

Chapter Eleven

Victory

I look, wide eyed up at William as he towers over me in the bedroom. I clench my black and white flowered bathrobe around my body as if it might protect me—from what I don't know.

“So when was your last,” He pauses as if choosing the word carefully “cycle?”

I think back to my last “cycle.” The one I faked. It was about three weeks ago I think. I'd be due for another in a few days. “Um, about three weeks ago.”

“So when are you due again, next week?”

“I think so. I need to check my calendar.”

“Does that mean you have been ovulating, or did we miss it?”

I think, counting in my head. I've been married for a week. “We might have just barely caught it in time.” I lie. I have no uterus, the eggs my body throws out go nowhere. I will have to be very careful. William seems determined to become alpha in the house, impregnating me and earning the coveted position over Liam.

He is handsome in a clean-cut sort of way. But he will never hold a light to my second husband. Liam has a more rugged look to him, rougher somehow. His hair is a bit longer, shaggier. His eyes carry something deeper than Williams do. There is something in his eyes that we share. Communication. Our own special way of speaking through our eyes. William and I will never share such a thing.

Last night he fell asleep on the couch and I slept in Liam's bed—alone for the first time since the weddings.

I am starting to wonder if William will only touch me when he thinks I am fertile, which is fine with me. His rough, quick, selfish manor only makes me pray for an ending.

“Let me know if you get your monthly or not.”

I nod. “I will.”

“I'm going out.” He sits down on the bed, pulling on the jeans that he wore yesterday.

“Where do you go during the day?” I ask, taking a step back after his sharp eyes pierce into mine.

He looks up at me without emotion. “Sometimes I go to the office and do paperwork. I have been off this week for the wedding. I go back to work tomorrow, flying to Canada. Today I am going to the whorehouse.”

I blink as he watches my face for a reaction.

Whorehouse. I guess I knew they existed. It's the oldest profession in the world.

Do these women ever get pregnant? Rumor is the Brotherhood supports the brothels, keeps them funded in order to please the men. I wonder if any sterile women are ever offered their lives in exchange for servitude on their backs.

I shiver at the thought. I'd rather die.

Good thing, because I probably will.

Should I care my husband is on his way out to a brothel? Yes. I should be upset, angry, and jealous. My only reaction is to wrinkle my nose in disgust wondering about the nasty women and what he might be passing on to me.

I inhale and exhale before speaking. "But why? You have a wife now."

He raises an eyebrow as he stands and pulls his pants over his hips.

"Do you really want to know?" There is a dark smile curling his lips upwards.

I don't think I do. The depravity that he might be into is something I don't want to know about. "No, no I don't think so."

He steps up to me, touches my hair. "Are you sure? Maybe it's something you would want to try."

Casting my eyes down, I reply with a small no. He laughs and goes to get a shirt, and I leave the room to dress.

In the solitude of my dressing room I am free to feel horrified without worry that it might show on my face. I choose my clothes and go shower and try not to think about what William might be doing.

It's when I am washing the dishes from lunch that I hear the front door. I don't look up, wondering if William is already home.

I have a plate for him sitting in the fridge, not sure when he might return. I feel more nauseated than anything else when I am unable to stop the thoughts about where he is and what he might be doing.

"Victory." I turn at the sound of my name to find Liam standing in the kitchen. He sets a brown paper bag with handles on the counter.

"Liam, you're back. How was your trip?"

He nods. "Fine, it was just fine. Got the work done. How were things here while I was away?"

"As expected, I suppose. Nothing special." Should I tell him what William told me this morning? I decide not to. I tuck the information away for another day. "Have you eaten?"

“Yes I ate, thanks. I got you something.”

I look up from the plate I am washing. “What?”

“Come look.”

I dry my hands on the dish towel on the counter and turn. He points to the brown paper bag. I smile, it’s been a while since anyone thought to get me anything. I peer over the top of the bag and my heart flutters.

Books. Many, many books.

“Oh! How perfect!” I reach in, retrieving book after book, setting them carefully aside until I reach the bottom. “Thank you!”

I turn, finding him standing closer than expected. “You like it?”

I nod. “It’s perfect. I love to read. Thanks for thinking of me.”

“Why wouldn’t I think of you? You are my wife.”

I smile again. “I can’t wait to read them.”

“Here.” He takes the dish towel. “I’ll dry.”

