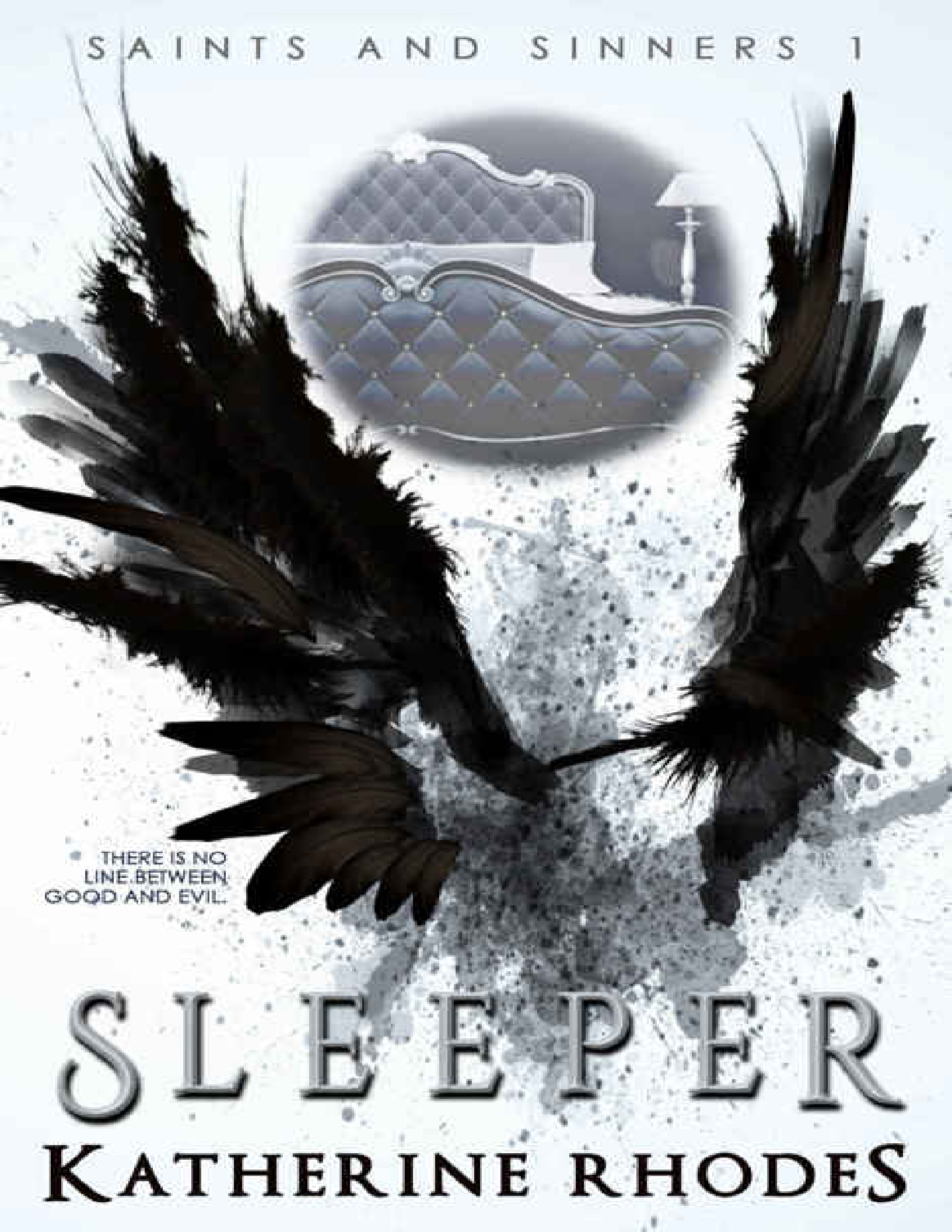
SAINTS AND SINNERS 1



THERE IS NO LINE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL.

SLEEPER

KATHERINE RHODES

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SLEEPER: Saints and Sinners 1

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About the Author
Also by Katherine Rhodes
Also by…

SLEEPER

There is no line between good and evil.

Dr. Wren Warner--successful, respected, and hard-working--doesn't have time for problems. She has patients who count on her.

But all of her problems lie in sleep.

As in, she can't. When she does, she is haunted by memories of fire and swords. It's starting to interfere with her work and she's desperate for answers.

One person may be able to help.

Dr. Fischer Skillman is the best neurologist on the east coast. Not only does he know his way around a brain, but he knows dream disorders better than anyone. Things don't start off well when he pisses Wren off before their first consult.

Until they touch.

Wren and Fischer share a vision neither of them can explain--the first of many. Wren is tired and scared, while Fischer doesn't want to investigate the reasons. When Wren is called in to help the children rescued from a sex trafficking ring, she needs Fischer's help, but he refuses to budge. It's not his job.

Wren and Fischer are pulled into a mystery when Elutheria--one of the rescued girls--proves to be nothing like the others. They find themselves in the center of things that defy understanding-- but they need to understand, to save Ellie.

Wren's story is a slow build, high burn series.

"The soul of the sluggard desireth,
and **hath** nothing: but the soul of the
diligent shall be made fat."

—Proverbs 13:4

Wren

Sleep was an elusive bitch.

It had been for years. I was tired of trying to sleep and getting nowhere, and the whole thing had taken a turn for the worse after…

Well, *after*.

I didn't know if it was worth this waiting room, though.

Whoever had decorated the renowned Doctor Skillman's waiting room had apparently thought zebra stripes and red patterns were a good idea. For people who had disorders like insomnia, shift work disorder, sleep apnea, and narcolepsy?

Not even close.

I wanted to puke. The room was spinning, and I finally forced myself to pick up a magazine, pick a page and lay it over my face to make it stop. I just hoped no one else had put the page on their face.

Germs. *Shiver*.

This doctor was supposed to be the best sleep doctor in Philadelphia, and I needed some damn sleep, soon.

So I waited in the nasty, nausea-inducing room for my name to be called so I could get this mess under control. I was tired of listening to my bosses tell me I had bags under my eyes.

It seemed to be hours later, not minutes, when the receptionist finally called my name.

"Temperance Warner?"

Oh. Shit. I'd forgotten about that. I hustled up to the counter, hoping I didn't trip over the psychedelic rug. "I'm Wren Warner."

She looked at me over her glasses. "Temperance?"

"I don't use that. Can you make a note on the file? I always go by Wren."

"Temperance is a lovely name."

"*I didn't ask if you liked it, just change it.*"

Well, okay. That was what I wanted to say, but I didn't. I managed to hold my tongue. "Could you please make a note? I just don't go by Temperance."

The huff of annoyance made me want to punch her—and the twitch of the muscle in my hand sent a cascade of pain up my arm. That made me unclench my fist and cool off.

She did finally take a Post-it off her *kawaii* kitten popup holder and scribble *Pat. prefers Wren* and slapped it on the top page. Her slap even offended the bobble head nekko she had sitting there, which bobbled violently.

If it were any other time or place, I would have loved to just chat with her about the kawaii cats she had everywhere. I adored the Japanese ultra-cute trend, but she was just a bitch and would probably look down on a thirty-two year old trying to talk pop-culture to her arrogant ass.

Millennial versus millennial, show down of the century.

"Ms. Warner, Doctor Skillman was called away on an emergency. Since you've been waiting so long for this appointment, his junior partner Doctor Rana will be doing your intake. She'll discuss your case with Doctor Skillman when he returns later today."

My blood pressure spiked, and when I clenched my fists and the pain came back, I relaxed. "That's fine."

It actually wasn't, but I wasn't going to wait another six goddamn months until this guy had another 'new patient' opening. People could complain about socialized medicine wait times, but when

you have a referral from another prominent doctor for the first available appointment, and it's still six months…it's all damn moot.

Doctor Dubrovsky had been trying to treat me for a year before he finally conceded I was a mystery. My brain didn't seem to work like anything he'd ever seen, and he couldn't puzzle it out. He handed me a referral to Doctor Skillman, close to home at a hospital in Philadelphia.

If I had known the preeminent sleep disorders doctor was 10 miles from my house instead of 90 up to New York City, I would have gone there first. The internet lied to me. Gasp, feign shock.

"We'll call you back in about five minutes," the receptionist said and motioned me back to the waiting room.

Bloody Zebra Hell, she meant.

I sat down right next to the window so that I didn't have to traverse the dizzying patterns, and waiting, staring at my cell phone on my black pants. It cut out most of the horrible carpeting.

***MiriMiri**: Hey you. S'up?*
***Wrentastical**: Fucker got called out on an emergency.*
***MiriMiri**: Are you for real?*
***Wrentastical**: Really real. I'm seeing some sub.*
***Wrentastical**: The receptionist bitch called me Temperance.*
***MiriMiri**: Oh noes. This is turning into a mess.*
***Wrentastical**: Preach.*

"Wren? Warner?"

I looked up and did a double take. Doctor Rana was a gorgeous Indian woman with long black hair and black-black eyes. Her skin was a warm light brown, and looked soft and satiny. Her lips were pink and sporting just a little gloss and all of my lesbian sensibilities were nailing the meters.

The problem with being bisexual was that my libido just didn't know when to cut the shit.

"That's me," I finally managed.

"Please, follow me," she said, waving me after her.

***Wrentastical**: Shit. Hot doc alert!*
***MiriMiri**: ooh, pix?*
***Wrentastical**: No! HIPAA.*
***MiriMiri**: He have a nice ass?*
***Wrentastical**: SHE has fantastic one.*
***MiriMiri**: …and you're playing for my team today! PIC!*

***Wrentastical**: Hey! Switch hitter here. I saw her first.*

Miriam only sent me back a middle finger emoji. I chuckled as I walked into the patient room with Doctor Rana. She dropped onto a chair and motioned me to the other across from her.

"Welcome to Penn, Ms Warner," the woman said. "I'm Doctor Laxmi Rana and I'm one of Doctor Skillman's partners. I regret he cannot be here as he has been looking forward to speaking to you."

"What happened?" I asked. "I mean, not to belittle your degree, but Doctor Dubrovsky wanted me to see him."

"Oh, you will, absolutely. Just, not today. He had a neurological emergency at CHOP."

"Oh."

I felt a bit sheepish. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia was not a place anyone wanted to go for an emergency. One of the best children's hospitals in the world, I always cringed when I got called in for a consult there. It was undoubtedly A Very Bad Situation.

"So," the doctor said, leaning back in her chair, and running her very long, well-manicured finger over the touchpad. God *damnit*, libido. Sit down! "Let's start with the basics. Temperance Dear Warner." She cocked her head at the sheet, then looked at me, then back at the sheet. "Seriously? Skylar said you were being a bitch about your name? What the hell is wrong with that woman?"

I couldn't stop my laugh. Her perfect, lightly Hindi-accented, enunciation in a near sing-song tone of the last sentence drove home the fact that it wasn't me, and that the receptionist was a bitch. "I'm sorry. That was just rude of me."

"That girl has got to learn not to open her mouth," she said. "So, you go by Wren."

"I do, please."

"Why did you get slapped with such a moniker? If you don't mind my asking? I mean, that's a sentence in English, not a name."

"My grandmother insisted on naming me, and grandma was a free-spirit…"

"Ah, so she didn't give a f—damn?"

I laughed again. "No she didn't. It was one of those times she should have."

The sweet, warm laugh that Doctor Rana let out had me tingling in all the wrong places. Jesus. This was bad.

"You are a social work—oh. You're a *doctor*." The woman looked up, pleasantly surprised.

"PhD in social welfare, yes. I'm probably one of the only ones practicing and not researching."

"What hospital?"

"Saint Chris… Christopher's, and I consult and fill in with CHOP. I work with the trauma teams and domestic violence units."

Doctor Laxmi Rana just stared at me. "I can only imagine that's where your insomnia comes from."

Slowly, I shook my head. "I've battled for sleep since puberty. I'll be good for two or three years and then wham, another bout for six months. Except this time, the bout didn't end. It's been three very long years, and all I want to do is close my eyes and sleep."

I didn't know if she realized she did it, but she reached across the table, and patted my hand without another word.

Her fingers were electric. The tingle they produced rode up my arm, and into my body and straight to the tips of my nipples.

Really glad it was winter and I was wearing a heavy sweater.

We went through the rest of the questions pretty quickly, confirming all my pertinent data and insurance information, making sure that I was who I said I was. Even though I had been mad about Doctor Skillman, this woman was putting me at ease. I liked her. If I had to work with her, I wouldn't have a problem.

That was a lie. I would have a problem. The doctor patient relationship was going to get in the way.

Eventually she pulled her hands away from the keyboard and studied me a moment. "Usually, Doctor Skillman just keeps typing in answers at this point, but he has a note in here that he wants to record the interview." Cocking her head, she pulled her phone out, and laid it on the table. "With your permission."

I nodded, and she pressed the button.

"So, I want to know about your bedroom habits." Her mouth dropped open in shock and hit the stop button, and quickly hit the delete. "I am so sorry, Doctor Warner. I didn't mean to…"

I grabbed her hand as fast as I could without seeming dangerous. "You did." I smirked. "Freudian slip."

She glanced at our hands. A tremor went through hers, and I leaned forward, dropping my voice and making sure the recorder was off. "Are you out?"

She hesitated. "I want to be. My parents won't hear me when I try to tell them."

Running my hand through my hair, I laughed lightly. "I'm falling into counselor mode. Let me end the whole session with just this. Have dinner with me?"

The clear surprise darted across her features and I watched as she glanced down at the phone to make sure that it wasn't recording. When she looked back up at me and saw my knowing grin, she laughed too, then gave me a quick nod.

I pulled out the notepad I had in my purse, and wrote down *St. Tropez Bistro, tomorrow night, eight.*

The hesitation in her fingers was clear, but a moment later she slipped the note off the desk and into her pocket with a more confident nod and a grin. Leaning back into the phone she hit record.

"So, tell me about your evening routine."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Is that sleep doctor speak for 'tell me about your mother'?"

We both burst out laughing.

"I ALWAYS FEEL SO naughty after I enjoy a nice piece of meat."

The double entendre hit both of us at the same time, and we started laughing. Again. A small burp escaped the slim, dark woman across from me and we both laughed *again*.

I was positively exhausted from laughing. It seemed that all Laxmi and I had done was laugh the entire night. I could tell that this date was a relief, an outlet for her. I kept everything light and on the up and up.

That wasn't to say I kept it rated PG. Not at all.

I'd taken her hand when we walked in, and held it all the way to the table. I held it while we were waiting for our drinks, for the appetizer, entrees, desserts, second desserts. Another glass of wine. I'd kicked my shoe off under the table and ran my foot up her leg. I ran a thumb over her knuckles. I dropped a kiss to the top of her head when I excused myself for the ladies room.

"I'm always happy to make you feel naughty," I said, letting a seductive smile crawl across my lips.

"God, I just want to do this all the time," she said, resting her other hand on her full stomach. "It's so nice to feel this unencumbered."

"Doesn't it?" I smiled.

"When did you know?"

I chewed my bottom lip. "I'm actually bi."

She grinned. "Is that…difficult?"

My hand slid down my face, and I nodded. "Sometimes, yeah. The things that turn me on in both sexes don't know when to shut off, and I'm just like…always ready." I shrugged.

"Well, then, I'm glad I swing on one side of the spectrum." She chuckled. "Do your parents know?"

"I'm…" I coughed.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's not that. I was raised by an eccentric spinster aunt who foisted me off to the nannies as often as she could. She was not what you would call affectionate."

"I didn't—"

Holding a hand up I stopped her. "Not your fault. What I do remember of my parents was from when I was seven, and they wouldn't have cared either way. They'd be prouder of the fact that I'm working with kids and helping them."

"How did you lose them?"

"Carbon monoxide. They slept on the first floor, and the gas line cracked with age on a joint. This was before CO-two detectors were all the rage."

And now, came the other question. The one that no one could avoid asking. I waited to see how she would phrase this one.

"So, how did you hurt your hand?"

Ah, polite and direct. A relief. There were people who asked *what the fuck is wrong with you, cripple hand?* and that always put just such a spring in my step and a fist in their stomach. Their balls if they were extra rude and added a few extra swear or cripple jokes.

The way Laxmi asked, I didn't mind.

"Freak accident," I answered. "I was in the car with my aunt, and she blew a tire. The car spun out of control, and smashed into a power transformer on the side of the road. She was killed on impact and when I touched her neck to see if there was still a pulse, the transformer was still live. It was power distribution transformer and it wasn't at capacity, but it still shot about a hundred fifty milliamps

into my hand and fried my neurons, while the wattage made mincemeat of my muscles."

I held the hand up. It was strangely uncorrupted from the outside, merely two burns by my knuckles. All of the burning had been internal.

It was still hard to miss that there was something wrong with it though. It just didn't act like a normal hand ought to. I curled the fingers in and tried to make a fist, but had to stop for the pain. Years of therapy had finally given me enough strength to hold a few things here and there, and the ability to type. Fists, stretching, anything more than typing and using it for a paperweight was it right now.

I was still grateful that it had been my left.

"Does it hurt…"

"If I do something stupid like try to show you it hurts, yes."

Laxmi chuckled. "You're not mad that I asked."

"Laxmi, my hand looks like a prosthesis on a good day and a student 3D-printer rendering of something vaguely resembling a hand on a bad. I'm so used to it."

She reached her other hand out and twined her fingers between mine. "You can feel that?"

Could I fucking ever. "Yes."

"And it doesn't hurt?"

"Not right now, no."

She ran her thumb up and down the outside of mine and just watched the motion. Every part of me was lit up and I wanted to find out if there was more she could light up. "Come back to my place?"

Her gaze snapped to mine, and I swore that I could see a bright flame behind her dark eyes. "Yes."

The check was easy to get since they wanted us to free up the table, and we were out the door and to my car less than five minutes later.

I leaned over to open the door for her and found myself staring into those black, black eyes. The light from the streetlamps glinted there, and I gave in.

Pressing her back against the metal and window behind her, I framed her body with mine. I watched as her tongue darted out to wet her lips. It seemed to happen in slow motion, and every part of me tingled.

"I'm going to kiss you, Laxi," I whispered, watching her.

"Yes, please…" The answer was quiet in the night air, but there was no doubt that she said yes, and from the way she was trembling slightly, she was frightened but not about to back out of this.

I slanted my lips across hers and then kept the kiss light. Parting my lips, I gave her sweet small kisses, let just our breath mingle, and she followed exactly, though her inexperience was clear.

Which then made me think…

"Have you ever kissed another woman?"

Her embarrassment hit me like a truck and I could feel her starting to pull back to get away from me. I laid a hand on her arm, anchoring her there.

"No, Laxmi. Talk to me." I pressed a little kiss to the corner of her mouth.

"You're my first," she breathed.

A bloom of heat rushed from my center out to all my fingers and toes. "You've never gone home with another woman…"

Her cheek brushed against mine and I knew she was shaking her head in the negative. "Never."

My lips found the shell of her ear and I nibbled there a moment. "I just wanted to know how much experience you had. I would still like you to come home with me." I pulled back to see the look in her eyes. It was the same burning intensity they'd had all night.

"Yes, please."

The heat was back in my stomach, and I brushed my lips over hers, just a little "Climb in, Laxmi. I live just over in Haddonfield. We'll be there in just ten minutes."

I popped the handle, opened the door, and she sank into the seat there. A wonderful sense of desire settled over me. The chance to corrupt her in to the world of sex, to be the first to explore that lovely, warm figure. The first to make her scream for God, or me.

The drive was quick this time of night. From the bank of the Schuykill across the quiet parts of the city we were up and over the Ben Franklin, and zipped through Camden into Collingswood. I took some back roads, pulling my car to a halt in front of the house I shared with Miriam.

Laxmi had held my hand the whole drive.

Glancing at the house, I could see the right porch light was on. Coast was clear—she was probably out for the night. Turning the en-

gine off, I was around the car and waiting for her with a hand to help her out.

As soon as we were inside the house, I closed the door, dropped my purse to the floor, and Laxmi's next to it. Once again, I framed her with my arms—this time against the wall in the hallway.

This time, my kiss was anything but chaste. I parted her lips with mine, and stole in to stroke her tongue with mine. She *moaned* and I suddenly just wanted both of us naked in my bed.

The door behind me opened as my phone in my purse started playing the ring tone for a CHOP consult.

I slammed my hand on the wall as I pulled back from the kiss.

"Shit."

Miriam was standing in the door, knob in hand looking contrite, but I ignored her and grabbed the purse off the floor and fished out the phone.

"Doctor Warner."

"Sorry, Doc. We got a bad one coming in. There's a little sister who saw everything. Officer says she just keeps shrieking, and the mother said that the only—"

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," I said, cutting off the nurse and ending the call. I let it slip out of my hand and hit the hallway table with a dull thud. I banged my head on the wall once and looked over at my date.

"Laxmi…"

She held up a hand. "I understand. Go."

"But—"

As the dark haired beauty I had *almost* gotten into my bed said, "I can take an Uber home." Miriam spoke up from the doorway, "I'll take her home."

Nodding at Miriam, I put a hand on Laxmi's cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm a doctor, too, don't forget that." She smiled, and I could tell that she was genuinely not upset that I was called in. "It could have been me. I do neuro consults at Penn Med."

"The first person I meet who understands it…" I grumbled. "Miriam, I'll give you gas."

"No, it's fine," she said. "Just go. The kids need you."

I leaned and gave Laxmi a good peck—which strangely felt like the last kiss I would give her—and grabbed my purse and phone.

“I’ll call you, Laxi!”

I darted out the door.

Fischer

I ripped the scrub cap off my head and threw it in the hamper. I scrubbed my eyes, yawned, and shook my head.

"Get it?"

Glancing up, I saw the head of emergency surgery standing there, arms folded. There was nervous energy rolling off him even though he looked calm and collected.

"Got it." I sighed. "You knew I would. That's why you called me."

"You're a cocky bastard, you know that?"

"Am I? Or do I just spend enough time rooting around in people's brains to know what I'm doing?"

Gutiérrez dropped his arms and the nervousness flowed away from him. I *liked* that about him. He worried about each and every child that came through his emergency room—and more about the ones that were truly in danger.

"You have the social worker coming in?"

"I have Doctor Warner coming in for the sister. I have a call in to Paige Domingues for DHS, and I had called you about the little boy."

I turned on the water to scrub out. "The mother? Father?"

"The mother is sitting in the waiting room, the father is in the tank."

Sighing, I hung my head. "Bets?"

"She'll refuse charges. Take him back. Things will settle for the boy while he recovers from fucking brain surgery, but the little girl is going to be his target until she either gets hurt or the kid recovers." He folded his arms again. "Are we getting a full recovery on the boy?"

Staring down into the sink, I hedge my answer until I realized he wasn't moving until I said something. "I'm optimistic for a full recovery."

"That bad?"

"I had to *wing* brain surgery. So yes. That bad." I pulled the bloodied scrubs off. "I'm done here."

"I need you to—"

I stared hard at Gutiérrez. "No. I was here to do the surgery and that's it."

"You could be the difference—"

"No. That's the way it is, and that's the way it's going to be. I won't talk to anyone about anything. That's the deal."

"Fisch…"

The scrubs got tossed in the bin. "Deal. Just deal. I got the kid back from the dead."

Pushing past Gutiérrez, I shoved into the hallway and strode away from him. The locker room wasn't too far away, but I had to be fast—Pablo Gutiérrez was going to be after me to talk to Domingues, and that other doctor, Warner.

I had successfully managed to avoid meeting him. I hoped to continue that streak. From what I'd heard, Warner was no one to eff with when it came to DHS. Thankfully, he was only a consult here.

The locker room should have been empty. It was nearly two in the morning and there shouldn't have been anyone but the regulars, and they were all on shift at this point.

There was no mistaking the fabulous ass that was framed between the bench and the locker as I walked in. I had only a few sec-

onds to admire it before the person straightened and turned around. She jumped and clutched at her chest.

I'd thought the ass nice—there was so much more.

"I'm sorry," I managed.

God, she was…

I couldn't find the words for her. Gorgeous wasn't right, beautiful wasn't either. Ephemeral was too much for her earthiness, and there was nothing coming to me. She had shocking green eyes, bright and curious, and brown hair with highlights that were clearly from a salon, but not cheaply done. Her skin was smooth, unblemished. And it looked creamy, like a taste of it would dance on the tongue for hours, reminding a person of the flavor of peaches and scents of summer.

Holy crap, where had that come from?

That, *and* the chubby I was now sporting.

"It's fine," she said after getting herself under control. "Just didn't expect to have anyone walk in this late."

"I'm not usually here this late," I answered. "Just getting ready to go."

She nodded. "Wish I was. Got called in from an incredible date…"

"Damn." I knew that feeling. Hustling along before Domingues showed up, I popped the locker open and grabbed my coat and messenger bag. "Good luck, Doctor. I have to hustle."

She nodded and closed her own locker as the door behind me opened.

"Hey, Wren!"

Well, fuck. I hadn't made it.

The funny thing was, hearing the woman's dulcet tones behind me, there was a pained looked on the other woman's face. Curious? She wasn't fond of Paige either?

"Hi, Paige. Did you just get here?"

"I did…"

The woman snagged her folio and purse and dodged around me. "I'll catch you later. Nice meeting you!" She was out the door.

"Well, that was rude," Paige said. "Were you on the Barrows boy, Fischer? I'll need to talk to you if you were. There's a lot about this case that you can help me with if you talk to me about the results of the—"

"No." I couldn't get out of there fast enough. The door was seriously in my way and I banged it all the way open.

"Fisch—"

"I said no." Hauling ass down the hall, I didn't even bother trying to get an elevator. I just went straight to the stairs and walked down.

There was no way I was getting caught up in all that. It wasn't my business. My business was the brain. No matter how they got there, no matter where they were going, my business was the brain.

Despite my best effort, I still wasn't free and clear. Gutiérrez was standing next to the door, his arms folded over his chest. Again.

"What is your problem, Fisch?" His voice was quiet and angry. "You gave the same run down I did on that kid, and yet you won't help us put that abuser away. You won't ever help us when there is a clear case of abuse or neglect or something just wrong."

"It's not my business."

He stalked closer to me. "You did an eight hour surgery on that kid's brain and you think how he got there and where he's going is not your business."

"I am in the business of repairing. Not judging."

"You're not judging, you're saving a life. You're helping someone who can't *do* anything about their predicament to get out of a shit situation. The kid is five. Five, and had his brain reconstructed thanks to you and whatever blunt instrument his father could find."

"I am a doctor. Not a social worker, not a psychologist. I had to cancel appointments at my office to save his life. And I did. What more do you want?"

"A fucking spark of humanity," Gutiérrez snapped. "Just one goddamn spark of it." He stepped closer. "That kid is going to die if he goes back to the father. You can stop that."

Quirking an eyebrow, I stared at him. "Can I?"

"You can and you fucking know it."

"I can't take away from my practice—"

"*Practice two things in your dealings with disease: either help or do not harm the patient*."

"Don't throw the Epidemics at me," I snapped. "I did not help someone today, and may have caused harm by not being at her appointment. For one of the most fascinating case I have ever been referred."

Turning so I could slip by him, he didn't try to stop me. But he wasn't done with me.

"You're all about the prestige, eh, Doctor Strange?" I tossed a middle finger at him without turning around. "Fine. Good to know. Next time, I'll skip your name on the consult list."

That made me stop and walk back to him. "If you want them to die? You go right ahead and do that. I will save every life I can, if you call me. I will *not* be caught up in the bureaucratic bullshit that comes after this."

"Cuts into your golf time, you lazy bastard?"

"Fuck you, Pablo. I am the best neurosurgeon in this town and you know it."

"The problem, Fisch, is that you know it, too." He walked backward away from me. "I'm skipping you, dude. Next time, you're not first. Next time, don't be afraid to tell me no because the prestige isn't there helping a five year old not only live, but escape the fucking monsters that brought him here."

He spun on his heal and strode back inside.

"You'll let them die?"

Gutiérrez stopped in the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder. "No. Maybe Corman's hand isn't as exacting as yours, but I'm giving them the chance to live beyond your perfect operating room. See you around, Fisch."

The head of emergency surgery of one of the best children's hospitals in the world had just dismissed me. All because I wouldn't speak to his precious social team.

Fuck that. I didn't do bureaucracy.

Dr. Emil Corman would do just fine.

"SKYLAR, did you confirm the appointment with Temperance Warner?"

She looked up at me, batted her eyes and tried to smile seductively. "Yes, Doctor."

Snatching the file off her desk, I walked away. "What time did she say she would be here?"

"She asked for two, Doctor. She said she needed some sleep."

"Sleeping until two? Well, there was part of the problem." I shook my head.

"Kind of lazy," Skylar said, giving me this bizarre, nearly anime-style eyes with a sultry look.

I made a mental note to think about replacing her soon. She was just way too interested in getting on my dick and in my bank account.

After closing the door on the office and making myself a cup of coffee, I flipped open the file on Warner, Temperance Dear to find the notes Laxmi had left for me. As always, my associate had taken notes that were without equal. The woman had such an instinct for patient care I was so glad she had fallen into my lap at the university.

When Gutierrez had called me the day before, I had the secretary cancel all the appointments for the day, except this woman's. She had been a thrilling case from the day her file crossed my desk. Dubrovsky and I were best friends in college, research buddies, coauthors on quite a few papers.

We approached problems differently, and we did this often: swapped patients. Luck had us each settling just 90 miles apart, and one Acela train ride to each other.

The human brain fascinated me, endlessly. And while I was a world class neurosurgeon, I was more taken by the way conscious and the subconscious worked. Sleep could be so damned hard to achieve for some people and others couldn't stay awake.

This woman couldn't fall asleep. According to the notes that Rana had left, she slept maybe two hours a night, and that was usually when she just dropped out in the middle of the night. Just one cycle of REM, but that was more than some people got.

Dub's usual method of split sleep for this situation didn't work. Normally, if a person could get the one cycle, there was a way to get a second one in during the night part of the cycle. Getting up between them, reading, getting a glass of water, checking email or the internet, and then down for the second. It wasn't ideal, but two cycles of REM were really helpful for most insomniacs.

She couldn't get the second one.

The attack had been lasting for almost three years. Medicines didn't help. Hypnosis hadn't helped. Music, relaxation, even a short course of ECT hadn't done anything. It just kept on. She just stayed awake.

The speaker on the phone beeped and Skylar's voice filled the room. "Doctor, your first appointment is here."

I flipped the file closed and started the day, Warner's case flitting through my mind the whole day. I also realized I was doing that to keep everything that Pablo Gutierrez had barked at me last night.

No. Bureaucracy.

Midway through the day I walked into the waiting room to grab one of the seltzers we kept for the patients, and found the woman from the night before sitting there, shielding her eyes, half reading a magazine.

What the hell had her name been? Dominguez had called her… Birdy? Sparrow? Wren!

"Excuse me, Wren?"

She looked up, and her jaw hit the floor. "Doctor Fischer?"

"Skillman," I said automatically, holding my hand out for her to shake. "Doctor Fischer Skillman."

Wren

Paige and I spent hours going between the mother and the sister and the recovery room the little boy had been in. Trying to convince the mother to go to Paige's "Holier Than Thou" domestic violence shelter, while trying to make sure that the little boy would have all the coverage he needed for recovery.

It had been a nightmare. The mother was telling us the whole thing had been an accident, the father had turned at the wrong moment and sent him flying into the edge of a sharp table. The simplicity of that story had rung all the wrong bells on my radar and it took me sending Paige to get water for the little girl to finally get the truth out of the mother.

