

Chapter Twelve – Predator and Prey

Lexi found him in the bedroom. He was sitting in a curled up, foetal position. The lights were off, leaving him in a post-coital gloom. He was alone, his tail splayed out over a clean, perfectly made bed. He felt dead inside, like there was something she had taken from him that could never be replaced.

“There you are.” She sounded a little disappointed. He said nothing, weeping softly as she sat down beside him. “What’s the matter?”

“It hurts.” Cruise moaned.

“What does?”

“You know... it.” He felt no need to elaborate, and there was nothing more to say that wouldn’t set her off.

“Really? I thought I was quite... careful.” She treated him like an object, not even bothering to say ‘Gentle’. She searched him for signs of physical pain. “Where does it hurt?”

“In here.” Cruise held a hand to his chest.

“Where?”

“My... heart.” He whimpered.

“Oh. So it’s nothing physical, then.” She was relieved, but still sounded disappointed in him. “Look. I’m sorry.” she was firm, her voice commanding. “We have to start somewhere.”

“How...” Cruise wiped away tears. “How many times have we got to... to do that?”

“I don’t know. We have to get the population up, and that takes years.”

“Years?” Cruise repeated with horror.

“There aren’t a lot of guys like you, you know that. We need your contribution.”

Cruise started crying anew. She petted him on the back as he bent over to cup his face in his hands.

“It’s not so bad, once you get used to it.” She consoled him. “You’re getting free sex and you don’t have to work for it. Most men would have to pay for that.”

She heard him mumble something about being used. This set her off talking, mostly to herself.

“Used? At least you don’t have to live in your mother’s shadow the rest of your life. At least you don’t have an entire clan to think about, all day every day. At least... at least you won’t have eggs to lay!”

It was the memory that Cruise couldn't stop thinking about as he hurried in her direction. He couldn't help wondering if this was it, this was the way it ends between them. Part of him already realised the implications of that. That all they went through, all they had together would end in vain, and he would lose her forever.

He told himself he should be angry, but he wasn't. He should hate her and never want to see her again. But he couldn't bring himself to. Not when they had been so close for so long. He didn't have the energy to hold a grudge. He'd lost her a long time ago, he'd been grieving longer than he realised. His friend who had done so much for him, had slipped away little by little until there was nothing left but the abusive beast within her. Perhaps it was only a shell, a ruse to gain his trust. Perhaps he didn't know her at all.

One way or another, this had to be goodbye.

The room was small and dark. It was cloaked in a deep blue gloom, a product of the blue walls and low fluorescent lighting. Lexi was sitting in a cell, on the other side of a glass wall. There was a table and chairs on one side. It was an interview room, part of a training course for law and policing students, but it also doubled as a facility for College security to use in rare emergencies. It was made to feel authentic, as though it was in a real police station.

The door was opened for Cruise by one of the guards, jangling their keys. He stepped in and the door was closed behind him. Lexi looked up at him briefly, not saying a word. She already knew he would be coming. Despite it all, Cruise felt strangely calm. Like he was observing the world's deadliest tarantula, but within a safely sealed glass aquarium. She wasn't going to sting him from out here.

For once, he was in a position of power. And he was going to use it to get some answers.

"I just want to know... why? Why did you do those things to me?"

"You know why." She regarded him coldly.

"But why persist?" Cruise pushed on. "You... got what you wanted from me. Why keep going after that?" Even raising the subject started giving him a flashback to one of the many times she did it.

"Because... it was fun. And because you enjoyed it too." It sounded like a realisation, but he knew her better.

"I did not!" He insisted, choking on the words.

"Yes you did! Admit it. It wouldn't have worked otherwise. You were aroused by it, so you must have enjoyed it."

"Those aren't the same thing!" Cruise was holding onto himself, his eyes growing wet. He was hurt, but there was no chance of him going anywhere.

"Aren't they?" She dismissed his argument as if it weren't even worth considering, as if his feelings were irrational and crazy. As if he were a child throwing a tantrum over something trivial. "You'll see. You won't get any of that action now, so don't say I didn't warn you. You'll come back to me sooner or later, you'll be begging for it!" her cold chuckle chilled his soul.

