

## Chapter Two

Liam

A few months ago, I got my letter. That same bright yellow envelope in the mail that everyone recognizes. Summoned to appear before the High Council of the Brotherhood.

My mate had been chosen.

I stood that day in the street, holding that envelope for a long time. I wasn't expecting it. My parents passed when I was nine years old, so I never knew what age they chose for my betrothal. You see, when children are born, sometime before their first birthday, the parents must choose the age for their pairing. Every year since my eighteenth birthday I've gone to the mailbox in anticipation, wondering if this was my year.

Turns out twenty-five was the one.

I wondered what would happen if I just threw it away. If I ignored the summons. But I didn't wonder long, knowing full well the brotherhood wouldn't allow it.

No one is exempt from their laws.

Sure, I have a say, but not the say I wanted.

Going back inside, I tossed the letter onto the table and let it sit for three days before I opened it, dreading the name inside. It wouldn't be anyone I wanted, I was certain.

Then I opened it, and it was. They actually listened. They honored their vow.

Of course it was, it was the least the council could do for me. I am too valuable. The desire to keep me sated is strong, so they gave her to me in an attempt to keep my silence. Of course, I know I can be replaced. I can be *relieved* of my duties at any given time, but at this juncture it would be more trouble than it is worth.

The Brotherhood needs me. So they did me this solid.

I sat on a hard, wooden chair I carved with my own two hands and I stared at the name.

*Victory Atherton.*

It was her, how could that be?

I picked up the beer I'd opened just to get me through the moment, and I sucked down half its contents before reading it again. I let out a laugh. All this time I'd dreaded being forced to marry a bride pre-chosen for me. One I didn't want. One I'd never want. I drain the beer and look at the date.

Tomorrow. I have to appear before the council and either accept or decline my bride. I'm sure they already know my answer.

Despite my station within the ranks, I still have to submit to their ridiculous customs. I'm just lucky they were generous, that they didn't want to start any shit with me. I'd become used to the other benefits offered to me for the service I provided to the officials, but still, Victory Atherton . . . that was quite an offer.

I crumple the letter, only to open it again and read the now wrinkled name again.

Would I marry her? Yes.

Would I finally kiss those lips? Fuck yes.

Make her love me? Maybe.

Share her with another? I gritted my teeth on that one. No option. I would marry this woman and then watch her crawl into the bed of another every other night. I'd have to call this man my brother, even while hating him for taking what is mine.

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That was months ago.

Now, today, she's my wife. Her hand is in mine and it's warm. Her fingers are delicate and the nails painted a light pink. They are curled around my rough hand and she walks behind me out of the chapel and towards my truck.

I was supposed to be spending the last three months preparing a special location for us to become man and wife, where we are to have one night to get to know one another before we are thrust together into the family home where there are three of us.

She stops when I open the door to my truck. I washed it, did a special detail job on the inside for her. Coming to and from construction sites, my truck is usually full of dirt and paper work, and more often than not, I sit in it to eat my lunch. Now, it's as clean as any new truck. I hold my breath as she peers inside, then glances over at me with a small smile and reaches for the handle. I help her up, she plops down and I shut the door. I wonder what she will think when she sees my motorcycle.

I've never understood how I can feel this way for a woman I've never even talked to, but here I am. Most don't believe in love now, too many go a lifetime without ever finding it. Especially since there is no point. Most guys aren't as lucky as I am to be paired with their choosing. So, to think that love at first sight is a real thing, I'm not even sure I believe it. More like infatuation.

As I sit beside her and start the truck, I can't help but wonder what last night was like for her. Did he hurt her? Did she like it? I can't let myself think about it. I catch myself gripping the wheel too tightly and my knuckles turning white as I hate him for no other reason than the Brotherhood pairing them together.

The Brotherhood dictates that we are family, one unit, and we are happy. But the whispers you hear when no one is listening tell another story. The whispers of wives that are

ravaged and beaten by young men and even worse by the hands of the older men they were paired with. There are no consequences for such abuse, because the Brotherhood turns a blind eye, just so long as they can still bare children.

“So, tell me about yourself.” She says as I drive. Her voice is trembling, but has that façade of a happy, lilting tone to disquiet her fear.

I wonder again, absently, about William. I heard rumors of his comings and goings in forbidden dens and secret places, how he leaves the women broken and bruised. When I was investigating him months ago, the tales that reached my ears suggested he wasn’t above brutalizing a woman. I’ll kill him if he hurts her.

“Well, you know my name. Um . . . I’m a contractor. I build homes and barns and all kinds of stuff. In the cold months when there is no building, I do the handy-man thing so I’m employed year round. I’ve lived alone since I was nineteen years old. I have a dog named Duke. I’m a simple guy.”

She’ll probably never know what I really do.

“What about your family? Why have you lived alone?”

Out of the corner of my eye I notice how she keeps smoothing invisible wrinkles in the bright white dress. “My parents died in a crash when I was nine. I lived with my aunt, who passed away when I was nineteen. I have other family out of state, but my home is here.”

At the light, I turn my head and note her reaction. Our eyes meet in the span of a second and my heart thunders so loudly in my ears I’m sure she can hear it, so I turn away and grip the wheel.

“Oh, that’s so sad. You didn’t mind living alone?”

“I had plenty of work to keep me busy.”

“Oh, I suppose so.” She mutters.

“And you?”

“Me?” Her voice tells me the question surprises her, which pisses me off. Leads me to think William never asked her about herself, never bothered to try to get to know her yesterday. “Of course, you. I want to know you.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” I don’t elaborate. I can’t. I can’t tell her I’ve been watching her for years. That I know she walks to the library every Thursday afternoon to read to Mrs. Applegate, who is an invalid. Or how she leaves the library and then goes to Mr. Barrister’s home to help feed his animals. That she graduated with a teaching degree, and works with children with autism?

I can’t tell her this, she will think I’m crazy. Maybe I am, but I can’t stop myself.

Since I first saw her, I wanted to know more. Torturing myself with a woman that I was so sure would never be mine. Now, she was.

