



THE EXODUS SERIES

A MASKED MAN NOVELLA

THRILL OF THE HUNT

DANA LEEANN

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Welcome to your chase through the forest.

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PROLOGUE



ISABELLE

The Reckoning.

All crime is legal on the night of the Reckoning. Truly, anything goes. There are no rules and nothing is off-limits when *The Exodus* plays their games. Animalistic sex, murder, and kidnapping are all surface-level shit when it comes to the event that happens only once a decade.

While this information isn't common knowledge, the locals have their suspicions. *Most* of them are smart enough to hide at home tonight, turning their heads the other way as The Exodus members rip their way through Vail and the forest surrounding it. *Less* people are killed this way, but death is inevitable when one of the deadliest societies comes out to play.

My father was one of the higher ranking members within the society, an *elder* they called him, for as far back as I can remember. He wasn't a kind man, best known for his dirty money and big-time drug deals, but he always admired me through the most adoring eyes when he came home. Not once did I fail to greet him at our front doors, his favorite red bow wrapped tightly around my wavy brown hair. He opened his arms wide, inviting me in as I ran to him as fast as my legs could carry me, eventually falling into his familiar warmth. His home visits were short, but always the highlight of my week.

Knowing when he'd be home, my mother prepared me for his arrival without fail. She kept her one and only wild child well-groomed and doll-like on the days of his return. An unexpected bone cancer diagnosis crippled her fingers, eventually making them too brittle and weak to raise from the soft threads of her hospice bed. My father's business meetings were relocated to the west wing of our family home following her diagnosis, which kept him home far more often than before, but it was hard to be happy when we were falling apart.

Soon after my mother's death, papá's little girl grew up, getting in the way of his business meetings one too many times. It didn't take more than a few months for his eyes to darken, replacing the love they once held for me with hate. I lost count of how many times he left me with a bruised face and fractured bones, forcing me to choose between missing school or applying heavy concealer to large sections of my body.

He *always* kept me here. I don't know how many times I tried to escape, running as far as the densely populated New York

City, but he *always* found me. I've never understood why he put so much effort into holding on to me when he couldn't bear to look at me. I suspect part of the reason was because I look remarkably similar to my mother, and their love was so deep it was almost unfathomable, intangible to most of the population. Anyone who saw the two of them together understood just how far they'd go for one another.

Perhaps it was the pain of missing her that made my existence insufferable. Not knowing when to shut my mouth created trouble a few too many times as well, but I couldn't help myself when he ran drugs through our kitchen at every hour of the night. Countless strangers wandered the halls of our home, and it was no way for a young woman to live.

At the end of the day, he used countless connections across the United States to control me, and I couldn't escape them. I couldn't escape *him*.

It was less than unfortunate when he was killed over two years ago. *Myocardial infarction, rupture of myocardium*. In simple terms, a heart attack, smack dab in the middle of our kitchen. At least, that's what the coroner wrote on the death certificate less than twenty-four hours after peeling his stiffened body from the floor.

I must admit, the thought crossed my mind more than once, but I didn't kill my father. I watched his men clean up every speck of evidence of struggle *long* before the police arrived. Clearly, there was more to it, but I didn't ask, not when I found myself suddenly *free*.

It was never my intention to be mixed up in the dealings of the Exodus, but fate has a funny way of changing plans. I should have left after inheriting everything, dirty money and all, but I couldn't get myself to leave the casita my mother put her heart and soul into. Her clothes still hang in their closet, and I don't know what I'd do if they were anywhere other than here. Her scent faded significantly over the years, but it's still there, laced within the fibers of the threads. When I close my eyes, holding them to my nose just long enough, I can still find her. It's harder and harder each time, but I can't stop. If I move them somewhere new, I fear I'll lose her forever. I can't take back a mistake like that, so I've stayed here, completely *alone*.

Tonight's Reckoning is the first to happen since the death of my father. On the nights of previous Reckonings, he would send me down the bunker beneath our twenty-thousand square foot mansion, thinking I was too ignorant and unaware to understand that there was more at play than an awkward movie night with several of his guards. I *knew*, though. Much of my time was spent listening through the vents, learning the dirty secrets he tried so hard to keep away from me, like *The Exodus*.

My view of the city lights is duller than normal, not twinkling and vibrant like Vail normally is. The locals know better than to show themselves tonight. They're hiding, just as I did in the previous decades, but tonight is different. I won't be joining them in their efforts to stay concealed for the next ten hours.

No, not me.

A silky black dress clings to me, showing off my curves and the body I've worked so hard to sculpt. My mother's gold bracelets jingle along my wrists, perfectly paired with the diamond studs I refuse to take out. My hair is thick, more wavy than curly, and I've left it down for what I'm predicting to be an eventful evening.

I'd like to say I'm not nervous, but the truth is, I am. My palms are sticky and slick as I wait for *him*.

Greyson Matthers.

Heir to the Matthers estate. Multi-millionaire. Unthinkably intelligent. Man responsible for an unsettling portion of the missing-persons posters plastered across the state of Colorado and beyond. He just so happens to also be the hottest fucking person I've laid eyes on.

He's coming for me tonight. I've known for quite some time. I've made a habit of brushing off the anticipation and pretending it's not there, but that ball in the pit of my stomach has grown so large that I've been unable to ignore it for weeks. Hiring a personal trainer took some of the pressure off for the first few months, but as it gets closer I feel the imposter syndrome slipping in, feeling like I'll never be good enough, almost as though no matter what I do tonight, I'll fail.

