

If he wants you?

RUN

Beautiful

VILLAIN

BOSS HUGO III

NATASHA ANDERS - LEE SAVINO - EMM DARCY
GEMMA WEIR - LEXI ARCHER - KT STRANGE

beautiful villain

AN ANTHOLOGY OF STANDALONE ROMANCE NOVELS

GEMMA WEIR NATASHA
ANDERS LEE SAVINO
MAY SAGE AS EMM DARCY
KT STRANGE LEXI
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Lee Savino

Vengeance is Mine

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black sheep

GEMMA WEIR

black sheep

I'm Alabama Delany, the forgotten daughter of a junkie prostitute.

I clawed my way out of hell and now I finally have a home, a job, and enough money to survive.

Things were looking up for me... then In the blink of an eye, everything I've worked so hard for was stolen from me. My home, my job and my life savings all gone in less than twenty-four hours.

I thought things couldn't get any worse.

I was wrong.

They say I'm Alena Polokoff, the forgotten daughter of a Mafia boss.

They say everything they've done is to keep me safe.

They lied.

Now I'm a prisoner, but theres no cage or bars to keep me confined, instead there's three men who demand my compliance while they toy with my self-control.

They say I'm theirs.

And maybe they're right.

also by gemma weir

Montana Mountain Men Series

Property of the Mountain Man

Owned by the Mountain Man

Kept by the Mountain Man

Claimed by the Mountain Man

Saved by the Mountain Man

Belonging to the Mountain Man

Loving the Mountain Man

Montana Mountain Protectors Series

Blaze

Scorch

Alphaholes Series

Obsession

Obligation

The Archer's Creek Series

Echo

Daisy

Blade

Echo & Liv

Park

Smoke

Archer's Creek: The Next Generation Series

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Black Sheep

foreword

One cock is fun, but three cocks are better.

warning

My heroes are assholes. They are not PC. They are, at times, morally ambiguous, behave like cavemen, and sometimes they'll do whatever it takes to get their heroines pregnant.

Please, please, please don't read this book thinking I'm exaggerating about how OTT and alpha these characters are because you'll hate the book and then write a scathing review saying both me and my characters are psychopaths.

This is my very first why choose romance, but you can be sure that all three of my heroes are controlling, manipulative, cruel, and sometimes cold to the point of being glacial. If alphaholes are not your jam, then please stop reading now.

While writing this book, I saw the line of okayness and sort of just hopped right over it. There are a few things that happen in this story that even make me a little ashamed of writing them, but if you can't go rogue in a wildcard book like this one, then when can you? I completely understand that some things in this book will be a huge red flag trigger, but please don't yuck someone else's yum and if this story isn't for you, try one of my other slightly less messed up books instead.

I don't like to put trigger warnings, beyond this one, but for this book, I'll put a trigger list on the books page on my website so you can look for it, if you're not sure about this one.

All of my heroes are over-the-top, jealous, unreasonable, possessive assholes.

If you consider unapologetic alphaholes unacceptable or feel their behavior is in some way abusive, then this isn't the book or series for you.

If you're a naysayer who thinks what I write is romanticizing domestic violence and abuse, then please, please stop reading now. You will not enjoy this book!

This book isn't a guide to dysfunctional relationships; it's fiction. My books are fantasy; this isn't real life. It's a romance novel and should be read as such.

We all know in the real world, throwing a woman over your shoulder, messing with her birth control, or stalking her and letting yourself into her home is a one-way ticket to either a restraining order or the mental hospital.

Nothing I write is based on real life, it's pure fantasy, so it's okay to agree that the dysfunctional relationships between my characters are sexy as fuck. Please do not kink shame me or my enthusiastic readers for finding these extreme alphahole behaviors hot. Maybe if you read this book with the pinch of romantic salt it was intended to come with, you might like it too.

Please heed this warning, my books will make you question your feminism, so I suggest you leave it at the door while you live in the world of my creation for a little bit, then pick it back up on your way out. It's okay to like this kind of story because that's all it is, a story, a few hundred pages of fantasy intended to titillate and excite, not to change your life.

If you're easily offended, this isn't the book for you. But if, like me, you love a guy or in this case three guys, who are so obsessively in love with their girl that they will manipulate, coerce, control and obsess over her until she gives herself to them completely, then read on and welcome to the world of the black sheep. ;)

For a full list of trigger warnings for each book, please check out my website www.gemmaweirauthor.com.

ONE

Alabama

The sound of a fist banging on my bedroom door at eight a.m. in the fucking morning, is the absolute last thing I want to hear. I only came to bed three hours ago and my eyelids feel like they're wrapped in sandpaper. Forcing myself, I blink my eyes open, groaning as I throw off the covers and stomp across the room.

"Hey," my roommate Monica says when I throw open the door and glare at her. She looks nervous, her arms folded across her chest, her teeth gnawing at her bottom lip.

"What?" I snap angrily, rubbing the sleep from my eyes as I wait to hear what emergency could warrant her banging on my door and waking me up.

"I... Errerr... I... I, err.... I need to talk to you," she mumbles anxiously, her skittish behavior odd when she's normally such a type A personality.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class this morning?" I grumble, stepping past her and stumbling toward the kitchen.

"I actually. Err..." Following me into the kitchen, she moves to my side, leaning against the counter and fidgeting with the sleeve of her shirt. "I got accepted as a transfer to Brown."

Monica and I have been living together for a while now, but I wouldn't exactly call us friends. Honestly, when I first moved in and found out we would basically run on opposite

schedules I was kind of excited. I could have the place to myself while she was at school in the daytime and she could have it to herself while I was at work all night.

I don't think us rarely seeing each other has ever been an issue for either of us. We're not the type of roommates who spend hours baring our souls or talking about our lives beyond polite conversation. But I do have a vague recollection of her telling me she'd hoped to go to an ivy league, but hadn't gotten in.

"Wow. Congratulations," I say, trying to sound like I care.

"Yeah, thanks. But, err, obviously, err, that means I'll be leaving."

Ahh. So that's why she sounds nervous. She's expecting me to be mad that she's ditching out on the lease. "Right." I nod. "Okay. Well that sucks, but I can find another roommate." I shrug, tipping coffee grinds into the machine and turning it on.

"Yeah, about that..." She pauses, her brows furrowing, her entire body squirming. "I saw Jerry last night and before I had a chance to tell him I was leaving. He, well, apparently, he's sold the apartment."

"Can he do that? What does that mean for me?"

"It means..." She fidgets, her hands plucking at her shirt. "It means, we have to get out of the apartment," she finally blurts.

"What?" I yell. "He can't just force us out. Can he?"

"I'm sorry, Ali," she says, tears filling her eyes. "Obviously I'm leaving anyway, but he said that you have to be out by the end of the week."

"The end of the week?" I shriek. "That's in two days. What about the lease? He can't just kick us out."

"I'm really, really sorry," she says, crying loudly. "The lease is just in my name and well... I'm not going to be here."

"But I pay rent," I gasp. "You made me sign a lease when I moved in."

“That was just a subletting agreement for your room. The lease is only in my name.” The moment she finishes speaking a fresh round of tears spills from her eyes.

Tipping my head back I groan. “How am I supposed to find a new apartment in two days?”

“Oh god, Ali, I’m so, so sorry.”

More tears follow her apology and I swallow down the urge to tell her that saying sorry doesn’t actually make this any better. Instead, I roll my eyes and try not to sound like too much of a bitch. “I guess it’s not your fault that Jerry is an asshole.” I sigh. “He must have known about this for weeks and just didn’t bother telling us.”

Bobbing her head, she tries to nod, but she’s crying so hard, her whole upper half is shaking with the intensity of her tears. Jesus, she didn’t cry this much when her grandma passed away earlier in the year.

“Seriously, it’ll be fine,” I tell her, not really believing it, but needing to say something to calm her down.

“I’m so sorry,” she shrieks, throwing herself at me and gripping me in a slightly desperate; very wet and snotty hug.

Awkwardly, I pat her back with one hand, while the other hangs limply at my side. After a moment, I carefully extract myself from her arms and take a large step backward.

Glancing around I try to look at anything but the weeping girl in front of me. “You’re already packed?” I ask when I spot the pile of suitcases and boxes by the front door.

“Yeah,” she says, clearing her throat and wiping at her eyes. “My flight is in two hours.”

“Okay. Well safe travels, I guess. I hope everything works out for you at Brown.”

“Thanks.” Lurching forward she grabs my hand and squeezes. “Good luck, Ali,” she says earnestly, then releasing me she darts toward the front door as a fresh bout of tears falls down her cheeks.

Sighing, I stare at her back as she opens the door and lets two uniformed movers in. Instead of watching them collect her stuff, I turn and head back to my bedroom. Flopping down onto my bed, I grab my shitty cell from the wooden crate that doubles as a bedside cabinet and search for roommates wanted ads.

After thirty minutes of fruitless scrolling, I decide to get dressed and head down to the university to see if there's any flyers on the notice boards. That's where I saw Monica's ad for this place and, hopefully, it'll be where I find somewhere new I can move into in the next couple of days. If I have to, I can probably bunk down in the break room at the bar I work at, or worst-case scenario I can find somewhere to sleep rough for a few nights.

I'm no stranger to living on the streets. After I left my aunt Darla's house with nothing but a bus ticket and a hundred bucks in my pocket, it took me twelve months of sleeping rough and at homeless shelters to scrape together enough money for the first and last month's rent on this room. Being on the streets isn't something I ever want to do again if I can help it, but if I have no other options then I'll do what I have to do.

Not bothering to shower, I drag my dark-brown hair into a ponytail and pull on baggy ripped jeans, and a T-shirt I found at goodwill that I cut down to make a crop top. Pushing my feet into the Docs I rescued from a dumpster about a year ago, I shove my cell and my tips from last night into my pocket and grab my keys from the hook by the front door on the way out.

I was born and raised in Georgia, but according to my mama on the days when she was sober enough to want to talk to me, my daddy was from Alabama. When I was born, I looked so much like him that she named me after the state he came from in some fucked-up homage to good ole George from Alabama—the guy who didn't even stick around long enough to tell Mama his full name.

For a while, I toyed with the idea of changing my name. I thought about calling myself something normal, like Amy or

Jennifer, but the more I thought about it, the more I couldn't picture myself as anyone but Alabama Delany.

Closing and locking the apartment door behind me, I stomp down the stairs and emerge onto the sidewalk. Columbus State University is a thirty-minute walk from here, so I push my knockoff air pods into my ears and hit play on a playlist to help pass the time.