Well, partly.

I can't tell her half the stuff I want to say. If she knew what I am, she would hate me.

The reality of who I am is classified. The Brotherhood thinks they have me under their thumb, but the truth is, not even they know who I really am.

## Chapter Three

### Victory

He listens in stone silence; my life story pours out of me while he drives. Liam turns onto a dirt road and drives for what seems like ages before we turn again. My heart beats fast in my chest, and I hear myself babbling about school and the kids I teach, but can't think on what I'm saying.

All I can think of is how my stomach is twisting in the strangest way, knowing each mile draws me closer and closer to . . . him.

The thought alone leaves parts of my body tightening in a way that makes me feel confused and afraid all at once.

He's so stunningly attractive, yet seems so cold. Hardly a smile, and the eye contact is so intense, it makes my mind go blank.

I had none of this with William. We hardly spoke, he just drove me to a rundown motel and that was that. No chatting. Just sex, and more sex. By this morning I already felt myself hating him, yet hoping with the sex out of his system, he will be different.

Maybe tomorrow, when the three of us are home together for the first time, he will not be what I fear.

"How do you like teaching?" I hear Liam's voice ask as we turn into a driveway. It's long, and in the distance, I see a modest sized farm house on lots of acres that might have been crop land but are now forested.

He's not a farmer, he told me as much. But the home is lovely, painted white with happy yellow shutters and a cleanly manicured yard with pink roses blooming all around a porch. His basset hound sits fat and happy on the porch with his tongue hanging out in a slow, lazy pant.

"I love teaching. Even if I had options like men do, I'd still choose teaching. Watching those little faces struggle, then grow makes me feel like I'm doing something helpful."

He shuts off the car and it dawns on me that he's brought me home.

To *his* home.

He's not supposed to do that. His home should have been turned over to the council. The husbands are to create a new place to bed their new wife.

He didn't.

"Liam, you've brought me to your house? How?" I stutter.

Liam sits back, pulling the keys and holding them in his hand. I glance over at him, so big and masculine. His cologne permeates everything in this truck and it smells musky and delicious.

“Yeah, well I have special permission.” He looks me dead in the eyes, creating that heavy sense of anticipation. I wonder, can he feel it too?

*Special permission?* I’ve never heard of that. The Brotherhood doesn’t bend the laws, not for anyone.

“The home, it’s still yours?” I bite my lip after asking. I’m not supposed to question things like this. I should have just commented on the shutters or something.

“I’m sorry it’s not fancy or anything. If you want to go somewhere else . . .”

I reach out and surprise myself by leaning in and touching his hand. My touch draws his eye, first to my hand, then to my face. “No, it’s . . . it’s perfect. I really think it’s lovely. Please, let’s stay.”

His hard stare grows soft before he looks away, towards the house and the property. I don’t know where the home is that the Brotherhood chose for our trio, but it won’t be like this. This is perfect. A pretty little country home that I could live forever in, happily.

It’s the kind of place I dreamed of all my life. The kind of home I’ll never have.

In the yard the dog comes waddling up to us, sniffing my feet and wiggling his happy butt at me. “Victory, this is Duke.”

I bend and scratch him behind his ear and note how clean the animal is. “He lives inside, doesn’t he?”

“How did you know?”

“He’s clean and very soft. Dogs that live outside get hard, rough fur. He doesn’t run away when you leave him outside?” This man must have something of a soft side if he lets his dog live in the house with him.

“No, there’s nowhere to go, even if he wasn’t the laziest dog ever, eh Duke?” Liam laughs for the first time all day. The sound makes me smile.

“Will he come to live with us?”

“Yes, I already asked William about him. Do you mind?”

*Do I mind?* He’s asking *me*?

In our society, women have no say on the run of the house. The men run the home, and we follow.

Until one of them fathers the firstborn, they will decide together. When the first born comes, the child's father will earn rule of over all three of us.

I will never have any say.

But head of household is my least concern. When they discover I'm not able to reproduce, the Brotherhood's men will come for me. No one talks about it, no one says what happens, but somehow everyone knows.

I swallow that down and hope it will work itself out, maybe they will grow to love me and the lack of children won't matter.

Yeah, and maybe I'll become the high grand poohbah of the Brotherhood.

"Do I mind?" I ask, repeating the question as if I couldn't have possibly heard it correctly.

He smiles at me. "Of course. What you want matters to me."

Warmth spreads across my chest. "Oh, well . . . no, I don't mind. I love animals. Thank you."

He nods, turning his gaze away and leading me further into the yard.

The inside of the house is immaculate. For a man living alone, I wonder if he did this himself or if he had someone help him clean it up. He opens the curtains, plain, white ones, letting light into the small space. There is a black couch and matching chairs, everything else is wood. It is gorgeously carved and looks like it was done by hand. Fresh flowers sit in the center of a maple table with ornate carvings all around the edge. I sit in a chair and touch the table, tracing the curve of the wood.

"This is stunning, where did you get this?"

"I made it."

I look up, I don't know why but I'm shocked. I find him watching me with a dark intensity that sends a chill down my back. "It's amazing."

Our eyes lock. "Thank you. Um, your bag arrived yesterday, do you want to unpack or . . ." He leaves the question hanging.

"You didn't unpack it?"

He frowns at me. "Why would I do that? It's not my stuff."

"Oh, well I guess I just assumed because William had gone through my bag when I got there."

He frowns, and runs his hand through his hair, leaving soft dark curls going every which way. "Victory, don't compare me to him, ever. Don't assume I'll do something just because he does, okay?"

His tone is harsh and his eyes are hard as stone. An alarm blares in my head, telling me I've upset him and I remember my mom's words when she sat me down to prepare me to be a wife.

I stand up and walk to him around the table. Only a breath away from him, I feel my lungs catch when his angry eyes dissolve into something sultry as he looks down on me.

"Liam, please don't be angry with me. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

I put my hand on his chest and feel his heart beating hard and fast. He glances down at my hand and takes in a breath, he doesn't let out right away. "I'm not mad at you."

"But you *are* mad?"