Tonight is the first time I’ve shared a bed with Liam. Not knowing what to expect, I lay in the bed under the blankets as he moves around the room in black pajama bottoms and no shirt. I am wearing a knee length oversized polka dotted gown in peach and white. The bed is soft as I burrow under the covers, not knowing how to act or what he will do when he gets into bed.

He meets my eyes as he reaches the bedside, and my heart rate picks up. I watch him pull back the blankets, crawl into bed, reach over and turn off the bedside lamp throwing the room into darkness.

His leg touches mine under the blankets, skin on skin. Hot and it throws my heart into palpitations.

Liam Yawns. “Night, Victory.”

Goodnight?

No pawing at me? No assumptions of ownership and climbing on top of me to take what belongs to him?

“Night.” I whisper loudly in the darkness.

The covers rustle as he rolls over, his back to me. He’s going to sleep.

I smile and believe him for the first time since he made his promise to me.

I go to sleep feeling safe for the first time in a week.

The room is chilly but I'm warm when I wake. Snuggled under a well-worn quilt with a slow, thick heartbeat thumping in my ear. A hot, hard body against me.

Confusion startles me at first, then I remember as I open my eyes and find myself curled into Liam's chest, held in loose arms that are still heavy with sleep. His breathing is slow and touches my forehead.

My first thought is to move, but he seems so content. Then I realize I'm content and I allow myself to smile, knowing he won't see it. I put my head back where it was on his chest, his chin resting on my head, legs slightly tangled.

My eyes start to get heavy just as he stirs, stretching his legs and taking a deep breath. I lift my head to find him awake, eyes puffy with sleep as a smile pulls his mouth up.

"Morning, beautiful." His voice is still rough with sleep.

"Morning."

He stares at me, his eyes move over my face and I don't know what to say. My heart starts to beat fast again as his gaze lingers and our bodies remain close enough to breathe the same air.

I recall the kiss the day we got married, just a week ago. I remember the way it felt, how my body reacted. As the memory of the moment invades my mind I realize that I want him to kiss me again.

My wish comes true.

I find that I'm holding my breath when he leans in. I close my eyes and feel hot, soft, full lips touch mine. A gentle tongue teasing as he tastes my mouth.

I inhale, opening my mouth to him and hearing a sound like a soft purr come out of his chest as he pushes a hand into my hair and deepens the slow kiss.

I can't stop my body's reaction. Like lightening curling and uncurling inside my abdomen, arching as his hand moves from my hair down my body to my thigh. Sliding up, pushing my nightgown up until he finds my hip, where his hand rests.

My arms move around his neck. I touch his hair as the kiss goes on. His mouth moves to my throat and I start to want things that I've never wanted before, confusing me because my mind tells me he is a stranger, but my skin feels differently.

He pulls my hips closer and I gasp when I feel the truth his body tells, pressing into my abdomen. My gasp pulls him back to reality I guess, because he pulls away and stops kissing me. I feel confused, wanting to pull him back but too shy to actually do it.

He is flushed with eyes shining and his tongue darts over his lips. “You want breakfast? I can cook us something.”

My stomach growls and he laughs, sitting up. “Guess that’s a yes. Take a shower, get dressed. I will cook breakfast and then we can go do something today. I will take you out.”

Take me out? Getting out of the house sounds perfect. “Okay.”

He disappears out of the room after pulling on a shirt. I peek out the window and see that William’s car is gone and relief floods me. With no idea what time he leaves or when his flight is, I don’t know if he will be back, but with Liam here I don’t worry so much.

I take a long, hot shower and dress in shorts and a shirt. I french braid my hair and spray on a little perfume before following the scent of food to the kitchen, where I find the table set with hot coffee, eggs, toast and cut fruit.

In the car as he pulls out of the driveway he speaks. “Victory, do you have any money?”

The question startles me. “Just a little that my parents gave me. I was told that my husbands—”

“Look, I don’t want you to be unable to care for yourself, or our future children if anything happens to me. I’m going to set you up with an emergency account, okay? Where do you bank?”

I tell him that it’s in an account at the National Bank on Sinclair Drive. He turns that way.

“We are going to go in and withdraw the money. Then I’m going to take you to a different bank and we will get you a new account that no one but you and I know about. Got it?”

“I don’t understand.” It’s only partly true. I understand what he is doing, I just don’t understand why.

