
CONTROL
Freak
BRIANNA HALE

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Total control. I need it in every aspect of my life. Some would say that makes me an asshole. A freak. But as long as everything's exactly how I want it, I'm completely flexible.

I'm kidding.

Okay, I'm not kidding.

Lacey needs someone in her life who's bigger and scarier than her demons, and she wants that man to be me. Her boss. The Viking in a suit.

I hope she understands what she's getting into. This daddy isn't going to pat her on the head and tell her she's a good girl for nothing. Especially not when she's spinning out of control.

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CONTROL FREAK by BRIANNA HALE

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Pour, Für & För Xenia

Avec amour et gratitude
Mit Liebe und Dankbarkeit
Med kärlek och tacksamhet

From Brianna, Frederic, Reinhardt and, now, Stian

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Playlist

Intro—The xx
dont ask dont tell—Tove Lo
Delicate—Taylor Swift
Power and Control—Marina and the Diamonds
Greyhound—Swedish House Mafia
Figure 8—Ellie Goulding
Perfect Now—Sarah Blasko
Losing My Mind—Beacon
Young Bride—Midlake
There Is No Such Place—Augie March
Better Now—Post Malone
Technicolour Beat—Oh Wonder
Mystery of Love—Sufjan Stevens

https://spoti.fi/2wpN793 or search “Control Freak” on Spotify

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One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: that word is love.
SOPHOCLES

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Pronunciations

Blomqvist—BLOOM-kvist
käraste—SHAR-asta

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Chapter One

Stian

CONTROL FREAK.

The words are keyed in eight-inch spiky letters down the length of my BMW. My top-of-the-line, very new BMW. I push my sunglasses on top of my head and look up at the parking garage ceiling, counting the nearby security cameras. Five. That should be enough. Not that I don't already know who did it.

As I turn onto Tottenham Court Road in my graffitied car, my fury smolders. I'm neck-deep in organizing the Laxos exhibition and my assistant did nothing but argue with me at every turn. Why couldn't he just *obey*?

There's a parking space directly outside the glass-fronted Mayfair gallery and I pull into it, contemplating the art and people inside with little pleasure. As museum director of the Albright Collection, showing up and shaking hands with people I don't like is my least favorite part of the job. I glance at my watch. Chris Petrou and his ghastly modern art can have no more than fifteen minutes of my time.

Inside, I pick up a catalog and read the descriptions, ignoring the waiters with champagne and the art world people who attempt to snag my attention. I weave through the crowd to the artist himself, who throws his arms into the air when he sees me.

“Stian! You made it.”

I shake his hand, murmuring a greeting. We’re not friends, but it’s thanks to him that the Laxos Archaeological Museum loaned me most of the artifacts for the exhibition, so I have to make nice. The Greek government can be touchy about loaning artifacts to Britain since the Brits stole half the surviving marble statues from the Parthenon. That was two hundred years ago, but governments have long memories. It also didn’t help that the British never gave them back. Being Swedish, I enjoy the convoluted explanations from some of my colleagues about why this is actually fine.

A few feet from us on a podium is a jar containing the artist’s urine and a prayer card bearing the image of the Madonna. I search for something complimentary to say about Petrou’s exhibition that I actually mean. “The catalog descriptions are very good.”

Petrou eyes the flyer I’m brandishing and then bursts out laughing, no doubt putting my words down to dry Scandinavian wit.

“That was Lacey, my daughter. She organized everything. Did an amazing job, all things considered.”

My silence isn’t an invitation to expand on this, but he takes it that way.

“She’s had some health issues. Done some silly things. But she’s a good girl, of course.” Petrou says this offhandedly, as if good girls are ten a penny and just waiting to fall into your lap.

If only.

“I’m sure she is,” I murmur, more out of politeness than anything else, my eyes wandering onto a painting of a man with his hands on his hips and contemplating his flaccid penis.

Petrou gestures airily with his glass of champagne. “She gave her mother and me a lot of worries. Eating badly at university. But she’s going to therapy now. In fact, she’s here somewhere…” he adds, glancing around.

If I had a daughter, I wouldn’t speak so blithely of her health issues. Eating disorders aren’t merely eating badly, but I hold my tongue. As Petrou looks about for his daughter, the crowd parts and he catches sight of my car through the glass windows of the galley.

“Stian. Isn’t that your car?”

I don’t turn and look. I know it’s my car. “Yes.”

“But what—

“Just someone letting off steam.”

He turns back to me, scandalized and delighted at the same time. “Who?”

I imagine telling Petrou to mind his own fucking business. “I fired my assistant this morning.”

“Why?”

Because he’s a lazy little know-it-all who couldn’t take a single direction without arguing with me, and I haven’t got the time nor the patience to explain my every decision to an entitled little shit. “Clash of personalities.”

Petrou attempts to look sympathetic. “Right in the middle of organizing the exhibition, as well. You must be panicking. I couldn’t have managed any of this without Lacey.” He pauses, and I can see the dots connecting in the air around him. His daughter, whom he clearly believes is a problem child, needs a job, and I need an assistant.

As he's opening his mouth, I speak over him. "Excuse me. I want to see your work and then I have to report the damage to the police. Good night."

I do a lap of the space as fast as I can without seeming rudely inattentive. The exhibition continues upstairs. I spend two seconds looking at half a dozen sculptures, and then I decide I can leave.

As I walk to the stairs I notice a young woman heading the same way, digging into her handbag as she walks and completely oblivious to the staircase in front of her. She's tall and slim and wearing high heels with a knee-length dress. Her legs are lovely, but they're not what's distracting me. It's the fact that she's walking blindly toward a steep drop.

Look where you're going.

You're going to miss that first step, look up. She keeps walking, scrambling frantically in her bag.

"*För i helvete*, look up!" I bark. Her high-heeled shoe slips on the top step and she teeters over a chasm of empty space. In that instant, I see what two dozen hard steps and a long fall would do to her body in vivid detail.

I lunge forward and pull her back, my heart pounding hard in my ears. I turn her around to face me, giving her a little shake. "You could have fucking died. What were you thinking?"

The young woman stares up at me, visions of her near-death experience dancing in her eyes. She's terrified, both of the fall that nearly swallowed up her life and of me, the strange man towering over her with death-grip on both of her upper arms.

"S-sorry, um. I—"

“Look where you’re going. Use the handrail. Find a way to get through your life without being attached to that device like it’s your pacifier.”

Indignation starts to bleed into her terror. She hates me for making a scene in front of everyone, but I cannot begin to express how much I don’t care. Watching a woman fall to her death for a ridiculous non-reason isn’t part of my planned existence.

“Got it? Good.” I let her go and head down the stairs, several dozen eyes staring reproachfully after me. Behind me I hear people murmur in kind tones to her, asking if she’s all right, probably more in response to my ferocity than her nearly falling to her death. They can do the kid gloves thing and fuss over her if they like. I hope she remembers me every time she sees a flight of stairs.

The traffic in the West End has thinned and it only takes thirty minutes to drive home to Wimbledon. I eat, and then deal with the shit that today has thrown at me.

A few hours later I put down my phone, having placed several calls to the police and the security desk at the museum. They’re going to forward the tapes to the police. I’ve identified the person in them. As I suspected, it’s my former assistant, Eric. He couldn’t even get this right. He was careful to keep his hat pulled low and his head down as he walked to my car, but halfway through the R of CONTROL he’s startled by someone walking by, and looks up. Right into the lens of a security camera. Idiot.

I head off to bed, and once I’m between the sheets I notice that I have an email from Petrou.

Stian, just had a thought. Lacey's been invaluable in helping me with my exhibition. Why doesn't she come along for the summer to assist you before she goes back to her Masters? She knows all about the pieces thanks to her coursework and can organize everything for you. Her attention to detail is better than yours.

I groan and rest the phone on my chest. I haven't got any interviews lined up yet for Eric's replacement and tomorrow my schedule is full all day. Petrou made his daughter sound like a train wreck at the exhibition, but what actually irritates me is someone else trying to fill the gaps in my life. Only I know what I need.

If she had a hand in organizing her father's exhibition, Miss Petrou could potentially make an adequate assistant. Now I wish I'd had the chance to meet her while I was there.

I consider it for a moment longer and then reply. *I can see her at the museum at seven-thirty tomorrow morning.*

I put my phone on the bedside table and switch off the light. If that's too early for Miss Petrou and she doesn't show up, I will have saved us both a lot of hassle.

Early mornings are going to be the least of her problems if she works for me.

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Chapter Two

Lacey

I hurry up the steps of Russell Square Tube station toward the Albright Collection, and the summer morning is warm and still. My stomach clenches uncomfortably around the muesli and yogurt I forced myself to eat in the bathroom at home.

The anxiety was bad this morning. My old habits crowded around me, eager to latch onto me while I'm weak. Even just thinking about going without breakfast and restricting myself to three hundred and fifty calories today made adrenalin surge through me; made me feel powerful again after dad sprang this interview on me at nearly midnight last night.

I was already feeling raw after a Viking in a suit grabbed me and shouted in my face. I know I did a stupid thing by digging in my bag for my affirmations while I was fleeing to the bathroom. If that man only knew the circumstances, could only feel what I feel. I needed that list.

I am not my eating disorder.

I will be gentle with myself.

I am aware of possibilities for improvement, but I don't want to be anyone else.

Every day is a constant battle between what I know is good for me and what my anorexia wants. She's always with me, spitting

insults and cruelty and telling me I'm unlovable, fat and greedy. I've been able to construct a box in my mind and trap her in it, but she's never truly silent. I can hear her in there, rattling the lid and screaming in frustration.

Each day is supposed to bring me closer to full recovery, but I'm just so tired. I know I'm going to slip up. It's just a question of when, and how badly.

At the traffic lights, I take a deep breath and a slow look around me, trying to be present. Trying to mentally prepare myself for a job interview I never asked for.

I am grateful for this opportunity.

New experiences lead to personal growth.

I do love this area, the center of Bohemian London a hundred years ago. It's not far from my university so I know it well. The narrow rows of Victorian terraces open up onto jewel-box garden squares. The weather has been hot and dry, and the grass is already going brown at the edges even though it's only the end of June.

The Albright Collection is an ultra-modern and slick building with an original redbrick Victorian façade. I hurry up the steps and the security guard in the foyer directs me to Mr. Blomqvist's office on the top floor. I find a waiting area with no one around, just several sofas, a desk where an assistant must sit, and a closed door which bears a plaque that reads, STIAN BLOMQVIST, MUSEUM DIRECTOR. I wonder what he's like. Probably frail with spectacles and papery skin, like some of my professors at university.

I'm getting a paper cup of water at the fountain when a man strides out of the elevator, tall, strong, blond, dressed in a suit and

with a laptop bag slung over one shoulder. He stops dead and stares when he sees me.

It's the Viking from last night.

I want to kick myself. I heard his accent, and I should have guessed that the man who shouted at me for nearly falling down the stairs was Stian Blomqvist. How many Swedes were there going to be at dad's opening night?

Mr. Blomqvist, so self-assured, so wide awake and full of purpose at this early hour, has been caught off guard by me, and I can tell he detests the sensation.

"Miss Petrou," he says, recovering. "This is my office. Come inside."

His voice is gravelly, and consonants sound hard and heavy in his mouth as if he's carving them onto stone as he speaks. I watch his broad back retreating. I should probably just leave because I don't want to work for him, and he won't want to hire me. We're going to spend twenty or so stiff minutes going through the motions of an interview for a job both of us know I'm not going to get. I can picture the look my therapist will give me if I leave, though, and dad will go on for hours about how I've disrespected his friend, and I don't actually want to get better.

Inside his office, I sit down in the chair Mr. Blomqvist offers me and watch as he takes out his laptop and various devices. He's got Nordic blue eyes and fine blond hair, shaved at the sides, and longish on top and swept back.

When he finally sits down and looks up at me, he's oddly still. Like he's been carved from stone as well as his words. Even his eyes don't flicker, but rather he stares.

“Your father tells me that you helped organize his exhibition.”

“Yes,” I say loudly, over the trumpeting of the elephant in the room. Oh, yeah. Only I can hear that.

Mr. Blomqvist is silent, so I start reciting what my duties were at the gallery. He laces his fingers together on his desk, and I notice there are markings on his knuckles. Tattoos. They’re Nordic runes, and there’s some sort of animal prowling down the back of his left hand. A wolf, I think. I wonder where else he has tattoos. If they’re on his hands then they must be all over his body. They’re so at odds with his immaculate appearance that I start to become distracted, because while he’s a jerk he’s kind of a gorgeous jerk, with a sculpted face and a generous, surly mouth. I like the way he says *dis* and *dat* instead of *this* and *that*.

“If the curator of another museum wanted to borrow a piece from us, what would you do?”

The question blindsides me, and I force my gaze back up to his. “I would pass on the request to the collections manager.”

“And if they demand to know how much we paid for a piece or if any other museums wish to exhibit it?”

“That wouldn’t be my place to say.”

He asks me several more questions of this sort, and I give him my answers. They’re all common sense questions, and I think he’s trying to establish whether I have good judgment. If that’s what he cares about most, I can probably do this job standing on my head. My only poor judgment is for myself.

“The work is glorified admin, but if you want to get a foot in at the museum, or any museum, it’s a start. I understand you’re completing a Masters so the contract will be for two months.”

He looks away, distracted by sorting through a pile of catalogs, and I realize he's offered me the job. Just like that. Are we going to ignore him shouting at me in the middle of dad's exhibition?

"Did you want to talk about what happened last night?"

He puts the catalogs down. "Yes. Thank you for reminding me. There are a great many staircases in this museum. Please keep your full attention on them as you move around the building."

I feel my eyebrows creep up my forehead. What to do, tell him he's an asshole and forfeit the job offer, or shut up about it and stew at my desk every time he sends me a perfunctory email? I don't want to be kicking myself over letting him talk to me how he likes for the next two months.

"You needn't have been so ferocious about it. I was scared enough."

Mr. Blomqvist's eyes narrow, and what he's thinking is written all over his face: *Good*.

"I reacted to seeing a young woman nearly plummet to her death. You should consider how your actions affect those around you."

I should *consider* it. I wish I could crack my head open and show him all my jagged thoughts crowding against each other, every single one of them screaming about the consequences of every little thing I do. But what would be the point? He's clearly one of those people who think millennials all eat overpriced avocado toast and expect the world to fall into their laps.

So do I tell him to go fuck himself, or no?

The summer spreads before me, empty of purpose. When I have nothing to do, my bad habits really flex their muscles, and I

have nothing to beat them back with. They kept us busy on the ward for a reason.

He'd be my boss. I don't have to like him. We just have to be civil to each other. I'll use him as a springboard to something better after I finish my Masters, and if he turns into a nightmare in the meantime, I'll just quit. I've dealt with bigger monsters than Stian Blomqvist.

"Yes, one should," I say with a polite smile, reverting to my mother's cultured phrases, sounding as if I agree with him but actually pointing out that he should be considering his actions, not me.

He's Swedish. He probably didn't notice.

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Chapter Three

Stian

Miss Petrou smiles coolly at me, thinking I don't know what she just said. She's rather rude. But then, so am I. From her answers to my questions she seems to have some common sense, though she's obviously highly strung. Her hands are gripping each other so tightly that her flesh is mottled red and white.

If she goes to pieces I'll just fire her later. "The hours are going to be long each day, but we pay overtime."

"When would you like me to start?"

I glance at my watch and stand up. There are several of Eric's messes I want to clean up before I can turn to the Laxos exhibition again. "Now, if possible. Lacey, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And that's fine. Dad said you'd probably want me to start right away."

She follows me out of my office, and I point to her desk and computer and pass her a key. "This is where you'll work. Here's the key to the drawers. I'll arrange for someone from HR to come by later to give you a security induction. Get a notebook and come with me."

As well as the Laxos exhibition opening in September, we're about to showcase a series of Phoenician artifacts. I want all the descriptions redone. Eric wrote them, and they've been irritating me.

There was a long fucking list of things he did that I didn't like and I never got round to correcting this one.

We go through the exhibition piece by piece, and I put red marker through the description cards I don't like and explain why. Lacey takes pictures of each one on her phone and makes notes.

"How long will they take?" I ask her as I walk us the long way back to my office. I want to show her where the Laxos exhibition will be set up.

She consults her notebook. "You hated twenty-seven out of thirty-six descriptions. But they're only short so I can probably get them to you in the morning."

"Good. All right. Through here will be the Laxos exhibition."

I swipe my pass and push through the doors into the space. At the moment it's vast and almost empty, with the display cabinets waiting against the walls. Several workmen at the far end of the room are constructing scaffolding to support the palace recreation.

"It's the first time these items will be loaned to a foreign country." I point to a space in the middle of the room. "That's where the Laxos Disc with be displayed."

The Laxos Disc is the drawcard of the exhibition, a ceramic disc stamped with symbols that defy translation. Its inscrutability makes it more valuable and interesting than all the gold and bronze objects we'll exhibit alongside it.

Lacey scans the room, but there isn't much to see yet. "What do you think about the claims that the disc is a fake?"

She's heard of that? The dispute wasn't picked up by many of the online magazines. "They wouldn't let it out of their sight if they

truly suspected it was fake. We might run our own tests while we have it and embarrass them."

When curators start telling me that a dubious artifact is too delicate to be loaned, that's when I smell a rat. All the same, it's fishy that they've never run a thermoluminescence test to determine the disc's precise age.

"Will you? Run your own test, I mean."

I scratch the side of my cheek, thinking. "Well. That would be a very rude thing to do to the Laxos Museum."

She shoots me a look, as if she can tell how tempted I am to do it anyway.

"Wait, this isn't your thesis topic, is it?" I ask, wondering if getting Lacey into the museum as an employee is a scheme by Chris Petrou. What an uproar it would cause if his daughter discovered the disc was a fake. It's convoluted and kind of paranoid, but I wouldn't put anything past a man who can display his urine for the sake of being sensational.

"No. Mine's about the deadly gaze in Greek myth. Medusa. Actaeon. Panoptes."

Thank fuck for that.

I take Lacey back to her desk and leave her to it for the rest of the day. I've got several meetings, and in between I go through my emails, flicking some over to Lacey to handle as I go.

At six I send her home, telling her that eight-thirty is fine as a start time from now on. It was a promising first day. We'll see if she can keep her head when I really start to load her up with tasks.

When I arrive at the museum at seven forty-five the next morning, she's already at her desk. I don't say anything. If she wants

to be a workaholic for the next two months that's fine by me. She won't run out of things to do.

At ten I have a free half-hour and call her into my office so we can go through the descriptions she's rewritten. I open my post as she reads them aloud, nodding as she finishes each one. They're structured well and give just enough context for the pieces.

I make a disgusted noise at a grotesque neon flyer I've just taken out of an envelope, and Lacey looks up.

"Malcolm Hesse?" she asks, eyeing the artwork.

"Yes," I mutter darkly.

"He's a friend of dad's. What did you think about dad's exhibition, by the way?" she asks, and when I glance up there's an innocent expression in her eyes.

I set the flyer aside. "You know these people. Maybe you can explain something to me. I'm the director of a museum of antiquities, and yet I seem to get an invitation to every modern art opening in London. Why?"

She casts her eyes over me, smiling faintly. "Well, you're Scandinavian, and you guys do have a reputation for being progressive. As you know about antiquities, you lend some gravitas to the room. And there aren't many museum directors with tattoos. Maybe the artists think you're edgy."

I glance at the dark blue ink on my fingers, scowling. *Kristus*, they're shallow.

"But what did you think of the exhibition?" she presses me.

"It was fucking terrible."

I wonder if she's going to be annoyed with me for being so blunt, but Lacey puts her hands over her mouth and snorts with

laughter. Her laughter is infectious and I find myself wanting to smile back. “I’m not saying his work doesn’t have value or purpose. It’s just that when I look at it, my gut tells me I hate it.”

She shakes her head, still laughing. “It’s all right, art is subjective. But I think you should know how much dad name-drops you at parties. He tells everyone that you’re a fan. Expect a lot more invitations.”

“Fuck my life. Sorry, keep reading,” I say, nodding at her pages. “They’re good.”

Lacey’s cheeks turn a little pink with pleasure as she continues, and the smile lingers on her lips. My assistant is very attractive, I realize, watching her as she reads. Her hair is long and dark, and she wears silver jewelry on chains around her neck and wrists. I notice a figurine of Osiris and several blue-and-white beads on her wrist. Greek, I think. Warding off the evil eye.

I rattle off a list of things I want done in the next few days, and she notes them down and suggests the order in which they should be done. It makes sense, and I tell her so, and she goes to do them.

I gaze at the closed door for a moment, considering Lacey. She’s not a frightened little mouse, but she’s not arguing with me at every turn, either. If she keeps this up she and I are going to get along just fine.

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Chapter Four

Lacey

“So, yeah. I guess I would like an apology for him yelling in my face, but I’ve put that aside for now, and I’m just getting on with the work. Maybe I’ll bring it up again before I leave, or maybe I’ll just let it go.”

“You seem to like your boss,” my therapist replies. I’ve finished talking through my first week at the museum, and this is the first thing she’s said.

“What?” I say quickly, pretending not to have heard her. I don’t think she’s fooled. Her eyes behind her spectacles are keener than usual. “Oh, yes. He makes the work interesting. Not that it’s not interesting.”

Ugh, shut up, Lacey.

I’ve been coming to see Doctor Loftin ever since I left the ward. We have weekly sessions, and I talk her through my days and any problems I’ve been having. Right now I’m considered to be recovering, and my weight is stable. I glance around her plain white office, trying to gather my thoughts. She won’t speak again until I’ve clarified myself.

Well, I do like Mr. Blomqvist. I didn’t at first because of the shouting and his refusal to apologize for it at my interview, but he’s been perfectly civil since. Only good things to say about my work in his flat, gravelly voice. When I told him I needed two hours on Wednesday mornings off to see my therapist he just nodded and

said that was fine. I even risked saying *to see my therapist* rather than pretend I was going to the dentist or something like that. Sharing with someone that I go to a shrink is very hard for me, because I can see the suspicion in their eyes as they wonder if I'm psychotic. Mr. Blomqvist didn't react at all.

"I like having something to do over the summer, and working at the museum is good for my career," I say firmly, because I didn't mention anything about how he's attractive or that I like the way he smells, so she's got no reason to be suspicious. I just told her how he wants things done a certain way, and I respect that. Sometimes he can be blunt, but it's being argued with once he's made his mind up that riles his temper. If I make a suggestion when we're planning things he takes it on board.

Dad told me about his car. Control freak. I suppose he is, but he's the director. He gets to be in control.

We finish the session by going through my food diary, but I'm still annoyed by Doctor Loftin's comment when I leave. *You seem to like your boss.* People are so sordid.

There's a beautiful park outside the museum, and when I arrive for work dozens of people are sitting on the grass eating takeaway lunches. It's a hot day but there's a breeze blowing, and the leaves on the trees are a brilliant green. Doctor Loftin and I have talked about me starting to eat in front of other people again, but I can't face it yet. The thought of people seeing me put food into my mouth and chew it makes shame and panic flood my stomach.

Instead, I go inside and take the stairs up to the office. When I reach the top floor, I sit down on a step and pull my lunchbox from

my handbag. No one uses these stairs. I can see the door from my desk, and I've been watching.

Lunch is a salad of poached chicken, sunflower seeds and a baked potato. To go with it I have eight carrot sticks and a small tub of hummus. I measure and prep everything the night before. My therapist wishes it was more food, but she's happy that I've reached a healthy weight. I'm skirting the lower bar of what's acceptable, though, so I have to be careful to eat everything on my plan. If my weight dips she'll send me back to anorexia prison, AKA the Dawnstead Eating Disorder Inpatient Ward, AKA the worst place I've ever been in my life.

I take a deep breath and start eating. It's more mechanical than pleasurable, and I can only take small bites. Swallowing too much at once makes me gag, and I have to concentrate so that the food goes down at the right time. Thinking of food as fuel for my body and brain rather than the enemy has helped, but I still don't like eating. From within her box, that nasty part of me whispers how disgusting and shameful I am the whole time, and how I deserve to fade away to nothing.

Forty-five minutes later I'm finally done, and I snap the lid back on my lunchbox and go to my desk.

Over the next few hours, I work steadily through my to-do list for the exhibition, trying to ignore the way the food feels in my belly. At three I go back to the stairwell and eat a muesli bar. That takes fifteen minutes, and I pray that Mr. Blomqvist doesn't think this is too long to be away from my desk. Hopefully he thinks I'm down in the café or something. I've seen lots of the other museum workers chatting away in there.

By four in the afternoon, the air-conditioning seems to be struggling. There's a skylight in the middle of the room and the temperature is steadily climbing as the sun beats down. In between emails, I fan myself with my notebook.

Just after five, Mr. Blomqvist emerges from his office in his shirtsleeves, carrying proofs for the Phoenician exhibition flyers that we've had redone. I wrote the copy, and I'm rather proud of it.

Right now, though, I'm not thinking about the flyers. I'm looking at Mr. Blomqvist. Earlier he was wearing a tie and jacket, but perhaps he's too hot as well because they're absent and his collar is open. He leans past me to grab the envelope the proofs came in, and his shirt gapes a little. I can't help peeking, and I see that there are more tattoos on his chest. His very strong chest. I glimpse blue and black ink, intricate designs that might be Nordic, and then he's straightening. I quickly look back at my computer screen.

"These are good. Approved to print," he says, putting the proofs back in their envelope and handing them to me.

Thank you, sir, I think, as I have lately whenever he tells me something like this. Except that today the heat has got to me or I'm still distracted by the sight of his tattooed body, and it slips out. "Thank you, sir. I mean—Mr. Blomqvist."

Crap.

"No need to call me sir," he rumbles over my head, and I could swear I hear a shade of something in his words, but I can't tell what. He goes back into his office, and I'm glad because now I'm so hot I could self-combust.

So I like calling him sir in my head. It's no big deal. I just like the way it sounds and these days so few words bring me pleasure.

The word *sir* fills my mind with peace, like a hand reaching out to dampen a struck cymbal. My therapist doesn't need to know. No one needs to know. Except I've just said it to Mr. Blomqvist.

Despite that thought making me squirm, my sense of peace endures well into the evening. I eat dinner in my room as usual—a piece of salmon, rice, hazelnuts, and steamed vegetables—and when I come back downstairs I watch TV with my parents for an hour or so, but most of the time I'm thinking about Mr. Blomqvist. About calling him sir. And whether I dare say it to his face again.

I kind of want to.

The next morning I arrive at the office to find an email that makes the bottom fall out of my stomach. A feature article about the Laxos exhibition in one of the major newspapers has been canned. Mr. Blomqvist spent three hours with the journalist a few days ago, but now she says her editor is pulling the piece.

When he steps out of the elevator ten minutes later, I can barely return his hello. He's going to go through the roof when I tell him. This was one of the key marketing pieces he was relying on. If we don't get the word out about the exhibition, it's going to flop and next year's budget will be toast. I won't be here of course, but I still care, and I'm the one who's going to break the news to him. I remember him berating me at dad's exhibition and I want to grab my handbag and flee.

We have catch-ups in his office twice a day, the first at ten, and the two-hour wait is agony. At exactly ten I stand up, knock on his door and go in. Feeling it's best to get the worst over with, I tell him about the article and then brace for impact.

“That’s disappointing,” he says mildly. “Can we contact some of the other papers and see if they’ll consider us last minute?”

I let out an involuntarily rush of breath. He’s not going to lose his temper.

“Something wrong?” he asks me, frowning.

“Oh—no. I just thought the news might upset you.”

He looks at me for a long time. “Did you think I would yell at you, Lacey?”

I’ve noticed he does that a lot, saying my name firmly, as if to emphasize that he’s talking directly to me. “I did, actually.”

“Why did you think I would be angry with you?”

“I know how important the exhibition is to you.”

“It is, but what the editor decided is out of my control. It’s out of anyone’s control.”

“I thought you were…” I trail off, embarrassed. *A control freak.*

The ghost of a smile touches his lips. “Someone’s been telling you about my last assistant.”

“Well, I heard about your car. Dad told me.”

Mr. Blomqvist stands up and comes and sits on his desk in front of me. “I’m sorry I made you think I was going to lose my temper. I get angry when people disappoint me or are careless, but I don’t focus on things I can’t control.”

Just like that, as if he has a choice in what he obsesses over? Sounds fake, but okay. We look at each other for a long time, and I wonder if he’s going to apologize specifically for yelling. I get the feeling he wants to say something, but he doesn’t speak.

“I’ll go and see if I can get another paper interested?” I offer, gesturing over my shoulder.

He nods and goes back to his chair.

I'm halfway to the door when I stop and turn back to him. "I wasn't searching in my bag for my phone the other night. I know you think I was being careless, but I was looking for something important."

I don't know why I need to tell him this. I guess I don't like being thought of as a silly girl who wanted to check her Instagram DMs so much she nearly died.

"Thank you for telling me that, Lacey."

"You're welcome, sir."

I go back to my desk outside, but I barely see the words on the computer screen. I said it again. Sir. This time he didn't tell me not to, but that's probably because I left the room so quickly he didn't have a chance.

I've never had anyone to say *sir* to. I would like to, one day. In bed. I've been low-key obsessed with the idea since I discovered that dominants and submissives exist. *That's me*, I thought to myself, as I read about the submissive half of the relationship. The one who derives pleasure from being controlled. It couldn't be just by anyone. There are plenty of people who think they deserve someone saying *yes sir* and *no sir* to them, but they have to do something to earn it. Have a presence. Be authoritative. Inspire people to want to do as they direct. Smile at you in a way that makes you want to suck their fingers.

Beneath my desk, I press my thighs together. Mr. Blomqvist has a smile like that.

I got so melancholy over not having anyone to say it to that I even Googled how to be submissive when you haven't got a dom.

An article advised me to find someone in authority in my life and make myself useful to them. I tried it with one of my university professors but I didn't see him often enough, and he was always trying to help me, so it was no good.

But I have someone now. He's intelligent, handsome, serious. Authoritative. Demanding. And he's my boss. It's perfect. He asks me to do things, and I do them. I already enjoy that, and now I've found a way to enjoy it more.

On my way home that night I go into a store and buy myself a present. A pale pink velvet choker with a silver clasp. I've always loved the look of these and what they mean, if you think about them in that way. A collar. Belonging to someone. Being owned.

I'm just trying it out. To see if I like the idea of wearing it for Mr. Blomqvist.

I wear several necklaces every day so don't think anyone at the museum notices I'm wearing it the next day, but I do, and I sit a little straighter at my desk as I type an email to the freight company who are shipping the Laxos artifacts.

At lunchtime, I think that it's not a bad sort of day as I head to the stairs with my food. I finish my salad and set out the carrot sticks in an orderly row. Not much left to tackle now.

I hear footsteps on the stairs, and freeze. Too late, I realize someone's coming up them, and then Mr. Blomqvist appears on the landing below and turns and climbs toward me. He's got a gym bag over his shoulder, and his hair is damp. Since when did he go to the gym at lunchtime?

"Not eating in the lunchroom?" he asks.

I feel my face burn, hard, as if I've been caught thieving or spreading malicious gossip. Without waiting for an answer Mr. Blomqvist keeps walking and heads through the door and disappears.

I sit frozen, staring at my lunchbox. He's seen my weird ritual, and now all I want to do is crumple up in shame and be scattered to the four winds.

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Chapter Five

Stian

I'm kicking myself when I get back into my office. The words just slipped out when I saw Lacey on the stairs. I don't know much about eating disorders but she's obviously sensitive about food, so I shouldn't have said anything.