The father had used the base of the lamp to hit the kid right in his temple because he'd asked for a glass of water. But it wasn't the request that set the father off—it was that he had come into the bedroom while her husband had been 'doing sex to her.'

Also known as marital rape.

He hadn't let her call 9-1-1. He had finished what he was doing before he let her up to check on the kid. And then they drove the kid there.

Thankfully, as soon as the officers had seen the wound on the kid, they had hauled the father off.

In the end, though, the mother didn't want to press charges. She just shook her head when the detective came to talk to her. Despite everything she had told me, she just didn't know how to get out of the situation.

And Paige was no help in that regard. At all.

She was a shining example of how not to handle domestic violence. Her Northeast shelter was for the wealthy woman who had some money, who didn't understand relying completely on their husband for everything. She didn't understand the psychological and economic links between abuser and abused. She just thought that these women could walk as they pleased.

It was nothing like that for the inner-city victims. They were probably in the same cycle their parents had been in, or worse. Some of these women, like the mother last night, could barely write and read. They survived. Because that's what they knew how to do. And if their partner hit them once in a while, well…they'd try to do better next time.

And Paige's pitch for her shelter was entirely too forceful. Had I know Gutierrez was going to call her in, I would have told him not to. Not until I could get there and assess the situation.

I stood in the bay doors as the father jerked the car to the curb and shoved the door open. The mother had held the door open until the little girl had buckled her booster seat, and then she climbed in, slamming the back door first, and then her door.

The car had peeled away as the mother desperately buckled her belt.

I sincerely hoped no one in that car came back in a body bag. I also hoped that she found the strength and support to break away from him. To my way of thinking, even abject poverty was better than being controlled and beaten. But that was me. Wealthy and privileged. I didn't pretend it was anything else.

Paige liked to pretend she knew.

I shook my head walking back to my car as the sun started to brighten the horizon over New Jersey. Paige was the perfect example

of someone who was absolutely one of the most beautiful people I'd ever seen—and her soul was just shallow. She was so proud of that shelter and her work that there was no way she really understood what she was doing. I didn't wish her ill, but I wished she wouldn't hang around all of the doctors, extolling her virtues.

I'd be roped into her Liberty Daughters fundraiser in a few months—only because that would fully fund her shelter for the year, and the overflow would go to the other shelters around the city. Especially WomenTogether, a favorite of mine and Miriam's for the network of unmarked houses that shuttled the women out of the city and into truly safe situations.

She made my job with these kids so fucking hard.

"You okay, Warner?" Gutierrez asked.

"I'm fine, but this situation is bullshit. What happened with the surgeon?"

He shook his head and walked away from me. "He's a dick. That's all. Lazy, entitled dick."

I pulled up to my house, with the sun already in the sky. I pulled up behind Miriam's car and sat there for a moment. That poor kid. I wanted to do so much more than just hope she'd be okay. I wanted to make sure that she and her brother were far away from that useless thing that called itself their father.

The flash of black and white across my vision and the sudden crack of my neck warned me there was a migraine coming, and it was time for some good drugs.

The migraines had become more frequent with the insomnia, which had kicked into high gear after the freak accident. I was pretty sure that they were all interconnected, but there was no way to prove it. I took supplements, which kept most of them at bay, but after a night like last night, I would need the prescription and about six hours.

Would it be sleep? Who the fuck knew, but it would be in my dark bedroom with a cool jell mask. For sure.

Swinging the door open, I trudged up to the front door and let myself in. I tried to remember what day it was, and the word 'Saturday' kept knocking around my brain. That meant Miriam would be home.

The purse and messenger bag got dropped on to my part of the table there, and I kicked off my shoes. I was still wearing the damn

outfit from my date and I wasn't ready to crawl into bed yet.

My pills were in the kitchen, as was a toaster Eggo and a glass of cranberry juice. My stomach grumbled in agreement and I trudged into the kitchen.

My brain took a second to process what I was seeing. For some reason, Miriam's head was hanging off the end of the table, her eyes closed, moans escaping her mouth. Her robe was wide open and there was a hand on her breast, playing with her nipple. There was something on the other end of the table moving around…

Frankly, I didn't care. Not really. I walked around the table to the cabinet that held my medicine. I opened it, and pulled out the blister pack that held the sanity saving Maxalt. Walking back to the fridge, the moaning stopped behind me while I pulled out my cranberry juice and poured some into a glass I had snagged from the dish drain. The pill pushed out through the back of the foil, I chucked it in my mouth and washed it down with the juice.

It could be twenty minutes, or it could be an hour before it kicked in.

Rubbing my forehead, I turned and was treated to the whole scene on the table, and it finally started to congeal in my brain what was going on.

Sex. Sex was happening on my kitchen table.

Or it had been moments before. Now, Miriam and Laxmi were looking at me, horrified and contrite.

Laxmi?

I blinked a few times and cocked my head. I considered them, then grabbed my glass and walked out of the kitchen toward my room. "No Eggos for me this morning."

I closed the door, and pulled out a washcloth, dampening it with cool water. I dropped it in the cheap plastic bag I kept in the cabinet and slopped it across my forehead as I laid down on the bed.

There was a tap on the door.

"I hope you at least made her come!" I yelled.

Without my permission the door creaked open. I managed to lift my head enough to see the dark, warm features of Laxmi framed below the cool, bright colors of my housemate and best friend.

I dropped my head back. "I can't stop you from coming in. Just don't be naked, okay?"

The two of them snaked into the room and walked to the side of the bed. Miriam sat, and Laxmi stood, both of them looking like the cat that swallowed the canary.

I burst out laughing when my brain spit out that analogy, and saw the two of them exchange a glance. I lowered the washcloth over my eyes again as the pain from the laugh slashed through my head.

"I don't care, you two."

"Can we explain?"

Peeking out, I giggled. "Explain what? Laxi's head was in your pussy on the kitchen table. I don't think there's a lot to be explained there."

"I'm sorry?" Miriam said.

"For?"

Miriam looked confused. "For fucking your date?"

Laxmi's blush was visible. I looked between them, and dropped the cloth again. "I have a migraine coming on. Did you at least have fun with each other?" I peeked again. "Did you know she was a virgin?"

"I found out pretty quick," she answered.

"We tried not to," Laxmi added.

"We really *really* tried not to."

I chuckled in the cool darkness. "Didn't work, eh?"

Even though I finally didn't lift the washcloth, I could feel the look they shared. That was interesting.

"When I went to shake her hand to say goodnight, we just…connected," Laxmi said. Her hand landed on my ankle and a tingle traveled through me. "If you want me to go, I will."

"No, for fuck's sake no. I'm fine with this. Miriam needed a little kitty in her life, it's been a long time. I'm not mad. I'm tired. Go have fun. The world is an oyster, and I'll find another one to suck out."

"Holy shit." Laxmi laughed.

Miriam chuckled, and I felt her lift off the bed. "You'll get used to her humor after a while. We're going to Amy's Omelet House for too much for breakfast. Coming?"

"I could swear you just ate."

"Oh, migod!" Laxmi laughed again.

"True story." They drifted toward the door. "I plan on eating all day." I almost heard her waggle her eyebrows and Laxmi's cry of

embarrassment again.

"I gotta sleep this shit off," I answered. "But have a few strips of bacon for me."

About an hour and at least two screaming orgasms later, my former date and my best friend walked out the front door, leaving me in silence for about five minutes.

The jangle of the phone in my pants was deafening as the migraine really started to kick in. I pulled it out and thumbed it to answer. "What?"

"Temperance Warner?"

"Speaking."

"This is Doctor Skillman's office. He'd like to know if you could come in this morning."

I squinted. "It's Saturday, right?"

"Yes, but he has Saturday hours every other week."

"Oh. Uh, sure. But can I have the last appointment of the day? I need to get some rest."

"Ironic, from an insomniac."

"Last appointment. What time?"

"One-thirty."

"I'll be there at two." I swiped the connection closed, set an alarm for one in the afternoon, and waited for the drugs to kick in.

INSTEAD OF WAITING for the alarm to go off, I crawled off the bed and showered. I needed to just try and feel a little more human. I slapped on a pair of jeans and headed down to the PATCO station. It might run less often, but I could sit there and enjoy my damn Wawa coffee and just zone out instead of trying to play dodge'em with the weekend drivers in the city.

The PATCO line wasn't the most robust public transportation system as it only had one line. But that line let me off at 10th and Locust and walk to Jefferson station, and take the Septa trains to University City. The office building with Dr. Skillman's main office was just outside Penn Med's main campus in University City.

The bloodstained zebra hell wasn't any better today when I walked in. It could have been even a little worse because I was so ex-

hausted. I tried the same trick again, with the magazine and the hand and blocking out the riotous hell. I was honestly afraid it was going to counteract the migraine meds.

"Excuse me, Wren?"

I'd been so distracted by trying not to vomit and get a headache again, I hadn't heard the man walk across the room and get within just two feet of me. And when I looked up, I nearly swallowed my own tongue. "Doctor Fischer?"

He nodded and held out his hand. "Skillman. Doctor Fischer Skillman."

"Holy shit, you're Doctor Skillman?"

Perhaps not my finest professional introduction, but Paige the Prick had gone on about him for hours the night before. Whenever she had a chance to bend my ear, she started going off on the guy. He was entitled, lazy, good for nothing, ignorant, selfish.

He was also the extremely sexy, exquisitely handsome, almost Raphaelite beauty who had been ogling my ass the night before in the locker room. In the light of day in his waiting room, I could see the black, black eastern Mediterranean hair with the contrasting shocking light blue Norwegian eyes, and the warm, soft glow of Spanish skin. He was not overly tall, but no one would mistake him for short, at all. His shoulders were broad enough to pull lightly at the button down he was wearing, and his contours ran down to a trim waist.

This guy was the stuff of very, very dirty dreams.

And, apparently, my sleep doctor.

Fabulous.

"Doctor Wren Warner." I finally managed to cough out the words and grasp the hand he had held out.

—his hips thrust again and again, driving his massive cock deep inside me. The fine sheen of sweat made him glow almost gold in the setting sun.

"Anything for you, Temperance. If I have to kill a thousand demons and fight the armies of El, we will do anything for you."

Fingers ran gently down my cheek, and his lips pressed to mine as he stole into my mouth. A hand found my clit and teased me indelicately, drawing out a scream of pleasure from my body—

We both leapt back, and I ran an exhausted hand over my face. The medicine got rid of the pain, by it didn't always get rid of everything else, including flash hallucinations and blackouts.

This time, apparently my brain couldn't wait for the dirty dreams until I actually fell asleep.

"What the fuck was that?" he whispered harshly.

I shrugged. "Just a…" My voice trailed off. Wait. *Wait.* "You saw that too?"

"Saw? I felt it in my whole body."

I stared at his hand, still in the position I'd yanked away from. "I get weird hallucinations because of the insomnia and migraines. But they're always mine. Just mine. You can't see my mind, only my brain…"

He stared down at his hand as well. "That was raucously filthy and intimate."

"They're just hallucinations." I heard the quiver in my voice.

Doctor Skillman dropped his hand and shoved it into his pocket. "Come on back, and let's get going on this. Doctor Rana gave me a lot of information from your interview yesterday, but I need more information."

He walked over and held the door open.

I tripped. Halfway across the psychedelic zebra meltdown that was the rug, I tripped and fell.

Doctor Skillman was over to me in an instant. "Are you okay?"

I looked up at him. "Do you have any idea how fucking stupid it is to have this print in a waiting room that services people who have neurological and sleep disorders?! I'm already fucked up in the head, and then I have to deal with zebra vomit between the chair and the door!"

He was shocked, but it didn't stop him from helping me to my feet. "I…trusted Skylar to…"

"Your idiot receptionist? Did you even walk in here after it was decorated? Did you even look at the designs?"

"I'm busy…"

"You're a fucking doctor and you'd better pay attention to whole patient care, not just what's in the file."

What the hell was wrong with me? I never treated colleagues like this. Then again, this was the second time I was in his office and I'd tripped on nothing.

"You definitely need sleep," he nodded, brushing off my rudeness.

I might sleep better if you joined me in the bed.

Oh, come on. I really had to have a talk with my libido. Just because it felt like that cock was cleaving me in two in that hallucination, didn't mean that was reality.

He pulled the door open motioning me through and I could see that *Skylar* had left for the day. When? I hadn't been there that long. Just distracted by the carpet.

God, he was so right. I need sleep. So much sleep.

Leading me to his office, which was plush and comfortable looking, he motioned me to the couch. Sitting behind the desk, he flipped my massive file open and pulled out Laxmi's…*Doctor Rana's* notes.

"I've read your whole file from front to back, Doctor Warner. I apologize that I didn't realize it was you last night. I wouldn't have tried to rush away."

I gave a snort. "Paige does that to people."

His smirk was panty-melting. I didn't need any more melted panties courtesy of this office. "She does, doesn't she? Have you been roped into her charity balls?"

"I'm a social worker, Doctor Skillman. I am one of the few and only practicing doctors in social work. I was the first person she tossed the lasso at," I answered. "I'm an 'ooh, shiny!' for her."

He chuckled and nodded and made my skin tingle delightfully. "So, I have a few additional questions that Doctor Rana may not have thought to ask, and we'll see what we can do about this intractable insomnia." He pulled out a recorder, just like Lax—Doctor Rana's and a legal pad. "Physiologically, you're sound. Menses?"

A favorite question when asked from a very hot doctor who wanted to get to know me and was making my nipples tingles. "Regular, and regulated."

"How?"

"Pill."

He scribbled. "The migraines?"

"Two, three times a week. I can usually catch them and medicate them away. Also on preventatives of vitamin B and magnesium. I hallucinate from them, because I can't sleep. It's like a waking dream."

A waking filthy dream, because *Jesus Christ*.

"Have you always had the migraines?"

"Since I was six. They pick up and slack off in waves. Or they did. They're pretty regular now."

"Sleep aids?"

"Do you want the list, or just the side effects that have me off them in weeks?"

After another quick doodle, he shook his head. "Side effect of sleep medication is insomnia. I know." Running his finger down the page in front of him, my stupid libido coming up with other better things for his finger to run down, he hmm'ed and mm'ed, and stopped near the bottom. "You're on Singulair, but I don't see anything about allergies or asthma."

"It was Doctor Dubrovsky's idea."

"For?"

"When I dream, I sleep. If I can fall asleep long enough to catch REM, I will sleep like the damn dead. Minimum of eight hours, I've gone as long as twenty-four."

The comprehension lit up his eyes. "One of the biggest side effects of Singulair is vivid dreams."

"So if we forced the REM with the side effect…"

His head bobbed in approval. "That's pretty damn ingenious of Dubrovsky." Back to the notepad he scribbled something down again. "Your last sleep test?"

"Eighteen months. We were doing them every six weeks for that long and nothing was showing up, and I rarely fell asleep."

"Apnea machine?"

"No change."

"Do the hallucinations always coincide with the migraines?"

Only when you touch me and make me think about a potentially huge dick I can ride all night?

"Not always, but they happen more often when they do coincide."

He put the pen down. "You've been through all these questions dozens of times, haven't you?"

I nodded. "I am an enigma, Doctor. I'm a high-level journal study. I'm used to all of this. The only real rest I get is when I catch one of those dreams. And I haven't in nearly three months. I'm on the edge of desperate, and it's going to start pushing me into depression soon. I don't want to have to give up what I do because I can't close my fucking eyes." Or shut off my *fucking* libido.

"Are you opposed to another round of tests?"

"Hey, why not."

He glanced at the door and raised his voice, “Doctor—” he cut himself off. “Fuck.” He looked horrified at the swear, but I waved it off. “Sorry. My associate seems to have disappeared for her usual Saturday hours.”

I coughed, and he eyeballed me.

This was ridiculous. I ran a hand down my face, and let out a breath. “Look, Laxmi and I hit it off when I was here yesterday and we went on a date. I left her at my place and she and my roommate hit it off even better. She might be at my house right now. They went out for breakfast while I tried to beat this migraine.”

Fischer

She was gay.

"You're gay?"

Could I possibly be anymore unprofessional with this woman? At this point I was glad I could manage to keep addressing her as doctor.

To that point, all I had wanted to do with this beautiful creature in front of me was lay her back on that couch and fuck her senseless. She was curved in all the right places: plump breasts, rounded hips for holding on, legs that were long, but not lean. She could probably kick some serious ass with those gorgeous calves.

And, she was gay.

My dick, which had been hard as a rock all this time, twitched in disappointment and started to deflate.

"I'm bi, actually."

And, the hard-on was back.

Be professional, asshole.

"You're confident in that?"

She nodded. “I never had parents who could disapprove and my aunt who raised me was an absolute nut and didn’t care. I brought home girls and boys, and she made them all tomato sandwiches on white bread and poured them glasses of SunnyD like it was still 1979.”

The easy manner this woman had was working my professional façade hard. She was also keeping my dick hard. This was insane.

I cleared my throat. “So we don’t have to worry about that as a potential source of anxiety.”

She was not confused in anyway, judging my her breathy, husky, quietly suggestive answer. “I wouldn’t say that.”

Oh. Well.

I swallowed hard. I really wanted this erection to stop twitching so I could think. The images that had flashed through my head when we shook hands had been utterly indecent and I wanted to see more.

I had never had that happen before, but I wasn’t willing to dismiss something like that as a mere coincidence or one off. The brain was one of the least understood, most misunderstood organ. After all of my years of research and practice, I was loathe to dismiss anything at all like that. She had clearly been shaken by our shared hallucination, which was why I had not pursued it. The truth was, I wanted to shake her hand again and see what happened.

Professionally, and personally.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to go for another round of tests, just so I can have a fresh view of what’s going on in there. As for sleeping more… I’m not sure what we can or want to do before that. You’ve been through so much therapy and so many drugs that I’m not keen on the idea of changing anything until I have a bigger picture.”

She nodded. “I appreciate that. Every time we switch up a routine, it seems that my sleep suffers even more. Getting the two hours I usually do now is a vast improvement over previous situations.”

“Then we’ll start with the tests. MRI, CAT, all with contrast. I’ll have Skylar set them up and send you the time and date for each.”

“Open MRI, please.”

“Don’t like to be closed in?”

“I don’t like to hear the banging without a clear escape. It intrudes on what little sleep I get and drags me into a nightmare.”

I scribbled down that in the notes. "Nightmares. Get them often?"

"About half of my dreams are nightmares."

"Do you get trapped in those?"

"Yes." I saw the shiver run through her body. "They're horrible. Cruel. Dark, blazing heat. Closed. I'm always stuck, and there's a rhythmic banging that starts to drive me out of my mind. I can't get out of the box I'm in, and I can't get out of the dream."

There was the anxiety that I had been looking for. I wrote down a few notes and schooled my reaction to her terror at the nightmare. It might be the only thing that triggered it, which meant this might be a 'doctor, heal thyself' situation—as in she needed to talk to therapist to get beyond it. But for the moment, I wanted to run more tests to eliminate problems.

"Scotch. Double, straight."

Wes was shocked at my order, but I needed something. I would have drunk gasoline at that point if it calmed me down.

"That bad?" He put the glass on the counter and poured my four fingers of the best MacCallan he had hidden, after checking over his shoulder for Matthew.

"This patient," I said.

"Hard case?"

"Well, something is hard."

Pushing the glass at me on the napkin, he raised an eyebrow. "Doctor patient lines being crossed?"

"She is medically fascinating, and personally I feel like I'm standing next to a whirlpool being sucked in. She's incredibly hot, incredibly intelligent, and incredibly screwed with her insomnia."

Wes smiled. "Sounds like you're screwed too."

I stabbed the counter with my finger. "She had no problem crossing the line with Laxmi."

"She's a lesbian?"

I took a hard swig of the scotch, and the warm burn felt good. "She plays for both teams."

"Is she interested in the contract you're offering for your team?"

"I have no idea." I let out a breath and slumped. "I don't want to lose her as a patient. I don't get challenges like hers every day. But God, I'd love to slip into bed with her."

"My suggestion? Don't tip the scales, Doc. Keep the patient. Mary Palm and her five sisters will just have to do the trick for now."

I nodded. "I don't know her. Getting tangled like that risks my license. I've already fucked up at CHOP, and this is just going to make everything worse."

Wes pulled back. "Wait. What did you do at CHOP?"

"Fucked up?"

He cocked his head, and I sighed.

"I basically told off Gutierrez last night. He wanted me to testify for the kid on the table. I stitched him up, I didn't see what else I had to do."

"And you don't do bureaucracy."

Twisting my head, I watched the man. "Am I that predictable?"

"It's a mantra with you, Doc. You do what you do best and leave the rest to the others. I've heard you say it every time you've come in here after a tough case." He wiped the bar top even though there was nothing there to clean off. "If I might, Doctor Skillman, you might want to consider revisiting that policy. You don't have to do anything in court but report what you did and what you saw. They never ask you to conjecture on what got them there, or where they would go after. Just the facts, ma'am."

It was hard to explain my aversion to the bullshit of the courts to people who hadn't been through *the incident* with me. Wes probably knew the most about it, and he was getting tired of my broken record about staying out of it.

"When someone you love is let down by the courts, and you have to bury them because of that…"

"Isn't it worth it try and save them? The way he couldn't be?"

"It's more than that…"

Wes leaned forward. "It's lazy, Doc. You're being a coward. And you can smash whatever bottle you like over my head, but that's the way I see it." He crooked an eyebrow at me. "And you'd damn well better go talk to Gutierrez. You know you're the best brain surgeon in the city. They need you. A little humility wouldn't kill you."

"You're probably right, Wes."

Chuckling and looking for Matthew again, he refilled my glass. "I'm the bartender, I'm always right."

"Possibly the only person who's more qualified to say that than I am," came a sweet voice I didn't expect. I turned and found Doctor Warner standing there, resting one hand casually on the counter. She smiled at Wes. "The usual, please, Weston?"

"Coming right up, Doc." He grinned.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I could *not* manage to get anything decent out of my mouth around this woman.

"I drink, too. Weston is the best bartender in University City, and I like a good—" Wes dropped a glass in front of her with a smile and salute. "—glass of bourbon."

Picking up the glass, she took a swallow. Watching her take that sip was amazing, and seemed to almost happen in slow motion. She tipped her head back just enough to make sure the lips she wrapped around the edge of the glass sealed and allowed the bourbon to slip over them. The creamy expanse of her throat was long and delicate, and she held the glass near her collar as her eyes fluttered closed, shutting me out of the expressive light brown eyes, the long dark lashes resting on the top of her cheeks.

A look of bliss drifted over her features, and she clearly enjoyed the taste and burn of the rich golden liquid. A moment passed and she swallowed once, her eyes slowly opening again, and searching me out.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

I nearly came in my pants right there at the bar.

Resting her glass on the bar top, she leaned in close to my ear. "We're not in the office. We're not at the hospital. I'm also not blind and can see that erection you've been sporting the whole time I've been around you." Pulling back, her eyes landed on my lips. "I'm curious about that hallucination from earlier."

I really felt like I had swallowed my tongue whole, but I finally managed to find it. "What did you see? Out of…professional curiosity."

"Mm. Professional curiosity?" Her mouth was close to my ear again. "I saw you, above me, driving into my pussy, wringing pleasure from my body. And you?" Leaning back, she snagged the glass again. "Professionally, of course."

Shit, was I going to play this game with her? Was it even a game at this point? Were we flirting? This felt more like foreplay. I didn't answer right away as I was too taken by her pleasure at the second sip of bourbon.

"You," I answered, quietly. "Spread below me, your gorgeous sandy brown hair fanned out on my pillow and your legs wide and welcoming, as I drove my cock into you."

I had never quite felt lust like this.

Another sip of bourbon, and her throat moved slowly. She licked her lips. "Are you still curious about what would happen if we touched again?"

"Professionally?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Wes, charge me for these," I snapped my words down the bar and saw him wave me an okay. Dropping my attention back to Wren, I choked out my offer. "I live in Manayunk."

To my utter disappointment she shook her head and pulled out her phone, quickly scrolling. She glanced up, maybe sensing my disappointment, and gave me the dirtiest smirk. "Too far."

I grabbed her wrist as she was still scrolling, and headed out to the street, checking left and right. My car was up in the parking deck and I headed us over to the elevators there.

"Go down Walnut. It's at the Cira Center." That was all she said as she buckled herself into the seat.

I wasn't going anywhere yet. I unclicked the belt she had fastened, wrapped my hand around the back of her neck and hauled both of us to the middle of the car.

There was nothing subtle about the kiss. I sealed my mouth over hers and drove my tongue in to taste her.

...the lightning streaked across the sky as I grabbed for her hand. Something was yanking and tearing us apart, a force I couldn't see. She reached for me, desperate, screaming. There were more people reaching for her, trying to hold her, bring her back.

A cruel laugh cracked the sky instead of thunder. "You have disobeyed El, and she will suffer the most for your disobedience!" Before we could get our hands on her more solidly, she was ripped away.

I pulled back, panting. Her eyes were sparking with fear and lust, her chest heaving in time with mine.

“Is it going to happen every time?” She was as torn between another kiss and the fear of the hallucinations as I was.

I simply wanted this woman below me naked too much not to risk it. I leaned in and pulled her close. “Let’s find out.”

She surged forward and caught my mouth this time, her tongue swiping into my mouth, desperate for a taste of me as I was for her.

Nothing happened.

Well, nothing happened in regard to a hallucination. Other things happened, like each of us wrestling the other for control of the kiss. She tasted like bourbon and vanilla, and I was suddenly desperate to commit her to memory. I surrendered to demands and let her explore me, licking and sucking my mouth and lips. Her tongue twined around mine and I realized she was inviting me in, and I followed willingly.

The bourbon vanilla taste was even more powerful, and I explored her desperately. Her tongue slicked against mine, intimately courting me there, offering her mouth as worship.

It took us a long moment to finally pull back. We stared, breath heaving. She pulled back first, and clicked her seat belt back into the fastener.

“Drive,” she demanded. “Just go.”

I threw the car in reverse, and jerked out of the parking spot.

Wren

The hallucinations were completely terrifying. They were exactly like the nightmares I got caught in. That this man was experiencing them the same as me also scared the shit out of me.

But not *him*. He didn't scare me at all.

There was something about him that brought my normally unapologetic libido to a whole new level. I wasn't shy about sex, but I had never so openly suggested that we had a bed in our future.

Not without dinner, anyway.

Bourbon and scotch weren't dinner.

I didn't even care. Between the appointment this afternoon, and the flirting at the bar, I just wanted this man. Everything in my code of ethics was screaming that this was a bad idea, but those few moments in the hallucinations where he was inside me had me tossing my code.

The hotel I had found was just a few blocks down from the bar where we had been, and there was a valet waiting there. My hands

were shaking so much I almost couldn't get my seat belt undone. But I did as Skillman handed the keys to the valet and grabbed the ticket.

I strode without him to the main desk and checked in, grabbing the two keys and leaving the card for the room charges. Turning I found him standing by the elevators, hand out waiting for me.

Grabbing his hand we stepped into the elevator. He spun me against the wall next to the buttons, and reached for the panels. "What floor?"

"Fifty-five."

It was the last thing I said before his mouth was on mine again. I felt like he was going to strip my clothes off my body right there. His hand slid around and palmed my ass, squeezing gently. I couldn't stop the moan that escaped.

He kissed down my jaw, nibbling down my neck. "At what point does my brain stop calling you Doctor Warner?"

"Your hand is on my ass. I think you're good to call me Wren any time, *Fischer*." I was really glad he said it, because my brain wasn't letting go of Doctor Skillman either.

He laughed, and his breath tickled my skin at my neck. It tripped through me and my nipples peaked. I pressed my body against his, and this time he moaned as my hip found his erection.

"This elevator is too fucking slow," I grumbled.

"It's fifty-five floors." He laughed again.

"I wish I was young enough for backseat car sex," I answered.

"Oh, but this is so much better." His tongue trailed up my neck to my ear, where he nibbled on the shell of it. "I can spread you wide and roll you over, and maybe even tie you up a bit."

I shivered at that. A good shiver.

"Like that idea?" His hand found my breast and palmed it.

"Yes. Goddamn, how slow is this thing?"

The bell dinged just a moment later, and the door finally opened to the floor we were on. It was serendipity that no one else needed to get on the car while we rode up.

Grabbing my hand, Fischer pulled me into the hallway, and found the room number quickly. He dipped the card in the reader and I shoved the door open as soon as it went green.

Fischer wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into the room. His mouth was on mine as the door clicked closed quietly.

I dug my fingers into his hair, and held him tight to me, not letting him move from the kiss he engaged me in. He tasted so amazing, scotch and cinnamon and I just wanted to keep tasting him.

His hands slipped up from the small of my back and lifted the shirt out of his way. His fingers were searing hot against my skin.

… "did you know I would smash the gates of Hell if anyone took you away from us?" The words were peppered with kisses on my breasts.

"As I would smash the gates of Heaven if any of you were taken from me."

His hands found the small of my back, and seared the skin there with merely his touch…

"Shit," I breathed, and pulled his hands back to me as they started to drift away.

"What is going on, Wren?"

"I don't know, I don't. I get them all the time. I ignore them, write them down."

He tried pulling back again, and I wanted to cry. I didn't know why I was so drawn to this man, but I was and I wanted him. And now my stupid fucked up brain was going to push him away.

"How are we seeing these?"

My shoulders slumped and I leaned against the wall next to the bathroom, and wrapped my arms around myself. "Are you asking as Doctor Skillman or Fischer?"

He stepped back and ran a hand down his face, not saying a thing. I walked to the bed, arms still tight around me and sat.

"Just…go, Fischer." My voice sound wobbly, and my hands were trembling even though there were flat against me. "You're not used to these. I don't know where they're coming from, why you're seeing them. I'm broken…"

I was so, so broken at that point. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't find a date, I couldn't decide if I wanted be with a man or a woman. The headaches curtailed my life, the hallucinations were ruining my sanity, and the nightmares were going to destroy me.

No matter how much I made people believe I was strong, I was losing my battle.

Now, I was going to lose this man as well—probably as a doctor in addition to the potential lover I had hoped for.

Craved.

Fischer knelt in front of me and grabbed my hands from where I had tucked them. "I'm not used to this, Wren. I don't understand what's going on. I've never had hallucinations or visions, and I don't know why you're triggering them."

"Go."

Tucking my hands together in his one, the other hand landed on my cheek. "No. I want to stay. I feel like…I *need* to stay. For you, for me."

"Fischer…"

"I want to understand you, as a doctor. I want to get to know you, personally." He stood, raising my chin to keep my eyes locked with his, and studied my face. "Whatever this is, I just have to learn to deal with it, because I am so fucking attracted to you…"

Standing, I studied him for a quiet moment, pulling my hands out of his, and placing my own hand on his cheek. "Ride them out, please, Fischer. Please. I need you, doctor and..."

"Lover?" he asked on a breath.

I nodded.

"How long have you been alone?"

"Years," I whispered. "Dates, here and there. Miriam and I have…a few times. But either my work or my…mind drives them away."

Why was I confessing this to him? I wasn't someone who unload on someone else—I was the unloadee. Almost always. But something about Fischer made me want to tell him, even though I was sure that I not only sounded desperate but slightly to mostly insane.

His thumb traced my lips, and I kissed it softly. I felt tears pool in my eyes, and I didn't want to let them fall.