I could ride the bus, but if I'm going to be homeless in a few days, I can't waste money on a ride when I can walk. Distracted, I stride down the sidewalk, admiring my scuffed, comfortable Docs. But I know better than to lose track of my surroundings. I know not to allow the veil of sunlight and daytime to stop me from remembering that danger doesn't only hide in the shadows.

With the music pumping into my ears and the bright morning sunshine beaming down on me, I don't even realize anything is wrong until I'm pinned against a wall by one guy, while another lurks menacingly behind him.

Both guys are clearly tweaking, their sallow appearance, rotting teeth, and scabbed faces giving them away as junkies. But despite his general rotting corpse looks, the guy who is holding me in place is strong, his grip firm and unyielding.

Grabbing his arms, I try to free myself, bucking and twisting against his hold, kicking out and frantically trying to get away. But when the barrel of a gun presses against the middle of my forehead I freeze.

I don't know whose hands go through my pockets, taking my shitty, broken cell, my tips money and even the knockoff air pods. But I'm just grateful that's all they take as the guy holding the gun slowly peels it off my head before they both turn and run, leaving me alone, unbroken and alive.

Unable to move, I stare at the brick wall ahead of me in the alleyway, breathing in the disgusting, trash-filled stench of the grimy dumpsters that are keeping me hidden from the people passing by. Those junkie assholes could have killed me or raped me, and a part of me is grateful that all they did was take the cash in my pocket and my shitty cell phone. For a second, I

almost feel sorry for them, and a wry laugh falls from my lips. Of all the people they could have dragged off the street to steal from, and they picked me.

Pushing off the wall, I take a moment to make sure my limbs are steady enough to support me before I step back out onto the sidewalk. Despite the fact that I'm fine and in one piece, I can still feel the echo of the terror-filled tremor that's running through my veins, buzzing beneath my skin. The urge to cry bares down on me, but I don't give into it. I've been attacked before. I've been scared before. I've been broke and without a cell phone before. Reminding myself that I'm alive, I shakily exhale and start to walk.

The notice boards at the university are a bust. It's mid-semester and almost all the flyers are for intramural soccer, study groups, and volunteering. Cursing, I look around for any flyers taped to poles, but there's nothing but ragged scraps of paper, like the janitors have ripped everything down.

Sighing, I glance up at the clock on the building across the quad. I need to be at work for the afternoon shift in an hour, so I head back to my apartment and change. The sports bar I waitress at has a uniform for all the staff, which consists of cheerleading uniforms with heeled high-top sneakers for the women, and tight red wrestling singlets with sneakers for the guys.

Honestly, we all look ridiculous, but the customers love it, and at least my boss is an equal opportunity perve. The guys look just as slutty as the women. Jumping in the shower, I wash quickly, then dress in the tiny fitted crop top, skirt, and matching bootie shorts. Pulling out the hairdryer I convinced Monica she'd lost on her last trip home to see her family; I blast my hair with it. Once it's mostly dry, I pull it into a high ponytail again and curl the ends into big bouncy ringlets, spraying them with enough hairspray to keep them looking perky for the rest of the night. Sliding an obnoxiously large bow into the front, I lift my head and look at my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

My hair is dark, and without the curls it usually looks a little limp. My cheeks are a bit too sunken, the result of

missing one too many meals when money is tight. My eyes are dark and always seem to look either sad, or furiously angry. My lips are bee stung and full or, blow job lips as I regularly get told by the drunk idiots at work.

Running my eyes over the reflection of the stupid costume, I sigh. The top is tight, even though I don't really have enough boobs to fill it. The tiny skirt hangs so low you can see my concave stomach and bony hips and it's short enough to display all of my pale, thin legs.

But despite the dark circles beneath my eyes that are barely hidden with a layer of concealer, and the fact that I'm skinny enough to look like I could do with a few good meals. I look young, innocent, and kind of hot.

Shaking my head, I turn away from my reflection and go back into my bedroom. Crouching down, I lift up my mattress and pull out the tin I keep my cash in. It's not the most advanced method of money storage, but it's much better than putting it in the bank.

Prying open the lid, I feel my heart start to race when I take in the bare metal and single sheet of paper.

I'm sorry, I'll pay you back. Monica xo

"THAT FUCKING BITCH," I hiss angrily, lifting the scrap of paper and finding five, hundred-dollar bills folded together. "That fucking bitch," I snarl again. There was over five grand in here and she took it. She fucking took it all, except for five hundred fucking bucks.

No wonder she was crying this morning. She left, knowing that I was going to be kicked out of our apartment, and that she'd stolen all the money I had to be able to pay for anywhere new.

I don't even have my cell to be able to call her and cuss the bitch out. Seething, I peel off a hundred-dollar bill from the tiny fold, then close the tin and shove it back under the mattress. Standing, I pull in a deep breath then blow it back out again. "This isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to me," I say aloud, needing to hear the words. "I have a job and

I can make more money. Then I'll hunt that thieving fucking bitch down and get my savings back."

Grabbing my ratty denim jacket from the closet, I slide it on over my slutty cheerleading uniform and head out. Home Run, the bar I work at, is a ten-block walk from my apartment. Holding my jacket closed tightly the entire way, I try my best to hide my outfit from passersby. At the bar, I just look like all the other idiots wearing a costume, but out here on the street, I do my best not to catch anyone's eye so I don't have to explain why a grown ass woman is dressed like it's Halloween in the middle of May.

Pushing open the door to the bar, I step inside and inhale the familiar scent of beer, wings, and desperation. At lunchtime on a Thursday, the place isn't exactly busy, but in a couple of hours, it'll be packed with a mix of college kids, guys getting off work, and old dudes that have been coming here since well before it became a tacky themed sports bar.

Waving to the bartenders, I head for the break room and stash my jacket in a locker. I haven't eaten yet today and my stomach is growling as I head into the kitchen and smile at Raul, the line chef.

"Hey Raul," I coo.

"Hey sweetness," he coos back.

Raul is in his late forties, with a gut that hangs over his pants and a permanent smile on his face. He's married with two kids and he works three jobs so his wife can stay home and raise their family. He's a great guy and I know he has a soft spot for me.

"You hungry? It just so happens the printer went on the fritz a few minutes ago and an order for a grilled cheese and onion rings got put through twice. It's only going in the trash if you don't eat it."

"Thank you," I mouth.

Winking, he nods to the plate that's sitting on the side, but we both know he made the food for me. When I started working here, I'd been living rough for a while before finally

scraping together enough money to rent a room in a shitty motel for long enough to get an address to apply for jobs.

The first time Raul saw me, he filled a bowl with fries and told me to eat them. When I'd refused, letting him know I didn't have any spare money to buy food, he'd told me they were too crispy to serve to customers and that if I didn't eat them, they were going in the trash.

Whenever we're on shift at the same time, it just so happens that there's conveniently a plate that's the wrong thing, or that is going to end up in the trash if I don't eat it. He's a truly wonderful fucking person.

Pressing a kiss to his cheek, I grab the plate of food and head back to the break room, flopping into the one small, uncomfortable chair and eating the delicious grilled cheese and greasy onion rings as fast as I can.

When I'm done, I load my plate into the dishwasher, then use the bathroom before heading out front for my shift. Twelve hours later, I'm sweaty, covered in beer, and exhausted, but I'm up a hundred and fifty dollars in tips and not feeling quite as hopeless as I was when I got here this afternoon.

I was supposed to have finished hours ago, but we had an entire fraternity worth of guys turn up. Whatever they were celebrating kept all of us busy, running backward and forward with pitchers and shooters all night.

"Hey, Ali, we're having a bit of a staff meeting out here, it won't take long," Tony, my boss and the owner of the bar says, nodding his chin to where all the other staff are standing.

"Sure," I say, sliding my money into my jacket pocket and following him back out to the empty bar.

"Sorry to keep you all, I know it was a busy night." He looks a little uncomfortable as he addresses us all, rubbing at the stubble on his chin with his fingers. "Look, there's no easy way to say it, so I'm just going to spit it out. A few weeks ago, I was approached by a company about buying the bar. As y'all know I think of this place as my baby, so I said no. But the more I said no, the more money they offered and, honestly, it

got to a point where I just couldn't say no any longer. I signed all the paperwork this morning, so this is actually my last night as your boss."

"Are they keeping the staff?" Raul asks, fear flashing wildly in his eyes. He might work three jobs, but he works the most hours here and I know losing this job would be devastating for him and his family.

"Your job is safe, Raul, I made them promise that. But unfortunately, they wouldn't agree to guarantee the front of house staff. So, you guys behind the bar and the wait staff, I'm really sorry, but it'll be up to the new owners if you stay or if they let you go."

There's a general mumbling of discontent, but as I glance around, I'm the only one who looks like they're going to be sick. There're a few people who, like me, rely on this job to make rent, but the majority of the staff are students, earning a little extra money to pay for books and clothes.

"When will we know if we're being canned?" I ask.

"Tomorrow. They're coming in to speak to all the staff. So, if you could all be back here for nine a.m. before we open, that would be great."

I walk home in a daze. Stumbling blindly through the door, I barely remember to lock it behind me before I fall face first into my pillow. The next morning, I walk back to the bar in a panicked mess. My life literally could not get any worse right now. In a day, I'll be homeless unless I can find an apartment. I'm broke because my skanky ass ex-roommate stole all my money and, in an hour, I could be unemployed too.

Has life been going too well for me or something? That must be the reason that fate has stepped in and decided to fuck me raw up the ass with a knife.

Two days ago, I was skipping through life with a smile on my face. I might not have loved Monica, but our apartment was relatively safe, reasonably bug free and affordable. Waiting tables at a sports bar might not have been my dream job, but the pay was regular, the tips were good and anyone

who tried to grope my ass got a one-way ticket to Andre the door man's fist. My life might not have been the perfect apple pie American dream, but it was mine, and I liked it.

Some people have aspirations beyond surviving, but I was never destined for white picket fences. My dad was out of the picture before the cum dripping down my junkie mother's leg had dried, and my mom picked heroin and a cardboard casket over me almost a decade ago. For a while, after she died, I lived with my mom's sister; but Aunt Darla handed me a hundred-dollar bill and a bus ticket out of town the day I turned eighteen and I haven't seen her since.

Things were rough for a while, but if nothing else, I'm a fighter and that's what I've always done. It might not have been pretty, but I've always survived.

Stepping into the bar, I'm startled by just how run down and shabby the place looks when the TVs are off and the lights are all turned on. Honestly, the place looks like a shithole, and I wonder why anyone would bother to keep pushing Tony to sell-up after he turned down their first offer.