I've got a budget meeting in forty-five minutes, and I should go through my notes. Instead, I open up Google and type "recovering anorexic" into the search bar, because I suspect that's what's up with Lacey. She doesn't drink coffee or eat fruit at her desk like the other office workers do. When I go into the lunchroom or to the museum café I never see her buying cold drinks or cake. She's slender, though not painfully so, so she must eat. Now I've discovered where.

I read an account of a woman talking about the "anorexic voice" and how angry it is with her when she eats; how it tells her she's disgusting and doesn't deserve food; how overwhelming the mere act of putting food in her mouth is, and that she can't do it with any pleasure. Only fear. Eating around other people, or being near other people when they eat, is torture.

It sounds fucking terrible. I think about the way Lacey was sitting on the stairs, all hunched over like she was being hunted by a monster. I've never seen her like that before.

I keep reading and find a chilling paragraph on an educational website. *Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. As many as twenty percent of sufferers will eventually die from the disease. The most common cause of death is heart failure.*

As I'm heading out to the budget meeting, I take some catalog proofs to Lacey and give them to her. "You can eat lunch in my office. I've got time for the gym again, so I'm out from twelve forty-five to one-thirty every day."

I have time because of her. I'm not constantly battling to get on top of things. Her eyes are startled, and I see her blush creeping back. Before she can argue with me or tell me it doesn't matter, I leave her to it. There's a sofa in the corner of my office. She can eat there and at least feel a little normal.

When I come back from the gym the next afternoon, I'm pleased to see Lacey sitting on the sofa. There's still food in her lunchbox, but she slams the lid on and tries to get up, her face flooding with color.

I put my hand out. "No, please. Stay where you are."

I go to my computer, and reluctantly, she sits down again. It's a big office and we do a good job of ignoring each other, but out of the corner of my eye, I can still see her. Most people eat without thinking, wolfing down a muesli bar while flicking through a magazine or taking bites of a sandwich while they scroll through their phones. Lacey eats painfully slowly, her eyes focused on her lunchbox as if she's hyper-aware of everything her mouth is doing. It seems more like a chore than a pleasure, and she's got that hunched, frightened attitude again.

Ten minutes later, she gets up and goes back to her desk.

Every day after that I find her in my office when I get back from the gym. We don't talk to each other during this time. We don't even acknowledge each other. To speak to her would be to scare her away, and I feel instinctively this is a big step for her, having someone else in the room while she eats. I like that I've been able to do that for her. I like that she's done as she's told, as well.

On the fourth day, I watch her retreating back, remembering how she's said *yes, sir* and *thank you, sir*. It's happened a handful of times now, and each time she does it I want to lean down and say quietly in her ear, *Try yes, daddy*. I didn't expect Lacey to be such a good girl, but she is. Helpful, clever and sweet. Just my type, actually, which makes it frustrating that she's my assistant, and quite a bit younger than me.

The eating disorder recovery, that's less of an issue. It's just that. Recovery. She's obviously a strong person to face such an uphill battle, and I admire her for it.

Two days later, I come back from the gym to find she's finished her lunch and is standing before my collection of bonsai plants by the window. I have twelve, all in glazed ceramic pots sitting on a specially made shelf. Japanese Maple. Chinese Elm. Ficus. Beech.

"Your bonsai plants are beautiful. I've never seen so many in one place."

"Thank you. They're my hobby." I come and stand beside her, looking at them with her.

"Is it hard, getting them to grow this way?"

I touch the leaf of the maple. "Not so hard. I keep them small and perfect and give them everything they need, and they seem to

thrive."

I look down at her, liking the smile on her face as she looks at them. My eyes land on the pale pink choker around her throat and I feel the urge to touch it. To feel her pulse beating beneath her fragile skin. To ask her why she started wearing it. She wasn't the first week she was here. I noticed her jewelry every day because the pieces always looked so good on her. The choker looks innocent enough but I'm almost certain she's wearing it as a collar, and the idea that it might be because of me is an enjoyable thought. She's good at her job, and sometimes I have the impression that she works hard because the pleasure she derives from it isn't purely about a job well done. The *sir* business especially makes me wonder if the collar's because of me. For me.

I've done domestic kink before. Office kink, though, that's something new to explore. I become distracted by thoughts of sliding her underwear down her thighs while she sits on my desk when I realize she's asked me about the bonsai.

"Hmm? Oh, these ones are five or ten years old. I have others at home that are younger, but they're not ready yet. It takes a while to train them."

The training is almost the best part.

Lacey looks up at me innocently enough, but my thoughts as I gaze back at her are far from so.

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Chapter Six

Lacey

Small and perfect. Everything you need to thrive. That sounds like an ideal existence. On my way home, I imagine Mr. Blomqvist tending to his bonsai plants at home, carefully pruning, positioning and watering them so they grow strong under his hands. I wonder what his home is like, and what he's like in it. If it's a house, and if he shares it with anyone, or if it's just him, shelves of books, plants, and a comfy chair by the fireplace where he reads. I wonder if he has a pair of well-washed jeans and a white T-shirt that he wears on Saturday mornings to water his plants, before he walks down the street to buy a takeaway coffee and a croissant. It's soothing to imagine him doing these things. Just simple things, but enviable, maybe because of their simplicity.

Mum and dad are still eating when I come back downstairs after eating my dinner, and for once I don't go through to the living room to read, but join them at the table. Glancing at their plates, I think they had beef stroganoff.

Both look at me in surprise when I sit down. Neither comment on it, but mum smiles a little. I ask them how their days were and about mum's tennis tournament this weekend. The aroma of their meal isn't too off-putting.

Finally, I ask what I'm really curious about. "Dad. How did you meet Mr. Blomqvist?"

Dad mops up the sauce on his plate with a piece of bread. “Well, that was an interesting day. It’s gratifying to meet a man who appreciates both modern and classical art. It must be his background. Scandinavians are so cultured.”

I fight to keep a straight face.

“A few months ago he’d run into a brick wall with the people at the Laxos Museum. You remember that my cousin, Yannis, is a curator at the Athens Hellenic Museum?”

I nod. Dad was born in Athens, but his parents emigrated to London with him when he was just a baby.

“One of Stian’s colleagues put him onto me, and I put Stian onto Yannis. Yannis put in a good word for Stian at the Laxos museum, and so—” Dad makes an expansive gesture and reaches for his glass of wine. “Connections are everything in the art world. Modern and otherwise.”

Mum looks on, amused, leaning her chin on her hand. If dad is the flighty, arty type then she’s definitely the practical one in their relationship. I see how much she loves his energy, though.

“But you didn’t know Mr. Blomqvist, so how could you and Yannis vouch for him?” I ask.

“I know *art people*,” dad says emphatically. “I only needed to meet him once. A man like Stian Blomqvist has exquisite taste, and the utmost respect for the things he admires. The artifacts will be safe in his hands, and the Laxos Museum will benefit for years to come from the pieces’ exposure at the Albright Collection.”

That last part is probably true. Brits do love visiting Greece and the various archaeological sites—when they’re tired of the beaches and bars, that is. I have no doubt that Mr. Blomqvist will

look after the pieces. He probably impressed dad with his well-cut suits and good looks. The tattoos, Mr. Blomqvist would be exasperated to hear, probably helped, as well.

“So you like him?” I ask, topping up dad’s water glass and taking a sip myself.

“Oh, yes. An intelligent man.” Dad takes a thoughtful mouthful of wine. “I could see that at the exhibition the other week. He doesn’t say much, but that just goes to show how deeply he’s thinking about my work. Most people chatter, chatter, chatter, more interested in themselves and their gossip. It’s deplorable.”

He says this with a smile, and I know he doesn’t really mind it at all. Dad loves noisy rooms full of people at his events.

“Stian Blomqvist actually takes the time to *listen*,” dad tells us. “A rare quality in anyone.”

I can’t argue with that. Maybe it’s his stony gaze, but I never feel like I’m being judged by Mr. Blomqvist. He must have figured out by now that I’m not completely well, but I’ve never detected any wariness or unease from him when he’s been confronted by my unusual behaviors.

“Do you like him, Lacey?” mum asks.

Am I being paranoid, or do a detect more than casual interest in her question? I take a slow sip from dad’s water glass again, striving for nonchalance. “Oh, yes, he’s fine. He received an invitation to Malcolm Hesse’s exhibition the other day,” I say, changing the subject.

Dad’s eyes immediately sharpen. He and Hesse are great friends, but also great rivals. “Oh? And will Stian be going?”

“I don’t think so. The flyer didn’t seem to appeal to him.”

Dad roars with laughter and thumps the table with his fist. “Did I not say he was a man of taste and intelligence?”

The next day at lunchtime I contemplate Mr. Blomqvist’s bonsai. It’s wonderful to be able to focus on the leaves and delicate stems while I chew, even if it’s only in flashes. I eat the same things for lunch that I have for the last six months. I’m afraid of switching to new foods and what the voice will have to say about them. Any change I make in my life has to be done so, so carefully, in case I accidentally dislodge the lid and my old friend comes flying out, screaming in triumph.

I wonder what it’s like having everything you need to thrive, no more, no less. To have someone give that to you with two large, strong hands. From within her box, I hear the voice mutter darkly about *small and perfect*; that I’m neither and I never will be unless I do exactly what she says. With some effort, I’m able to push her cruelty away. Besides, that’s not the *small and perfect* I mean.

Little…at heart really. Joyful. Carefree. Like a child. Sometimes my therapist encourages me to do coloring in when I talk to her because it helps me focus. I told her it reminds me of being a kid, nine years old or so, and lying on my belly on the living room floor with my coloring-in book, watching cartoons on a Saturday morning. Doctor Loftin said that was good as I was remembering a time before I had an eating disorder. That’s a comforting way to put it because some days it feels like I’ve never not had it.

When Mr. Blomqvist comes back from the gym, I finish my lunch and then stand up to go, but he calls out to me.

“I have to go down to the vault. Have you got a moment to come with me? I want to show you something.”

He never talks to me at lunchtime, as if we're both pretending I'm not here, so it takes me a moment to get over my surprise. "Oh—sure."

The vaults are in the basement and they house all the artifacts that the museum owns which aren't currently on display. It's cool and silent when we step out of the elevator, and Mr. Blomqvist walks me through a series of rooms filled with neat shelves.

Going to a cabinet, he pulls open a large, flat drawer, and then steps back to show me the contents. I see a shield with three wings, the bronze green with age, with a grotesque Medusa head at the center.

I lean closer excitedly. "Oh, my goodness! Is that a gorgoneion?"

I've only ever seen photographs of these shields, and I didn't realize how big they were, nearly a meter across.

"Yes. You mentioned your thesis topic, and I remembered we had this." He hands me a pair of cotton gloves, and I realize I'm allowed to touch it. I put on the gloves, still studying the artifact. It's nearly three thousand years old, and I carefully trace the thin edges of the wings and the ghastly Medusa face. I don't dare do more, but that small contact is enough. I've felt it with my own hands.

Medusa's expression is furious and frightening, but I gaze down at her, smiling. "She's always been a favorite of mine."

Mr. Blomqvist hasn't moved from my side, even though he said he came down here for something. "Oh?"

"Everyone remembers that Perseus cut off Medusa's head, because he's the hero and she's the monster. But they don't

remember the part before that when Medusa was a beautiful maiden, and why Athena transformed her into this."

Poseidon raped Medusa in Athena's temple, and the virgin goddess was supposedly furious at the sacrilege and took her revenge on the young woman.

Mr. Blomqvist must know the story, because he says, "The gods were never fair."

"I don't know. Maybe turning her into a gorgon wasn't a punishment. No one was able to look upon her again without being turned to stone, let alone hurt her. She was free."

Until Perseus came along and killed her. I play with the blue and white Nazar beads on my wrist as I talk, dropping them one by one through my fingers like prayer beads. They look like eyes, and they're meant to protect you. Medusa is carved on shields because she's meant to be protective as well. I believe it, looking upon her ferocious gaze.

I'm aware that Mr. Blomqvist is watching me silently and I shrug. "I don't know. It's a strange preoccupation, but the idea of sight having power has always appealed to me."

Gaze being evil or malevolent. Gaze giving strength, too. I suppose I like the idea power from nothing when I feel so weak. That's why I chose it as a thesis topic.

"Some people seem to have powerful gazes even without any supernatural ability," I say, and when I glance up at him, my gaze becomes snagged on his blue one.

Like you.

I remember how his eyes bored into me that night when I nearly fell down the stairs. I felt like he was trying to burn through my

soul. I can still feel it.

He considers this for a moment. “It’s not so strange a preoccupation. Power is alluring. So is influence. Control.”

He speaks like he knows what he’s talking about.

Changing the subject, I say, “Dad told me about the trouble you had getting the Laxos exhibition here. I’m glad he was able to help.”

“Yes, your father was instrumental. I am grateful to him, despite what I said the other day about his art.”

I shake my head, smiling. He can not like dad’s art and still be grateful for the help. “But surely there were collections that you could have acquired more easily?”

“Of course. But it’s good for the museum to obtain unusual artifacts instead of the same ceramic jars and sculptures everyone else does.”

Everyone else being the nearby British Museum, I suppose. I wonder if Mr. Blomqvist feels a little professional rivalry with that institution. Or a lot.

“It’s a risk, too,” I point out. “If anything goes wrong, the Laxos Museum will probably be extremely vocal about denouncing you in the press. I know how protective they feel toward the Laxos Disc.”

He nods in agreement but doesn’t seem particularly bothered by this.

“Hiring me was a risk,” I go on. “I might have hated you and sabotaged things in worse ways than keying your car.”

He leans back against a counter, arms folded, but there’s a small smile on his lips. “Am I being psychoanalyzed?”

I smile back. “Maybe.”

It’s a side-effect of being in therapy, I suppose. I have to do so much self-reflection, and it gets me wondering what makes other people tick.

The silence stretches between us, and his gaze holds mine. He’s expecting me to become flustered and drop the subject, but I’ve had months of practice at this with Doctor Loftin. Being looked at doesn’t scare me. In fact, from Mr. Blomqvist, I rather like it.

Finally, he says, “I like a challenge. Occasionally things blow up in my face, but when I take a chance and it works out, it’s extremely rewarding.”

And so here we are, working on an exhibition that could ruin his reputation if anything goes wrong, with me, the highly strung and mentally unstable assistant. It could be an incendiary combination, but so far so good, I think?

And yet he must be wondering as much as I am, what’s around the next corner?

Mr. Blomqvist holds out his hand for the cotton gloves, and I pass them back. I enjoy figuring people out, and I’m glad he’s not one of those people who get touchy and offended if you try.

“What did you come down here for, anyway?” I ask, glancing around.

“Hmm? Oh, just a piece that I thought might fit with the Phoenician objects,” he says vaguely. “I’ve changed my mind.”

My attention is snagged by a ceramic jar on the other side of the room. It portrays a man being pursued by three winged women with wild eyes and terrible faces. The man must have committed a blood crime or lied under oath, and now he’ll be hunted into

madness by the Erinyes. I can hear their hateful screams and feel his torment.

They'll never, ever stop. Not until he's dead.

"Lacey? Are you all right?" Mr. Blomqvist comes to see what I'm staring at. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and I flinch. For a moment I'd forgotten he was there.

"Yes. Sorry. I'm really cold suddenly. Excuse me."

I hurry up the stairs and back into the sunlit entrance hall of the museum, and realize I didn't even thank Mr. Blomqvist for what he showed me.

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Chapter Seven

Stian

I look at the jar for several minutes, wondering what about it made Lacey so distracted. It's a perfectly ordinary Greek vase.

Or is it?

I peer closer at the scene and see that it depicts the Fates. The gods could be vengeful, but there's something sadistic about these women and the way they're pursuing this wrongdoer. I know the stories. Nothing will save him but the release of death. Not repentance, not Nazar beads, not Medusa carvings.

I put the gorgoneion away and head back upstairs.

There are emails to be got through and updates from my colleagues about everything from the audio descriptions for the exhibition right down to the intensity of the downlights over the Laxos Disc. I like to be across everything before an exhibition opens. Some things deserve to be perfect.

Every now and then my gaze is drawn from my computer screen to the window, and I look without seeing the sunny day outside. Lacey's questions have made me introspective, and I find myself thinking back over the pattern of my life, trying to pick where I've ever chosen the path of least resistance. I could have stayed in Sweden and worked with Scandinavian antiquities. I could have worked with Scandinavian antiquities here, also. But no, I had to

emigrate to another country, learn a whole new language, and diversify my knowledge across the world's civilizations.

Then there's Lacey. I had a terrible first impression of her, and she was rude to me in the interview. The sensible thing would have been to send her away and hire a temp to handle admin while I searched for a permanent assistant, yet despite her being risky and unpredictable, she impressed me. She answered my questions in exactly the way I was hoping a potential assistant would, and she remained calm and firm despite how I'd shouted at her.

Four years ago, when I was thirty-five, I became director of my own museum. Lacey has been the best assistant I've ever had. I take risks, but only when I'm sure that they'll pay off.

I notice that it's nearly six o'clock, shut down my computer and head home.

That evening I'm meeting a friend at the pub on the common for a drink, but I have a few spare hours first. I change into jeans and a T-shirt and go into the garden to check on my bonsai. I rotate them between my office, the greenhouse, and this paved outdoor space to keep them healthy. All the watering happens first thing in the morning but in the evenings I like to prune, repot, and do any other complicated care they require.

My pride right now is a pink azalea in boisterous bloom. Azaleas can grow into large shrubs, but this one is twisted into an elegant slanted style, and is small and beautifully formed.

"And so very pretty," I murmur, running a forefinger over a delicate blossom.

God. I can't remember the last time I spoke so lovingly to a woman. My mind is still on Lacey, and I imagine speaking so

indulgently to her. Maybe while she's on her knees. At my feet. Naked, while I viciously grip her ponytail. Because sometimes you have to be fierce to get the best out of someone, in the same way I brutally pruned back this azalea. And now look at her.

"Beautiful," I murmur to the plant.

The azalea doesn't need my attention, so I turn to the double-trunk cherry that is overdue for a repotting and spend an hour pruning its roots and fitting it carefully into a larger pot. The next-door neighbor's cat leaps down from the fence to land silently on the lawn, and watches me for a while with bright green eyes.

The evening is warm and breezy, the wind occasionally ruffling my hair into my eyes. This part of Greater London, on the south side of Wimbledon Common, is very peaceful.

At a quarter to eight, I wash my hands, change into a blue and white striped shirt, and walk down to the pub. Adam has secured a table out back, so I head through to the bar and order a couple of pints.

When I'm sitting down, he regales me with stories from his trip to Turkey, and I tell him about Eric's graceless exit from my office.

"What a little shit," Adam says with a shake of his head.

"Tell me about it," I agree, taking a long pull on my beer. I never got a taste for the darker ales favored by the English, so I have a pint of Krušovice instead.

"Have you got a new assistant yet?"

"Yes." I tell him the story of meeting Lacey at her father's exhibition. I tell him everything. Shouting at her, not realizing she's Petrou's daughter, then coming face-to-face with her the next morning.

Adam is incredulous. “And you offered her the job after all that? And she said *yes*?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, Stian. Why can you never make things easy for yourself?”

I smile faintly. “That’s what she said today.”

“Sorry?”

I focus on my pint, quashing the smile. “Nothing. She was just observing that I exerted a lot of energy on getting the Laxos exhibition here when I could have gone after something easier.”

Adam takes a mouthful of beer, and when he puts his glass down he has a knowing expression in his eyes. “She’s got you pegged already. Pretty, is she?”

I give him a long, baleful look. “Adam, she’s fifteen years younger than me and she’s my assistant. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

He shakes his head, smiling innocently. “I didn’t say a word. When was the last time you went on a date, anyway?”

A date? Years. My last relationship was a disaster. Someone setting fire to all your clothes on the front lawn after a fight can put you off dating for a while.

My mind glides over the memory of Lacey gazing with rapt, delighted attention at the gorgoneion. *Lacey doesn’t create drama, she just has a lot of it to deal with.*

I wonder if I could help her with that.

I push that thought away and change the subject. We eat fish and chips, have another pint, and then I head home at ten.

The next night is the opening of the Phoenician exhibition. We're hosting a drinks reception with a speech by the lead archeologist on the dig where several of the artifacts were discovered. I've told Lacey she doesn't need to come if she's busy, giving her a way out of a social situation she might be worried about, but she assures me that she'll be there.

I wish I knew what she was digging in her handbag for the night of her father's exhibition. Something upset her, and not knowing what it was makes me tense.

I head downstairs at half-past five to check on the arrangements and Lacey tells me she'll be right there, she just wants to get changed.

The guests start arriving at six, and I get myself a beer. I can relax a little now that everything is in place. The pieces are correctly displayed, and the descriptions and flyers that Lacey wrote are perfect. Everything's as it should be.

A few minutes later I see Lacey on the far side of the room. She's wearing a white cotton dress and has removed all her jewelry except for the velvet choker. Her hair's loose and shiny and her lips are glossy. I want to push past everyone and tell her how beautiful she looks. I shouldn't though, because I'm her boss, and commenting on the appearance of someone with an eating disorder is probably something you shouldn't do.

One of the collections managers has gone to talk to her. Derek, whom I know is single, and he's looking at her like he wants to eat her. I feel my hackles rising. He notices Lacey hasn't got a drink and gestures to the table where rows of wine and beer have

been set up. She seems to say no but Derek presses her, and she says yes to something. White wine, I think.

I try to concentrate on what the head of museum operations is telling me about the order of service tonight, but my attention keeps getting snared by Lacey. She takes a sip of the wine Derek has given her, and I see her pained expression as she swallows. Derek doesn't seem to notice. She's wearing high heels, and her ankle is trembling.

Go over and get her out of there.

Leave her, she'll be all right.

No, I can fix this.

I argue back and forth with myself, gripping my beer bottle tightly and imagining smashing it right into Derek's face. The head of operations mentions that the speaker has arrived and I look, but when turn back to search for Lacey, she's gone.

"I'll be back in a minute," I say, putting my beer down and heading for the stairs.

She didn't have her handbag with her, so she's probably gone back to her desk. I jog up the stairs two at a time, hoping to catch her before she heads for the Tube. I need to tell her it's all right. Tell her *something*. It's my fault she's so upset because it's my event, and I'm ashamed too because this must have been the state she was in when I grabbed her and yelled at her at her father's exhibition.

Lacey's not at her desk when I reach it, but the door to my office is open. I peer in and see her hunched over something, shaking slightly.

"Are you all right, Lacey?"

She jumps and turns around. There’s a piece of paper clutched in her fingers and an expression in her eyes like she’s drowning. All I want to do is reach out and save her.

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Chapter Eight

Lacey

Mr. Blomqvist seems out of breath, as if he ran all the way up here.

I straighten quickly and try and smooth out my expression of panic. I only got halfway through my affirmations, and my heart is still racing. “Sorry. I know I shouldn’t be in here. I just needed a moment.”

I had to come to his office. It’s calming, being in here. The tidy space, the bonsai, the sofa. The reminder of him. This is the only place in the last year where I’ve felt comfortable eating with another person present.

Mr. Blomqvist comes in and stands next to me. “It’s all right. I was just worried about you.”

“I wasn’t going to fall down any stairs,” I say with a weak smile. “Promise.”

He doesn’t return my smile. We stand in awkward silence together, looking at his plants.

“Shouldn’t you be downstairs?” I ask. “I thought you were supposed to introduce the professor who’s speaking tonight.”

“Someone else is.”

I don’t know if I believe him, and it makes me feel wretched that he’s up here with me when he’s got other responsibilities. I’m being unprofessional and a liability, two things that only make my

anxiety worse. Doctor Loftin tells me I can have a normal life if I learn to manage these situations, but I don't think I believe her. The taste of wine in my mouth makes me want to throw up.

Mr. Blomqvist breaks the silence first. Studying the ficus, he asks quietly, "Why did you take the job when I was such an asshole to you?"

I look up at him in surprise. His expression is serious and hard as granite. I give him a one-shouldered shrug. "I have to say yes to things that make me seem normal. I wanted to leave as soon as I saw it was you, but once I'd talked to you, you didn't seem so bad. Demanding people don't frighten me. Actually, I kind of like them."

The words pass my lips like a forbidden confession, skating close to what I really want to say. *Actually, I kind of like you.* "You never asked me why I need to eat in secret. You probably think I'm really weird."

Still looking at the bonsai, he says, "I think you're under a lot of pressure to be a certain way and do certain things. Otherwise, I don't think much other than that you're a lovely and capable young woman."

I look up at him sharply and find him gazing back at me. My heart explodes in a shower of stars. I can't help it. He said I'm lovely.

I imagine what it would be like if he took me in his arms and kissed me. I know it could never happen. He must be fifteen years older than me and doesn't think about me like that. He's probably got a girlfriend. I still want to share more of myself with him, because right now the only person who understands me is my therapist, and how sad is that?

“I don’t feel lovely and capable. Social events are hard with people eating and being loud. Work is more manageable. I thought I could manage it, anyway.”

Mr. Blomqvist doesn’t say anything. From anyone else I’d assume the silence meant he was uncomfortable, but I know he’s just listening.

“Here,” I say, passing the list of affirmations to him. The paper is worn and falling apart from so much unfolding and refolding, but my handwriting is still legible.

“You were looking for this in your bag that night?” he asks, reading the words.

I nod, looking at the paper in his big fingers. He’s got beautiful hands. I wonder what they’d be like to hold onto. I kissed boys in high school when I was still more or less functional around people, but at university when you’re supposed to go on dates and have casual sex, I was too tired, sick and anxious for any of that. I’ve missed out on so much. I’m still missing out.

“They’re an antidote to the other things my mind yells at me.”

He nods as if he understands, and passes the paper back. I remember what he said about not focusing on things you can’t control. What must that be like, not to have your mind screaming at you all the time that you’re disgusting and unworthy?

“I’m so jealous of you,” I whisper. It just slips out. When I talk to my therapist, everything’s so goal-oriented and structured. How was your week, what was the hardest moment, did you eat. Over and over again. With Mr. Blomqvist, I feel like a person. He’s my boss and I should be careful about how much I share with him, but there’s no one else in my life like him and I crave to be closer to him.

He turns to me, both his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Oh?”

“When I imagine your mind it’s a seashore early in the morning, calm and crystal clear. If a stone is thrown into the water the ripples just dissipate, one by one, and a moment later it’s like nothing happened. You probably don’t even know how lucky you are.”

I’m smiling as I say it, but I’m filled with so much sadness it aches. Mr. Blomqvist considers my words, trying to piece together what I’m getting at. I like that about him. I feel heard whenever I’m with him, and whatever he replies with I know he’s chosen every word carefully.

“I’m jealous of your plants, too,” I whisper, knowing I’m treading in dangerous waters now.

“My bonsai?”

“Yes. They’re small and perfect, because you made them that way. They never worry that they should be anything else. Why would they want to be?”

My voice cracks and a few hot tears spill down my face. I rarely say anything like this to my therapist. I’m too busy trying to impress her with how okay I am.

But I’m not okay. I’m really not.

Mr. Blomqvist mutters something in Swedish and puts his arms around me. *Sharasta*, or something like it. I wonder if he swore, but it sounded too soft to be a curse word. The gesture is platonic and kind and only makes me want to cry harder, feeling his arms tight around me. I want to bury my face in his chest and just let it all out, but I’ve already shown too much weakness.

I am strong and calm, I repeat to myself until my tears stop. It takes several minutes, and all the while I breathe in his scent of almonds and leather.

I pull away from him, wiping my eyes, hating to go but knowing I have to. “Sorry. Please don’t fire me. I know I’m a mess, but it’s just in the cracks, you know? Between the time that matters.”

“It all matters, Lacey.”

I press my palm over my eyes, wishing he wouldn’t say things like that. I have to believe it doesn’t matter that I break down every now and then because I know that I’m going to, over and over.

“I wish I were one of your bonsai plants,” I whisper, not looking him. “I wish I could feel like there was one reason for me to be. One thing I had to do.” I wish I had someone who understands what I need and is there for the worst parts, as he is now. “I feel different when I’m around you. I like you very much and wish you could…”

I choke the words off because I’m not treading in dangerous waters now, I’m walking right into a deep, shark-infested ocean with stones in my pocket.

He puts a hand lightly around my throat, right over the velvet choker, and rests it there. “Lacey. Why did you start wearing this? I noticed it the week after you started working for me.”

I blink away the shimmer of tears and see him gazing back at me intently. His hand around my throat is large and warm, and grounding, too. It’s suddenly easier to speak. Not just words, but the truth.

“I wore it as a reminder to be useful to you. I feel it against my skin and it brings me pleasure. Helps me focus.”

Reading his expression is impossible. “Is that why you kept saying *sir*?”

I nod. “Because I like it. And because I thought maybe you liked it.”

My lips tingle. Mr. Blomqvist watches me with gentle eyes, his hand still wrapped around my throat. Doing nothing. Just touching me. Grounding me.

“Being here is the only place lately that I’ve felt okay.”

He lets me go and the temperature of the room plummets by ten degrees. “Are you so unhappy, Lacey?”

I laugh hollowly and tug at the hem of my dress. “Unhappy? I’m lonely. I’m anxious. I sometimes feel out of control and do stupid things.”

“What stupid things?”

But I can’t say. I’m too ashamed of what I do. I know it’s not healthy to skip one meal, let alone two or three a day. It’s the only way I have of feeling on top of things and that I’m not a complete failure, and I can’t even do it anymore. For six whole months I haven’t skipped a meal or exercised for more than ninety minutes a day. This is supposed to be what recovery looks like, but I feel worse than ever.

“I’m getting help. I do everything my therapist says. But nothing makes me feel as good as…” I reach up and touch the velvet at my throat. “As you do.”

He looks at me for a long time, his arms folded. “Is it purely emotional, or do you want me to fuck you?”

I suck in a breath. Jesus. Did he really just say that? I suppose he knows what it means then, to collar someone. That it’s

sexual. Is he into being a dom, and did he know what I've been doing all along? "Would you, if I asked you to?"

Mr. Blomqvist shifts on his feet. "It's complicated, Lacey."

Humiliation courses through me. That's just a polite way of saying no. Why did he even ask me if he was just going to say that? "Never mind, I should go. In fact, I quit. It's for the best."

I try to push past him but he catches my arm and gently pulls me back. "No, you don't. I haven't finished talking to you. There's no reason to feel embarrassed."

"It's not that." It is that. I asked him to sleep with me, and he turned me down flat. "I just don't want to be here right now."

"I said there's no reason to feel embarrassed or that your pride is hurt. Do as you're told."

I look up at him through my lashes, my feet suddenly planted to the spot. *Do as you're told.* That's what I want to hear him say. I suck on my lower lip to redden it and watch him watching me do it. I've never done anything like that in front of a man, but it feels good. "I'm trying, sir."

"I can see that," he murmurs, reaching out to touch my cheek. I feel my heart beat a little faster because with that one small touch he's joined me in these dangerous waters, and suddenly they don't seem quite so full of sharks.

He drops his hand. "But I don't do pale imitations of the real thing."

I feel as if he's punched me in the guts. I'm a pale imitation. Bland. Boring. I didn't think he'd be so cruel. He could have just said he doesn't like me that way, or he can't.

“*Lacey*,” he says sharply as if reading my mind. “I didn’t mean you. I mean it’s complicated, because I always want everything.”

There’s a fire burning in his eyes that I’ve never seen before. He touches my neck again, his thumb caressing the column of my throat, almost as if he can’t help himself.

“Everything?” I whisper.