"Yes."

"At who?"

He can't be mad William, can he? The husbands are supposed to reach an agreement before the wedding ever starts. Both men are to look at their wife as a vessel to deliver babies only. Jealously and anger is not supposed to happen.

"It doesn't matter. Go unpack, I'll make us some lunch."

I nod, heading in the direction he points. Nothing about Liam is what I expected, he's not like the others. He respects my space, my opinions.

Maybe he's just trying to be nice.

The bedroom is small and neat. A breathtaking four poster bed made of sealed, natural wood sits in the middle of the room, another piece that looks to be hand carved. A multi-colored quilt is on the bed, assorted squares of worn fabric, but it doesn't look old, just loved.

My bag sits on the bed, untouched. I lift a pillow and put it to my face, taking in the scent. It's the same one I picked up when he kissed me at the altar. Beside the bed sits a simple table of matching wood, it has a pretty red vase with yellow flowers in it. I smile, knowing they must be for me. Bending, I take in that scent too, sweet and clean and floral.

On the opposite side is a dresser, tall with six drawers. One by one I open them, finding some empty, others with his neatly folded clothes. The closet is almost empty. He's likely packed up his things, knowing he is moving out.

I wonder why these things were left in the drawers.

I shrug, and move back to my bag, ready to change out of this dress. I pull out my things, putting everything away except the slacks and top that I plan to wear.

I change, hanging my wedding dress up, glad that I don't have to put it back on. I take my toiletries into the bathroom across the hall. I check my hair, my face, then I step out. I want to look at the rest of the house, but I smell food cooking, so I squash the urge and head towards the source of the smell.

I'm too nervous to be very hungry, even though I hardly ate. William ordered room service for me this morning, but I barely touched the heavy order of steak and eggs. He ordered without asking me, and I could see he was annoyed that I didn't eat. Then the car arrived and I was whisked away to get dressed for my second wedding.

I manage to find my way into the kitchen, it's small and quaint, and empty. I furrow my brow, the table isn't set. As I turn to head out to look for Liam, a back door opens and he walks in. He's shed his suit jacket and wears his white shirt with a few of the top buttons open revealing what looks like chest hair, and the sleeves rolled up. He has one arm covered in small tattoos, they look like symbols of some kind, dozens of them that disappear under his shirt. His skin is sun kissed. His bright, stormy eyes lift and meet mine.

"Hey, come outside, the food is ready."

*Outside?* I follow without a word. Crisp, spring air hits me in the face, the screen door slams behind me with a slap, and I smile. There is a table set for two.

"Oh, this is just so perfect." I breathe the words, not meaning to have said them out loud.

"Is it?" He pulls out a chair for me.

"I love it. It's beautiful here." I sigh, sitting on a cool plastic chair.

He sits across from me, cocks his head to one side. "Do you?"

I nod, looking around, taking in the fresh air.

His dog comes waddling around from the side of the house, plops down in the sun, and goes to sleep. "I'll be sure to bring you back here sometime then."

The comment draws my stare. He's watching me. "How?"

I don't understand how he's managed to hold onto the property when everyone is supposed to surrender all past possessions to the Brotherhood on their wedding day.

I realize I've done it again, and I avoid his eyes by looking down at my food and hope he's not upset with me for asking again.

I see the food for the first time. Toasted chicken salad sandwich with fried potatoes. Did he buy this or have it already made? Either way, he seems to have put tremendous thought into it, and all for me.

I pick up the sandwich and fill my mouth with a bite before I say something else.

“I do a lot of wood work for some of the council, so they let me keep the house in lieu of payment. We made a deal. Don’t tell William.”

I look up, he winks at me and picks up his fork.

*Don’t tell William.* I almost laugh, and I don’t know why. “This is very good, where did you get it?”

“I made it.”

I feel my eyes go a little wide, then I smile and take a bite. “You will have to teach me how you made this.”

He smiles into his plate. “You got it.”

Lunch continues with small talk, and I manage not to put my foot into my mouth or ask any more invasive questions that will get me into trouble.

After lunch he shows me around the house, the property. He tells me about his parents, he shows me pictures and tells me stories. He doesn't touch me once, not even to hold my hand.

It’s his motorcycle that surprises me the most as I walk up to it, almost afraid to touch it.

“It’s ok, you can touch it.” He laughs lightly. I glance over my shoulder, find him standing with arms crossed over his broad chest. “You won’t hurt it.”

I touch the leather on the seat. I’ve never been on one of these things. As I touch the machine, I wonder if it would be scary or enthralling to ride.

“Do you want to go for a ride?”

I turn, unsure of how to answer. Eyes on me, a hint of a smile playing around his lips. I swallow, wondering if I should. “Is it safe? Aren’t they dangerous?”

“I won’t go fast, I promise. Just a slow, easy ride around the country. Did you bring any jeans with you?”

I nod.

“Go change, and I’ll wait outside. I have a helmet you can wear.”

I guess that’s decided. My heartrate picks up as I head back inside, changing, and then returning to find him sitting out front. He smiles, handing me a black helmet.

“Here. Just relax and hold onto me, it will be fine.”

I get on the machine behind him, my thighs thrown wide. I’m forced to scoot up behind him, wrap my arms around his waist. My heart thuds over and over, a hard, frantic

rhythm against my ribs when he starts the thing and glances back at me. I can't see his face through the helmet, but I hear his muffled voice, "Are you ready?"

I nod, closing my eyes. The thing rumbles to life, vibrating between my thighs, the cool spring wind on my skin. He doesn't go fast, just as he promised, and the slow, leisurely pace gives me the courage to open my eyes and take in the country side.

We ride, and ride. For a long time. By the end of the ride I'm relaxed and sitting behind him with my hands on his thighs instead of holding onto his waist for dear life. The ride ends on the banks of a slow, lazy river.

He pulls off his helmet. I do the same. "So, did you like it?"

"I did, it was relaxing, made me feel . . ." I search for a word.

"Free?" he offers.

A hard feeling to come by. I smile. "Yeah, I guess so. Thank you."