Apart from Raul, I haven't made any real effort to get to know the people I work with. I know most of their names, but it's pretty obvious which ones are students and which ones work here because they have no other choice. Those are the faces I look at now, the ones with fear in their eyes and hopelessness in their postures.

When the door that leads to Tony's office opens, we all turn to stare. Stepping out, he holds it open, and an attractive woman in an expensive suit and impressively high heels with red soles follows him out.

I wait for more people to arrive. For the dodgy drug dealer, or the sketchy business man, but the door closes behind them without anyone else making an appearance.

"Hey everyone, thanks for coming. This is Eliza Dubont, she has some information that the new owners have asked her to share with you all," Tony says, gesturing to the woman who steps forward and clears her throat.

“As Mr. Burrows mentioned, my name is Eliza Dubont, I am a lawyer working for Chatsworth, Highbury, and Dubont. I have been asked to come here today to act as a proxy for my client who has recently purchased this business and the property it’s housed in. It is my understanding that Mr. Burrows has informed all of you about the sale of the business, and notified you all that while the new owners have agreed to retain all of the kitchen staff, they will not be requiring the services of some of the bar and wait staff. We have looked at time in employment, salary and working hours, and decided which staff will be retained and which of you will unfortunately no longer be required. An email has been sent to the email address you provided when you applied for your positions, with details of either your new employment contract, or your notification of termination. Thank you for your time.”

With that, she turns, slides her purse over her arm and leaves. All around me, people pull out their cells and check their emails, while I stand and watch, cursing the junkie assholes who stole my piece of shit phone. Not that I could have checked my email even if I’d had it, because my prepaid data ran out yesterday morning when I was looking for a new apartment.

“So?” Raul asks, appearing at my side.

“My cell was stolen,” I tell him as I glance around the room, watching elation on some faces, and heartbreak on others.

“Here, use mine,” he offers, pushing his cell under my nose.

Reaching out, I take it from him and stare down at it, until he nudges my arm and I tap at the screen, opening up the web page and logging in.

I know even before I open the email what it’s going to say. The feeling of overwhelming helplessness washing over me as I click into it and scan the words.

Unfortunately, your services will no longer be required. We wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

“No,” Raul hisses, taking the cell from my hands and rereading the email. “I’ll speak to Tony; I’ll get you a job in the kitchen or something.”

“Tony isn’t the boss anymore,” I say sadly. “It’s fine, I’ll find something else.”

“I can put in a good word for you at the cleaning firm, they’re always looking for more people. Pay’s not great, but it’s something.”

“Thanks, Raul,” I say, turning and pushing up onto my tiptoes to press a soft kiss to his cheek. Sighing, I offer him as much of a smile as I can muster, then walk over to Tony.

“Hey Tony,” I call, standing in front of him. “I guess I need to pick up my last check.”

“They canned you?” he asks, eyes wide in surprise.

“Yep.” I shrug, refusing to show how devastated I actually am.

“Wow, I didn’t see that coming. I told them you were one of my best. Always on time, always willing to work extra hours and cover shifts. Geez, I’m sorry, kid.” Reaching out, he pats my shoulder. “I’m looking for a new place to buy, why don’t you come and work for me when I find something? I’d be happy to have you.”

“Sure,” I say, noncommittally.

“Checks will be ready tomorrow. Swing by after lunch and I’ll have it waiting for you. Wow, I’m just... I’m really sorry, Ali.”

“Me too.” Exhaling, I blink back anger and impotent tears. “See you tomorrow.”

I deliberately don’t turn around and look at Raul again before I go. If I do, I know I’ll cry and I refuse to cry over this. I didn’t cry when my mom overdosed. I didn’t cry the day Aunt Darla kicked me out. I didn’t cry when I spent weeks on the street alone and terrified. So, I won’t cry now.

Head up, shoulders back, I stride out of the door and onto the sidewalk. Blinded by the bright daylight, I blink rapidly, forcing my eyes to adjust. Movement draws my attention and I look up and see a paper flier taped to a pole right in front of me, like it was placed just for me to find. It wasn't there before I got here, I'd have seen it. Looking around I spot several more bright-white flyers, just like this one, taped to fences, walls, and anything they could find up and down the street in both directions.

Compelled by fate or curiosity, I step forward and I rip the paper down. It takes me a moment to process the words, then a giggle bursts free from my mouth. It's not a noise I usually make, but Jesus, what are the chances that someone would have walked past the bar I worked at until ten minutes ago, hanging roommate wanted flyers? I mean, what are the chances?

Roommate wanted.

*Searching for a clean, tidy, quiet roommate to share four bed,
two bath loft.*

Fully furnished, first and last month deposit required.

Call Avery for more details.

237-400-5682

READING THE WORDS AGAIN, just to make sure my eyes and brain aren't playing tricks on me, I hug the paper to my chest tightly. I've never been into religion or any of that, but I remember a teacher once saying that when God closes a door, he opens a window. The last couple of days might have been a great big stinking pile of shit. I'm losing my home, I lost my job, all of my savings, and I almost got killed by some junkies. Doors have been shutting on me in every direction, but this could be my window.

Rushing down the street, I head for the university campus and into the admin offices. There's a free use phone in here. I guess it's intended for students to use if they run out of credit or can't afford a phone plan. But at twenty, I still look young enough to pass as a student, so I glide past the desk and over to

the phones, picking up the receiver and dialing the number on the flier.

“Hello,” an upbeat female voice answers.

“Oh hey, I saw your flier and wondered if you’re still looking for a roommate?”

CHAPTER 2

lev

Guilt isn't an emotion that I feel often. In my life guilt, remorse, and regret are the types of feelings that make you weak, sloppy, and sometimes even dead. But as I watch the girl rip the flier down, read it, then hug it to her chest, an unfamiliar feeling slithers through me.

When she turns and strides off down the sidewalk, I move too, walking at a slightly slower pace than her. I'm on the other side of the street dressed inconspicuously in jeans, scuffed, dirty sneakers, and a dark hoodie, with headphones covering my ears.

I'm invisible right now, just one more person, going about their day, minding their own business. Or at least that's what I'm telling the world at large. In reality, I'm the most dangerous thing on this street. More dangerous than the cars and motorcycles driving past. More dangerous than the junkies and criminals hiding in the shadows, waiting to reach out and grab you. More dangerous than the assholes sitting behind their desks, making deals that help the rich get richer, and the poor stay poorer.

But the difference between me and the other dangers out here, is that the only person I'm a danger to right now is her. Staying at a distance, I watch as she crosses the street and enters the university campus, walking as if she's been here a hundred times before—which she has. She might be in her twenties, but she could easily pass for being in her teens, especially today when she's dressed in tight jeans, a T-shirt that's had the sleeves and bottom cut out of it, and scuffed Doc

Marten boots. Her face is free of makeup and her hair is straight and loose, hanging down her back.

She looks young, sweet, and innocent.

When she strides confidently into the building that holds the admin staff, I follow her in, wandering over to the wall of pin boards and information leaflets. I'm close enough that I can hear her make the call and the moment I hear Bea answer, I turn and walk away.

What we're about to do to this girl is unforgivable. But that's not enough to stop us, not anymore. A year ago, when she popped back onto our radar, we tried to convince ourselves that she was nothing but an inconvenience; a burden to be watched and monitored. But over the last twelve months, we've all been forced to admit that she's so much more than that.

Dimi, Vik, and I have watched every move she's made for the last three hundred and sixty-five days. We've followed her as she buys groceries, sat at the back of the bar she works at night after night, keeping her safe, then trailed her home until she's tucked up in her bed. We know everything about her. What type of shampoo she uses, what brand of tampons she prefers. The candy she buys when she's had a shitty day, and the things she cuts out when she's struggling for money.

We've seen her brush off a thousand guys and a few hundred women who thought they could have a taste of her. We've watched her laugh and smile and frown and scream. We've been there for the highs and lows. We know her. Which is why, even though what we're about to do is reprehensible, we know we can keep her safe, secure, and cared for better than anyone else in the world. She might not see it to begin with, but we're going to make her life better.

We're just going to fuck it up first.

CHAPTER 3

alabama

“Wow, you’re fast, I literally just got home from putting up the flyers,” a cheerful female voice says, then giggles.

“Good timing on my part if the room’s still available.”

“It is.” She giggles again. “Why don’t you tell me a little about yourself?”

“Well, my name is Ali, I’m twenty, I’m a part time student at Columbus State, and I work at Home Run, the sports bar on Fifth in the evening. My current roommate just got accepted as a transfer to Brown, and because the lease was in her name, I’m having to try and find somewhere new to live. Which is just an absolute nightmare on top of the huge assignment I have due on Monday.” Almost everything I just said is utter bullshit, but as if I’m going to be honest. Part time student with a job sounds a hell of a lot better than unemployed, uneducated, almost homeless person.

“Oh my gosh, what a nightmare.”

“It really is,” I agree, giving her my best valley girl impression.

“Well, my name is Bea. I’m a sophomore at Columbus, and there’s me and two other girls all living in the apartment. The room that’s empty was Danika’s room, but her boyfriend dumped her and she stopped going to class and flunked out. We were going to use the empty room as a walk-in closet for us all to share, but Chelsea is a bitch who will borrow your clothes, stain them, and then refuse to admit she’s done it. So, we’ve decided to rent the room out instead.”

“Seriously, that’s terrible,” I say, rolling my eyes at how vapid and ridiculous this girl’s first world problems are.

“Right,” she agrees.

“So, the flier didn’t say how much rent was.”

“So rent is five hundred a month, plus utilities.”

Exhaling, I swallow thickly. I have the five hundred Monica didn’t take, plus the one fifty I made last night and then my last paycheck from the bar. All that should give me the first and last month’s rent, I just won’t be able to eat until I get another job. But that’s okay, it won’t be the first time I’ve gone hungry.

“Could I come and have a look at the room?”

“Sure, when did you want to come?”

“I don’t have class today. I could swing by now?” I suggest.

“Well, I’m going out for coffee at four, but sure, let me give you the address.”

She reels off the address and I write it down on the conveniently placed Columbus State University notepad. “Perfect,” I say, exhaling a relieved breath. “I’m just on campus at the admin building, so I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“Awesome, the door is at the side, take the freight lift up to the second floor, we’re the second door on the right.”

“Okay, see you soon.”

Ripping the sheet of paper from the pad, I head over to the information desk and smile at the bored looking student, manning it. “Hey, my cell has died, would you mind giving me an idea of where this address is please.”

The girl rolls her eyes, then puts her hand out for the address. Without saying another word, she types at the computer in front of her, then reaches down and grabs a piece of paper and hands it back to me.

I take it from her, realizing she printed me off a map and directions. “Thanks.”