Greyson began dropping hints last fall, about a year ago. The first few were subtle, and I almost missed them. The first of many was confusing. After a night out, I returned home to find one of my father's empty champagne flutes placed in the middle of my kitchen island. At first, I thought perhaps one of the housemaids moved it while dusting and forgot to put it back, but a small crack in the stem and a drop of blood inside the glass immediately made my stomach churn. What I've always believed to be the sign of The Exodus is melted into the base of the flute. The only time my father brought it out was the night of the Reckoning. None of the maids would be reckless enough to be so sloppy with my father's belongings. He may no longer be earthside, but we all still fear him.

A month later, as I was wringing my wet hair out from a long shower, I noticed the same sign drawn into the fogged glass, and it only became visible once there was enough steam in the bathroom. Anger got the best of me, and I wiped it away before I could get a good look at it. It was stupid, but the reminders of my father were too much to handle. For longer than I'd like to admit, I questioned whether or not I was imagining things or simply tricking myself into thinking my father had come back to haunt me, but I eventually realized it was more than that when notes began appearing in my mailbox. They were all unstamped, so I knew the post office wasn't the one delivering them.

"328 days..."

Another arrived two weeks later. *"314 days, my sweet gazelle."*

I didn't know what it meant for months, not until I received one with the sign of The Exodus stamped on the back. My fingers trembled as I pulled out my phone, searching for a date calculator online and asking it what day was 273 days from then. My world stopped spinning as I put the pieces together.

The Reckoning.

He was sending hints about the Reckoning. Six months ago, he showed his face for the first time, stopping by at night to watch from the end of the driveway as I trained in the lawn with John, one of my self-defense coaches. We moved training to the back of the house, but it didn't stop him. He appeared within the shadows of the forest surrounding my yard. He watched *everything*, observing my strengths, my weaknesses. The unease of his presence wore off after I realized he wasn't going to make a move until the Reckoning.

As of three months ago, Greyson is everywhere I go, spending what seems to be all of his time watching me, studying everything I do. When he took it public, he watched from a distance for several weeks, but once I was able to completely ignore him, he switched, blatantly stalking me in broad daylight. He made it impossible to avoid his dark gaze.

Ofentimes, I find myself staring for far too long. Even though I know his intentions are ill, he's become the one constant in my life, and I'm beginning to find comfort in his presence. He's dangerous; I know that. He's going to kill me, but there's something so intriguing about his commitment to pursue me.

He *knows* I won't call the police. I can't. Not when half the police department supports The Exodus. Another one of my father's dirty little secrets I learned while listening through the vents. The desire to call for help wore off long ago. When he's ready to take me out, he will. There will be no stopping him.

His final note was delivered by hand three days ago. His lips were silent as he approached, catching me in the middle of a routine jog around the property. My mouth was dry like cotton as he gently placed the folded paper between my fingers, leaving as quickly as he came. A shudder ripped through me as I opened it, reading the black, inky words.

"It's almost time to play. Die, or join us. See you soon, my sweet gazelle."

He no longer needed to count down the days until the Reckoning. He saw the intensity of my training pick up each day. The words on the paper were accompanied by a small portrait.

The face of his father was the final piece of the puzzle.

He isn't doing all of this because of something *I've* done, but for what my father did before he died. It's been six years since my father slaughtered William, Greyson's father, on the front lawn of their family estate. William had been trying to separate himself from The Exodus for quite some time, but The Exodus doesn't *let* anyone go. Tasked with *removing* the problem, my father handled it. Greyson was bound by rope and beaten senseless, forced to watch as his father was dismembered. William's blood was transferred into champagne flutes, which my father and his men toasted with and passed around to share. It was certainly among his favorite murders and he spoke of it often with his men, laughing as though they hadn't inflicted a trauma too deep to heal from.

Greyson wasn't seen around town for months, likely taking time to heal from the wounds and broken bones inflicted upon him by my father and his men. During his absence, I felt sorry for him. We'd both been forced away from the world to heal from my father's wrath, and I was able to relate to him on a deeper level than most without ever exchanging a single word. I understand what it's like when you can't face the world, too ashamed to show the bruises covering your face. People change their perception of you all too quickly when the black and purple flesh is exposed.

Like you're *weak*.

Not good enough. You *let* someone do that to you.

I'd assumed Greyson was the man responsible for my father's death, but why would he continue to seek revenge after killing him? I now believe I was wrong, and it was more likely a drug deal gone bad.

Whoever it was, it wasn't Greyson Matthers, and he's still out for blood. *My* blood.

The night of the Reckoning is here.

CHAPTER 1



GREYSON

I can smell her perfume before she comes into my view.

Her first mistake of the evening.

Her scent has always been alluring to me. It's luxurious and easily the most divine fragrance to hit my nose, but the light berry notes are playful, making me feel alive as I inhale her. My eyes flutter closed as I momentarily let myself be consumed by her presence.

She's so fucking sweet.

I've resisted the urge to take her every day for the last year. After my father's death, so much of my time was spent plotting a thousand different ways to destroy Carlos Garcia, Isabelle's father. The options were limitless, which felt overwhelming at the time. I toyed with the idea of torturing him slowly, making Isabelle watch in the same way *he* forced me to watch my father bleed out before me. I was completely and utterly useless as the tight ropes they bound me with tore into the flesh of my broken wrists.

All he wanted was to leave The Exodus, but once you're in, there's no escaping. The Exodus sinks its claws in as deep as they can go, making it impossible to remove yourself from its grasp. My father knew that, but he couldn't justify this way of life anymore. I pleaded with him time and time again, begging him to lay low and ride it out, but he couldn't. He was tired of the killings, the senseless murders and kidnappings. The drugs, the political meddling.

The monster I was becoming.

He hated how far I got sucked into the secret society. It didn't take long to climb the ranks. The most elite members have the dirtiest hands. Whether they do the work themselves or hire out is questionable, but we've all sinned beyond the point of return. We *all* have a seat in Hell.