That's when it seems to happen. The silence falls between us and he just stares at me for such a long, intense moment I feel my face go hot and I have to look away. I don't know what to say. He hasn't so much as hinted at sex all day. Now my heart is pounding and my stomach has plummeted.

His first steps towards me draw my eyes back up. His eyes are stormy again, troubled, but still somehow soft and wanting. He stops inches from my face.

I can't breathe.

"Victory, I know I'm not supposed to ask, but I want to know."

It's the first time he's said my name. I like the way it sounds on his rough, deep voice.

"How are you, after your night with William? Did he . . . are you hurt?"

I swallow, then take in a breath and I hold it.

How do I answer? Why is he asking?

"Why do you think he would hurt me?" I finally ask, softly, unable to tear my eyes from his.

"I know some things. I just want to make sure you are okay. You can come to me, always, you got that? I won't ever hurt you, and I won't ever let anyone else hurt you."

Somehow, I believe him. He doesn't know me, but I believe him. "I will."

"Good. Are you hurting?"

Tears burn my eyes. "Not much." I whisper, choking on the lump that's formed in my throat.

He blows out a breath, runs a hand roughly through his hair before turning back to me. “I want to make you a promise, okay?”

I can’t speak. He moves into me, wipes tears off my face. “It won’t hurt when I touch you. I swear.” He looks as if he wants to say more, but stops short.

I don’t know what to say, or what to do. So I stand and just look up at him, into blue, cloudy eyes. My heart beats fast as his hand lingers on my cheek, then he kisses me. Softly, gently, but I can feel the passion that he’s holding back. I feel it in his lips as they taste mine, in his tongue as it begs to be let into my mouth, in his hands when they fist my hair when I finally relax and sink into a kiss that makes me forget everything. It’s deep, and it makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. My arms find their way around his neck as he backs me into a tree.

No one has ever kissed me like this, ever. Men and women don’t interact much before pairing, it’s considered inappropriate. He pulls back, my face in his hands, stormy eyes blazing. “When I touch you, you will want me to. Understand? I won’t force you. I promise.”

I don’t know how to react. My lips are tingling from his, my face flush from such intimate conversation. “I believe you.” I finally whisper. It’s all I know to say.

Releasing me, he backs up a step, then another. “You ready to head back?”

As the day wears on, we cook dinner together. He makes me laugh as we chop and cook, and I smile when he insists on eating in front of the TV so we can watch a movie. Night has fallen by then, and I’m sleepy. No longer afraid, gone is the worried anticipation of the touch of a stranger on my mind.

He promised, and I believe him.

“Here, lay down.” He puts a pillow in his lap with a crooked smile. I’d been sitting with my head propped on my elbow, eyes heavy.

“Oh, I’m fine.” I lie.

He laughs, patting the pillow. “Lay down, Victory. Get comfortable.”

I hesitate, he rolls his eyes, and grins.

I shrug. He’s my husband, right?

I move, settling my head in his lap atop the pillow, he covers me with the blanket. I feel his hand on my head, stroking my hair. This man is attentive and considerate. He’s spent the whole day trying to get to know me, helping me get to know him. I feel my eyes grow heavier, the movie blurs as I struggle to stay awake. I fall asleep, warmed by this man’s hands in my hair.

## Chapter Four

Liam

My neck has a sharp, shooting pain that wakes me up. Blinking, once, twice, three times before full focus and memory returns. The weight of her head on my lap, the pain in my neck from falling asleep on the couch.

She shifts, rolling onto her back. I glance down, smiling at her beautiful face. That shock of red hair splayed out, those perfect rosy lips that kissed me back so passionately.

Her brown eyes look up at me after fluttering open. "Morning." Her voice is sleepy, shy. "You shouldn't have let me sleep here on you like this."

I chuckle, she has no idea the thought of lying in a bed with her is almost more than I can stand. I promised I wouldn't touch her, but even as I said it, I had no idea how to keep the promise. I want her like I want to breathe, but more importantly, I want her to want me.

I'm grateful for the pillow in my lap when she rises, pushing tousled hair away from her face and standing up with a shy glance as she heads to the bathroom. I jump up myself, not ready to face the embarrassment I can imagine she would feel when she's faced with my morning erection. I rush outside, relieving myself in the back yard since she is using the only bathroom.

Today is the day that I leave this place behind. My home since I was a baby. I've packed up all but a few things, some I am leaving here with every intention of returning when I need to get away.

When I want to have a secluded place to bring Victory.

The council could hardly refuse my simple request, considering I know so much. It's just easier for them to give into my requests rather than fight me on something so easily granted.

I've made breakfast by the time she returns. Her hair is damp from the shower, and she's changed into jeans and a loose pink blouse.

"Do you always cook?" She asks, taking a seat behind a plate stacked with an omelet and toast.

"I have been cooking for myself for a long time now, so why wouldn't I cook for my wife?" I shoot her a smile. She flushes, her brown eyes dancing as she picks up her fork.

"Not many men would agree with you."

“I know. I don’t really give a damn what other men think and do.” I sit down with a cup of coffee.

“That could be a dangerous way to think.”

“It could be, but I’ll be just fine.” I wink at her.

“Where is our new house? Have you seen it?”

I nod. “Yeah, it’s not bad. It’s on about an acre of land, nice place.”

It’s because of me that we didn’t end up in an apartment in the city. When I chose Victory, I pulled the old housing director aside for a small chat.

I chose this house because it had a place for me to do my woodwork, so I can have a place to go when she’s with *him*. I have thought long and hard about that, and I decided I need to try to be close by in case William proves my suspicions right.

Maybe he will be different because she is his wife, who knows.

I guess I should worry less about them and more about what she would do if she ever found out . . .

Or what I’d have to do if William found out.

Only I know the truth. But I’ve lived alone so long, I wonder how difficult keeping these secrets will be.

“Same here.” Her voice pulls me out of my own head.

After breakfast we clean up, and get ready to go. I see apprehension all over her face. Tension wrinkles her forehead as I take our bags out to the truck, check the house one last time.