“You need to wear your student ID on campus.” She scowls.

“Oh, I left it in my dorm, I’ll go back and get it. Thanks for your help,” I call, keeping my smile fixed in place as I turn and leave. Just like I thought, the apartment is only about five blocks from campus, but as I walk toward the address, the streets become more and more industrial in style with apartment blocks changing from modern condos, to converted warehouses.

Considering this area is close to a popular university, I’d expected to find more bars and stores, but instead it has a very commercial vibe with signs for various companies hanging over doorways. When I reach the address, I look at the huge warehouse. The old building has clearly been converted into expensive looking apartments, and I wonder how Bea and her friends are managing to rent the place for only two grand a month. There isn’t an obvious lobby or entrance, but she told me to go to the side door, so I walk the perimeter of the building until I find it. When I push open the door and step inside, the vibe is still very industrial, but it’s clearly been well converted, and the concrete floors are polished to a shine. The walls are all exposed brick, with framed pictures of how the building used to look when it was still being used as a working factory.

On one side of the corridor is a small elevator with an ornate metal grill that slides into place. On the other side of the corridor is a door that’s propped open and leads to a huge freight elevator, with a wooden shutter. Following Bea’s instructions, I board the elevator, slide the shutter into place, then hit the button for the second floor.

It’s a nice building, but for some reason the hairs on the back of my neck are on end and I’m hit with a creepy feeling of being watched. Glancing up, I’m surprised to find a small camera positioned in the corner of the elevator. I guess it makes sense, I bet this place has security everywhere, but it’s not something I’m used to. In the places I’ve lived in the past,

the closest to decent security they've had is an angry homeless person sitting on the stoop, to stop more angry homeless people from getting inside.

Once more, I ask myself why the rent on this kind of building is so cheap. Maybe the others pay more and the room I'll be living in is a windowless cupboard under the stairs like Harry Potter had. Internally shrugging, I realize I don't care if it's a cupboard, it's better than going back to the streets, which right now is my only other option.

The elevator is bumpy as it ascends to the second floor, jolting to a stop and sending my stomach plummeting back to the street. For a moment, I question why I didn't just use the antique-looking people elevator with the fancy gold mesh. Shrugging to myself again, I decide to use that one on the way back down.

Lifting the wooden shutter, I step out, then follow the corridor until I reach a door that opens onto another hallway, similar to the layout downstairs. Up here, there's more exposed brickwork, only instead of framed pictures, there's huge canvases hung on the walls with awesome graffiti-style pictures painted onto them.

I'm so struck by the cool artwork that I almost forget why I'm here, meandering down the hallway like I'm at an art gallery rather than to find a new place to live. Blinking, I drag my gaze from the pictures and to the doors on either side of the hallway. Bea said it was the second door on the right. Spinning around, I check for a door I've missed, and realize it was on the other side of the door that led to the elevator.

Pulling in a deep breath, I glance down at what I'm wearing. If I'd have known I needed to impress a group of sorority row bitches, I'd have dressed up a little. But I'm hoping my black skinny jeans, ole faithful Docs and cropped, shredded tank top makes me look enough like a student that she won't question all the lies I've told her.

Lifting my fist, I knock, then wait. A few moments later, the door cracks open and a girl appears in the doorway.

"Hi, are you Bea?" I ask.

“I am, you must be Ali?”

“Yeah.” I wave, smiling like a cheerleader on the top of the pyramid.

“Awesome, why don’t you come on in?” she offers, pushing the door open and then stepping to the side to allow me to enter.

“Thanks,” I say, tentatively stepping inside.

My eyes scan the vaulted ceilings and open plan space as I walk forward. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle again and I know I’m in trouble, but before I have a chance to do anything there’s a sharp pain in my neck and everything goes black.

CHAPTER 4

dimitri

Handing over the envelope of cash to Bea, I close the door behind her as she leaves. I don't like that we had to use her for this, but there's no way that my sweet Alena would have come if she'd thought it was an apartment full of guys.

Glancing down at her unconscious body laid out on the couch, I feel a moment of remorse for what I'm about to do, but it's gone in the blink of an eye. This was destined to happen from the moment I first laid eyes on her, it's just that circumstances in the last couple of weeks have pushed the timetable forward.

Lev hoped to be able to meet her, woo her, and convince her to come with us of her own accord, but I always knew it would come down to this. That, in the end, we'd simply take what was ours.

Someone knocks on the door and I take one last glance at her prone form, turning away and checking the peephole before opening the door.

"Everything go as planned?" Vik asks, bounding into the apartment and rushing over to her. Dropping to his knees at her side, he reaches out and brushes her hair off her face, his hands far too gentle for the stone cold killer he is.

"Of course it went as planned, we worked out every detail," Lev scoffs, but his eyes are on Alena, not on me or Vik.

"How long will she be out for?" Vik asks.

“I gave her enough that she should be unconscious for at least twelve to fourteen hours, but if she starts to wake, I have a second dose I can give her,” I tell him.

“Won’t that be dangerous? She’s so fucking small,” Lev says, his eyes crinkling at the corners with concern.

“I had the doctor work out the dosage, he says as long as her breathing stays stable, there shouldn’t be any side effects from the sedation,” I assure him for the twentieth time.

My cell phone vibrates in my pocket. Pulling it out, I tap the screen and read the message.

12594: Transport ready.

“The cars are here,” I announce.

“Have you made sure all the cameras are off?” Lev asks Vik.

“Of course, this isn’t my first time.” Vik rolls his eyes, sliding his arms beneath Alena before he lifts her off the couch, cradling her into his body like she’s the most precious cargo he’s ever carried.

A jolt of unexpected jealousy that I wasn’t anticipating pounds me in the gut as I watch him with her. Vik and Lev are my brothers in every way except for blood. I have never had anything that I wasn’t willing to share with them, and to feel jealousy over Alena is as shocking as it is abhorrent.

“I’ve activated the locks on all the doors in the building except for our exit route. There are a few residents still home, but none that will be able to see us leave,” Vik states as he stares longingly down at the woman in his arms.

“Let’s go,” I order, gruffer than I intended. Closing and locking the apartment behind me, I remind myself to appoint a realtor to sell the condo. This has been our place for over a year, but we won’t come back, our stay in Georgia is over. It’s time to go home.

Lev leads the way, Vik is in the middle with Alena in his arms, and I follow behind as we traverse the short hallway to get to the freight elevator. Once we’re inside, I slide the shutter

down, then reach up and remove the wireless camera we installed in here, so I could watch her arrival from upstairs.

When we hit the ground floor, instead of heading to the street, we enter the underground garage, pausing when we reach the row of three cars that are waiting for us. Vik hands the girl to Lev, who climbs into the back seat of the middle car. When the door is closed, Vik nods to me and quickly jumps into the back of the last car, while I slide into the first. A moment later the convoy moves, splitting in three different directions as we hit the street.

My muscles are tense as I click into the app on my cell and track the movements of the other cars, watching as they take circular routes in different directions, only to ultimately end up at the same destination.

All of this subterfuge is probably overkill, but I'd rather be overly prepared than have to scramble to make a plan at the last minute.

"We should be at the airport in forty-five minutes, Mr. Belov," the driver says. He's one of our men, but I can't remember his name. He's American, but he's proved to be a good man, who'll be coming home with us when we leave.

I don't speak, just nod, my eyes focused on the tracking app and the progression of my brothers and the girl. My muscles ache by the time the car pulls into the small private airport, but I know that I won't be able to relax until we're on the plane and away from here.

We're not at risk yet. In the year we've been watching Alena, no one else has come looking for her, but now that circumstances have changed, it's only a matter of time before her existence is discovered.

The stairs to our jet lower the moment my car slows to a stop, but I don't move until the other two identical vehicles to my own, file in behind me. Once all three cars have stopped, I climb out at the same time that Vik appears.

Catching my eye, he nods once and we move as one, striding to the third car in our convoy and opening the door.

The moment I see Lev and the girl still in his arms, I exhale. Reaching in, I take her from him, cradling her to my chest as I mount the stairs and enter the luxurious cabin.

“Good evening, Mr. Belov,” the captain greets, eyeing the girl in my arms with careful blankness.

“I believe Lev provided you with all the paperwork for our departure. We’d like to leave as soon as possible, we have a deadline to keep,” I tell him, dismissing him the moment I finish speaking and heading for a seat.

“Of course, Mr. Belov,” he says, before I hear him order the cabin crew to close the doors the moment my brothers are on board.

Striding down the cabin, I head for the sofas that we normally use when we fly, and lay the girl down on the smaller one, her petite frame barely filling it. Reaching around her, I awkwardly fasten her belt diagonally across her waist, then take a seat on the sofa opposite.

“I take it everything went as planned?” I ask once Lev sits down beside me and Vik takes one of the recliners on the opposite side of the plane, rotating it until it’s facing us.

“No problems my end. I never spotted anyone following us, and the license plate tracker never identified a vehicle with the same plate more than twice,” Lev reports.

“Same for me. I think we’re in the clear. No one knows that she’s here, or that we’ve taken her,” Vik agrees.

“Do you think there’ll be any issues with anyone she works with? That guy she’s always talking to?” I ask.

“Raul.” Lev nods. “I’ve sent him an email, letting him know that she got a job in San Francisco and that she’s sorry she never got a chance to say goodbye. Then I closed her email account. Her cell number has been disconnected since I got it back from that fucker Frankie.”

“Did you kill him?” I ask.

“No. I did,” Vik snarls.

“Good.” I nod, my eyes on the girl again.

“Gentleman, welcome aboard, the captain is just preparing for takeoff. Our flight time is approximately thirteen hours. Can I get you anything to eat or drink?” a blonde stewardess asks, her eyes darting to Alena, then quickly away.

“Bring a bottle of Macallan, three glasses, and a blanket for our guest,” I order, dismissing her with a flick of my hand. She returns a few moments later with the bottle and glasses on a tray, and a soft fleece blanket tucked under her arm.

Placing the tray on the table, she falters, glancing at Alena, then me.

“Give it to me,” Vik growls, shoving his hand out. Passing it to him, she scurries away as the sounds of the engine whir to life.

The plane starts to move, but I don’t bother to watch as we taxi toward the runway, focused completely on watching Vik carefully drape the blanket over Alena’s sleeping form, tucking the edges around her, so she’s completely covered from her toes to her chin.

When he’s happy she’s warm and cocooned, he sits back down in his seat and re-fastens his seat belt. By the time the front wheels lift off the ground, we each have a glass of whiskey in our hands and our prize by our side.