"You're wrong..." he muttered, struggling to find the words to say, and the nerve to say them.

"You're hysterical. You don't know what you're saying." Her caring tone fell flat. It was becoming painfully clear to him how her mind worked, as if it were laid bare. The mask was slipping.

"What's happened to you, Lexi? You weren't always like this." He finally said after a long silence.

"I could ask you the same thing." She responded instantly. Her resentment of him grew, until she could barely restrain it any longer. "You've really hurt me."

"I can't stay with you a moment longer. You've broken my heart, Lexi." Cruise parried deftly. But for her it was the last straw.

"Me, break your heart? Don't talk to me about broken hearts, because that is NOTHING to what you did to mine!"

Her outburst seemed to do nothing to him. Cruise looked hurt, but he was getting past caring. He chose to wait, letting her fill the silence. *'You Just have to let her cry it out at this point,'* he thought.

"You can't just ditch me like that. We're still linked together. I'll haunt you for the rest of your days." She promised threateningly. "You need me, you need my protection. I need you to be fertile. To grow our family together."

"I don't need you!" Cruise stammered, barely able to communicate. The words continued, forced out of his throat by raw emotion. "I will not... help you anymore... find someone willing!"

"They're all taken. Besides, you can't just abandon me now. I haven't just donated your seed this time. I'm pregnant." The revelation was timed perfectly, to sting him as deeply as possible.

"I gave you all I had. I'm not a father, I don't have that capacity. If they find out about me, they'll understand why I had to leave."

"No, they won't. They'll hate you for it. And I'll tell them the truth. I'll tell them how whiny and selfish you were. You had it all, you were loved, you were needed. You had luxury and safety and tons of sex, and that wasn't good enough for you!" Her resentment was unleashed upon him like a wild dog set loose.

"I need to be free." It was a simple statement. It was all he could say.

"You'll be alone. These people won't accept you, you're not like them. You frighten them, and one day they'll have an excuse to cast you out. Put you in a cage, or a laboratory, or maybe even kill you."

As Cruise sat in silence, a metal grille was lowered from the ceiling. The grille was unhinged, and a tall figure dropped down from the square hole in the roof. The figure grabbed Cruise from behind and held him high in the air. Cruise panicked, shrieking and struggling. It was Agent Vinson, back to complete the job.

"I can't let you throw your life away out there. You're coming back with him whether you like it or not, and when this is all sorted out I'll be coming back home too." Lexi told him.

Cruise's fear took hold of him, and in the depths of his desperation, something else did too. An instinct told him what to do, though it was something he would never have contemplated doing otherwise. Vinson's hand was on his mouth, but as he thrashed it came loose, and he saw his chance. Without any warning, he took a long, hard bite into his hand, plunging the blades of his fangs deep into his flesh. Vinson yelped angrily, which quickly turned into a scream as blood was drawn. Suddenly he was the one struggling. Cruise wasn't letting go, he wasn't showing mercy any more. He felt a boot in his back and was kicked to the ground. It hurt, but he only cared about gaining his freedom. He carried himself out the door, the shocked Agent's face passing briefly in his vision. Vinson wanted to grab him by the tail, but pain and shock was stopping him.

Cruise opened the door, about to run. He felt a sharp tug of his tail. Vinson was grabbing it with the other hand. What neither of them expected was the way Cruise turned and looked at him. He bloody fangs were bared, and his eyes were bloodshot. He snarled menacingly, barely holding back rage. A streak of the Agent's blood ran down his chin. He let go, thinking of what this creature would do to the other hand. As he did, Cruise regained control of his faculties, and his expression softened. He was horrified at what he'd just done.

Without another word, he quickly turned and raced away as fast as he could. The Agent was clearly frightened of him, but decided to give chase. He seemed to be back to normal now, and with skill he could apprehend him before he could do any further harm.