I've grown to enjoy the ways of The Exodus for the most part. The political meddling doesn't interest me in the slightest, but I've enjoyed the endless line of needy girls begging to suck my cock. The money buys me just about anything I could want. I've dabbled in cocaine more than once to take the edge off my stress. There are so many benefits to being an elder in The

Exodus, but it has its price.

Ironically, I've been tasked with keeping our members in line, ensuring no one gets out, and only those who *earn* it get in. I kill who I have to, fuck who I need answers from, and hunt down the few who make a run for it. It's the same story over and over again. They don't make it far before I've caught up to them, and they're always so surprised when I make my appearance. When *death* makes an appearance. The only way out is death.

Once a decade, we hold the Reckoning. It's not only a staggering show of power and wealth, but also a clever way to recruit new members, keeping the society alive. The rules of the event are simple. Each member brings a guest, willing or unwilling, and that guest either passes a series of games and sacrifices chosen for them by that member, or they die. It's ten hours of madness and chaos, driven forward by drugs, sex, and bloodshed. With law enforcement on our side, everything is legal tonight. There are no boundaries to be broken. Identities are kept confidential for the most part, so all members are required to wear masks.

This year's Reckoning is extra special. I've chosen Isabelle Garcia as my guest of honor. The vision of how I want tonight to play out came to me last fall as I chased a rogue member through the woods. His ending was long, drawn out by my imagination running wild with possibilities for Isabelle. After Carlos pissed off the wrong dealer and got himself killed, I had no choice but to turn my sights on her.

Isabelle has always intrigued me. Her long, brown hair flows in the prettiest waves. The way she carries herself, like she hasn't had the weight of the world on her shoulders since her mother died, makes me wonder if she has any emotion at all. After Carlos died, I watched her to see what she'd do, but she stayed. No one expected her to remain in that big, empty house by herself, but she did. She carried on with life, keeping to herself most days, but she seemed more free than ever.

I've questioned how Carlos treated her, to leave her appearing unaffected, but then I remember back to the days when we were younger. She was his entire world. A real daddy's girl. Her ability to remain unphased when she lost her entire family is admirable, and it makes her the perfect candidate for The Exodus.

I was further impressed with her when she hired personal trainers within weeks of picking up on my hints. She's smart. She's been preparing for this night, even though she has no idea what's in store for her this evening. I've had ample time to plan out every fucking minute of the next ten hours.

Sacrifice or die, she's *mine*.

CHAPTER 2



ISABELLE

There's a warm breeze drifting through the yard when my eyes finally land on him. Dressed in all black, he's hard to see through the shadows of the trees, but he's there. My heart drops into my stomach, and I can feel my pulse quicken. I swallow hard, trying to convince myself I've been training for this night for months. No matter what he throws at me, I'm more prepared now than ever. My chances of surviving the night are slim, but if I play it smart, I might just walk out alive.

He steps out from the trees and into the driveway, letting the moon light him from behind. His eyes are on me, more predatory and dark than I've ever seen. Greyson stands there, scanning my entire body as I rise from my spot on the cement staircase. Fixing my dress and flattening any wrinkles, I raise my eyes to his, holding his glare. I can feel my chest rising and falling faster than I want, but I can't get it under control. My breathing is too erratic, completely unstable as he takes a step toward me.

Greyson's stride is long and cool, like he's out for an evening walk and nothing more. But we both know that's not the case.

He's here for me.

Gathering the courage I desperately need, I straighten my back, beginning my descent down the staircase. My knees threaten to buckle, but I force myself to stay upright. He reaches the bottom before I do, resting his hands behind his back as he waits.

The yellow porch lights shine just bright enough to show me his face. It's hard and flat as he watches me, not giving off the slightest hint of emotion. Pursing my lips and ignoring how striking he looks in all black, I turn my focus to calming my nerves.

I *need* to stay in control. I can't fall apart now. The night is only beginning and it's too early to give him the satisfaction of my fear. I *won't* give him that satisfaction. Not yet.

Greyson clicks his tongue as I stop two steps short of the bottom, giving myself just enough height to stand face to face with him. He's so much larger than I am, and if I take those last two steps he'll be towering over me, dominating the entire space between us.

“Are you ready to play a game?” he asks, finally breaking our silence.

“That depends on what games you intend to play,” I respond, scanning the sharp features of his face.

His hair is nearly black, styled to look slightly disheveled with a holding gel. His fancy gold watch reflects the porch lights, drawing my attention as he pulls his arms from behind his back. He’s holding two masks, the first being an intricately sculpted face of a lion, painted a rich gold color. The other is a metallic black, but the face of a gazelle. My heart is pounding out of my chest, but I do my best to remain unphased. What do the masks mean?

Greyson’s lips twitch upward as he extends the gazelle mask toward me. “You’ll wear this tonight. The only time it leaves your face is when I remove it myself. Do you understand?”

I take it, nodding slightly, confused by his words. “Why a gazelle?”

His tongue flicks out, wetting his bottom lip as he takes a step back, allowing himself a moment to observe me standing before him. Holding up the lion mask, he lets it shine in the light. It’s strikingly beautiful, sculpted so precisely it almost looks like it’s from another world. Although, I suppose Greyson appears to be otherworldly, too handsome and dark to be from the same world I am. It suits him perfectly.

“When a lion requires a meal, he will hunt down a gazelle, then feast upon its flesh. There’s a chase, a fight, and then bloodshed. *That* is how tonight will go, my sweet gazelle.”

Goosebumps pimple along my skin, raising the tiny hairs as they travel down my spine. He’s going to hunt me? Like, actually chase me?

“You’re going to chase me?” I nearly laugh, not completely sure he’s being serious.

His face does not waver. “Yes,” he says flatly. “Your first trial is a chase. There will be two more after that. *You* decide whether you live or die tonight, Isabelle.”