CHAPTER 5

lev

When the plane levels out, I watch as Dimi exhales and some of the tension in his shoulders melts, giving me a glimpse of the boy I grew up with beneath the hardened man he's been forced to become.

My eyes move once again to the girl asleep on the sofa. I can't see her chest rising and falling because of the blanket, but her face is peaceful and she just looks asleep. I've been dreading this moment, almost since we found her, but now that it's here; now that we've taken her, I feel a sense of relief that it's over.

Not that I disliked watching her. Quite the opposite in fact, watching Alabama was fascinating. She's young, but she doesn't act like she's barely twenty. She works a lot, but I've never seen her go to a bar or a club that she wasn't working at.

In a year, she's never had a boyfriend, or even a hook-up, she made no friends, apart from Raul the line cook, but that never strayed outside of work. They never called or text each other, even though they had one another's numbers. But on the days that they worked together, he always made her a meal of some sort, which she ate like she was worried someone would take it from her in the staff break room behind the bar. Honestly, apart from working and sleeping, she doesn't do anything for fun, or spend any money that isn't an absolute necessity.

We might have been watching her for a year, but we've known about her for almost three. The first time I saw her, she was seventeen, almost eighteen. Fresh faced and nowhere near

as wary as she is now. She was living with her aunt, in a tiny backwater town about four hours from where we found her living in Columbus. We'd planned to take her then, but one day she just disappeared. We hadn't watched her then, like we do now, and she'd slipped away from one day to the next and none of us saw her again, until she started working at Home Run, using the social security number we created for her.

I don't know where she was in the time that we lost track of her, although if I had to guess, I'd say she was living in hostels or on the streets. Now she has that look that says even if she's okay, she's preparing to lose everything in the blink of an eye.

Part of me wants to erase that look from her. To pamper her and indulge her until she never wants for anything. But the other part of me wants to nurture that fear, to hone it and develop it until she becomes a force to be reckoned with.

"Where's the kit?" Vik asks, his voice pulling me from my inner thoughts.

"It's in the vanity in the bathroom," Dimi says.

Unfastening his seat belt, Vik pushes upright and moves through the cabin, to the bedroom at the back. I know what he's fetching, and another annoying pinprick of guilt hits me again. This has to be done, I even understand why, but even though I've never spoken to her, I know this is only going to make her hate us more.

"Where are you putting them?" Dimi asks, when Vik returns carrying a small black plastic case.

"Back of the neck, side of the shoulder blade and base of the spine."

"Three?" I ask.

"I can echo each place on the other side of her body if you think six would be better."

"Six is definitely overkill." Dimi chuckles.

"And three isn't?" I ask, hating that I'm the only one who seems to be feeling guilty about what we're doing to her.

“We agreed that she needed to be tagged,” Vik says, ever the pragmatic asshole.

“She’s going to fucking hate us.” I sigh.

“She’s going to hate us whether we tag her or not,” Dimi says quietly, his brows furrowed together.

The truth of his words seems to settle over all of us, and the silence that surrounds us feels stifling. Setting the box on the table, Vik kneels down on the floor beside Alabama, then turns and opens the kit. Pulling latex gloves onto his hands, he loads a tracking chip about the same size as a grain of rice into the insertion device. Looking up, he nods to Dimi, who moves behind the sofa and carefully unwraps her, exposing her neck first.

Wiping the place he plans to inject her with an alcohol wipe, Vik pinches the skin, then pushes the needle into her neck, depressing the plunger until the tracker is buried deep.

Watching him check his cell to make sure the tracker is working is both a relief and a kick in the gut. When he’s content it’s okay, he nods to Dimi again and he rolls her forward until she’s almost chest down on the sofa. Repeating the process, he inserts a second tracker into the skin at the base of her spine.

After he checks that one on the app, he nods to Dimi again and it feels like all of us hold our breath when he slowly lifts her shirt revealing smooth, creamy skin. She’s not wearing a bra, but that’s not a surprise, she rarely wears one. But having her here, close enough to touch and knowing there’s nothing but a scrap of fabric between us and her perfect fucking tits is almost more temptation than I can handle.

This time when Vik moves, his touch seems lighter, reverent even, as he wipes the skin at the base of her shoulder blade, then carefully inserts the third tracker into her.

No one speaks as Dimi covers her up, then carefully rolls her back to her side and tucks the blanket around her again. Something about knowing she’s tagged and that she’ll never be free of us, feels both settling and agitating at the same time.

“We don’t tell her,” Vik growls, his brows furrowed, his gaze firmly fixed on her unconscious body.

“What?” I ask.

“We don’t tell her about the trackers. She doesn’t need to know, and unless she tries to run, or someone takes her from us, we’ll never need to use them.”

Nodding slowly, I consider that idea. It’ll be one less thing for her to hate us for. And Vik’s right, if she doesn’t run, then we’ll never have to use them. Nodding more vigorously I smile. “She never has to know.”

“Unless she runs,” Dimi murmurs, his voice even more gruff than before.

“She won’t run. She can’t run.” Vik shrugs, his body relaxed.

“We won’t let her run,” I snap, looking at each of my brothers in turn. When they nod back, it’s like we’re forming an agreement. Now we have her, we won’t ever let her go.

CHAPTER 6

vik

She doesn't stir the entire flight home, but Lev still watches her like he expects her to jump up and make a break for it, or like she's going to stop breathing. He's spent more time stalking her than Dimi or I have, so I guess he's a little more obsessed than we are. But that doesn't make her any more his than ours.

Lev might have been the one trailing her to work and back, but I was the one who was always watching. I'm the one who planted cameras in her apartment and the bar she worked at. Since she reappeared a little over a year ago, there hasn't been a moment when we haven't had eyes on her.

I like women, they're fun to play with, nice to fuck, and then even better to leave. But Ali isn't like that. I expected to have gotten bored of her by now but, if anything, I'm more intrigued after a full year than I was the day I planted the camera in the vent in her bedroom and the bathroom she shared with that bitch Monica.

I doubt Ali would have called her roommate a friend, but it hadn't taken anything but the offer of a place at her school of choice to have Monica jumping at the chance to royally screw Ali over. She was the one who told us about the tin of cash Ali kept beneath her mattress. We already knew, of course, but if she'd have kept her mouth shut, she could have left knowing that Ali at least had a chance at survival. Instead, she cried crocodile tears as she walked out, without even trying to warn Ali about the powerful men who were about to ruin her life.

My fingers are still buzzing with excitement from touching her. Pushing that needle into her skin, and knowing that no matter what happens, she'll never be free of us; was exhilarating. Watching Dimi lift her top, knowing that she wasn't wearing a bra, and that we could have just rolled her over and had a perfect uninterrupted view of her sweet tits, made my dick so hard I almost came in my pants.

But I don't want the first time I touch her like that to be when she's unconscious. I want to see the fear and excitement in her eyes when she offers herself to me. I want her to know exactly who's touching her, I want her to want it.

She's going to be pissed when she realizes we've taken her. But once we explain why, I think she'll be okay; and eventually even appreciative of us saving her. My dick is excited to see her grateful. In my mind, I picture her on her hands and knees crawling to me, ass plugged, eyes begging me to own her.

"Can I get you anything else?" the annoying stewardess asks, eyeing me flirtatiously.

"No," I growl, dropping off my seat and crawling over to Ali, stroking her hair behind her ear as I press a soft kiss against her lips. This isn't the first time I've visited her when she was asleep. Dimi and Lev don't know, but sometimes I'd tell them there was a problem with the cameras, then sneak into her room, just to be close to her.

We'll be landing soon. Our island doesn't have its own airstrip large enough for a jet of this size, so we'll be landing on the mainland and then boarding one of our light airplanes to take us home. Normally we vary our arrival and departure methods, using planes, helicopters and boats, but unconscious women draw attention, so for once we'll be flying straight to the island where a vehicle will be waiting to take us back to the house.

All three of us were born in Russia, but it's been a long time since we left, after our families were exiled. Our grandfathers and fathers sought and failed to get revenge on the man who sent us all away, but Lev, Dimi, and I know

better. Revenge is a lifetime wasted. Instead, we strove to be better, stronger, and more powerful than our families' enemy, that's the greatest revenge that can ever be claimed and Ali is the final piece in that puzzle.

I don't know how long I sit by her side, but I startle when Lev touches my shoulder. "We're landing, you need to take your seat."

Standing, I lift her legs and slide onto the sofa beside her, bringing her legs back down to rest over my thighs. Dimi sighs, like I'm annoying him, but I ignore him, looking down at her feet in my lap.

The jeans covering her lower half are tight, but worn, like she's washed them a hundred times until the denim is soft to the touch. Her shirt is a plain black tank that someone—probably Ali—has taken a pair of scissors to, shredding the bottom to shorten it in an attempt to make it look like it's deliberately ragged, not just old.

Her feet are clad in Doc Marten boots, which Dimi watched her pull out of a dumpster one day. She'd been elated when she'd gotten home, taking the time to clean the scuffed leather boots and then threading them with red ribbon instead of black laces. It was the first time Dimi almost broke, he demanded we take her then and there, even though we weren't sure if anyone else knew about her.

Eventually we talked him down, even though he almost ordered her new shoes every time he saw her wear them. Once we get her home, she won't ever wear thrift store clothes again. We'll bathe her in diamonds and gold and as many pairs of boots as she could ever want.

The plane jolts as the wheels hit the ground, the brakes slowing us and making Ali slide across the sofa. Placing a hand against her waist I keep her in place, until the plane slows to a stop and the sounds of ground staff bustling around seep into the cabin.

We always keep the jet fueled and ready to go, although we have no plans to leave the island any time soon. Our home

is a tiny island about a hundred and fifty miles north of Ilha de Boipeba, a tourist hotspot off the coast of Brazil.

We bought it on a whim during a drunken night out to celebrate making our first billion. Our families left Russia disgraced and ruined, but even as small children, we knew how to hustle and make sure we never starved.

Much like Ali, we did what he had to do to survive. We ran drugs for small-time dealers, worked as muscle in protection rackets when we were in our teens, and then diversified into the gun for hire sector in our early twenties. While we made money in the shadows of the back alleys, we worked in the light to legitimize our public personas. I graduated from MIT, Dimi from Harvard Law, and Lev with an MBA from Yale. We used our grimy, dirty, blood money to fund purely legitimate businesses, then we sold them, and made more money than anyone could imagine spending in a lifetime.

By the time we were thirty, we'd done everything we could think to do. We'd proved we were successful by anyone's definition, and we found ourselves bored. Lev and I dipped our toes into the criminal tides once again, occasionally taking a job or two, just to make sure we still had the skills, but even killing people lost its appeal.