In the next moment his lips were on mine again, and I couldn't stop the tears. Instead of ignoring them, though, Fischer kissed them away, one at a time, until he reached my mouth.

"Fischer," I managed to hiss out.

The frenzied push of lust had changed to a low, hot burn between us. He turned me in his arms, and wrapped them around me, popping open the first two buttons of my shirt.

Instead of finishing the job, he pulled the collar to the side and using one of his hands, fisted my hair, turning my head to the side. His lips skimmed down my throat, dancing down my skin, licking and nipping and occasionally finding my lips and taking possession

of my mouth. He traced lines and circles all down my cheeks, and down my shoulder, under the edge of the shirt.

"I want this," he finally hissed. "I want you. We'll figure out what's going on later. There's something here, something we need to have between us."

"Yes," I answered, closing my eyes to enjoy the sensation of his lips all over me.

A finger traced down my collar, and I quickly unbuttoned the rest of my shirt. His hands were on my breasts in the next moment, and he tried to slip the cups up over me.

Chuckling, I spun back in his arms. "That's not going to work, Fischer. There is just too much of them."

He grunted, pulling his lips away from me for the first time in minutes. Glancing at my bra, he nodded. "I can see that. Mm." His hand caressed the nipple through the satin.

I ran my fingers through his hair as he teased me. "You know, ethically, this is wrong."

"Is it…"

"Doctor patient relationships are dangerous." I kept my tone light. I didn't really care. He was right, there was *something* that was pulling us together.

"They are," he agreed, slipping a hand around the back of my neck and pulling me against him. "So very, very dangerous."

He kissed me again, and all the heat that had been there in the car was back again. I slipped my hands to the top of his shirt, and pulled hard.

The buttons went skittering across the room and Fischer pulled back laughing. "It's dangerous all right! To my wardrobe!" With a few quick movements, he had the cuff unfastened and the coat and shirt were on the floor. "Leave me the T-shirt at least," he whispered.

His fingers landed on the front of my pants, and he had them off my waist with the flick of his hand. "I need you naked."

"I need you inside me," I answered. "I hope to God you have some condoms?"

His grin was absolutely lascivious, and he nodded. "Some. We're going to need more."

"I'll run to the store later," I said. "Right now, I need you to fuck me."

With a twist of his arms he had me on the bed, caged in his arms, his mouth sucking a path down my body, over my breasts, and teasing my navel with his tongue.

Placing a hand on my hip, he rolled me to my front. A flick of one hand unhooked my bra, and his lips found the center of my back. He nibbled and sucked his way down my spine, pressing hot kisses to the space just above my ass.

His fingers found the edge of my panties, and achingly slowly he slipped them down, seeming to kiss every inch of flesh as he uncovered it. He nipped once, twice, and smoothed the satin down my legs in an electric caress.

Sparks shot through me, lighting up every nerve in my body.

...there were two mouths, at least two, tracing lines on my skin. There were fingers everywhere, and the scent of sex hung on the air.

"Ours," someone whispered. "Ours alone."

"Our balance," another voice said.

Fischer's visage was there, his eyes locked on my lips, his hair drenched with the sweat of well-satisfied post-coital glow. "Our angel."...

He paused for only a moment. His hands slipped under my thighs and lifted my ass into the air, just before his finger dipped into my cleft. He found my clit instantly. He circled it with a slow finger, and glanced down at me.

"These visions are goddamn filthy." He breathed the words over my sensitive bud, and I shivered hard from head to toe. "I like filthy."

The air rushed from my lungs—his whole mouth covered my pussy and I couldn't make a sound. His lips and tongue sought out every depth of my sex. I had no choice but to fist the sheets and hold on.

I finally dragged in some air and let out a scream of pleasure. It had been so fucking long since anyone had touched me, and this wasn't just a touch. This was being consumed, fire and pleasure racing through every nerve of my body.

A finger slipped into my channel and I couldn't breathe again. I gasped and tried not to squirm, but the moans and yelps of pleasure were completely out of my control. Fischer stroked me slowly, moving another finger inside, but going no faster. It was sheer, magnificent torture.

"Oh, shit, Fischer! Please make me come!"

I needed it. I wouldn't be able to make it until he slid his cock into me. There was too much lightning rushing through me, and if he stopped now I truly felt like I might die.

He crooked his fingers inside me, and found the soft spot there that would take me over the edge—and made it even more intense when he nipped at my clit.

Everything on me started shaking and shivering. It was only his strong hands on my thighs that stopped me from sliding forward away from his wicked tongue. I screamed into the bed, hoping to keep it from waking anyone on the floor, as well as above and below us. I couldn't even haul in a desperate breath for a long few moments, to the point I couldn't even be sure I wasn't going to pass out.

Finally, the climax let me go and I heaved in the air I needed, turning my head to the side.

Fischer chuckled. "Liked that?"

"Shit." It was all I could manage.

He started nibbling again, and to my utter shock, licked his way from my clit, across my entrance and right over my anus. The unexpected move made me yelp, and he did it again, but moved up the crease to my back again.

His hands skimmed up my skin, catching the straps of my unfastened bra, and turned my whole now-boneless body over. I dusted my hand through his hair and smiled as he kissed me again. The taste of my own sex was a dirty, delicious flavor on his tongue.

"You're still wearing pants," I managed. "Strip."

He quirked an eyebrow as he relieved me of my bra and tossed it to join the rest of the clothes on the floor. Taking a deep suck of my breast before he moved, he lifted himself to the side of the bed. I rolled to my side to watch.

This was my chance to see the man in all his glory, and what glory it was. Defined, but not built, his broad shoulders looked like a place I could spend many an hour tracing patterns and swirls with my tongue. His pecks were lightly dusted with the same dark hair as he had on his head, and the trail led down to his stomach. He was flat, but not toned. I didn't need toned—what I was seeing was just fine with me.

His hands slipped around his waist after he unbuttoned his pants, and the slacks fell to the ground.

Commando.

Fuck, yes.

The dusting of hair traveled straight down, joining the faint but clear Adonis belt to point at a magnificent, proud erection. A drop of precum beaded there as I watched and I couldn't resist. I reached out a finger, collected his moisture, and licked it off. He was almost sweet, but still salty and masculine.

He groaned, and I realized his eyes were fixed on my lips. I sucked my finger into my mouth and let him see me wind my tongue around it before closing my lips.

"Jesus," he whispered.

I reached out again, after popping the finger free, and cradled his balls in my hand. I rolled them, slowly. I drew my finger up the underside of his shaft and he watched every second of my movements.

"Do you want me to suck this?" I asked, blinking a few times, and giving him a light tug.

"Oh, God, yes, but—" He grabbed my hand. "Later. I need to be inside you, Wren."

Nodding, I released him and rolled on to my back. "Come and get it, Fischer." I trailed a finger through my own pussy.

He leaned down and grabbed his wallet, pulling out a condom. My eyes followed his as he tore it open, and pulled out the latex sheath. Shit, I wanted him bare, but that wasn't a good idea yet. I was clean, he probably was, but we hadn't talked about it at all. This happened too fast to take the chance.

And there was something so inherently sexy about this man taking his own cock in hand and tugging it a little to prepare it for its sheath. I watched his fingers roll it down over the nearly purple crown and down his wonderfully long length. Maybe he didn't need a magnum width, but he filled it up just fine...and it ran out of coverage long before it hit his base.

He walked to the end of the bed, lowered himself down and crawled up the bed, covering my body with his. He kissed the tip of each nipple, and bit lightly at the base of my throat.

"You are so fucking sexy, laying there waiting for me."

"You like what you see?" I teased, my fingers circling his own puckered nipples.

"God, yes."

"Get that dick in me, Fischer." The words were a whisper over his lips.

"Show me," he replied as he bumped the blunt head against me.

Reaching down between us, I fisted his cock and placed him against my entrance. "Right there. Be good to me, baby. It's been a long time I've had anything but a vibrator up there."

He shivered, then smiled. "I'd like to see that one day."

...My legs were wide, and two different hands held me there. The room was closed, dark, with only a few lamps burning. I could feel others there with me, but this was a private place.

My own fingers were dancing on my bundled nerves as I twisted and panted. Eyes, many more than just the two holding my legs, watched as I pleasured myself. A hand reached forward, handing me a carved stone dildo. With no shame, I slipped it into my channel so all those watching could see...

"I'll be happy to show you."

The words directing him to just get inside me died on my lips as he slid himself deep. One long, slow, hard thrust and he was all the way to the top of my channel, bumping against the barrier there. I sucked in the air, hard, and arched my back.

"Ffff...that feels so good..." I managed to squeak out. He was just as thick as the hallucination promised. My walls were delighted to hold him tight as they welcomed him and adjusted to his intrusion.

"Oh, baby, like I was made for you," he breathed, the words dancing on my lips as he nipped and licked there.

"Move, Fischer. Please. I want to feel you," I said, and I covered his mouth with mine, my tongue mimicking what I wanted his shaft to do.

He started slow. Drawing all the way out, and sliding all the way back in. I was so wet from his mouth that it seemed almost to magnify the sensation of the slide. He pulled and pushed again, an almost flawless motion that didn't have a hitch or pause in it. He let me keep kissing him—and it was him *letting* me, because he could have pulled away. He was in control of every part of my body.

The next push had hitch, a bump against the top of me, and I inhaled, sharply through the kiss.

"Again," I whispered.

He complied.

Each push, he popped his hips. The move sent a shiver of not-pain through my pussy, and I arched into him just a little.

My hands found his ass and grabbed the perfect globes, squeezing lightly. "Harder, babe. Go harder. I want to feel it in the morning."

He laughed. "Oh, you will."

Still, he started to move faster, not quite as smoothly. There was more pop, more thrust in his hips. He lifted one leg to rest on his shoulder and opened me even wider for him. His hand reached between us and he dusted my clit.

The sensation he caused tripped through me, catching my breath and making me heave my breasts. His eyes landed there, and he looked mesmerized. A moment later, he pulled both of my legs to his waist and rolled us.

"Take what you need, Wren. Fuck me the way you like it," he commanded as his hands wrapped around my breasts.

I didn't last at the long slow pace I started. It only took me a few minutes to start dragging myself hard over him, pulling and pushing his cock inside me. Angling down, I had his cock lined up perfectly with my clit and I pulled him over myself again and again.

His eyes rolled back in his head even as his finger rolled my nipples and pinched them.

"Fuck, fuck," he breathed. "Go, baby. Go!"

I dropped on to him, over and over, the sensation of the climax clawing its way down my spine, over my skin, sparking a desperate heat in the very pit of my body.

"Pinch them hard, baby!" I yelled at Fischer. "God, please, give me just a little more pain!"

He pinched, and pulled the nipple.

"Again!" I cried, my body trembling. "Ah, fuck! Again!"

His fingers were magic. He pinched and this time, twisted lightly as I dropped on him.

I came, screaming his name.

…"Give me your pleasure, love. I am a collector of your pleasure. Perhaps that makes me slothful, to take instead of seek, but your pleasure is the most precious thing, and I will never seek what you do not wish to give."

"You may take my pleasure whenever you wish"...

I dropped on to him again and a third time as climax ripped through me, and on the fourth time, his hips rushed up to press his erection all the way inside me, and I knew he had come as well.

He grabbed my hips and held me still while he thrust through the rest of his orgasm, spilling inside the barrier with a satisfied shout of delight.

I collapsed down on to him as his hands let go of my hips. Slipping to his side, I quickly drifted to sleep.

Fischer

I lied to her.

Not about anything that was going on between us because the heat and pull of the attraction was completely real. I didn't want to lie about that.

I had lied about the hallucinations.

They weren't hallucinations, and it wasn't the first time I'd had them. It wasn't that I was having them that shook me, but that we were sharing them—and they were fucking filthy like we had been bedmates for years.

Staring at her file on my desk, looking occasionally at the notes I had made on the images that had flashed through my brain whenever we had been close or touching the night before, I ran a hand down my face.

These had happened to me when I was a kid. Very young, maybe six, seven years old. I didn't tell anyone for a few years, thinking that everyone had that happen.

They didn't. And it wasn't the sign of a healthy person, to my parents' way of thinking. They took me to a therapist, they had Father Tomlinson come over every Wednesday and lead me in prayer for God to heal my mind.

The visions didn't stop. Nothing stopped them. They weren't predictable, I couldn't call them up. It could be a smell, a time, a gust of wind, the brush of a stranger against me, or that I hadn't slept well the night before.

My own brain was the catalyst for my career. I didn't understand what had happened as a kid, and I wasn't really closer to understanding it now.

Father Tomlinson asked me to visit him in the rectory when I was fourteen. People had already started talking about the pedophiles in the Church and I was nervous as hell about being in a room alone with this man.

But, Tomlinson wasn't one of those. He was an honest, intelligent man who had come from an excellent pedigree and had a faith in God that was unshakable. He was patient, but my parents had exhausted that in him.

"Fischer. Are these visions still plaguing you?"

"I never thought they were a plague, Father. Not ever. I just thought they were something that everyone had."

"Indeed they are not." He nodded. "Once upon a time, in many cultures, you would be a shaman, or priest. A wise man. Not everyone is granted such vision of the future, or the past, or the lives we've lived before. It could be that if you live this life right, you might finally achieve Nirvana. I am not one to say."

I was shocked. "You...don't believe in..."

"God is my rock and foundation, son, but that does not mean our Christianity is the only way to Him."

My jaw dropped. "That's heretical."

"That's education, Fischer." He leaned forward. "I don't think that there's anything wrong with you, or with your brain. I think that these visions are just part of you. Whether or not you make something of them is up to you. But they aren't interrupting your life..."

"They aren't, Father."

He tapped a finger on his desk. "Your parents are good people. They wanted nothing more than to have a child, and you were the best thing that ever came into their lives. They are good Christians. The right kind of

Christians—but they don't understand the mind. There's nothing wrong with yours, It's just not like theirs, and that's natural for adoption."

I didn't react to that—I hadn't officially been told that I was, but I had long suspected it. It was just a confirmation of the obvious. I was dark where they were light, I was tall where they were short.

"I don't want you to lie to them," Father said, not realizing that he'd finally spilled truth. "But our weekly prayer time could be used for other things for you. You're a smart, smart young man, Fischer. I want to see you be the best you can be, and that's not in service to the Lord the way your parents are hoping. I also don't want to keep dragging out their hope that you'll join the seminary."

"Father—"

"I know. You're not a priest, not for this Church. So, over the next few weeks, what I want us to do is start to have discussions with them about how you are no longer haunted by the visions, they don't threaten you anymore. The same thing with the therapist. Twice a week for this is excessive."

"Not haunted," I mumbled. "That's not a lie. I was never haunted by them."

He grinned. "Technicalities are the best kind of dodge."

I laughed at the memory. Father Tomlinson had retired years ago, but we had stayed friends for years. And he had helped me escape the therapist and the prayer sessions with the most respect I could.

It took my parents another two years to finally tell me that I was adopted, and by that time I had worked through all the bullshit it entailed in my head. They were happy that I wasn't upset with them, and gave me all the information on my adoption.

I was a fire station baby. Left in a basket with a birth certificate that had no mother and no father listed. I hadn't even known that was possible, but there it was. There was never a hope that I could find my parents, and strangely, I was fine with that. As much as I had walked away from my parents' religion, I loved them just the same. Tomlinson was right. I was everything they had ever wanted.

I glanced at the picture of them on my desk. They were still young. They'd gotten married young and adopted me as soon as they could, just twenty-five years old. My father hadn't even started talking about retirement yet. He was just sixty.

That all reminded me, I was due for a visit. I hadn't been to see them in a few weeks.

"Doctor Skillman?"

I found Laxmi standing in the doorway. “Yes, Doctor Rana?”

“Do you have a few minutes?”

Nodding, I motioned her in. She pulled the door closed and sat in the chair. She really looked like the cat that swallowed the canary, and I had the feeling I knew what was eating at her.

“Doctor, I have a bit of a confession to make to you, and in doing so I’m hoping we can avoid an ethics violation or an ethics board.” She folded her hands in her lap.

I motioned for her to continue. This was exactly what I thought it was.

“Last week, when you had to run to CHOP for the neuro consult and surgery, I met with Doctor Warner, Wren Warner. We connected on a less than professional level and…we wound up going on a date.”

“And this has been bothering you all this weekend?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. She got called away so nothing did end up coming of it, but it’s still a violation of ethics and—”

I held up my hand. “Stop. Laxmi, we’re fine. I’m not going to report you. Nothing happened in the office?”

“Nothing but the plans for the date.”

The smirk crawled across my face, and I leaned back in the chair, folding my arms. “You’re fine, Laxi. Are you going to see here again?”

I knew the answer.

“No. I’m not. After she got called in, her roommate offered to drive me home, since we were in her car. We didn’t…” She shook her head. “Not important.”

“Never made it home, eh?”

Laxmi sighed. “Fisch, I didn’t make it to the door. I feel really, really bad about ditching her. But Miriam and I just hit it off like no one I’ve ever met before.”

“Like you were being pulled into orbit around each other. There was no way to keep your hands off her, and she felt the same. You were connected without words, and each touch was seared into you.”

Laxmi cocked her head and stared at me. “That…sounds like experience.”

“You weren’t the only one to fall for the very attractive Wren Warner, Laxmi.” Folding my hands on the desk in front of me, I

smiled at her.

The confusion on her face slowly slid from realization, and then into shock, and finally, a filthy little grin.

"Doctor. You didn't?"

"Not in the office, no. She caught up with me at the bar," I answered. "Laxi, as long as neither of us let's this happen in the office, or on the clock, there are no ethics violations. Lots of doctors fall for patients."

Shaking her head, she finally managed to sit back in the chair she had been only using the edge of. "I don't think it's going to happen again, Doc. Miriam and I can't seem to get away from each other, and don't want to. I was going to spend the week feeling bad that I'd basically installed myself in the house."

I snickered. "You don't have to feel bad for that at all." Tapping a pen on my desk, I consider the woman across from me. "What about your parents?"

"They are either going to accept me or not." She shook her head. "Last week I was terrified of telling them, but now that I found Miriam…"

"Worth losing them forever?"

Her fingers twitched, and she picked a fingernail. "I want to be authentically me. I've always wanted that. I just didn't want to give up what my family is to me for something that wasn't a sure thing—as in, I was scared to be utterly alone. She won't let me be."

"I won't either, Laxmi." Pulling open one of the drawers of my desk, I lifted out the file I had there. "I meant to show you this on Friday, but the surgery kept me away from the office."

She took the file from me and flipped it open. Her eyes grew wide and she looked at me, then back at the paper. Several times. I relaxed into the chair while she read over the file.

"What is this, Fisch?" she managed to breathe the words eventually.

"What does it look like?"

"Pa…partnership documents…"

"All legal and ready for your signature."

"Are you serious?"

"Doctor Rana, you are one of the best doctors I've ever met. You've been nothing but excellent in this practice and you have taken on everything I have tossed at you. You being the main office con-

sulting doctor will help me worry less, be able to get to the hospital more often and give you the leg up on being one of the best sleep doctors on the East Coast. I want to give you that chance, because you deserve it."

She had tears in her eyes, and her lip was quivering. "You're absolutely sure about this?"

"You don't want it?"

"God, no! I mean yes! Yes, I want it. This is everything I've worked towards since I was a little girl." Glancing around the desk, her eyes landed on the pen. "Give me that. I'm signing this before you come to your senses."

Laughing, I happily handed it over. I watched as she signed her name at all the Xs marked on the paper with quite the flourish.

"I'll have all the signage changed in the next few weeks," I said, and I grabbed her hand as she passed the pen back. "This is your office now, too, Laxi. We'll work everything out and you're not going to be left alone if your parents won't accept who you are."

The tears in her eyes fell and she grinned. "I know. I realize that now. Thank you."

"Quite welcome."

She snagged a tissue, and swiped at her eyes. She sniffled and her grin was infectious. Tipping her head to consider me, she laughed.

"So, you and Doctor Warner?"

I nodded. "Me and Wren."

"She seems to be a really good person, Doc. I like her. I mean more than I wanted to get naked with her like, too." Laxmi giggled.

"We, uh…didn't talk much. We're planning a date tonight so that we actually hold a conversation and not just a naked wrestling match."

I LET OUT A DEEP SIGH, but when my eyes met with Wren's we both laughed.

"Whose is it?" She smiled.

"Bet?"

She leaned across the table. "Oral, before we have to go."

"You are so filthy." I grinned. "I'll take the bet. It's mine."

"Ooh, I was going to say mine at St. Chris."

We both flipped our phones over, and found messages on the front of them. Both for CHOP, and both for immediate response.

"What the…" I grumbled. Wasn't I still on Gutierrez's shit list?

Wren already had the phone dialing and on her ear before I could even swipe open to read the whole message.

***CHOP-ER**: Call immediately. Emergent situation. Do not speak to press.*

Press? What the hell?

"Doctor Warner," Wren snapped into the phone. She listened quietly and her eyes darted to mine, holding them and widening in horror. "Got it. I'm on the way. So is Doctor Skillman."

Stabbing the phone, she reached into her purse and threw some money on the table. "We'll talk in the car. No media."

She was all doctor, and I was all turned on, but at the same I knew this was deadly serious. She glanced down the street, toward the hospital as I shoved the ticket and a twenty into the valet's hand.

Within two minutes, I was sliding into the driver's seat and Wren slammed the door. She pulled the seat belt on and looked over at me.

"The cops busted a child sex worker ring. There are dozens of children and they are calling in everyone they can, while trying to keep this quiet."

"Fuck," I hissed. "Anything else?"

"They'll brief us when we get there." Her fingers were flying over the keyboard. "Would Laxmi want to help?"

"Yes," I answered instantly.

Nodding, she hunched over the phone, and flicked through the screens. "Miriam will help too."

"What does Miriam do?"

"She runs a healthcare charity that works with all the pediatric patients in a dozen or more hospitals."

I nodded and wove my way through the streets, trying to avoid getting on the Vine until the last minute. I could see it was backed up as usual, but managed to pull some terrible driver maneuvers and get into University City pretty easily. The parking garage gate for doctors and staff opened with a swipe of my card and I found a visiting physician spot.

Wren and I were practically running for the building. There were dozens of cops around, but thankfully no press. Slipping our IDs over our heads we swung past the police, and found Gutierrez standing in a doorway. He motioned us over, and clicked the door closed behind us. There were a half dozen other doctors with visiting badges and we found two chairs in the middle of them.

"This stays here. This is for your information only," Gutierrez said. "Detective?"

The woman at the front of the room stood up. She was tall with long black hair in a low bun at the back of her neck. Her pants suit was nothing but business and she was exactly the kind of woman I would have been interested in a week ago. I took a glance at the woman next to me, and realized I was done looking.

"I'm detective Lily Haden. Thank you all for coming in. I'll be working out of this room for the next few hours, trying to coordinate our efforts on this. After nearly two years of working with several confidential informants, IT professionals, and some unprofessionals, and several dozen undercover agents, we finally broke a dangerous and complex child sex worker ring." She made a face. "That's the wrong term for it, even. They weren't workers, they were slaves. They didn't have a choice.

"We've gotten twenty-six children out of the network tonight and we have eighteen more that will be coming in—either here or St. Chris' or UPenn. They agreed that so many were too much for just CHOP and St. Chris. UPenn will take the older ones. You all get the really young ones."

"Really young?" someone muttered.

She slumped and leaned against the desk there. Her eyes were defeated and tired and disgusted all at once. "We found them as young as four, and they are all kinds of fucked up, you guys. Physically, mentally…some of them look like the walking dead. I don't know if there's a way to save some of them. We have to try, but…"

No one said anything as she searched for the word. She glanced around the room and her eyes landed on me and Wren, and something *shifted* in the universe. Wren felt it too, because she grabbed my hand and held on tight. Detective Haden straightened a bit, and ground the words out.

"The devil himself would never condone this."

…"That is not my job!" The man with dark hair and eyes exactly like Wren's stared at this interloper. "I was cast down because I was—still am! —defiant! My job is not to turn men to evil, or unbalance the sins! It is to make sure that they are punished when they find their way there on their own!"

The bright man who stood in front of them snarled. Actually curled his lip. "This is not what El wants!"

Fischer held Wren's hand tighter, pulling her close as he felt the presence of more protective bodies behind them.

The dark man walked down the steps in front of them, walking right up to the bright man's face. "You think you know what El wants? Really? That is how I wound up here! I don't want you here with me. Straighten up, fly right, Malachai. And stay the hell away from my charges."

"It's not just me, Lucifer. It's not just me that knows this is wrong!"

A light and dark flash went through the room, and a moment later, a white figure with a black blade and black figure with a white blade stood on either side of Malachai. They turned and pointed swords at Malachai's neck.

Fischer spoke, "Leave, Malachai. Leave us all alone. Do you think that there would be Guardians here if El had a problem with us?"

"Your perversions will not go unpunished."

Lucifer's hand shot out and grabbed the man by the neck. "Perversions? There is nothing there but love, you deranged maniac. Do you know what's a perversion? The hate and disease you allow to rain down on your own charges. Do not ever tell me *that love is a perversion."*

Wren was as surprised at that one as I was. There was a lot of information there, and I grabbed my notepad to scribble down what I could remember and the names that were bantered back and forth.

As well as the fact that Detective Lily Haden seemed to have triggered it.

"We need all the help we can get in dealing with the kids. The police department has to focus on getting these dealers, pimps and owners taken down. We need someone to take over for the kids. They need to be around people who are careful and kind and won't lose their shit. My officers on this case are strung taut because of what they're finding. And I need to keep them away from the kids."

A tired hand traced down her face. "I need them angry. And I can't put angry cops near these children."

"For the love of all that's holy, people," Gutierrez sighed, "Do not leak this. Detective Haden is handling everything, and she will

speak to the press when she's ready. Nurse Hamadani is going to be coordinating our efforts. She'll have tracking sheets, and Doctor Warner, I know that you're at St. Chris'. We may have to ask you to shuttle back and forth to help with the tougher cases."

"Whatever you need," Wren said, squeezing my hand.

"Doctor Skillman, we need you to scrub in immediately," Gutierrez said. "We have a bad one."

Bad one turned out to be an understatement.

Wren

Wrung out was an understatement.

I'd had a dream two nights before and managed to get a full ten hours of sleep. Between that and the amazing night of nearly nonstop sex Fisher and I had, I had woke hopeful.

And then came the page from the hospital.

The migraine was horrible. I didn't know why I expected anything different. Truth was I should have been grateful I was home and able to lay down.

Sleep was being elusive. After what I had seen and heard the night before, it was going to be that way for a while. I had spent most of the night to midnight at one hospital, then made a break for it to St. Chris' to spend the rest of the night there. Then, as the sun came up, I wound up at UPenn for another six hours.

Finally, at noon, I had to go. The migraine was stopping me dead in my tracks, and I couldn't see the letters on the papers anymore.

I was able to get home, and able to crawl into my bedroom, swallow the migraine meds, and basically pass out. It wasn't really sleep, and it wasn't really passed out. I called it my migraine state. It was more just complete inability to think or move.

Somewhere in my mind I watched the sun slide through the sky by the shadows in my room. The curtains were drawn, but nothing was ever truly completely dark, unless I had the sleep masks on. Which, again, no energy. I just laid there, numb.

Numb not only because of the pain. What I had seen in the past eighteen hours.

I was not a freshman social worker—I'd started volunteering at domestic violence shelters when I was sixteen. I'd been immersed in the shit that was humanity for years, and certainly I didn't get senior positions at both hospitals by not knowing my shit.

The forty-four children I had help process into the state's care were like nothing I'd ever seen. Certainly, this wasn't the first sex trafficking case I'd dealt with, at all. This was the first that was a high-end clientele, with children who were beaten into obedience. This was one of the first times I'd dealt with the end point of the trafficking, the owners who pimped out these children for their perverted customers for their twist pleasures.

Fourteen of the kids hit on AFIS or CODIS. Haden was beyond thrilled that they were going to be able to tell the parent their kids were alive. Then I reminded her how damaged these kids were and how long it was going to take to rehab them.

Most of them would never really be completely okay again.

It wasn't that I wasn't happy these parents were going to have their children back. It was that what they were getting back were not their children. They were shells. Still, fourteen would have warm beds, loving families, and a real chance to survive.

The other thirty were not quite as clear cut. Particularly the ones that had to undergo surgeries—ranging from a splintered ankle to someone who had recently been hit so hard on the back of the head, their spine was swollen.

That was Fischer's patient. She was going to live.

Haden had found me at UPenn before I couldn't move for the pain. She gave me the low down on everything that had happened everywhere, and then dropped another bomb on me.

"This is the first bust. Just the first. We think there may be as many as ten other houses with about twenty kids each."

"Jesus," I said, running a hand down my face.

"We're moving slowly because we don't want to lose this chance. It's why we're keeping it from the press as much as we can."

"Understood, I'm not talking to them."

"Oh, and thank you for calling in those other two…Rana and…"

"Doctor Laxmi Rana and Miriam Crownin," I supplied.

"Yes. Thank you. They were great helps. Rana was able to run over here and handle some of the smaller issues with their patients. And Miriam stepped up for the really little ones."

The implications of the phrase 'really little ones' in conjunction with sex trafficking made me want to puke, which just made my head throb even more. Haden grabbed my arm.

—We sat across the table from each other, laughing while Lucifer looked at her darkly, trying to hide his humor.—

"Take it easy, Doc. We're doing good. I wish that we could have stopped this long before they were even taken, but barring that, these kids are all going to have a chance at their own lives." She paused and considered me a moment. "I wanted to ask you a favor, but I can see you're about to drop. I'll find you tonight and we can talk then. Good deal?"

"I'll try to be functional, but no promises."

Staring at the ceiling, I could feel the drugs fighting for dominance. I would at least be pain free for now. The other symptoms would still be there after this.

I was still wondering if Haden had seen that flash of hallucination, or was it all me? She didn't seem to be phased by it at all.

From the shadows on the wall, it was nearly six in the evening by the time the meds had enough of a grip on me that I could move. Five hours of just laying there, hoping for medicine and time to help the migraine.

The phone in my hand—that was impressive, it was still in my hand after all this time—started to vibrate and I moved it closer to me to look at the face.

***Fischer**: Hope you're okay. We need a makeup date. And maybe more sex.*

I smirked, not letting myself chuckle as I wanted to. Since I was starting to get hungry, I wanted to be able to stand up soon.

***Wren**: Alive, but down with the brain pain. Sex helps headaches, did you know that?*

***Fischer**: I did. I helped with one of the studies.*

***Wren**: Helped…how?*

***Fischer**: Surveys, Wren. I wasn't dipping my wick.*

***Wren**: You could survey me. With wick dip.*

***Fischer**: You, my dear, are fantastically filthy. Relax, take it easy. I'll be over with Haden later.*

I sent a smiley face and dropped my arm and the phone to the side.

Wait.

Fischer was coming here? To my house? With Haden in tow? I didn't even know what the place looked like after weeks of inattentiveness on the part of the staff. Namely me.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I sat up. Giving myself a moment, I flexed the fingers of my hand to make sure that I could feel all of them.

I needed a shower. Desperately. I always slept on top of the covers if I couldn't make it in there. I needed to try and wash away the filth that clung to the kids. It wasn't that the kids were actually physically dirty. There was always a sense of grime when we removed kids from a bad situation. They could have showered just five minutes before I walked in, and that feeling of grime that was not theirs hung in the air. That was what I needed to get rid of, the cloying sense of terror, abject fright, desperation.