Furrowing my brows together, I use the tips of my fingers to feel the mask in my hands. The horns extending from the top of the mask are long, almost spike-like. They’re sharp at the end, giving it the most fierce look. Greyson’s mask is of another world, but this one... this one matches me. It’s simple and not overly complicated, yet exceedingly lovely. It feels as though this mask is a portrayal of how he’s seen me after all these months. These masks elevate not only our external features, but our personalities. I breathe deeply, realizing he possibly knows me better than I know myself.

Greyson Matthers is more than he appears. He’s thoughtful and intuitive, even if it’s in the oddest way I could imagine.

“You’re not going to kill me?” I raise a brow, still confused. I thought the plan was to bring me to The Exodus to put an end to the Garcia lineage, but he’s telling me *I’m* in control of whether or not I die tonight?

His face breaks for a moment, contemplating his answer, but he quickly smooths it out. “I will kill you *if* you refuse my trials.”

Shaking my head, I say, “But no one gets away from The Exodus. I know how they work.”

A small chuckle emerges from his throat. “I didn’t say anything about letting you go. Pass my trials and join The Exodus, or die. The choice is yours.”

“And if I refuse your trials? Right here, right now?”

Greyson’s eyes darken, and he moves toward me, closing the distance between us. His musky scent immediately overwhelms me, sending a tingling sensation down my spine. He darts his hand out, moving it toward my throat. Those thick, rough fingers grab onto me, forcing my face upward to meet his glare. I instinctively press my thighs together, trying to relieve the sudden pulse between them.

“I’ve spent too much time watching you to just end it all right now. I’ve spent *too much* energy thinking about how every second of tonight is going to play out to let you choose death and fuck it all up. You’re a fighter, Isabelle. Be that fighter tonight. *Show* me I made the right decision.”

I don’t say anything. My chest rises and falls rapidly as he forces me to stare at him. I don’t *know* what to say. I’m too overwhelmed with him being so far into my personal space, taking up every corner of my mind. He’s even more handsome up close. The faint lines in his face show a little bit of aging, but it’s so fucking perfect. He’s in his prime at thirty-three, six years older than I am. He’s lived long enough and had enough experiences to be undeniably confident in the way he holds himself. In *who* he’s become after all these years. The Exodus didn’t ruin him when he joined, it just made him that much more godly.

His eyes soften slightly as he watches me, loosening his grip on my throat. Dragging his thumb down my jawline and then to my lower lip, he drags it downward, prying my lips apart. His breathing slows, then his eyes return to mine.

“Put the mask on,” he says as he removes his hand, using it to slide his mask over his face. He’s careful with his hair; he pulls the strap to the back of his head. It covers most of his face, but from the mouth down, he’s exposed. “I’m rather hungry, Isabelle, and I’m growing impatient.”

The way he says it has my knees ready to buckle again. There’s an invisible surge in the air coursing between us as I swallow. The pulsing between my legs only quickens, getting harder to ignore. How fucked up am I to be this turned on when he’s threatening to kill me if I don’t comply with his demands?

Shaking my head, I try to brush off my thoughts, and then pull the gazelle mask over my face. It sits on my face just as his

does. I'm completely hidden from the nose up, with the exception of my eyes, but the lower portion of my face isn't covered.

Greyson grins, reaching up to adjust the mask on my face. "It's perfect," he says as his lips part, exposing his perfectly white teeth. His canine teeth look extra sharp, making the mask that much more fitting.

He's the perfect predator, but I'm too foolish to feel afraid right now. I'm nearly too distracted by his commanding presence to notice the growing bulge in his black pants, but it's too large to miss. Greyson sees where my eyes have gone, and he reactively slips a hand behind my waist, pulling me into his body. His rock hard length presses into me, showing me just how big he is.

For a moment, I don't think he's going to pull away, like he's going to fuck me right here, right now. His eyes are so dark they're hard to get a good read on. The anger is easy to see, but they're also confused and conflicted as he stares down at me, holding me to him.

"You don't have to do this," I whisper, quietly pleading with him. "I won't say anything to anyone." My breath fans across his neck, making him roll his shoulders back as he fights to control himself.

Snapping his attention away from me, he pulls back, pointing in the direction of the forest which surrounds my home. "The lodge is a mile in that direction. I'll give you a head start."

My stomach tightens with his mood change and the news that I've unsuspectingly lived a mere mile from where The Exodus congregates. How could I miss this detail? "You want me to run?"

Greyson won't look at me. His face is set in the direction he's telling me to go. "You run as fast as you can. I'll hunt you down, and when I catch you, you're *mine*." There's a predatory growl within his words, making me shiver.

"It's dark in there!" I snap, catching his attention once more. "There has to be another way."

"You'll do as you're told, or I'll kill you right now. Don't be a fucking idiot." There's no room for sympathy in his tone.

I fully believe him when he threatens to end me, and I can't say I blame him. My father tortured him, then forced him to watch as he did unspeakable things to his father.

An eye for an eye, and with my father no longer living...

I am the eye.

CHAPTER 3



GREYSON

“Run, my sweet gazelle,” I whisper, daring to look at her only for a moment. She looks too fucking hot in that tight black dress, and the mask I had made for her looks absolutely perfect on her. I knew she’d wear black tonight. I’ve learned everything about her over the last year, and I had no doubt what she’d choose for the occasion. Every intricate detail of the mask was made with her in mind.

The metallic shine draws attention to her green eyes, contrasting against them to make them appear even more vibrant than they already are. Her plump lips are on full display just below the mask, perfectly available for drowning on my cock when I shove it down her pretty little throat.

Isabelle doesn’t move. She’s frozen in place, so I do what I have to do to get her running.

“RUN,” I yell as I pull a blade from my back pocket, flipping it open as I advance toward her.

“Fuck! Okay!” she yells back, matching my volume. “I’m going!”