That's when we found out about her.

Alabama Delany—Born Alena Polakoff—is the illegitimate daughter of Grigoriy Polakoff, also known as the Pakhan of the Russian Bratva. We weren't looking for it, but when the sweetest revenge found us, we couldn't resist.

CHAPTER 7

alabama

Inhaling deeply, I stretch, feeling like I've been asleep for days, even though I know it can't be for more than a few hours.

My limbs crack as I lift my arms over my head before rubbing at my dry lips. Pointing my toes, I arch my back as I slowly wake up. My eyes are still closed, but I can feel the warm air coating my limbs, and I wonder if I left the window open.

My body doesn't want to wake up. I feel sluggish and a yawn slips past my lips when I try to force my eyes open. I must fall back asleep again, because the next time I wake up, some of the lethargy has gone, and this time when I stretch, my muscles feel refreshed and not heavy.

Inhaling, my nose fills with an unfamiliar floral scent and blinking my eyes open, I look around me. It takes me a moment to make sense of what I'm seeing.

Natural wood paneling runs along a wall that leads to a huge bank of floor to ceiling windows. No, they're not windows, they're those doors you see on the TV that slide all the way back, like the entire wall just opens on its own. Except these doors aren't moving on their own, they're being pushed by a man. A man I don't recognize.

Pushing up onto my elbows, I notice the fabric beneath me. I'm lying on a cream couch, the kind you see in fancy department stores and interior design shows. Opposite me is a

couch that looks like it's made of the same fabric, and sitting on it are two more men I don't know.

The guy who was opening the doors walks toward us and sits down in a chair beside the other couch, and all three of them turn and look at me.

I know I should be scared. Inside, a voice is screaming at me to get up and run away, but my body still feels too tired to move and my brain is too foggy to feel the fear I should be feeling right now.

"Where am I?" I ask calmly.

"You're on an island a few hundred miles off the coast of Brazil," one of the men says calmly, like he's mirroring my tone.

All three guys have dark hair and sharp, intense eyes. The one that's speaking has full lips that I struggle to look away from as I try to process what he said.

"Where?" I croak.

"Brazil, it's a country in South America, a little over three thousand, eight hundred miles from Georgia," another of the guys says.

"Why am I in Brazil?" I still sound calm, but as sensation starts to come back to my body, so does the awareness of how fucked up this entire conversation is.

"Because we brought you here," the third guy says, his voice lower and rougher than the other two.

"Why?" I croak again.

"Because you're ours," the third man says, so matter of factly, that I actually question myself. Am I theirs?

Tilting my head, I blink, then blink again, searching for some kind of recognition. Waiting for something to flash inside of my head and tell me who this person is. But there's nothing. Nothing about him is familiar.

He's attractive, but obviously considerably older than me, not that I think age matters. I'm the oldest twenty-year-old in

the world. His hair is short and styled into a messy perfection that probably took him longer than it's ever taken me to style my hair. His eyes are dark and assessing, but from this far away I can't tell if they're dark brown, or a navy blue. His features are classically attractive, almost aristocratic. His cheekbones are high and defined, his jaw square and chiseled. In short, he's beautiful, but I'm confident I don't know him.

Straining, I push to recall the last thing that I can remember.

I remember losing my job.

I remember finding the flier for the apartment.

I remember walking to campus and calling the number.

I remember talking to a girl and getting an address.

I remember walking through town and into a converted warehouse.

I remember knocking on the door and a girl opening it.

I remember stepping into the apartment and then... then nothing. That's the last thing I remember.

No, it's not the last thing I remember. The last thing I remember is pain and then darkness.

"Who are you?" I ask, hearing the tremor in my voice.

"My name is Dimitri Belov. This..." He gestures to the man sitting beside him on the couch. "Is Lev Adamovich, and this..." He points to the man sitting in the chair. "Is Viktor Sorokin."

"I don't know you," I stammer.

"No, you don't. But we know you, Alena."

"My name isn't Alena," I scoff, wondering for a moment if this is just a fucked-up case of mistaken identity.

"The name on your official birth certificate is Alena Grigoriyyovna Polakoff."

"No." I shake my head. "My birth certificate says my name is Alabama Georgina Delaney." My voice is high and

panicked, my limbs bursting back to life in a shower of pins and needles as I force myself to turn, my feet flopping to the floor as the blood rushes back to them.

“Your father was a man called Grigoriy Polakoff. It is our understanding that he met your mother when he visited America during a business trip. We do not know the nature of their relationship, but we do know that he was aware of your birth. He named you, and his name was on your original birth certificate. However, that birth certificate was buried, and the one that replaced it had your new name and no father listed,” Dimitri tells me calmly.

I’m shaking my head before he even finishes speaking. “No. My dad was one of my mom’s paying customers, who either couldn’t be bothered to pull his dick out of the whore he was fucking, or just didn’t care enough to put on a condom. When my mom gave birth to me, she must have been feeling sentimental or something, because she named me after the only things she knew about him, his name and the state he was from,” I sneer. “I’m not who you think I am, and I’d like to leave now please.”

“I know this must be difficult for you to hear, growing up the way you did,” the guy I think is Lev says.

“My mom was a junkie whore, she sold herself to feed her drug habit.” I shrug. “No point sugar coating it. But you still have the wrong person. I don’t know which hooker that Grigoriy guy shoved his cock in, but it wasn’t my mom. Or maybe it was, but either way that hump and pump didn’t result in me. So again, I’d like to go home now please.”

“Alena,” Dimitri starts.

“My name is Alabama, if that’s too difficult for you to understand, then you can call me Ali. My name never has been, and never will be Alena,” I say through gritted teeth.

Dimitri’s jaw tics, and I brace for the hit that usually comes when a guy looks at you like he’s looking at me right now.

“I apologize. You’re right,” he says, shocking me. “Just because it was your name once on a piece of paper, doesn’t mean it’s *your* name.” His voice is soft, but the expression on his face is anything but. In fact, he looks pissed.

“Look, this is clearly a case of you picking the wrong person. I guess that kind of stuff happens, right? So, you can just put me on a plane home and I’ll pretend this never happened. I won’t ever mention it again. You can carry on looking for your Alena, and I’ll just go back to my life.”

“What life?” the third man, Viktor, scoffs. “You were jobless, broke, and on the verge of being homeless, what exactly are you in such a rush to get back to?”

Inhaling sharply, I internally deflect his barb, then level my gaze on him. “I’m not going to ask how you know all that stuff about me, because as far as I’m concerned none of this is happening right now. But I promise, you don’t need to worry about me. I’m a survivor, I always have been, and as soon as I get home, I’ll get things back on track. This week will just be a blip in my rearview mirror.”

“This is your home now, Alabama,” Dimitri says, sounding out my name precisely.

Shaking my head, I deny his words.

Turning, Dimitri looks to Lev, who stands and walks to a sideboard. Grabbing a leather folder, he crosses the room and sits back down on the couch, placing the folder on the table between us.

My eyes track his movements as he unzips the folder and opens it, pulling out a sheet of paper and pushing it across the table toward me.

“What is that?” I ask, not reaching out to take it.

“That is a DNA test confirming that your father is Grigoriy Polakoff,” Lev says.

Now that my eyes are clearer, I can tell that his hair isn’t as dark as the other’s. Actually, it’s more of a dirty dark blond, rather than a brown. Where Dimitri’s features are refined, Lev’s are rougher, harsher. His nose is broader, his cheeks

thicker and fuller. His mouth is wider and his lips are full and plump. Everything about him feels softer, even though his body is clearly bigger and more muscular.

Pursing my lips, I shake my head. "It must be a fake."

"It's not," Lev assures me, taking a second piece of paper out and laying it next to the first sheet on the table. "This is the original DNA test that was done when you were born, which also confirms that Grigoriy was your father."

Closing my eyes, I allow my body to sink back against the couch. Lifting my hands, I rub at my aching temples.

"Are you in pain? Would you like a drink or some Tylenol?" Lev asks, concern furrowing his brow.

"The last thing I remember is going to look at an apartment in Columbus Georgia and, apparently, I'm now in a completely different country, on the other side of the world. If you were me, would you accept drinks or drugs from you?" I snap.

A part of me knows I shouldn't be talking to them like this, but I'm too numb to be able to find the appropriate level of fear right now. Once they realize I'm really not who they think I am, they're more than likely going to kill me, and if that's the case, I don't want my last words to be begging and pleading. I'd rather go out mouthing off at my psycho kidnappers, than being a pathetic scared mess.

"Perhaps some rest would improve your headache," Dimitri says, standing and offering me a hand. "Let me show you to your room."

"I can sleep on the plane. I don't know exactly how long of a flight it is, because I flunked out of geography, but I don't really care. I can sleep anywhere," I try.

"There will be no flight, this is your home now, do not bring it up again," Dimitri snaps.

"Dimi," Lev says lowly.

"I apologize," Dimitri says again. "I know this must be confusing for you. We should have waited until you were

completely recovered from your journey before we told you any of this. Come, I'll show you to your room and then bring you some food and a drink."

"I just want to go back to Georgia," I say, not using the word home in case it triggers him again.

"It's not safe for you in Georgia, Ali," Vik says, standing and moving beside Dimitri.

The two men are so similar, but strikingly different at the same time. Dimitri is tall, but he's all lethal grace. The suit he's wearing accentuates his toned torso and muscled arms, but he's lean and not big in a showy way. Viktor is just big everywhere. Taller than Dimitri, his muscles are overt and the definition of thick. His thighs are the size of tree trunks and even though he's dressed in a suit too, he fills it in a completely different way. Dimitri is wearing his suit, where Viktor is being throttled by his.

The best word I can think of to describe Victor is pretty. His hair is long enough to be tucked behind his ears and I can imagine him pulling it up into a ridiculous man bun. His eyes are a warm brown that sparkle with mischief. His lips are smirking and everything about him screams naughty, which is in complete contrast to his huge body that screams dangerous.

"We brought you here to keep you safe," Lev tells me, standing too, so all three men are towering over me where I'm still sitting on the couch. Lev is shorter than the other two, and slimmer than Viktor, but still muscular in a way that it's clear he works out and never misses leg day.

While I'm assessing them, they remain standing over me, staring at me intently. "What are you keeping me safe from?" I ask.

"Your father is a dangerous man," Lev offers.

"He hasn't bothered me for over twenty years, assuming he knew about me, like you're saying he did. Why would he bother with me now?"

"Come. We can talk more once you have rested," Dimitri orders, offering me his hand to take.

“I’d rather talk now, then I can leave,” I say bluntly.