There was nothing more comforting than a hot shower anyway, so I managed my way to the bathroom. The scalding hot water sluiced down me and started to unknot some of the tension and I was able to stretch and relax a little. The drug had killed the pain in my body, but like I thought, everything else was still there—the aches, the soreness, the flashes of light.

I enjoyed the shower as much as I could, and took a long time to towel off and dress. Yoga pants and loose shirt were all I managed, along with a house bra—the kind that are over-worn, stretched out and don't really do anything except keep the boobs from getting out of control.

And the boobs I had needed to be controlled.

I wandered out into the living room and kitchen area and found it brimming with people. Miriam had broken out the coffee tank, and it was still three-quarters full.

Why were all these people in my kitchen?

A moment later, my skin tingled and I glanced up to find Fischer standing against the counter, looking at me. There wasn't a smile there, but I could see that he was glad to see me through the shine in his eyes.

"Uh, hi?" I finally said, looking at the table.

"Oh! You're up!" Miriam said, jumping up from the table. "Are you feeling any better?" She snagged a coffee mug from the cabinet and got my coffee for me.

"Drugs are working for now."

"Did we wake you?" Haden asked from her spot at the head of the table.

"I don't really sleep, so no. And I didn't hear all of you come in, so…" I took a sip of the liquid of the gods and let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Miri."

She winked and sat back down, right next to Laxmi after dropping a kiss on her head. Those two got really comfy really fast.

I immediately amended that in my head as Fischer finally worked his way over to me and gave me a kiss that curled my toes. Apparently, love was in the air. Or at least really good sex.

"Tongue wrestle later." Haden smirked. "We're here on a mission. We have thirty children who don't have families that we can easily locate. We need to deal with them, and we need to come up with a plan."

"That doesn't involve much more of Paige Domingues," Gutierrez said from the chair in front of me. I hadn't even realized the man was there until that moment.

Then, I realized what he'd said. "Oh no."

Turning in the chair to find me, he nodded. "Someone asked her in. It wasn't me and I know it wasn't anyone in this room."

Haden raised a hand. "It was one of my officers. He didn't know about the moratorium I'd put on contacting her about this. She showed up and I managed to shuttle her into a room and give her only the ones who were…"

"Not overly damaged," Laxmi said. "The new ones. Just four of them. They would still need help, but not like the others."

"Which is why we're here," Haden said. "Gutierrez suggested that we have a confab outside of the city so we don't have to be on the record about anything."

"Can you even legally do that about something like this?" Fischer asked.

"Off the record?" She grinned.

"Fair enough." He laughed.

"So, now that our wayward social worker has appeared," Miriam said, "Can you tell us what happened?"

"We got a tip from a guy we caught with a minor about two years ago. The kid was a missing child from upstate New York and they were ready to throw the book at this guy. He turned, and started singing about the sex trafficking ring that he rented the kid from. *Rented. The Kid.*

"In order for us to start getting on the trail of this, we had to give him almost no jail time. I was disgusted, but I also understood what was going on. We needed to get into this and get these kids out. I went undercover for about three months on this, and decided that no one was going to be undercover for more than that. You can't handle it, no one can. It's psychologically scarring and some of the strong guys I know barely made three months.

"We managed to get all the information and close the place down last night in a sweep. We've got the runners, the owners, the bookies, everything. A few of them are already singing about the other ten houses we suspect operate so they don't have to go to jail. I talked to the DA and he's not interested in pleading out most of these fuckers —we're still going to have to."

"Who are the end users?" Laxmi asked quietly.

"This is a high-end operation. Really high-end. The kind we usually can't touch for the money that rides behind them."

"Elite?" Gutierrez asked.

"The One Percent, yes," Haden said. "We have trouble getting in up there because we don't have a lot of people who can walk the walk. It's a different world up there."

My eyes shot to Miriam for just an instant and hers caught mine. I didn't know if anyone else saw the exchange, but she let out a sigh and leaned into the table.

"I can get in."

"Miri…" I warned.

"No, this is my choice. I have the fucking pedigree."

Laxmi leaned away to look at her better, but then, so did everyone else.

"Miriam Crownin. It's a shortened, and legal version of Crowninfield, an old, old Boston family. I'm legally a cousin or something to John Quincy Adams. I grew up in all that hoity-toity shit, but most of the family didn't want much to do with me because my parents adopted me. We moved down here and no one cared that I was adopted, they just cared that I had the inheritance. I don't run in those circles anymore, because most of my fellow one-percenters think that my work at the charity is a cute but pointless endeavor."

"They also don't talk to her because she's a lesbian," I added. "And it's not that they care that she likes women, but that she wants to live openly as a lesbian." I'd heard this argument so many times between her and her parents.

Miriam nodded. "True. They don't care if I sleep with every woman on the planet, as long as I get married and get enough D to get them an heir."

Haden's hand slammed over hers and a grin spread on her face. "If your girlfriend is willing to go along, can we mockup a fake marriage for you and get you in there? I'll walk you through everything you need to know get the right information and you'll never have to deal with the actual dealers—"

"Slow down, Detective!" Miriam said. "I don't—"

"I can't slow down, Ms. Crownin. Those people have hundreds of children as sex slaves they rent out. I need as much information as I can get as fast as I can get it."

Miriam looked at me, and I tipped my head in an 'up to you' gesture. She looked at Laxmi, who kissed her knuckles in the same, more intimate gesture.

"You can't just throw me back in there," Miriam said. "This has to be a little controlled. There's like a six month window here to get me back into the scene."

Haden ran a hand down her face. "Fucking rich mort…morons."

The words were grumbled, but I caught the redirect from another word to morons. I was probably the only one in the room who would have, too.

"Fine. We'll work you back in. If your girlfriend agrees."

"I'm not—" Laxmi began, but the look that Miriam pegged her with had the words halt instantly. Laxmi sighed, then smirked. "Fine. I am, and I'm okay with it. As long as I get you on weekends."

Haden grinned. “I can probably do one better than that. Let me talk to my people, and we’ll set all this up. Good deal?”

“Rotten deal, but I’ll go with it for the kids.” Miriam nodded.

“Thank you.” Haden nodded. “In a lot of cases, we are literally all they have.”

Miriam and I nodded. We were both familiar with that fact. I also saw Laxmi and Gutierrez nodding.

“Doctor Warner, I have a favor to ask of you,” Haden continued, glancing over at me. “We need, desperately need, to keep Paige away from a few of the kids at St. Christopher’s. I sent four very bad ones over there, but they are teenagers. Fourteen through sixteen. If Paige gets to them, she’s going to use them as poster children, and we can’t have that.”

“Oh, hell no, we can’t,” I agreed.

“So, I need you to personally take charge of those four over there. If you need a restraining order, I’ll do it.”

I waved her off. “I shouldn’t. St. Christopher’s isn’t the high-profile place. She wants the big shiny building and the hard luck cases. Not the ones that are really fucked up. She won’t make it over to Port Richmond for four fucked up kids.”

“I want to say thank you, but at the same time,” Haden sighed, “it’s pretty screwed up that we have to keep her away.”

I nodded. There was no argument there, and the room was quiet for a moment in evidence of that.

“All right,” Gutierrez said. “Who’s hungry? And what’s the best pizza place that delivers?”

I grabbed Fischer’s hand before he could walk out the door with the others, and pulled him back.

“Stay.”

He put a hand on my cheek. “Wren, it’s late. You need to rest.”

“I never sleep, Fischer. Stay.” I twined my fingers with his and studied them. “This is not a request for sex—I don’t have a problem asking for that.”

“I know,” he said, quirking an eyebrow.

Smiling lightly, I rewrapped our fingers. “Stay. Sleep next to me.”

I didn’t know if he could sense what I was really asking. I was so tired of being alone in my bed. Having him there the night at the hotel hadn’t gotten me the whole night’s sleep, but it had gotten me a good four hours that I needed.

He nodded and I closed the door as the last of the house guests left. We walked back to the kitchen hand in hand and found Laxmi and Miriam cleaning up.

“There’s still a bit of coffee,” Miriam said.

“I’ll take it,” I answered. Caffeine didn’t do anything bad or good for me. I’d cut it out completely years before to see if I could fix this, but nothing happened. Well, that wasn’t true, something did happen. I couldn’t focus because I was used to the caffeine in my system. Never let me sleep, though.

Miriam put the enormous mug in front of me and I watched Laxmi nervously drying some dishes at the sink, glancing over her shoulder once in a while.

Fischer chuckled. “Laxi, relax, please. You’re an associate, and I like to think a friend. We already had this talk in the office. I’m not going to the ethics board if you’re not going to the ethics board.”

She put the towel on the drainboard. “Well, that’s just fine, but are you going to listen to me bringing my girlfriend to climax while you’re here?”

“Not if you’re not listening to Wren’s screams of delight,” he answered with a smile.

“People,” Miriam said, looking between all of us. “There’s a reason why there is a hallway and a bath between our rooms. And closets.”

I laughed. “Look, we’re all adults here. We know what happens behind the doors. We don’t have to play Dueling Orgasms tonight, all right? I actually just want to sleep. For real.”

“Do you think you can?” Miriam asked.

“Who knows. I want to try.”

She nodded and put the last coffee mug back in the cabinet.

“Can I ask why we don’t want Paige Dominiques talking to these kids?” Laxmi asked, cutting through the slightly awkward silence. “Her charity has the highest reputation—”

“She’s a kiss ass.”

“She’s a fame whore.”

"She's doesn't do this for them."

The words each of us chose rolled over one another, and had Laxmi backing up into the counter. "Okay then!"

Miriam laughed and grabbed her hand. "Paige's intentions are the best, but the road to hell is paved with those. She doesn't do this because she feels that it's her calling. She does it because it gets her attention in the right circles. Not the high up circles like Haden wants in on, but the gossips, the influencers, the nouveau riche. The people who want to be seen with flashy cash and good deeds a plenty."

I ran a hand over my face. "I don't think that she doesn't believe in what she does. She does, she knows these kids are in trouble, and they are screwed. But her reasons for helping them are skewed."

"We all still support her though," Fischer said, running his thumb over my wrist. "She uses us—gently—and we use her back. We just have to detour her sometimes, like with these kids that Haden asked us about."

"They must be a mess to get her to move them out of University City," I said. "And if they are that messed up, then there's a good chance they would be awesome poster children for her foundations."

Laxmi blinked a few times. "So you keep her around because she's a means to an end?"

Miriam traced her finger over the back of Laxmi's hand. "Baby, I work with the kids who are in the worst of the worst situation. Pediatric oncology patients, rare diseases, developmentally delayed, or non-developmental. And worse. They all come from families that are dead flat fucking broke, but they don't want that advertised—they just want their kids to get the treatment they need and deserve.

"She turns them into billboards and charity cases. The absolute last thing a poor person wants or needs is someone advertising that they are poor and have a sick child. They are literally threatened at every turn. God *forbid* they buy a nice pair of shoes, or a nice cut of meat. Don't you know poor people can't have nice things ever? Especially not if someone else is helping them foot the bill for their child's treatment."

"The people who take umbrage with the patients and their families don't realize that without the help, those kids would be dead, or

institutionalized," I continued. "Even poor people deserve compassion, despite the bootstrap bullshit you hear all the time."

"How is someone who is desperately poor going to pull themselves up by the bootstraps if they have over a million dollars in healthcare bills hanging over their head?"

I folded my hands, and pursed my lips. "They aren't. Ever."

Fischer

Holy good goddamn.

These two women were a force to be reckoned with. They were smart, passionate, fierce and driven. And I was watching them pull Laxmi into their circle.

I wanted her to join them. I wanted to cheer them on, and be their fan squad.

Wren put her cup in the sink and blew out a breath. "Well, it's time to go stare at the ceiling for a few hours, hoping that I can drift off enough to snag some sleep."

She held out her hand to me, and then pulled it back. "I'm not in this for the Most Orgasms in One Night Award in this house. I'm completely exhausted."

Miriam and Laxmi laughed and walked down the hall to her bedroom. "We'll take that award tonight," Miriam called back.

I heard Laxmi swear in Hindi as the door shut behind them.

Wren held her hand out again as they disappeared and this time, I grabbed it. She smiled and walked down the hall with me.

"There's no obligation, here, Fischer."

"I know," I said, closing the door with a soft click. "We're both exhausted, and we can mess around in the morning if you're up for it." I kissed her forehead, and walked to her bed.

It felt so strangely right to be here. I didn't understand how I could know someone for about a week and feel like I'd known them my whole life. But I did and here I was sliding into bed with her, with no intention of doing anything sexual.

"It's an interesting third date," I murmured as she shut off the light.

Wren chuckled, settling up against me. "It is."

"So, Miriam…"

"Is really that rich, yes." She nodded.

Laughing quietly, I let my hand draw little circles on her arm. "That wasn't what I was going to ask, actually. I wanted to know who Miriam is."

"My best friend," she said softly. "She and I dated, and we moved in together, here. About six months into it, we realized we were much better roommates than a couple, and broke up. But we stayed here. We work really well together."

"I can see that."

She let out a breath. "I have to be honest, Fischer. She and I have had sex after the breakup. Sometimes it just got to be too much for one or both of us and—"

My finger pressed her lips shut. "I know. I get it. Alone sucks."

"That's the voice of experience."

I nodded in the faint light of the room. "It's been years since I've even tried dating. The last one was…God, what? Like five years ago? They see that MD and it's all about how they can be a doctor's wife, and get into my wallet."

Wren let out a soft giggle. "Not even your pants?"

"Nope. Wouldn't have even cared if I cheated on her, because she just wanted the business arrangement."

"Wow," she whispered.

There was a quiet, comfortable silence between us, but Wren spoke up again, "What do you think is wrong with me?"

"Wrong…oh, the sleeping." I let the quiet drift between us for a while. "I don't know yet. I suspect it has to do with the visions and anxiety, but not sure how the two interact yet."

"Hallucinations," she corrected me.

"Do you really believe that?"

She was quiet a moment, but her hand never stopped tracing my skin lightly. "I don't know what they are. A glitch in my matrix?"

I chuckled. "That's an apt description. I'm not one to push mystical powers or religion, Wren, but we share the visions, the hallucinations. That's not really something that happens in one brain alone. Could be déjà vu. Could be visions, hallucination, shared hysteria. I don't know. I won't know, and we may never know. What I do know is that I want to find out why you aren't sleeping."

She moved in shadows and held up her hand. "Could it have something to do with this?"

It was impossible not to have noticed her bad hand, but I didn't want to make a big deal about it. I was terribly curious though. "How did that happen?"

"I was hit with the full voltage from a transformer," she answered.

"Jesus!" I gasped. She quietly told me about the whole incident with her aunt and the roadside transformer and I started to formulate a totally different idea of why Wren couldn't sleep.

"You said that you've had ECT?" I asked.

"Yes, but it was a complete disaster."

"Your migraines used to always spike when you had an episode?"

She nodded. "Now they're their all the time. Even preventatives don't do much. Just the in-progress drugs."

I kissed her cheek. "I have something in the office I want you to try. It's not a drug. I can't promise it will work, but I have a pretty good feeling about it. I think that after a few sessions you might be able to get some sleep."

It was quiet a moment and her voice was soft in the darkness. "Will it help right away? I mean, if I used it tonight do you think it would help?"

"I don't know…"

She put a hand on my chest and I could feel her looking at me. "Can we get it? Can we try?"

"Hey, hey, Wren. Deep breath. I don't know if it will work."

"I'm desperate, Fischer. All I want to do is put my head down and sleep. And I can tell you right now that as tired as I am, and

wiped as I feel, I won't get but two hours if I'm lucky."

She was desperate, and I realized that while I was fixing brains and spines, she had been trying to touch souls and psyches.

"What did you see, Wren?"

"It's not what I saw, Fischer. It's never about what I see. It's what I feel, what I hear, what I don't hear. Those children are all broken. They're empty and eaten up. There's nothing in them that makes them *them*." She swallowed. "I just want to sleep and escape that for a little while. Dubrovsky knew that. Miriam knows that. My research assistants know that. If I can close my eyes and rest, I can keep doing this."

The implication that she would lose all of this if she couldn't close her eyes and sleep was there. If my idea worked, I could save her career, and possibly her sanity.

I rolled so I hovered over her. "It's late, baby. You need two solid hours the first time you use this device. It'll be four in the morning by the time we get there get it and get back for you use it, and all hope of a night of sleep will be gone."

"God, I want to sleep. Just sleep. I don't care if it means pills or electrocution again. Sleep."

I leaned my head down and kissed the soft spot just behind her ear. "Maybe I can distract you instead."

Her hand found my cock as it was still growing thick, and her touch sped me along. "Whatever do you mean, Doctor?"

"I have the prescription you're looking for right here." I wiggled my hips and a half second later we collapsed in laughter.

"Good God, *please* don't tell me that line ever worked on anyone."

I kissed her sweetly on the lips. "Once. In med school. Just once. And the sex was *awful*. Just terrible."

"You deserved it after that line." Her hands worked under the waist of my boxers and she slipped them down over my ass.

"Doctor, are you trying to seduce me?"

A small laugh left her, and she leaned up and kissed me. "I don't think that I have to work very hard at that, do I, Doctor?"

My hand slipped her night shirt up and pushed the edge of her panties to the side. I dipped a finger into her, and could feel that she was already growing wet.

"Please tell me you have a condom in that nightstand," I managed.

"You bet your ass I do."

"I don't want to bet my ass…"

"Open the drawer, Fischer. Get the fucking condom out," she said. "Because I swear to God, if you don't get that dick in me—"

My hand was already in the drawer. There were only a few things in there, one of which felt like lube and the other few that felt like toys. My hand landed on a wrapped condom and I slammed the drawer.

"You have an interesting collection over there."

She ripped the package open, and reached down for me. "Lesbian sex isn't just cunnilingus."

I moaned, both from the feel of her hand rolling the latex down my shaft and the implications of her words. An image of Wren tangled in the sheet with her mouth on another woman's pussy while I watched flashed through my mind, and I moaned again.

"You're thinking very dirty thoughts, aren't you, Fischer." Her voice was soft in my ear.

"Very, very dirty," I breathed.

Her hand moved me to her entrance and I realized she did not intend to strip off her panties. I looked at her in the dark, and her eyes flashed at me.

"Just fuck me, Fischer. I don't want foreplay. I want you in me."

There was something so freeing about a woman who wasn't young or inexperienced. This woman, rubbing the head of my erection up and down her cleft, knew what she wanted, and wasn't afraid to ask.

I certainly wasn't one to object. The next time I passed over her entrance I pressed forward, entering her just a little. A quick, quiet gasp let me know I was there, and I pushed myself in deep, holding myself there. The edge of her panties were dusting over her clit, doing most of my work for me.

Moving slow, I pulled back and arched forward slowly. Each move was deliberate, and her walls were tight around me. It was a caress that, after only one other night, I was going to be addicted to.

"Hard, Fischer," she hissed the words.

I added a pop to the end of my stroke, and had her moaning a moment later. It wasn't enough for me though, and I started to shut-

tle in and out of her faster, harder. The pop was gone, and the motion of my thrusts were scraping the cloth across her sensitive bud.

We weren't long for this. I was surprised at how fast we had gone from zero to orgasm, but I wasn't one to complain.

I slipped an arm under her knee and lifted her leg to my shoulder. I watched as my cock disappeared over and over into her wet, wonderful pussy in the pale light from the streetlamps. The erotic sight sent me spiraling faster.

"Damn it, Fischer, make me feel this!" My eyes snapped to hers and she reached up, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Do it. Please."

I smiled, and thrust hard into her. Her body jerked and she groaned. I did it again, and leaned down to brace myself on either side of her body. Her leg was still hooked on my arm and she grunted every time I hit into her.

"Fuck," I breathed.

She pulled up and slammed her mouth over mine, and she stole into me, licking and sucking on my tongue. I felt a desperation in her, but more a driving desire. There was more to her than she knew, more than I knew. There was lust in spades inside this woman, and I didn't know if I would ever be able slake her thirst for sex.

I'd happily try.

"Yes, yes, Fischer, yes…" She was mewling and squirming under me, so I pushed through to the hardest thrusts I could give her. She threw her head back, and her breath was sawing in and out of her chest.

"Come, baby," I managed to squeak out. "Come on, come around me."

"Fuck yes!" She arched her back and her orgasm took over and had her screaming, "Yes, yes yes yes, oh yes." The word was an endless loop, and as her channel fisted me, the delightful feeling of climax rolled down my spine and landed in my balls.

"Shit!" I yelled as my release shot out of me. I desperately wished I was pumping ropes of cum into her and not a barrier. Still, it was one of the mind shattering orgasms like I'd had the other times with her.

…"Never leave me, S. No matter what happens, don't leave me."

"There is nothing that will keep me from you."…

Wren smiled at the images of us wrapped together as she tried to catch her breath. “Damn it, Fischer. You are so good at this.”

“I have someone who’s good at her part.”

She laughed and wrapped herself around me after I tossed the condom in the trash and dropped back to the bed.

“There’s more to us,” she whispered. “That’s what these hallu—visions are trying to tell us, isn’t it?”

“Don’t know, baby,” I said, kissing her forehead. “We’ll just have to find out.”

And for the first time in what had to be years, Wren fell asleep.

Wren

…A month later…

"Doctor warner?"

I turned away from the observation window, and unfolded my arms where I had them wrapped around me. One of my favorite nurses was standing behind me.

"Wow! Doctor Warner!" He stepped up and studied me. "Did you get your hair cut? Lose weight? You look radically different!"

The grin just grew on my face. "I've been sleeping every night for seven hours for the past three weeks."

"Oh, my God! Really?"

"Dead serious, Andy."

"So this new doctor worked out!"

I coughed and I couldn't stop the blush. "You could say that." He laughed. I hadn't actually meant to reveal that part of it, but when he said it that way, the blood just rushed through me. "Well, he actually came up with really weird use for a migraine device."

The nurse cocked his head. "The Cefaly?"

"Yes," I nodded. "After he realized what screwed up my hand, he realized that the ECT might be too blunt for the issue. The magnets in the Cefaly are the perfect strength for TENS therapy. I mean, I had it on three days and I woke up feeling so goddamn refreshed that fourth morning I could hardly believe it."

"That was a brilliant idea." Andy nodded his approval.

"It also feels really good after a tough day," I answered. I nodded back to the young woman in the observation room. "I'm here for her today. How is she?"

Andy held out the file in his hand. "She hasn't had an episode for three weeks, but I don't think she's done freaking out. I think there's more in there and it needs a trigger."

"Like?"

He nodded at the file. "Look."

I put the file on the table and flipped it open. Drawings, pages and pages of faces and abstract drawing. Some of the abstracts were thoroughly violent and disturbing, and some of the faces were distorted and terrible and full of hate.

"You're right. There's more in her."

He leaned against the table. "I've managed to have them keep her here, but they want to put her in the Horsham pediatric unit. I don't think it's safe for her yet. Not until this…evil gets out of her."

"I need to talk to Justine, don't I?" I sighed.

"She's the only one who can get Foster off the case."

"I fucking hate that man."

Patting my shoulder, Andy headed for the door. "We all do, Doc. We all do. But yeah, Justine is the one who is going to get him to back off."

I looked back at the girl in the room. "I'll write up a justification for keeping her here."

"Don't forget why she's here," Andy said. "If you have to go for the low blow of the case and going out of the district, do it."

"Good man, Andy," I said.

"Going in?"

"Yeah." I glanced at him. "Just turn on the cameras. I can handle it."

He nodded and flipped a switch on the way out. I waited another moment, still paging through her drawings. This girl was incredibly

talented, and I was having trouble trying to figure out how to use that in the case.

I left the file on the table. I didn't need it. I knew everything about Elutheria Stavros that was available. A sixteen year old girl who had been working the streets when she was twelve. She had been grabbed eighteen months before the bust and was forced into slavery. She had been unresponsive at first, but she quickly started to recover.

Too quickly. I, and most of the nurses and doctors didn't believe it for a second. I figured she was trying to get out and go back to her corners. She didn't have anything. Her mother had pimped her out for drug money, and then she killed herself with bad heroin. She had no father in the picture, no siblings, and no place to go. She hadn't been to school for years, and there was just nothing for the girl to look forward to.

Except her art talent.

I looked up at the ceiling in frustration before I walked in. I was going to have to talk to Haden about bringing Paige in for this girl. She had the best connections.

Pushing the door open, I walked into the room. Elutheria looked up and smiled at me. "Hey, Doctor Warner. How are you?"

"I'm good, Ellie. How are you?"

She pointed to the paper tablet that she was drawing in. "Is there any way I can get something more potent than crayons and graphite pencils? I feel like I could do more if I could have ink or pastels…"

"Sorry, doll. You know the rules."

"Damn," she said softly, but it wasn't disappointed. She did know the rules, and she was just trying to get me to bend them for her. Until she could get a psych clearance, she couldn't have sharp objects. Or belts, laces, things with cords…

If Justine didn't keep her here, it would get worse in the institution. I had the utmost respect for the hospital, but for this girl, at this moment, it was the wrong place.

"Doctor, why am I still here?"

"Why don't you tell me what you think the answer to that is?"

She shrugged, and look at me through her lashes. "You all think that there's still something wrong with me."

"And is there?"

"I'm the same as I've always been."

"You were trafficked, Ellie."

The nonchalance in her one shoulder shrug killed me. "It wasn't that much different from the street. I didn't get paid was all."

I leaned back in the chair, and folded my arms. "Where are you going to go after this, Ellie?"

"I'm sure I'll do just fine in foster care."

My eyes rolled so hard, I was pretty sure I nearly sprained them. "Don't take me for an ass, Ellie. Maybe the other doctors here want to hear those words, but I want to hear what you're thinking, what you're planning."

The pencil she was using to draw on the pad with sped up. She was agitated and didn't answer me right away.

"I'm going to leave. Pack up my shit, find a way to get emancipated and find a place to stay away from all this bullshit. Probably have to turn some tricks to get on my feet, but…it's just a lousy fuck with food and shelter after."

Exactly what I was afraid of.

No sixteen year old should ever think like that.

"Ellie, do you have anyone?"

She paused before she shook her head. She was lying. I waited a moment. "Who is it, Ellie? Who are you protecting?"

"No one." This time the answer was too fast.

But she gave herself away. The pencil was moving furiously over the portrait that had appeared there. A young boy, maybe three or four. I stood so I could see the image better from behind her shoulder.

"Who is he?"

She hunched down and drew even more furiously. "Ben. Ben ben. Ben. Baby Ben. Ben-ja-man. Ben."

"Who is Ben, Ellie?"

She shook her head, her hair flying around her. I leaned in close. "Ellie, we can help him. We can help you, too."

"Foster system sucks. Sucks. Sucks. Sucks. Give me back Ben. Ben ben. I promised. I was too small they said. But he was mine mine mine. I needed to protect him."

Every scenario I didn't want to imagine was galloping through my head. "Who is Ben, Elutheria?"

"B is for Ben. B is for Baby Ben. B is for Baby Brother Ben."

Holy hell. The relief coursed through me—I had visions of this being her son. Though if he was this young, she might be maternally attached to him anyway.

"Do you know where Ben is, Ellie?"

"Mmm. Yes. No. Yes."

"Does Ben have the same last name as you?"

"Nope, nope. Nope."

Shit, this wasn't going to be easy. "Can you tell me his name?"

"Ben ben ben…"

"His whole name, Ellie."

She didn't say another word, but I saw her writing across the top of the page in big angry letters.

Benjamin Matthias Sheehan.

That was not good.

HADEN RAN a hand down her face. Miriam had her head down on her arms. Fischer was leaning against the back wall of the observation room. Ellie, still in the other room, had calmed down since the drawing earlier, and she was doodling something else now.

"I have trouble believing that Matthias is a pedophile," Fischer said.

I waved a finger. "No, we're not going to go there. There are all kinds of disguises that people wear to hide who they really are. That said, I don't think he's part of the ring. I think that he's actually just a man whore who left Ellie's mom with a kid."

Haden nodded. "He has a reputation for fuck and flee, to be sure. The man is a total glutton."

"Witnessed by his size," Miriam grumbled into the table. She lifted her head. "He's foul."

"Are we fat shaming?" I asked quietly.

"Hell no," Fischer said. "He's actually gross. The amount of food that man eats is shocking."

"He makes excuses that he has to taste all the dishes," Miriam said. "I forgot about his habits. Another reason why I left the upper echelons. Unapologetic excess."

"So, her brother Ben is Matthias' kid," Haden huffed. "Did she leave him with him? Is he in foster care?"

"Who can find out for us fast?" Miriam asked. "You're the cop."

"DHS is a fucking mess," she answered. "I don't want to approach them as a cop, and that's what I would be doing. We didn't even know there was a brother."

Fischer huffed, "Paige."

We all groaned.

I hung my head for a moment and then glanced at Ellie sitting in the room. "I had already thought about contacting her. Miriam, you have to talk to Foster—"

"Lincoln Foster?" she gasped.

"Yes," I said.

"Oh, my sweet Jesus, don't make me talk to that man. He doesn't see anything but dollar signs and opportunities."

Closing my eyes, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "He's one of the hospital's best patrons. He donates a lot of money and Ellie is here on his grant program. Justine Blackwell put her on it when we realized she had nothing."

"He'd pull that?"

"If he felt it wasn't a good investment."

She ran a hand over her mouth and thought for a moment. "I don't know if I can, but I might be able to get a grant from my foundation. I think that there's a proviso…

"No," I interrupted. "Foster has to be convinced. We don't have time, this is on a twenty-four hour rotating check-in. She could be dropped off at eight tonight and they have to send her to Horsham."

"Once she's in Horsham, we can't get to her to protect her or stop them from releasing her. You saw the tape—she's not healthy yet."

"This isn't a mental hospital," Haden said.

"Horsham is out of district," I answered. "None of us can get to her. We need Paige and Foster in on this. We have to finish busting up this ring. You've seen those other kids—even the ones whose families are there for them. They are fucked up. We've only cleared one other pocket." I glanced back at Ellie. "I think she knows everyone in the ring. All of the customers who rented her. We just need to give her time to draw us all the faces."

Fischer

Miriam was a mess.

I glanced at Wren, who took a deep breath and grabbed Miriam's arm.

"Miri, please, please calm down."

"I haven't been to one of these awful parties since my father tried to marry me off, and beat me with a pool cue for thinking that being gay even mattered in marriage."

That was news, and probably news she should have shared before we dragged her to this godawful charity benefit. Now I was mad at myself.

I hated these benefits as much as anyone else, but she was having some sort of freaky visceral reaction to it. More specifically, Lincoln Foster.

Wren gave her a pointed looked and nodded off to the table we were seated at. Laxmi was there in one of her most gorgeous saris, and the sight seemed to settle Miriam tremendously.

"Right. We're doing this for the kids," she managed to squeak out.

I offered her my hand and winked at Wren as Miriam and I walked out to the dance floor.

"Deep breath, dear. It's all just a charade, and you can go home to Laxi in a little while. Just three hours."

"Man, Fisch. I am not up for this anymore. It's hard to pretend that I'm like them." She jerked her chin at the people on the dance floor with us.

"You're doing fine, Miri." I smiled at her. "What's scaring you?"

"My parents."

I balked, but didn't lose my rhythm. "What?"