Mr. Blomqvist moves toward me, each of his steps slow and measured. His grip on my throat tightens, and he keeps coming until he has me pinned against the wall.

His mouth is very close to mine. “Yes, everything. I’m a control freak, remember?”

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Chapter Nine

Stian

“Doing thing by halves isn’t my style,” I tell Lacey, loving the feel of her beneath my hands. I can feel how desperately she wants to be happy, and I think I can show her how.

“And you feel like you’d have to because I’m in therapy,” she says, misery still coloring her voice.

“No. If you weren’t in therapy, I wouldn’t touch you.” I stroke my thumb over the velvet choker, imagining what she’d look like wearing nothing else. Her head is tipped back, and she’s looking up at me with parted lips as if she’s waiting for me to kiss her.

So I do.

Lacey tastes like cherry lip gloss and salty tears and it’s so good. I kiss her slowly, coaxing her lips apart and then sliding my tongue against hers. The movements of her mouth are tentative, and she lets me take the lead. I deepen the kiss, desire shooting through me. I’m more than just kissing her. I’m marking her with my lips. *Mine*. My sweet bonsai girl, just aching for some control.

I gather her up in my arms and pull her to me, feeling her slender body against my hard one. She might be troubled, but she’s not fragile. I’ve seen for myself how hard she battles to just get through the day. Telling me how she feels and what she wants must

have been excruciating, and yet she did it. She trusted me. I like to be wanted, and I fucking love to be needed.

"Is everything too much Lacey, or does that sound about perfect to you?"

"What's everything?" she asks breathlessly.

"Your body. Your obedience. Your submission." I stroke a finger along her plump lower lip. "Your happiness."

"You can have the first three, sir," she breathes. "They're all yours. But I don't know what I've done with the fourth."

"I told you. Everything. I'm going to have your happiness, too. Trust me, *käraste*."

The acceptance in her eyes is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"I could make you happy if you tell me everything that your heart desires. But I won't settle for less than everything. You can't hide things from me or save things for other men."

"I don't want other men," she says right away.

I cast my eyes over the pink choker, the white dress. A possessive thrill goes through me at the thought that she only wants me, and she's been wanting me, as much as I've been wanting her. "Then how about while you work here you be my girl? Daddy's girl. I know you like to say *yes, sir*. Why don't you try *yes, daddy*."

I slide my hand down her belly and cup her sex, and she whimpers against my mouth. Her arms come lightly around my neck and she arches into my hand. I move my fingers beneath her dress and brush the seam of her sex through her underwear.

"Daddy? That's a bit kinky, sir," she says, opening her legs for me. I hear shades of *oh I couldn't possibly…* in her voice, and it

makes me smile.

“I am a bit kinky.” I circle her clit through her underwear. “How does that feel?”

“It feels so good, daddy.” Her cheeks turn the same shade of pink as my azalea. Fuck. This is going so well already. I ease one finger beneath her underwear and find she’s waxed completely bare and so wet. I have to close my eyes and grit my teeth as the urge to fuck her right now sweeps over me. Her clit is swollen and I bear down on it, imagining the slow plunge into her pussy.

“Do you like daddy’s big fingers touching your clit?” I whisper into her ear, rubbing faster.

She whimpers and nods, her lower lip caught between her teeth. I slant my mouth across hers again. “Good girl. Why don’t we see if we can make you feel even better?”

My office is spacious and comfortable and tucked away from the other museum employees, but just in case someone from downstairs comes looking for us, I go and lock the door and come back to her.

I hook a finger into her underwear and pull them down her legs and over her shoes, and then push them into my pocket. I sit back on my heels before her, just holding up her dress and looking at her. Totally bare, her lips pink and shiny with her arousal. Her pussy is going to look incredible spattered with my come. I want that, so fucking much, but not today. Lacey leans against the wall, gazing down at me and breathing lightly, alert but trusting.

I lean forward and kiss her little cleft, and then slip my tongue between her folds. Her clit is hard and swollen against my tongue. She makes a whimpering sound, and her leg shakes. *Herregud*, she

tastes good. I part her with my fingers and lick deeper, groaning with pleasure at the feel of her against my tongue. Lacey is shuddering against the wall, teetering on the brink of an orgasm.

Denying her the release just yet, I stand up, put one hand on her collarbone to keep her where she is, and reach for her clit with the other. I love fingering girls. All I need to do is make tiny movements on that little spot, and I can overwhelm her whole world. The control is spectacular. Lacey watches me with big, trusting eyes.

I talk to her as her climax builds, controlling the intensity to keep her this side of her peak. To keep her focused on me. “Here’s what I want to happen, Lacey. I’m your boss. We have work to do. But we’re going to have more than just a working relationship while you’re here. Sometimes I’m not very nice, but I think it will be good for you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, daddy.”

I up the intensity of my rubbing and she shudders against me, her head tipping back. I smile indulgently at her. “Sometimes I’m very nice, though. Do you like that?”

Lacey reaches up and grasps the lapels of my jacket, holding on for dear life. Her voice is tight with arousal as she whimpers, “Yes, daddy.”

Fuck me, that’s good. I push one of my fingers into her mouth, and she immediately sucks it. Even better. If I ever made a porno, it would be called *Girls In Dresses Being Good And Doing As They’re Told*. I could watch this all day.

Her climax rises up and takes over her, and her cries get louder. I take my finger out her mouth and press it against her lips.

She wraps her arms even tighter around my neck and holds me as she comes, lost in what I'm doing to her.

"Good girl," I breathe into her ear, easing up the pressure a little as her orgasm trails off, and then releasing her. I smooth her skirt down as the afterglow makes her weak.

Taking her hand, I perch on the edge of my desk and pull her between my thighs and into my arms. I can feel my cock straining against my trousers. When she moves closer to me, she rubs against me, reminding me that she naked and wet beneath her skirt. I think about pushing her face down over my desk and fucking her, hard and fast, until I burst deep inside her. Tempting, but not yet. I line up all the things I want to do to her, one after the other, like a row of delicious morsels. I can't wait to take the first bite out of her.

"How do you feel, *käraste*?"

Lacey leans into me, resting her cheek against my shoulder. The gesture is so sweet and trusting it makes my heart ache.

"So good, sir." Then I feel her smile, her lips curving against my throat. "Daddy. That's such a cute name for you. I thought you'd prefer sir."

I do like sir. But from her, sweet and young as she is, I think I prefer daddy. I smile down at her, enjoying that I've been able to give her this moment of peace. It won't last forever, but we can work on that. We'll make time to work on it.

"Thank you for telling me what you want."

She covers her face for a moment and looks sheepish. "I don't know what came over me."

I think I know. When you're that unhappy, you haven't got much to lose. What's a temp job when you could reach out for

something you're craving deep in your soul?

It's tempting to send her home without her underwear because I want to keep them in my pocket, but that's for another day. I help her back into them, one foot at a time, and slide them up her legs.

Still kneeling before her, I cup her ass in my hands, feeling how smooth and soft she is; wondering how receptive she might be to my harsher, more punitive, side. I think she might be. She didn't start calling me sir because I remind her of a cuddly teddy bear.

"Have you ever been spanked?"

Sucking on her swollen lower lip, she shakes her head. The possessive impulse doubles. Good. No one else has been putting her over his knee and turning her ass a brilliant shade of red.

"Would you like to be, when we have more time?"

Lacey's mouth twitches with a shy smile, and she nods. A little fearfully, but wanting it just the same. I memorize her expression so I can relive it later, along with every second of the last thirty minutes.

"I'll look forward to it," I murmur, standing up. I'm happiest when I have someone under my thumb. A dictator, but in the most benevolent way possible. I smooth Lacey's hair back from her face and marvel at the change in her. From tears and anxiety to softness and sweetness after just a short time in my arms. I hold her for a little longer, loving the feel of her, tracing the velvet choker and the neckline of her dress with a forefinger.

Reluctantly, I let her go. "I'll walk you out to the Tube station, and then I'd better get back to the opening."

She grimaces. "I'm sorry I made you miss most of it. What are you going to tell them?"

I'm not sorry in the slightest. "The truth. That important business came up, and it couldn't wait."

Lacey collects her handbag and we head out of the museum and across the square, not speaking but in step with each other. The evening is warm and the breeze gentle. Lacey's long hair brushes against my arm, and she's smiling. I hope her smile lasts all evening.

I kiss her cheek when we reach the Tube. "Mind the stairs," I say with a wink.

She disappears down into the station with a smile and a wave for me, and I head back to the museum with a lightness in my chest than I haven't felt in a long time. Despite what some people might think, I don't enjoy being a grumpy asshole. I like being happy, same as anyone else, and Lacey knows just how to put a smile on my face.

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Chapter Ten

Lacey

The train journey home passes in a heavenly daze. I'm still tingling inside my underwear, and I remember every word, every touch, every kiss of the last hour. I can feel Mr. Blomqvist's lips against mine. The slight rasp of his shaven jaw and the smell of his masculine scent. He was so big beneath my fingers, and yet so gentle as he got down on his knees to lick my sex.

I can't believe that it happened. That *I* made it happen. My therapist said once—and I want to roll my eyes at myself for being one of those people who say *my therapist said*—that confidence is overrated. Confident people are so often insufferable. What matters most is courage.

I'm not confident about anything. I'm really, really scared most of the time, but I can have moments of courage, and I think I just had one with Mr. Blomqvist. I run my finger over my tender lower lip and smile a secret smile. This is something that's all mine, and it's filled with pleasure and more than a dash of naughtiness.

Mr. Blomqvist is so easy to talk to. Kind of a dirty talker, too. *How about you be my girl? Daddy's girl.* I touch the pale pink choker at my throat and smile even more. I can so do that.

As I disembark the train and walk up the street to my parents' house, I gaze happily into the big, clear evening sky. I have a feeling

this summer is going to be amazing.

My good mood persists all evening. The next morning I stand before my open wardrobe door in my underwear, deciding what clothes to put on. For once it's not, *What will not make me look disgusting and ugly and fat, fat, FAT?* The nasty voice is quieter than ever within her box as I ask myself instead, *What will make me feel cute?*

I pull out a foil pink midi skirt and a loose white tee. As I put them on I remember Mr. Blomqvist saying, *Do as you're told* in that deep, gravelly voice of his. Hell yes, I can be daddy's girl.

An hour later at the museum, he passes my desk on the way to his office with his usual, brusque, "Good morning," but today there's a shade of a smile for me as well.

We have our scheduled catchups and respond to work emails, both of us pretending nothing out of the ordinary has happened. I eat lunch in his office, and as usual, he doesn't say a word to me when he comes back from the gym.

After our afternoon catchup, a notification pops up in my inbox. It's a new meeting with Mr. Blomqvist, scheduled between six and seven every weekday evening until the end of August. The meeting name is *one-on-one*, which is the same as all our other catch-ups. I have a feeling, though, it's going to be a very different sort of one-on-one.

Nervously, I hit accept. The first meeting is tonight. I wonder if Mr. Blomqvist needs me to do anything. I'm used to prepping like crazy for meetings, but this invite is entirely blank. He sends me several more emails over the next thirty minutes, but they're all about innocuous work things. It's difficult to concentrate fully on what I'm

doing when I remember what he asked me last night. *Have you ever been spanked? Would you like to be?*

It felt so easy to say yes at the time when we were so intimate together, and his large hands were cupping my ass.

Placing my fingers over the keyboard, I put all thoughts of Mr. Blomqvist and spankings out of my mind, and get on with things. I would be a poorly behaved sub if I let my mind run riot while I'm supposed to be working for him.

Oh, there goes that tingly feeling again…

At six, my heart pounding, I knock on his door and go in. Mr. Blomqvist is typing and doesn't look up. He points to a spot on the carpet in the middle of the room. "Kneel. On your heels. Hands on your knees." Then he goes on typing.

I do as I'm told, sitting in the spot he indicated. Well, this isn't what I expected. He sounded so peremptory, very different from his soft, indulgent manner yesterday.

A moment later he calls out, "Turn a little to your right."

I do, and now I can see his bonsai trees along the windowsill, and him in my peripheral vision to my left. He doesn't speak after that, and I just sit there quietly, looking at the plants. Listening to him typing, feeling my legs beneath me, my breath flowing in and out of my body. It feels strange having nothing to do.

A moment later Mr. Blomqvist gets up and locks the door, and my heart rate picks up, but he just goes back to his desk. Even though he's not looking at me, I feel instinctively that he's as aware of me as I am of him.

Ten minutes later by the clock on the wall, he comes and stands before me with his hands clasped behind his back. "You were

upset yesterday, *käraste*. I think you need a good cry. I didn't like seeing you holding in your tears."

I gaze up at him, and he seems impossibly tall and broad from this angle. I didn't think he would make me cry. I thought he wanted to do the opposite.

Mr. Blomqvist kneels down before me and peers at me closely. "I'm going to put you over the arm of that sofa, and I'm going to spank you."

He points to the sofa, and I look. Oh, boy.

"It's going to hurt. If it starts to get too much say *orange*, and I'll ease off. If something is awful and you want me to stop altogether, say *red*. If that sounds awful now, say *red*."

He waits, and I say nothing.

"Good girl. You're not going to say anything else except for those two words if you need them. Not even *yes, daddy*. There's nothing I want you to say. There's nothing I want you to think about. Is that clear? Nod if you understand."

I nod again.

He takes hold of me by the ponytail, and I gasp, and he impels me to my feet. He's not rough exactly, but he's not gentle either. My stomach swoops with alarm and something else as he pushes me down over the arm of the sofa.

Sometimes I'm not very nice, but I think it will be good for you.

He pulls my skirt up handfuls at a time and then traces a finger over my underwear, his touch delicate. "You look so pretty today, Lacey."

I open my mouth to say thank you but then remember my promise not to speak and shut it again. Mr. Blomqvist laughs softly.

The first strike of his hand is vicious, and I have to clap a hand over my mouth to keep from crying out. The stinging goes on and on, and I shift around on my toes. He waits, and then wraps my ponytail around his hand again, though not so tightly I couldn't get up if I wanted to.

I don't want to.

He spanks me again, and then again, pinching my flesh hard in between, making tears start into my eyes. I whimper, but I don't speak. Not *orange* or *red* or anything else. I just stop fighting. I haven't given up in a long, long time, but it finally feels safe to let go now. It's not even the pain that makes me cry. The pain just makes it easier. I pull a cushion over and press my face into it, and soon I'm sobbing. For once I'm not afraid of the tears, because nothing terrible is waiting to sink its teeth and claws into me. Mr. Blomqvist is the only beast in this room.

Sometime later, I'm not even sure how long, my ass is burning, and he gathers me up against him. His hands are gentle now. We sit down on the sofa, and he pulls me close to him. He wipes the tears from my cheeks, speaking softly in Swedish. I don't know what he's saying, but it sounds so good, how you might talk to a skittish horse or a frightened child. The tears keep coming, but this time I don't try and stop them. It's a relief not to be forcing myself away from my emotions for a change. I put my head down on his shoulder and let the tears run down my face.

A few minutes later, I begin to sniffle my way back to normality.

Mr. Blomqvist passes me a tissue and smooths my hair as I mop my face. Then he kisses the top of my head and murmurs, "You

can speak when you're ready. Do you feel better?"

I do feel better, strangely. I look up at him shyly. I want to thank him for what just happened, but I'm not sure what I want to say. Instead, I ask, "Can I kiss you?"

He smiles, and it's the loveliest thing I've ever seen. "Of course, *käraste*." He pulls me closer and kisses me with such tenderness. My arms slip around his neck, and I lose myself in the kiss. A slow kiss. A vivid kiss. A kiss that says so much and feels even more intimate than his tongue on my clit. His body is so warm and strong against my own and he holds me lightly but firmly in his arms.

I think I like this Viking very much.

Mr. Blomqvist breaks the kiss and glances up at the clock. "Meeting's over already. How are you feeling?"

Tired. Weak. But happy. "A whole hour and I didn't think one bad thought."

He kisses me again. "That's the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever heard. What do you think, shall we go on with our meetings? I won't make you cry every time, I promise."

"Just sometimes?" I ask teasingly.

Blue fire lights in his eyes. "Oh, yes. Sometimes I will. You're just so pretty when you cry."

He stands and helps me up. Before he opens the office door, he takes my face in his hands and kisses my forehead. "Thank you, *käraste*. Text me if you need anything, all right?"

I go up on tiptoe and plant a kiss on his lips, smiling. "Thank you, daddy."

I'm rewarded with a small growl, and his hand briefly gripping my throat. "Off with you. Before I change my mind."

The next day it's the same routine. We work together innocently throughout the day. At six I go into his office and kneel on the floor in the middle of the room. I listen to the sound of Mr. Blomqvist typing at his computer and relax into my surroundings. There's nothing I need to do or decide for the next hour. The freedom is luxurious.

A short while later Mr. Blomqvist stands up and comes toward me. Today he's smiling, but it's not exactly a friendly smile. My heart skips like a stone across water as he reaches down and pulls me to my feet. He lovingly cups my chin, and his mouth is close to mine as if he's going to kiss me.

But he doesn't. He turns me around, draws my back tight against his chest and wraps a hand around my throat.

"I've been thinking about your pussy all day," he says roughly into my ear, pulling my skirt up in fistfuls. His hand dives down into my underwear, and I'm slick against his fingers.

"*Va i helvete*, girl. Are you wet at your desk all afternoon thinking about our meeting?"

Weakly, I nod, already too lost in the circular motions of his fingers. I close my eyes, relaxing against him and giving in to the sensations as he strokes me. They build rapidly, and my body floods with heat.

"I see you out there working so diligently," he growls, between kissing my throat. "Looking like an angel. Being so good as you answer phone calls and emails for me. But you've been thinking filthy things about your daddy, haven't you?"

I open my mouth to reply, but he speaks over me. “No talking until I say so.”

If Mr. Blomqvist was sweet yesterday while he inflicted pain, he’s ferocious today while he gives me pleasure. His hard-on is wedged into my ass. I wonder if he suspects I’m a virgin and that he’s the first man to touch me like this and whisper dirty things in my ear.

Trapped in the vice-like hold of his arms, I’m edging closer and closer to my peak—but then he stops.

“Do you want me to keep going, little girl?”

I whimper, nodding, and clutch at him. I was so close. He teases me with the tip of his finger, his grip on my throat tightening and making me light-headed.

“Then how about I don’t stop?” He says it like a threat.

He starts to work my clit again, harder and faster than before. My orgasm rushes up so fast that I cry out, but the sound is strangled as he squeezes my throat. My climax moves deeper inside me until my whole core is ablaze with fiery pleasure. I’ve never come so hard before.

When my orgasm subsides, Mr. Blomqvist keeps stroking my clit. I squirm in his arms, trying to show him that I’ve finished, but he doesn’t stop. All my nerves are raw and my flesh so over-sensitized that it’s becoming painful. I have to say something.

“No, daddy, that’s too—”

“Shut up.”

I writhe and buck in his arms, unable to control what my body is doing. He’s too strong and I can’t get away from him. No matter what I do he keeps rubbing my over-sensitized clit, bolts of lightning

hammering through me. As I flail about, one of my heels connects with his shin, and I hear him grunt in pain. I didn't kick him on purpose, but it's tempting to do it again. It's tempting to say *red*, because this is agony. A moment later the torture starts to blend with pleasure, and a white-hot orgasm burns through me, exploding through the pain. I climb even higher than before, my whole body wracked with bliss.

When it passes off, Mr. Blomqvist lets go of me and I slump down over his desk, out of breath and panting hard. What the hell? It hurt so bad I wanted to scream, but then I had the most intense orgasm of my life. I push myself up with my arms and turn around to face him. I can see the outline of his erection through his trousers. God, that's sexy.

Also, he's a fucking asshole.

"You can talk now," he tells me. "You looked so pretty as you were fighting to get away from me."

My mouth twitches with my desire to swear at him, and he must see it because he grins knowingly. *Go on, little girl. I dare you.*

"Do you like it when I fight you?" I ask.

"Mm, I do. When you can't help yourself. Poor baby, completely at my mercy." His hard blue gaze is not at all sympathetic.

I sink down to my knees, reaching for his trouser leg, and push it up, finding the red mark on his shin where I kicked him. I kiss it softly, and an ache goes through my pussy. I like it down here very much.

"Sorry for kicking you, daddy," I whisper softly, caressing his calf with my fingers.

His eyes are narrowed with heat, and I pretend not to notice that his bulging cock is close to my lips.

“What does *va i helvete* mean?”

“It’s a naughty phrase that good girls like you shouldn’t be saying.”

I plant a kiss on his thigh, not breaking eye contact. “Am I not allowed to say bad words?”

“Certainly not, unless you want a spanking. But I tell you what. Because you’re being such a good girl, and because I’m curious, I give you permission to tell me what you really think of what I just did to you. Just this once I won’t punish you for any bad language.”

I smile sweetly at him. “You’re a prick, daddy. But apparently I’m into that.”

Mr. Blomqvist laughs, and I feel higher than ever. I love making him laugh. I kiss up his thigh, taking my time until I find his erection, and drag my tongue along his length. I flick my gaze up at him, and he’s intent on what I’m doing.

“Teach me?” I whisper.

Sitting down in his chair, he pulls me between his thighs and undoes his belt and flies. I rub him through his underwear, enjoying the thick, hot outline of his shaft. I grow bolder, tugging down the waistband of his underwear and revealing his cock, hard and swollen with veins. I’m not afraid, though perhaps at seeing the size of him I should be. I trace my fingers along his generous length, and he’s velvety and hot to the touch. Tentatively, I reach out with my tongue and lick him. He tastes slightly musky, a pleasant taste, and I move a little closer to take the hot tip of him into my mouth.

Mr. Blomqvist pulls the elastic from my hair, and it tumbles around my shoulders. “Beautiful girl,” he murmurs in that deep, gravelly accent of his, gently fisting my curls in his big hands.

A thrill goes through me. He likes what I’m doing, even though I’m just making it up as I go along. I gather wetness onto my tongue and run it over his shaft, and he hisses in pleasure and grips my hair tighter. I take him deeper into my mouth, and then suck up and down slowly, enjoying the way he feels against my tongue and the small sounds of approval he’s making. He wraps his legs around me and pulls me closer, and I revel in the strength of him around me. Protecting me and desiring me.

I suck him in rhythmic motions, using the drag as I pull up to pleasure him. Beneath my fingers, I feel his belly tighten and his breath deepen. His head tips back, and as he comes he lets out the most delicious groan. My mouth floods with that same musky taste, but stronger and salty-sweet, and very Mr. Blomqvist-esque. I like it, but I lean over into the wastepaper bin and spit.

“Sorry,” I mutter, dragging the back of my hand across my mouth. “Can’t really swallow, um, anything.” Not even semen, apparently. How many calories does—

That’s what I’m thinking about right now?

Mr. Blomqvist doesn’t seem to notice I spat. He reaches down and pulls me up into his lap, holding me tightly against him. Still breathing hard, he kisses me deeply, tasting himself on me with his tongue. “That was fucking amazing, sweet girl.”

“You liked it?” I ask, fishing for more praise.

He makes a *nnnng* noise in the back of his throat. “Very much. Do you enjoy our little meetings, Lacey?”

I wrap my arms around his neck and wriggle until my sex is pressed against his cock through my underwear. “God, yes.”

“How is this affecting you? Out there I mean.”

Out there as I get on with my everyday life. I think for a moment. “You’re scarier than anything else I’m afraid of. I don’t know what you’re going to do to me in here, and that’s a good thing. It clears all the clutter out of my head.”

Mr. Blomqvist is silent for a moment, tidying the riot of curls around my face. “I’m glad, *käraste*.”

“Thank you for being so sweet to me,” I whisper. I like when he’s a prick, but I love these tender moments even more, when we’re quiet together, just holding each other.

“I’m rough with your body sometimes, but I’ll always be gentle with your soul. She bruises far more easily.” He plants a kiss on my nose and hands my hair elastic back. “I want you to know you can confide in me if you ever want to. I can take whatever you throw at me, *käraste*.”

His eyes are filled with meaning. Somehow I don’t think he’s talking about me accidentally kicking him.

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Chapter Eleven

Stian

A whole hour of Lacey to myself every day, Monday to Friday. In my free moments at the gym and driving to work, I plan the progression of each of our sessions together over the next few weeks, mentally upping the intensity each day. I want to test her limits and find out what she can withstand. Not to be cruel, though there is a sadistic pleasure in watching a sub shaking and whimpering in pain that she's bravely enduring for me. The plan isn't to break her. The world is a slightly less scary place when someone's taken you to your limits, and you haven't broken down and begged for mercy.

I see Lacey unfurling as the days pass. She smiles more easily, especially at me. She walks taller and her eyes are brighter. It's like watching a neglected, battered flowering plant tentatively opening up again under my care. I think she must have pruned away much of her enjoyment of life after she became sick, and now it's coming back to her.

A week after I give her a forced orgasm, I decide it's time to try something new. She hasn't been naked with me before, so I prepare her by taking off her top and bra, looking steadily into her eyes as I do. No flinching. No shyness. Her nipples are dark and tight, and I suck each one into my mouth, listening to her gasps of pleasure.

The next evening, I unbutton her blouse and pull it off, and then her bra. I show her the two silver objects on my palm. Nipple clamps. I apply each one, screwing them firmly into place and giving them a small tug so I know they're secure. I look up and wait a moment, giving her the chance to say *orange* or *red* if she needs to. Her expression is slightly pained, but she doesn't speak.

I'm not finished yet. I take out two small metal weights on thin silver chain, and I hook each one to the clamps. The tips of her nipples are an angry pink.

"Do you want to say anything, Lacey?"

She shakes her head firmly, though her lower lip is caught between her teeth and her gaze is fastened on the other side of the room as if she's concentrating hard.

"That's wonderful," I murmur, tracing her nipples with the tip of a finger. "You just stay there."

I go back to my desk and continue with my work. I don't look at her, but I'm totally aware of her. She's breathing more sharply than normally so it must hurt. Good. Her silent fortitude is like a drug for me. It's brutish, liking sweet girls in pain, but it fucking makes my dick hard.

When I go back to her ten minutes later, I see her teeth are gritted against the pain and there are tears in her eyes. I don't release her immediately. I take a good, long look at what she's enduring for me, knowing that when I release her she'll be so grateful to me.

I unscrew the clamps and let them fall into my palm, and she gasps in relief, hunching over and burying her face in my shoulder. I palm the back of her neck and rub my fingers over her scalp.

“Good girl. You did beautifully.” Picking her up in my arms I carry her over to the sofa and lay her out along the cushions. I kiss her nipples softly and blow on them, easing some of the redness. Her arms and legs lock around me and she whimpers and pulls me closer, wanting comfort from the asshole who did this to her.

This is the exact state I want her in when she takes my cock, clingy and grateful for my mercy, and completely vulnerable to me. It’s too soon, though, so I slide down to my knees before her, which I’m sure is anathema to some doms. So is the daddy thing and giving cuddles, but that’s bullshit. You can’t be cruel to a girl without showing her sweetness. I like it, too. When Lacey’s endured so much for me, I want to show her how pleased I am. She described my mind as a calm ocean shore early in the morning, and when no one’s got on my nerves that’s more or less right. Doing this with her, though, smooths it to perfection.

I tug her underwear down her legs and spread her open. I lick her pussy slowly and tenderly, incredibly gentle with her now. Using my middle finger, I explore inside of her carefully. She’s slick with arousal, and though she’s tight as hell, I slip into her easily. Then I feel the barrier. I can push past it safely with just one finger, but now I know. Lacey is a virgin. No man’s ever done this to her before, and yet she’s not scared. She trusts me completely. No thought that I might harm her, and that simultaneously breaks my heart and puts it back together again.

I keep my finger where it is, rubbing her swollen g-spot as I lick her clit. Lacey’s eyes are closed, and her fingers twine through my hair. She so deep into subspace when she comes that she forgets where she is and starts to make long, loud moans of

pleasure. It's a shame to dampen them, but I quickly reach up and put a hand over her mouth as I keep licking her. Inside her pussy, I feel her clench on me rhythmically, and my balls spasm with the need to come deep inside of her.

Soon. I'll make her all mine very soon.

I'm up on the couch with her before she's very aware of her surroundings, and I pull her into my lap, enjoying her state of near nakedness. All she's wearing is a skirt, and that's rucked up around her hips. I get my hand around her cute little ass as she takes deep breaths and comes back to me.

"How was that, not too much pain?"

Lacey pushes her hair back with both her hands. "Oh, god. I forgot my own name for a while there."

Good. I don't want her thinking about anything but me when I'm working her over. There's one thing I'm not pleased about, though. "Lacey, why didn't you tell me you're a virgin?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Oh, you noticed."

"Of course I noticed." I suspected it beforehand, but she still should have told me.

"I was going to, but it's just so embarrassing, you know? I'm nearly twenty-five."

"Why is that embarrassing?"

For a moment she plucks the buttons on my shirt. "It's because I've been sick. Yet another thing to add to the long list of things that everyone else has got to experience, and I haven't."

I watch her steadily. There's no point telling her it doesn't matter, because it's clear she finds it troubling. I cover her hand with my own and press it against my chest. "It doesn't matter to me."

“Thank you,” she says softly, and then looks up at me impishly through her lashes. “Can you, um, un-virgin-ize me?”

I feel my mouth twitch. “I’m trying to be stern with you, and then you say cute things like that.”

She giggles and puts her arms around my neck. “How can you be stern with me daddy? I’m just too sweet.”

“Hmm, yes. Too sweet for your own good.” She rests for a while against my chest, stroking her nails along the back of the hand I have resting on her bare thigh. *Yes, I will un-virgin-ize you, as you put it, Lacey. It would be a pleasure.*

“What are those symbols tattooed on your fingers? I’ve wondered since you interviewed me.”

“Runes.” I point to each of them in turn, sounding them out for her. *Ehwaz, laguz, raido…* They must sound harsh to her, but I hope they sound beautiful, too.

“Does it spell out a word? What does it mean?”

I run a finger across my knuckles, reading it out. “*Ek erilaz*. I am the runemaster.”

She sits up, snorting with laughter. “You are the runemaster?”

I grin at her. “It sounds grand but it just means, *I wrote this*. I studied runes in Sweden as part of my doctorate and saw this phrase over and over. On standing stones. On jewelry. It’s very common.”

“But you like it because it sounds grand, right?”

“Of course. Words are important. Words have power.” I wrap my hand around her wrist, and say, “Kneel.” Like the good girl she is, Lacey immediately slips from my lap onto her knees. “See?”

She leans forward and runs her tongue over the symbols on my knuckles. “Yes. But it’s not just what you said. It’s the way you said it.”

I clench my hand tighter and angle my hand so she can better see the sigils inked into my flesh. “I don’t have to say it. I am the runemaster. Does this look like I don’t mean it?”

Lacey smiles up at me. “No, daddy.”

I look at her down there for a moment longer, enjoying the sight. Then I help her up onto my lap again, because I’m not done cuddling her. In my arms, she’s light-hearted and happy. I hate sending her back out into the world where her anxieties will get their claws into her again. I wish I could always keep her with me.

She traces the markings on my fingers, and then the faint pattern of the tattoo on my chest through my shirt.

“Tell me about Sweden?” she asks.

“Sweden? Well, the summers are good and hot, but it’s cold and endlessly dark in the winter. If you’re in the countryside, then it can be romantic. Winter days in Stockholm are black and miserable. They gave me the motivation to study English hard and I took the first job in London I could get.”

She laughs. “Are you telling me you came to Britain for the excellent weather?”

“No. The food.” Joking about British food with my colleagues has become a habit, but I glance at her quickly, hoping I haven’t said the wrong thing, but Lacey just grins.