“There is no leaving,” Viktor says, stretching his neck to the side and exhaling wearily.

“So, I’m a prisoner?”

“No, this is your home,” Lev rushes to assure me.

“Then I’m free to go?” I ask, pushing shakily up from the couch, my legs wobbly from however long I was knocked out for.

“There will be no going anywhere, Alena. You are my wife, your place is here with me,” Dimitri growls.

CHAPTER 8

dimitri

“Excuse me?” she gasps, shock and outrage etched across her face.

It’s the first strong reaction she’s shown since she woke up and, honestly, it’s a relief. The calm manner in which she’s handled herself since she opened her eyes and realized she wasn’t in Georgia anymore was starting to freak me out.

In all the time I’ve watched her, I’ve never felt like I knew her. I know Lev and Vik don’t feel that way. They both think that observing her has given them both enough insight into her that they could anticipate her reaction, but I knew different.

Alena is a chameleon capable of reacting to a situation and altering her behavior to fit. It’s one of the things I admire the most about her, but it’s also the thing that intrigues me the most too, because it makes her unpredictable.

A part of me had expected screaming, shouting, and maybe some tears, but the calm, firm denial had been a surprise I wasn’t expecting. The copies of the DNA tests that confirm she is Grigoriy’s daughter are still on the table, untouched and ignored. She’s barely glanced in their direction, even though the results prove unquestionably who she is.

“You are my wife,” I tell her again calmly, watching carefully as her expression morphs from shock to horror in the blink of an eye.

“I am not your wife. I’m not anyone’s wife,” she protests.

Turning, I nod to Lev, who reaches into the folder again and pulls out the wedding certificate that confirms that Alena

and I are in fact man and wife. Taking it from him, I push it forward and into her hands.

“No.” She shakes her head emphatically. “This can’t be real.”

“But it is,” I say coldly,

“This says we got married two days ago. We hadn’t met two days ago.”

“We met three years ago,” I state coldly. “We started a long distance relationship that transcended you leaving your hometown and eventually moving to Columbus. Your roommate Monica, Lev, and of course Viktor were all witnesses at our wedding and then we left to have an extended Honeymoon on our island.” I say each word clearly, making sure she understands what I’m saying.

“You can’t do this. None of this is real,” she whispers, staring down at the paper in her hands.

“It’s all very real. Our marriage license was signed by a judge, and the ceremony was performed by a priest. In the eyes of the law and God himself, we are man and wife.”

“No,” she gasps, shaking her head.

“It is done,” I state, making sure she hears the finality in my tone.

“Why?”

“That is a story for another day. Come.” She flinches when I reach for her arm, stumbling forward to get away from me.

“I just want to go home,” she whispers, the calm façade finally cracking as her voice breaks.

“This is the only home you’ll know from now on,” I whisper, reaching for her again, but stopping short of touching her when she recoils. “Lev will lead the way.”

Stepping around her and giving her enough space so she doesn’t react to his proximity, Lev turns, motioning with his head for her to follow. It’s painful to watch her stiff steps, but

as much as I want to, picking her up would not be a good idea right now.

Instead, Vik and I walk a step behind her as she hobbles from the living room and toward the stairs. The island itself is a triumph of nature and beauty, but the house we built here is surprisingly modest, four bed, four and half bath, with more outdoor space than inside, including a large pool and patio. Hidden behind the house are three bungalows that house the men we have living on the island with us and the housekeeper and groundskeepers who maintain everything for us.

It takes everything I have not to lift her off her feet as she slowly ascends the stairs, but I manage to restrain myself, keeping the distance between us until we step into the bedroom.

Lev, Vik, and I are a family, as close as brothers ever could be. Despite us not sharing blood, we share everything else, so although Alena might be my wife in the eyes of the law, as far as we're all concerned, she belongs to all of us.

When we found her again and put this plan into action, we had the entire first floor remodeled so it was like a large hotel suite, only instead of a sitting room being at the center, we have the room set up as a large bedroom, with three smaller bedrooms connected to it.

I can't see her face, but I watch her muscles tense as she takes in the impressive space. "What is this?" she asks.

"This is your room. Those." I point to the three doors leading off this one. "Are our rooms."

Spinning around, her eyes flare with anger. "No."

Arching a brow, I stay quiet.

"This isn't a room, it's a peep show. Prisoners get a cell, with a door that shuts. I'll take a cell over whatever the hell this is." Lifting her arm, she gestures around her.

"I've never seen a cell that looks like this." Vik laughs.

"Why can't I have one of those rooms, with doors?" she asks.

“You can sleep in any of those rooms you choose, but those are mine, Lev, and Vik’s rooms. If you choose to stay in one of them, it will be with the company of the room’s owner. Alternatively, you can sleep alone, in your bed. The choice is yours.” *For now*, I think, but don’t say.

“Why me?” she says, tipping her head back and closing her eyes. “Why does this crazy shit have to happen to me?”

“What other crazy shit has happened?” Lev growls.

Ignoring him, Alena looks at me. “So, my options are sleeping with one of you. Men who are complete strangers to me, have drugged, kidnapped, and apparently forged documents that say we’re married, all because you think I’m someone I’m not. Or sleeping out here in the open without any privacy, mere feet away from three psychos who think all of this is perfectly okay?”

A smile tips the corners of my lips. She’s cute when she’s being patronizingly angry.

“Yes,” I agree.

“Great, just fucking great. Fine, I’ll take option two. Is there a bathroom I can use, or does it have a two-way mirror so you can watch me pee too?”

“The bathroom is just through there.” Vik laughs, pointing at the archway that leads into the master bath.

Stomping forward, her stiff, awkward gait negates most of her attempt at indignancy, but I manage to hold back my laughter, not wanting to anger her any further.

“She’s pissed.” Lev whistles.

“Did you expect otherwise?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“I don’t know. I thought maybe she’d be...” He trails off but I fill in the blanks.

“Grateful? You thought she’d be happy we stole her away from her life and everything she knows?” I ask, amusement lacing my words.

“She was in danger,” he protests.

“Was she? In the year we’ve been watching her, no one else has come looking,” I point out.

“But they will,” Vik says, speaking to us, even though his eyes are fixed on the doorway that leads to the bathroom.

“Yes, they will, it’s only a matter of time,” I agree.

“She’ll get past this, eventually, she’ll realize that we did this for her,” Lev insists.

“Brother, please don’t deceive yourself. Saving her is a happy coincidence, but we took her because we wanted to, and because we could. We’re the villains, stop trying to make yourself the saint.”

His eyes narrow and I wait for whatever dressing down will come from his barbed tongue, but Alena steps back into the room, drawing all of our attention.

“I take it you guys have an issue with doors, because the bathroom doesn’t have one either,” she snaps, the hair framing her forehead and cheeks damp from where she must have washed her face.

“There’s products in there if you’d like to take a shower,” Lev offers.

“With no door and you three standing out here? No thanks. I’d rather stink than get naked anywhere near you,” she spits, crossing her arms over her chest.

“If you’d like to shower, I promise, none of us will enter. The closet is full of your clothes,” I offer. Wanting to tell her that as my wife, I can see her naked whenever I want, but not wanting to make her any angrier than she already is.

“My clothes?”

“All yours,” Vik says, bounding forward and throwing open the doors to the enormous closet that houses all of our clothes.

She takes a tentative step forward and peers into the room. “Those aren’t mine.”

“You are our wife, we purchased everything we thought you would need, but please feel free to make a list of anything else you require and we’ll provide it for you,” I tell her.

“I’m not your wife,” she hisses, “And those aren’t my things. My clothes are in my closet back in Georgia.”

“I’m afraid they aren’t. Your landlord arranged for your remaining possessions to be disposed of when your lease terminated.”

For the first time since she opened her eyes and realized she wasn’t in America anymore, tears fill her eyes, falling down her cheeks, as anguish coats her features. “What?” she gasps.

“Your land—” Lev starts.

“I heard you. Everything is gone? All of my things? Everything?” She’s crying in earnest now and I step forward, needing to touch her, to comfort her. But as I reach for her, she jumps backward.

“Yes, everything is gone,” I confirm coldly, stepping back again.

“Gone,” she repeats.

“Alabama,” Lev starts, looking to me and Vik, as if one of us should find the right thing to say.

“I think I’d like to go to sleep now. I can’t do that with you all standing here staring at me.”

“You should eat—” I start.

“I’m not hungry,” she cuts me off.

“You—” I try again.

“I just want to sleep,” she says, her voice monotone, tears still rolling down her cheeks.

“Ali,” Vik tries.

Ignoring us, she turns her back and moves over to the enormous bed we had specially made for us. It’s more than big

enough for the four of us to share, once she comes to accept her new circumstances.

Vik and Lev eye Alena warily, then glance to me. I shrug, unsure what to do when she won't allow us to comfort her. Sighing, I head to the door and look into the retinal scanner to arm the lock. She might be tagged, but that doesn't mean that we're going to give her the opportunity to run. We're all locked in, until one of us unlocks it.

"Sleep well, just call if you need anything and one of us will be here," I tell her. Turning away I stride to my bedroom and open the door, then pull it almost closed, leaving just enough of a gap to be able to hear her if she calls out during the night.

Sinking down onto my bed, I hear the low murmurings of Lev and Vik talking to her, then the sound of them entering their own rooms. Undressing, I step into my own bathroom, and shower quickly, washing away the stale air from the plane, before sliding under my comforter naked.

It's almost dark now and I've been awake for over twenty-four hours, but sleep doesn't come easily, especially not when the sounds of her muffled sobs creep through the gap in the door.

CHAPTER 9

alabama

I never cry. Ever. It's one of the only good things Aunt Darla ever taught me. *"Never let them see you break,"* she'd said. *"Tears are a weakness that others can exploit, so swallow them down and channel that sadness into drive."*

In the two years since she handed me a bus ticket and a hundred-dollar fuck you, I haven't cried once. Not when I slept behind a dumpster in ten-minute intervals because I was terrified someone would find me and hurt me. Not when I hadn't eaten in so many days that I thought I might actually die from the pain of my hunger. Not when I finally got enough money to rent an apartment rather than sleeping in hostels and shitty hotel rooms. I don't cry. But knowing that everything I've worked so hard for the last two years is gone. That all the things I've found, stolen, and bought are just gone, thrown in the trash, is devastating.

Deep down I know they're just things, but they're my things. I left Aunt Darla's with a pair of jeans, two shirts, two pairs of panties, and a bra. My backpack got stolen my third night on the streets and I went weeks without spare clothes or anything to call my own.

My things might have been ratty and old, but they were mine and now they're gone, because three sociopathic assholes decided to steal me from my life, because they think I'm the bastard child of some guy I've never heard of.