Cruise ran up a stairwell, taking him from what was a very low floor of the College into one of the main halls. He stopped. He could hear the heavy footsteps of Agent Vinson climbing the stairs after him. And already a bunch of students were staring at him. There was nothing to disguise his appearance from them anymore. He had no choice but to run straight through them.

Vinson got to the top of the stairs and found students gawping and talking to themselves. Most were looking in one direction, and he knew which way to go.

Cruise was running through a hall of students, trying his best not to care about their expressions. He decided the best thing was to head directly for someone he knew, even though it made him feel like a kid in high school running from a bully and hiding behind his teacher's back. But perhaps that was better than the alternative, to whatever change had taken over him downstairs.

Vinson was running behind him, getting slowly closer. He was small and afraid, but Vinson was tall and well trained, covering the ground in half the time. Both were running on adrenaline.

A corner came up. Cruise turned it sharply, barely missing Vinson's reach. Luckily for him, the Agent crashed into the wall and took a moment to right himself. It wasn't long before he was back in the chase, running down a much emptier hallway. But someone was waiting for him.

Vinson was stopped in his tracks when someone grabbed the back of his collar. A very gruff man, one of the College security guards was holding him from behind.

"That's enough!" he growled. He was flanked by a small group of guards to apprehend him by force. It was clear he couldn't be trusted, despite his protests as he was dragged away.

"You're making a mistake! We need him, they'll die out without him! He's important, he has to come back with us! Listen to me!"

Evelina had arrived on the scene too late to see what happened. Most of the guards were gone, leaving behind their leader. The gruff Cervine man in a slightly smarter suit. He was watching Cruise, guarding him. Students came and went, but none of them passed without stealing a look at Cruise. He was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, curled up in a foetal position. He was too frightened to move.

"Cruise?" she called out to him. She knelt down to see him eye-to-eye. "Are you alright?"

"I-I am now." He stammered. He took her hand and was pulled up. She held onto him. He didn't want to let go.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get here sooner." She suddenly realised they were being stared at. With fear or envy, she wasn't sure. Students who were on their way to other places stopped in their tracks. Something about the scene had taken them by surprise.

Ignoring them, she turned back to him. He was embarrassed, blushing profusely but saying nothing.

"You could do with a cup of tea." She said, and turned away in a hurry.

Lance met Cruise in an empty staff room, in a secluded part of the College. He was told to meet Evelina there, the only explanation he heard was that some kind of incident had happened, and his mind immediately turned to the worst. He breathed a sigh of relief to find Cruise with her, safe and sound. He had been holding his nerve for what felt like an hour, but he was loathe to admit that.

"You're alright, thank goodness!" he could hardly express his relief. It was palapable.

"Hi." Cruise held up a hand, not bothering to wave. "I'm okay. Agent Vinson tried to grab me, but he was too slow." His explanation felt like a lie to him. It felt uncomfortably like self-aggrandizement.

"How about I make us a cup of tea, and you can tell me about it." Lance was already at the kitchenette, boiling the jug.

"I'll leave you two alone." Evelina turned and left. Only Cruise registered her leaving, with a quiet wave.

Some time had passed, and the two of them were sitting on the staff room's only couch with camomile tea in hand.

"What did you say this was again?" Cruise was asking, as he finished off the mug of tea.

“Camomile.”

“Camo-Meal...” Cruise tried it on for size. He pronounced it like a way of disguising military food “What a funny word.”

Lance chuckled sweetly. A few moments later, Cruise made an awkward attempt to change the subject.

“I’m just not sure what happened back there. He grabbed me, I panicked... I just sort of lost control.” He was saying. He was continuing on with a conversation that they’d been having before he paused it.

“It sounds like flight-or-fight response to me. It’s actually amazing how much damage you can do when your back’s to the wall.” Lance said analytically. He wanted to say something profound, something maybe even a little bit comforting. But this was all he came up with. He felt like he was being the teacher again. He didn’t mean to.