"They're here, at table eight. I didn't know they were going to be."

I chuckled, and dipped her back to the music, lifting a moment later. "They must be thrilled to see that you're dancing with a person with a penis."

She hmm'ed noncommittally. "Wrong penis."

"They had one picked out."

She nodded, but offered nothing more.

"Who?"

"Lincoln Foster."

That time, I tripped and lost the rhythm. "Jesus Christ, Miriam, why didn't you say that sooner! We would have found a different way."

"It won't change anything. Lincoln was pissed when I said no, and he probably still is. But he sees everything as dollar signs, and I know how to manipulate that to get him to keep Elutheria in the hospital until we can get the images out of her."

Shaking my head, I spun her across the dance floor. "When you're ready to go, we'll go. If you can't talk to Foster, then so be it. We'll figure out how to get around it."

"I wish I could just pay for her."

I shook my head. "We all do, Miri. We all do. But we can't, not without the ethics board coming down on all of us." I glanced over at Wren, who smiled at me. "We've tried to figure out how to convince her to stay in the program, and if we can promise her that we can find Ben, I think she'll hang around."

"You heard your girlfriend. She's not healthy yet. She's going to have to go into the behavioral ward."

"I know. But I think we can work this out."

There was a tap on my shoulder, and I turned us to see Lincoln Foster standing there, looking ridiculously handsome in what was no doubt a custom tuxedo. The man was perfect—black hair, flawless skin, deep green eyes. He was totally manscaped, too, right down to manicured nails.

"May I cut in?" His voice was smooth and cool.

"I defer to the lady," I answered, and took a quick glance at Miriam.

After a long moment, she nodded, and I stepped back, offering her hand to the biggest, greediest bastard I'd ever met. Also, the man who held the key to the health of one young girl who could help the police crack a child-sex-for-rent business.

He gave me a stiff nod, then pulled Miriam into a close but not improper hold, swirling them away from us. Turning to the table, I found Laxmi's eyes glued on her girlfriend as the rival for her legal standing as spouse danced her around the floor.

"Motherfucker," she whispered as I sat.

"Did you know her parents tried to marry her off to him?" Wren asked, indicating she had also just found this out.

"She told me two hours ago. I'm so pissed."

I splayed my hands on the table. "Miriam can handle herself. She's big girl, and she's broke away from this once. I think we have to trust her."

Wren leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Jealousy, Fischer. I know what she's feeling." Her glance was pointed and I chuckled.

"I've got eyes for no one but you, gorgeous," I said. "I mean Miriam is hot—"

They each punched me in an arm, and I laughed.

We had really lucked out on this benefit. It had only taken Miriam an hour to find this was going on, and another hour to get invites. The biggest problem was getting Wren a dress and that was mostly because every time she had walked out of the dressing room, I just wanted to strip her out of them.

She'd changed, in all the right ways since the night I had fucked her to sleep, and gave her the Cefaly the next day. She was sleeping, rested, adjusted. She had only become even more gorgeous.

And more sex-driven.

The visions between us, even the ones she admitted to without touching each other, had diminished. I had no idea if she was going to keep having them, but we had both kept journals to compare them.

I just never showed her the ones I saw on my own. I hated to keep lying to her, but I just wasn't ready to share that yet. I was a hypocrite for that.

There was a crack from the dance floor that pulled everyone's attention to the center of the room.

Miriam and Foster were facing each other, and it was painfully apparent by the red handprint on Foster's face what had happened.

Foster made the mistake of grabbing Miriam's wrist. She backhanded him.

A couple—apparently Miriam's parents—vaulted on to the dance floor to rush up to the couple. Laxmi clearly was getting ready to do the same, and I grabbed her wrist.

"Let her handle it," Wren's words whispered across me to Laxmi.

"I'm going to rip his balls off and feed them to him."

Wren looked at me, and then we both turned to Laxmi. She was red and shaking with anger. With a toss of her chin, she told me exactly what she wanted to do. The three of us headed to the dance floor, but I held Laxmi back, gently.

Miriam's mother had a hand out to her daughter. "Miri—"

Her fierce gaze landed on the woman. "Fuck you, *Mother*."

"That escalated quickly," Wren murmured.

I had to school my features and try desperately not to laugh. Laxmi as well.

"Let go of me, you piece of shit," Miriam snapped. "This was a fucking mistake, to think I could be around you."

Foster was unmoved. "My offer still stands."

"Your *offer*. Do you think I'm some sort of piece of cattle you can buy at auction?"

"I can make it worth your while, and you know it."

"Now I'm a baby making slot machine?!"

Laxmi pushed forward and grabbed Miriam's hand. She might not have been the tallest person in the room, but the fury radiating off the woman made most everyone step back a bit.

"Let's get something straight here, Lincoln Foster. This woman, right here—" she held up their joined hands "—is mine. We came here tonight to talk to you about helping one special patient at St. Christopher's, and instead you put a rental dollar amount on my girlfriend's cunt." She stepped closer to him, and I saw just the tiniest bit of shock glance over his features. "The only thing that goes in that cunt is my tongue."

She whirled, jerking her out of Lincoln's grasp, and marched off the dance floor with Miriam in tow.

"I'll make sure to cut off that patient as soon as I can," Foster said.

Laxmi turned, very clearly flipped him the bird, and marched out of the ballroom.

"Well, that got shot to hell." Wren sighed. She looked at her watch. "Efficient. Less than twenty minutes. Do you think we'll have to pay for the parking?"

I started laughing. Even Foster had to smile at that while Miriam's parents just looked utterly mortified.

I took Wren's hand and headed back to the table. "We spent a lot of money on these tickets, I'm at least getting dinner out of it."

She laughed as we sat down, and picked up her champagne glass. It was only a moment before we both noticed someone standing at the other end of the table. Two someones.

I let Wren lead the way on this one.

She stared at them and took a slow, arrogant sip of her champagne. "Hello, Mister Crownin, Mrs. Crownin. Can I help you?"

"You have ruined our daughter," her mother growled.

"I have done nothing to your daughter. She is as she's always been."

"You and your authentic life bullshit. You deny us a grandchild, an heir." Her father was red-faced and looked like he needed another drink. "You and your lesbian ways…"

She chuckled. "I had nothing to do with this except to introduce her to someone she could love. And you do realize she can still have a child, right? But on her terms. Not yours, not that arrogant prick's. Go home, Monica, James. Just go home. Let your daughter live her life. Laxmi is everything you'd wish for in a daughter-in-law, but you're just too arrogant and stupid to see that."

She took another sip, and put the drink down.

James grabbed his wife's wrist and dragged her away from the table.

Foster stood there, clapping and laughing.

"This is spectacular," he said, slowing his clap. "I am so glad I decided to come tonight. This is endlessly entertaining, thank you."

I considered him for a moment, and glanced over at Wren who shrugged and addressed him. "You are a prick, aren't you."

"You know, I could make you a deal as well."

"Holy shit." Wren laughed, pulling me back into my seat. "Relax, Fischer. He's baiting us."

"Am I?" he asked. "A child. Just one. I don't care if you keep him as the backdoor man after. I pay well."

"I'm not playing *Indecent Proposal* at all, Mister Foster. We came here to ask you to extend the grant of one girl in the hospital. She's sick, and she's helping the police. But you've managed to run off Miriam Crownin, and her doctor girlfriend. You just propositioned me, in front of my boyfriend, well done, and as much as we need this girl's help, I don't think dealing with you is worth it."

"Give me one date, and I'll extend the grant."

"Fuck off, sir."

Man, this woman was good at handling her shit.

"I'll cut the grant loose tonight. With one phone call."

Wren stood, and I stood with her. We were going to be leaving shortly, I could tell.

"Mister Foster. Let me make this completely clear to you. We came to ask your help. To make the legalities of this easier to navigate. But I assure you, I do not need your ill-got, all-consuming dollar to assure that she gets the help she needs so she can give others that same help in turn."

"I'm sure you think you don't—"

She dipped her hand into her purse and pulled out a small slip of paper. "My card, Mister Foster. I can't say it's been a pleasure."

She grabbed my hand and we stepped back from the table. Offering my arm, I steered us to the doors. I leaned into her ear. "I'll pay for the parking, because I'm hard as a fucking rock and we're not going to make it out in under the hour."

"Doctor Warner, wait."

Foster strode over to stand in front of us, giving us no choice but to stop for him.

"You're Temperance Warner. Cadence and Langhorne's daughter?"

She nodded. "I am."

"I apologize for my rudeness," he said.

Wren slashed her hand through the air. "Don't, Mister Foster. I don't give a crap how hot you are, or how rich you are. Not everything has a dollar amount attached to it. Not my womb, not my friends, not my patients' lives. So thank you for your time and your insults. Please, don't let us detain you from finding some other dick to suck or cunt to humiliate."

She stepped around him and we were heading to the door again.

"Doctor. I am sorry."

She paused and looked back at him. "No, you're not."

My God, I wanted her. We were going to be lucky to make it to the car.

Foster was nothing if not persistent. He ran ahead of us again and put his hand out to hold her in place and I balled my fist to take a swing at him.

…Her moans filled the air as we dusted our lips over her breast, each of us sucking and nibbling on one. She had her head back, and our hands wandered down Wren's body, finding her clit, touching her entrance.

"She is gorgeous," I said, savoring her flavor.

"So responsive," Lincoln said.

"Oh, God…" Wren breathed, lust heavy in her voice. "Please…make me come."…

Foster ripped his hand away from her as though he had been burned, but Wren and I had schooled ourselves weeks before when we had a shared vision.

Apparently, we weren't the only ones who could share.

Wren

I slammed the button on the elevator and the car stopped at the next floor. I grabbed Fischer's hand and dragged him out, and into the hall.

I crushed my mouth over his and backed him against a bench in an alcove. He dropped on to the bench pulling me down to straddle him.

"What the fuck was that?" I managed to gasp the words between the scorching kisses.

"Apparently now our visions are telling us that we can share."

"Visions, or me?" I gasped as he pinched a nipple.

Fischer's hands gathered my dress in the front and pushed it up near my waist. He slipped his hands to my ass and pulled my panties down off my waist. I wasn't getting up, so he snapped the one side of the string and then the other and pulled the scrap away and shoved it in his pocket.

"Maybe both," he answered.

My hand found the fasteners of his pants and I had his cock in my hand in moments, moving my hand up and down on him.

"With Lincoln Foster? Oh!" His two fingers shoved into me roughly, but it felt good.

"You said he was sexy," Fischer growled, and didn't give me a chance to answer as he captured my mouth with his, and possessed me.

"That doesn't mean I want I ménage with him. Condom?"

"Wallet," he gasped.

I reached into the back of his pants, and within a few second I had him sheathed. He had his hands on my hips and helped me lift up so I could slide down on to his cock.

"Oh God, yes," I hissed. "Why do I need you so bad?"

"Adrenaline, Doctor," he answered, digging his fingers into my hips and rocking me back and forth on his length. "I would have thought you knew that."

"I've *never* been drunk on adrenaline like this, fuck." He was rocking me so each time I passed over him, my clit dragged over the root of his erection.

"Do you think he shared the vision?"

"Yes," I gasped. "Yes, I do."

His hands moved to my ass, and squeezed. "God, fuck, I'm going to come."

My movements were desperate as I chased the orgasm. "Come with me," I gasped.

He dusted his finger over my dark entrance and I had to slam my mouth over his so I didn't scream as I came. As soon as I offered him my climax, he jacked his hips up and drove in to my pussy hard. He offered his own climax back, and I wished I could feel his cum inside me.

A moment later, he slumped back against the wall, and I followed him, peppering his face with kisses.

"Damn, Fischer," I breathed.

"Damn, Wren," he gasped back.

"You ripped my panties off."

He smirked. "YOLO."

I smacked him playfully on the arm.

"So what are we going to do?" he asked, his cock finally slipping free of me. I wiggled back and gave him space—and cover—to re-

move the condom. I tucked him back in, and took the remains to the garbage can across the hall, my dress falling easily back into place.

"I guess I'm going to figure out how to donate the money to keep Ellie safe in that hospital." I sighed, and sat down next to him on the bench. "I had the feeling Foster was a long shot anyway."

He jerked back. "You?"

"Foster was a short cut, Fischer. He has all the legal routes set up. I don't. And Miriam can't because of impartiality in her non-profit. I guess I have to talk to legal before Foster—"

His finger was on my lips. "What do you mean, *you*. You'll donate how? Wren, you're a well-known doctor, but you're still a social worker."

I raised an eyebrow. "You think that a social worker could afford to become a practicing PhD on that salary?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Lincoln Foster was abjectly and duly humiliated tonight because he tried to make a rude, public pass at me. My family wasn't old money, but we were *monied*. I'm still monied. Just as wealthy as he is. My aunt never entertained his bullshit, and I never had to deal with him. It just would have been easier, but I can get my lawyers on this and—"

He sighed. "Legalities. I don't want you to do that."

"Fischer."

"Don't bring this to court. Don't get the lawyers involved. It's not worth it."

"I don't have to do anything, I just have to get them on it." I wrinkled my brow.

"Don't. It's not worth it."

My eyes went wide. "Excuse me?"

"It's really not worth it to fight the courts."

"This girl is potentially the key to breaking a sex trafficking ring and you're saying it's not worth it?"

"I'm saying there must be another way. Something that doesn't drag lawyers and courts into this."

"You think we can avoid any of that at this point?" I was really confused. "This is *all* up to courts and laws now. She's a ward of the state. We're going to have to testify in this. The damages done to them physically and psychologically. The families are gearing up for lawsuits and civil suits."

He stood and walked away from me, digging his hands into his pockets. A moment later he turned, and looked at me, his face red and angry. "I don't do courts. I don't do legal shit. My responsibility stops at the operating room door."

"No it doesn't," I stated.

"Oh, the fuck it doesn't."

I stared at Fischer openly. Anger raged through me. "Are you serious?" I pointed an accusing finger at him before I could stop myself. "*This* is what you and Gutierrez are always fighting about. Your refusal to do anything to help those kids you put back together."

"I don't have do anything beyond put them back together," he snapped.

"You selfish prick," I whispered. "Are you being serious right now? All those kids you've operated on and saved? You're just fine with them going back to the same people, the same house where they were beaten within an inch of their life?!"

"It's not my problem."

"If it wasn't your problem, then why do you even bother to operate on them?"

"That's ethics. I am ethically obligated to operate and fix what I can."

"And that stops at the operating room door?"

"Yes."

There was such finality in his words. His attitude was unbending, and I could see he had been through this argument before. I wasn't going to crack this nut, ever or at all.

I dropped my hands to my side. "We're done. It's over."

"What?" He was instantly confused.

"I am not going to spend time in the presence of a man who won't even help these kids find a sense of peace in their lives. Who won't help them escape the hell they live in. No, Fischer. I'm sorry, but people don't only exist when it's convenient for you, or comfortable. That's lazy doctoring."

"I don't—"

I slashed my hand down. "No. We're done. I'm not going to hear this bullshit. I didn't get to be where I am by picking and choosing the times and places I would care. I'm a twenty-four-seven doctor. Inside and outside my office. It's why I'm here."

Striding past him, I headed back to the elevator, and hit the call button.

His hand landed on my elbow.

…We clung to each other desperately, watching the two faceless creatures circle us. A cold, horrible threat was in the air.

"You can't take me away from them!" I cried. "You can't! It's the balance! It's my purpose!"

"You are a perversion of nature," one of the faceless hissed. "You and all of your lovers."

"You are broken apart," the other faceless said. "You are not whole and will not be whole until you find all and regain them, and your balance."

"And if you fail, if you continue this perversion, you will be brought back to the beginning. Again and again."

"How is love a perversion?" Fisher screamed.

"El says it is." The first faceless leaned in. "You are broken!"

A sharp pain slashed through me, our bodies ripped from each other and —nothing…

We'd gotten so good at schooling ourselves from the visions and hallucinations I couldn't read his face at all.

"Perhaps we aren't meant to be together, Fischer." My words were quiet and solemn.

"Maybe we are," he said.

I raised an eyebrow. "I guess we'll never know."

The elevator opened and I stepped in. I only turned to see him there when I pressed the button for the bottom floor.

"I drove you here," he called as the doors slid toward each other.

"I'm not your problem after the doors close."

They tapped together softly.

MY BODY WAS SHAKING as I tried to keep the sobs from echoing in the station. The train had to come soon. I didn't want to stand here much longer with my shoes in one hand and my purse in the other.

I knew I looked like a disaster. Everyone stayed away from me, and that was for the best.

I was a disaster on the inside, too.

How could someone say their obligation to these kids ended at the door? How could someone who seemed to have such a big heart put limits on it? I had been so close to admitting I loved Fischer to myself that hearing his words absolutely rocked me to my core.

He'd helped me with the migraines and the insomnia. I could sleep again. But he couldn't see his way clear to helping a child? Who had been abused?

It was my whole life. My PhD had been in children's social work. I wanted to help everyone I met, help them find the balance they needed, especially kids and young adults. It was who I was. It was my purpose.

Fuck. I shook with another sob, and barely heard the phone in my purse ringing. After the third ring, I realized it was my phone and quickly pulled it out, prepared to reject Fischer's call.

It wasn't Fischer. The main line for St. Christopher's flashed, and I quickly answered.

"Doctor Warner." I managed to choke out my name.

"Doc, it's Nurse Rollins. We need you at the hospital. Now."

I coughed to try and clear my voice. "What's wrong?"

"Ellie. She's having a really bad episode. Really, really bad."

Nodding, I tried to find my voice. He couldn't see me, so I finally choked out the words. "Yes. I'm on my way." I turned from the platform and raced for the stairs back out. I needed a taxi, an Uber, a Lyft…something. "I'll be there as soon as I can find a ride."

"Thanks, Doc." He closed the connection.

There was a taxi just on the other side of the street and ran for it, sliding into the back seat, giving the driver directions to the hospital. I was really glad I kept wipes in my purse because I was able to get most of the running mascara off my face before we pulled up at the entrance.

Andy's assessment of 'really really bad' was actually an understatement.

"A jacket!" I gasped, seeing the young woman sitting on the bed and rocking.

"I didn't want to sedate her," Andy said. "She hasn't done anything in weeks to warrant that, and I'm hoping you can help her. Without the drugs. Bring her back. We've got someone working on her room right now…"

I turned sharply and looked at him. "Her room?"

“She got her hands on charcoal. I don’t know where the hell she would have found that, but she drew up the whole room.”

“Show me,” I snapped.

Andy led me down the hallway to where Ellie usually slept in the hospital. I walked in and the whole damn room was covered in black charcoal.

It was awesome. My mouth fell open and studied all the walls as I moved in. It looked completely abstract, and random. There were lines and swirls and smudges, all long and tall and distorted. It made no sense, and from the first day Ellie had been with the staff, everything she’d drawn had made sense.

Reaching the window, I could see little words in the lines. No, Ben, Bad, Rape… over and over and over through the lines and spaces.

I turned back to ask Andy a question and froze.

The mural only made sense if you were looking from the window.

I gasped and laid down on her bed.

“Holy fuck, holy fuck…” I breathed. I leapt up, and grabbed for the janitor. “Stop! Stop cleaning!”

I’d scared the shit out of him, but Andy nodded at him. He put the mop down and I looked at where he had started to clear the walls. It was only a tiny portion in the corner.

“This room does not get touched until Haden has CS come in and document,” I said.

He nodded, and walked to the head of the bed. “What do you see? It’s all jibberish and abstract.”

“Turn around and look up.” I put a hand on his shoulder and spun him around.

Looking up, he gasped and staggered back into me. “Holy shit…”

My phone had already dialed and I had it on my ear in the next instant. Haden picked up on the second ring, and she was out of breath.

“Sorry, Detective,” I said, “but we need you at the hospital. There’s a major break in the case. We have the face of the ringleader.”

“You what?”

"Ellie lost it tonight and you have to come see this drawing she did. It's shocking, and I'm about ninty-nine percent it's his face."

"Can you confirm it? Get a name?"

My feet hit the linoleum flooring with a 'splat' sound as I marched back to the observation window to the room where Ellie was. "I am going to talk to her right now. They put her in the jacket and didn't drug her."

"Finally, a smart decision," Haden answered. "I'll be there as fast as I can."

The phone disconnected and Andy already had the door unlocked for me as I put my phone and purse in the locker there. "Make sure the cameras and sound are recording. I'm taking the jacket off her."

"I know," he said.

Elutheria was laying on the bed, facing the wall. I put a hand on her back, and unfastened the buckles.

"I'm sorry, Ellie," I whispered. "I know this hurts, but please trust me, this was better than the drugs."

"I know," she whispered. "Anything is better than the drugs."

My heart stuttered. "Did they drug you, Ellie?"

"Not if I could help it. I usually went along, and they didn't need them. Just another lousy fuck, you know? But there were some who were so terrified of me, of someone finding them with their dick deep in a rent-a-pussy they insisted I have them."

I helped her sit up, and slipped the jacket off of her, throwing it in the corner, away from us. "What's happened? What went on in that room?"

"His face always haunts me, and I couldn't get it out today. Since you won't let me cut, I had to do something. I thought drawing him on the walls would get him out of my head."

"Who is he?"

"Mister Passayunk. Or that's what he wanted us to call him," she said. "He controlled who we would go with, he broke in the new…"

I rubbed a hand over her back. "It's okay. Did you remember all of this all along, or is it coming back to you now?"

"Pieces, here and there. Some's been with me, some I'm remembering." She looked down at her shoes. "The ones who wanted the drugs were always the cruel ones. They were the ones who could really hurt you. I'm not stupid or naïve—I know what men like. I was

more than happy to lay there and let them pretend I was whatever they wanted."

"So Mister Passayunk…"

"He liked me. A lot. Said I had a pretty cunt that brought a lot of money in. He liked to used me too. He liked me when I was brought back from a client."

I put my hand on hers. "What do you remember about him, Ellie. He's out there, and he's hurting a lot of little girls right now, and you can help us find him."

"There was nothing special about him. Brown hair. Brown eyes. No tattoos. He looks like a thousand other white guys walking down the street. He wasn't short or tall. There was nothing…" She wrapped her arms around her and rocked lightly. "There was nothing."

My hand rubbed her back. "Deep breath, Ellie. Deep breaths, slow and calm."

She calmed a bit. "He had dead eyes." Her brow wrinkled after she said that. "No. That's not right. His eyes weren't dead, they were soulless. There was no humanity there. There was nothing to show he'd ever cared about anything but sex and making money off sex."

I nodded, understanding. I'd seen those eyes. There weren't shark's eyes, like Quint described in *Jaws*, because there was depth to them—but the depth was a window to the pits of hell.

"God, they're never going to catch him, are they?"

"No, Ellie, we're going to catch him I swear." I glanced at the observation window, and back at her. "Do you remember anyone or anything else?"

"I have the faces in my drawings. Those are all the men who fucked me."

My hand rested on her cheek. "Ellie, doll. I don't want you to call it fucking anymore, okay? They raped you or they assaulted you. I want you to save the 'f' word for when you find a man who knows the difference between making love, having sex, and fucking. And there is a difference. What they did to you? Was none of those."

"I'm sorry. The streets make—"

"That's not why I want you to stop using it. This is part of the healing process. You have a very long, very painful road ahead of you. I'm here for you. There are a lot of people who are cheering for you."

She stared at me, her eyes were bright with unshed tears. The poor girl who'd been handed a shitty hand in live had probably never had anyone there for her.

"So," I said, steering her away from the f-bomb conversation. "All those men in your drawings are from the organization?"

"Most of them. Either I saw them there, or they wanted to purchase time with me. Some of them were frequent flyers. I can probably remember names—but they were all streets in the city. Passayunk. Broad. South. Sansom. Race. You get the idea. All of them. They never used anything but those around us."

"Do you think you could remember some of the others who were there with you?" I asked. "They shifted you all around."

"Rotated us through different places yet, I think I was one of the few who didn't get passed around. Mister Passayunk liked me. I cost a lot."

It felt like someone ripped my heart out and tore it in half. This girl *cost* a lot. She should have cost parents a lot, in clothes or makeup or books or art supplies. Not some random dude who wanted a pretty young thing to stick his dick in.

"Okay. Do you think you can sleep tonight? You can't go back to your room—you really did a number on that."

She grimaced. "Yes, I should be able to sleep here. No problem. Doctor Warner, why are you all dressed up? I didn't know coming to see me was a formal occasion."

Laughing I patted her knee. "We were actually at a party tonight to try and secure the funds to make sure that you're covered and cared for until you're ready for a group home or foster home."

Her face fell, and she looked surprised. "For me…"

"Yes, we were appealing to one of the wealthy patrons of the hospital to continue to cover you here, so we wouldn't have to move you to a different hospital. You've got a long road—"

"Just for me?"

"Just for you, Elutheria. You can help us find these assholes, and it's only right we make sure that you're safe and warm and cared for."

"Did it work?"

I took a moment to consider my answer. The straight answer was no, and I'd discovered something terrible about the man I had been falling in love with. But the real answer?

"Yes, just not the way we thought it would," I smiled at her, and stood up. "Now, I want you to get some sleep. If you can't fall asleep, ask the nurse for something to help you sleep, something light like Benadryl. Detective Haden will be in with questions in the morning."

She nodded and laid down on the small bed. She adjusted a few times and then finally settled. I grabbed the blanket and settled it over her.

"Night, Ellie. Thank you." I walked to the door and flipped the light off. A second later, a soft yellow night light clicked on. I hoped it was enough to chase her demons away.

"Doctor?"

I stopped in the door and turned to her in the dim light. She picked at the blanket, and didn't meet me eyes in the near dark. I didn't say a thing.

"Always at night. In the middle of the night. He said I was his cure for insomnia. He could always fu—find his satisfaction and sleep with me. Sometimes he wouldn't let me go, and he would bring a little machine with him for when he fell asleep."

"What kind of machine?" I was shocked and could barely get the words out.

She paused for a moment. "It went over his nose, and made a whirring sound. He had to fill the water tank once in a while. A *seep-ah*? A *see-ap*?"

"CPAP?"

"That's it," she whispered. "CPAP. That's what he called it."

Holy hell.

CPAP—something a sleep doctor could proscribe.

Fischer

I couldn't sleep.

That was ironic considering what I did for a living.

My brain couldn't decide how to process all that was going on. The woman I was falling in love with, hard, had walked away from me today. Not only had she walked away, but she had thrown my own words back in my face.

A very large part of me felt I really deserved that. She was right to do it.

But there? Then? Right after some of the hottest sex I'd ever had, and then refused to talk to me about it at all? Just walk away and let the doors close?

I had called up her contact on my phone a few times. I had a few messages typed out. But I never hit the send button—not on the message or the phone number.

I was confused.

Wren was absolutely passionate about helping people. She hadn't become a doctor of social work to sit in an office. She didn't go into

one of the lowest paying professions for the glory and accolades. She did this because she loved it, and loved making a difference.

I loved what I did, too, but I didn't want to let my obligations take over my life. They already took up a huge swath of my life, I didn't need more.

That hadn't worked out so well last time.

When I had finally gotten my shit together in that hallway the night before, I managed to get to my car. I was still reeling from what happened, and I was worried about her. Calling Laxmi had seemed like the best bet to make sure she was home safe, but she wasn't answering her phone. I texted her, and then Detective Haden, to make sure that everything was okay.

***Det. Haden**: She's at St. Chris. Whatever you did, this is not the time to talk to her.*

Whatever *I* did? Why did they immediately blame me. And what was going on that it wasn't a good time to talk to her?

So, I spent a good portion of my night running Google searches on Temperance Dear Warner and her family.

No wonder she'd told Lincoln Foster to fuck off, in not so many words.

The girl was beyond loaded. Beyond. She had money that had money, that made money. Her parents had been patent and inventor sponsors, all over the world. They were good people, and they had taken a small percentage to get people to market. But some of those inventions had taken off like bats out of hell. They were savvy, and smart with the money. They had invested, and it had grown and grown.

And then they had adopted Wren.

She was an orphan at a Chilean orphanage. She stuck out like a sore thumb because she had such pretty light eyes and brown hair and looked nothing like the other children. But she had been left at the door, and they had no birth certificate for her—her birthday was a guess.

Just like mine had been.

I sat back in the chair and looked at the picture of her on the screen. She was so fucking gorgeous. I didn't want to lose her. But how the hell did I start to explain my aversion to the whole legal system? The *whole* thing. I didn't mind cops, or lawyer—but the legal system.

It always failed. Always.

Was I going to lose the best thing that had happened to me in years because we looked at this situation differently? Because years of experience had taught me one thing and her something else?

I ran a hand down my face, and scrubbed against the beard that was already trying to grow in.

Everything in my life had focused on getting where I was. I was the best. People came from all over the country to see me about their sleep problems, their neurological issues. They paid me top dollar to help and my failure rate was less than five percent. Less than five percent of all the people I saw continued to have problems.

Laxmi was amazing as well. She had a less than fifteen percent failure rate. She was tied with Dubrovsky for second.

Nothing in my life or my practice was less than exceptional.

I slumped in the chair. Everything had come to me easily. My parents knew from when I was very young, I was ridiculously smart. I screwed up tests so I didn't get held to standards I didn't want to perform to. I did exactly the kind of work expected to get good grades, to get into the best schools. I never let on how high my IQ really was, to my parents' great disappointment. They were always aware I was hyperintelligent.

And they were always aware I was lazy. They didn't know what to do with me. I was exactly as smart as I needed to be so I could get what I wanted and not be pushed to the next level.

It had all gotten me here. To perfection, to being *the best.* The laziest best doctor on the planet. I knew everything I needed to know, and I could figure out most every problem.

Except this one.

I couldn't let myself be sucked into the lawsuits and bullshit that had nearly crushed me. I had to shut down the part of me that gave a crap about the terror these kids could experience. I had to leave my fear for their future in the operation room or I would never be able to work. To think. To operate and function in the world.

The sun peeked over the horizon and I sighed. Sunday morning.

I had to find her.

I had to apologize and explain why I had to leave my worry on the table, behind the doors. If she chose to walk away again, I wouldn't stop her. I couldn't. She was too much...her. She was who she needed to be.

I wasn't there yet. I might never get there. The balance of my sloth and my brilliance was still a way off—even at age thirty-six. Even for as much success as I had.

I grabbed the phone.

***Fischer**: Can we talk?*

I didn't expect an answer for hours. She could sleep now.

***Wren**: Can't. Too many things going on right now.*

***Fischer**: You're up? Don't tell me the insomnia is back.*

***Wren**: No. At St. Chris. Things happened. Haven't slept yet.*

Things happened?

***Fischer**: My fault?*

There was no answer for hours.

THE DOOR to my office opened without preamble, and Laxmi walked in. I had never seen her so angry or resolute, and I was a little afraid of what was going to come out of her mouth.

Turned out, I had every right to be.

She put two pieces of paper on my desk, and pushed one forward first. I moved it closer reluctantly and saw the lawyer's letterhead staring at me. Blackwell, Hathorne and Ferrera.

"What's this?"

"My release letter. I'm dissolving the partnership." Laxmi folded her arms.

"The partnership we just formed last month? Why?"

"Because I can't work with someone who doesn't get involved in the lives of his patients. I don't only care for a patient in the office and never think about them again. If someone needs me beyond the confines of this office, or of the emergency setting where I first meet them, I am not going to walk away from them. And if that's a condition you want to set, that's fine. I'm not beholden to it and I'm not beholden to work with that attitude."