“Hey, don’t go making fun of our cuisine. Fish and chips. Egg and chips. Curry and chips. What more variety could you want?”

I want to tell her about the food I miss in Sweden. Pickled herring salads. Open sandwiches piled high with shrimp, slices of boiled egg, cucumber and crème fraîche. The displays of green *Prinsesstårta* in bakery windows, and how a summer gathering isn't complete without a slice. Food is something I enjoy very much when I'm not focused on work. I would like to be able to share that with her. Not just the food, but the experiences that come with them.

A picture forms in my mind, very clear, of Lacey at my parents' house near Söderhamn. It's Christmas and the garden is deep with snow, and she's bundled up in a quilted white coat and a fluffy scarf and beanie. Her lips are cold but her tongue is warm as I bend down to kiss her.

"When did you come to London?" she asks, pulling me out of my daydream.

"I was twenty-eight. A city like Stockholm starts to feel very small after a while. I was ready for something new." I was also coming out of a very intense and destructive relationship that's made me hesitant to embark on anything too serious since. We were on again and off again for years, each breakup more dramatic and stressful than the last.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asks softly, as if she knows where my mind has gone.

I level a look at her. "Would I really be sitting here with you if I was with someone?"

She gives a shy half-shrug. "A girl just likes to be sure."

I settle my arms around her. "You can be sure, *käraste*."

"You could see other people, though. I mean, that's what people do, right? It's casual until decided otherwise."

I study her, feeling puzzled, wondering if there's something she's not telling me. "Is there anyone I should know about?"

"Oh, god no." She chews her lip, looking stricken. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound like I don't like you or that I'm seeing other people. I remember what you said, about not saving things for other men. I'm not. I'm just, um, inexperienced at this sort of thing. Whatever this is."

"*This* is very serious to me. If I expect things of you, you can be damn sure I expect them of myself. I'm not saving anything for anyone else. There's only you. *Bara du*."

I'm so sick of drama for the sake of drama. Lacey might struggle, but I can tell she enjoys peace as much as I do. She just has to fight for it, and I want to fight with her.

"Thank you," she says softly, twining her fingers through mine again. "That makes me very happy to hear."

"Good. Because I meant what I said. I always want everything."

Shy pleasure shines in her eyes, and a possessive thrum goes through me. *Soon.*

She puts her hand up and strokes a finger down my cheekbone and along my jaw. "You would have made an excellent Viking warrior, you know," she tells me. "Do you ever regret that you were born now and not 900 AD, when you could have set forth across the seas in a longship with all your raider comrades, and demanded tributes of gold on pain of death?"

"Who, me? I'm far too soft and bookish. I would have been a scribe." Her fingers trail across my lips, and I nip playfully at them with my teeth.

“Do you want me to start calling you runemaster?” she asks with a giggle.

“No. Daddy is just fine. What about you, ever wish you were a Vestal virgin in Rome or the spoiled daughter of an olive oil merchant in Ancient Greece?”

“Always,” she answers quickly. Far too quickly for my liking.

I catch her chin and guide her face gently up until she’s looking at me. “Hey. I think you’re wonderful just as you are. When you’re happy, I’m happy. Do you believe me?”

Lacey takes a deep breath and lets it out heavily, as if she’s struggling beneath the weight of the world. “I believe you, daddy. I’m trying to be happy, but I have to do something I’m dreading.”

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Chapter Twelve

Lacey

Wednesday. It's fast become my most hated day of the week. Two Wednesdays have gone by since I've started being submissive to Mr. Blomqvist and I've not mentioned it to Doctor Loftin. It's been difficult because I'm leaving out the thing that's taking up a huge, happy space in my head. Doctor Loftin can tell that my mood has improved, and I know she's suspicious as to why. Beyond saying, *Is there anything else you'd like to add?* though, she hasn't outright asked me what's up.

The morning after Mr. Blomqvist puts clamps and weights on my nipples, I fidget my way through most of my session with Doctor Loftin.

She prods me here and there about my routine and whether anything has changed, and I pretend to think carefully and tell her about the various work assignments I've been given.

Finally, where there are just five minutes left, I run my thumbnail along the seam of the armrest and say, "I've become intimate with Mr. Blomqvist."

I was going to say *my boss*, but the point isn't that he's my boss. It's that we're sleeping together. Well, not sleeping together. We're doing things together. Wonderful, crazy things.

Annoyance flits over Doctor Loftin's face, and she glances at the clock. "Is that what you call him? Mr. Blomqvist?"

The question sits heavy in the air, and I know she's wondering why I don't call him Stian if we're intimate. *Actually, I call him daddy.* "Sometimes."

Doctor Loftin closes her notebook with a suppressed sigh. "All right. We'll pick this up next week."

I leave her office knowing she's irritated and disappointed in me, but I did it, didn't I? I told her, and she's got a whole hour to look forward to next week in which she can ask open-ended and judgy questions about whether I think it's a good idea to sleep with my boss.

"Something for her to look forward to," I mutter darkly, pushing through the glass doors into the fresh air. The bigger part of me knows that she doesn't ask me hard questions because she enjoys watching me squirm, but right now I feel malicious pleasure in imagining that she does.

That evening when I'm cuddled against Mr. Blomqvist wearing nothing but my underwear, I start thinking about what I'm going to tell Doctor Loftin next week. How am I going to describe Mr. Blomqvist to her, and what we have together?

"Daddy," I say hesitantly. "I know a little bit about doms and subs, and usually subs have rules, don't they? You haven't given me any rules."

"You want some rules?"

I don't know about *want* some rules, but shouldn't I have rules? There are a few little things I know he wants from me that fall under *being good*. No talking during our sessions until he says so.

Being respectful and polite when I do speak to him. Calling him daddy. “You never tell me what to eat and when to eat, for instance.”

“You know what’s best for you in that area and what you can cope with. If you want to talk about it, I’m here for you.”

That’s fair. Being an in-patient on an anorexia ward means I know more than most people about macro and micronutrients and how carbs and proteins are metabolized. In fact, it’s made me angry in the past when people try to take control of something I know more about. I had a friend at university who was always peppering me with advice and quotes from self-help books and nutrition articles. She thought she was helpful, but it just felt arrogant. I’m the one with the eating disorder. I’m the one that reads about specialized nutrition and goes to therapy for it. We had a huge fight because of it. I already feel powerless most of the time, so it doesn’t take much to send me spinning out of control.

I didn’t win the fight. I was never going to win because what she was—helpful, interested and supportive—meant she was the good guy and I—defensive, churlish and ungrateful—was the bad guy. But that’s not what it felt like to me, and I couldn’t make her understand how patronizing she was being. She wouldn’t entertain for a second that maybe I knew better, because if I knew better then why was I failing so much?

Okay, so rules about food are probably not for me, but sometimes I worry that I’m not “subby” enough for Mr. Blomqvist. “I still think you should give me rules. I don’t want you to feel like I’m too fragile to treat me the way a sub ought to be treated.”

“Your rules are to be in here at six o’clock, wait on your knees for further instructions and be a good girl for daddy. You do those

things wonderfully, *käraste*. I couldn't ask for more."

I smile at him and kiss his cheek. Because it's late in the day, it's rough with stubble, and I love how it rasps against my lips. "When we're together I feel so normal for the whole hour that I start to wonder if it might be permanent. That you might fix me. Can you fix me?"

His eyes are gentle as he smiles back at me. "I can't fix you, because you're not broken. But I'll try to help you in any way you ask me to."

He's only saying that because I haven't shown him everything. Eating in secret, freaking out at social gatherings, that's nothing. I think of the hospital records detailing all my failures and denial. My mother crying when she saw me in just my underwear at my lowest weight. The things I screamed at my father. Because I work for Mr. Blomqvist, he gets to see the best of me. I'm a good worker, and he makes it easy for me to give the impression that I have it all together.

I'm dreading my conversation with Doctor Loftin so much that I struggle to eat all my meals that week. As I throw unfinished breakfasts and dinners into the toilet, I know I'm going to regret this when Doctor Loftin sees my weight on the scales. Inside her box, the other me laughs.

Wednesday morning rolls around, and I'm sitting in Doctor Loftin's office. My weigh-in didn't go well. I've lost nearly a pound since last week, and that's definitely not allowed when I'm already skirting the lower end of the healthy weight band. The other me screams, *You're finally doing something right, you stupid, greedy bitch.*

You're not me, you're in the box I made for you, and you're never getting out again, I repeat to myself, taking deep breaths. Her voice fades a little, but she's never really silenced. She sneers something about Mr. Blomqvist, and I feel my eyes prickle with tears.

Just shut up, I tell her. *I hate you so much. Why can't I have anything nice? Why can't I have one thing that's mine?*

"I know I screwed up this week," I say quickly. "Please don't send me back to the ward."

Doctor Loftin finishes making note of my weight in her records, and looks up. "I think it's time for a reassessment of your goals. Tell me your goals, Lacey."

"They haven't changed. Maintain my weight. Never go back to the ward." The Dawnstead Anorexia Inpatient Ward was where I landed myself just over a year ago when my anorexia was at its worst. I lost so much weight in four months that I couldn't walk, and I temporarily lost my sight and hearing. Everyone around me was terrified, from my roommate who found me collapsed at the bottom of the stairs to my parents when they rushed to the hospital where I'd been admitted. It should have been the most frightening experience of my life, but I felt nothing. You can't feel anything when you're starving. My anorexia silenced everything. The memory of not having to feel pain, sadness and fear is an alluring one.

I spent five months on the ward, slowly gaining the weight back. I was getting better, but all the shame and unworthiness came back as I ate. That's something people don't tell you about recovery. It makes you feel much, much worse than the actual disease. Suddenly you have the calories to think and your old tricks, the ones you used to pacify your anorexic half, aren't allowed anymore. So

you eat while she screams and screams at you, and you fantasize about tearing the flesh from your bones with your nails because your head is full of agony.

Slowly, it got easier. My treatment taught me how to painfully unstitch that other Lacey from my psyche and admit that I was ill. I could distance myself from her and put her away in that box. I reached a healthy weight and maintained it, and I became an intensive outpatient for four months. That was reduced to weekly therapy and weigh-ins with Doctor Loftin. The therapy will probably never end. Not for years, anyway, and only then if I don't relapse.

I'm not going to relapse. This week was just a blip.

So far, I'm one of the lucky ones. A lot of people with anorexia backslide and have to become inpatients over and over again. I'm determined to never, ever let that happen. Structuring my life carefully is the way I cope now, not restricting calories. Structure is my deity.

"How does Mr. Blomqvist fit in with these goals?" Doctor Loftin asks.

I look at her sharply. I'm always searching for hidden meaning in her questions because she never tells me outright what she's thinking. Is she implying that he's somehow counter to my goals?

"What we have together is straightforward. I have an hour with him every day after our work is finished. It's something just for me. Just for us."

It's heavenly saying *us*. I've never been an *us* before, even temporarily.

Doctor Loftin's silence feels like judgment. I hate her silences so much. Does *an hour with him* sound weird? I wish she'd just tell

me what she's thinking.

I haul a cushion into my lap and start working at a loose thread, scowling down at it like it's done me a personal injury. "Are you telling me not to do this? Are you implying I'm making a mistake?"

"I'm trying to help you to gain some perspective on something new and important in your life that's affecting your recovery."

Oh, she definitely thinks I'm making a mistake. Hearing Mr. Blomqvist be medicalized like this makes my temper ratchet up to a thirteen. The words start spilling uncontrollably out of my mouth. "It wasn't even Mr. Blomqvist who made me lose a pound. It was worrying about telling you about him. Other people get the luxury of making mistakes in private, but because I've got disease everything I do gets trawled out here in front of you. It's not fair."

"Do you think sleeping with your boss is a mistake?"

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second. I walked right into that one. I was dreading this all week, and now I've done exactly what I feared and made a mess of this. I'm twenty-four, and I have the dating experience of a thirteen-year-old.

I throw the cushion to the other end of the couch, wishing it was a vase I was hurling at a wall. "No. I phrased that wrong. I think he's very good for me, actually."

"Masking difficult feelings with sex can—"

"We don't have sex, actually. He hits me."

Doctor Loftin hesitates, and then closes her mouth. I know I'm only making it worse, speaking of my relationship with Mr. Blomqvist like I'm too immature to know what I'm talking about, let alone doing. Wanting to shock her rather than communicate. But the unfairness of

it all is so wretched. Why can't I just be normal and choose what I want for myself? Why does everything I do have to be a symptom of my anorexia instead of something precious that's mine?

I mash my hands over my face so I don't have to look at Doctor Loftin. She's silent, and for once I'm grateful. I lean into my palms, wishing I was far away from here.

Good job, idiot. That's not even my anorexia talking. That's just me.

I take a deep breath and sit up a little straighter. This is hard, but I can't act sulky and resentful. That will only convince Doctor Loftin that I'm too immature for something that I know is making me happy.

"I want to start again. I didn't tell you this in the way I was hoping to. I'm defensive about him, and so I sound childish."

Doctor Loftin waits for me to continue. I remember a conversation we had several months ago about my need for approval, and I know she's probably remembering it, too. How I want approval from her. How I want approval from *everyone*. She's tried to teach me ways to distance myself from that need, so putting into words why I think a man who spanks me and says *good girl* is good for me is going to be impossible. Worse, it's going to sound unhealthy, and I'm never, ever allowed to have anything in my life that's unhealthy. If Doctor Loftin thinks I'm engaging in destructive behaviors she can have me sectioned and sent back to the ward against my will.

I take a deep breath, trying to quell the panic that's rising up. I'm risking so much by getting involved with Mr. Blomqvist, but I can't go on merely existing. I have to find ways to *live*.

Doctor Loftin says, “There was a Dutch study a few years ago that indicated people who engage in BDSM activities report less neuroticism and a higher sense of well-being.”

I look up at her. Instead of the face of professional judgment I expected to see, Doctor Loftin smiles at me mildly.

“I’m concerned that he’s your employer because there’s already a power imbalance in play, but you’ve said that you’ll only be Mr. Blomqvist’s assistant in the short-term. It’s not inherently harmful to engage in BDSM activities with a partner who is aware of your treatment. Does he know?”

I sit back, feeling stunned. “Um. A little bit. I told him I’m in therapy and he knows it’s food-related, but I haven’t talked to him in detail about it. I think he’s waiting for me to bring it up. Every time I tell him something about it he listens and says thank you. And—and I kind of love that about him.” I scratch my forearm, not looking at her.

“I can see why you would.”

I feel the corners of my mouth curl up in a sheepish smile. All right. I take back every crappy thing I’ve ever thought about Doctor Loftin. “Thank you. I guess it’s safe with him. I’m not talking just about the kinky stuff. I mean, it’s safe in that room with him. No one’s going to make me eat anything. He’s in charge. I don’t have to speak. I don’t have to think. I get to feel what it’s like when a man wants you. I didn’t think I’d have that because to get close to a man you have to go on dates first, and I can’t do that. With Mr. Blomqvist, all that’s completely irrelevant to our arrangement. It’s such a relief.”

Doctor Loftin nods and doesn’t say anything.

“I think that’s all I want to say about it today,” I tell her, and she nods again. What I have with Mr. Blomqvist is special and private. I don’t want to make it clinical within these four walls.

“I want to see that you’ve gained the weight back by next week, Lacey. You know what that means. The weight-gain meal plan until you’re back to where you were.”

My heart sinks, but I nod. The weight gain meal plan has cake and ice-cream on it, two incredibly scary foods that I’ll have to face for a week, maybe two, because I slipped up. It’s going to be demanding, but at least I got through this hour, and I still have Mr. Blomqvist. I still have something that’s mine.

At six o’clock that evening, I head into Mr. Blomqvist’s office. Instead of going to my usual spot in the middle of the room, I go and sit at his feet. I need to talk to him, and this is the time when I feel the bravest.

Mr. Blomqvist turns to me and puts a hand on my cheek. “*Käraste*? You can speak.”

“I’ve had trouble eating this week. I haven’t eaten as much as I agreed with my therapist and I lost weight.” He waits for me to go on. “That’s not allowed, and I didn’t want to lose that pound, but part of me is glad. The cruel half. She tells me that you’ll like me better if I’m smaller.”

This is the tricky part about telling people about the anorexic voice. Sometimes people hear what I’m saying and get defensive, thinking I’m blaming them for my disease. I can still hear my mother saying to my doctor, back in the first days after my diagnosis, *“I never told her that she needed to lose weight. How dare she put this on me?”*

Mum didn't tell me to lose weight, but the voice said it's what she wanted, a daughter who isn't so disgusting and greedy. Doctor Loftin once asked me how often the nasty voice talks about what other people think of me. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I told her.

"Why has it been hard to eat this week?" he asks me.

"Because I had to tell my therapist about you. And now I have to tell you that I told her."

I bury my face against his thighs and wrap my arms over my head, seeking to hide as much as I'm seeking comfort. I feel again the unfairness of it all, that I can never just enjoy something. It always has to be raked over and analyzed.

Mr. Blomqvist strokes my hair and doesn't say anything.

"I'm scared because if I slip, she'll send me back to the anorexia ward," I say, my words slightly muffled against his thigh. "It's the worst place in the world. You have no idea what it feels like. Not because of what they do to you, though that's bad enough. Because of the shame you feel in your heart." I take a deep, shuddering breath. "But I'm not going to slip."

He goes on stroking my hair.

"I looked up this daddy dom thing online the other day. It's called daddy dom, little girl. You never call me your little girl. You probably made a mental list of danger words never to use with me. I'm grateful, but it's hard, you know? Realizing that you've had to censor yourself around me."

Finally, he murmurs, "Being my girl is not about your size or the way you look. I don't feel censored because it's easy to call you other things."

I lift my head and look up at him. “Convince me, please. Convince me of everything, in that way you do. Especially, convince me that I haven’t just made you hate me because I told you the truth about me.”

Mr. Blomqvist stands up and helps me to my feet. His mouth descends on mine in a kiss that takes my breath away, and he pulls me so tightly against his body that the heat from his chest envelops me. He’s kissing me like a lover, and I need that so badly, and when his hand creeps up to take tight hold of my hair, I need that even more.

“Take off your underwear,” he orders me.

I do as I’m told, and he grips my hair the entire time, and each movement I make tugs sharply on my scalp. He holds out his hand for my panties, and then spins me around so I’m facing away from him.

He picks me up and sits me on his desk, and ties my hands behind my back with my underwear. “Open your legs.”

I draw my knees up to my chest and open them while he takes vicious hold of my ponytail again and pulls me back against his chest. His other hand reaches down and strokes my thigh. The play of his fingers is gentle at first, and he trails over the seam of my pussy and back again. Then he grips my thigh, hard, his fingers digging in, and I hiss in pain.

“Do you think I would stand for anyone hurting my *käraste*?”

I hesitate, not knowing if I’m allowed to speak or not.

His tongue curls up the rim of my ear. “You may answer me. Is that what you think?”

“No, daddy.”

His hand travels back to my sex and delves between my pussy lips. I've grown wet while he's handled me roughly and sweetly and then roughly again.

"Good. I would have to be angry with you otherwise. Do you know what I do to girls who start believing dirty little lies?"

"I—"

I start to answer, but he takes his hand away and then smacks it against my sex. Bright pain fizzles through me. I try to curve my body around the pain, but he grips my hair mercilessly and pulls my legs open again.

"Did I say you could move?"

"No daddy," I whimper.

"I won't stand for you disrespecting yourself. Not looking after yourself is disrespecting you, and it's disrespecting me as well. I expect better than that from you. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

He smacks my pussy again, harder than before, and it makes a wet, smacking sound. "What was that?"

Fuck, that hurts so bad. He's spanking me far fewer times than if it was my ass, but it's ten times more intense.

I try to curl up to protect myself, but he growls in my ear, "Keep your legs open or I will bend you over this desk and strap you with my belt. Then you'll really have something to fucking cry about."

I shuffle my feet open again, taking deep breaths.

"I'm still waiting for you to answer my question."

What was it? Oh, yes, that he expects more from me. "Yes, daddy."

That seems to assuage him because his fingers find my clit and he's gentle once more. He softly kisses my throat. "Are you ever going to please everyone?"

"No."

"Are you going to please me?"

"I hope so." I'm going to try my hardest.

"*No*." He spanks my pussy again. I gasp through the pain, but I don't move. He grips my hair and angles my ear up to his lips, and snarls, "I said, are you going to please me? Just as you are. Just like this."

"Yes, daddy."

"Do you believe that you can?" He spanks my pussy again, and I jump in his arms. "I need to feel that you mean it."

I look up into his ferocious blue gaze. "I do believe it, daddy."

He bites down on my earlobe and then sucks on it. "I believe it, too. Good girl."

My eyes close as he sinks a finger into my pussy, and then goes back to working my clit, as sweet as can be now, his hand stroking my hair and his lips against my throat. A tight bead of pleasure grows through the heat and pain, and when I come, he wraps his arm around my waist so he can feel my climax with his body, and buries his face against my throat.

"Beautiful," he says raggedly. Mr. Blomqvist unties my hands, shoves my underwear into his pocket and helps me off his desk and into his arms. He holds me tightly, cradling me with his whole body.

"I'm proud of you for telling her. And then for telling me."

I bury my face against his chest and wrap my arms around him, eyes closed. The realization dawns on me. I actually did it. A

hard, scary thing, and I didn't fall apart or let her out of her box. I smile up at him, suddenly feeling high. On life. On achievement. On him. "Yeah. I did it."

We've still got half an hour together, so we sit quietly together on the sofa. I love these moments together, warm and happy in his arms. He plays with my hair, watching me without saying anything. I showed him a little more of what a basket case I am and he still hasn't freaked out. His hands on me are only loving.

"You know who you remind me of?" I say, looking up at him. He raises an eyebrow questioningly. "The Laconians of Ancient Greece."

His mouth twitches. "A whole people?"

"Yes." I lace my fingers through his, playing with them and tracing his tattoos. "They were a very taciturn people. After Phillip of Macedon conquered lots of Greece, he sent a message to Laconia and asked if he should come as friend or foe. They replied, *Neither*. That pissed him off a whole load, and so he sent them an angry letter. *You are advised to submit without further delay, for if I bring my army into your land, I will destroy your farms, slay your people, and raze your city.* Do you know what they replied?"

He raises his eyebrow again.

"They said, *If*."

He grins at me, but still doesn't say anything.

"Laconic, that's you."

"Is that fancy talk for grumpy and shy?"

"Shy? You?" He's surely the least shy person I've ever met.

"How can you tell if a Swedish man likes you?"

I giggle and twist my fingers through his. "How?"

“He’s looking at your shoes and not his own.”

“Swedish men? Really? Aren’t you all supposed to be incredibly sexually liberated or something?”

“The women are. The men dress nicely and hope that a pretty girl approaches us.” He kisses me gently. “Like you did. Asking to be one of my bonsai.”

I bury my face in his chest, my face burning with embarrassment. “I still can’t believe I said that to you.”

“I’m so glad you did.” He reaches an arm behind the sofa, retrieves a carry bag and sets it on my lap. “Happy birthday, by the way.”

I lift my head and look up at him in surprise. It’s not actually my birthday until tomorrow, and I’ve been trying my best to ignore it. “How did you know?”

“Your father texted me the other day. He said you don’t want to celebrate this year but that I might like to know. He was right. I did want to know. Why didn’t you tell me, *käraste*?”

I shrug awkwardly. “Birthdays are…difficult.”

My last birthday was on the ward. I was made to eat birthday cake. The nurses actually stand over you while you eat and all the toilet doors are locked for half an hour afterward so you don’t go and throw anything up. Happy birthday to me.

“How do you feel about early birthdays then?”

I think for a moment. Sitting cuddled against Mr. Blomqvist without any underwear on, well that’s different. “Early birthdays? I think I might be all right with those.”

He kisses my throat. “Good. Open it, *käraste*.”

I take a closer look at the carry bag and the word that's printed on the side, and change my mind again. "Versace? I can't, it's—"

"Open it," he insists softly, still smiling.

Inside I find a white leather handbag, made to perfection and very chic. Stupidly expensive, though. If he wanted to buy me something, it should have been something inconsequential and small, because this is making a much bigger deal out of my birthday than I'd wanted to. "It's beautiful, but I can't accept something so—"

He turns the bag around and points at the clasp. It's large and silver and is shaped like Medusa's head. I'd forgotten that Medusa was the Versace logo.

"I thought she might make you feel powerful."

My face crumples, and I cover my eyes with my hand. He remembered what I said about Medusa, and that I like to wear symbols of protection. I think with all his tattoos he must understand that they're more than just symbols. They're my strength and meaning when I need them.

"I'm sorry," I say through my tears, because making me cry was probably the last thing he wanted to do.

"Hey. *Käraste*. Did I do something wrong?"

I shake my head, trying to speak past the lump in my throat, but failing. He did the very opposite of wrong.

"Are you going to say *thank you, daddy*, and accept your birthday present like a good girl?"

I nod, and he wraps his arms around me and pulls me against him. A few minutes later I'm able to whisper. "Thank you, daddy."

"You're very welcome."

I study him. “Why do you like doing this for me so much? Not the birthday present. All of it. I have a lot of baggage. You must have figured that out by now, but nothing I do or say seems to scare you off.”

“Scared of you? I’m the control freak. Shouldn’t you be scared of me?”

“You’re not a freak. You’re actually really lovely. Why are you looking at me like that?”

He’s wearing a smile that’s so peaceful and beatific it almost doesn’t seem real. That a person can feel that way. That he can be looking at *me* that way, as if there’s no place in the world that he’d rather be than here.

“No reason, *käraste*. You’re just sweet, that’s all. Happy birthday.”

“Daddy,” I whisper, my heart fluttering in my chest. I take a deep breath. “Did you want to maybe, um. Sleep together?”

His vivid blue gaze holds mine. “There’s no hurry, *käraste*.”

But there is a hurry. I won’t be here forever, and it’s not like we can see each other out in the real world. Our entanglement or whatever this is exists only in his office, and we have just a few weeks left together. It might be weird, having sex in an office and not a bedroom, but I don’t care. He’ll be there, and that’s what matters.

I open my mouth to remind him that time is short, but he points out that it’s seven and sits up.

“Can I have my underwear, please?”

Mr. Blomqvist rubs a hand over his jaw. “Mm. No.”

“Excuse me?”

He grins, and this time he doesn't look beatific at all. He looks devilish, and pulls my underwear out of his pocket and dangles them on a forefinger before my face. "These are mine. I want you to remember your lesson all the way home."

I want to snatch them from him, but I can see him daring me to with his eyes. Instead, I smooth my skirt down demurely and stand up. "Yes, daddy."

He grins even wider and pushes my panties back into his pocket. "Such a good girl."

The very breezy journey home has me clinging to my hem every time there's a gust of wind. When I walk in the front door an hour later, my parents spy the Versace carrier bag straight away. I'm suddenly doubly conscious that I'm naked beneath my skirt. Knowing I'm probably blushing red to the roots of my hair, I say, "It's a present from Mr. Blomqvist. To say thank you for all the work on the exhibition, I guess."

Dad accepts this blithely, as if it's no surprise that a daughter of his is so useful to Mr. Blomqvist. My mother looks like she wants to say more, such as, *Employers don't buy young women Versace handbags for platonic reasons. What's really going on here? How old is he? What's his agenda?* But she holds her tongue. Probably she'll ask dad a load of questions about Mr. Blomqvist later when I'm not in the room, because I don't think she's ever met him.

I wear the handbag to work in the morning with a pair of white jeans and flats and a sleeveless blouse, and it works. Medusa is protecting me, and even though it's my birthday, a day I've been dreading, I feel powerful.

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Chapter Thirteen

Stian

Did you want to maybe sleep together?

I've been thinking about taking Lacey to bed ever since she called me *sir* the first time. After she asked to be one of my bonsai and I kissed her soft, cherry mouth, I've been aching to. But it's delicate. For starters, I didn't think I'd be taking anyone's virginity at my age. It's something I probably wouldn't have thought twice about in my twenties, but it seems a lot more significant now, being someone's first. Being Lacey's first. Being the one to possess her body. Make her come. See her breathless and vulnerable beneath me.

She's never self-conscious when I undress her, though we've never been fully naked with each other yet. Lacey doesn't seem to be afraid of touching me. She's gone down on me three times without any prompting from me, and it's fucking delicious, though she seems sheepish about spitting afterward. As if I give a damn.

After my hour with Lacey the following Wednesday, I pull into my garage and head inside, looking around at the book-lined lounge room, the greenhouse through the French doors that keeps my bonsai alive through the winter. I'm loath to try and change the parameters of our relationship in any way because change seems to be something that upsets Lacey, but I don't want to sleep with her in

my office. I want to do it here, somewhere comfortable where I can treat her properly and she can relax. I picture her in my bed, her long dark hair spread out across the pillow and her body naked and ready for me to devour.

I want to have her under my control, but more importantly, I want to take steps to make her mine permanently, and that means moving things outside my office.

Because Lacey, I believe, is perfect for me.

I keep circling back to the fact that she told her therapist about me, and it brings a smile to my face every time. It must have been hard for her to tell her therapist what we're doing, and I feel a fierce thrill of satisfaction that she did. Lacey's determined for this to be something real, too, and I can be good for her. I listen to her. I'm supportive. Out here, in the real world, we could have a real relationship.

We could have everything.

I go to the fridge and pull out a bottle of mineral water and notice the calendar stuck to the wall. Next week is her last week. Already. Fuck, I'm going to miss her so much. In a week and a half, I won't have her in my office at all.

The next evening I have her on my lap with her dress unbuttoned down the front and the lace cups of her bra pulled down. She's just finished coming all over my fingers and her hair is wild and tumbling around her face. She stretches her arms luxuriously over her head, arching into me and rubbing her pussy against my hard cock.

I grip her waist, smoothing my thumbs over her ribs, imagining how good it would feel to unzip my trousers right now and just

plunge into her.

Patience, Stian. Virgin, remember?

Should it bother me that the woman who fills my head every hour of every day is so much younger than me? I haven't been able to feel one ounce of guilt over the age difference, but I feel like I should bring it up.

"Does it bother you that I'm older than you?"

Lacey lowers her arms thoughtfully. "You know, I don't think I ever asked you how old you are."

"Thirty-nine."

She considers me for a moment, and then shakes her head. "No, it doesn't bother me. I prefer it, actually. I don't do the normal things other women in their twenties do, like go to bars and clubs and things. They're too loud and intense. You don't like to do that, either. Or at least, I don't think you do."

I hadn't thought about it that way. I like the pub, but bars with loud music and a crush of people get on my nerves. "You're safe. I don't."

Lacey smiles and wraps her arms around my neck, stroking her fingers through my hair. "You're steadying. Plus, you're really sexy. I guess I'm into older guys."

"Well, lucky me," I murmur, kissing her smiling mouth.

"What about me, I'm not too young and silly for you, am I?"

"*Käraste*, you're about the least silly young woman I've ever met." Insanely cute, though. A sweet, clever little girl, and all mine. I put my head on my side, watching her fluff her long, dark curls. "What are you doing Friday night?"

“Nothing, why?” She looks up and meets my intense gaze, and her cheeks slowly turn pink.

I trace my forefinger over her lower lip. “I thought I could show you my other bonsai plants. At my house.” It’s outside our routine. Outside anything we’ve ever done together before.

She smiles shyly. “Oh, your bonsai plants. Yes, I would love to see them.”