She turns to run, kicking off her heels as she begins the motions. Her head turns back toward me, and I see the fear in her eyes. It makes my cock that much harder. I’m already straining against my pants, but this has me ready to fucking explode without even touching her.

There’s a short distance between the yard and the forest edge, but she clears it quickly. Her long brown hair flaps in the wind behind her as she sprints. Those gold bracelets she chose jingle with each stride, heightening my animalistic senses. Between her sweet perfume and the loud metal clanking together on her wrists, she won’t be hard to find.

I count to thirty, giving her the head start I’d promised. Her bare feet smashing against fallen leaves grows more distant as she puts space between us. With each passing second, my cock grows thicker with anticipation for what it’ll be rewarded with once I catch her.

“Thirty,” I breathe through hushed lips, knowing she can’t hear me. I’m astonished the night is finally here. The *chase* is beginning. Isabelle Garcia is going to be *mine*, and she better not fuck it up by failing my trials. We’ve both worked so hard for tonight.

I've spent countless hours following her every move, and she's spent nearly as much time preparing herself with personal trainers and self-defense coaches. She morphed herself into the prey I've always dreamt of. Pretty, fit, fast, and fucking sexy. The mouth on her also drives me wild. She's bolder than most, daring to say things others don't when she sees fit. It makes me think she'd give me a run for my money, and no one has ever come close to that. No one has ever been a more perfect match than my sweet gazelle.

Raising my voice, I can't help but smile widely as I shout, "Run, run, as fast as you can!" My voice trails off with a laugh. *I'll hunt her down, then make her choke on my cock.*

Taking off in a sprint, I head in the direction she disappeared through the trees. She's probably shitting herself in the forest. It's dark, veiled from the moonlight by the dense trees. There are bears and mountain lions, but I'm the predator she should be afraid of tonight.

The lion will catch the gazelle, then feast upon her sweet flesh.

I can't wait to cut her skin, making her bleed crimson as I sink myself inside her. Killing her was my top priority until I studied her long enough to realize that she's absolute perfection. I'll kill her if I must, but I'd prefer to see her join me in The Exodus. The dark shit we could do together would be limitless. That wicked little personality could take us a lot of places. No one would suspect a girl like her could be turned into the deadliest weapon the society has ever seen, and that's exactly what I intend to do with her. She's already partially proven herself with her training. She's fast and strong, but so fucking intelligent. Not many people fight as smart as she does.

Entering the woods, I quickly catch her scent. It's intoxicating, giving me an immediate high. The forest floor is a mixture of moss, fallen leaves, and dirt. Not much grows here because the trees are so tightly packed that not much sunlight makes its way to the ground. The moss smells earthy and the air feels dry on my throat as I inhale, trying to breathe in every particle of *her*.

I've studied her long enough to know that she won't run straight for the lodge. She'll try to throw me off, taking a zig-zagged path through the thick trees. My cock pulses as I slow, opening my ears. *This* is what I've been dying to feel for months. The thrill of the hunt excites me, making me feel animalistic and primal to my core. My little gazelle can run faster than most, but she can't hide from me. She'll tire long before I do. My motivation is far stronger than hers.

I've abstained from torturing and killing anyone for well over a month in preparation for tonight. I've deprived my mind and body of the release I so desperately need to thrive. For me, clarity is found through bloodshed. Perhaps it seems sick, maybe even psychotic, but I truly believe I am at my best when there's fresh blood on my hands. Taking lives makes me feel powerful, like I'm a god who's been chosen to be judge, jury, and executioner. The Exodus chose my position based on my ability to be emotionless, and that's why Isabelle will fit perfectly at my side.

A deep laugh escapes my lips as I feel the adrenaline coursing through me, encouraging my cock to strain harder. "Run, run, my sweet gazelle," I call out, reminding her she belongs to me.

There's no response, but I know she's close. Her scent is still strong, so I continue. "You can run, but you cannot hide. Once I catch you, you're *mine*."

Stopping, I listen for her. There's a squirrel in the distance, rustling leaves high up in the trees. Turning my head, I wait for her to move. She stopped running at some point. I'd hear the crack of twigs breaking if she'd continued, but the forest is silent.

An owl makes my head jerk as it flees from a tree branch not far away. Thirty yards, maybe. I begin unbuttoning my shirt, untucking it from my trousers as I take a step toward where the owl fled. I don't mask my stride as I walk. I *want* her to hear me coming. I *need* her to know she can't hide from me.

I'm fucking thirsty for blood. I can no longer control my ability to resist marking human flesh. She's going to bleed so beautifully for me when I slide my blade across her skin. And she'll love every second of the pain. I already know she's sopping fucking wet for my cock. She probably thinks I didn't notice when she pressed her thighs together, biting down on her bottom lip as I instilled fear within her. She's into it; I know she is.

She's as traumatized and fucked up as I am, but she doesn't know it yet. She hasn't admitted it to herself. She *needs* my help.

I stop ten feet short of the tree I suspect she's hiding behind.

"We both know you can do better than this," I confess, rubbing my fingers along my jawline.

Isabelle stays silent as I suspected her to. It's natural instinct to lay low, freezing in place and letting the predator pass, all the while praying you'll remain undetected. Unfortunately for her, she sprayed more than enough of that sweet fragrance all over her tight little body to last all night long.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I allow Isabelle to hear me inhaling her, devouring her scent. I *want* to make her uncomfortable. She's become far too content and at ease with my presence over the last few months. She needs a reminder of who I am and just how far I'll go to see her bleed.

CHAPTER 4



ISABELLE

I hold my breath as I wait, hoping he's bluffing and will pass by me.

He's speaking out loud, but I can't see him. He's somewhere behind me, dangerously close.

What will he do if he catches me?