“Thanks.” Cruise was feeling a little bit more normal at last. “I just wanted to see her, try to make her see sense. I thought I could reason with her, but she’s... changed.” He emphasized the last word. “Or perhaps...”

“Perhaps the mask has finally slipped off.” Lance finished that thought. He instantly regretted it as he watched Cruise’s depression grow.

“It’s so terrible... I still miss her, sometimes.” Cruise admitted. His face fell, wet with shame. Even Lance could sense his feelings, and quickly offered something comforting to say.

“There’s no need to be ashamed of your grief. It’s only natural.”

“She was unique. She was a good person once, brave and strong and loyal. Her family turned her into a monster... the pressure of being in charge is just too much for her. I wish...” there was a brief moment as Cruise tried to figure out what he wished, as if there was a magic genie waiting to grant them. “I wish... you... and your people could save her too.”

“You two were together for a long time.” Lance wasn’t really telling him anything. It was barely a reminder. He was still processing what he had just learned today, he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I’ll get over it, I just need a little time.” Cruise smiled weakly with an optimism he didn’t feel. Lance simply held him tightly for support. His own support. He was scared too. He was carrying the weight of their collective problems and it was bearing down on him.

“You’re one of a kind, Cruise. She’ll never find anyone like you.” Lance said sincerely, coming precariously close to whispering it in his ear.

Cruise smiled at him, blushing a little. Lance’s eyes were so bright, so full of life. Like everything was new to him, every experience an exciting discovery. Cruise wanted to take the moment further, to show his love for him. So badly.

The tips of their noses rubbed together, and before they knew it they were nuzzling closely, like affectionate kittens. Cruise looked up at him to kiss him, but Lance was already about to steal the kiss.

When the door burst open, it caught them both by surprise. Fortunately for them, it was only Evelina. She seemed oblivious at first, but before she could say anything the two of them were looking at her like criminals she'd caught red-handed. Both were blushing, their cheeks turning pink.

"Oh... I'm sorry guys, did I catch you at a bad time?" her question was rhetorical.

"N-No, n-not at all." Cruise stammered as he got up. He was nervous, but it was something he was accustomed to. It felt too familiar, like a nasty old sock. He had the courage to speak while Lance was still blushing. Lance got up, smiling softly and with his hands cupped behind his back like a naughty child trying to hide something.

"Well, we can always talk about it later..." he said sheepishly. There was no point hiding anything from her. They both looked adoringly at him, thinking about how cute he was being about it.

Cruise put away his tea, coming to a decision while the others were caught in an awkward silence. It was broken by Evelina as she moved forwards to sit with them.

"Actually Cruise, there is something I wanted to ask you, if that's okay."

Cruise looked up at her readily. As she sat down, his eyes followed her intently.

"How do you and Lexi know each other? You don't have to answer that if you don't want to, but..." she trailed off somewhat, noticing him look thoughtfully back at her. She stopped in mid-sentence to let him speak.

"Well... it's a long story, but the gist of it is, we've always been friends. Since childhood. She protected me from the other boys, she was always there for me."

"Did..." Evelina wanted to say something, hesitating for a moment. It seemed rude to ask, but she was curious. "Did... you love her?"

"I..." Cruise started, but the words were slow to form in his mind. When he began again, he stammered nervously. "I-I don't think so, no. Only as a friend. It never felt... right, somehow. She was always like a sister to me, especially when..." his explanation was halted by a lump in the back of his throat. It had been years, but it was always there waiting for him to say those names again. "Well, she's the closest thing to a sibling I've got left. And when her family selected me for marriage, we were thrilled."

"It was an arranged marriage?" Lance almost spat out his tea.

"Yes. You see... they really chose me for my... my assets..." Cruise was mumbling, he was ashamed. His cheeks blushed red with humiliation and he gripped himself tightly. Lance rubbed one of his shoulders.

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything." He soothed.

"She's the heir to her clan. They... they've suffered terribly over the years. Fertile males are hard to come by, especially for them. They don't always last long enough to reach maturity. Influenza, consumption, you name it. The men are the hardest hit for some reason. So when I was a teenager, my family were excited. I was a healthy man, in a world full of women and boys."