I kiss her hungrily and pull her even more tightly against me in my lap. *Yes, you sweet girl. You know exactly what I’m talking about and that’s why you’re blushing. You want your daddy to fuck you, don’t you?*

Her hand slides down over my chest, and I cover it with my own, pressing it tightly against my heart. “If you’re sure,” I say, watching her closely. “Like I said, there’s no hurry.”

She nods, still smiling. “I’m sure, daddy. I’m on the pill, by the way. I’ve been on it for years, because of cramps.”

Condoms are fine, but thinking about rawing Lacey makes my cock spasm in my pants. Keeping my face carefully blank, I say, “I’m clean, but I can use a condom if you prefer.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want you to.”

My eyes rake her, from her waist to her pretty little tits to her throat to her beautiful face, vividly imagining what it will be like when I have her spread beneath me with her pussy wrapped tight around my cock.

All mine.

On Friday we leave the office together at six and head down to my car. She hums along to the radio as I drive, her hand reaching over now and again to brush against my thigh. She seems relaxed

and happy, and I take her hand and give it a squeeze as we sit at the traffic lights. It's a beautiful evening, warm and sunny, and for once I don't even mind that the roads are busy.

When we get to my house, I pull into the garage and take her inside.

We hold hands as I take her through the rooms. I'm proud of the home I've managed to make for myself in the years I've lived in Britain. I've furnished the rooms carefully, and filled them with books and pictures that make me happy every time I look at them. Everything is just how I want it, and the house has a sense of permanence to it because I wanted it to feel permanent. When I decide something's right, I commit to it.

"This room is my favorite," she says, standing in the middle of the living room and gazing around. "It's so cozy with the sofas and the bookshelves. I would love to read in here on a rainy day when the fire's going."

I stroke my knuckles across her cheek. "I would love that, too."

Min älskling. My darling. My love. The feeling fills me from the center of my being right to the tips of my fingers and toes.

Lacey gazes back at me, the softest of expressions in her eyes. I smile at her, wondering how we got here, but so grateful that we have. "It's funny how things work out, isn't it?"

"If you hadn't fired your last assistant. If I hadn't nearly fallen down the stairs."

"I still feel terrible that I shouted at you."

Lacey shrugs one shoulder, still smiling. "Maybe if you hadn't, I would never have shown you my affirmations and confessed that I

wanted you so badly."

I step closer, brushing my lips over hers and taking her in my arms. She rises on her tiptoes to meet me, her fingers twining through my hair. Fire licks up my body as I hold her against me, and I deepen the kiss, my lips parting hers and my tongue sliding into her mouth.

Lacey reaches for my tie and unloops the silk, still kissing me. It slides to the ground, and then I feel her fingers undoing the buttons of my shirt one by one.

I press kisses to her cheeks, her throat, as her palms stroke my chest. "Can I put you into subspace, or would you like to try vanilla for your first time?"

Lacey wraps her arms around my neck, and whispers in my ear, "I want you to do what you do best, daddy."

I was hoping she'd say that. I tell her to get on her knees in the middle of the living room floor, and she does. With red lips and flushed cheeks, she looks up at me while I pull off my shirt and fist it in my hands, breathing a little faster now.

"Perfect. You just stay there, *käraste*."

From there she can see the bonsai plants in the adjoining greenhouse. I move about the house, putting my things away and opening the windows to let the breeze in, and enjoying the knowledge that she's there. Waiting for me.

Ten minutes later, I retrieve something from the bedroom and go back into the living room and sit on the sofa, just watching her. I'm behind her to the left, but she doesn't turn to look at me. Not even when I run a chain through my hand so that it clinks softly.

"Come here. On your hands and knees."

Lacey turns around on all fours and does as she's told, nestling herself on the floor between my thighs. I fit the leather collar around her throat and wrap the chain around my hand. She looks up at me with clear, calm eyes, and I drink in the sight of her.

Collared.

Chained.

Mine.

"Take off your clothes."

She does as she's told, unbuttoning her blouse and then wriggling out of her skirt. I hold the chain the entire time, keeping her close to me. When she's in her bra and panties, I pull her up over my lap. She's smiling as she settles her cheek on the back of her hands, and wiggles her cute little ass for me. Her panties are pink lace and tucked tight into the cleft of her bottom.

"Daddy's just going to warm you up a little," I murmur, squeezing fistfuls of her in my hands. I give her a test spank, just a little smack, and she makes petulant little sounds.

I do it again, just the lightest smack. Lacey doesn't say anything, just whimpers again as if it's the worst thing that's ever happened, but pushes her ass into my hand.

Oh, I see, are we playing that game? I love that game. I give her a gentle smack, and she sniffles dramatically.

"You're too fucking cute, did you know that?"

I can just see the side of her cheek, and she tucks her face against my thigh and smiles. We go on like that, me hitting her softly and her writhing about and making little gasps like no one's ever spanked anyone as hard as I'm hitting her now. I run the flat of my hand up her arched spine and unclasp her bra. As it falls away, she

makes the *poor little me* noises again, and I feel my cock pulse with heat. *Min Gud*. I'm a sucker for that shit. Play up to me baby. I love to see you wriggling about.

I explore her panties with gentle fingers. Stroking my thumb up the seam of her sex, I find that she's wet between her legs. The lace is soaked and I can see the folds of her plump little pussy. Taking my time, enjoying the peace of knowing that we're in my house without anything to disturb us, I trace her sex, from her clit all the way to her ass and back again, listening to her soft sounds of pleasure.

Utterly trusting. Completely focused.

I lift my hand away. This time, I really spank her, and that shocks her right out of her faux-crybaby act. Her palms suddenly press into the sofa and her whole body tenses. The flat of my hand strikes her again and again, swift, glancing blows that sound delicious and raise the blood to the surface of her skin. She squirms in my lap, for real this time, and I pin her down with my other arm. I don't want any tears from her, but I'm going to make damn sure that I've shown her who's boss.

When she's roasting hot in my arms, I release her back down to the floor again, holding tight to the chain, and look into her flustered face. Her eyes are hazy and she licks her lips and gazes at my mouth.

Perfect.

"Upstairs."

I take her by the chain and the hand and lead her up to my bedroom. She clings to me as I unbelt my trousers and undress, planting kisses on my chest and generally getting tangled with what

I'm doing, but in the most adorable way. I love it when she's clingy. I unhook the chain from her collar and throw it aside, but leave the collar on her. It looks so good against the pink choker.

I hook a finger into her panties and pull them down her legs while she holds onto my shoulders, and then I stand up and take her in arms. My fingers trail across her flesh, marveling at the sight of her burnished by the early evening light. Nothing between us now. No clothes. No time constraints. No need to be always hushed and secretive.

I pull the duvet off the bed and throw it to the floor. Lacey comes with me, wrapping her arms around my waist as if she can't bear not to be touching me.

"Are you in subspace, baby?" I ask, turning to brush her hair off her face. Dazedly, she plants kisses on my wrist.

I put my lips against her ear. "Does it feel nice?" She nods and presses closer to me. "Want me to keep going?" Again, the nod, and this time a whimper of need.

Turning Lacey around, I clasp her tightly by the upper arm and slide my fingers into her wetness. She's so slick and tight, but completely fearless.

"*Min söta flicka*." I murmur, pushing my middle finger slowly into her, watching her eyes close with pleasure. *My sweet girl.*

I consider pushing another finger into her and breaking her now, but we have a bed. We may as well do this properly. Gathering her up in my arms, I lay down with her, covering her with my body and planting kisses on her mouth. My cock is hard and pressed against her stomach. I twist her nipples and her tongue slides against mine. I twist them harder and she arches her back, moaning

softly. Perfect. She's so deep into subspace that anything that hurts her causes her pleasure. Because I'm going to have to hurt her in a minute.

I move my knees between her thighs, opening her up before me. Her pretty little pussy looks so delicate against the shiny thickness of my erection. I drink in the sight of her, poised and waiting for me. As I rub the silky tip of my cock through her folds, she wraps her legs around my hips and arches her back.

"Just a little bit more pain, *käraste*." She barely seems to hear me, and not even a flicker of discomfort registers on her face as I ease into her. I feel a little resistance, and keep going. She's as tight around me as a vice. I groan and slant my mouth across hers, kissing her hard.

Lacey slides her hands up my chest and locks her arms around my neck. I take a breath, quelling the urge to fuck her hard and deep. Gently, slowly still.

"You're being so good for me, *min ängel*." I wish I could speak to her completely in Swedish. English is fine, but I like my own language better. The first time it slipped out was in my office when she started crying. It was the most natural thing in the world, to put my arms around her and call her *käraste*. Darling. Almost as dear as *älskling*, but nowhere near as beloved as she is now.

Lacey pulls me closer and makes a soft, needy sound. I can't tear my eyes away from her as I slowly pull back, and then drive myself deeper into her. I do this over and over, feeling my cock push a little further each time. Lacey's eyes are closed and her head tipped back in surrender.

When I pull out, she makes a whimper of regret, and I see a shiny smear of blood on my cock. I move down the bed and push her knees up to her chest and lick her lovingly, all the way up her pussy to her clit, getting her all over my tongue. I can taste her arousal and a metallic tang. When she's crying out like she's about to come I sit up and impale her with my cock again, replacing my tongue on her clit with my thumb.

I can't hold back this time. I start to fuck her deeply, setting a harder pace, reveling in the long plunge of every thrust and groaning as my peak builds.

"*Där min kära*. Come for me."

Lacey's opened her eyes and they're filled with that supplicative expression she gets when she's close. As she tips over the edge, I clamp my hand around her throat and fuck her hard, letting go in the best way possible. She's going to feel this tomorrow and remember how she was pinned and helpless beneath my body as I rode her hard. I keep rubbing her clit even after she's come, knowing how sensitive she is, and seeing the pleasure-pain flash through her eyes.

"Again," I growl, not feeling one ounce of mercy as I pound her hard. "Do you hear me? I'm not letting up until you come again."

She bucks beneath me, crying out, but her hands are gripping me, not pushing me away. "Yes, daddy," she manages through her whimpers, and then her head tips back with her climax, and I feel my own rock through me.

"*Duktig flicka*," I manage gritted teeth. *Good girl.*

Finally, my thrusts slow and I can take long breaths again. I pull out of her, watching my seed spill from her pussy.

Possessiveness thunders through me. Mine. Mine first, mine now, and mine forever. Lacey's the one I want, and I'm never going to let her go.

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Chapter Fourteen

Lacey

Mr. Blomqvist eases himself off me and pulls me tight against his body. I come slowly swimming out of the sex and subspace haze he put me into, and I feel lulled and comforted by his arms wrapped tightly around me.

Sleepily, we twine our fingers through each other's. The early evening sunshine is slanting through the window, bathing us in golden warmth. His cheek is pressed against the pillow and he's smiling that beatific smile that almost doesn't seem real. His secret smile, just for me.

A moment of perfection.

It almost makes me scared to breathe. I want to box this moment up in my mind, put a red satin ribbon around it and place it carefully on a high shelf where it will be safe forever.

"Was that all right, *käraste*?" Mr. Blomqvist murmurs, kissing my neck.

I smile up at him, weak from his ferocity. Does he know what we have right now? Pure peace. For a moment the world has stopped spinning, and I'm truly living. "Perfect."

I trace the patterns on his chest with my fingertips. I've only had peeks at his body before now, and I finally get a proper look at

the tattoos inked into his muscles. They're Nordic. Animals, swords, runic knots and symbols.

I point to each one and ask what they are. Valravn, he tells me, his fingers tracing the dark ink on his chest. Valravn is the raven of the slain, and the tip of one glossy black wing curves up toward his throat. Fenrir, the monstrous wolf, prowls across his hip bone and belly, and again down his wrist. Each one beautiful and elegantly inked.

I trail my fingers over him, wondering at his beauty. "You must have made a lovely canvas for the tattoo artist."

He plants a kiss on my nose. "Thank you. I like being a canvas. I'm thinking of getting an old Viking saying on the back of my calf. I haven't decided which one yet."

"What sort of saying?"

He turns onto his back and tucks me into his side. "Well, there are lots of proverbs about courage in battle and holding your tongue lest you be thought a fool."

I laugh, tracing the planes of his belly. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"Then there are very grand sayings, and very long and weighty ones. But I thought a simple one would suit me best. Perhaps, *Slow and sure*. *Tómr ok munu*. It's from a thirteenth century saga." His eyes follow the patterns of light and shadow on the ceiling as he tastes the words in his mind. "*Tómr ok munu*. Yes. I like it."

He rolls onto his side and props himself on his elbow. "I am learning patience, *käraste*. Or, I'm trying to. I have wanted you so badly, but there is sweetness in the waiting."

He’s the one who’s been teaching me about patience, every evening on my knees in his office. The pleasure in slowing down. Being present. Really seeing someone.

“Slow and sure,” I whisper. “I like that, too.”

We’re doing this together, I realize, my heart swelling. We’re building something precious, slowly and surely. Tonight it’s grown, and I can feel it burning through me, bright and strong. We hold onto each other, just breathing in and out, like gentle waves on the ocean shore.

Mr. Blomqvist’s phone rings, and he reaches down off the bed to his trousers to check who it is. “The collection manager for the exhibition,” he grumbles. “I should take this.”

He heads out of the room, naked, his phone pressed against his ear. He’s got another large tattoo covering his right shoulder, a wheel of some sort. It almost reminds me of a weathervane, but Viking-looking and encircled with runes. I get a good view of his ass as well, and dear lord, does he have a beautiful one.

I stretch and grin to myself. My lover is downright gorgeous.

Opening my eyes I spy a thick, full-color book on the bedside table and pick it up. It’s a beautifully printed book about Viking ships and artifacts. I start flipping through it, marveling at how well preserved the Viking burials are, with all the carvings on the wooden longships intact.

Toward the back I find a diagram of the circular design on Mr. Blomqvist’s shoulder. It’s called a *vegvísir*, a Viking compass.

If this stave is carried, I read, *one will never lose one’s way in storms or bad weather, even when the path is unknown.*

I trace my fingers over the design. I want to hold him close. I want him to be my stave that I carry through storms, so that I never get lost. I want to be that for him, too, because everyone needs someone to help them through the bad times. I close the book and hold it my chest for a moment, hugging the precious thought to my heart.

I'm daring to hope. I haven't dared in such a long time.

I put the book down, collect my clothes from downstairs, and come back to the bedroom to get dressed. Mr. Blomqvist is out in the greenhouse and doesn't see me. Enough being sentimental. We've had much more than our allotted hour today, and it's time I got going.

A few minutes later, Mr. Blomqvist comes back, his phone in his hand. He's still naked, and looks so good it makes my mouth water. I just want to go to him and spend hours exploring his body. *How does it feel when I lick you here? Do you like that?*

He frowns when he sees that I'm dressed. "You can stay the night. I'd like you to, if you want to."

The whole night. It sounds wonderful, but he'll want to eat dinner soon, and in the morning there'll breakfast to deal with. I'm not sure if I can cope with so many new experiences at once.

"It's nearly nine. I should get going because, you know…" I trail off helplessly, because he knows. "I'm sorry."

My good mood crumbles into misery as I see the hurt flash through his eyes. It's only there for a split second, and then Mr. Blomqvist takes my face in his hands, kissing me tenderly. "It's all right. Slow and sure, *käraste*. Like we said. Come on, I'll drive you home."

He pulls on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and he looks so damn sexy in them that I want to pull them off him again. That's what should be happening right now. We should be going at it for round two, but I can't because I have salmon and fucking rice waiting for me at home. Angry tears blur my eyes. It's not fair. I want to stay, he wants me to stay, but the voice will take this as an opportunity to test the limits of her cage and I daren't let that happen in a strange house, and not in front of him.

"Hey. Are you all right?"

I swipe quickly at the tears in my eyes. "Yes. I'm fine."

Don't press your luck. Get home where it's safe before anything bad happens. You'll see him again on Monday.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that he's disappointed in me. It never occurred to me that he might have been expecting more from tonight than just sex, but now I realize how stupid I am. People who like each other spend the night. People who don't care, leave.

I care. I swear, I care so much.

My throat is tight with unshed tears, and I can't find the words to tell him that even though I want to stay, I can't. His hand is warm around mine as he walks me out to his car, but for once his silence isn't the comfort it usually is.

As we drive around the edge of Bushy Park, he clears his throat and asks me, "Where would you like me to drop you?"

I bite my lip. I don't want him to pull up in front of my house because dad might recognize the BMW, and mum will put that and the Versace bag together and figure out that I just slept with my boss. God, no. Not tonight. Except now I feel bad because Mr. Blomqvist is going to think I'm ashamed of one of the most beautiful

experiences of my life. The tears spring into my eyes again and a sense of panic overwhelms me. I'm ruining everything.

"It's all right, *käraste*," he assures me, pulling over even though we're still a street away from my house. "How about here?"

"Yes," I whisper gratefully. "Thank you."

Mr. Blomqvist kisses me goodbye. I hope he knows how much I care for him. My something special that's just mine and no one else's. When I pull away his blue eyes look worried. Or maybe reproachful.

I get stiffly out of the car and walk toward my house. He doesn't pull back onto the street right away as if he's waiting for me to turn and wave. I can't, because I'm already crying.

I go through the side gate and stand for a few minutes with my back to it, gulping down my tears and taking deep breaths. *Please let him understand that it's because I feel so much for him that this is so hard. Whatever is inside him that makes him smile so gently and beautifully at me, let him be feeling that right now and not the pain that's filling me from head to toe.*

I unpeg some clothes from the line as an excuse for why I didn't use the front door, and go inside. Dad's in the living room when I call out. He would definitely have seen Mr. Blomqvist's car if we'd pulled up together. I stare out onto the empty street, wondering now why it was so important that he didn't.

"Are you all right, Lacey? Where have you been?" dad asks, looking up from the laptop perched on his thighs.

"Fine, thanks. Busy day."

The last thing I feel like doing right now is eating, but I have to. When I open the pantry to get out the rice, I see the packet of

lemon cake there, and my heart sinks. I'm still on the weight-gain plan. I'd forgotten.

Twenty minutes later, I take my dinner and dessert upstairs to my room. I manage some of the salmon and broccoli over the next thirty minutes, but the rice tastes like glue in my mouth and I start to dry retch. Mr. Blomqvist's disappointed expression swims before my face.

Don't eat it. Throw it out, and I'll take some of your pain away. The voice is a muffled whisper within her box, but so seductive.

I glance toward the bathroom door. I'm allowed to eat upstairs because my parents have promised to trust me, and it's been a long time since my weight dipped. If they knew I'd lost a pound, mum would be standing over me right now seeing that I eat every bite. But I didn't tell them, and so she doesn't know.

Throw it all out, and you won't have to think about him all weekend.

I go through to the bathroom and throw the rest of my dinner and all the cake and ice-cream into the toilet. I'm not backsliding, I tell myself as it all flushes away. It's just one weekend, to help me cope with what just happened. I'll be better by Monday and I'll eat so many calories to make up for it.

A cold laugh echoes at the edges of my mind. *Of course you will, my love*. *Of course you will.*

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Chapter Fifteen

Stian

I message Lacey twice over the weekend, but I don't get much out of her in reply. She's fine. She had a good time. I stare at her text messages, not sure that I believe her. Every instinct is screaming at me to go around and see her, and if she were any other sub I would take control of the situation and make certain with my own two eyes that she really is okay. I dare not do that with Lacey. It's best that I leave her in peace so she can settle into whatever routine she has for herself on the weekends. Me banging on the front door will only result in a lot of questions from her parents, and that's not my choice to make for her.

Confiding to her therapist about me was enough to make her lose a pound. She'll tell them about us when she's ready.

On Monday morning I arrive at seven-forty, and I'm intensely relieved to see her sitting at her desk, the same as any other day. There's no one else around so I stop and talk to her. I need to look into her face.

"Good morning, sir," she says with a smile, and her eyes dance with pleasure as she gazes up at me.

All the tension goes out of my body. She's perfectly fine. Maybe a little pale, but that could just be the light. It's overcast this morning. "Good morning, *käraste*," I murmur, and head into my

office, feeling more at ease than I have since I watched her walk away from my car.

At six that evening, she knocks on my door and comes in and sits quietly on the floor as usual. For once I turn and look properly, enjoying the sight of her there. I won't have this for much longer so I want to enjoy it while I can.

I forgo any attempt to cause her pain or put her into subspace in favor of going down on her. She's smiling after she comes, and wraps herself around me.

"You're so gentle tonight. Afraid I might break, daddy?" she teases, rubbing her cheek against the lapel of my jacket. "You already did that."

"Oh, I remember," I say with a smile, kissing her.

The next morning she definitely looks pale, and at our morning meeting I ask her if she's feeling all right.

"I had a rotten night's sleep. Tummy ache," she explains with a grimace, sliding a hand over her lower belly.

"Will you be all right? You can go home if you need to."

Lacey just smiles at me. "No, I'm fine."

She goes back to her desk and works diligently, and I turn my attention to a task that I've been putting off for a week now because I resent it with every fiber of my being. Advertising for a new assistant.

Striking the keys harder than necessary, I type an email to HR with the job specs and ask them to put the ad up on all the usual job sites. Whomever I hire, they'll be perfectly adequate. But they won't be Lacey.

That evening, I don't know why, but again I don't have the heart to cause Lacey any pain. I make her come, and then capture

her hands with mine when she reaches for my belt, stopping her from undoing it.

“I wanted to talk to you, *käraste*. About us seeing each other when you leave.”

The smile fades from her face for a second. When she puts it back it’s not quite so easy and natural. “Oh?”

“We’ve had such a beautiful time together. I’ve advertised for a permanent assistant, and it got me thinking about what’s going to happen to us. Things are going to change.”

Lacey sits back from me and folds her arms. “I hate the thought of leaving. What if I stayed permanently? What if nothing changed?”

I’ve thought about that too, and it could work, for a while. But that would mean Lacey giving up her Masters, and there’s no way in hell am I going to let anything get in the way of her prospects for the future.

“I would love that, but you need to complete your Masters. Your university isn’t far away from here. We could see each other almost as often. I’ve never even taken you out anywhere.”

She laughs shakily. “We don’t need to go out anywhere. I like it here just fine.”

“But you’re leaving, *käraste*,” I remind her softly.

She’s silent for a long time, looking down into her lap. “Can I think about it?”

A cold feeling slips down my spine. I can take being rejected. I like to think I can, anyway, but is that what’s happening here? Am I misreading something? I know I have to go carefully because there are so many more things at play here than just romantic feelings. All

this is so new to her, and anything I ask of her will be disrupting her routine.

Don't push her. Give her some time to think.

Even though it takes every ounce of my self-control not to dig into it further, I let it go, for now. "Of course, *käraste*. We can talk about it later."

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Chapter Sixteen

Lacey

Relief pours through me at his words. I don't have to deal with this now.

The box rattles. *You're disgusting and unlovable. He'll see that soon enough, out there in the cold light of day. What use are you to him when you're no longer his assistant, anyway?*

"One thing. Call me Stian."

"Pardon?" I couldn't hear him over the sound of the voice, and he repeats himself, but I feel more confused than ever. "You don't want me to call you daddy anymore?"

"Of course I do. But you think of me as Mr. Blomqvist, don't you? I want you to start thinking of me as Stian, not your boss."

I force a smile and nod, but the sick, fearful sensation in my stomach intensifies. When he's my boss I know my place. I have things to do, and I know how to talk to him. If he's just a man who expects me to be a normal woman, then I'm going to disappoint him so goddamn fast.

In the Tube on the way home, I do what my therapist would want me to do, and I think critically about my emotions. What I'm really afraid of is the unknown. Of change. Of failing because I'm not prepared for anything that isn't as ordered and restricted as the way Mr. Blomqvist treats his bonsai.

How *Stian* treats his bonsai.

Stian. His name feels like longing, an intimate piece of him that I hold in my heart. I imagine being someone who could call him that.

Stian and I really liked that movie.

Stian's picking me up soon and we're going out.

Things are going really well with Stian.

I picture the breezy, happy Lacey who says such things, and she's like a fairytale princess. I imagine she's me, and I'm walking hand in hand with Stian, out in the open. Sitting with him in a bar and flirting with him over my wine glass. Laying on a blanket in the park with him having a picnic. Sharing all the small and wonderful things we both love. Just the two of us.

Just the two of you? You think you can have that? You think you DESERVE THAT?

She screams so loudly out of nowhere that I jump as if the train has lurched, and grab a handrail. My heart pounds wildly. It's as if the clock strikes midnight, and everything blasts apart and I see the truth. That's not what would happen if Stian and I were a couple. It could never be just the two of us, because *she* would be there. I'd be in a cubicle in the bar's bathrooms, having a panic attack because a glass of wine has three hundred calories. In the park, I'd have my hands over my ears while I sob silently because I can't bear the sight of anyone seeing me eat all this delicious food spread out on the rug before me.

It's not a fairytale. It's a nightmare.

I tremble like a leaf as I grip the handrail. I've made a huge mistake by opening the door and peeking through to a future that will

never be mine. The nasty voice is louder than ever within her box, rattling the lid and cackling with high-pitched laughter.

You're mine. How could you think you'd ever be free?

I close my eyes and concentrate on my breathing. It's all going to be fine. You have your routine back now, and you're going to get through this, just like you have every time before. She's not you.

I am you, you stupid little bitch. Forever and ever and ever, and there's nothing you can do about it.

On Wednesday morning Doctor Loftin looks up from the scale and beams at me. "You've gained almost the whole pound back. Well done, Lacey."

I get off the scale and concentrate on putting my shoes on, not looking at her. We go through to the armchairs we sit and talk in. While the results with the scales may have deflected the worst of what Doctor Loftin can do to me, this part is going to be almost as challenging.

"How have you been this week?"

There's no point in lying. I look like shit. "I haven't been sleeping. The cake and ice-cream were stressful, and so are men, you know?" I give her a tired half-smile. Inviting her to share in that sisterhood thing I've heard about. *Men, am I right?*

She doesn't play along.

"Has Mr. Blomqvist been having a negative impact on your recovery?"

Oh, you know. He's just standing on the other side of a door I can never go through, and realizing that was one of the worst

moments of my life.

I'm so hungry that this doesn't even make me sad anymore. "It's challenging dealing with these new feelings, but I'm grateful for this opportunity for growth."

I sound like I'm reading from my list of affirmations, but Doctor Lofton doesn't seem to notice. She just nods and waits for me to go on.

"He's asked me to call him Stian. I'm trying to get used to that." *The weight of what I'm missing out on is crushing the life out of me. She's shredding my heart with her black fingernails. Help me, please.*

Doctor Loftin peers at me, her head on one side. "Lacey, I'm going to need you to go into a little more detail."

"Look, like I've been saying, it's difficult for me to talk about this stuff when it's so personal. I'm not ready to go into it with you yet."

I get away with this because while I seem off, the scales have told Doctor Loftin that there's no urgent cause for worry. We finish the appointment by talking about other things. She wants me to continue the weight gain diet for another week, and I agree without argument.

An hour later, in the bathroom at the office, I remove the two one-pound strap weights that I've Velcroed just above my knees and stash them in the bottom of my bag.

I'm fucking up so bad. I know I'm falling victim to that voice again, but the allure of what she's doing for me is too powerful. If I eat, then I feel, and I'm so frightened of what might crash over me.

I'll be ready to eat and deal with it all soon. Maybe tomorrow. At lunchtime, I eat one piece of broccoli, bag up the rest, and throw it into the trash on another floor.

That night I tell Stian that I have a dentist appointment and leave the museum at five-thirty.

The next I day I email him at three when he's in a meeting, saying I'm not feeling well, and I leave. I've lost count of how many lies I've told this week.

Then it's Friday, my final day, and it's all over. I stand in his office instead of kneeling on the floor, and he comes out from behind his desk, his hands pushed into his pockets and arms so tense that I'm certain they're balled into fists.

I can sense him wanting to offer to take me out to dinner or for a drink, or ask if I've thought about seeing him outside of work, but those are invitations for other girls. I don't know what to say, and I'm so deadened by hunger that I don't have the energy to think of anything.

In the end, we fall into well-worn phrases that sound strange in our mouths.

"You've been an amazing help. I couldn't have done any of this without you."

"Thank you for this opportunity. It's been a great summer."

I was happy working here. Within these four walls, he allowed me to be free for one whole hour every day. I'm going to miss him so much.

I turn and hurry toward the elevator, unable to bear it any longer.

"Lacey, wait."

I pretend not to hear him and press the *close doors* button. Down in the entrance hall, I run out of the building and make a sharp right because he'll be expecting me to cross the square to the Tube station. I head toward Goodge Street Tube instead.

At the top of the stairs, I turn and glance behind me, expecting to see six-feet-something of angry Viking bearing down on me, ready to blast me for running off while he was talking to me. Demanding to know what's wrong and why I'm taking another route home. Ready to grab hold of me, kiss me fiercely, make me sorry for all the lies I've told and stupid things I've done.

But Stian's not there.

Of course he's not. He was glad to get rid of me.

"Shut up," I say to the voice, but I'm talking to myself.

"Look what happens when you try to ignore me," I say out loud. "You make stupid fucking mistakes. This whole summer has been a mistake. Mistake. MISTAKE."

A few people turn and look at me, the woman shouting at no one.

I flee down the stairs. When I get out of the train at my stop twenty minutes later, I see that Stian has called me three times, and I switch off my phone. I walk home, trying to feel strong. Trying to make a new plan for myself that means I won't have to admit to anyone how badly I've been screwing up. No one knows yet, and if I'm careful I can keep it that way. Stian's gone from my life and so is the museum work that kept me busy. I can switch straight to study mode and start prepping for the new semester. There'll be several issues of the antiquities and archaeological journals for me to catch up on, plus the online news. My thesis topic and research questions

could use a going over. I can spend the weekend in the university library studying.

“How was your last day, sweetheart?” mum asks me as I head for the stairs. She’s folding a pile of laundry on the sofa.

I smile as best I can. “It was really great. I’ll miss the work, but it was such a good way to spend the summer.”

Dad comes into the room and beams at me. “I knew you’d be just the assistant Stian needed. I checked in with him about you a few times, and he only had the best things to say.” He laughs. “Getting three words out of that man is remarkable, but he didn’t seem to want to shut up about you.”

I swallow hard on the sob that’s threatening to rise up. My smile is painfully stretched on my face. “I’m going to take a shower. It’s really hot out there.”

I see my sneakers the moment I step into my room and change my mind. What I need is a good run, and I get changed and head out. Bushy Park is just a block away, and there are miles and miles of paths that skirt ponds and copses of trees where I can get lost.

I’m a good runner. I’ve got a long, even gait and I enjoy the tight feeling in my lungs as I push against my cardio limits. I’m out of practice, so I reach that limit quickly, but I manage to keep it up as the solemn red brick walls and white statues of Hampton Court Palace rise before me, and then I turn around and run back again.

A herd of deer lift their elegant heads to watch me as I sprint by on a gravel path. The tight feeling in my chest is replaced by a sharp pain that gets more and more pronounced. I wonder if I should stop.

Ignore it. Pain is just an excuse to be lazy.

Mum gives me a look when I come back an hour later, but she doesn't comment.

Busy, busy, busy. That's how I need to stay. I get up at my usual early hour on Saturday morning and head into the university library. Stian has left me voicemails but I delete them without listening to them. I lose myself in reading and drawing mind-maps for my thesis research plan. At lunchtime, I lock myself in the disabled toilets and do star jumps for forty-five minutes.

When I get home from the city, I head straight for my workout gear and put it on. The pain in my chest comes back halfway through my run, and it's worse this time. I don't stop until black spots dance in front of my eyes, and I have to bend at the waist to prevent myself from fainting. My blood pressure must be dropping because of the lack of food.

In my mind, I hear a pleased snicker.