Greyson didn't actually say he'd kill me if he caught me, just that he'd kill me if I refused his trials. I wanted to refuse to run, but what choice did I have? Could The Exodus really be *that* bad? My father was involved with drugs, but I never associated it with the secret society. Sometimes it all blurred together so closely that I couldn't decide why he did half the shit he did.

Too many drugs. Too many murders. Too much money.

Not that I've ever complained about the copious amounts of cash filling our pockets, but he let it get to him. He changed after my mother died, losing who he was and becoming something entirely different.

A monster.

Sort of like Greyson, but the difference between them is I believe Greyson still owns his soul. My father sold himself to the devil long before he died. He lost any redeeming qualities he had when he forced Greyson to watch his father die. I understand how corrupt all of this is, but there's a line he crossed. He couldn't come back from it.

A twig snaps behind me. I've got my back against the tree, pushing my body against it to make myself as small as possible. My pulse is racing at a thousand beats a minute. I feel like I'll drop dead any second from the anticipation.

Greyson's footsteps are soft as he crosses the forest floor, closing in on my location.

Fuck.

Glancing around, I look for *anything* I can use. John taught me not to give up or accept defeat until I'm dead. There's always a chance if I'm still breathing. My eyes land on a stone a few feet away. If I want it, I'll have to leave the cover of the tree trunk, temporarily exposing myself to Greyson.

I listen, trying to pinpoint his location, but he's gone silent. He's stopped moving. Risking a glance to my left, I slide my

head around the tree as far as I can without moving my feet.

Nothing.

He's not there. Turning in the opposite direction, I do it again.

Nothing again.

If I can't see him, there's a good chance he can't see me. It'll only take a second to grab the stone. Crouching, my knees crack as I bend, and I wince knowing I've broken the silence. There's still no movement or sign of him, so I use my legs to push my body forward, pouncing for the rock as quickly as I can. It's within my palms within a second, and I push off the ground, forcing my body back against the tree.

Clutching the rock to my chest and closing my eyes, I calm my breathing, exhaling through my mouth as slowly and quietly as I can manage. I've got this. I'm going to live through the night. I will not give up.

I decide to risk another glance around the other side of the tree, holding the rock tightly as I navigate around the tree trunk. He's gone.

He was bluffing, I silently laugh to myself, sighing in relief. Now, if I can trail him to the lodge, he won't find me until we're emerging through the other side of the forest. He won't be able to catch me if I'm behind him.

Turning back toward the direction of the lodge, I immediately faceplant into Greyson's chest. It's hard and warm, and he doesn't budge as I run into him.

I squeal, completely shocked at how close he managed to get without me knowing. I'm such a fucking idiot. How am I supposed to survive the night if I couldn't even hear him a foot away?

Self-defense sessions with John couldn't fix my stupidity.

Greyson's arm is raised above my head, resting on the tree trunk. His pupils are so dilated I can no longer see his brown irises. They've completely vanished within the darkness of the forest.

"Going somewhere?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

Chills roll down my spine as his breath hits my face. He's so fucking close. *Too fucking close.*

"T-to the lodge," I breathe, struggling to form words.

A smile breaks across his face, but it's not friendly. He's amused by my lack of survival skills. I didn't make it more than a few hundred yards into the forest before he found me. I thought if he passed by me I'd be able to get through, but he knew exactly what I was going to do. He knew before I did. That's why he's been studying me for so long.

Greyson Matthers knows me better than I know myself.

"I gave you a head start with the intention of letting you get at least halfway into the forest, but you couldn't resist the temptation to hide from me. You really are the perfect little prey, my sweet gazelle."

His mask moves slightly as he speaks. The neatly trimmed beard along his jaw is tight against his face, and I can see his jaw muscles flexing as he watches me. My thighs press together again on instinct, betraying my mind as my clit begins to pulse. I can feel the slickness of my pussy as my legs slide together. Some of the intensity is relieved with the pressure.

"I'm going to claim you long before we leave this forest," he says as he lowers his hand to my chin, grasping it between his fingers. "I'm going to wound you, then watch you run from me."

"What?" I gasp, taking a step back.

There's a flash at his side, catching a stray ray of moonlight being cast through the trees. My eyes fall to it, quickly realizing that he's holding a knife. Greyson's hand slides around the back of my neck, forcing me to stay where I am. I grip his wrist with one hand, then surprise him when I raise the stone in my hand, slamming it down on his temple. There's a loud crack as I connect with his skull, and he roars when he releases my neck. His fingers go straight to the spot where I struck, and blood wets them as he slides his fingertips across the broken flesh.

Twisting away from him while he's stunned, I drop the rock and push my legs forward, trying to get solid ground beneath me. Before I make it two steps away, there's a sharp pain shooting across my lower back. I cry out at the pain, wincing as Greyson's blade easily breaks through my dress and skin.

Stumbling, I fall to my hands and knees where the ground is rocky and uneven. Frustrated and hurt, I hiss as pebbles grind into my kneecaps. Greyson is on me within a second, wrapping his huge hand around my hair, then yanking me upright so I'm on my knees, back pressed against his legs. He pushes his right leg into where he cut me, making me yelp. His hand is holding my hair so tightly, I can't move beyond wrapping my hands around his wrist. I can't fight him with how hard he's keeping me here.

"The gazelle wounds the lion." He tsks, running his blade behind my ear, then down my neck.

It hurts, but he isn't breaking skin. He's pressing just hard enough to inflict pain, but he knows what he's doing. If he presses too hard, he'll cut my jugular and I'll bleed out within a minute. Pulling harder, he lifts my knees off the ground, but I can't get my feet underneath me. I'm levitating under his grasp, and my skull is on fire. Every strand of my hair is within his fingers.

"Let go of me," I gasp through ragged breaths. I can barely speak through the pain.