“Victory, I have something for you before we leave.” Taking her hand, I lead her out to my wood shop. I sit her on a bench, where she watches me with curiosity and a hidden smile as I retrieve her gift. It took me ages to make. I carry it to her, sitting beside her, placing it on her lap.

She smiles at me, and my heart starts to beat fast as she begins to remove the cloth that protects it. I don’t miss the soft intake of breath when she reveals the intricate box. Hand carved flowers decorate the lid stained a light maple. I watch her fingers touch it, tracing the design.

“You made this?”

“For you.” I don’t know if I should tell her how long it took me. “I thought you could keep it in your dressing room or something.”

I watch as she opens the lid to find soft white velvet lining the inside. Inside is my mother's sapphire ring. Rose gold with small sapphires and alternating diamonds around the band. She picks up, looking up at me with wide eyes. "What's this?"

"It was my mother's. I want you to have it."

She lets out a sound that resembles a soft squeak, slipping it onto her right hand. "Are you sure? It's so beautiful, Liam. If you want to wait a bit, I'll understand."

She admires the ring, it looks as if it was made for her. I take her hand, turn her face towards me. "Victory let me tell you something. I have no doubts, none. I never doubt. Trust one thing; if it comes out of my mouth, I'm sure of it. You are my wife, you are to be my love. Why would I doubt you?"

Her gasp is audible. Her cheeks bloom a pretty pink and her brown eyes hide unasked questions. I bend and touch my lips to hers, soft and full. She's receptive, kisses me back. The shy woman that looks up at me, comes alive when I kiss her.

When I pull back, she is flush. A beautiful pink color on her cheeks. "How can you be so sure about me? About us?"

"I'll tell you another time, we have to go."

## Chapter Five

### Victory

What a night. It went nothing like I expected. This man stirs something in me that remains undefined. Feelings that I've never had, starting from deep within my belly every time he gives me that dark look or touches my lips.

When he told me I would want it when he touched me the first time, I was speechless. I still don't know what to think. My only experience with sex was awful, so I can't imagine how it must feel when it's desired.

*Do women desire it?* I suppose they must, but when you don't get to choose and some stranger is forcing himself on you, desire is a thing lost in the shuffle.

I swallow the emotions that flush my cheeks and cast my gaze on the perfect country home one last time, as we pull out of the driveway, his dog tied in the back of the truck with our things.

My mind goes to William as we make the drive to our new home. How will he react when he sees me? How will the men greet one another? Surely, they met before, when preparing the home, right?

We pull onto a road called White Dove Lane, and Liam tells me that our new home is here. The houses are farther apart, not quite country and not quite suburban. Some old ranch style brick, others look like they were newly constructed. I sit up in the seat as if it might help me see the neighborhood better. I'm excited and nervous at the same time.

He pulls onto a gravel driveway leading to a two-story newer home, painted a deep gray with navy accents on the trim. The yard is neatly trimmed and in need of some flowers.

William's car is in the driveway. My heart starts to beat too fast as Liam shuts off the engine, keys in hand, but he doesn't move to open the door. We both just sit in silence for what feels like several minutes.

"You ready for this?" He finally asks me.

No, not at all. Two husbands? Who's jacked up idea was this? What moron thought this would be a good idea sixty-five years ago?

Everything changed so drastically after the war.

When it was all over, when years went by and uproar started over a country that was decimated by war, the turmoil was quickly squashed. Laws were created to sweep it under the rug and make it illegal to complain. History was deleted. Removed from schools.

Now all we have are stories that may or may not be true.

Our grandparents are afraid to talk, because so many have disappeared after doing so. The government, responsible for killing its own people by accident and destroying its economy, was replaced by an anarchist “brotherhood” that rebuilt the country in the image they saw fit.

So now, here I sit.

I live in a society run by twelve old farts.

“You okay?”

I turn my head, having forgotten that I never answered his question. “Yeah, just thinking.”

“About what?”

I can’t tell him, can I?

Not yet.

I think I could trust him, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. People who talk too much don’t last long around here. One day their here, the next they’re gone. Vanished in the night. Presumed executed.

Which will likely be my fate in a few years anyway, when I can’t bear a child for one of these two men.

One of them, if not both, would turn me in.

“Nothing, just a bit overwhelming.” I sigh deeply from my chest. “Let’s go inside.”

As we both open our doors, the front door swings open and William walks out. My feet touch the gravel, eyes on him. He stands, hands on hips as I slam the truck door, my stomach suddenly churning.

## Chapter Six

Liam

I grab what I can, and carry it out of the truck. When Victory throws her large eyes up at me as if it ask permission to help, I shake my head no and motion for her to move towards the house. She pales a little, glancing between William and myself as she takes small steps. My dog follows, having been untied, he jumped out of the bed of the truck. Happily panting, waddling up to William.

William raises an eyebrow at the dog, but otherwise ignores him. The beast flops down on the porch and proceeds to warm his butt with the welcome mat.

The man that I am supposed to call my new brother steps off the porch and down the steps, making no move towards the truck to help with the rest of the bags. He grabs Victory by the hand and bends to kiss her upturned palm. She flushes, obviously forcing a tight lipped smile.

“Welcome home, wife.” He smiles at her as he stands back up.

She glances at me walking past them with the bags. My boots fall heavy on the wood of the porch as I step into the house. William moved in yesterday and evidence of his presence is in the living room in the form of a television that is on and a half eaten sandwich sitting on the coffee table without a plate or a napkin beneath it.

I pass the living area, eager to unload, however I don't know where my room is, so I pause.

“First room on the right.” William calls to me as he escorts our wife into the house, shutting the door and leaving my dog outside.

I nod, proceeding to tackle the stairs. I don't know how to feel as I walk into the plain room with plain pine furniture. Nothing fancy, nothing personal.

Not yet.

I will have to make the space my own. Mine and hers.

I drop the bags on the bed, only to pick hers up again. I find her dressing room across the hall. I open the door, finding boxes and bags stacked up that had been delivered already. To the left is the closet. Beside that is a high dresser with a mirror. A private bathroom that is just hers is in the back.