It's lazy to be standing still where there are so many joggers and walkers passing by me in the park. They must think I'm pathetic, so I start running again.

When I get home, mum intercepts me at the back door. The expression on her face is grim. "Is there any reason you've started running again?"

I shrug. "I wasn't very active this summer because I was at the museum so much. I've been feeling cooped up." I push past her into the kitchen for a glass of water, and she follows me.

"But you look pale and drawn, sweetheart."

I slam the fridge shut. "Mum! That's so rude of you to comment on my appearance. I'm just trying to adjust back to my

normal routine again. Can't you leave me alone?"

I storm upstairs before she can harp on about it. I'm *allowed* to exercise if I want to. Just not to excess.

On Sunday I go to the library again and work all day. It's getting difficult to concentrate, but I don't feel hungry anymore, so there's that.

While I'm changing into my running gear that evening, I see a pair of jeans tucked up high on a shelf of my wardrobe. Nobody knows I kept them. I bought them when they were two sizes too small for me and made it my goal to fit into them. When I reached my lowest weight I managed to struggle into them, though I was so weak I could barely find the strength to do the zipper up.

They won't fit anymore. I should have thrown them out a long time ago, but I guess I kept them as a grim souvenir.

I pull them down, knowing I'm doing the wrong thing but unable to stop myself. All the hairs are standing up on the back of my neck, and my heart is thumping painfully in my chest.

Do it. Do it. Do it. Put them on. See how fat you've become.

I heave the jeans up my legs. The denim is skinny cut and the pockets pull awkwardly over my thighs. I manage to get the waistband up over my hips, but my stomach protrudes over the fly, which I can only just close.

I stare into the mirror in horror at the rolls of fat over the waistband. I'm fat. I'm fat and disgusting.

The lid flies from the box, and out she comes in frenzy of beating black wings, shrieking in triumph. *Look at yourself. Look what you've become without me, you SHAMEFUL LAZY FAT COW.*

I haul the jeans off and reach for my sneakers and shorts and pull them on. I need to run. Run and run until I leave this terrible sight far behind me.

The sharp pain blazes through my chest almost immediately, but I ignore it. I need to run through the pain. Run through the hurt. Get back to the place where everything's numb.

I need to find my way home again. She's guiding me. She's the only one who can take the hurt away.

The pain in my chest gets fiercer, and I run faster. I'm not there yet. Just a little bit further. My breath is labored and I can barely see the path ahead. The pain makes my whole body spasm and I stumble over my own feet. Darkness opens before me, as welcoming as a lover, and I fall gratefully into her bony arms.

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Chapter Seventeen

Stian

The whole weekend passes and Lacey doesn't answer my calls or text me back. My anger and frustration grows until I'm prowling my house like a caged wolf. I keep circling back to the same thought over and over again.

This is fucking bullshit.

I grip the door jamb between the kitchen and living room, breathing hard. People's feelings change toward each other. People are let down by sex and new experiences. Women decide they don't like a man as much as they thought they did. Office affairs can fizzle out as soon as one of the pair quits. I know all that, but I don't believe that's what's happened between Lacey and me. We shared something intense and beautiful when we went to bed together, it brought us closer for a moment, and then we went careening off in opposite directions.

I wanted her to stay, but she couldn't, and something broke inside of her.

Even though it killed me not to push her as she pretended to be sick or busy so she could miss our private time together those last few days, I let it go. I gave her space all week, not wanting to interfere as she struggled to right herself. Hoping that she and her therapist would figure it out. That she'd get down before me on her

knees, press her cheek against my thigh and whisper that she'd missed me so much.

Because I miss her so fucking much. Where did my little girl go?

It's Sunday night and I'm done giving her space. I grab my keys and head to the garage. Her anorexia tells her things that aren't true, and I have a terrible feeling she's started listening to it again.

The nasty voice. She tells me that you'll like me better if I'm smaller.

Someone could be pouring poison into her ear, and it's someone I can't even get at because she lives inside Lacey's head. As I drive, I try and rein in my fury. I'm not angry with Lacey, but if I burst in shouting she's going to think I am. Mostly I'm furious with myself for not going to her house on Friday night after she gave me the slip on the way to the Tube station. She's been alone with her thoughts for two days, suffering, and I might have done something about it. Petrou likes me. He can't be too angry with me that I'm seeing his daughter, can he?

I accelerate toward the main road. I guess I'm about to find out.

There's a gravel path next to the road that skirts Bushy Park, and I see a runner in a gray-blue jogging outfit. Something about the way her ponytail swings looks familiar. I keep watching, certain that I recognize her. She bends over her knees as if she's dizzy, then puts one desperate hand to her chest and crumples to the ground.

"*Jävlar!*" I pull up onto the grass verge and get out of my car. "*Lacey.*"

Several people are crowding around her, some of them reaching for their phones to call an ambulance. I think I hear someone say, “Isn’t that Chris Petrou’s daughter? Quick, call him.”

I push past them all and fall to my knees beside Lacey. I turn her over, and her eyes are closed and her face is a deathly white. “Lacey, oh *jävla Kristus*.”

Don’t be dead. Please, God, don’t let her be dead. I cradle her in my arms, searching for any sign of life, and I’m shocked by the change in her. There are dark circles under her eyes and I can see the orbits of her eye sockets through her skin. When did she lose all this weight? How did I not see this was happening?

I hear ambulance sirens, and then there are hands on me. They’re trying to take Lacey away from me. People dressed in dark green and fluorescent yellow jumpsuits speak urgently to me, and I finally realize they’re paramedics. I get shakily to my feet as they get to work on her. A moment later they’re strapping her onto a gurney and loading her into the ambulance.

I go to follow them, but one of the paramedics stops me. “Are you her father?”

Thin and weak as she is, Lacey looks fifteen, not twenty-five. “Yes.” Whatever it takes to get me into that ambulance. I don’t care.

A voice speaks behind me. “I’m her father.”

I turn and see Petrou behind me, his face blank with shock as he looks at his daughter unresponsive on the gurney with an oxygen mask over her face. He pushes past me into the ambulance, and the doors slam closed behind him.

I run back to my car and tailgate the ambulance to hospital, running every red light and hearing the honking of angry drivers. I

don’t fucking care. I’m not letting that vehicle out of my sight. I can’t let Lacey out of my sight. Look what happened to her in just two days without me.

At the hospital, the ambulance disappears into a bay and I pull into what I think might be a parking space and run into the ER. Lacey’s not there, and neither is Petrou. I see a set of double doors and I start toward them, but a security guard steps toward me, his thumbs tucked into his belt.

I swear under my breath, wondering what to do next. I speak to the triage nurse, but because I’m not bleeding or passing out, she snaps at me to get out of the way. I try calling Petrou, but there’s no answer. I pace up and down inside the ER waiting room, clutching my phone, dialing Petrou’s number every other minute.

Where’s Lacey? What’s happening? What are they doing to her?

A woman comes hurrying into the waiting room from the street, her eyes wild with fright and worry. I recognize her dark hair and the shape of her face even though I’ve never met her. It’s Lacey’s mother. Petrou himself comes through the doors that were barred to me, and the woman cries out and hurries into his arms.

I stride over, and Petrou sees me over his wife’s shoulder as he embraces her. He looks as terrible as I feel.

“What’s happened to Lacey?” I demand, at the same time as Mrs. Petrou.

“They think she had a heart attack,” Petrou tells his wife, and she starts to sob. “The doctors are examining her now. She was unconscious the whole way here.” He glances at me. “Thank you for

coming along, Stian. I guess they wouldn't have let you in the ambulance if you said you were her boss."

This isn't the time or the place, but I haven't got a choice if I want to get nearer to Lacey.

"She's my girlfriend," I say hoarsely. "We've been seeing each other for the last six weeks."

Petrou and his wife both turn to me in shock. An accusing expression slides across Mrs. Petrou's face. I think she must have suspected something was going on between us, and now Lacey's been taken to hospital. She thinks it's my fault.

I don't blame her, because I think it's my fault, too.

A heart attack. She's only twenty-five. She's too young to die. It should be me in there. Why isn't it me?

A man in scrubs comes through the doors, looking for the Petrous, and Mrs. Petrou grabs her husband's arm. "Chris, the doctor."

I follow them, terrified of that door closing and being stuck on the other side. Mrs. Petrou starts to flat out tell me to leave them alone, but Petrou hushes her and then clamps a hand on my shoulder, leading me through with him.

I take back every unworthy, critical thing I ever thought about Petrou. I take it all back.

Mr. and Mrs. Petrou sit with the doctor in a waiting room, and I stand against the wall. The doctor flicks me a curious look before turning to the Petrous. He talks calmly, but the words strike me like daggers. *Mitral valve prolapse*. *Heart surgery required*.

Mrs. Petrou asks a question and I hear, *complications of damage to the heart common in anorexics*.

I bury my face in my hands, the blood roaring in my ears. She's only twenty-five and she's trying so hard. She doesn't deserve this.

The doctor leaves the room. I can hear someone pacing up and down, but I can't look up.

A short while later the doctor comes back, saying that Lacey is awake if we want to see her. I follow the Petrous down the hall and into a private room. Lacey is in a hospital gown and propped up against the pillows. She's awake, but her face is ashen. There's a drip with a needle going into the back of her hand, and it looks frail and small beneath the medical tape.

Ruefully, like a child who's found herself in trouble yet again, Lacey says hello to her parents. Then she looks past them and sees me.

"Stian," she says in a cracked voice, and her eyes filled with tears. I step forward and reach for her—but Mrs. Petrou moves in front of me and angrily addresses her husband.

"Get him out. I don't want that man anywhere near her."

Over her shoulder, Lacey and I look at each other. Neither of us are surprised by her reaction, but I have to ball my fists to control my temper. That's my girl in the bed, and I have to go to her.

"Let's not cause a scene, Faye. For Lacey's sake," Petrou says in a placating voice.

"It's his fault she's even in here!"

"I want him to stay." Lacey speaks quietly, but it's enough to silence both her parents. I step around Mrs. Petrou and go to Lacey.

Lacey's mother glares at me, her face flushing red. "We're not going through what we went through last year all over again. You're

ill, and that man has made you worse. I'll call security. I'll have him thrown out!"

"Mum, I'll have *you* thrown out if you don't do as I say. This is my hospital room."

My mouth twitches as I look at Lacey. Even weak and pale as hell, she still has loads of fight in her. I sit down on the chair next to her bed and take her hand, and she grips mine back, hard.

Good girl. We're going to get through this together.

Petrou puts his arm around his wife and draws her to the side of the room, where they talk in whispers, hers angry and his soothing.

"You get your spirit from your mother, I see," I say softly, and Lacey gives me a crooked smile.

The doctor comes back and tells her what he told us. Watching her face as she listens to him speak, I find it easier to take in what he's saying. After *complications of damage to the heart common in anorexics* I hear what I didn't hear before.

No increased risk of heart failure. Positive prognosis and full recovery.

I groan and sink over Lacey's hand, relief flooding through me.

"As I told your family earlier," the doctor says, "mitral valve prolapse occurs when the valve doesn't close tightly. The pain and dizziness it causes can be very frightening, but it's not a life-threatening condition. We performed a scan, and we're going to take you into surgery as soon as possible. It shouldn't be longer than a few hours."

I sit up breathlessly. *Tack gode gud.*

“He’s only happy because he feels so guilty,” Mrs. Petrou says after the doctor has gone. I don’t give a damn. Lacey’s the only one who matters to me in this room, and she’s gripping my hand back as tightly as I’m holding hers.

“You can go now,” Mrs. Petrou says icily. “Now that you know you haven’t killed her.”

“Faye,” Petrou says sharply.

Even though I don’t want to, I should give the three of them some privacy. “I’ll go outside for a little while, *käraste*, but I won’t be far away, I promise. I’ll see you after the surgery.” I kiss Lacey’s forehead and stand up.

But Lacey doesn’t let me go. She glances at her parents. “I want to talk to Stian. Alone.”

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Chapter Eighteen

Lacey

Mum doesn't want to go, but I appeal silently to dad, and he finally persuades her out of the room. They haven't gone far, though. I can hear them talking just outside the door, which they haven't closed all the way.

I look at Stian, and pain and worry are etched all over his handsome face.

He squeezes my hand and sits down again. "Were you in a lot of pain when it happened? I saw you collapse, and I've never been so scared in my life."

I reach out and touch Stian's cheek, which is covered in blond stubble. It looks as if he hasn't shaved all weekend. I wasn't in pain. I was in the blessed oblivion of that dark void. I can't tell Stian or my parents that, because they're already so afraid for me.

"You saw me?"

He nods, shifting his chair closer. "I was on my way to see you. I needed to see you so badly."

My insides ache with the desire to be in his arms, and tears fall down my face. "I told you so many lies this week. I'm so, so sorry."

"It doesn't matter. I know it's not your fault."

I shake my head, because as much as I'm grateful for his forgiveness, it doesn't work that way. "It does matter. I'm not a child. I did this to myself."

"I'm the one who pushed you too hard."

"You didn't, Stian. You were so patient with me. No, you have to listen to me while I'm still myself." It's the shock of being here, I suppose. She's quiet for the moment.

I look at our joined hands, knowing that I have to confess something painful. "There are two sides to me, Stian. One that wants to get better, and one that doesn't. That other half of me hates you so much. She hates anything that I love more than her. When I hear the things she says about you, I'm so ashamed because you've only been kind and good to me."

Stian shakes his head. "It's not you. It's your disease. You're going to get better, and you're going to be my girlfriend. I won't let her take you from me."

"It's too late. I don't know how to be anyone's girlfriend, and you deserve someone who's got their life together."

He keeps shaking his head and grips my hand tighter. "I'm not giving up on you."

"You say that, but you will! You think I can go on dates with you? Go to a restaurant? Sit on the sofa with a movie and eat popcorn and ice cream? I can't do *any* of that. You have no idea how much having a social life revolves around food, and all of that is shut off from me. You don't know. *I* know."

Stian leans back and glares around him, as if he's searching for the patience to deal with what I'm saying. "Lacey, that's not—"

“I knew it wasn’t going to work when you drove me home. It’s not your fault. The part of me that’s good knows you only wanted us to be happy.”

“Stop saying that,” he says fiercely. “All of you is good. All of you, no matter what she says.”

Quietly, lazily, she laughs. I was wrong. She’s not silent because I’m in shock. She’s settled back and is enjoying the show because she knows she’s won.

I pull my hand out of his grasp. “Thank you for coming. But I’d like you to go now.”

“I want to talk to Doctor Loftin. There must be something we can do together to—”

“Stian, you have to go.” Tears leak from my eyes, and I start to shake. “I swore that I’d never end up back here. I’m such a fucking disappointment.”

“Don’t say that. You’re not. It’s just a set-back.”

I know all the platitudes. Recovery isn’t linear. Fail up. But this time I’ve hit a brick wall, and he’s on the other side.

Mum has come in, and she’s standing on the other side of the bed, her expression reproachful. She thinks all of this is Stian’s fault because I was getting better before I started working for him. It’s not true, though. I wasn’t getting better. I was only existing.

“Please, just go away and leave me alone.”

Stian looks up and notices mum, too, and the specter of her motherly disapproval finally convinces him, and he reluctantly gets to his feet. Mum goes to him and firmly shepherds him away from her daughter and out of the room.

There's nothing to do after that but lie there and wait. I don't have to eat anything because I'll be going into surgery, so she stays quiet. I doze for a while, and then I'm woken up by dad. There are several people in the room, nurses I think, and they're adjusting my bed and rehanging the drip.

"Time for surgery, sweetheart," dad tells me, leaning over the bed to stroke my hair. "You're going to be just fine."

I grip his arm. "Please call Stian after, and let him know I'm okay?"

He nods, his mouth a thin, tense line. "Of course. Your mum and I will be right here when you get out."

The nurses wheel me out, and I watch the neon strip lights pass by overhead. I'm not like some anorexics. I don't deny I'm sick, and I know the steps I have to take to get better. I can feel my world shrinking down to what it was before I met Stian. A teacup-sized existence. A small world. A little life. The water can't get too deep, otherwise my head will go under.

In the operating room, the anesthetist attaches something to the needle in the back of my hand and asks me to count backward from ten. I reach eight when the drug washes over me, and I slip into unconsciousness.

A moment later, or what feels like a moment later, I hear mum saying my name. Everything's jumbled and foggy, but she and dad tell me that the surgery went well, and not to worry if I feel strange because I'm on strong painkillers.

I fall back into something far denser than sleep.

I half-wake sometime later in the darkness with the sensation that someone is standing over me. I feel a warm kiss against my

forehead, and hear a few soft, deep words in a strange language. Or maybe I just dream it.

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Chapter Nineteen

Stian

The Laxos exhibition opens four days after Lacey's surgery. There's a drinks reception at the museum on opening night. I don't want to go, but I force myself to attend. No one at the museum knows about Lacey and me. I thought that would make it easier, but it's draining, pretending that everything's normal when my strung-out heart is with her.

The exhibition space is packed when I go downstairs. The guests are admiring all the artifacts and reading the descriptions that Lacey wrote. I don't want to spend too long with any one person, so I make up a lot of things I have to check on and then after forty minutes I slip away.

I get home to a house that feels even emptier than usual and consider calling Petrou. I haven't heard from him since he called to say that Lacey came out of the surgery just fine. I already knew she had because I saw her myself and talked to the surgeon before I left the hospital. He'd seen me with the Petrous and assumed that I had the right to ask.

Everywhere I've gone since, I've carried the haunting vision of Lacey in that hospital bed, unconscious from the anesthesia, needles in her hand and wires connected to her body. Deathly pale and weak, with an unfathomable darkness in her head. She should

be a happy and healthy woman with worries no greater than getting her best marks in her Masters course. Instead, she's facing weeks, maybe months, of pain and struggle. More therapy, more weigh-ins, more darkness.

I meant what I said to her in the hospital. I'm not giving up on her, but right now I don't know what to do that won't screw things up for her even more.

My phone rings suddenly. It's in my hand, and I answer it without looking at the screen. "Blomqvist."

"Well, hello to you, too. Fancy a pint?"

It takes a moment for me to place the voice. "Adam. Hi. Sorry, not right now. I'm busy with…"

"Stian? You sound like shit. Is everything all right?"

I rub my eyes. "Not really, no."

"Meet me at the pub in half an hour."

I suppose I could use a drink. "All right."

The evening is the first chilly one of the new season, overcast and gray, though the leaves on the trees are still green. We sit out the back away from the twenty or so people watching a sports game in the bar. Adam gets us pints and then sits down across from me, his face creased with worry.

"What's happened?"

I don't even know where to start. How do you tell someone you nearly killed a girl? "My assistant, Lacey. We got involved."

To his credit, Adam doesn't crow or say, *I knew something was going on*. He just nods and waits for me to continue.

"She's a recovering anorexic. We got involved very slowly, but very intensely. I thought we were both managing. The work we had

to do, but also…" I make a vague gesture, not wanting to go into all the details about the nature of our relationship. "Us. She was seeing her therapist, and she was even able to eat lunch in the same room as me. That's one thing she's extremely sensitive about. She can't stand people seeing her eat."

I know I'm rambling. I'm punch-drunk, unable to figure out where it all went wrong.

"I thought we were doing so well, and that I was being so patient with her. She wasn't experienced with men at all, because of the anorexia."

I remember her sitting next to me on the sofa, asking for time to think. I should have known then there was something fatally wrong. I didn't see how terrified she was about bringing what we had into the real world until it was too late.

I take a deep breath. "We slept together, and she wound up in hospital a week later, underweight and with heart problems."

"Jesus," Adam says quietly.

I scrub my hands over my face, wishing I could obliterate all the things I did wrong. "I thought she was going to die."

"She's all right, though?" he asks sharply.

"I don't know. It wasn't a heart attack, just a problem with a valve that's not life-threatening. But if she doesn't start eating again, she'll get weaker and weaker. That's what carries anorexics off. Heart failure, because the muscle wastes away as they starve."

Just thinking about it makes my chest feels tight. What we did together is actually killing her. For the first time in my impatient, angry life, I think I may have caused someone real harm, and I'm so fucking scared.

“Have you spoken to her?”

“She wants me to leave her alone.”

“And are you going to?”

I stare at my untouched pint. “I don’t know how to stop, but I’m terrified that if I don’t, I’ll kill her.” I look up at Adam bleakly. “I let her down. I ruined everything, and I have no idea how to fix this, or even if I can.”

We talk for another twenty minutes. Adam doesn’t have any idea what I should do, of course, and neither do I.

I call Petrou twice a day over the next few days, and he’s kind enough to take my calls. Occasionally I can hear his wife in the background, asking if he’s talking to *that man* again.

He keeps me updated with Lacey’s progress. She recovers from surgery, and then voluntarily admits herself back onto the anorexia ward. I was expecting this, and I’m glad she went willingly, but my heart still hurts for her, remembering what she said about it.

It’s the worst place in the world. You have no idea what it feels like. Not because of what they do to you, though that’s bad enough. Because of the shame you feel in your heart.

“Does the ward allow visitors?”

There’s a pause.

“Stian, best leave her be,” he says gently. “I know you want to help, but—”

There’s a faint scuffling sound, and then a shrill female voice comes on the line. “I forbid you to go anywhere near her! Do you hear me? Lacey was doing just fine until you got your disgusting hands on her. You should know better at your age not to prey on troubled young women.”

“Lacey’s not—”

The line goes dead. I stare at my phone, wondering if that’s what I did. Prey on someone who was struggling, just because I’m obsessed with control. Because I need the drama of a challenge.

I call the ward, and they do allow visitors. When I’m asked who I’m calling about, I tell them I’ll ring them back.

I need to think.

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Chapter Twenty

Lacey

I wake to the sight of worn institution-gray paint and feel the scratchy, over-washed pillowcase beneath my cheek. My stomach clenches painfully, as it has every morning since I arrived at the Dawnstead Anorexia Inpatient Ward. From shame. From the knowledge that it will soon be crammed full of food again, and then again and again.

She is furious. She screams in frustration that I allowed myself to be committed a second time. She tells me I'm stupid and disgusting. Why am I even bothering to live if I'll be greedy and unlovable? I'm a waste of fat, ugly space.

She's giving me all her greatest hits.

My alarm rings and I swing my legs out of bed and switch it off. My room's tiny, but at least I have space to myself. All the furniture and floors bear marks of the patients who came before me. I try not to think about where they are now. If they got better. If they came back again. If they died.

Like all the other women on the ward—and it's just women and teenage girls, though there was a nineteen-year-old boy last time—I dress in loose, drab clothing. None of us want to draw attention to our bodies.

Breakfast is muesli and milk, and we eat it together at one large table without speaking. I look around at my fellow patients. Janice will sit down only at mealtimes, but for the rest of the day she stands in order to burn more calories. Cora is hunched over her food, her corn silk blonde hair hanging around her face. She cries quietly in a corner most afternoons. Taylor hits her bowl with her spoon in a nerve-shattering rhythm. She won't eat until the nurses threaten to take away her phone for a week. She's angry all the time, ranting that the doctors are picking on her, that there's nothing wrong with her, that the whole world is against her. I like her the least because she sounds so much like the other me. I wonder if Taylor is what happens when you allow your anorexic half to assume your whole identity.

Taylor is the only one here with any pride! the other me shrieks. *She knows there's nothing wrong with her. The rest of you have been brainwashed. Weak! Pathetic!*

To distract myself, I glance around and see that Cora has got some half-chewed muesli stuck to her lip, and my stomach churns.

See how disgusting she is? *Do you think you look any better?*

I quickly lower my eyes to my bowl. It's best to try and block out the fact that anyone else is here. I know the other girls are doing that, too, which makes our mealtimes eerie and robotic. I eat slowly, the voice ranting the entire time.

After breakfast, we have group therapy, and we all shuffle into the therapy room and sit on the sofas. We have private sessions with a psychiatrist, but these group sessions are our opportunity to workshop each other's disordered thinking. We're meant to

challenge each other on our assumptions in a non-judgmental way, and complete mindfulness exercises and various worksheets.

Everything's the same as the last time I was here, which makes it hard to believe that it's going to make any difference.

After lunch, one of the nurses calls out to me. "Lacey. Doctor Loftin is here. You can have your session in the group therapy room. It's free for the next hour."

I'd forgotten that Doctor Loftin wanted to keep seeing me while I was here. I go through to the therapy room and see her waiting for me in an armchair, cool and collected as always behind her glasses.

I glance around for the scales. "Where do I weigh in?"

She motions me over to the sofa. "We don't need to do that. I met with your counselor earlier, and she updated me on your progress."

I sit down, my hands tucked between my knees, remembering my deception with the weights. When I first started seeing her, she would make me strip down to my underwear before I stepped onto the scales, but over time, she started treating me with a little more humanity. A little more trust. And I betrayed that trust.

"How's your recovery been since the surgery?"

"I don't know. Fine, I guess." I feel tired and wrung out, but that could be because of a lot of things. There are four small sets of stitches on my chest. They hurt a little, but I should heal quickly because it was keyhole surgery. The surgeon told me they didn't have to replace my valve, only repair it. I'm supposed to rest, eat healthily, and not perform any strenuous exercise. Which is of course

precisely what the people here expect from me too, so yay for me, I guess.

"Your counselor here says you've done well your first week."

Eaten my meals, she means. Not hurled food at a nurse or thrown up in a corner or attacked another patient. I've seen all these things happen.

"A regular little duck to water," I mutter. I see nothing to be proud of in the fact that the routine of this ghastly place is so familiar to me. I fold my arms and stare up at the tiny window overhead. Barely any of the sky is visible from this angle.

Doctor Loftin waits for me to expand on my week. I know from experience that if I barricade myself in a sulk, she'll come up with some exercise for us to do together. I search around for something to say. "Everything's the same, but also it's not. As last time, I mean. This place is familiar, but what's going on inside me isn't."

"How does it feel different?"

I shrug, picking at a loose thread on my sleeve. "I guess I'm angrier."

"What are you angry about?"

I shoot her a poisonous look. "You lied to me. You said I could have a normal life, but the truth is there's nothing normal about me and there never will be."

"Is that what your anorexic voice has been telling you?"

I shake my head. "She's screaming at me again, and I can feel her all around me, but this is something I figured out for myself before she came back with a vengeance. I think it's *why* she came back."

"What do you mean, Lacey?"

“I mean,” I say, over-enunciating every word as if she’s stupid, “that I’m a moron for thinking that I could ever be happy. When I realized that everything I wanted was out of my reach, she got her nasty little claws into me again and I wasn’t strong enough to resist.” Worse, I didn’t want to.

“What else do you feel, apart from angry?”

“Isn’t that enough?” I snap. Doctor Loftin looks coolly back at me. I don’t know why I’m performing for her. She’s seen me in a bitchy mood before and she’s not going to be shocked or argue with me. “Sad, I guess.”

“What are you sad about?”

Just get through it and get out of here. The sooner I jump through their hoops, the sooner I can get a little privacy.

“I lie awake at night or stand in the shower trying to find a name for the piece of me that’s suddenly gone. It doesn’t feel like I’ve relapsed. It feels worse.”

Doctor Loftin nods. “You’re capable of great self-reflection, but there will be times when your self-reflection shows you painful things. You haven’t been through one of those times yet, but I think you are now.”

“Are you saying that if I was stupider, I’d still be living in blissful ignorance?”

Doctor Loftin gives me a thin smile. “The feeling you described sounds like grief.”

“But no one’s died.”

“You can experience grief for any number of reasons, not only after a death. Loss of a career. Status. A role you once played.”

What about a life you’ll never live?

I think of that other Lacey, holding Stian's hand and speaking of things which are theirs. I wonder if she's out there in some other universe, tracing the patterns of his tattoos with her fingers. Sleeping in his bed. Being held by him.

I look back up at the window as tears slip down my face. "He wanted me to be his girlfriend."

We sit in silence together for a few minutes, and then Doctor Loftin describes the five stages of grief to me and what I can expect in the weeks ahead. She suggests I keep a diary of my feelings, and I give a non-committal answer. I know what my feelings are going to be. I'll feel like crap.

Two days later, one of the nurses finds me again after lunch. "Lacey, you have a visitor. You can go through to the meeting room."

I frown. My parents came yesterday and Doctor Loftin isn't due until tomorrow. I want to ask who it is, but the nurse has hurried off to deal with a tantrum that has suddenly erupted on the far side of the ward.

I suppose it's dad, because he didn't say much yesterday. Mum was doing all the talking, and he just seemed unhappy.

When I open the door, I don't see dad.

It's Stian.

I stop dead at the sight of him, my injured heart thumping painfully in my chest. He's wearing jeans and a dark blue T-shirt with a brown sports jacket. His blond hair is rumpled as if he's been running his fingers through it. When I look into his eyes, I don't think I've ever seen a shade of blue so clear and pure.

He stands up and comes around the table toward me, but I flinch away when he reaches out to hug me. My body is a ruin. I

don’t want him to touch me.

His arm drops to his side, and he says softly, “Hey.”

I fold my arms tightly across my chest. “Hey.”

He goes back to his chair and stands by it, waiting for me to sit down with him. Hesitantly, I do. We face each other across the Formica, his hands on the tabletop, mine crammed into my lap. I gaze at the symbols tattooed above his knuckles.

I am the runemaster.

“I’ve missed you,” he says.

I don’t know what to say to that. What has he missed? My neuroses? My weakness? My inability to have a normal human interaction with him?

“I can see from the expression on your face that you don’t believe me. I wouldn’t lie to you, *käraste*. I’ve fucking missed you.”

“Have you found a new assistant yet?” I ask hoarsely.

Stian sits back, and his jaw flexes. I’ve seen this happen when he’s been annoyed by other people, and it always amused me, like a secret only I knew about. Now he’s annoyed because of me and it’s not funny in the slightest.

“I’ve got a temp from an agency, someone to manage admin. I’ve had other things on my mind.”

Silence stretches between us. He’s not going to leave until he gets something meaningful out of this encounter, and I need to find a way to show him that coming again will be useless. I can’t be the Lacey he wants me to be.

“Welcome to my humble abode. I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything.”

He's not impressed by my lame sense of humor. I pick at my sleeve for a moment, trying to think of something to say. As with Doctor Loftin, I just have to get through the worst of this so everyone will leave me alone. The more I see Stian the harder this will be for me. I don't want to be reminded of the thing I want most.

"Do you remember getting out of bed and taking that call the other week?" I ask him.

He frowns, and nods.

"While you were gone I flicked through a book on your bedside table. About Viking artifacts. I saw a diagram of the tattoo you have on your shoulder."

"A *vegvísir*."

"Yes. A stave that guides you through bad times. I imagined that you might be that for me. I even wondered if I could be that for you, too." Oh, the arrogance, that I could be that for anyone.

He leans forward, his eyes lighting. "We can be, Lacey. I believe it with all my heart."

I shake my head sadly. "It wouldn't work. The more I am around you, the harder the storm rages. I have to give you up if I'm ever going to get out of here."

Stian gives me a long, hard look. He's searching for ways to take back the reins of a situation that's out of his hands. My control freak doesn't give up so easily.

He shakes his head. "No. I won't accept that."

"I've had some time to think in here. It's only been a week, but they make you think all the goddamn time." Sometimes I wonder if you can sprain your brain with too much self-reflection. Everything hurts in there.

“Do you know the story of Pandora’s box?” I ask, and he nods. That’s the upside of getting involved with a museum director, I suppose. He already understands all my favorite stories.