Greyson's voice is a little less controlled than before as he says, "I'm going to give you one more chance. Take it, and run,

Isabelle. Let me chase you for real this time. Let me hunt you down. Give me the thrill of hunting down the pretty little gazelle I've chosen for tonight's feast."

"I'm not giving you anything," I spit, still trying to find my footing.

He laughs in the most menacing way, making my blood go ice-cold. "You will run from me, Isabelle. If you want to survive the night, you will *run*."

"You'd kill me for something my father did?" There's no longer fear in my voice, only spite. "You'd torture me in the same way he did to you? Did you lose yourself that day? Was *that* the day you chose violence and darkness over everything else? Is your sole purpose for this revenge? Because if so, kill me now. Don't play these stupid fucking games with me, Greyson. I don't want it."

Greyson's knife presses into my neck harder, and I feel a warm trickle of blood fall, coating my chest and shoulder.

"Do it," I spit, daring him to end it now.

What's the point of living if he's this hell-bent on revenge? What kind of life will I have after tonight if I live to see tomorrow?

"No," he grunts as he releases my hair, pushing the back of my head forward so that I fall quickly. "These *games* are for your survival. Prove your worth and you'll become a lioness, strong and capable of the most wicked sins."

"That's not what I want." Catching my breath, I sit back on my heels, turning just enough to see him. "I'm not fucked up like *you*."

"You aren't?" He cocks an eyebrow, flipping the blade between his fingers. "You didn't bat an eye the day your father died. And every day after that, you moved on as though it didn't happen. What kind of daddy's girl doesn't shed a tear when daddy dearest dies?"

Greyson circles me, glaring down at me as he steps. I watch him, not breaking eye contact through our masks. He has no idea what I've been through. He's making assumptions based on my life prior to my mother dying. No one knew how my father and his men treated me.

Beating me until I couldn't move, day after day. Breaking my bones until I couldn't leave the house, controlling me over and over again. Keeping me here, never letting me leave to begin a life of my own.

He has no idea what it's like to go from being someone's entire world to the scum on the bottom of their shoe. His father *loved* him when he died. That's the difference between us.

"You act as though we're the same," I say flatly.

Greyson stops walking and rotates his body to face me. "We aren't so different."

"We are *nothing* alike." My voice raises, losing patience. "You'd lose the ability to *feel* if you were beaten into submission."

His eyes soften a little, and he almost looks stunned. "Your ability to feel nothing makes you that much more perfect for the job."

A hysterical giggle leaves my throat. "I didn't realize this was a job interview."

Greyson's words don't waver as he says, "You certainly dressed for the occasion."

Looking down, I find that I'm covered in blood and dirt. There's moss on my dress, and it's wrinkled now. A single tear falls down my cheek. I can't hold back a small smile as I let out a laugh. I feel like I'm losing my mind.

Why am I feeling so many different things right now? I should be terrified and running for my life, but here I am, on the forest floor with one of the most dangerous men in the United States. There's sadness and grief hidden behind my mask. He can't see it, but I know he can feel it. The fear he instills within me leaves as quickly as it goes. How can he cut me from behind, breaking my skin as I flee, then make me feel the will to live?

Perhaps *he* isn't the problem. It's me. I *am* fucked up. He's fucked up in his own kind of way, his own kind of trauma. But no sane person could feel the slickness building between their legs while their life is in the hands of a monster. Maybe I'm further gone than I thought.

"Get up," Greyson demands, losing the friendliness in his voice. "We've got a long night ahead of us."

I stare at him for a moment, not moving as he adjusts his mask on his face. He blends in so well with the dark forest. The black pants and button-up shirt were purposefully chosen for the occasion. They provide him with both camouflage and a fierceness no one could match.

The way he's looking at me should be enough to get my legs going, but I can't get myself to move. I'm stuck in his trance, suddenly feeling desperate to touch him.

He must understand my conflict, because he puts his knife back in his pocket and steps closer, sliding his hands through mine as he pulls me to my feet. I inhale as his musky scent washes over me in a wave, filling me with need.

Greyson's breath is hot as he lowers his mouth to my ear. "There will be plenty of time for fucking, but right now you need to run, Isabelle."

Chills run down my spine, making me crane my neck against his lips. My body presses into his, and I immediately feel the hardness in his pants. He's so fucking hard. If we were different people, in another life or another time or place... I'd let *this*

happen. But we aren't.

"Which direction?" I ask, pushing myself off of him as I struggle to stay in control.

His shoulders drop as I step away, and I realize he's releasing a breath he's been holding. Do I have more of an effect on him than I previously thought? Is he struggling with this as much as I am?

He can't be. He's Greyson fucking Matthers. People like him don't let themselves catch feelings, not when they know firsthand how dark the world really is.

"That way," he points behind me. "There's over three-fourths of a mile left."

"Okay," I swallow, looking away from him. "You want me to run?"

His eyes immediately darken at the mention of me running from him. The muscles in his shoulders tense up, and he looks larger than he did a few seconds ago.

"You'll run as fast as you can, and I'll hunt you down. You'll fight for your life to get away from me, but I'm going to catch you, Isabelle, and I'm going to make you *drown*."

The words come out as he intends, dark and malignant. Predatory instincts begin taking over, and he's reaching for his knife again. His calm demeanor changes so quickly that I can feel the electric charge between us. My heart starts back up, beating faster and faster with each passing second. I begin backing up, feeling his wrath as it reemerges.

"Run, Isabelle," he warns, flipping his knife open as he matches my backwards steps.

CHAPTER 5



GREYSON

I'm losing control.

She's fucking with me more than I thought she would. Those pretty little lips are so distracting I can almost feel my cock shoved between them, pumping down her throat.

This wasn't the plan. I was supposed to chase her through the forest, then fuck the living daylights out of her. She's supposed to be *mine*. Instead, she's making me bend to *her* will.

