbs.

He stands. “Be good, babe,” he warns before leaving me. The wind has quieted, and a streak of sunlight cracks through the clearing clouds out the window.

Sighing heavily, I get up and pull my pants up before turning on the light. I sit in the chair and raise my foot to my thigh, examining the marks that form a red X, the slashes reminding me of his handwriting. The cuts are deep enough to scar.

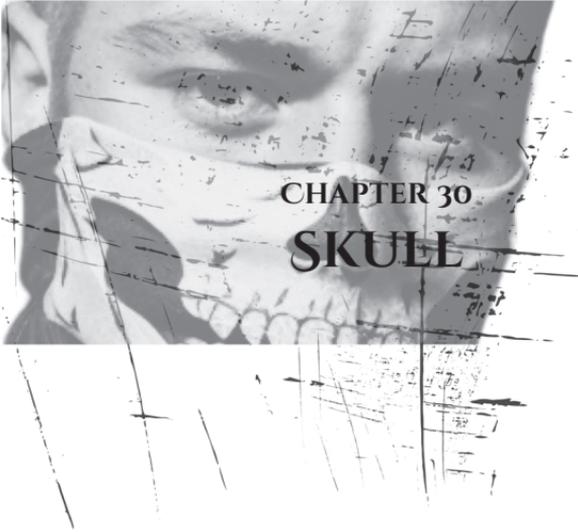
I imagine myself showing my foot to the police. How humiliated I would feel, and how hard it would be to explain this ordeal. Even if I leave out the bit about how much this twisted guy turns me on, how hard he makes me orgasm, it's still going to look suspicious. Like, I'm the crazy girlfriend of an accomplice to murder.

Is that what I'm becoming? His crazy girlfriend? *Fuck.*

A brutal reality pits inside my gut. Every day, I'm sinking deeper into this madness. He's absorbed me into his game, and there seems to be no escaping it.

Me, his "prized game piece."

His stolen treasure.



SQUEEZING a man inside an unfinished sheet metal cabinet meant for a slot machine is a slight challenge. This is mainly because a panel is three-quarters down, which separates the would-be coin tray from the rest of the machine. This is where I place one foot of the limp body. As for the other foot, there is a narrow opening where the bill mouth goes, and the money pours into the money chamber. I extend his leg and pull off his dress shoe, chucking it before shoving his foot down the hole.

When I finally slap him across the face, his eyelids twitch as he slowly wakes to find himself tied in place, secured by zip ties through the screw holes, wishing he could stretch his bent neck and crouched body. I walk away and leave him there. His voice croaks as he realizes he's trapped.

"What the...shh-it...FU-U-CK!"

The slamming of the metal echoes through the large factory as he struggles.

"You won't...fucking get away with this!" he yells.

The ones who think they're important always say that.

The ones who don't go straight to begging. But he'll be begging soon enough. Everybody begs, eventually.

Banks and Ace are in the break room, devouring a pepperoni and onion pizza. I grab myself a slice, my thoughts drifting to a feeling like I forgot something. Puzzling for a moment, it dawns on me. Though my lips briefly enjoyed the pleasure of Bethany's delicate skin, I left without tasting her mouth or her pussy. Shame. Feels entirely remiss.

I'll have to use my time better when I see her again.

Ace looks up from his pizza. "Somebody shut that fucker up."

"Bout to," offers Banks.

"Police are making the rounds again," says Ace. "Heather was at the party. She says they think it's a lone operator."

Banks shoots me a look. "Speaking of girls. How about *Bethany*?"

My eyes narrow. "How the fuck do you know her name?"

He looks at Ace.

"Some chic named April rattled off to Heather a list of everybody in attendance at the party. When the commotion started, someone saw Bookstore Bethany go off with a guy. She only saw him from behind; it looked like he wore a black ski mask. *Bookstore Girl*. I knew I recognized that bitch."

"She's none of your fucking business. I'm handling her."

"You're not going to share in the spoils?"

He and Ace exchange a lustful glance.

My face flattens as my eyes harden into a cold stare.

"My apologies, boss-man," he says, standing. I keep my hard gaze fixed on him as he kicks back a beer.

“Stay the fuck away from her. *Both* of you,” I warn, making my opinion clear.

I don't expect these dicks to see the whole picture as I do or to understand how Bethany plays into the game. Regardless, they need to know that I'm not sharing this girl; this one I'm keeping for myself.

I pound my fist on the table.

“I'll kill anybody who fucks with her! Remember that.”

I've never been so dead serious in my life.

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