The Ancient Greeks had a myth for every painful and joyous aspect of the human psyche. Pandora was a mortal, and she was given a box by Zeus and told she must never, ever look inside. She didn’t know it, but it contained all the world’s ills. Sickness, pain, death, hunger, and many other things besides.

“I have my own Pandora’s box. It’s where my anorexia has lived since I was discharged from the ward last year. I put her in there and sealed the box up tight, and I was able to keep myself alive, and functioning. I could have a job and exist out there in the world with everyone else. For a while, I was able to have you, too.”

I reach out and brush my fingers across the back of Stian’s hand. A whole hour with him every evening. It was like a beautiful dream.

He catches my hand and grips it hard. “You still have me. I’m not going anywhere.”

I take a deep breath and continue. “When Pandora opened the box, which she did because she’s human and humans are weak, all the evils of the world came flying out. She slammed the lid shut, trapping in what was left inside, but it was too late. All the bad things had got out. The only thing left in the box, fluttering sadly around, was one little creature. Hope.”

Stian waits, not understanding.

“I have to trap my anorexia in that box so I can survive, but other things get locked in there, too. My hope. The things I really

want. I know they're in there, but if I reach for them, she gets out, too."

The possibility of falling in love. Traveling. Having children. Just *being*. Hope is always out of reach. Trapped in that box forever.

"But it's not—"

I cover our joined hands with my other hand. "Please, Stian," I say, my voice shaking. "I only have so much strength right now, and she's taking everything I have. I can't argue about this with you, too."

He lapses into unhappy silence, glaring at our twined fingers and gripping my hand so hard that my flesh is white.

"How was the exhibition opening?" I ask, trying for a neutral change of subject.

"It was fine," he says tightly.

I slowly pull my hand from his, because it's time to say goodbye. "I'm proud of what we were able to do together. We had a good two months."

His face is stony, as if he hates me talking in the past tense. It was a sliver of happiness between two great chasms of darkness. I suppose it's not his style to think in terms of morsels that quickly disappear. He told me that the night he first kissed me. *I always want everything.*

"I can never give you what you need, Stian. You know that. I appreciate you trying, but it's not going to work."

I think back to the conversation we had in the vaults. We were curious about each other then, and we were learning what made the other tick. That conversation gave me the courage to confess my complicated feelings for him. He told me he enjoyed risky ventures. What was I, if not a challenge he was dying to get his hands on?

“I was a risk, but I blew up in your face.”

He slams his palms down flat on the table and stands up. He hovers there for a moment, pain and fury burning in his eyes. Then he storms out.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Stian

I'm too angry to get on the Tube, so I walk the two and a half miles to the next station, my feet pounding the concrete. I won't be told to give up on anyone, by anyone. Lacey doesn't get to sit there in that horrible institution and calmly shed me from her life as if it's what she wants. That was her disease talking, the jealous, spiteful bitch who—

That was her disease talking. I want to hate *her*, but it feels wrong because it's all Lacey. Sometimes I sense someone else in there when I talk to her. I can see darkness and cruelty lurking behind her eyes, an entity just waiting to latch onto my girl and drag her down to hell.

Right now, Lacey's terrified, so she's retreated behind what she knows. Therapy. Eating plans. Doctors. Nothing in her life for her. Nothing that makes her happy. Nothing that makes life worth living. My chest aches at the thought. How long can she go on like that, knowing that happiness is right there, but denying herself? She's at the limits of her strength right now. What if next time I see her that other Lacey is looking back at me?

What if I never see her again at all?

I get on the Tube at the next station. At home, I go out into the garden with the intention of working on a particularly tricky cascade I'm trying to train with wire, but I'm still too riled up. The museum is

the only place I can distract myself from the pain of not having Lacey, so I do the minimum of upkeep required on my plants and then head in, even though it's Saturday.

The foyer is packed with visitors, but the staff areas are blessedly empty. In my office I boot up my computer and get to work, but my concentration is patchy. I find myself staring at the sofa in the corner of my office where Lacey used to eat her lunch, going over and over the events that landed her back in that ward.

Something's been bugging me about the conversation we had this morning. Specifically, about the box she uses to trap her anorexia. It seems all wrong, because isn't therapy about overcoming fears, not trapping them? Or is that some pop-psychology bullshit I got from TV?

I want to go back to the ward and ask her about it, but I'm not sure that they'd let me see her twice in one day, or if Lacey would appreciate me bursting in there again. I could call Petrou, but he's sick of hearing from me and won't be drawn into detailed discussions about Lacey's health. I wonder if it's too frightening for him, and I don't blame him.

There's one other option. Before I met Lacey, Petrou gave me his home number in case I needed him urgently over the Laxos matter, and I still have it. If I call it, Mrs. Petrou might pick up, and I think she's the one I need to talk to. Not just because she seems heavily involved in Lacey's treatment, but because she's another problem I need to overcome. Mrs. Petrou despises me. I can't do anything about Lacey's anorexia pouring poison into her ear about me, but I can try to show her mother that I'm not the enemy. I could use fewer enemies when it came to Lacey.

I think about it a moment longer, and then pick up my desk phone and dial the number. A woman answers on the third ring.

“Don’t hang up, please. It’s about Lacey.”

There’s a pause, and then Mrs. Petrou says accusingly, “Is that Stian Blomqvist?”

“Yes, it is. I saw her this morning, and she said something that worried me. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

I hold my breath, hoping that maternal concern wins out over her distrust of me.

In an only slightly less unfriendly tone, Mrs. Petrou says, “Well? What did she say?”

“Lacey was talking about a box where she mentally places her anorexia in order to cope with it. That’s why she can’t be happy, because other things get trapped in there, too. It worried me, and I needed to know that someone else was aware of it.”

Because Lacey won’t let me talk to her about it, and it’s killing me.

Silence stretches on the line. I ball my fist and press it hard against the tabletop, aware of how strange I must sound but desperately hoping that Mrs. Petrou can see past her dislike of me to listen to what I’m saying.

“It seemed to me like a strange way to cope with her disease. Does it sound right to you? Has she mentioned it to you?”

Mrs. Petrou takes a shaky breath. “No. She won’t talk about these things with me at all. She never has.”

I suspected as much. Lacey’s too good at pretending that everything’s fine when it’s not. “I just thought you should know. I don’t like going behind her back but considering where she is and

that she won't… Anyway. Maybe it's something her therapist should know. Goodbye." I go to hang up, but Mrs. Petrou tells me to wait.

"Thank you, Mr. Blomqvist," she says jerkily. "I appreciate the call."

"Please don't thank me," I tell her, and hang up.

I sit back and look over at the sofa again, wondering if I've done the right thing. When Lacey finds out I've passed on details of our conversation to her mother she'll probably be angry with me. I'll just have to live with that. Even if I can't be with her, I still need to protect her, in any way that I can.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Lacey

They let me out after four weeks. I'm not better.

No one who leaves the clinic is ever "better." They're just not in imminent risk of relapse or organ failure. If I maintain my current weight and keep attending therapy with Doctor Loftin, I won't be forced to go back. The thought of going back used to strike terror into my heart, but I even can't bring myself to be afraid of that anymore.

Dad arranged for me to take a break from coursework for the rest of the semester, sending documentation to the university that showed I was in a psychiatric ward. That's the second time he's had to do this. I wonder how many more times they'll allow me to defer before they just kick me out.

Mum and dad are both tense and unhappy, even more so than the first time I was released. We had hope then. Hope seems to have flown away this time.

I see Doctor Loftin twice a week, and it's the only time I leave the house. I have to strip down to my underwear before I'm weighed. My food diary is intensely pored over, and I'm questioned about the feelings I experience at every single meal.

We talk a lot about acceptance. I tell her I have accepted things, but Doctor Loftin doesn't seem to believe me, or that I've

accepted the right things.

I don't know. I don't see the point in anything she wants me to do anymore.

At the end of my first week living at home, mum hugs me after I come home from a session. "You'll get better, sweetheart. I know you will."

I push her away. "How do you *know* that?"

"Because I have hope. Don't you have hope?"

What I have is a food diary that makes me want to scream every time I look at it, a therapist who thinks I'm a failure and the knowledge that another relapse is just over the horizon, and then another, and then another.

"Fuck hope," I snarl. "Hope's something healthy people hold up like some sort of trophy. Well, *congratulations*, mum, for having hope. I hope you'll be very happy together."

I run upstairs so I don't have to look at her shocked, hurt expression.

At my next session with Doctor Loftin, she surprises me out of my miasma with a question I'm not expecting. "Has Stian Blomqvist been in contact with you?"

My belly swoops like a swallow at dusk. "I told you, I don't want to talk about him."

"I hear he visited you on the ward."

I narrow my eyes at her. Who told her that? I suppose the people who run the ward like to pass on all sorts of juicy gossip. "Yes, once. But not for long because there's nothing more for us to say to each other."

“Your mother called me yesterday. She’s worried about you. Apparently, she’s spoken to him as well.”

Mum talked to Stian? And she didn’t tell me? “What? When? She hates him.”

“I suppose she loves you more,” Doctor Loftin observes mildly. “Stian was concerned about something you said to him, and when he couldn’t reach you, he called your mother.”

“He *what*?” I grip the arms of my chair. How dare he pass on details of our private conversation to my mother? What could possibly be of interest to her about our relationship?

“Tell me about this box that you keep your anorexic voice in.”

I frown, puzzled. That’s what he was calling my mother about? I suppose that’s not a great secret. I just don’t talk about it. Impatiently, I describe the box. It’s not a very big box. It’s not even a very strong box, to look at. It’s made out of brown cardboard, like an archive box I’ve seen in record offices, though there are no holes for the handles.

“She was crammed in there, folded up and uncomfortable. And raging, always raging. If I didn’t stay vigilant, or if I did things that she really didn’t like, she would start testing the strength of her cage, and I’d hear the lid rattling.”

“What would make the lid rattle?”

“Anything new or dangerous. New foods. New places or experiences. Being around a lot of people. Having strong feelings.”

Doctor Loftin has been making notes as I talk, but now she lays her pen down. “This isn’t a coping technique I taught you. Did you learn it on the ward? Perhaps from another patient?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I made it up myself, I guess. I found if I compartmentalized the things she was saying to me, it became easier to get through the day. She was still furious, but I just couldn’t hear her as much.”

“How restless was she when you first started at the museum?”

I take a deep, shuddering breath. “At first, I thought she wasn’t going to let me work there, but the structure of the work and Mr. Blomqvist’s—Stian’s—authority meant that everything just seemed to grow quiet in my head. There were a few hiccups. He caught me eating on the stairs, and I was afraid he’d think I was crazy. There was a drinks reception I ran out of. Then we started… Well, you know what we started doing.”

“Did you think about her in that box very often?”

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. “All the time. I spent so much energy visualizing that box and making sure it was sealed tight, but in the end it was no good. She got out.”

“What allowed her to escape?”

“I did, because I’m not strong enough. I started thinking about a life I could have with Stian, one where we were a proper couple. I think I knew that I wouldn’t have the energy to maintain her prison and do all the things I wanted with him, and everything just crumbled. Out she came, bigger and stronger than before.”

“What did she say when she got out?”

“That I’ll never be free of her. That I belong to her, and no one else.”

My eyes land on my food diary, a pathetic, weak tool in the face of her strength. I snatch it up and start tearing the pages out. “I

hate it all!" I scream. "I hate everything. It was all a huge lie. What's the point of living if I can't be happy? If all I can do is just exist?"

I hurl the book to the other side of the room, and it flutters to the ground like a bird that's been shredded midflight. Little pieces of paper flutter down like broken feathers.

"There is more for you," Doctor Loftin tells me gently, after a few minutes. "But we have to deal with your disease first. The more you try to suppress something, the harder it fights back to be heard."

"I'm not able to deal with her in any other way. Right now she's free, and she's rampaging around in my head. I don't know how to get her back in that box, and I've got nothing with which to arm myself against her. The only thing that makes her quiet is not eating. I have to eat, and so she just screams and screams."

I rub a shaky hand over my face. I haven't slept properly since the surgery.

"Have you been practicing the techniques they taught you on the ward and the exercises we do together? It's important to allow the disordered thoughts to flow through your mind like water."

"She's too loud, and too much," I whisper, shaking my head. "None of it works."

What's a little mindfulness going to achieve when what I really wanted was a life with Stian? I'm not going to meditate my way through a date with him. Mindfulness isn't going to cut it when I want to spend the night in his bed.

Doctor Loftin twists her pen in her hand, just watching me. This is what she dislikes the most: when I throw what she's offering back in her face. I suppose it hurts her professional pride, being told that everything she believes can help me isn't worth anything.

She glances at the clock. Our time is up, and she closes her notebook. “There’s so much you want from life, Lacey. If you shut all possibilities down, there won’t be anything left for you.”

I can’t be happy with just *some* possibilities. Every time I think about Stian and the life I imagined with him, I become overwhelmed by despair.

There’s a chasm between what I want and what I can have, so what’s even the point of trying?

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Lacey

“What about re-enrolling? We should probably think about you going back for the next semester so you can earn that Masters degree.”

Mum straightens the duvet and the cushions on my bed, which is hard to do, seeing as I’m lying on them. I got out of bed today, for a while at least, but now I’m back in my room again. I’m still in my pajamas at eleven in the morning.

“Yeah,” I say listlessly, staring at the ceiling. “I guess.”

She looks down at me helplessly and then pinches the bridge of her nose. “Lacey, you have to do something. You were never like this before.”

I roll onto my side and face the wall, closing my eyes. Mum sighs and leaves me alone.

I’m too tired to re-enroll. I’m too tired to do anything at all, though when night comes I can’t sleep, and instead I lie awake in the dark, wondering what Stian’s doing. Asleep in his big bed, probably, shirtless beneath the sheets, his blond hair rumpled against the pillow. During the day he will have been fiendishly busy at the museum, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he types, or marching through exhibition spaces, his discontented blue eyes searching for things that don’t meet his exacting standards. That someone has so much energy seems magical to me now, though it

wasn’t so long ago that I was working ten or eleven hour days at his side.

I haven’t heard from him since he stormed out of the ward. He probably hates me for being so weak. I suppose the phone call to my mother was his way of washing his hands of me. One final thing before he said goodbye.

There’s a knock on the door, and I wrap my arms over my head. “What?” I mutter peevishly. It’s probably time for my next meal. “I’ll make it in a minute.”

My mother’s voice sounds uncharacteristically timid. “Darling, there’s someone here to see you. Can I let him in?”

My eyes fly open.

“Him who?”

But the door’s already opening. I flip over in a panic, sending a paperback book and three stuffed animals sliding to the floor. Dear god, no, he can’t see me like this. Through the crack I see my mother’s face, and she must decide that I’m decent enough because she steps back, and a large figure moves into the doorway.

A large, blond figure, in gray trousers and a black sweater.

“Lacey.”

He stops where he is, studying me uncertainly. I swing my bare feet to the floor, and then just sit there, paralyzed by the sight of him.

Mum looks between us for a moment and then disappears back down the hall.

“Can I come in?” he asks.

I glance around the room. It’s not messy exactly, but it’s not how I would have liked him to see it. I’m not how I’d like him to see

me, either, but there's nothing I can do about that now, and I suppose it doesn't matter, anyway.

"Um. Yeah."

"May I?" he asks, indicating the end of the bed.

I nod, and he sits down. Stian looks large and incongruous in the small room, his dark, masculine clothes in stark relief to all the white and pastels. The bed sinks a little beneath his weight, but there's still more than a foot of space between us.

I poke at a stuffed bear on the carpet with my toe. "Mum must be desperate if she let you in."

"Actually, she's the one who called me."

I glance at him in surprise, but then I remember how Stian got into mum's good books. "Oh, yeah. You guys have talked before."

He's not here because he wants to be. You're a charity case.

"I'm sorry that I went behind your back. Are you angry with me?"

I reach down and clutch the bear to my chest. "It wasn't really a secret, and it doesn't matter anymore. Doctor Loftin says I can't use the box, because it's not healthy."

Stian nods and stares at his hands, flexing his fingers as if examining his tattoos. "I stayed away because I wanted to give you time. I know how important space is when you've lost yourself. But I also didn't want to leave you adrift for too long." His voice is low, almost unemotional, but I can see tension in his shoulders. "Will you come back to me now, Lacey?"

I breathe in sharply and clutch the stuffed animal even tighter. When he stormed out of the ward, I was sure that was the end of things between us. He'd reached the end of his patience with me. If

he's been waiting for me to get better then he must be sorely disappointed at the sight of me.

When I don't speak, Stian curves his fingers briefly into fists. He wants to demand, to take hold of me. "I've missed you so much it's been a physical ache. It doesn't have to be all at once. We can take things slowly in any situations you find stressful."

"That's every situation," I whisper.

"Then I'll be patient in every situation."

Silence stretches between us. It's not that I don't believe he has patience. It's that I don't have any hope anymore. He could be as patient as a stone monument, but what would be the point if we never get anywhere?

"This grumpy asshole has enough patience in his heart for one scared girl."

I take a deep breath. "Your patience isn't mine to wear through, and I'm not a puzzle for you to figure out."

Stian looks up at me. "Is that what you think you are to me? Do you know how much I smiled before I met you? Once a year, at Christmas, for my mother. Now I'm up to three times a week. It's disgusting."

My heart aches at the memory of his smiles.

"Lately, since I lost you, not so much. But I'm hoping that you might give me a reason to smile again." He reaches out and brushes the back of his fingers over my cheek. "You're not a puzzle, Lacey. You showed me the most vulnerable parts of yourself, and I thought she was beautiful every single time."

Nothing's changed since the day I realized Stian and I could never work out there in the real world. The only thing that could allow

Stian and I to have a chance would be if my anorexia suddenly evaporated and I was healthy again. Miracles don't happen.

"Things were so much easier when you were my boss," I tell him. "I should never have let you think it could be more than a kinky work relationship."

"You didn't let me do anything. I found you, and my heart went rampant."

I squeeze my bear so hard I'm practically choking him. "You can't say things like that," I whisper fiercely. "It's not fair."

Stian shifts a little closer. "I know how strong she is, that other part of you. I'm not going to pretend that I'm stronger than her. But I promise you that no matter what she tells you about me and how I feel about you, she's wrong. She wants you for herself, and I'm not going to let her take you from me."

The one person she's most cruel to after me is Stian, and hearing her tell me that he thinks I'm disgusting, greedy, lazy and stupid is incredibly painful.

I shake my head. "If we face her, she might make me say and do the most horrible things to you."

"Maybe she will, but I'm not afraid of her."

My parents have to love me and forgive me, and even through the worst of times I know that they'll always be there for me. I don't *want* to hurt them, but I know I do. I wonder sometimes if they miss their other Lacey, the daughter I was before I got sick.

I sniffle and rub my nose. "I was a happy child. Can you believe that? I don't know why everything changed."

My other hand is in my lap, and Stian reaches out and tentatively touches his pinkie finger against mine. I look at his large

hand laying alongside my small one.

“When was the last time you were totally and completely happy? What were you doing? It can be anything.”

I think for a long time. “I was thirteen or fourteen, and on holiday with mum and dad in Singapore. The awful thoughts about my weight had started, but because we were far from home, I’d somehow left them behind me. There was an enormous fish tank in the lobby filled with tropical fish. I would watch them for hours. They were so peaceful. I was happy then, doing nothing. Just watching them swim.”

Stian reaches down and picks up a stuffed animal that’s laying on the floor. He examines it carefully, turning it over in his big fingers. It’s a dolphin, its blue fur almost gray from age and washing. “Did you know there’s an aquarium in London? Along the river, not far from the Eye. Why don’t I take you there?”

“You’re a grown man. You don’t want to go to the aquarium.”

“Are you kidding? I love fish. Who doesn’t like fish?”

Maybe he does. We might even have an okay time, and I could get home before I needed to eat my next meal. But then what? There are a thousand things we couldn’t do together, and eventually he’d feel every single one of them. He’d become frustrated. He’d grow to hate me.

“I can’t go to normal places with you. Restaurants and bars and picnics. That’s impossible for me.”

“Do you think I care about that? You’re what I want, Lacey. If you do your homework at my house while I look after my plants, isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that perfect?”

Tears spring into my eyes, because what he's describing could be wonderful. "But why would you settle for that?"

He looks up from the stuffed dolphin, shaking his head and smiling as if he can't believe why I'm asking that. "Because I love you. And don't you fucking dare call that settling."

"But you can't," I say in a cracked whisper. "Love me."

He reaches out and caresses my face. This was just supposed to be a short, kinky office relationship. He was never meant to fall in love with me.

I was never meant to fall in love with him.

"Hey," he whispers, pressing his forehead against mine. "You can't tell me what to do. I'm the runemaster, remember?"

Despite everything, I give a gulpy sort of laugh. He puts the dolphin down and pulls me into his arms. "You've got to stop ruling things out for yourself, *älskling*. If you love me too, then we'll find a way to make it work. Don't you think I can do that?"

I look into his eyes. My control freak. I twist my fingers through his, feeling their warmth. I've tried for so long to force myself into the right shape for the world, so it accepts me. Stian's used to bending everything out of shape to accommodate him. But not everything wants to bend, and if it doesn't, he lets it go.

Except me.

"Sometimes I think you can do anything," I whisper.

"Well, then," he says, brushing his lips against mine, "you should just go ahead and let me love you."

I want that, more than anything. I hold my breath, wondering if I dare. I can feel *her* circling in my mind like a witch on a broom, and she's screaming at the top of her lungs that I belong to her. Stian and

I might fail at this. The world might not ever be the right shape for us to fit into it together. We might bend so far that we break.

I have two choices: to give up completely, or to try with Stian.

I swallow, hard. “I’m scared. But I want you so damn much.”

“*Älskling*.” He kisses me hard, his lips slanting against my own, and then folds me in his arms and holds me tightly. His body around mine is so big and strong, and I lean into him, letting the bliss of his embrace overwhelm me.

When we part, he cups my face in his hands and rubs his thumb across my cheek. “You’re not alone with this. I will help you.”

“She’s out of her box this time,” I tell him. “She’s going to fight, and it’s not going to be easy, for either of us. Are you prepared for that?”

Stian smiles his gentle smile. “I’m sure, because this time she’s out and flying too, isn’t she? Hope.”

I bury my face in his shoulder. He’s right. I can finally feel the brush of her wings, very faintly. And maybe, just maybe, I can feel her getting stronger.

“When was the last time you had any proper rest?” he murmurs into my hair.

“So long.”

“Come on. Lie down with me for a bit.”

Fully clothed, we lay on the narrow bed. “*Tómr ok munu*,” he whispers. “Slow and sure. I knew that if I was patient, I’d find my way back to you. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, staying away, but you were never gone from me. I could sense you, always, like a needle pointing the way home.”

Tears blur my eyes, and I whisper. “Through the storm.”

The warmth of his body surrounds me, and the beat of his heart against my ear is more soothing than a lullaby. My eyes drift closed.

I wake up sometime later and find that Stian's still in my single bed with me, his arms wrapped around me. He's fallen asleep, too. We must both have needed some rest. I let my eyes travel over the planes and angles of his handsome face, remembering everything he said to me.

As I nestle closer in his arms, he makes an *mmm* sound, and his eyes open.

"I'm afraid," I whisper to him. "I think I'll be a little bit afraid all my life, but I want to try."

He reaches out and strokes a forefinger gently down the bridge of my nose. "So do I. And I always will."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Stian

“Would you like to spend the afternoon at my house?” I ask her. “Just a few hours. I’ll bring you back before dinnertime.”

She snuggles closer to me and whispers, “Yes please, daddy. That would be lovely.”

I smile down at her, warmth expanding through my chest. “You still want to call me that?”

“I want all the things we had together before. Do you?”

“Yes I do, my little bonsai.” I glance at my watch. “All right, it’s just after one o’clock. How about I drop home for a bit, and come back to collect you after lunch. It must be time for you to eat.”

She nods and sits up, a determined expression on her face. Her hair is in tangles and her pajamas are wrinkled. She’s never looked more beautiful.

I kiss her mouth and tell her I’ll be back in an hour and a half, and head down the stairs. Mrs. Petrou looks at me expectantly as I come down the stairs.

“Back shortly,” is all I say with a smile, and head out to my car.

There’s not much for me to do at home and I can’t settle to any reading. I fidget with things in the living room, feeling like a teenager having a girl around for the first time, wondering what she’s going to think of me.

At a quarter past two, I get back in my car and drive back to Lacey's. She's waiting for me by the letterbox, wearing a dress and jacket and with her hair brushed and waving in the breeze.

She gets in with a lunchbox in her hand. "It's my dinner. I thought maybe I could try eating it in the greenhouse tonight, if I may?"

"Of course you may. You don't even have to ask."

When we get to the house, we store her lunchbox in the fridge, and I take her out into the back garden. I have six new bonsai to show her. I've had a lot of frustrated time on my hands lately.

"This was a beautiful pink azalea over the summer," I say, running my finger over a bare branch. "She was my favorite."

Lacey's wearing a pink dress. When she presses close to me, I trace the neckline with the same finger. Her lips part as she looks up at me, but I turn and point out a Japanese maple.

We end up laying on the grass in the last of the afternoon sunshine, me teaching her the rudiments of Swedish grammar. It quickly devolves into her trying to roll her *R*s, and me trying to make the *th* sound, and us laughing at each other.

"*Th*," she coaches me. "This. There."

"Dis. Dere. What? I said it perfectly." I grin at her and pick a piece of grass from her hair.

Lacey giggles and props her chin on my chest, her eyes lighting with amusement, and then something else. She presses her lips against mine in a soft, tender kiss. Heat flashes through me and my arms wrap around her, English phonetics forgotten.

"Would you like to go inside?" she whispers.

I glance at the house. There are fresh sheets on my bed. We have hours and hours and I've barely let myself even think about making love to Lacey while we were parted. It was too painful, and too much like tempting fate. "It's such a nice evening. We could stay out here for a little longer."

Lacey walks two fingers up my chest. "Or we could go upstairs. You're not avoiding being with me like that, are you, daddy?"

"No, I'm just…" I trail off, seeing how she's looking at me.

"I won't break, you know," she says solemnly.

I clear my throat. "I know that. It's just that the last time we slept together—"

"The last time we slept together, it was beautiful. This time it will be even more beautiful because we know for sure what we are to each other now."

The expression on Lacey's face reminds me of when she would persuade me that her way of doing something at the museum was the most efficient way, and she was always right. "You make excellent points, Miss Petrou."

She grins at me. "Thank you, sir. You always did take my good ideas into consideration."

I pull her tightly against me, but I'm still uncertain. I'm just happy to have her with me. I don't need anything else. "Only if you want to. We don't need to today."

Lacey stands up and tugs me to my feet. "I want to like crazy."

We don't make it upstairs to my bed. In the living room, we undress each other quickly and then fall onto the sofa. I feel high from the sensation of her skin against mine after so long.

Lacey climbs up onto me and straddles my hips, holding onto the back of the sofa. I cup her hips in my hands, rubbing one of my thumbs in slow circles on her clit. She moves slowly back and forth along my cock, her slippery sex coating my length. I reach up and take a firm hold of one of her breasts, groaning.

"You feel amazing."

She takes a shuddering breath, her eyes closing. "I don't think I can wait."

Taking my length in her hand, she angles me against her sex and moves her hips, working my cock into her. She watches me questioningly as she slides up and down, as if wanting to know if she's doing it right.

"Perfect, *älskling*. Just like that."

As her confidence grows, her movements grow bolder. I start thrusting up to meet her, and her cheeks flush pink. One by one, I take her hands and place them on my chest.

"Hold on to me."

Grasping her waist, I pound up into her, fast and greedy. Lacey moans and tips her head back, her body turning pink. Her cries increase in pitch and I know she's going to come. I reach up with both hands and wrap them around her throat. She looks at me desperately as her peak approaches, pleading with her eyes. Pleading with me not to let go.

She orgasms, and I squeeze her pretty, slender throat. Her inner muscles ripple along my length, and I burst beneath her, thrusting up hard into her tight little pussy.

Lacey collapses onto my chest, breathing hard. Then she starts laughing. "I think we both needed that."

I kiss her damp cheek. “You’re not fucking wrong, *älskling*.”

She untangles herself from me and lies flat on my chest, tucked under my chin. She peers up at me. “You always used to call me *sharasta*.”

“*Käraste*.” I correct her pronunciation. “It means *darling*. But now you are *älskling*. Beloved. You are loved by me.”

“How do you say *I love you* in Swedish?”

“*Jag älskar dig*,” I whisper slowly, letting her hear the long, soft vowels and the gentle consonants. “I’ve said it to you before. Do you remember?”

She looks puzzled for a moment, and then she opens her eyes wide in realization. “At the hospital. You were there after my surgery, and you said something. I wasn’t sure if I dreamed it or not.”

I pull her close to me, resting my chin on the top of her head. So she did hear me. “It wasn’t a dream. I said it then, *älskling*. *Jag älskar dig.*”

Lacey whispers it back, and her eyes close. My poor girl is utterly exhausted, and she falls asleep within a minute. I lie quietly beneath her, watching her sleep, until it’s time to wake her for dinner.

She eats in the greenhouse while I make scrambled eggs for myself in the kitchen. After, we both wear pairs of my joggers and my T-shirts as we sit on the sofa and watch a Louis Theroux documentary. Lacey curls herself into my side, hugging a cushion. It’s incredibly mundane, and absolutely wonderful.

By nine-thirty she’s yawning every other minute, so she changes back into her own clothes and I take her home. She’s smiling and sleepy when I kiss her goodbye at the front door. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Yah aksar day. Did I say it right?”

“Slightly mauled,” I tell her with a grin. I have every reason to smile now, and I can’t help myself. “But still beautiful, *ängel*. I love you, too.”

She pokes me in the chest, laughing. “I’ll get it right. Night-night, runemaster.”

I smile the whole way home as I drive. There’s a text message on my phone when I walk in the front door. It’s from Chris Petrou.

We heard Lacey laughing when you dropped her home. We’ve missed that sound.

I smile as I type my reply. *Me, too. Goodnight, Chris.*

“How was your therapy session?”

We’re sitting on the sofa at my house. Lacey’s just eaten her dinner in the greenhouse and now she’s got her legs over my lap. I put a marker in *The Asia Minor Journal of Antiquities* and lay it aside.

Lacey takes a deep breath. “Good. Doctor Loftin says I should talk about them with you, actually. Do you mind?”

I smile and shake my head. “Of course not. Where is your anorexia right now?”

“She’s right here with me, doing her thing.”

I study her face, searching for signs of fear. It’s been three weeks since Lacey and I started seeing each other again. We’ve been taking things slowly, as we promised each other. She spends a few evenings a week and usually a whole weekend day at my house, but she hasn’t slept over yet.

“Tell me what she’s been saying to you.”

Lacey purses her lips and fiddles with the hem of her dress. “The usual things. She hasn’t been overwhelming yet, but that’s because I haven’t tested the limits she’s set for me.”

I would like to start doing that, but I’ve been waiting for her to suggest that we go somewhere new, or have a sleepover, or try eating together. Trying not to seem too interested, I wait for her to go on.

“My homework is to start introducing new experiences one by one, and practicing letting what she says to me flow off my mind like water. Maybe we could do something together. If you want to.”

I kiss her hair. “I think that’s a wonderful idea. How about we go on that date I suggested? The aquarium on the river.”

Lacey smiles at me, and rests her cheek on my shoulder. “That would be perfect. It’s Saturday tomorrow. We could try then, maybe?” She pulls out her phone and works out how long it will take us to get into Central London and then walk over to the aquarium. “If we spend just thirty minutes at the aquarium, I can make it back home in time for lunch.” She looks stricken, as if she’s worried that the idea is stupid after all. “I’m sorry. That’s not very long.”