Wounding her was harder than I thought it'd be. I've had so much anger built up for her over the years that I didn't even give it a second thought. It should be *easy* to hurt a girl from the family who took so much from me, but I think it hurt me as much as it hurt her when I slid my knife through her back.

Of course, she had to be facing away from me. I had to slice her from behind. I don't think I could have done it if she hadn't turned to run. Perhaps that's cowardly of me, but she's forcing me to unravel when I least expected it. *I* am supposed to be in control tonight.

Not her.

She's running again. I think I scared her enough to get her heart pumping, but how far will she go? Will she try to run all the way through the woods this time? Or will she try to be smart and hide from me again? Hiding would be the foolish thing to do, because I'll have to punish her again. This time I won't be as forgiving. My blade will cut deeper, and I'll really wound her. I'll carve my initials into her flesh, branding her as my property. She belongs to me.

The society had contemplated killing her as soon as her father died, removing her from the equation to prevent any future problems, but I wanted to do it myself. I needed time to think it over.

Admittedly, she's made me feel more alive over the last year than I've felt for as long as I can remember. Perhaps as far back as childhood. She's different from anyone I've ever met. Her mind works in different ways. She's more independent than most, never needing the comfort or company of anyone else to be content. She's a loner. Much like myself.

She's the only person who's ever made me *want* to be with someone. We haven't exchanged more than a few words prior

to tonight, but somewhere along the way, I may have let myself get in too deep. Words weren't needed for us to make a connection. Presence alone was enough.

I'm certain she feels it. She won't say it, but the feral way she looks me up and down, appearing to be as animalistic as I feel... it tells me. She *needs* me.

Stop it.

I shake my head, letting out a thunderous roar filled with frustration. My volume escalates as it gets longer, and I don't have to hear her to know she's running even faster now. Anyone would. I'm fucking scary, and I know it.

She's going to feel so good when I catch her. She's going to be crying, begging, and screaming for more of me. I'll have her for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day going forward, and I already know it'll never be enough. I've waited so long for this.

Just a little bit longer, I remind myself as I reach down to my cock, adjusting it in my pants. I'm so strained it hurts. My release can't come soon enough.

I stand there for a moment, listening to her frantic footsteps fade into the forest. She's quick, but I'm quicker. There's a path up ahead that she'll find, and if she doesn't hide, she'll take it. It's a fast track out of the trees, and from there she'll be able to see the lights of the lodge. I'll let her get close enough to get a little taste of freedom, then I'll close in for the kill.

I've run this stretch of forest every morning for the last year. I know the quickest way to the path, and I'll beat her there by a long shot. She's scared, and she'll make mistakes as she runs. The direction I pointed her in is rocky and far from level which will slow her down, especially taking into account the fact that she's barefoot right now.

When she's no longer within earshot, the adrenaline sets in, raging through my body as she puts distance between us. I need her as much as I need air. My body has become too accustomed to being around her; I can't think straight when she's not around. Why else would I have spent every waking second of my time near her?

Isabelle doesn't know that I've set up camp in the tree line outside of her estate. Most nights I sleep there, making sure she goes to bed alone and not with someone else. Isabelle *can't* have anyone else, at least not anyone else who will live to see the end of it.

For too many nights, I watched her through her window. She closed her curtains when I first began dropping hints of tonight, but she eventually grew the courage to leave them open. I think she *wanted* me to see her. It was the same routine every night. The lights on the lower level of the mansion would be shut off as she made her way upstairs to her bathroom. Less than ten minutes in the bathroom and she was always on her way to bed, dressed in the most scandalous little nightgowns. My personal favorite is a deep shade of red, decorated with black lace. Some nights she sleeps naked, and I like that even more than my favorite nightgown.

The best part of it all was when she would pull her pink vibrator out of her nightstand. She'd crawl into bed, sliding her dress up as she lightly touched herself. Never wasting any time, Isabelle went straight to work with her vibrator, arching her back off the bed as she pressed it into her clit, legs spread wide. Cock in hand, I found my release with her every fucking night. She's a horny little thing, and I can't get enough of it.

My cock strains harder in my pants, making me run harder. My sweet gazelle has been wounded, slashed through the back by a lion. I didn't get as good of a look at it as I would have liked, so I'll have to carve her some more when I catch her. She drew more blood from me with that fucking rock than I did with my blade, but I won't make that mistake again.

I won't be as forgiving this time.

Even though I no longer feel the urge to kill her, I *love* the idea of her blood slicked across her body while I pump her full of my cum. Shiny and warm, it'll decorate her skin perfectly.

Running harder, I leap over the same log I've jumped over every day for a year. I could run this course with my eyes closed, and it almost feels that way because it's so dark here. This land is unforgiving at night. It'd be far too easy to get turned around, which is all the more reason to spend endless amounts of time here.

I'm banking on the guess that she'll find and take the path. I sent her straight for it. My pace quickens, and I'm moving so quickly it doesn't feel real. My legs pump hard, and I'm sprinting at full speed. The way my blood is pumping has my heart working so hard it feels like it's going to explode out of my chest, but I keep going. I don't have another choice. The chase will only last a few more minutes. Isabelle runs five miles every morning, averaging a seven minute mile. At full speed, she's likely to complete a mile between six and a half and seven minutes. I'll be there less than one minute from now, and she'll be there shortly after.

Curving around the last few bends, I find the bushes I've planned on hiding in. The lodge is in the distance, accompanied by the soft glow of moonlight reflecting off the lake. I stop, diving into the bushes before she gets here. My breathing is ragged, and I'm having a harder time getting it controlled than I thought.

I'm *too* worked up. I need to calm down. I have to focus.

Focus, Greyson. Fucking focus.

Squatting, I slow my breathing, taking deep inhales and exhales so that I can hear her coming. I smile to myself, clenching my fists as I prepare to pounce.

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