She won't have to share with the men.

I nod, approving of the space that the brotherhood's settlement team created for her with the things I chose. Things that I made or paid for.

I wanted it this way, and I wonder if she will ever know, if it will ever matter.

When she finds out the truth of who I am, I doubt it will, she will surely hate me.

These stupid gestures will be my only fall back when I try to tell her that I'm not a bad man.

I set her bags down by the other things she has to unpack and I leave the room. I run into her in the hall, so I smile and hold the door open for her.

"Is this mine?" she asks quietly.

"Yes, your dressing room."

She enters the room, looks around. Touches the furniture and then looks up to see that I am still watching her.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No, thank you. I told William I need time to organize my things."

"Do you want a radio or something?"

Her eyes light up, as if she had not thought of it. "Radio?"

"Yes, something to listen to while you work."

A hint of a smile is followed by a nod. "Yes, please. Thank you."

I go to the truck and fetch the last of our things, pulling the small, plug in radio out of one of my boxes. I take it to her, wanting to touch her when she takes it from my hands with a gentle smile. Instead I walk back to my room to unpack my own things.

After I get my stuff unpacked, I pass William lazing on the couch with his dirty feet up. I head through the house and out the back door where my shop is waiting for me.

A place to hide. My retreat.

I had this place set up before William moved in. Only I have a key. I insisted on it when I talked to that old bastard and told him what I wanted for my homestead.

Inside, I find what I am looking for. Pocketing the key, I find the locked tool box. I remove the tools, take out the false bottom, and pull out the tablet that sits in the there.

Computers were lost in the war, everyone knows. What everyone doesn't know is they were brought back, quickly.

Only those of us that work for them, have access. It's highly confidential. If the public knew, it could start a revolution that might overthrow the Brotherhood and bring us out of this Stone Age they have intentionally left us in, in order to maintain control.

I power it up and press my thumb to the screen when prompted. It lights up, welcomes me, and I maneuver to my inbox to check my email. See if I have any new assignments.

There is a lot of administrative crap I delete, not my issue. Some I forward to my counterpart, an assistant I've never met, never will meet. Rules, you know.

Can't have anyone knowing anything.

The last email that remains after I clean everything up. I open it and breathe a deep sigh.

*Assignment . . . MaryAnne Haverford.*

*Age . . . twenty-one*

*Reason for deletion . . . diagnosed with uterine cancer. Forced removal of organs to save her life rendering her infertile.*

Private information follows. I open attachments that contain pictures, information on her family. Her work, her charities, her doctor's name. The hospital that is treating her, everything I need to know to . . . delete her.

My next move is to make my arrangements, book my flight, my hotel. All with a private account that only I have access to. One that is provided specifically to aide me with my work.

My work as a paid assassin for the Brotherhood.

I accept the assignment, and as soon as I do, the money is transferred into my account.

The ten thousand I get for each one of them.

I replace the tablet and lock it back up, proceeding to pick up my tools and start carving on the bookshelf I have been working on for my new wife.

## Chapter 7

### Victory

I place my things in the drawers and hang my clothes in the closet. My perfume and brushes and the little makeup I have, I place on the vanity. I touch the wood, carved in similar fashion to the coffee table I admired at Liam's house. Stained a deep walnut, bringing out the grain of the wood. He made this for me, somehow, I know it.

Maybe not for me, but for his wife.

He couldn't have known that I would be his wife before he got his letter. I smile though, in spite of this. Glancing up at my reflection in the polished mirror. I sit down, shake my hair down and pick up the brush. I comb my waves, loose curls tumbling around my face.

How long did Liam spend creating things for his bride? It must have been ages.

Of course, I don't know how long it takes him to make a piece of furniture, but he's terribly gifted and I wonder why he doesn't open a shop and sell his work.

Maybe he does. Maybe he sells his pieces on the side to his customers, the ones that hire him for contracting work.

I sigh, setting down my brush. Longingly I glance over at my book. A tattered old paperback. It was my mother's; she gave me a box of her old books as a birthday gift. I selected one that I knew to be her favorite the day before my weddings. A mystery by Isabella Adams sits on my chair, waiting for me. I groan a protest, knowing that I have to go prepare lunch for the household. No reading for me right now.

Leaving the book behind, I exit my sanctuary closing the door behind me. I am grateful the Brotherhood still allows reading. They did do away with history books, but they still allow fiction, claiming it seems harmless enough.

They do watch though; they monitor what is out there. If they don't agree with the contents, the offending books are burned, removed from the shelves.

The books my mother gave were hers before the laws. They are old, tattered and well read. Some of them might be banned, I don't know, I don't care.

The men aren't supposed to violate my sanctuary, so I hope they won't. I hope they won't enter my dressing room and go through my books or take them from me.

I swallow the thought and glance back at the room before I step down on the stairs, deciding to go back.

In my room, I put the book back in the box and set it inside my closet.

It can't draw attention if it's not sitting out.

Back down the stairs, I find William sitting on the couch watching TV. He winks at me and I smile back, forced, as I pass through to the kitchen.

The kitchen is lovely. I stop to take it in. Wood cabinets, light colored natural pine with a clear coat on them. They are tall, to the ceiling. The counter looks like concrete, stained a marbled gray. The room is large and off to the left is the dining table in front of a bay window. The table seats six, it's also light pine like the cabinets.

Upon opening the fridge, I find bacon and fresh beef. I discover potatoes and onions, and proceed to chop them up for home fries. I make patties, fry the bacon, and cut the vegetables. I toast bread buns, and set the table family style with the food the pretty serving dishes I found in the cabinet.

“William, lunch is ready.” I call through the door.

“About time. It's almost two.” He mutters, passing me.

I watch him sit down and start to scoop food onto his plate, remembering how he was with me on our wedding night. The way he eats reminds me of the way he has sex. Hungrily, greedy and in a rush to please his senses.

I turn away before he looks up at me with his dark brown eyes. “I will go fetch Liam.”