Why the secrecy? The danger beneath his words that he won’t come out and explain to me.

I won’t ask. Curiosity isn’t a safe personality trait to let fester.

He sighs, turning the car towards Sinclair. “I know. Just trust me. There is a lot that could happen. It’s just best to be prepared. A good husband should take care of his wife . . . in any circumstance. Don’t you think?”

I remember the kiss in bed this morning and feel heat flame my cheeks. Warmth rushes to strange parts of my body causing me to squirm in my seat.

“Yes, I suppose you are right. But in this day and age it seems to be more important that we produce babies than anything else. Not much else seems to matter.”

He nods, pulling into the bank that is only a few minutes from our home. “True. But that doesn't mean it's right. You are my bride. I will do all I can to make sure you are cared for.”

I get out of the car wondering if he will still mean that when he discovers my truth.

What he will do when the brotherhood puts my name on a list and someone shows up at our door.

Not long after we leave the bank and I have seven hundred dollars in my purse. He drives us thirty minutes away to a different bank. We open an account in my name, and then I stand stunned when he tells the cashier to transfer fifty thousand dollars from his account to mine.

He signs something, then I am given a slip with my new balance on it. I stare at it, flabbergasted. I had no idea he had so much money. How does a carpenter have so much?

He tells the cashier that I don't want an access card and then turns to advise me that if I ever need the money I will have to come withdraw it in person. He tells me in the car that it's to prevent anyone from being able to steal my money if they find my card.

People like William—he finally says.

“You don't like him.” I say.

His jaw clenches as he drives. I don't know where he is taking me.

“No, I don't.”

“Why?”

He grips the wheel tighter. “A few reasons. He's an asshole for one. That and . . .” He trails off.

“And what?”

He sighs. “And I am forced to share you with him. I don't like to share the woman I . . .”

He white knuckles the steering wheel. “That you what?”

“Nothing.”

I want to ask, but I don't.

He speaks again after I look out the window. "I knew who you were when I got my letter, Victory."

I look at him long and hard. Searching my brain for any hint of recognition. The way he sits, his body tense, constantly watching his surroundings, ready for an attack at any given moment. I am sure I have never seen this man prior to our wedding day. He glances at me, our eyes meet. "How?"

He's trying to decide if he should tell me. I frown, confused by his hesitation.

Why hide it? Why would it matter? There must be some reason why he would be afraid to tell me.

But why?

Chapter Twelve

Liam

I turn the car towards a little marketplace on the edge of town my mom used to talk about when I was a kid. I haven't had a reason to visit in a long time, but taking her there feels like sharing a part of my life with someone that I never have before.

It's an old outdoor strip mall with all kinds of shops and eateries, even has an outdoor theater and on weekends there are plays or concerts there. I thought it would be a nice place to spend the afternoon with my new wife.

But then she asks me this question and I don't know what to say.

The more she knows about me, the closer *he* gets . . .

There are truths that no one needs to know about me.

About *them*.

Being married to me, the Brotherhood will be watching her, and I don't want her in danger.

As the silence hangs between us the sound of my breathing fills the small space. She turns, I suppose assuming that I won't respond to her. Surrendering to not knowing. I grip the wheel, stop at a red light.

"I remember the first time I saw you. It was maybe two years ago? I'm not sure. I was there fixing old man Barrister's barn when you walked up carrying books and bags of food. I walked up to help you, took the bags and carried in the groceries that you brought him. You don't remember me?"

She wrinkles her brow, then her eyes light up. Her mouth opens, full lips parting. "Yes, I do remember you! You asked me my name."

I nod. "I did. I never forgot you."

Her chest rises and falls with a deep breath. "I don't understand why."

I pull into the parking lot of the marketplace and look at her after I park the car.

She really doesn't understand. I wonder, did her parents bring her up to think she was forgettable? Not special? Or is she just being modest?

"You will. One day, you will understand. Come on, let's go walk around."

After getting out of the truck, I reach for her hand. She takes mine without hesitation.

It's late in the day, on the way home, when she asks me. "What do you know about William?"

I don't flinch. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I think you know something."

I sigh, pulling the car over at a rest. "Let's go for a walk." I can't talk in my truck. I don't trust it. They might be listening. I can almost guarantee that they are. I leave my phone in the car, anything that might be bugged. "I can't talk in here."

She nods, unbuckling her seatbelt.