"Laxmi, that's..."

She folded her arms and I knew I wasn't going to get through to her. I sighed and pulled the other paper forward.

It was a police sketch. I studied it a moment, and saw the date was yesterday. "What's this?"

"That is the ringleader of the sex traffic ring. Elutheria had a complete freak out Saturday night and she drew his picture all over the walls of her room. It's an impressive and terrifying portrait. If you actually gave a shit, I'd tell you to ask to see the pictures from Haden. But since you don't and I don't think anyone could make you, I figured I'd walk it down to your lazy ass so you could see it."

The man was unremarkable. There was nothing unique about him. Even his stats were boring. Brown hair, brown eyes, middle height, middle weight, no tats, no scars... "How the hell are we going to find this guy out of the millions who look like John Smith Whiteman here?"

"Good question." She sighed. "It was one we spent most of yesterday trying to figure out while we were waiting for his picture. We thought about releasing the real image of him, from Ellie's room, but that's going to remain an unreleased detail. This is the picture we have." She stared at me for a long moment. "He uses a CPAP."

I started at that detail. "That's oddly specific."

"Ellie remembers him wearing it and falling asleep next to her."

Wrinkling my brow, I stared at the picture. "Why would she know that?"

"She was one of his favorites, Fisch. He kept her in the same place so he could use her when he wanted to."

My lip twisted down in a frown. That was disgusting. A child, kept for his perverse entertainment.

"How long?"

"She was there for eighteen months."

I felt the bile in my throat. "Jesus Christ, she's only sixteen."

Laxmi slammed her hand down on the desk. "Don't start to give a shit now, Fisch. Just don't. We've got this and we're handling it. She's got help, she's got support and she's going to have a place to stay and get well. She doesn't need you to suddenly find your conscience."

She turned on her heel and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her. I stared, completely unable to move.

The picture of the ringleader and rapist sat there, staring at me. He was the most unremarkable person I had ever seen. It was the perfect disguise. Mister Normal. Someone who would never be suspected. How were they ever going to find this guy?

I picked up the sheet and stared at it for a long moment to see if I could place him in my head.

…"You won't see her again. Not ever. Because you will never learn your temperance." The dark man stood over me, holding a flaming sword. The light man stood next to him chuckling.

"You can't take her away, Seleth. You can't. Do you understand what that will do to the world? To the very mortals we were meant to tempt and temper!"

"Chaos," the light man said, his blade burning with a strange black flame. "Utter chaos."

"How do I stop you, Malachai? You can't create a curse without a cure! It is demanded by the balance, by El!" I screamed. A welling of power coursed through me. A gray power, balanced between evil and good. "Tell me how to break your curse!"

They jerked and stood straight as I let the power whip through them from my outstretched hand. How did I have this power, but not the power to stop them?

"There is no line between good and evil. Temper your sin, and find that evil lies in good and good lies in evil."

The dark man twisted his lip angrily and drove the bright blade and it's flames straight through my chest...

Laxmi was standing in front of me in the door, looking terrified and confused. She stared at me for a long, long moment before I saw her hand on my forearm, holding me in place.

"Fischer...?"

"I'm okay. Just a flash of memory." I pulled my hand away from hers and headed to the bathroom we shared between our offices.

"Who is Seleth?" Her voice was low and quiet.

I spun. "You...how long were you holding on to me?"

"A few seconds. You yelled, really loud and I found you here." Laxmi's voice was shaky. "I was trying to..." She shook her head. "What the hell was that?"

"Nothing, it was nothing."

She strode over to me, slamming the door behind her. She grabbed my elbow. "That was not nothing, Fischer. What the hell was it?" I didn't answer her. "Fischer. I saw someone shove a flaming sword through your chest. Talk."

I turned my head away from her and let out a breath. "It was a vision. Wren calls them hallucinations. I've had them my whole life

and most of the time I just ignore them."

"Vis...visions?" She shook her head. "How the hell did I see what was going on in your brain?"

I pursed my lips. "One of the great mysteries of the mind, I suppose."

"Oh, fuck you, Fischer," she snapped.

"I don't have an answer," I said. "The dark and light men have always threatened me. I didn't see Wren in them until we met. Now she's in them all the time."

"Wren?"

"I don't know how you saw that."

"You see Wren in these visions?"

Swallowing, I nodded. "We share them. Randomly, but we see the same thing."

"This isn't significant to you?"

"Laxi, I've had them my whole life. I don't know where they come from, or why I have them, but I can't focus on them."

She let my elbow go and stepped back. "Fischer, I was going to tell you to just leave her alone. But that…whatever you just saw, makes me think you do have to talk to her."

A painful twinge hit my chest and I rubbed at it. "She's so much more than just a smart, sexy chick. I don't want to lose her. But there's a lot more to me, too, Laxi. She has to give me a chance to explain."

It was quiet in the office, and I could barely hear the whispered sound of feet on the carpet. "I will talk to her, see if she'll meet you. But, Fischer…these visions…"

"My parents tried to pray them away."

"White Western religion doesn't allow for them, at all," Laxmi said. "My culture does. Will you let me talk to the *pujari* at the temple?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You attend temple?"

She smirked. "Just because I don't wear saris all the time and light candles to Vishnu doesn't mean I don't go to temple. My parents are very religious, and I know all the leaders in the temple. And anyway, unless you know a medicine man or a shaman, I'm all you'vegot."

Running my hand over my face, I sighed. "Laxi, I've dealt with this my whole life. It's not a big deal, and I'd just…"

"Let me talk to the *pujari*, and I'll tear up the dissolution."

That stopped me dead. "You'd do that? I really don't want you to dissolve this."

"I have two conditions." She held up one finger. "I can talk to the *pujari*, and two, you start working on helping the kids you repair and save beyond the operating room."

"Laxi—"

"I don't care if you have to see a therapist. You have, or could still have, one of the best therapists in the Philadelphia area as a girlfriend if you can sort your shit."

"My shit is sorted."

"Oh, no, sir, it is not. You have issues and you have to figure out how to cancel the subscription. I'll get her to talk to you, but you'd damn well better not fuck it up. She will come for your throat."

There wasn't much that could change my mind. But I nodded. I wanted Laxmi as a partner more than I was willing to put up a fight about therapy. I wanted Wren in my life too much.

"Fine," I said. "Don't press her, please. Just tell her I want to talk to her."

"It's been a hell of a weekend, Fischer. The evidence that girl sprawled all over the walls of the room is damning and shocking. It hit all of us."

"Just answer me one question, Laxmi. She slept? Wren was able to sleep?"

"She got five hours," she nodded. "Miri and I keep track."

"Thank you," I said.

"Will Haden let me see the images from the room?"

"You…why?"

Why did I? If I looked at them, I would be involved. It was bad enough I had gone with Wren to the party, agreeing to get involved that way.

But a sixteen year old? No. Worse. The girl had been fourteen when she was taken. And there were even younger there.

It wasn't fair I asked to help her and not every other child who had been brought in and tortured.

I hung my head. "I do need help."

Wren

Laxmi staggered into the house, looking wrung out and horrified and lost. Miri ran around the table as I ran over to her from the couch where I had been sitting.

"Laxi?" Miriam asked.

I grabbed a bottle of water and put it in front of her. "Laxi, what's wrong?"

She looked up and it was clear she had been crying, a lot and hard. A few gasps later she managed a sip of water and immediately started crying again.

"What the…" Miriam was at a loss.

"They've lied to me my whole life," Laxmi managed to whisper. "My whole life."

"Who?" I asked, pulling up a chair to sit with her.

Looking up, her lip trembled. "My parents."

Miriam was on her knees next to her in the next moment. "Tell us what happened?"

Laxmi wound her fingers into Miriam's and took a few deep breathes. "I went to the temple *pujari* to ask about visions, about *darsana*. He was wonderful and understanding and we had an amazing conversation about what *darsana* are, and how to know if you've simply had bad curry or an actual vision.

"I explained to him I believed I'd had a *darsana*, a glimpse of another life, and he wanted to talk to my parents about how exciting this could be. That there might be a real way to focus the *darsana* for the good of the people."

Miriam let out a deep sigh. "He called your parents."

She nodded. "I didn't think it would be a problem. I was at their temple, talking to the *pujari*, doing religious things for a good reason. I was actually kind of hopeful that they might be pleased by all this.

"But they showed up, and had a manila envelope with them. I was so confused until Baba asked me if I had made a spectacle of myself at the party on Saturday. I mean, I did, but I didn't think they would hear. They don't run in those circles.

"But one of their friends' sisters was there. Saw the whole thing, heard me scream you were mine. And of course, spread that down to my parents. I had really, really hoped to talk to them and break the news gently. I don't even know if it would have made a difference at this point.

"The *pujari* excitedly started to tell them about the *darsana*, and my father just held up his hand to stop the man. He held out the manila envelope, and sneered at me. Maan didn't do a thing, except stand behind my father.

"I grabbed the envelope and flipped it open, but before I could pull a single thing out of it, he and Maan turned away, and started to walk away from us."

She pulled her purse off her shoulder and pulled the manila envelope out, slapping it on the table. "*Pujari* called them back, but only Baba turned around. He pointed at me, and said that I wasn't welcome in their lives anymore and that even agreeing to raise me was a mistake."

Oh, no. My heart fell to the floor. I popped the envelope open, and drew out the papers inside, studying them.

Adoption Plénière.

Plenary adoption papers, from France. As well as a birth certificate with her name on it. Just her first name. No parents.

Miriam put a hand over her mouth. "You're adopted. You didn't know."

"No idea. I didn't know I wasn't born in the U.S. I didn't know I was abandoned at the orphanage. I don't even know if my birthday is real!"

"But why did they give this to you now?" I asked.

"They disowned me. Standing there in their damn temple, in front of the *pujari*, they disowned me. No daughter of theirs was going to take a woman to wife."

Miriam wrapped her arms around Laxmi and the woman who had become such a friend to me, and everything to Miriam, just crumbled in front of our eyes. I let them stay where they were for a few minutes, and then motioned for Miriam to take her over to the couch. She helped Laxmi stand and they made it to the living room.

She sat them down and tucked Laxmi against her, dropping sweet kisses on her head. I trotted into the kitchen to make one of Laxmi's favorite dishes I had mastered: tikka paneer, with peas and basmati rice. The woman would live on it if she could and I figured comfort food was the way to go.

It took almost an hour, including a shower with Miriam, to get Laxmi to settle enough to come to the table. She sat down and smiled at the dishes there.

"You two. What the hell would I do without you?"

"Probably live a very boring life," Miriam said, pulling her chair close to Laxmi.

"Would that really be so bad?" she asked.

I pretended to think. "Yeah, it would."

She laughed lightly and reached for the bowls of food to make herself a plate. "So, the whole reason I went to temple in the first place was because of the *darsana*."

"What is *darsana*?" Miriam asked.

"Visions. Hallucinations. Second sight."

I jerked my head back as I scooped rice on to my own plate. "Why on Earth would you be asking about that?"

"Something happened on Monday in the office and it kind of freaked me out," she said. "I went in there and actually handed Fischer all the papers to dissolve the partnership. He was shocked, but he agreed in the end. I left them in there and started to get set up for the day. I heard him yell and when I found him, he was just standing

there behind the door. I grabbed his wrist to make him sit down, but instead..."

Once again, I wanted to puke. That had been the prevailing feeling lately, the urge to barf. I managed to keep myself under control. "Instead what?"

She pushed the peas around on the plate. "I had a vision. A *darsana*, a peek, into another world or life or something like that. It wasn't this world and it wasn't right now. The end of it had a... well, a dark angel shoving a sword through his chest and that's when we both jerked out of it."

Miriam threw a look at me. She'd known about my hallucinations, visions, whatever, but she was clearly asking me about Fischer's.

"So, you saw something when you touched Fischer?" I asked.

"Yeah, and I offered to talk to the *pujari* about it. *Darsana* are sacred and revered in most temples and this was weird that we both saw the same thing at the same time." She speared a chunk of the cheese in the tikka sauce. "He tried to tell me to forget it, it wasn't worth worrying about, but a dark man and a light man with weird flaming blades didn't seem like nothing."

"Did he agree?"

"I told him I'd tear up the dissolution if he agreed." She smirked. "He did. I tore it up. I just don't understand why he wouldn't have gone to talk to someone about them before."

"Before?" Miriam asked,

"He said he had them his whole life."

My fork clattered to the table. "What?"

Laxmi looked worried she had done something wrong and paused before repeating herself. "He said he's had them his whole life."

"That lying son of a motherless goat!" I roared.

"He never told you about them?" Miriam asked.

"No! Not even after he and I—" I froze, looked at Laxmi terrified for just a moment then tossed it all to the wind. "Not even after he and I started having them together, as well."

This time, Laxmi's fork fell to the tabletop. "What?"

"I've called them hallucinations, but I've had them my whole life, too," I said. "And when Fischer and I met, we started having them

together. The dark man, the light man, the swords and *lots* of filthy things going on between us."

"What the hell?" Laxmi murmured.

"You said it." I didn't know if I was pissed or disgusted or just tired, but I had to drop my head into my hands to just hold myself together. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"He's been trying to call you all week, but he keeps chickening out," Laxmi said. "I think that whatever happened between you two, you knocked some sense into him."

Sighing, I pulled out my phone from my pocket and showed them all the texts I hadn't sent to him that week. "I've been chickening out too. I just can't deal with his *leave it at the door* attitude."

Laxmi nodded. "I get that. I mean, that was the whole reason I was going to dissolve the partnership. But something happened. Two somethings, I think. You walked away from him. That really got under his skin. He really is invested in your relationship, and in the six years I've been working with him, I've never seen that. But I also think Ellie's situation is getting to him. There's something about the girl and her predicament that gets to him. I'm not saying this is all going to change overnight, but he's never been this unsure about what to do. He's a cocky bastard."

"Ya think?" I laughed.

"He's also lazy. So all of his cocky is deserved. He's really this smart and it scares me sometimes what he might be able to do if he was to really apply himself," Laxmi said. "But when I showed him the picture of the ringleader, I saw his face fall. He mentioned like nine times this week that there was no way to find this Average White Dude in a sea of average white dudes."

It was our biggest problem. Average dude was average, and that was his best attribute.

Laxmi put her hand on mine. "So, let me get this straight. The entire time you and he have been dating you'd get these shared random visions?"

"Yes." I nodded.

"I think that alone qualifies the guy for a second chance."

"I really like him," I admitted. "But I can't if he doesn't see that by not helping these kids, he's spitting in the face of everything I do."

She and Miriam nodded.

"Talk to him?" Miriam asked. "Just talk to him."

"I can do that," I said. I scrolled through my phone and found one of my less exasperated texts that was more on the side of sweet. I hit send, and hoped he would still be willing to talk to me—though from what Laxmi was saying, it wasn't an issue.

How was I going to convince him to stop closing the doors on people who needed his help?

The first thing was, I had to figure out why he closed the door in the first place.

***Fischer**: I've missed you so fucking much.*

***Fischer**: Can I take you to breakfast?*

***Wren**: If it's Amy's Omelet house, yes.*

***Fischer**: There's nothing like a woman who appreciates a good omelet.*

***Wren**: Is that what we're calling it now?*

Fischer: I got a table.

I walked up to the door and was really glad he had grabbed us a table. The place, one of the best breakfast joints in South Jersey, was always crowded. Even on a cold March day like today, the tables outside on the covered patio were filled. We were seated just inside the door, though, and there was a cup of hot coffee sitting on the table just waiting for me.

I pulled my coat off and wrapped my hands around the warm mug and sighed in delight. It was still early, and coffee was the best thing ever at this point in time.

After I could feel the heat of the mug seeping into my fingers, I finally looked up. "Hi."

Wow. The man looked haggard. Sexy, but haggard.

"Hey." He smiled, relief drifting through his eyes. "I wasn't sure..."

Snapping my hand across the table, I grabbed his. "I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't serious."

A little more of the worry slipped from his face as he nodded. "We need to talk about...well, every fucking thing under the sun, really. I don't want to risk losing you again, and you need to know everything."

"Same here," I agreed, and lowered my voice, "but let's skip the fucking part. We'll never talk if we start with that."

He chuckled, and leaned in. "Even my left hand wasn't doing it this week."

I almost choked on the air I was breathing, and then shook my head violently. "Nope, no. Not going there. We need to talk."

"We do. Let's order, and we can chat over the food."

"We're not going to be able to talk all day here," I said.

"No, but we need a table between us to start the conversation." Fischer smiled, and his thumb ran over my knuckles.

I understood exactly what he was saying. As soon as his eyes hit my gaze in the next moment, it was as if nothing in the room existed. The heat between us was already raging and we just weren't in a spot to let the fire consume us. Not yet. Not until we talked through what was going on.

He pulled his hand back and wrapped it around his own coffee mug, turning the burn down by several hundred degrees. It was a relief and a loss at the same time. I wanted to pull it back, but we'd be out in the back seat of one of our cars in a heartbeat if I did that. So I just wrapped it around my own mug again.

"Wren, I can't say I'm sorry for what I did Saturday," he said. "It's my default setting, and it's defined everything I do since I was a little kid. I don't like the court system. I haven't ever." His voice was filled with painful sadness, but I resisted the urge to touch him. Bad idea. I wasn't even mad he wasn't apologizing—I hadn't been planning to either. Neither of us had been wrong, we just hadn't talked about it.

"What happened, Fischer? Why do you hate the courts? What makes you leave all the caring I see inside you behind the operating room doors?"

He didn't say anything for a few minutes, studying the menu. I didn't want to interrupt his thoughts, so I just let him look at the menu. He saw that I didn't have my menu open, and raised an eyebrow. I grinned.

"I have five omelets I rotate through. Today, we're at omelet 104, the Maine. I realized I had to do that or I'd end up reading all 200 of them over and over."

He laughed a little and that seemed to calm him down. "Okay, fair enough. This is pretty insane."

"It is, and worth every cholesterol-laiden bite."

The waitress walked up, refilled the coffee we had barely sipped and waited for us to order. I rattled mine off, and Fischer glanced at the menu one more time. "I'll have the 190, no onions."

She nodded and walked off.

I raised an eyebrow. "The Polish Cowboy?"

"I like kielbasa. Sue me."

I laughed. "Not on a bet. I love it. We'll go to Port Richmond for some good kielbasa and I'll make you some."

"Cooking up some sausage for me, Doctor?"

"Stop. You're not going to throw us off track here." I waved him off, and swallowed the urge to grab him and take him back to my house, to hell with breakfast.

"Right, right."

Fischer stared down into the coffee mug and swirled it a bit. "My parents adopted my older brother with the hopes that once they had one child, it would be easier to get pregnant with a second. It's a common occurrence—adopt one, get pregnant immediately because no pressure. Didn't work for them. At all. They finally just conceded defeat when Colman was twelve and adopted me. I was the icing on their perfect family, and really, I had an awesome childhood. Colman was such a great big brother." He shook his head. "I had an awesome childhood. I'm not kidding. I don't hear many people say that, but I did. I loved it, I love my parents, I loved my brother.

"But he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He told me the whole story, and I believed him. I never had reason to doubt him. He said he was walking by the dorm room when someone fired a gun. A bunch of guys ran by, bumping up against him, and dragging him with them. The cops were waiting at the other end of the street and arrested all of them, including him. He explained he had just been walking back from class and got caught in the mess. Cops didn't care. He didn't expect them to.

"They found a quarter key of cocaine in his bag, as well as a gun. Someone had shoved it in his backpack as they were running, he was sure. He was confident the lawyers would get him off, explaining what happened.

"Then the murder charge came down, tied to the gun he'd been found with in the backpack. He still believed the system would do

him right and release him after they realized the gun didn't have his prints or his name attached to it.

"He was found guilty of nine charges, including the murder. He was sentenced to forty years, with no chance of parole for twenty-six years. We have had lawyers upon lawyers and I've even contacted the Innocence Project—but they're overwhelmed and it could take months to even hear an assessment. Meanwhile, my brilliant, loving brother sits in a fucking jail cell, rotting. Because the legal system failed him. Time and time again."

"Jesus, Fischer..."

"So I don't like to get involved in this shit because it just fails. It gives the wrong people the wrong conviction and there's nothing I can fucking do to change that."

My finger ran around the rim of the mug. "It doesn't always fail."

"Forgive me if I don't believe that."

I let out a breath. "I can't give up on the system. It's my lifeline. It's the only way I can make progress, the only way I can hope to get some of these kids out of the system, into real homes. Away from the hell that is their everyday life, being beaten and worse."

"I realize that. Now."

"Is there any way I can get you to think about helping the ones you put back together? You don't do a lot of those surgeries like you did on the Carson boy...maybe once a month. You don't even have to go into the court. It's possible to do a written statement. We can have Haden depose you and have it notarized."

He sighed. "That doesn't sound like it would be out of reach..."

I did grab his hands this time. "Anything helps, Please, Fischer. These kids deserve a chance to live."

"It's not going to be easy for me to do this. I've been against this so long that I'll have to be reminded now and again that I want to do this. I know Ellie deserves justice, and the chance to get away from all of this."

"And the others?"

"*If* you can get Haden to depose me, either by written or video statement, yes. But please realize that's all I can give. I just don't trust the system."

I smirked. "You don't trust it or you don't want to put on suits and give the time?"

He laughed. "Maybe a little bit of both."

"Laxmi squealed on you, she told us you're lazy."

"Oh, she's..." He really laughed hard. "I am. It's true. But that's not the only reason I won't get involved. I hope you can understand that. I have to go see my big brother, who has a PhD in physics, in jail. He earned his whole degree behind bars. He can't be a part of the world because the system failed him. I am terrified that he won't ever be exonerated."

"I get it, Fischer. I do. I promise. But help us help Ellie. Don't hide away if I have to deal with the courts to do something. Please. That's where I lost it. You didn't give us a chance to work through the courts to get her the money to stay in the hospital."

"Did you?" he asked.

Taking a sip of the coffee, I studied him. "I didn't have to. Foster never took the funds away. He didn't fight it at all. All the money he had earmarked for the fund showed up without interruption."

"Curious," he said. "Do you think it was an empty threat? Or an attack of conscience?"

"I think we shamed him into it," I answered. "I think he was too mortified by what we did that night for him to even think about pulling the money. It's a healthy tax write off for him, so why would he stop the payments. I also don't think there's an iota of conscience in that piece of shit."

Fischer nodded. "I think you're right. That's his reputation. He has no drive except money. And if you embarrass him enough about his money, he does the right thing."

"Ugh, what a shit way to live," I answered.

"Something went wrong in his childhood."

"Hey, Doctor Freud, leave the analysis to the experts."

He cocked his head. "I'm wrong?"

"Not even remotely."

Fischer

The door to the house finally banged open after a very long string of curses.

Most of which were my fault as my hand was stuffed down the front of Wren's jeans and my finger danced over her clit.

"Fischer…" she ground out as she pulled me into the house.

I slammed my mouth over hers and took her mouth hostage. Christ, one week without her and I was like a crazed maniac.

Kicking the door closed, I backed her up against the wall, still plundering the kiss. Her hands were on my belt and she was in much better control of that than the house keys.

"Shit!"

The exclamation came from the living room of the house and I saw a blanket fly through the air and land on a lap. I pulled away from Wren to glance into the room. She leaned her head back on the wall and was laughing already.

Looking into the room with me, we were both giggling. Miriam sat with the blanket over her lap, her face bright red and desperately trying to keep her expression neutral.

The blanket was not staying still.

Wren tossed her head back and let out a good loud laugh. “I see you, Laxi!” she called.

A hand emerged from under the blanket and flipped a middle finger at us. I couldn’t hold back my laugh either.

Wren stared at Miriam, and a wicked grin spread across their faces. “Race?” Miriam asked.

“Bet,” Wren said.

She grabbed me by my belt and dragged me down the hall to her room. A moment after the door slammed, I heard the other bedroom door slam, and her mouth was on mine.

“Make me come. They’ll pay for dinner.”

I laughed. “You’re serious.”

“Whoever gets off first wins.”

“You and your roommate are perverts.” I smiled against her lips, but my hands pulled her pants down, right off her ass. She stepped out of them, I backed her all the way up to her bed and she fell backward on to it.

With no preamble, I dropped to my knees and hiked her legs over my shoulders. Her sex glistened from her own desire that I had been stoking with my fingers.

I’d had a hand down her pants on the way back from the restaurant. I missed her feel that much. One week. I couldn’t be away from this woman, not on the horrible terms we had been. I needed to figure this out, and I need to make sure I kept her.

Driving two of my fingers into her channel, she gasped loudly and grabbed a pillow from the head of the bed. She stuffed it behind her head so she could watch me, but her breath was already stuttering in her chest.

And what a fine, fine chest it was. I could see her pert nipples poking up, pressing against the fabric of her bra and T-shirt and I was planning to get my fill of those this afternoon.

But first, dinner.

I dropped my mouth to her mons and licked my way down to the neat little bud nestled in her folds. Dancing my tongue around it, I couldn’t stop from being pleased at her gasp and hip jerk.

"Holy shit," she gasped. "Fischer…"

"Got you all hot and bothered in the car, baby," I breathed the words over her and let them tickle her sensitive skin.

"You weren't supposed to, you naughty assed bastard," she managed to groan out between gasps.

"You wanted my hands on you just as much as I wanted them."

"Will you shut up and eat me out already?"

I nipped her clit and she squeaked in shock and delight. Lapping my tongue over her, I started moving my fingers in and out of her tunnel, but there was no finesse in it. I was rough, and she loved it by the moans and yelps and mangled gasps of my name.

She tasted so good to me. Her silk was soft and sweet on my tongue and lips, and I couldn't help sucking lightly on her. Her fists curled into the bed and she was begging softly, "Yes, yes yes yes," as I stroked in and out, over her spot deep inside, but never pressing hard on it.

I adored her murmured yeses because I knew she was lost in the pleasure I wanted to give her. There was almost nothing better than hearing this woman come, either on my fingers, my tongue or my cock. Her absolutely divine sexual confidence was addictive. She knew what she liked, what she didn't and asked for all of it.

I wanted this as mine. For eternity.

…"For eternity."

"Forever."

I spiked myself deep into her body…

"Fuck!" she screamed as my finger finally pressed against the spot deep inside and sent her over the edge.

Between her taste, the way she abandoned herself to me and the vision, I came right in my pants. Right there, without ever having touched myself. Like a twelve year old boy who'd just discovered tits were a thing.

"Oh Fuck, yes!" Her voice echoed in the room, and she clawed the sheets desperately. She curled in on herself, trying to claim more of the climax and I helped her on the merry chase.

To both of our shock, when I brushed my finger over her spot deep inside, she came again, and this time there were no words, just a scream of pleasure that had her arching up on the bed, pressing her pussy hard against my face.

I had to pull my fingers from her depths. I had the feeling that if I touched her spot again, she'd come a third time and I couldn't ask that of her body, not right now. Using my fingers and my tongue I helped her calm from the insane height we had hit so quickly.

"Holy shit, Fischer."

"Got a washing machine?"

She squinted at me confused. "That's not what I expected to hear…"

"Well, I kinda came in my pants."

Gasping, Wren sat up, and the evidence of my not-really-shame was there on the front of the pants. She put a hand on my jaw and drew me in for a languid kiss. "So it really was that good."

"Yeah, baby, it was." I smiled against her lips.

Then, down the hall, I heard another shout of delight, echoing a bit in the hallway.

"Yes! We won!" Wren gave a quick fist pump.

I couldn't stop laughing.

I TRACED little circles over the naked skin of her back as we settled from the last round of mad fucking.

After we confirmed our win, she slammed and locked the door and had her way with me. I wasn't complaining. Her way was just as wonderful as any which way I could get her.

"Why did you lie to me, Fischer?"

The question wasn't unexpected, but I thought I had a little longer before she asked it. She didn't sound too angry, so I took some comfort in that. "I don't know. It just didn't occur to me you'd be okay with me having visions too."

She lifted her head and rested her chin on me to stare at me. "That's why you insisted they were visions and not hallucinations."

"Yes."

Her fingers trailed on my arm this time. "How long?"

"My whole life," I answered. "I thought everyone had them. My parents were horrified when I told them."

Her lips twitched in a smile. "Over reacted?"

"Understatement."

Wren smiled and laughed lightly. “What did they make you do?”

“Therapy and the Rosary.” I smirked.

“Wow, I got away with therapy.”

I shrugged. “It made them happy, and Father was a good guy.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mind the therapy. It helped me work out a lot of stuff not related to seeing weird shit in my head.” She sighed and laid her head back down. “Fischer?”

“Yes, little bird?”

“We can’t have this relationship if we lie to each other. I always want the truth from you. And I promise the same. Always the truth.”

“I know. Always the truth. I don’t want to go through this week again for anything,” I answered. “I mean, it’s probably insane I want you this much, that I feel bereft without you, but it’s the damn truth. You’ve…changed me. I wouldn’t say softened my heart, but opened it up. Made me willing to see things I haven’t before.”

“Good.” She smiled. “Because this week did suck. I hated not having you around, or be able to sext you.”

I let out a huff. “Is that all I am to you? Just an easy sext?”

“Please. If you were any more willing, you’d walk in wearing a condom.”

“Who said I didn’t?”

She slapped my arm, then settled against me again. “Do you think the visions really mean anything?”

“I like the name that Laxi gave them. *Darsana*. It has more of a connotation that we’re getting a peek at something else. Because even though we both have them, they don’t…connect to anything. They’re not things going on in the world, I don’t even know where they take place. They seem to feed off our emotions more than anything else.”

“Have you ever seen the place where they come from?” she asked, and seemed confused by her own question.

“I have, kind of,” I said.

“Green fields, bright sky, but not blue.”

Nodding, I played with the ends of her hair. “Not here, but not really any place you can name. Not like another world, or another dimension feel.”

“Exactly. It’s here. But still not here.”

“I’m just glad I have people I can talk to about them now without getting looked at crookedly, or immediately locked into Belmont.” I

quirked an eyebrow.

She flexed her hand, the bad one, over my chest. I reached down and brought her knuckles to my lips. "Hurts?"

"A little. Not so bad right now."

I ghosted my hand down her back and over her ass. "I can take your mind off it."

Wren cocked her head to consider me. "And just how do you propose to do that, Doctor?"

"Mmm, an old practice called 'laying of hands'."

"Oh?"

I rolled so she was under me. "Yeah. Imma lay my hands all over those gorgeous tits."

THE IMAGES of the room were shocking.

It was honestly one of the most horrifying pictures I had ever seen, and it really made me reconsider my promise to Wren. Until she kissed the top of my head and leaned over the tablet with me.

I remembered quickly that this was her lifeline, her driving force.

And she smelled good.

Down, dick. Down. We had agreed to try not to let our lust get the better of us. I didn't think we were long for that, but I was willing to try. Just for a challenge.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think this is one of the most fucked up things I've ever seen."

"Wait until you see this..." Wren hit a few buttons, and the lights went out in the room, and the four projectors started up. The images from the small screen were tossed on to the walls and it was suddenly way too real.

Three walls and the ceiling were covered with the pictures. I could see why it took them a day to get the picture of the guy out of the images. The whole terrifying thing was a third angle perspective of the ringleader leaning over her, fists on the bed. His grimy face took up most of the ceiling, but tapered down so that it was possible to see his chest, his hips, his penis and his thighs.

There was no doubt about what was going on at that moment.