The back yard is fenced, and on the back of the property sits a rough building with peeling paint and sliding barn doors that sit partly open. “Liam?” I call from a few feet away, unsure of going further. Not wanting to overstep into personal space, or make him angry. “Liam, are you in there?”

The sun is hot as I stand in the yard, summer having arrived already. The doors slide and Liam walks out wiping his hands on his jeans, sweating. His hair sticks up and is damp on the ends.

“I'm sorry to bother you, but lunch is ready if you are hungry.”

“Starving, thanks.” He turns and shuts the doors, securing the lock. “I need to get a fan in there, didn't realize how hot it would get. I kind of forget myself when I am woodworking.”

“I made bacon burgers, I hope that is okay.”

“Sounds perfect.”

His smile seems genuine. Liam opens the back door for me and we enter the kitchen finding William gone and his plate empty but still on the table. Crushed napkin sitting on the plate.

I strain from rolling my eyes at a grown man that can't put his plate in the sink, but I manage. Liam pulls a chair out for me before washing his hands in the sink.

He sits and as I make my own sandwich with tomatoes, lettuce, pickles and mayo.

I watch him scoop food, make his burger with a large amount of mustard, and then take a big bite.

“Very good, thank you.” He says after swallowing. He drizzles ketchup on his potatoes, forks them. “I have to go out of town tomorrow.”

I stop eating. “Pardon?” *Go out of town?* Leaving me alone with William, dread fills the pit of my stomach.

“Yeah, tomorrow. I have to go out of town for a contracting job. A customer told their father about me and he wants me to come up there and put a new roof on his house. Be a few days.”

I push the food in my mouth down my throat, picking up my ice water to wash it down. “I didn’t know you did out of town work.”

He nods. “I do. I will be back when the work is finished. You can call me on my phone if you need anything at all while I’m gone.”

“I don’t have a phone.”

He nods. “I assumed. I have one in my room for you. I will give it to you later.” He lowers his voice. “Be just between us, okay?”

“Sure, sure.” I agree.

“We will talk about that later. I will get back as soon as I can.”

I meet his eyes across the table. His eyes hold a strange emotion, but it is clouded.

So many questions cross my mind. Ones I can’t ask.

Is he worried about my safety? Is that why he wants to rush back?

It can’t be because he will miss me, he barely knows me. What will I do while he is gone? I don’t teach during the summer.

Will I have to sleep with William every night that he is gone?

I eat, looking down, away from his strange gaze. Suddenly, I don’t want food, but I force it down anyway, down into my dread filled gut. I really want to talk to my mom.

## Chapter Eight

Liam

I stash my work truck in the garage at my old house the next morning. It has to look like I'm leaving for a contracting job and nothing else. I pull my bags out and walk to the corner, where a black vehicle with tinted windows sits waiting for me.

I toss my luggage in the trunk before getting into the back seat. The partition is up, I can't see who is driving. Neither of us speak.

I lean my head back and remember watching Victory walk out of William's bedroom this morning. I ran into her in the hallway. She looked up at me with tired, defeat in her eyes and it made me want to ask questions that I know will make me want to kill him.

I blink, looking out the window in the car as I hope and pray that he doesn't hurt her.

I imagine that he takes her roughly, uncaring that she is untouched. Bruising and hurting her as he takes from her body what the Brotherhood has decided belongs to him.

She might be my wife, but I don't want it because it was decided for me. I want it because she wants me as much as I want her. Because she gives herself to me, not because I just took it.

After a while the car pulls into a small airport secluded in the middle of a forest, accessible by only one road. The road is blocked by a barricaded gate covered in warning signs, which the driver had a remote to open.

I'm dropped off not far from a waiting personal jet. Inside, I flop down into a soft leather seat. A smiling woman offers me refreshments, which I decline. During the flight I go over the files again. Committing everything to memory. I go through check lists in my mind again and again, forcing Victory out of my head and throwing myself full throttle into my work.

It's warmer in California when I get off the plane, so I shed my jacket, tossing it over my luggage. Another car picks me up, takes me to a hotel. I walk up to the desk and a smiling man looks me in the face.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"I have a reservation for Abe Westinghouse."

He pecks away at a computer. Businesses are allowed to have them, not regular citizens. And as far as they know, the internet is a thing of the past.

"Here you are. Room 704."

Key in hand, I thank him and head towards the elevator.

The room is plain, but nice. I never book anything fancy when I make my reservations. I get out my phone and send Victory a message on the phone I got her.

**Liam: I arrived here safely. Don't hesitate to contact me day or night. Just keep this phone in my room and don't let him see it. If he finds it tell him it's mine.**

I put the phone away, not expecting to hear back from her for a while, if at all.

I change my clothes into something inconspicuous and get to work.

*Step one: Rent a vehicle.*

*Step two: Find MaryAnne Haverford.*

*Step three: Follow her, learn her. Meet her.*

*Step four: Do away with her.*

## Chapter Nine

### Victory

I keep myself busy. Cleaning, cooking, and avoiding William as he mills about the house. I know he is a pilot so I try to ask him about it. I should know him a little I suppose. After all, he is my husband. . Having him crawl on top of me makes me want to weep, at least it did last night. He's rough and sweaty and his grunts make me dread being near him. Being alone with him makes my stomach churn.

What if he wants to drag me off to his room sometime during the day?

But so far he hasn't.

I'm not sure what he does all day, but at some point he leaves and I'm thankfully alone. When I see him pull his vehicle out of the driveway, there is no spark of curiosity regarding where he is going. It doesn't much matter. I assume if he was going to work he would tell me as much, but who knows? Communication isn't something we've mastered at this point in our relationship.

I head up the stairs and carefully open the door to Liam's room, feeling as if I am intruding even though I know I'm not. I find the phone that he left me and unlock it the way he showed me. I find a text message from him.

I find it easier to call him, so I hit the dial button and put the phone to my ear. He answers in two rings.

"Hello."

"Hi, I'm sorry if I'm bothering you, but I got your message and calling is easier than texting on this thing."

He chuckles lightly. "You're never bothering me. You okay? Where is William?"