"So you were especially important to them, for survival." Evelina observed. Cruise took a deep breath. He'd started shaking like a leaf.

"S-so, she... u-used me." he whimpered. His heart was racing as the thoughts took hold. Layer upon layer of abuse entered his mind. He swallowed. There was much more to say. "It wasn't just in bed, that wasn't even the worst part. It was the... the routine!" he wailed. He could barely put it in words in his mind, let alone say it. It was something else. It went beyond the realm of unwanted sex, into something that was soul-rending.

"Routine?" Evelina was morbidly curious. Despite herself, she wanted to know just a little bit more. Cruise took a moment to compose himself, putting on a brave face as he divulged all he could.

"Once a month, then once a week. They forced her to do it, t-to take... c-control..." his words faltered. He gulped once more, trying to swallow the pain for one moment longer. "At first, I thought I could enjoy it. But I can't... I can't..." He was choked up with emotion, the words caught in his throat. "I hated it!"

"W-what... did she do to you?" Lance found himself asking. He felt uneasy saying it, like he already knew he shouldn't have. It was now or never, he supposed.

"She took away everything that I was. She did things... things I can't even say. She took me and she used me and I couldn't-!" He broke down instantly. His face fell straight into the palms of his hands. He sobbed loudly as they both tried to console him. But touching him only made it worse.

"There there, everything's going to be alright. She can't hurt you anymore. You're safe now." Lance was saying, taking charge. Evelina looked back at him admiringly, and with a little tinge of jealousy. Not for Cruise's situation, but for Lance's affections toward him. She didn't know what she had until it was over.

"I... I can't thank you guys enough." Cruise lifted his head a few degrees, enough to see him streaked with tears. All he could think about was the demeaning life he'd been saved from. Something flashed behind his eyes for a second, and he buried himself in his palms once again.

"Oh God... Oh *God!* It **HURTS!** S-so bad!" he yelped. He was getting hysterical, his mind was agony. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. It was just like...

He suddenly found himself gasping for breath like a frightened rabbit. Lance had seen this before, and did his best to look stoic. But Evelina was in shock, on the verge of tears. It took all her professionalism not to start bawling and add to the scene herself. It was almost too much to handle.

"I'm sorry..." she began to say, for some reason. It was all she could think of at first until she decided to get up. "Excuse me..." She mumbled under her breath and darted for the mini-fridge. She poured out a glass of chilled spring water, and turned back to offer it to Cruise. He had regained control of his breathing, sniffing and wiping his cheeks.

"Here." She presented him the glass of water. "You could really do with a drink."

"Th-thanks." Cruise held it in both hands, but they were still shaking. He barely managed to hold its weight. All his strength had abandoned him. All pain had left his wide, bloodshot eyes. There was only gratitude.

He stood up, weakly supporting his weight and the glass. When he'd downed the contents of it, he put it aside. He seemed lost in thought, facing away as if ignoring them. There was an ominous silence, prompting the other two to stand up beside him. They were starting to worry, until Lance put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Cruise gasped. He spun around, like he was pulled out of a trance.

"D-don't touch me. Please..." he begged. "I'm not... ready for that yet." He felt Lance's hand, in a feeble effort to brush it away. His touch was like rice paper. It was soft and brittle, even for him. All his energy had gone, like the sudden outburst had sent his whole body into a deep shock. He was even getting a little light-headed.

"Can we get you anything?" Evelina spoke softly. Cruise almost missed her voice, too dizzy to concentrate.

"Hungry..." he murmured. He was feeling ravenous, like a pit had opened up in his stomach and sucked out all his energy with it. "I could eat a..." he noticed Lance looking bemused at what he was about to say. "Nevermind..." he staggered, his legs turning to jelly. Blood rushed to his head. The thought of moving a few steps to the fridge or the kitchen cupboard was too much to take.

He bent over double, collapsing to the floor. He thought he heard Evelina gasp and shout "Catch him!" before he blacked out.