The back wall was her legs and feet and the crests of her breasts. Jesus Christ.

The right wall was his arm, and some background images that seemed to be a door with a light on behind it, possibly a bathroom. There was a wardrobe in the corner and the edge of the window near the closest edge of the image to the wall behind us.

The left wall was more of a dark room. A nightstand, a clock, a lamp, a dresser, and a set of windows. It was also possible to see the outline of the city in the windows.

Pointing to it, I walked over and studied it. “This is from Fairmount park, up by Belmont Hospital.”

“Yes, somewhere by the hospital or the zoo,” Wren agreed. “Haden had a few people casing the area looking around to see if they could get a close match to the skyline.”

“Was that where the first bust came from?”

“No, it was up by West Girard, behind the museums.”

“She got moved.”

“Yes, and doesn’t remember it. Which means she was drugged.”

I nodded, and looked back at the nightstand. The clock read 4:07 a.m. and there was something behind the clock, next to the lamp. I cocked my head and squinted. I stepped back and looked at it again. It was familiar. I walked back to where Ellie would have been laying to look at it again.

“Holy shit. That’s a CPAP machine.” I whipped my head around and looked at Wren.

“She told us he used one.”

“No, you don’t understand. They are all different. Unique designs so they don’t infringe on other patents.”

Wren’s mouth dropped open. “She remembers what it looks like. If she can draw the machine, we might be able to identify the manufacturer.”

I grinned. “Yes. And trace the patients who have bought and rented them. They need maintenance on the regular.”

“Oh, my God... " She pulled out her phone and dialed a number, putting it on speaker phone.

“Detective Haden.”

“Lily, it’s Wren. I’m going to head down to St. Chris to talk to Ellie. We think she might be able to really give us a hand with this. The CPAP is going to be the key.”

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I think we'll be good."

"You're not planning a detour with your hot boyfriend, are you?"

I snorted, and Wren turned red from nose to toes. And what an image that was in my head. She coughed. "No, Detective. I was not. This is a major opportunity and I want to get to it and get it down. Also, did you guys figure out she was moved before you busted the ring?"

"Moved? What?"

"The skyline."

There was a pause and I could almost see her nodding. "Right the skyline was up by Belmont."

"And the bust was down behind the art museum. Different skyline."

"Oh, shit how did we miss that?"

"We were all too taken by her drawing. I hope this girl never has to draw anything like this again."

"You and me both, Doctor Warner. You and me both. Let me know what you got when you're there." Haden disconnected the line and Wren pocketed the phone.

We were in the car and on the way to the hospital in minutes. There was the usual Monday afternoon traffic from the precinct house to the garage, and we were up the stairs in minutes.

Holding hands the whole way. It was a huge relief and delight to have her hand back. I had taken it when we got in the car, and when we got out of the car and she sought me out after signing us into the visitor log.

"Andy!" she yelled up the corridor to one of the nurses walking from the station. "Where's Ellie?"

He stopped and waited for us. "She's in her new room. You are going to love her progress, Doc. She's doing really, really well, and we're going to have to find her a place to stay soon."

I grinned. "So the drawing was cathartic?"

"A dam burst, more like." Andy nodded leading us down the hall.

And he was right. I hadn't seen her in a few weeks, but she really looked amazing. Even though she hadn't been in a terrible place, she'd been holding something back. She was bright, and her hair was clean and neat and she looked happier and relaxed.

"Hey, Doc, hey, Doc," she said, smiling as we walked in. "Nurse Rollins, can I get some extra apple juice later?"

"You got it, kiddo." He looked at us. "You good?"

"We're good." Wren nodded.

The nurse trotted out and Wren and I found chairs at the end of the bed.

"Were the drawings helpful, Doc?" she asked quietly.

"Extremely, Detective Haden says thank you." She leaned forward. "Ellie, we have…a working theory on the CPAP machine. Do you think you could draw us a picture of the exact machine that the creep used? As many details as you can remember, and describe?"

"That's easy." She nodded, flipping the page in her sketchbook. "That thing was always on the nightstand, and it was always chugging away. There was a woman who came in and cleaned the machine every day."

How much did a woman have to be paid to ignore the fact the man who employed her was fucking a fourteen year old girl who was probably chained or tied or restrained in some way?

What the hell was wrong with these people?

"Do you remember her face?" I asked.

Ellie's hand froze for a moment, then resumed drawing. "I do."

Wren glanced at me. We had clearly hit on something there, but it wasn't the time to go after it. I nodded and we sat back.

"How are you doing, Ellie?" she asked, watching the girl skim the pencil across the page.

"I feel better. I know I got a lot going on up here," she tapped on her head, "and I realize it's going to attack me when I least expect it, but at least I know that now and I have a chance to get better."

She looked up briefly then back down at her paper. "You know, I love art. And I don't know if I can go back to school now because people look at me funny for having been a prostitute and having been sex trafficked. I was thinking about getting my GED and going straight to college. I'm not a stupid girl, I just did stupid things."

Wren tipped her head to the side. "Have you considered that what you did was smart?"

"Smart? I let guys pay to fuck me—I mean, I let guys pay me for sex. I'm going to be all screwed up about that for years. I don't even know if I'll be able to have normal sex."

"But, was it really stupid?" Wren raised an eyebrow. "Think about it."

"I needed food for me and Benjamin. I needed a way to pay the rent." Ellie looked up. "I paid the rent with sex more than once."

"Not surprising," I said, keeping my voice neutral. It was disgusting that someone would take that from a fourteen year old, but it really wasn't surprising.

"So you made people pay for something so you could survive." Wren reasoned. "Seems more smart to me than anything else. Yeah, maybe your wares weren't hats and scarves, but you bought food and shelter. I wish there could have been another way to do it, but you survived. And you're going to keep surviving."

"Nurse Rollins says he knows a few gallery owners. Says if I can get a dozen or so pieces together, he'll help me shop them around, maybe take a chance on me."

"That sounds like a brilliant idea," Wren said. "Do you want to focus on art?"

"I want to focus on getting better so I can live a normal life," she answered. "I don't care if I have to be a bank teller or perfume lady at Macy's. Just normal. With normal problems. Normal paychecks. Normal friends and normal sex."

Wren scratched her nose and my phone dinged with a message a moment later. I looked down and it was her.

***Wren**: She's fixated on sex. I need to find a therapist for her. That's not my specialty.*

***Fischer**: That's not my opinion, Doctor.*

***Wren**: Jesus. Stop. I already can't keep my hands off you.*

***Wren**: But I'm serious. I need a therapist who can walk her through this mess. Do you know of one?*

***Fischer**: No. But I'll poke around the hospitals and see if we can find one.*

***Wren**: Thank you. +1 BJ for help.*

***Fischer**: Now who needs to stop?*

The sound of paper being torn out of the sketchbook pulled us out of the text exchange. Ellie held out a piece of paper for Wren to grab. "That's everything I remember about it, on the three sides I could see."

Wren took the sheet and looked at it. She shook her head. "This is a quick sketch?"

"Yeah, just a rough one." Ellie nodded.

"Damn," she whispered and handed the paper to me. I accepted it and was blow away by what Ellie called a rough sketch. Her rough would have been my masterpiece I spent two years on. But it was wonderfully clear and I could see the shape and size, and *the lettering* she remembered.

"Oh, I almost forgot, the front of the machine was gold. Not like shiny gold, but gold."

I grinned. "I know exactly what machine this is."

Wren smiled back. "Think he was stupid enough to pay for it with a card or rent it from a rental store?"

"Maybe." I shrugged. "He may have even used insurance."

Wren

I didn't want to be here.

I didn't like this woman.

Smiling, polished, white bread suburban woman who would do anything for the children.

As long as it made her look good.

But I needed her help to navigate this system. Ellie needed special care, and I needed help finding her brother to get him in the same place, or at least put them back in contact with each other.

"Doctor Warner, I'm so glad I can help you. These kids are in such a dangerous and changing place that I'm always worried about them."

Paige. Fucking. Domingues.

"What can you tell me about Benjamin Matthias Sheehan?" I asked, leaning forward.

She flipped through some papers and tapped on the computer in front of her, scrolling and then tapping again. "Ben Sheehan is in a

foster home in the northeast. He's been there for a year now and the family has a good track record."

"I want to bring his sister to see him."

"Oh, no that's against the rules."

I stared at her. "What?"

"That's against the rules. The family doesn't want her there. They said she's a bad influence on Ben."

My finger jammed the desktop. "They never met her. The girl was out of the picture for eighteen months. That is her brother, and she has every right—"

"She doesn't. She's a minor. She doesn't have a lick of rights in this case," Paige said. "The boy is a ward of the state. The girl is the same. There's no compulsion by the state to keep them together, at all. If the boy is in a good home that wants him, unless there is a guardianship challenge, we have to abide by the wishes of the foster parent."

"Even a sister doesn't get a say?"

Paige sat back in the chair. "I'm going to be painfully honest, Doctor Warner. The girl was a prostitute. I don't blame them for not wanting her around."

"She was fourteen years old." If I could have snapped words off, I would have. "She was left alone on the streets with a little brother to take care of."

"And she chose to sell her body."

"Jesus Christ, Paige, are you kidding me!"

"I'm sorry, we have to abide by the wishes of the foster home. Ben is safe there, and he's well cared for. If there's no cause to remove, we won't. And I won't take her there."

"You are un-fucking-believable." I stared at her. "You're really going to do this?"

"I have to abide by—"

"The wishes of the foster home. Right. Heard you the first three times." I stood up, and grabbed my purse.

"Wait, what about Elutheria? We need to talk about her placement. She needs a place to stay." Paige started to flip through the papers on her desk.

"Elutheria will be staying with me."

Well, *fuck*. Now I'd done it.

"You're…you're not qualified as a foster. I mean we can get you qualified. It would take a few weeks, but we can do a temporary emergency placement—"

"I'll be seeking guardianship."

Out of the frying pan…

She stared at me. "Doctor, are you sure?"

"Mrs. Domingues, are you kidding me with that question? That young woman isn't going to make it in one of your foster group homes and she's certainly not going to stay put in a foster home."

"But…to take a former sex worker into your house…"

"I suggest you clam it, Mrs. Domingues. Or I will do what I need to do to pull your license."

She leaned back and gasped, "Doctor!"

"Put it in your pipe and smoke it, Paige. I will be coming back with a court order to let Ellie see her brother. He was the whole reason she was a prostitute—to keep him from a horrible life on the streets. She'd do it again if she had to. And I would never hold it against her."

"Doctor—" She held up her hands. Shaking her head, she sat back in the chair. "I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this. That girl will hurt your reputation. I swear it."

"No one needs to know she's staying with me, Mrs. Domingues. Keep that in mind. You don't have to tell the world I'm going to be caring for a young woman who has survived being sex trafficked. You might do well to remember what brought her to this point."

Paige swallowed and a moment later the printer started spitting out paperwork. "These are the temporary guardianship papers you'll need to fill out so that I don't have to send Detective Haden out to arrest you for kidnapping. I suggest you get a lawyer and get your guardianship claim going." She handed me a stack of sheets. "Get them back to me by the end of the day and we can get the temporary order in place by noon tomorrow. Can you keep her in the hospital that long?"

"She's being discharged on Friday if there's care." Tucking the forms in my bag, I headed for the door. "Paige, don't forget what I said. Not everyone needs to know where this girl is."

I pulled the door closed and found a very curious Fischer standing there with his arms folded.

"I can handle this, Fischer," he said. "Don't worry, Fischer. It's all under control, Fischer. We'll have a perfect place for her to go so she can start to recover, Fischer."

"Oh, fuck off."

He laughed—he wasn't really mad, and that was a huge relief. Curling an arm around my waist, he pulled me close. "Congratulations, Mom."

"Oh, *really* fuck off."

He laughed and led me down the hall. "Where is she going to stay?"

"Well, I have to clear it with Miriam, but we have an attic. It's got holiday decorations and luggage, and nothing else. We can fix it up. Get a space heater, run some lights, a platform bed. And if we can get Ben back, they can share. I think he'd have fun with that."

He dropped a kiss on the top of my head. "You have a very big heart, Doctor."

"You really aren't upset?"

"Ellie is a special girl. She needs someone who understands who she is and her very precarious situation. You've grown close to her, so why not?"

I pulled something out of my bag and handed it to Fischer with as much innocence as I could muster. He took the folder and opened it. Gasping he stopped walking and stared at me.

"You didn't!"

I shrugged. "You're not the only one who doesn't trust the system all the time. I know it can go wrong. So, I took a step towards skipping ahead."

He paged through. "These are all of Ben's records. His address, his birth certificate…wait…" His eyes went wide. "Is that…who I think it is?"

"I think we need to find out."

"You want to confront one of Philly's most influential residents and most prominent restauranteurs about the possibility of his abandoning a child to the foster system?"

"Yes."

"Fuck, I'm going to need a scotch for this one."

"You don't have to come—"

He stopped my words with a hard kiss. "We're in this together, Wren. If you're going to talk to Matthias Sheehan about this, I'm go-

ing with you." He grabbed my hand and wrapped his around it.

I took a deep breath. "Right. Lemme text Miriam about the attic thing."

***Wren**: So I did a thing.*

***Miri**: What thing. You do so many things.*

***Wren**: I'm petitioning for guardianship*

***Miri**: …*

***Miri**: I knew you were going to do that.*

***Wren**: You did?*

***Miri**: Please. That girl wouldn't stay anywhere except a place that had us there. Oh, lemme guess…*

***Miri**: Paige told you to fuck off about the kid brother.*

***Wren**: She's predictable like that.*

***Miri**: Un. Real.*

***Miri**: So, when are we going to Ikea? I'm assuming you're thinking attic? And a cute fireplace space heater?*

Fischer started laughing as we walked down the hall. "She really does know you, doesn't she?"

"The house wasn't the only thing we've shared over the years." I balked when I realized I said that.

He cocked his head, and smirked. "Oh really?"

"Well, you already knew we slept together…" He nodded and motioned for me to continue. "So there might have been a guy, or girl, or both, that we also shared."

Fischer's expression was pained for just a moment, and I was terrified that he was about to walk away from me.

I clutched his hand. "Fischer—"

He pressed my hand to the front of his pants and pulled me close. He was as hard as rock beneath my hand. "Little bird, the last thing I am is disgusted. The idea of sharing does funny things to me, and it's not bad sort of things."

Shit. I slammed my mouth over his and stole into him. The idea of being shared was doing funny things to me too.

When the kiss got a little too heated, Fischer pulled back and rested his head on mine. "If we're going to talk to Sheehan, we should just go and do this and get it over with. He's…"

I chuckled. "Yeah. He's…"

Wrapping his arm around my waist again he pulled me in close and nuzzled my neck. "You know the bad thing about bringing Ellie

to live with you?"

I was a little frightened to hear his response.

"No more Orgasm Contests."

"Bourbon, Double neat."

Wes put the glasses in front of us and we both grabbed them and chugged them down. The poor bartender's eyebrows tried to escape his hairline, and he pulled the bottle out to refill both classes.

"Well, that was interesting. Something on your minds?"

I enjoyed the last of the burn from the scotch. It was a delicious warm burn that started at the back of my throat and followed all the way down to my stomach, loosening my limbs a bit. "Yeah. There is something. Is Sheehan around?"

Wes nodded. "He is. He's upstairs. The accountant is here and they're going over the books for the week. He's in a good mood, if you want to hit him up with something."

Fischer wrapped his knuckles on the bar top. "He's not going to be happy after we're done with him."

"Shit. Let me get my stuff together so I can make a quick break," Wes said.

He was only half kidding.

After he pointed us to the door to the second floor, he turned to the back of the bar and actually started to clean up as if he were closing for the night.

Walking through the door to the stairs, I looked at Fischer, who looked as petrified and determined as I did. "Have you ever actually officially met Sheehan?"

He shook his head. "No. I know of him, we have acquaintances. That's it."

"Going in blind. Let's get this over with, and piss off one of the most influential men in Philadelphia."

I knocked on the door labeled office at the top of the stairs. A faint voice yelled permission to enter, and I pushed the door open.

I didn't know what I expected to find inside but it wasn't what was there.

An extremely large man was seated in a chair behind a desk. He looked like he was about to explode—or float away. Despite that, he was good looking, with wavy blond shoulder length hair, and milk chocolate brown eyes.

"You're not Weston," he stated.

"No, Mister Sheehan, we're not," Fischer said. "We need to talk to you about a situation…"

"My managers deal directly with any and all complaints about food and service." He picked up a piece of cheese and nibbled on it, oddly delicate for a man of his size.

I waved him off. "This isn't about food, or your restaurants. It's about a woman named Andrea Stavros."

His nibbling stopped and he looked at the corner of the room. I hadn't even realized the accountant was in the room, but whatever look Sheehan gave him, he took it to mean get the hell out, and he did. Quickly.

"Andrea Stavros," he grumbled, standing up. "Really. Has that bitch crawled out of her sewer? I told her years ago—"

"Andrea Stavros is dead," Fischer said, cutting him off. "She died four years ago, a heroin needle in her neck because the veins in her arm collapsed."

The details Haden had given us on the woman's death had sent a chill up my spine again. It wasn't a pretty or nice way to go.

It was quiet in the room after Fischer's declaration. Sheehan moved to one of the other platters in the room and picked up a piece of honeydew melon, nibbling on that this time.

He finally broke the silence after he'd eaten the whole slice. "Heroin."

"Yes," I nodded. "She left children behind."

"Child*ren*?" Sheehan was honestly shocked. "There was only the little girl."

I held out the picture of Benjamin that had been in the file. He didn't want to touch it, so I walked forward, holding it so he couldn't miss the kid in the image.

Who looked *so exactly like him*.

It was as if the picture was a thing alive.

"What the hell…" He took a step back.

"His name is Benjamin Matthias Sheehan, and you're listed as his father on the birth certificate."

"I don't have any kids."

Fischer looked between the picture and Sheehan a few times. "Funny. That kid really looks like you. So I'm thinking you didn't know about this kid, and didn't care to know."

Sheehan's face switched from disbelief to sheer anger. "She was a fucking fling. Anything that came out of it was on her."

Fischer started wandering around the room.

I stared at him, and slipped the picture of the boy back in the folder. "I was hoping this would be easy, you would say you didn't know, you didn't want him, sorry about Andrea."

He still didn't say anything.

"Why do you think we're here, Mister Sheehan?"

"To ruin me."

"You're a suspicious bastard," Fischer said, picking up a piece of pineapple and munching on it.

"I didn't get here by being some affable *dude*," he sneered.

"We're not here to ruin you," I cut in before the two of them could really get going. "We want to work a deal with you. About the boy. You haven't officially terminated your parental rights to him."

"Where do I sign?"

"Nowhere, yet," I answered. "We want to pull him from his foster home and place him with his sister. But the foster parents aren't agreeable to that. They want to keep her away from him."

"Wasn't she—" He snapped his jaw shut as mine popped open.

"You knew! You knew about both of the kids!" I roared.

Slowly, Matthias Sheehan turned bright red.

Fischer's anger was all over his face and in his body language. "You knew. And you let her fuck her way to food and shelter?"

"Not my responsibility."

Fischer grabbed the plate of food and threw it across the room. "You have all this food! All this space! And you let that girl sell her body for ramen noodles and hot dogs to keep her brother—*your son*!—fed and sheltered." He dumped a chafing tray on the floor, and I watched as the sterno spilled on to the rug.

If we hadn't been standing there, I would have let it burn. I grabbed the pitcher of water and put it out, out of sheer self-preservation.

"They weren't my problem." Sheehan walked back, horrified at the mess.

"You're disgusting," Fischer snapped, and flipped another tray of food off the table.

But at that moment, a look of horrified realization slid over his face and he slammed against the table, tipping trays and glasses. He shook his head violently and ran for the door, yanking it open and darting down the stairs.

I took a deep breath. First this pig, and then I'd deal with my boyfriend.

"You knew about Ellie and Ben. And you let that little girl sell herself for money. You are a trash human, Sheehan. What I want you to do is sign that child's guardianship over to me. Relinquish your parental rights and let me take care of him. Like he deserves."

"Send the paperwork by courier," he snapped. "Don't come back here. I won't be threatened by you."

"Deal," I said, heading for the door. "The papers will be here tomorrow. And, Mister Sheehan, if you have any other mistakes walking about in this city, I suggest you find a better way to deal with them than getting their mother's addicted to heroin."

The large man in the corner sucked in a breath, but didn't say a thing. I walked out the door and shut it with a quiet snick behind me.

The heroin had been a guess, but since he'd already shown me what kind of man he really was, it was an educated one.

Sheehan had two things he loved in this life: food and sex. And he didn't want to deal with anything else ever.

Fischer

I grabbed the plate of food and threw it across the room. "You have all this food! All this space! And you let that girl sell her body for ramen noodles and hot dogs to keep her brother—*your son*!—fed and sheltered." I grabbed the chafing tray and dumped it on the floor, and I watched as the sterno spilled on to the rug.

Wren grabbed the pitcher of water and put it out. She was dead calm as she did it—it was marvelous to see.

"They weren't my problem." Sheehan walked back, horrified at the mess.

"You're disgusting," I barked, and tossed another tray of food off the table.

But in that instant, his answer finally reached my brain.

They weren't my problem.

The same words I used all the time. The ones that had me justifying my cowardice outside the operating room doors. The same reasoning I gave for embracing my sloth about courts, and the legal sys-

tem. No paperwork, no courts they didn't work. Why try? It wasn't really my problem.

I came off narrowminded. Hateful. Uncaring. Cold, aloof, closed, and inhumane. The ability to say no to life saving procedures to underfunded families made me a monster in my own eyes.

I was no better than the piece of shit upstairs, who sat on his leather throne, surrounded by all the food he could eat, clothed in custom suits, living in massive penthouses that could hold twenty or thirty Ellies and Bens… And didn't. He had gone out of his way—as I had so many times—to say it wasn't his problem. And even if it wasn't, it didn't absolve him—me—of our basic responsibility to humanity.

Even though he'd tried to abdicate his responsibility to his own flesh and blood, I couldn't see that he was anymore heinous than I was.

A soft hand touched the back of my neck and I felt more than saw Wren sit next to me on the curb.

I'd made it as far as that?

"Fischer."

"Is that me? Is that really what I am in there? Someone who just can't be bothered with the rest of humanity?"

"Do you think I would have been even remotely interested in a person who couldn't give a shit?" Her words were soft. "I don't even think the piece of shit is a piece of shit inside. He has…demons. We all do. I know what yours are, and I know you aren't the kind of person you saw in there."

"All those kids I could have helped all this time, if I hadn't been acting like so much of a shitbag."

"Well, stop acting like a shitbag and start now. He agreed to sign Benjamin over to me."

I chuckled, and smeared away the tears that had gather in my eyes. "Like that wasn't going to happen?"

She pursed her lips, and the smile fell a bit. "You know, you were kind of right about him. He's conceited, and selfish. I'm pretty sure he got Andrea Stavros hooked on heroin to get her out of his life. To be able to walk away from someone with an addiction."

I picked at the cement curb. "He's not one to criticize anyone about addiction."

She nodded. “The food in that room… It was obscene how much was in there. He doesn’t even realize his addiction. Being a restauranteur is the worst profession for him.”

Coughing, I glanced back at the bar. “Sorry about the mini-inferno in there.”

“Next time you flip a table,” she said, standing up and offering me a hand, “make sure to extinguish the sterno.”

“What makes you think there’s going to be a next time?” She raised an eyebrow. “Because you were raised in Jersey. We all flip the fucking tables.”

ELLIE STARED at the four of us standing in the lobby. “You’re all serious?”

“Completely,” Miriam said.

“I had the electrician come in yesterday and run power up there,” Wren answered. “I got you a stupid little fireplace space heater, and we’re going to Ikea, right now, to pick out a bed and furniture.”

“Hence the U-haul,” I answer, jerking my thumb over my shoulder out the door at the rental van.

She looked us over again and she looked shaken. “You really did this?”

Wren held out the temporary guardianship papers, and she took them to inspect. “I sure did. I don’t want you in a group home and somewhere along the line, I crossed from doctor-patient to ‘potential older-sister-type of foster thing’.” I folded my arms. “Which is totally the proper clinical term.”

Laxmi snorted.

“What about Benjamin?”

Wren nodded. “We’re working on that. We found his birth father and there is paperwork involved in getting him out of the foster home.”

“Can I visit him?”

“No.” Her answer brokered no argument. “There’s too many complications in that. But, he’s safe, and warm and fed, so you don’t

have to worry about that right now. We'll do what we can to get him to the house."

She looked down at the papers in her hand and held them back out. "I've never been to Ikea."

I snorted. "Oh boy."

"Come on, let's go. We have to be able to at least get the bed set up tonight," Miriam said. She snagged Laxmi's hand and headed out the front doors of the hospital.

Wren and I tucked the young woman between us and headed for the U-haul. I hopped in the driver's side, and she held the door open for Ellie. The girl looked a little shocked, but climbed in, and Wren right behind her, slamming the door.

"You…you're really doing this for me?"

"Yep," I said, pulling the van into traffic.

"Why?"

"Because we like you?" Wren smiled.

"What's the catch?"

"You have to go to school and be a regular sixteen year old girl," I answered. "Do homework. Watch TV. Read bad teenage literature."

"Get in trouble for breaking curfew. Learn how to drive a car. Get in arguments with your besties." Wren laughed. "Get your high school diploma. Think about college, or a trade."

Her hands covered her face, and her body started shaking. Wren glanced at me across her, and wrapped her arm around Ellie's shoulders. "Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

She was sobbing. "You're serious?"

"Elutheria, you're a very talented young lady with a shitty situation," Wren said, quietly. "We see that. We see you. And we can help, we want to help. If we put you in the foster system you'd be lost or gone in a few days. I think you trust us, and those papers you saw earlier aren't foster papers. They're guardianship papers. They have my name on them as your legal guardian. They're temporary, but I want to make them permanent. Miriam and I want to give you the room in the attic, and I think this is what you need."

She was still sobbing, and I motioned to Wren to ask her if she wanted me to pull over or stop. She motioned me on, and I knew she was just going to let the girl cry it out.

Finally, as we passed under the Ben Franklin Bridge she started to calm down, and inhaled a few deep breaths. "I'm sorry…"

"Nope, not allowed. This is all a radical change for you," I said, patting her leg. "You're allowed to be as emotional as you like."

"I haven't had anyone, not *anyone*, give a shit about me since my mom died, and even then she wasn't all that invested after a while." Ellie's voice started to calm down.

"Well, you now have three nagging aunts and a nagging uncle." Wren laughed.

Her hand slapped hard on Wren's knee. "Ben—"

"I'm working on it, I'm working on it," she answered, patting the girl's hand.

"No, I mean if you get him, where…"

"With you, of course," I said. "Don't be ridiculous. Like we'd get him back and then him go somewhere else? No, you'll have to share the attic with him." I pulled the U-haul off the highway and down onto Delaware Avenue. "When we get him, we'll come back for his bed and stuff."

She was quiet a minute as we chugged down the road toward the massive Swedish furniture store. "I still feel like something is going to go wrong and I'm going to wake up back in *his* bed."

"And that's perfectly normal," Wren answered. "It's going to be a long time before you're going to be able to rid yourself of that feeling. So don't deny it, but don't go hunting for something to confirm it. It's just a feeling, and you're safe now."

I turned into the parking lot, and Ellie's mouth dropped open. "For real? It's this big!?"

"Ikea is an adventure," I said, finding a parking spot a distance away from the entrance. "Let's go explore."

I pushed the door open, and we all climbed out. Laxmi and Miriam were climbing out of their car, and Miriam started to power walk to the door. "Come on. I want meatballs."

"I thought this was a furniture store?"

Laxmi raised an eyebrow and grabbed her hand. "Ah, my sweet innocent child. Just wait, just wait."

Wren

The curtains laxmi had picked out were exactly what the space needed. They gave the wide space a definition, and were already helping to keep the little room warm.

The light bulb strings gave it a soft glow, and the sheers over the windows let in just enough moonlight. There was also a small desk near the window with its own lamp and another on the nightstand by the bed.

The platform bed was just a few inches off the ground, the ideal height for where Ellie decided to put it. There was a dresser with a mirror, anchored to one of the roof beams, and chest of drawers.

We bought a few eclectic rugs and put them in different places around the room, covering the rough wood and giving it an even more personal touch.

We'd spent nearly four hours planning the space with Ellie, and she loved every minute of it. She seemed like such a different person from even just that morning, and I was relieved.

Finally, at nearly eleven at night, the room was done and we were planning to go shopping the next day to get her more than the jeans and sweatshirt she was wearing. We'd only stopped at Target for the essentials and some pajamas. And some basic art supplies.

She flopped on to the new mattress, sheets and duvet. She just could not stop smiling, and picked up her head to look at the four of us standing by the stairs.

"Thank you. Seriously. I will never be able to repay you for this."

"Sure you will," Laxmi said. "Just by getting better. Now, it's late and I need to sleep." She poked Miriam in the arm and a second later, Miriam agreed.

"Right. Sleep. Cough."

I rolled my eyes as they headed down the narrow staircase to the first floor. I consider the girl on the bed.

"All right. You know where the bathroom and the kitchen are. The only boundary we want to set are our bedrooms. Those, like this," I waved my arm, "are personal space. We'll let you in if you knock, but don't barge. We'll give you the same courtesy as long as everything is on the up and up. Meaning you go to school, you do your best, and don't get into any fights with the Mean Girls."

"Really?" She swore to herself. "I feel like the whole day I've just been saying really and questioning everything you've done for me." Tucking her hands between her knees, I saw her as the little lost girl she really was in that moment. "I do love everything."

"I know you do." I smiled. "Tomorrow is Saturday. Feel free to use the kitchen and the living room if you're up before us. Which you may well be."

"Are you going to keep me up?" There was a husky tone in her voice.

"No, it's your first time in a bed that doesn't have chains and handcuffs on it," Fischer said. "It wears on your nerves and you may have trouble sleeping."

"Oh," she whispered, turning red.

"Hey, hey." I grabbed her hands away from the flame red of her cheeks. "Nope. No embarrassment. There are two healthy female adults here, and several others going in and out. It's a perfectly normal implication you've suggested. All I really meant though was that you can turn on the TV or whatever while you're waiting for us to join the land of the living."

Fischer leaned forward. “We like to sleep in. We’re in our thirties and we’re just going to get more tired from here on out.”

Ellie stifled the laugh. “Okay, fair enough.”

“I’d leave the lightbulb strands on, just for tonight,” I suggested. “You don’t want to wake up in complete darkness and not know where you are.”

“Good idea,” she said.

“We’re going to bed,” Fischer said, grabbing my arm. “Holler if you’re bleeding heavily or have detached a body part.”

Wren rolled her eyes, and shoved me at the stairs. She was just about to follow me when Ellie jumped up and ran across the room. She tackled hugged Wren and then yanked me into an awkward hug.

“Thank you both so much.”

And then she was gone back to the bed. I heard the little stereo that Laxmi bought her start playing some music softly as we reached the bottom. I shut the door quietly and we headed to my room.

We both saw the kitchen light at the same time.

“Can’t be good,” I murmured, and we headed down the hall.

It wasn’t good.

Haden was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and two very concerned women. She looked up as we walked in, and swallowed, putting down the mug.

“It’s late,” Fischer said.