"He left. I don't know where he went. How is your job going?"

He coughs, "Um, it's about as expected. It's warmer here. I'm plugging along."

"Be careful, don't fall off the roof."

I hear a smile in his voice. "I won't. I'll be home soon enough, okay?"

"Okay."

We end the phone call, not sure of what else to say. I decide to take my book out into the back yard and enjoy the solitude in the sun.

The warmth of the sun feels good as I stretch out in the grass beside Liam's dog. The animal sits beside me panting happily as I lean back, tickled by the grass, curling onto my side with my open book. The solitude is glorious, but it gets me thinking.

I know William will be asking me questions soon, wanting me to bear his child so he can become alpha. He might even track my cycles, some men do.

I got my cycles at twelve years old. Everything started out normal, but by the time I was fourteen, I recall being bedridden from the pain, the immense amount of blood, and the distention in my abdomen that refused to go away.

My mother and father used to have hushed conversations when they thought I wasn't listening. Arguments about whether to leave me sick or use their savings to find a doctor on the black market who would cure my condition without notifying the Brotherhood. They chose to save my life. Or at least temporarily extend it.

We moved not long after that, selling the house. I recall an old doctor, past retirement age telling me to lay on a bed covered in a plastic sheet. My mother holding my hand as I threw my legs wide and felt him prod and poke at my most private parts.

He stood up, pulling off gloves. He had no formal equipment like a regular doctor. Mom said he was a gynecologist from before, when women had a say. He was blacklisted due to the fact that he used to perform abortions.

“She has to have her uterus removed. Nothing else can be done, it won't get any better.”

Crying, begging, pleading that there must be another way. Images of me lying for the rest of my life, knowing I would die by forty when I never produced a child, seeing the tears on my mom's face when she finally resigned and called the old man back and told him we would have to move forward with the surgery.

Either way I was doomed.

The doctor never gave me an official diagnosis. My mom said the less I knew the better, so if people asked me questions I could lie with some genuine ignorance.

By the time I was fifteen my uterus was gone, and I started to fake my periods around friends. My mom bought me pads every month with a sadness in her eyes that never really went away.

We both knew why; I won't live to be an old woman.

The brotherhood will eventually find out, no matter how well I hide my secret.

## Chapter Ten

Liam

Maryanne Havorford lives in her parents' small, yellow frame home. Her mates have been chosen, but her cancer diagnosis set back her weddings by six weeks.

I've been sitting in my rented vehicle watching her exit her home at precisely nine am every morning for the past three days. She walks to the park, to the store, then back home again. Always alone.

Her file shows that she is—was a nanny for a family on the other side of town with four young children. Her illness forced her out of the position about three months ago. She has filed papers with the brotherhood to be re-instated in the next few weeks or to find a new placement.

Her requests have been answered in the form of myself. The real life terminator.

I watch her walk, turning the corner. She has on black slacks and a short sleeved blouse, pink in color. Her brown hair is short, tucked behind her ear. According to her records, she didn't receive chemo, but opted for surgery. Recorded conversations from her doctor's office reveal they worried that the chemo treatments would draw too much attention to her, putting her on the map for deletion by the brothers. They hoped going for surgery might allow her to just fade into the background. She was assured by an older nurse that her surgery would be off the record and she would be safe.

Of course, the doctor was one of theirs.

Only a few blacklisted doctors exist in our world, working from their homes, or hidden locations. The brothers tried to track them down at first, but at some point they just got lazy and decided it'd be easier to do away with the women instead.

Women that can't procreate are always found out, one way or another.

Even the best liar can't forever hide the fact that she is approaching her late thirties with no children.

I inhale and exhale deeply as Maryanne walks up the driveway back to her house. Her parents aren't home. I look over at the case to my right, sitting in the passenger seat.

A black satchel with my gun, rope, tape, and a few other necessities.

I swallow, knowing her parents won't be home until later this evening.

I get out of the car, the bag on my shoulder. I cross the sleepy little street, step onto her driveway, loose gravel crunching under my boots.

I crack my knuckles, adjust my sunglasses, my ball cap.

Will she answer the door when I knock? Not everyone does.

I knock lightly, turning my back to the door casually.

I hear the lock turn, the door open. I spin slowly on my heel, a smile creeping onto my face. Maryanne looks up at me. I lift my glasses so she can see my eyes.

“Morning, Miss. Are you Maryanne Havorford?”

“Um, yes I am. And you are?”

“My name is Abe and I was told you are looking for placement as a Nanny? The Council sent me to conduct an interview with you.” I pull a badge out of my pocket and show it to her. Her eyes go down, reading the information. “We have several families requesting assistance and we would like to make sure you are matched with a suitable fit.”

She visibly relaxes. “Really? Oh that’s great. Come in. I’d be happy to. I’ll be ready to work in a couple of weeks.”

I step inside. The room is cool. The air smells of fresh bread and vanilla, and the windows are all open letting in a lot of sunlight. A small calico cat sits lazily on the arm of a cream-colored couch flicking its tail.

“Yes, we think the timing will work out well.”

“Have a seat, can I get you something? Coffee?”

I sit down beside the cat, setting my bag down. “Coffee would be great.”

She smiles at me and disappears into the kitchen.

I reach down and unzip my bag.

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Before I come home, I figure I should get Victory something nice. I noticed the books in her belongings, so I visit a bookstore before I board the plane and I spend money on a dozen books that I hope she might like. I get her a bookmark and a book light for night reading. A blank book with a nice black leather cover for journaling, and I pay for it all.

I don’t know enough about her to buy her anything else. I figure things like clothes and jewelry would come later, when we are closer.

Maybe even shopping together.

The thought of spoiling her makes me feel warm as I thank the clerk and head towards the black Lincoln that shows up to take me to the airport.

Before I get on the plane, I text Victory that I'm on my way home, hoping to see her this afternoon. I've been gone for four days now, and I wonder how William has been treating her. I grab my luggage from the trunk and step towards the waiting plane, just in time to receive a response from my beautiful wife.