“*Tómr ok munu*,” I tell her. “Slow and sure.”

Lacey caresses my cheek, and then kisses me. “*Tómr ok munu*,” she whispers back.

The next morning, I pick her up and we get the train into Waterloo and walk over to Southbank and the great wheel of the London Eye. There are already crowds forming, and I hold firmly to Lacey’s hand. I walk slowly. If all we have is five minutes looking at the fish it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to rush her.

I watch Lacey's face surreptitiously as we buy our tickets and head inside the aquarium. I'm looking for *her* lurking behind her eyes, and wondering if that nasty voice is hounding her because of the crowds, the unfamiliar place and people eating ice-creams and drinking coffees. But there's only Lacey, the dappled water flickering over her face as she gazes up at the fish.

Around a bend, we come upon a vista of coral. Stingrays drift majestically overhead, and schools of bright tropical fish dart this way and that. We pause and watch them moving, their colorful bodies rippling. The water flows around them, soft currents making them sway and dip.

I move behind her and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her against me. "What do you hear, *älskling*?"

"I hear the water. I can hear the children laughing up ahead. And I can hear you." She takes a deep breath and lets it out in a happy sigh. "It's so beautiful."

I look down at her, and there's not a trace of darkness in her face. She's smiling as she watches the fish, their delicate colors reflected in her eyes.

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Epilogue

Lacey

“Kneel. On your heels. Hands on your knees.”

I sink down before Stian on the carpet, naked except for the choker around my neck. From here I can see him sitting in his armchair, reading. A little to the left is the glass door to the greenhouse, filled with bonsai plants. He always makes sure I can see them and him when I’m on my knees.

I sit quietly on the carpet, knowing I have no expectations of me when I’m down here. Nothing I need to be afraid of. Nothing I have to do or think about. Stian turns a page of his journal. He’s smiling faintly as he does, and I know it’s because of me.

We do this several times a week, and it’s as good as the mindfulness exercises that Doctor Loftin finally has me practicing, only far more pleasurable. I’ve stopped fighting the anorexic voice, and she’s become easier to ignore. Struggling to keep her in that box gave her power over me and she was able to wield my fears like weapons. Now that I don’t have to be afraid that I’ll never be enough for Stian and the things I want, she’s diminished, almost pathetic.

I am loveable. I do deserve to eat. To feel. To love and be loved. They’re not just affirmations anymore. I’ve slowly managed to stitch these beliefs into my psyche, into the places that she once

occupied. There's less and less room for her with every day that passes.

We take road trips, and I sit in the back of the car and eat my lunch while Stian drives. We've never eaten in a restaurant, but we have sat in a pub together several times, me with a glass of wine and him with a pint of beer. I still hear her whispering to me, but she's quieter now, as if she's drawn very far off or her heart's no longer in it. Every day she grows a little fainter.

At his home, we sometimes sit in the greenhouse with his bonsai trees and eat together. I can't do it all the time. Some days are harder than others, but I'm getting there. I'm remembering that food has a taste, and I like to eat slowly still, but so I can savor it. I'm amazed how much sensory detail I can get out of a slice of apple or a bite of roast potato.

Sometimes I think of the boys and girls and men and women back at the Dawnstead Inpatient Clinic, and I wonder how they're doing. I used to remember that place with fear, but now I feel mostly sad about it. The statistics for recovery from anorexia are grim, and I know a third of the people I met there will learn to live with their anorexia, though it will always be lurking at the edges. Another third will relapse again and again, their relationships suffering, their lives depleted. Or they'll die. Only a third will recover.

I'm determined to be one of the third who get over this disease. Then I'm going to keep going, my life expanding outwards like a deep, generous breath.

Over the winter, Stian grows a beard, and I find a few red and brown bristles among the blond as I'm nestled in his lap. "You don't

look nearly so scary and severe with a beard, daddy. You're all cuddly."

He moves to stand up. "I'll go and shave it off, then."

"Nooo!" I protest, laughing and wrapping my arms around his shoulders. "I like you all cuddly."

He shoots me an amused look. "Well, all right. But only because you like it, and just for the winter. By May I'll be scary and severe again." He rubs the bristles against my cheek, making me squeal with laughter.

I continue with my Masters, though I take it very slowly. The university board has told me not to worry about the gaps due to my psychiatric treatment. They're happy that I'm persisting with my studies. I take a part-time maternity contract assisting one of the collections managers at the Albright Collection, which means I get to see Stian most days. I even eat lunch in his office.

In the early summer we take a train out to the countryside and go hiking. Beneath the trees on the edge of a field, we spread our lunch on a picnic blanket and eat quietly, watching the cows who are watching us. My sandwich tastes of sharp cheese and watercress and the bread is slightly squashed. It's delicious. Maybe in a few months' time I can think about having a picnic in a city park, or even going to a restaurant with Stian. It will be a big step, but one that I feel is getting closer and closer.

As we're packing up the sandwich wrappers and brushing crumbs from the blanket, I look around wonderingly. "A year ago I never thought I'd be able to have a picnic."

He reaches out and strokes his forefinger across my cheek. "A year ago is when we met. Did you realize it's today?"

I think back carefully, and then a smile spreads over my face. “So it is.”

“How is she?” he asks, meaning the anorexic part of me.

I can’t even call her my anorexic half anymore, because she’s become so small that she’s barely a tenth of my mind, or even a twentieth. I gaze around at the blue sky. “I can barely hear her over all this birdsong.”

We’re about to set off when Stian swears and crouches down. “*Åh, helvete*. I’ve broken a shoelace. Hang on.”

I take out my water bottle and have a drink, and watch a flock of small birds flying from tree to tree. “My Swedish is coming along all right, but my Swedish swearing is excellent, thanks to you.”

From somewhere down near my feet, he laughs. I put the bottle away. A few minutes later, he’s finished with his shoelace, but he hasn’t stood up.

“What are you still doing down there?” I ask, glancing at him.

He’s calmly looking up at me, and he’s holding a ring. A silver ring with a diamond, and it’s shimmering in the sunlight.

I clap my hands over my face.

“I told you I always want everything,” he says in his deep, gravelly voice.

He did say that, right from the start. I’ve given him all of me, which is more than he bargained for, probably. But he’s accepted me with open arms every time.

“Can I have everything, *älskling*? You know how badly I need it.”

I nod.

“Is that a yes to marrying me?”

I nod again.

His mouth quirks in a smile. “Then are you going to take your hands away from your face and kiss me?”

I do, and instead of standing up he pulls me onto his knee. His lips are warm and possessive as he kisses me, and I wrap my arms around his neck, tears blurring behind my eyelids. While I’m perched on his thigh, he takes my left hand and slips the ring onto my finger. It sparkles in the dappled sunshine, bright and clear and beautiful.

I’ve let the world in, and I’m no longer afraid of it. I’m more afraid of shutting it out. There are too many wonderful things that I’d be closing the door on. I made a mistake when I shut that box, because like Pandora I sealed up hope as well. I shut away all possibilities for happiness along with that cruel voice, and she doesn’t deserve any of those things.

But I do. From now on I’m going to live, and that means loving Stian with all my heart.

Stian wraps his arms around me. “I’ll always want all of you, Lacey.”

I kiss him softly. “I’m all yours, daddy.”

My love. My control freak. My everything.

A free bonus epilogue is available! Click here to download:
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Author's Note

I've always been fascinated by and appreciative of the calming effects of BDSM activities, and the different ideas each of us have about being "in control." My question when setting out to write this book was, What would a relationship look like between two people obsessed with control, but in two very different ways?

In writing *Control Freak*, I wanted to show how BDSM supported Lacey on her road to recovery, in conjunction with her therapy. Despite her setbacks, she was able to grow toward the life she wanted but thought she could never have. It was important to me to show that while Stian supported Lacey, he wasn't what "fixed" her.

I made every effort while researching anorexia treatment to portray it in realistic manner, but please remember that this is a work of fiction. Every journey toward recovery is different and requires professional treatment. If you or someone you love is struggling with an eating disorder, please reach out for help, either to a loved one, your GP, or one of the eating disorder charities or information centers in your country, some of which are listed below.

The National Eating Disorders Association (United States)
Beat Eating Disorders Charity (United Kingdom)
National Eating Disorder Information Center (Canada)
ReachOut Australia (Australia)

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And thank you to Mr. Hale for connecting with and appreciating Stian, and putting up with the two dozen or so Mikael Persbrandt movies that were suddenly and inexplicably playing on our television throughout the months of February and March.

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COME TO DADDY

Rules for the New Sugar Baby

1. Are you worth it? Hell yes you are, ten times over

2. Hustle big, hustle hard and get out fast

3. Never, ever fall for your sugar daddy

I've always believed "I'm not that sort of girl," but with my father's debt to a bloodthirsty crime lord to pay off I have no choice but to dip into the sugar bowl.

Misha, a handsome older billionaire, is willing to pay top price for me. Something about my daddy doesn't add up but with a debt to pay I don't have the luxury of being picky. I'm the luxury in his life, his fantasy to fulfil, and I'm going to play my part to the fullest.

My name is Ciara, and when daddy calls, I come.

"Five OMG THIS WAS FABULOUS stars!" – **K Webster, USA Today Bestselling Author**

"A roller coaster of sexy fun that will leave you on the very edge...before plummeting you once more. It will definitely have you biting your lips and turning those pages. Misha is f*cking hot, the daddy of my dreams. Do yourself a favor and BUY THIS BOOK!" – **Vivian Wood, USA Today Bestselling Author**

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Misha

Eighteen years later

It's her parents' funeral, but she isn't crying.

The girl in the footage is a petite, pretty blonde of around twenty in a black dress and blazer and a broad-brimmed hat. She's standing next to the priest while a stream of people shake her hand. I search their faces, trying to pick out any lawyers or investment managers among the mourners.

She's got money somewhere and we're going to fucking find it, says the email from my brother, Damir. *You know all the money people in this city. Look at their faces. Who's helping the little bitch? Once we know who they are we can sort them out.*

The mourners dwindle to nothing and the priest goes into the church. I didn't see anyone we need to "sort out". I go to close and delete the video but see that Miss Alders hasn't followed the priest inside. She takes a long, pensive look around the churchyard, and I notice her fingers are fiddling nervously with her bracelet. My mother

used to do the same thing shortly before my father was due to arrive home.

“Are you all right, Mama?”

“What? Oh, I’m fine, Misha. Go and play, and keep out of your father’s way.”

I sit back in my chair. It’s a gray, still day in London and I glance at the Ravnikar Enterprises skyscraper a few blocks away where Damir works. I’m part of the company but I like my space, so I’ve rented my own office on the thirty-ninth floor of a different building. The less I have to do with Damir—with anyone—the happier I am.

In the footage, Miss Alders firms her lips, ready to go into the church. Then she freezes, her eyes going wide like a startled fawn’s. A man steps into the shot and she presses her back against the church in fear.

I lean forward to get a better look at the screen. It’s Damir, his broad back and tall figure almost obliterating my view of this small young woman. What the hell is he doing there? Her gaze flickers past him, as if she’s yearning to escape.

Intent on the footage, I don’t notice that my PA is peering over my shoulder.

“Hey, look. It’s the dead girl.”

I slam my thumb on the spacebar to pause the video and glare up at Bethany. “What is it?”

She tosses a file onto my desk and shrugs. “Here’s the report thing you need for that meeting or whatever.”

My eyes sweep disapprovingly over her unprofessional attire. Today it’s an off-the-shoulder blouse showing a great deal of creamy

cleavage and a tight lace pencil skirt. Her wild black curls are swept to one side and tumble down her arm.

"Thank you. That will be all," I say tightly, keen to get back to the footage. Damir is frozen in the act of looming over Miss Alders and my every nerve is on edge.

But Bethany folds her arms and nods at the screen. "I know Ciara."

"Oh?"

"We took classes together until I quit last semester."

Bethany gives me a fake sycophantic smile. "In order to devote more time to you, sir."

"You'd be better off getting an education," I mutter, checking the messages on my phone in an effort to quell the desire to shout at Bethany to get out. *What's Damir playing at? Why is he so hung up on this girl? Why do I want to reach into the screen and pull him away from her?*

Bethany casts her eyes to the heavens. "Education? Please. I'm going to date a series of rich men, find the most corrupt one to marry, and then when he's sent to prison for fifteen to twenty-five years I'll console myself by spending all his money." She shrugs a bare shoulder. "The ideal life."

People aren't sent to prison around here; we're far too wealthy for that. But if she wants to marry a corrupt man then she certainly has her pick at Ravnikar Enterprises, assuming she can turn a blind eye to the things that go on around here. It gets easier. The trick is to think of the money.

I put down my phone and look at the screen. At Miss Alders' terrified eyes. A memory comes to me, of seeing my father standing

over my mother in the same manner. Damir looks so much like him these days.

Anger surges through me. Why did he make me look at her face? He knows I don't like to get personally involved. Numbers. Databases. Spreadsheets. The only people I like are theoretical ones on the other side of a business portfolio.

The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop myself. "What's she like?" I suppose I'm hoping she's a nasty, greedy little thing like her father so I don't feel guilty when I wash my hands of her in thirty seconds' time.

Bethany considers this. "Smart. People like her. I think she was top in both the classes we had together."

Of course she's smart and likeable and gets good grades. Of course she is.

I tap my fingers on my desk, trying to think. "Three years ago, I introduced Miss Alders' father to Damir and persuaded him that taking on our Diamond Property Developments scheme was an excellent opportunity for him. He then stole money from us, and when he realized he'd been caught he fled with his wife rather than face Damir. Their plane went down in the Ukraine two weeks ago."

I remember how Damir had laughed when we got the news, like it was the best joke he'd heard in his whole life. Then the laughter had stopped, and cold steel returned to his eyes. *"They shouldn't have left their daughter behind. She'll wish she'd died with her parents by the time I'm finished with her."*

Damir has managed to recover nearly all of the seventeen million pounds that Mr. Alders embezzled from us via our lawyers, all but four hundred and fifty thousand of it. Maybe Mr. Alders used it for

bribes. Maybe he had a debt to pay off. Maybe he liked high-class hookers. Who knows. But I've been through the accounts and the money's gone. I want to leave it at that but Damir isn't satisfied.

In the frozen video footage Miss Alders' eyes are sparkling with fear as she looks up at Damir.

"Misha, I told you to go to bed. It's all right, your father and I were just talking."

I point at the screen. "If it wasn't for me Miss Alders' parents would both be alive, and Damir wouldn't be out for her blood."

Bethany puts a hand over her heart and stares wide-eyed at my chest. "Oh, sir, is that—what's that on you?"

I glance down at my suit, wondering if I spilled salad dressing on myself at lunch.

She peers closer, frowning intently. "Is that—a conscience?"

I level a dry look at her. If it wasn't near-impossible to find a PA who can put up with my brother and his dangerous associates, who knows how to keep her mouth shut about the things she overhears, *and* can keep a meeting diary in order I'd fire Bethany.

"Thank you, you can go now."

She ignores me. "I don't know why her dead parents should matter to you. You didn't make Ciara's dumbass father double-cross Mr. Ravnikar."

True. But for some reason that doesn't make me feel any better.

I recall the last line of Damir's email. *I'll get my half a mill from her if I have to wring it out of her fucking corpse.*

I know my brother better than anyone else in the world. He means everything he says. Miss Alders will have to find some way to

raise half a million pounds, money that won't make any difference to our business, but will probably break her. I suspect that's the point: it's not the money Damir wants. It's revenge on the last living member of the Alders family.

Our servers are secure. There's no way to trace that this video was sent to me. I can delete it now and I'll never be held accountable for what happens to Miss Alders, even if her body turns up face-down in the Thames.

But the gods must be pissing on my grave today because I point at the screen and say to Bethany, "Miss Alders' debt. I can cover it easily but getting the money from my accounts into hers so she can give it to Damir is a problem. How do I do it?"

Bethany shrugs. "How should I know? I'm not one of your dodgy accountants. Go ask them."

"The accountants who all report to my brother? What an enlightened idea. I need to give her half a million pounds, but she can't know who I am or where the money has come from. I don't trust her to not tell Damir who helped her."

Or break under his questioning.

My PA gives me a baffled look. "Why do you want to give her money?"

"That's none of your business," I say coldly. If I do nothing and something happens to Miss Alders it will be one stone too many laying heavy on my conscience. I just want to get on with my work but instead I'm suddenly burdened with integrity I didn't fucking ask for.

She thinks for a moment and then shakes her head. "If you've gone soft on her why don't you just *tell* Damir you'll cover her debt?"

“Do you really think my brother will allow me to use my money, that he likes to tell me is *his* money because I work for him, to pay a revenge debt?”

Bethany wrinkles her nose. “Oh yeah. Your brother is an asshole. I forgot.”

An asshole. Assholes glass you in the pub. Key your car. Cut you off on the motorway. My brother is enriched uranium-level psychopath. “There aren’t many ways that a student stumbles over half a million pounds.”

“Let her work it off on the pole, then.”

In one of Damir’s own strip clubs, she means. I believe that’s his plan for her, watching her slave away in one of his seedy strip joints for a decade until he’s ruined her life. They’re popular clubs and strippers who work there of their own free will probably clean up. But a stripper forced into it and wearing her vulnerability night after night for all to see? She’d be bullied by the girls and patrons alike and taken advantage of night after night until she’s a hollow shell of self-disgust.

“Look on the bright side, sir. Once she’s a stripper you can go and get as many lap dances from her as you like.”

I flick my gaze up at her. “I wish I could replace you.”

“But you can’t, because no one but me can put up with your surly ass. Can I have an advance? One that doesn’t actually come out of my next pay check?”

Bethany can have anything she wants if she can make Miss Alders go away. And she needs to go away, fast. I’ve wasted enough time thinking about her. “Come up with a way to solve this problem and you can have this month’s pay check twice over.”

She considers this for a moment, and then perches on the edge of my desk and says in a breathy voice, “Why don’t you be her daddy?”

“Her what?” I deadpan.

“Her daddy. You know, her sugar daddy. You give her a fat allowance in exchange for a couple of dates a week and a blow job when you’re feeling lonely. I don’t imagine anyone’s sucking your dick by choice. Ciara gives the money to your brother and your newfound conscience lets you sleep at night. Problem solved.”

My expression is still baleful, but my mind is ticking over. It’s a ridiculous idea, though on the upside Damir would never suspect it and drip-feeding Miss Alders the funds rather than trying to give her a lump sum would seem less suspicious to him, as she’d pay him off bit by bit.

But I don’t know Miss Alders, I don’t want to know her, and I have no idea how I would go about getting her to agree to such a distasteful arrangement.

“One of my friends was in the sugar bowl for a while,” Bethany says, and I stare at her blankly. “That’s what sugaring is called, being in the sugar bowl. The girls are the sugar babies and the guys are the sugar daddies. It’s super popular among students, actually. Why slave for hours in a coffee shop if you can make thousands holding some flabby old guy’s hand while he pays for your expensive dinner?”

“It’s a legitimate arrangement? Young women will take money just for going out on dates?”

Bethany gives me an incredulous look. “Well, you’d get to sleep with her, too. That’s what it’s about. You do have sex don’t you,

you big weirdo? Or do you, like, pay people wearing stiletto heels to step on your balls?"

"I don't know why I'm asking you questions when I could just Google all this."

"Because I'm better than Google." She puts her hands together in a prayer position and wags them at me. "You tell her that you'll give her so many thousands of pounds a month in exchange for dates, say two a week, some of which end in sex. You buy her handbags, some Italian shoes, maybe take her away for a dirty weekend or two and give her extra cash when you've had a particularly satisfying time. She sees you as a rich dude who wants a pretty young girl on his arm, and you get to pay off her debt."

Bethany beams at me, proud of herself, but it seems like an awful lot of hassle just to give my brother half a million pounds that he doesn't need. I have much, much more than that sitting in offshore accounts and despite what Damir thinks it's *my* fucking money. I just want to give it to him so I can get on with my life and forget about Miss Alders. He was like this when we were children. Vindictive. Cruel. When he was six and we were still living in Slovenia, one of our nannies scolded him for stealing chocolates from her handbag and he got her fired. But it wasn't just fired. He wasn't satisfied until our father screamed at the poor woman in front of all the staff and then kicked her out onto the street, still weeping. Damir smiled ear to ear, watching the nanny sob as she walked away from the house. I'd never seen him so happy. That was when I realized that there was something wrong with my little brother. I didn't do anything to stop him. That's how I knew there was something wrong with me, too.

“Well, sir?” Bethany prompts.

Being Miss Alders’ sugar daddy is a terrible idea and I don’t like it but it’s the only one I’ve got right now. “How many thousand can I give her each month? Fifty?”

Bethany gapes at me. “Do you want her to think you’re a cannibal or you’re grooming her for some weird kink? She’ll run a mile. *Ten* thousand. You give her ten thousand a month, max, and slip her a few extra thousand in an envelope at the end of each date if you want to bump it up a bit.”

I groan inwardly. Ten thousand. At that rate it will take nearly four years for her to pay off the debt in full. Four years of tedious dates and pretending to be her sugar daddy. I don’t have the time.

But maybe it wouldn’t take quite so long if I came up with something better in the meantime. For now, ten thousand pounds a month would appease my brother and keep Miss Alders out of his strip club while I work on a plan to get her a bigger lump sum sooner.

“It’s a good idea, isn’t it, sir? Go on. Admit it.”

“It’s…got potential,” I concede. “But how do I enter into this sort of arrangement with Miss Alders? I don’t know her.”

Bethany flips her long hair over her shoulder and gives me a dazzling smile. “But I know her. I’ll put the idea in her head for you. Classes start tomorrow and Ciara hangs out at a café on campus before every lecture. We weren’t friends but she’s too nice not to talk to me if I sit down at her table. Let me go look up the schedule.”

She turns to leave but I catch Bethany’s wrist, pulling her back. “If you breathe a word of this to anyone you and she are both dead. You know that’s not me threatening you. That’s what Damir will

do. He doesn't want money, he wants to cause her pain, and he'll hurt anyone who gets in the way of what he wants."

Bethany shrugs out of my grip, and I see a flicker of fear in her eyes before she masks it with nonchalance. "Please. You think I'd go blabbing about anything I do here? I like my blood *inside* my veins." Her eyes run over me. "What about you?"

I sit back in the leather chair. "What about me?"

"What will Mr. Ravnikar do to you if he finds out about this?"

Me? I'm too useful to Damir for him to hurt me. I bring in too much money. I *like* bringing in all that money. I like the power and influence we have in this city, however we go about getting it. "I can look after myself. Now go."

But Bethany hesitates in the doorway, an unfamiliar expression in her eyes. "Be nice to her, okay? This is going to be weird for her, taking money from a bad-tempered old dude."

My ego prickles at that. I'm not old, I'm forty-two. I'm fit, I don't smoke, barely drink and I work out five times a week. I could sit in the bar of an upscale hotel and have women flock to me, and not only because they can smell money on me. Maybe I am bad-tempered, but while my brother makes an art out of being cruel and manipulative, I just simply don't care about making people like me. I don't *need* people to like me. Being liked is for thirteen-year-old girls and talk-show hosts. I make money. I am very bloody good at making money. That's what people need from me and that's what I provide. Money.

The more money I give Miss Alders and the less I want to see her, the happier she'll be. "Nice to her? This isn't a relationship, this is a financial transaction entirely for her benefit."

Bethany snorts. “How would you know what a relationship is?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing, sir,” she calls in a sing-song voice as she saunters out. “Sounds like you’ve got everything covered. I’ll go plant the idea in your sweet little baby’s head and everything else will just take care of itself.”

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THE PROTÉGÉ

He's always protected me since I was eight years old, the neglected girl he took off the street and raised as his own. Laszlo can feel what music needs instinctively. He can tell what I need.

My world shattered the night of my eighteenth birthday and he still hasn't forgiven me for what I did. I'm not asking him to love me, touch me, take me to bed. What I want goes deeper than that and I have to say this out loud because it's one thing that music won't be able to tell him.

I want what only Laszlo can give me. I want to be his protégé again. And this time, I'm going to be so good for him.

Yes, maestro.

Yes, sir.

Yes, daddy.

Brianna Hale has yet again surpassed my expectation with THE PROTÉGÉ. Laszlo and Isabeau's story stole my heart. This book has everything. Steam. Romance. Emotions. Sex. All kinds of feels. One of my top reads of 2018! **– Lylah James, author of THE MAFIA AND HIS OBSESSION**

I love THE PROTÉGÉ beyond words can describe...It isn't all

about steamy scenes, it's about real life doubts and lessons. Laszlo will have your heart racing and will leave you panting for more. **– White Rose Stories**

My heart is still wrapped in these two...perfection is hard to come to in a book, but this one succeeded. **– Anne Reads and Reviews**

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Chapter One

Isabeau

I came to say sorry, but it didn't work out that way.

"A cellist?" says the woman with the clipboard, looking between me and my instrument case as if we've ruined her day. "I've only got one cellist on my list and his name is Roger Somers. Who are you? Is Mr. Valmary expecting you?"

My heart bangs like a timpani drum against my ribs hearing his name. Laszlo Valmary, conductor and musical director of the Royal London Symphony Orchestra and my former guardian and mentor. I've come straight from the train, luggage and all, to face the man I haven't spoken to in three years. Now that I'm in London again I feel him on every street I walk down, in every strain of music I hear, in the very air I breathe. But he's not expecting me and I wasn't expecting this, whatever this is that's happening today.

The woman cuts across what I was going to say. "Never mind. The flautist hasn't turned up so the schedule's a mess

anyway. Go through and wait." She gives her clipboard a pained look and marches away, and I'm left in the alcove by the stalls as musicians file past me. I draw back into the shadows letting my thick red hair fall forward, not wanting to be recognized.

The Mayhew Concert Hall in the West End is a huge, stately venue of plush velvet and gold scrollwork. An enormous crystal chandelier hangs overhead and the auditorium is lit by dozens of sconces lining the balconies. The seating goes up and up to the dizzying nosebleed sections where people crowd together for five pounds a head for a glimpse of the orchestra on stage. For those paying upwards of three hundred pounds a ticket for a stalls seat every string of the violins is visible, the notes on the sheet music, the precise movements of Laszlo's large, skilled hands as he conducts. It's a more intimate experience down in the stalls but up in the gods the music is just the same. The music soars.

I breathe in the memory of remembered notes. I've missed this place.

At this time of day on a Thursday I expected to find Laszlo in his office but rehearsals seem to have gone on longer than usual. No, not rehearsals. Auditions by the looks of things. If Laszlo's lost orchestra members then he'll be impatient, distracted. This isn't the time for me to untangle my feelings for him or ask for his help. I should go, but curiosity holds me in place. What has happened? Has a swathe of the ensemble walked out again? He's not the "callow youth" that he was accused of being thirteen years ago when he took over the orchestra. He's a man of thirty-eight and the darling of the British classical music scene. The best musicians in the country clamor to be part of his ensemble.

I listen to threads of conversations going on around me and try to discover what has happened to the orchestra. Then I tell myself to focus and plan what I'm going to say to Laszlo; how I'm going to have to tell him that after all his training and effort I've ruined my musical career before it's even begun.

"Isabeau."

My hand convulsively grips my cello case. I turn and see him standing by the rows of red velvet seats, the man who took me from my home when I was eight years old. Who taught me almost everything I know about music. About life. The man I've spent the last three years in turmoil over. Missing him like crazy. Being angry with him. Wanting him.

I don't need to get close to know that he'll smell like sweet peppercorns and smoky Arabian nights. He looks good, but then he always looks good, tall and lean and smartly dressed in a dark shirt and suit. A sultry mouth and hawkish nose, and not quite enough facial hair to call it a beard but just enough to scratch your nails through and feel the lovely rasping of the bristles. Hazel eyes that always seem to be moments away from warm pleasure or flashing emotion, and fine, sandy brown hair that's too long as usual, growing down to his collar. I used to tease him about that, telling him that he has conductor's hair, the careless mane that *maestros* grow so they can toss it about in passion to the music and look romantic in journalists' black and white photographs. I was the only one who could tease him. One of the few who could make him smile.

Laszlo steps forward, and my heart leaps because I think he's going to fold me in his arms and hold me close like he used to

do. But when he reaches for me his hand closes around my upper arm, cold and hard, and he leads me out of the auditorium and along a corridor without a word. Hopeless tears prickle in my eyes. He's still ashamed of me. I look up at the ceiling and breathe in sharply, a trick that a makeup artist once taught me before a solo student performance, the first one of my career that Laszlo wouldn't be watching. *Suck those tears right back in, pet. Don't go ruining your face.*

He takes us into to his office, closes the door behind us and then just stands there with his back to me, one hand braced against the door. A clock ticks on the wall and I count the seconds in three-four time, a minuet clashing with the pounding of my heart.

I should speak first but I don't know how to unravel the apology that's become snarled on my tongue. The last three years without him have been hell and losing him was like cutting off a limb. No, worse, like taking a sledgehammer to my cello. My world shattered the night of my eighteenth birthday and I can see that he still hasn't forgiven me for what I did. I hid the broken pieces of my heart deep down where no one would ever find them and I don't know what he'll do with them if I show them to him now.

His hand slides down the wood and he turns to me. "Isabeau—"

The door opens and a man puts his head in. I recognize him. Marcus Sabol, Laszlo's first violin and concertmaster. "Laszlo, that oboist… Oh. Hello." Marcus comes to a halt when he sees me. He's a stringy man in his late fifties with a shock of white hair and the energy and bubbliness of a much younger man. We never met as he joined the orchestra after I went to university in Durham, but

I've seen him play. He and Laszlo are perfect together, working in tandem to get the most out of the ensemble.

Marcus' eyes travel from my face to my cello case and back again. "You're Isabeau Laurent. I saw you play in Cambridge last year. Absolutely phenomenal. Are you coming with us?"

He sees my blank face and smiles. "Laszlo didn't even tell you why you're here, did he, he just called his protégé back from university. Former protégé? Anyway, we're trying to put this last-minute fiasco together with half a damn orchestra. Thank god you're here."

Laszlo's expression doesn't change but I see how his jaw clenches. Marcus has just put him in a difficult position. The first violin is the most important person in the orchestra after the conductor and he gets a say in the principal players. I should correct Marcus and come back another time. It's not just the graceful thing to do, it's the only thing to do if I want to put our past behind us and ask for Laszlo's help.

The atmosphere is as tight as a bow string and Marcus' smile dims. "You are here to audition, aren't you?"

There are so many things I want to say to Laszlo. Most importantly that I'm sorry, but also that the happiest time of my life was when I was his protégé. That my musical career has stalled and I don't know what to do about it. That when I play the music doesn't even sound like me anymore.

That I need him in ways he doesn't understand and I'm only just beginning to.

I've never been good at saying what I feel but Laszlo always knew how I felt when I played my cello. It's not everything I want to

say but it’s a start, and if he’s leaving for a tour then I need to say it now.

I lift my chin and look Laszlo in the eye. “Yes. I’m here to audition.”

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Also by Brianna Hale

LITTLE DANCER

PRINCESS BRAT

SOFT LIMITS

MIDNIGHT HUNTER

THE PROTÉGÉ

THE NECROMANCER'S BRIDE

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VOW OF OBEDIENCE

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About the author

There's nothing Brianna Hale likes more than a large, stern alpha male with a super-protective and caring streak, and when she's not writing about them she can usually be found with a book, a cocktail, planning her next trip to a beautiful location or attending the theatre. She believes that pink and empowerment aren't mutually exclusive, and everyday adventures are possible. Brianna lives in London.

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