“It’s important,” she answered, and pushed a very thick file folder to the middle of the table. “The information you were able to give me about the CPAP was perfect. We were able to locate him, and even better,” she gestured to the folder, “he has a rap sheet.”

“That’s not a rap sheet, that’s rap ream,” Miriam said, flipping the top of it open.

“You’re absolutely right,” Haden said, tapping her hand nervously. “It goes all the way back to a sealed juvie record I can’t get my hands on at all.”

There, on the top of the pile of papers was a mug shot, dated just eight months before, of the same man in Ellie’s drawing. The same plain face, the muted brown hair in a common style. No tats, no scars, no life in his eyes. But it was the same face.

“His name is Scott Woodall.”

“Jeeze, even his name…” Wren murmured.

"Nothing about this man stands out as a dangerous person when you pass him on the street. Absolutely nothing," Haden said. "So I drew up an arrest warrant for him and sent it through the system. Went and got myself a soda, came back, the entire thing had disappeared off my screen, out of the system. I drew it up again, and went to the bathroom. Same thing. Gone. Third time, I wrote it up and sent it through and watched what happened."

She let out a long breath. "Disappeared. I watched it disappear off the screen. Nothing I did could bring it back up. I didn't know what to do. I stared writing it a fourth time, because it had to be a glitch that I needed to talk to IT about it.

"That's when the phone rang. An Agent Barry Northwater introduced himself as a representative of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He calmly explained that the warrant I was trying to process would disappear every single time I tried."

She flipped the pages on their faces, nearly the whole pile at once, just leaving a few sheets at the end. "You see, our friend Mister Woodall has made himself invaluable to the Feds. He is a protected witness in a RICO case. Which means, he is untouchable by law enforcement in exchange for his testimony."

It was dead silent in the room for a moment. We stared at the information on the federal case in front of us, and I finally broke it.

"That's money…these are children's lives."

"I realize that, and Agent Northwater heard the same words out of my mouth. He said that as sorry as he was, there was no evidence he committed the pedophilia and sex trafficking crimes at this time, so the RICO case had to take precedence."

"There is a young woman upstairs who would be more than happy to testify against him, and chop his balls off at the same time," Laxmi growled.

"I know that," Haden snapped quietly. "We all know that. The whole fucking city of Philadelphia knows that. But Agent Northwater said there was nothing to be done at this time, and every warrant would be voided."

I could see that Fischer wanted to punch the wall, and I couldn't blame him. We had a face, a name, a goddamn address, and absolutely no recourse to take this bastard out and stop this sex trafficking ring.

I grabbed Fischer's hand, and murmured his name.

"I don't trust them, and this is why," Fischer said, his voice tight.

"If they put him away—" Haden started.

"*If* the feds put him away for a racketeering charge, he'll go to Club Fed and be able to continue running his sex empire," he snapped.

She was quiet, then nodded. "I know. You're absolutely right. And there's nothing I can do about this. Nothing." She stuck her finger in his face. "And if you think I'm cool about that, you are dead fucking wrong. I don't care how much you hate the courts and don't trust them, you have no idea what it's like to battle with these assholes all. the. fucking. time."

Haden sighed and sat back. "If I didn't see the good they did, I'd give up and go home forever."

It was quiet in the kitchen. For all the anger I knew Fischer had over the shit court system, none of it bubbled up. None of it. I didn't sense an iota of misplaced anger. I knew we were doing everything we could to make this right, and I hoped his non-reaction was his way of showing he knew that.

"If the fed case falls through, we can go after him," Laxmi said.

"As far as I can tell, it's a strong case." Haden sighed.

"I'm not going to just give up," Laxmi said. "But for now… We just need to concentrate on keeping Ellie safe, getting Ben here, and making sure your officers on the inside are doing what they can to bring this empire of shit down on itself."

I agreed, "Let's focus on the kids here, and let Lily handle the shit with the sex trafficking."

Haden nodded. "I'm good with that. Keep her safe, help her heal. We'll deal with everything on the other side."

"Tomorrow should be fun," Miriam said. "Shopping for a teenage girl who doesn't know what it's like to be a teenage girl."

Fischer smirked. "I don't envy you."

I slapped him on the back. "You shouldn't. You're going with me."

Laxmi leaned forward and smiled. "I've got all of tomorrow's patients handled neatly."

He looked around the table at all the toothy grins. "I've been hornswoggled."

~

WE HAD DOZENS OF BAGS. My arms were completely covered in bags, and Fischer and Ellie were also loaded to the gills with just stuff.

We'd wound up at Moorsetown Mall and a nearby Target and I could swear I could hear my credit card screaming at me when we hit the Barnes and Noble.

But seeing Ellie smile, and be a teen, and pick out cute clothes and some makeup was worth it. The delight I felt in teaching her about being a normal person was extraordinary.

Picking out the bag for school was heart wrenching. She hadn't realized she'd have to go to school since it'd been so long, and she had a mini panic attack in the store. It took me and Fischer about twenty minutes to calm her down and then she carefully looked at every school bag possibility, and considered all the ins and out of each of them. She decided on a messenger bag with about one million pockets for all the little things that she said she might need.

And then Miriam had texted me that she'd bought something for Ellie and it was waiting at Best Buy.

It was two somethings and I wanted to punch her. The woman had bought her a brand new Surface computer and a iTouch. Then Laxmi texted me and said that there was another package there—which was a brand new Samsung phone.

Fischer laughed. "Great. Are we going to start the Apple-Android battle?"

"No," Ellie said. "Because I am not going to complain at all about someone buying me these ridiculous electronics and computers. I don't care what it is—I haven't had a good phone ever."

I put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a serious hug. "I like you. Let's get some dinner and we'll head home."

We'd wound up at the local diner, and I had to stop her from ordering most of the menu. Finally we were on our way home and it felt good to say that to her.

I was liking this big sister-guardian thing we had going on. A lot.

Fischer noticed the doorknob was wrong.

He pulled us all back and kept his voice quiet. "Put everything back in the car. Quick."

We all moved back to the car and put all of the bags in the trunk. I looked at the two people with me and sighed, reaching deep in the trunk and dislodging the handgun I kept hidden there. I slipped the clip into the handle and locked it in position.

"What the fuck?" Ellie breathed as I shoved it in the back of my waistband.

"I sometimes have to work in the worst part of the city," I groused. "I have a concealed carry in both NJ and PA. New Jersey demands I carry it locked in the trunk unloaded, which is fine."

"You can…" Fischer coughed. "You can use that?"

I smirked. "I go to the range once a week, and I'm really damn good with my own weapon."

He was totally hard right now. I knew it without even asking. His girlfriend with a concealed carry in a state that barely allowed guns? I had no doubt he was harder than a granite rock. I smirked as I pulled the coat around me, and headed back for the front door.

Walking next to me. "You can clear a residence?"

"Been with the cops plenty of times," I answered.

"Jesus," he whispered.

"You stay right behind me with Ellie. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," he breathed.

Well, now I was wet. Great. This was not the time to think with my libido. I shoved all the images of me and Fischer naked and tangled together to the back of my head and pushed the door open with my foot.

Making sure it went all the way back on the hinges, against the wall, I walked into the house. The dining area and the kitchen were immediately on the left, and there was no one there, but…

Everything was flipped over and smashed. The canister set Miriam and I had loved was in pieces, the sugar, flour, and coffee were everywhere. There were dents in our newish fridge, and the window on the stove was destroyed.

I slowly turned the corner from the foyer into the living room. I didn't see anyone moving so I walked in carefully taking in all the damage. The couches were torn to shreds, the television ripped off the wall and slammed face down on the floor. The pictures on the wall were all cracked and smashed. The armchair had both arms broken off.

"Holy shit," Fischer gasped.

"This is only going to get worse," I said. "Stay here. I'll get the rest of the house cleared."

Heading down the hall, my bedroom was on the right. Destruction, but nothing that couldn't be fixed or replaced. Mattress flipped, sheets ripped. The biggest mess was the smashed full-length mirror.

The bathroom at the back of the hall was wrecked. They'd smashed the toilet, which was miraculously draining into itself, and the shower doors were destroyed. The mirror was cracked and crumbling, but since it had been glued to the wall, it wasn't going anywhere.

Miriam's room was much the same. Sheets, mattress—her dresser mirror had suffered a terrible fate though.

Then I saw the attic door. Or, what was left of it.

It had been pulled away from the wall and hung at an odd angle. There was a hole in the middle, and a giant crack down the center.

I climbed the narrow steep stairs and gasped when I reached the top.

Every curtain was cut to ribbons. The dresser and chest of drawers were crushed to bits. The lights, all of them, were smashed, and most of the rugs were all shredded.

But it was the bed that was the worst.

There was a meat cleaver, straight in the center of the mattress, and the whole thing—mattress, pillows, sheets, blankets—was covered in bright red blood.

There were words on the rug in front of her bed.

I yanked my phone out and dialed 9-1-1.

"Wren?" Ellie called from the bottom of the steps.

"*Do not come up here*!" I screeched.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

"There's been a break-in at my house."

Fischer

I sat at the table, rubbing a hand over my forehead, tired and worried as fuck about the two women across from me.

We had never let Ellie back upstairs. There was no way, once I saw the room, that we could. The words that were written in blood on the rug were enough to have me packing Ellie and Wren up as fast as I could. As soon as the cops released them from the scene, we were in the two cars and the hell out of there.

I'd called and told Laxmi to get Miriam and not let her back in the house. The cops were going to secure the house and we'd figure out what to do later.

Right now, we all needed to be away from that place.

I drove us straight to the station where Haden was working, and we were waiting to talk to her. It was an interrogation room, but I didn't care. It was also the safest place on the planet for them right now.

Now, it wasn't just a threat to Ellie. This was also a threat to my girlfriend. I didn't know where the *fuck* this alpha thing was coming from, but it was powerful and I needed to make sure the two of them were safe.

The door to the interrogation room blew open and Paige Domingues rushed in, wrapping her arms around Wren.

"Oh, my God, I'm so sorry, Doctor Warner! I heard and I was so scared for you—"

Wren, in a shocking move, wrenched the woman away from her and slammed her against the wall. "One day, Paige. One *fucking* day I had the girl. I told you not to tell anyone who had her, or where we were. Was my chair even cold before you were handing out the information?"

"Wren," I said, calmly pulling her arm off of the woman's upper chest. "Let her breathe."

Her other hand still pinned Paige to the wall, but at least her color was returning. Well. Turning from red to utter pale.

She ground the words out, right into Paige's face. "Who asked you for my address? Who asked where Elutheria was?"

My God, Wren was fantastic when she was pissed. Once again, I was glad I was wearing jeans because shit, there was no way to hide my erection otherwise.

"He said he was her uncle," Paige managed to hiss out. "He had her pictures and a birth certificate."

"After I told you no one? After you knew the situation she was coming from?"

Paige coughed and tears pooled in her eyes. "I thought her finding her uncle was good. He could give her a good place to live—"

"And traffick her all over again," Wren barked. "You should have called me, Paige. You should have called and cleared that with me."

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and held up the image of the bloody bed and the words on the rug. "What do you see there? Do you see a loving uncle? Or do you see the words *Talk and You Die Bitch* written in fucking blood on her new carpet?"

The tears that Paige had in her eyes spilled out and ran down her face. "I didn't know…"

Wren pulled away from the wall and slammed the phone face down on the table. "I had to clear my own house today, Paige. Someone came and wrecked my private space. They violated the space we

had set up for a young girl who has had nothing but shit for luck for most of the last four years. The space we had hoped she could use to recover herself. You could have picked up the fucking phone and asked me!"

"He had all the paperwork…"

"You won't let Ellie see her own, legally documented brother because the foster family said no—and yet you handed out my address for some random uncle who showed up?!"

The woman against the wall worked her jaw. "I only want to help. It's all I ever want to do!"

Wren was back in her face. "But it's not for them, Paige. It's for you. You thought getting her uncle back to her would look good for you. It would make you look like a hero." Narrowing her eyes, she stared at Paige, hard. "What do you think you look like now?"

Paige was trembling. I had to stop Wren. The woman had suffered enough at this point. I slipped an arm between them and wrapped a hand around Wren's wrist.

…Two of them feasted on her breasts and see her face covered in the delight they were visiting on her was magnificent. I could watch her all day.

But more was the gorgeous head of dark hair that was nestled between her legs. Long, soft, black curls flowed up her back just a little, and I reached down to gather it in my fist. I tugged and there was a grunt. I drove my cock into her a little harder, a little more.

"Eat her good," I managed to breath out. "Make her come, gorgeous. Taste her cum on your tongue."

"I'll give her my cum if you give her yours," Wren said.

"Bet," I answered…

Both Wren and I jumped back.

What the fuck was Paige doing in that vision?

The sound of a sob behind us yanked us both back to reality before we could question it.

Ellie. She'd heard the whole thing.

I dropped into the chair next to Ellie and she threw her arms around me. Her sobs shook her whole body and her tears were soaking my shirt.

"They want to kill me," she wept.

Paige tried to cross the room, but I saw Wren nail her to the wall with a glance before she herself walked over and sat on Ellie's other side.

"You knew they would," I whispered.

"I didn't think they would really try! I don't want anything more than to get away from them. If I never saw them again, I'd be fine. If I never had to have another nightmare about them, I'd let it all go."

Wren rubbed her hand over the girl's back and didn't say anything. We just let her weep.

The door clicked open a few minutes later and Haden stepped in. She jerked her head at Paige. "Go on, go. Don't give out any more information on this girl. Or any of the fosters without talking to the adults first. Got it?"

I saw her nod and slip out the door.

Haden leaned against the wall. "Doctor Warner, you have a temper."

I couldn't stop my laugh, and Haden grinned. Wren looked up, blinked a few times and offered both of us her middle finger.

Haden tossed a chin at Ellie, and raised an eyebrow.

"Ellie? Doll, you okay?"

She shook her head no. "I've been trying to be strong, but it's too much. I can't keep pretending I am."

"You don't have to pretend you're strong all the time, Ellie," Wren said quietly. "You either are or you aren't. And you don't have to hide when you aren't. That's why we're here. It's why we have custody of you. We're here to help you, to make sure you have the chance to recover, and recovery has a lot of ups and downs."

She looked up from my shirt and directly at Wren. "Did they really write…*that* on the carpet?"

Wren hesitated, but nodded. "Do you want to see it?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation in Ellie's voice.

Her phone was on the table, and Wren swiped the lock screen off. The image was right there since she hadn't shut down the gallery app.

The beautiful blue and cream rug was stained with the horrible words that someone had slathered in blood. Ellie's breath hitched, and she choked back a few sobs. But she didn't move, and she didn't freak out.

"According to the ME," Haden said, unfolding her arms and walking over, "it's bovine blood. Someone went to a slaughterhouse and got it. Everything that had it on it tested for only bovine."

"So no one was hurt? No one hurt someone's pets?" Ellie's big eyes were still luminous with tears.

"No one was hurt," Haden said.

That seemed to relax her a lot. "What now though?"

The room stayed silent for a moment and Ellie looked at the three of us. She let out a defeated huff.

"We can't touch these people?" she asked.

Haden shook her head.

A little sob escaped and she looked down at her shoes. "And now we can't go back to that house. I was going to start school on Monday…"

Lifting her chin with my finger, I smiled at her. "You and Wren are coming to stay with me in Chestnut Hill. I have my house there, and there's plenty of room. Paige won't be told where you are so she won't be able to tell anyone. We're going to put you in a private school, and we're going to replace everything you lost today."

"But we just bought it all yesterday. It was thousands of dollars…" She hiccupped.

I leaned down and stage whispered in her ear, "I'm rich. I don't care how much it takes to replace everything."

Ellie's one eyebrow raised, and she glanced at Wren. "You're rich?"

"Yes." I laughed.

She laughed and turned to Wren. "You got yourself a sugar daddy!"

My house was not understated. Not at all.

Being one of the best surgeons had its benefits, and money was one of those. I'd bought the 1908 Tutor manor two years before and restored the whole thing to as much original interior as I could while still keeping my modern necessities.

We pulled in all the bags from Wren's car and let Ellie pick out her bedroom of the seven empty ones I had in the house. She picked one far from the stairs and opposite our master suite.

Wren had pulled the clip out of her gun and looked like she was ready to put it back in the car. I shook my head and after hesitating

only a moment, she put the clip back in and put the gun back in her waistband.

I wanted that gun nearby. I only had a rifle in the house, and that wasn't helpful for keeping her and Ellie feeling safe.

One of the nicest things about my house was the security system. Walking in the front door with Wren and Ellie, I knew they needed that alarm there. It was better than the gun, but they needed both right now.

I showed them both how it worked, and then Ellie had seen the house.

"Holy shit, you are rich…" She walked through the foyer with her mouth open.

Wren laughed. "You know, I don't need a sugar daddy, but this… this isn't bad at all."

Ellie turned and looked at her. "You don't?"

"Doll, she's just a wealthy as I am." I grinned.

The young woman sauntered over and wrapped us both in a hug. "Mom, Dad, I'm home."

Ellie started laughing again. "Oh, my God, you guys. It's been so damn long since I was able to laugh like this. It feels amazing."

Wren took the girl into her arms and gave her a tight hug. "I'm glad to hear that from you, Ellie. I really am. Nothing about these past few weeks has been easy for you and I've been worried."

Wrapping her arms around Wren, she returned the hug and they clung to each other. I grabbed the menu out of the cabinet where I kept all the menus, and spread it out on the island there.

"You were…uh…you were pretty bad ass with that gun this afternoon," Ellie said. "And with Mrs. Domingues. I thought she was going to end up in about eight pieces."

"Truth? I was ready to tear her into about eight pieces, starting with offering a new asshole."

We all collapsed in a fit of laughter, and I dragged the two of them into the kitchen. It had been way too long of a day and we needed food and beverage.

"What do you want to eat?" Wren asked, opening the fridge. She'd been here a few times, and I was glad she had—she felt comfortable here and I didn't need the two of them wound tighter than a drum. One was enough.

"I don't know? What do rich people eat?"

We glanced at each other and chorused, “Chinese.”

Fischer

…three weeks later…

Opening the door to the bathroom, I saw the tableau of her naked back, shoulders to toes in the shower stall. The water from the rainfall shower head cascaded down her soft skin and I was instantly and impossibly hard.

Quickly removing my socks and watch, I walked straight into the falling water and trailed my hands over her waist, up her sides to caress her breasts.

Wren leaned her head back into the crook of my shoulder.

"You're still dressed."

"Don't care. You need me."

She started sobbing, and I just held her against me.

I didn't know how I knew she needed me, but halfway through a check up with a patient, her sadness and fear ripped through me. I had finished with the patient, and had Laxmi cover the rest of the day.

"What's wrong, little bird?"

She sobbed, her body shaking. "He's dead."

A rip of shock went through me—but it wasn't what she thought at all. "When?"

"They found him two days ago. The coroner has ruled it heart failure. Just plain old heart failure."

I had no idea if she could feel the tension in my body release. "That's good, right?"

She nodded. "I was just so overwhelmed to hear he was dead. Just dead. After all the fear and vigilance and uncertainty, I was just overwhelmed by Haden's call. She knew yesterday morning but couldn't say anything until the FBI confirmed everything."

I kissed the base of her throat, and I could feel her calming down. It was still amazing to me how much we were in tune with each other. I just ran my hands over her body, time and again until I could really feel her starting to calm down.

I knew she was doing better when Wren reached for the buckle on my pants. She was very deft at getting them unfastened from her angle, and she had my dick in her hands in a moment.

"Just fuck me, Fischer," she breathed.

When my hand trailed up her body this time, I grabbed her hands and pressed them against the wall of the shower. At the same time, my feet nudged her legs apart and I brought my hands down to her ass and slapped her hard.

"Shit!" she gasped and trembled, this time in delight.

Trailing my hand down her crease, I dusted over the dark entrance there, and whispered, "Someday."

She turned and looked at me over her shoulder. "Someday," she agreed.

My hand hadn't stopped, and I found her entrance. Dipping a finger into her, she was wet, but I needed her even wetter. I dropped to my knees, and buried my face deep in her pussy, licking and sucking and pleasuring her. I didn't use anything but my lips and tongue, but I still had her squirming back against me, quietly begging for relief.

"Get inside me, Fischer. Please, please. I need to feel you in there."

I didn't move until I was satisfied by how wet and ready she was, which wasn't very long. Trailing my fingers up her ass, and her back,

I stood and merely pushed my pants out of my way, down my ass a bit.

"Ready?"

"Please, please," she hissed.

I moved into her slowly savoring every inch and every moan I captured from her. She was panting and I had to grab her hips so she wouldn't spike herself back onto me. I was in control, and she needed that.

I was in more control than I ever had been in my life. This woman gave me purpose and direction and it was everything I had ever needed. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Pressing forward, I finally filled her as far as I could, and popped my hips. She pulled in a sharp breath and let out a whisper of my name. I could listen to that all my life.

I moved out of her, and then carefully possessed her again. I kept the pace unhurried, enjoying each and every tug and pull of my shaft in her channel. Her back moved, a soft undulation in time with the press and pull of my cock inside her.

God, she was beautiful. Every part of her was so beautiful, I wanted to keep her in this house always, never let her out. But that was wrong.

And I had a terrible stain on my soul now.

I sped my thrusts up a little bit, and reached around to dust over her clit. I wanted to hear her coming soon. I leaned forward and put my hand on the shower wall next to her, inhaling her pure scent.

Because I was about to ruin that purity.

"Wren..." I breathed.

"Fischer..."

"I have to show you something..."

"Mmm..."

My hand left the wall, and I wrapped it around her throat, touching each of her pulse points softly, and I opened my mind.

...The room was dark the first time. There had been no one around, and it had been insanely easy to get into the penthouse.

The view from here of the Cira Center was perfect. There was nothing not perfect about this place, except I could see the black stain of evil on

everything in the room, in the whole penthouse. The stench of cruelty and foul sex, the pain of disrespect for the human condition.

All of this was new, but for some reason it was right. It seemed the natural progression of my visions into something far more than just the glimpse of things that had been or things that could be.

I crept through the darkness, to where the machine rested on the nightstand in the bedroom. The cruelty in here seemed to glow on the surfaces. The sins this man had committed were made of different colors, and they coated the surfaces. The floors. The windows, the bed, the sheets.

The machine was quiet right now, since the intended patient was here. It was going to be easy to find a way to make the machine stop working, and once that was found and the machine malfunctioned, I quickly and quietly left the room and the apartment...

...The room was lit by soft white lights the next time. It was still dark out, but this time, there were people in the penthouse. Servants, cooks, others whose purpose was now clear to me, but not to the others who merely kept the house for the bastard in the bedroom.

I was directed, without words, to that bedroom. The wretched smell of misery and sin nearly choked me, and while the man sitting on the end of the bed looked to be normal, it was as if I had suddenly developed the ability to see him as though he were the Picture of Dorian Gray*: pock-marked, scared, covered in boils and puss, cuts and scabs, holes in his skin. Covered in the colors of his unbalanced sins, he flickered in and out of his hideous visage.*

"You're the tech?"

No hello, no polite welcome.

"Yes."

"Good. Make it work or replace it."

I nodded and walked to the nightstand. The little machine was blinking an orange light. I pulled on a pair of latex gloves and got to work making a show of a repair for a problem I had caused and knew exactly how to fix.

"I have to take this in to the bathroom. I need just a little more light."

He held up a hand, and motioned to someone in the corner of the room. The man hurried into the bathroom and pulled a younger girl in a night gown out of the room. She couldn't have been twelve.

"My daughter. She takes too long in the bathroom."

Such a fucking liar. I saw the fear and pleas in her eyes.

She'd be free soon enough.

I put the machine on the counter and lifted up the top. I rinsed out the water tank. I tinkered a bit, reconnecting the wire to the machine to make sure it worked. I reached into the toolbox I had there pulled the two vials of succinylcholine I had gotten out of the cold pack. Shaking them well, I dumped the two of them completely into the water tank and slid it back in.

I closed everything up and put the two vials back in the toolbox. I locked everything down, and flipped the switch to make sure that it worked.

It did.

Shutting it down, I brought everything back out and placed it back on the nightstand. "That should do it, sir. I'm terribly sorry you had that happen."

"You should fix the model," he snapped.

"Well, everything is good to go now. I also cleaned and replaced your water with some fresh distilled, so you'll be good for tonight."

"Damn straight." He looked over my shoulder. "Jake, show the man out."

Jake didn't say a thing except to point to the door. I nodded at Scott Woodall and to Jake as he showed me out. I rode the elevator down...

...The room was dark again. It was insanely easy to get in and out of this place. How someone so evil, who ran a sex trafficking ring, could not put real security on the door was beyond me.

I headed straight for the bedroom, where I could hear the whimpers of the little girl that I had seen earlier. She was chained by her ankle to the chair. I remember Elutheria said he always used her in the early morning hours, which meant this girl had not been brutalized yet.

Tonight.

I walked to her and put a finger to my lips.

My skin was almost luminously blue as I uncuffed her and untied her.

"Are you an angel?" she whispered fiercely.

"No, I'm...sin."

She cocked her head, and seemed to accept my answer.

I turned her around to see the man in the bed. "He's going to die soon. I will not make you stay."

"I want to see him die. Will it be painful?"

"If he wakes, yes."

"Do you think he will?"

I put my hands on her shoulders, and stood watching his chest rise and fall. "I can only hope."

She took a deep breath. "I can, too."

The room was quiet save the whirr of his CPAP, and I watched the colors of his evil washing over and over him. I didn't know how long the girl and I stood there—an hour? Maybe, or maybe fifteen minutes. It was impossible to know.

His eyes flew open and his body jacked knifed up off the bed.

Clawing at the sheet, he realized he couldn't breathe. His lungs weren't working, his diaphragm wouldn't contract to pull the air in or out. And slowly, his heart slowed in his chest.

Perfect.

It would take him exactly seven minutes to die from lack of air. He went gurgling and gargling and knowing there was no way to call for help or escape this fate.

At six minutes, he thrashed like a dying fish, I walked the two of us to the side of his bed and his eye lit on us standing there. He couldn't even grab at his throat, his eyes were desperately trying to close.

I leaned in close. "Goodnight, you piece of shit. The minions of Hell will welcome you with open arms."

He died a minute later.

Using a tissue from the nightstand, I turned the machine off, and took the water tank to the bathroom and rinsed out the drug. I filled it back up with the distilled water I had in my pocket, and put it all back in the machine, and flipped it back on.

"He's dead?" the girl asked.

"He's dead."

"He'll never hurt another girl."

"No, sweetie, he won't."

"Can I spit on him?"

I told her the rest of my plan, and she was keen to go along with it...

"Fuck!" Wren flew apart in my arms, her orgasm cascading through her. Her channel grabbed me tight and I flooded her walls with my hot cum.

~

Wren

I LAY FACE down on the bed, recovering the incredible sex Fischer and I had been having for nearly three hours.

He'd purposefully given me his memories while he'd fucked me against the wall.

The memory that he had killed Scott Woodall.

It was a memory I was glad to have.

"You really did that."

"I had to, little bird. You understand?"

"Of course, I understand, Fischer. What...changed?"

He kissed down the back of my neck. "Not caring, something not being my problem is just another word for sloth. It's not as simple as being lazy...it's being completely disengaged from life. Which is what I was until you, little bird. The balance is learning how to care, and how to make something your problem without getting overwhelmed by everything that's wrong with the world."

"You caused a wrong to make a right," I whispered.

I felt him nod.

"We're more than we appear, aren't we, Fischer? You sent me those memories. We share visions. There's more here, something we don't understand."

"I think we are. I don't think we're alone, either. I think there's more to us and more *of* us."

"Does that scare you?"

"As long as you're with me? No. Not at all." He was quiet for a moment. "Do you hate me, Wren?"

I shook my head. "Not even a little."

"You can live with what I've done?"

"I would have helped."

He shook his head. "No. It had to be me alone. I had to do this for you and Ellie." He kissed down my spine slowly.

"Fischer," I whispered.

"Yes, little bird?"

"I love you."

His lips were at my ear. "I love you, too."

Outside in the strange late fall storm, bright blue lightning split the sky.

EPILOGUE

Lily

I heard the thunder crash as I pushed the door to the basement open. It was advantageous. No one needed to know this place was a place.

I descended the stairs and hurried to the storage room at the other side of the apartment building. Six apartments, seven storage areas. Everyone assumed the last was just equipment.

It wasn't.

Waving my hand over the lock, it popped open and I ducked in, locking it behind me. The door on the other side seemed to go into the foundation and lead nowhere.

I walked into the wall—it was nothing of the sort. Merely a curtain that made it look like a wall.

Hurrying down the stairs, I didn't have much time. It grew darker and darker as I spiral down until halfway when the light from below filtered up, casting an orange glow in the stairwell. Supernatural light, comforting.

Finally the door appeared, and I pulled it open. The massive entry of stone was just beyond, and the fire that always burned in the pit there glowed happily.

Home.

I missed this place terribly. I missed everything it was once.

That was the exact reason both my husband and I avoided it. For the past two centuries, we'd found other places to hide and work and think. The massive palace had no life in it—all of that was stolen from us in just one year.

We didn't know who had destroyed what we had built. I spent my time away from here, two hundred and thirty years all told, looking for those who were stolen. He had spent the same time looking for those who had stolen them.

"Luce?" I called, walking deeper into the palace. I didn't have to raise my voice much at all to get it to echo loudly. "Luce, are you here?"

The tall, imposing figure of my immortal husband stepped out from the sitting room near the kitchen. "I am here, Lilith."

There was no pretense with me, I ran into his open arms and wrapped myself around him. He was warm, always so warm, and I loved that about him. His darkened skin had its usual ruddy hue, and his hair had grown long. I played with the ends. I barely reached his shoulders, but we fit perfectly.

"I missed you so much, my love," he whispered into the crown of my head.

"Missed you too, my dear heart." I sighed. "Any news?"

He shook his head. "None." He was so sad, and I didn't blame him. I wanted our lives back.

"I found her," I whispered.

He stepped back and held me carefully by my shoulders. "You did."

"I did." There was no containing my grin. "We were looking for amnesia. It never occurred to me they might be recycling her and all the others. She has had a whole life to now."

"Oh... Why didn't I think of that?"

I could tell he wanted to curse himself, but I reached up and pulled him down and kissed him hard. "No. No regrets. Because this gets better. She's found one. Her alpha."

"She did..." His black eyes sparkled with the first glint of hope I had seen in them in years.

I nodded. "And even more still?"

Luce nodded his head in anticipation.

"She has the guardians."

"Do they know?"

"No, none of them know...though I think she and the alpha suspect."

"Bring her here—"

My hand landed over his heart. "No. Not yet. Not now. I know, *I know* how that kills you to hear it. But trust me. I really believe they will figure all of this out, and through that they will help us figure out what happened and who the bastards are that took our lives away from us."

"Lily—"

"I know, my love. I know. She's part of you, part of us. But give this time. Whoever thought they could punish the Prince of Hell needs to be found and punished. And we need all of that evidence for El and the Court."

His mouth landed on mine and possessed me, his delicious flavor flooding my senses and making me wish this was all over so we could spend days just fucking each other.

"My brilliant wife," he whispered against my lips. "Come to bed. We have more to do, but for now, you are mine and I am yours."

Tomorrow, I would go back and play the part of Lily Haden. But for tonight, I was Lilith of Hades, the Princess of Hell.

...Sloth has found his Temperance...

The Sins are beginning to gather.

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