One by one, they leave, walking into their own bedrooms and closing the doors behind them. I know it's only an illusion of privacy, but I take it anyway. Circling the bed, I sit down on

the floor, managing to pull myself into as small a ball as I can, and bury my face into my knees before the first sob bursts from my mouth.

I cry for my mom. For the dad I never knew, the aunt who didn't want me, and all the asshole johns who tried to buy me when I was nothing more than a skinny little kid. I cry for the nights I was cold, wet, tired, hungry, and terrified huddled beneath sheets of cardboard to hide from the horrors of the night. I cry for the light I'd seen at the end of the tunnel when I finally got the job at Home Run and moved in with Monica. I cry for the freedom I fought hard for that was taken from me in the blink of an eye, and I cry for all of the things that were mine, that were a part of me. Each shitty, stupid item told a story about my survival, and now they're gone.

I cry for so long that my eyes are gritty and swollen and my chest hurts from how tight I've been hugging my knees to try and stifle the sound of my sobs. This is the only show of weakness I'll allow myself. From here on out, I'll be strong until I'm away from here and the three men who had the audacity to steal my life.

Pulling in a shuddering breath, I wipe my face on my shirt, then lift my head, taking in the room. I heard the click of the lock on the door before they all left me alone, but I still push to my feet and walk silently to it, turning the handle, even though I know it won't open. The large windows don't open when I try them either, but even if they did, it's a straight drop to the ground below and if the fall didn't kill me, it'd certainly hurt me enough that fleeing would be impossible.

I didn't take the time to really look at the space when they first brought me in here, but now, I walk the perimeter of the room, noticing for the first time that there are large double doors hidden behind wooden shutters.

When I turn the handle, the shutters easily slide back and I open the doors that lead out onto a large balcony. My heart starts to race as I step to the wall, looking down and hoping there's a tree or something that I can climb down to escape. But instead of freedom, I find the face of a curious guard looking back up at me.

“Is everything okay, Mrs. Belova?” he asks, a gun hung in a shoulder holster clearly on display over his black polo shirt.

Hopes dashed, I turn and step back into the bedroom without responding to him, closing the doors behind me. I’m a prisoner, and as much as I hate to admit it, I won’t be escaping tonight. The logical side of my brain knows I shouldn’t give up, that if I bide my time, I can run at the first opportunity. But the terrified, desperate side of me withered into a pathetic heap at the sight of armed guards standing below my only possible escape route

Glancing at the ridiculously large bed, I eye it warily. I don’t know how many people they planned to have sleeping in that thing, but I’d take the tiniest queen mattress over having to get into the orgy bed.

Looking around, I contemplate curling back into my corner to sleep, but even hidden behind the bed, I’d still be easily seen if any of them leave their rooms. The door to the closet is still partially open, and I wander forward, peering inside again.

It’s a massive room, almost as big as the entire apartment Monica and I shared until a few days ago. One half of the room is split into three, with each section showing a slightly different style and clothing choice. The other half of the room is filled entirely with women’s clothes.

Refusing to even glance at the rails full of stuff that I will never think of as mine, I walk over to the vanity table, bending down to peer at the space beneath it. Nodding to myself, I tiptoe back into the bedroom and grab a single pillow and the knit throw from the bottom of the bed, then head back into the closet, closing the door behind me.

With the door shut, I instantly feel better. I’m not safe, and a door won’t keep me in, or them out, but the illusion of protection is enough to allow me to slow my breathing and let some of the tension bleed from my muscles.

The lights must be on sensors, because they brighten as I move, illuminating the racks of shoes, rails of dresses and clothes that I will never, ever wear. Kneeling down on the

floor, I crawl into the small space beneath the vanity table, then drag the pillow and blanket in behind me.

The floor is wooden and hard, but it's not even close to the most uncomfortable place I've slept and with the pillow beneath my head and the soft blanket wrapped around me, I drift off into an uneasy sleep, filled with dreams of three psychos chasing me, and always catching me no matter how fast I run.

"What is she doing?" a male voice asks, cracking my fragile veneer of sleep.

"She appears to be sleeping?" a different voice says dryly.

"She's on the floor," the first voice says derisively.

"Alena, are you well?"

"My name is not Alena," I growl, not opening my eyes, because the moment I do, I'll have to admit that this is real, not a nightmare. I'll have to accept that I'm somewhere really far from home, with three dangerous strangers, and I'm just not ready to do that yet.

"Ali, Baby, why are you on the floor?" a third voice asks.

"I was sleeping, until y'all woke me up," I hiss, eyes still squeezed tightly shut.

"Could you come out please?" Someone asks.

"No."

"Alabama, you can come out of your own accord, or I can drag you out," the fucking asshole Dimitri demands, his voice more familiar when he's being a dick.

"Go away, I'll come out when I'm ready," I snap, like a petulant child.

I don't hear him approach, but a second later firm fingers wrap around my wrist and ankle. My eyes snap open as I'm pulled out from beneath the safety of the vanity, and not released until I'm spalled across the closet floor, my eyes wide and looking up at the faces of the three fuckers above me.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” I spit, letting my head flop back to the floor with a thud.

“Why were you on the floor and not in the bed?” Dimitri demands.

“I’m not sleeping in that bed.”

“Why? Is it not comfortable? We can buy a new mattress if you prefer.”

Scoffing, I push my hair out of my face and scowl up at all three of them. “You can buy as many mattresses as you like, I’m still not sleeping in that fucking bed.”

“You’d rather sleep on the floor?” Dimitri sneers.

“Every day for the rest of my life.” I nod.

Gritting his teeth, he swears beneath his breath in a language I don’t understand. “Come, you need to eat.”

“No thanks,” I hiss, pushing up to my elbows and crab walking backward until my back hits a dresser.

“You must be hungry, it’s been almost two days since you ate,” Lev says, offering me a smile as he holds out his hand for me to take.

“I’m not hungry,” I say more firmly.

“Then a drink, we have coffee,” Lev offers.

“No.” I shake my head.

“For fuck’s sake,” Viktor hisses, grabbing me and hauling me off the floor and over his shoulder, before I even realize he’s moved.

“Put me down, you fucking asshole,” I scream, thrashing against his hold. His grip never loosens as he carries me downstairs, his shoulder digging painfully into my stomach as he bounces down each step.

With my head upside down, I don’t get a chance to see where he’s taking me, until I’m turned upright and dumped unceremoniously into a chair at a massive dining table. A

plate, heaped with food is placed in front of me and, a moment later, a mug of steaming coffee is slid beside the plate.

Crossing my arms, I lean back in the chair, not even allowing myself to smell the food. I'm hungry, but I've been hungrier, and right now I'm not prepared to eat or drink anything that comes from them just in case they drug me again. I might be a prisoner right now, but at least I'm still wearing the clothes I was when they took me, and I have no aches or pains except for the stiffness of being drugged and unconscious for a long time. If they drug me again, I might not be so lucky.

"Eat, please," Lev says, his tone pleading. "Our chef is exceptional and if there's something you want that isn't here, she'll make it for you."

"Not hungry," I tell him again, pointedly ignoring him as I take in the room. My year living in a comfortable apartment with a lock on the door and food in my stomach has made me weak and it takes me a moment to scan the room, finding the exits and escape routes.

We all fall into a tense silence, the sounds of the men eating slowly fading until they stop completely.

"Alabama—"

"How long are you planning on keeping me here?" I blurt, turning to look at Dimitri.

"We are married." His sigh is weary and I'm happy to wear him down, maybe he'll get bored of me and just send me home to get rid of me.

Scoffing, I force a derisive smile to my lips. "Look, I'm not an idiot. If I am who you say I am, then you brought me here for a reason and it wasn't to keep me safe. So, what is it you need from me and how long do you think that will take?"

Dimitri's jaw tics again and he glances to the other two men, before he looks at me again. "You are our wife. This is your home. You're right, we did not bring you here with the sole purpose of protecting you, although that was a valid

concern. But there is no timescale, and we will not be taking you back to Georgia, ever. You belong here with us now.”

“Bullshit,” I snap.

“Enough,” Dimitri shouts, the tone of his voice a warning that echoes through my body. “Now eat.”

Sighing, I close my eyes and tip my head back to rest against the chair. “Can I go back upstairs?” I finally ask.

“I thought I could show you around, give you a tour of the house and grounds,” Lev says, smiling brightly.

“No thanks.”

“Alena—” Dimitri starts.

“My name is not Alena,” I growl, standing. “Now I don’t want to eat your food, or drink your coffee and I don’t want a fucking tour. The only thing I want is to go home, but apparently that isn’t going to happen. So can someone please tell me how to get back to the bedroom.”

“I’ll show you,” Lev offers, dabbing at his lips with a cloth napkin before pushing his chair back and standing up. When he goes to place his hand on the base of my spine, I jerk out of his reach, jumping to the side to get away.

Sadness fills his eyes, but he doesn’t say anything, instead he steps ahead of me and leads me slowly back up the stairs to the bedroom.

“I know you’re upset,” he starts.

“I’m not upset,” I spit. “I’m pissed. I had a life and you took it. The three of you drugged me and flew me halfway across the world to a place I don’t know, with men who don’t care enough to ask me if I wanted to be taken, and you what? You expect me to say thank you? To be grateful that you deemed me so insignificant that you just stole me? Fuck you. Fuck all of you.” Storming past him, I throw open the closet door, then slam it closed behind me, sinking back down to my hiding spot under the vanity.

CHAPTER 10

lxv

I flinch at the sound of the closet door slamming shut. Sighing, I glance around at the beautiful room we decorated just for her. A part of me actually thought she'd like it, that she'd be pleased that we'd put so much thought into her space. But I guess that was foolish of me, because she's right. We took her. We destroyed her life bit by bit and then we took her like she was a possession we could buy or steal.

Glancing at the closet door, I try to decide what to do now. I could go in there, maybe try to talk to her, reason with her. But right now, what would be the point? She's too angry to listen to all the valid reasons why we brought her here.

I don't want to leave her alone when she's hurt and upset, but I don't think my presence will make her feel better. If anything, I'm pretty sure I'm just agitating her even more.

Retreating out of the bedroom, I glance at the lock and wonder if I should arm it. Sighing, I press the button to activate it, look down into the scanner, and lock it. She isn't a prisoner, but although the island is safe from uninvited guests, it's still an unknown to her in a tropical climate and if she decides to run, she could get hurt before we have a chance to find her.

My steps are slow as I head back down to the dining room, my mind whirring with things we could do or say to make her understand that this is her life now. But everything comes down to the fact that none of this was her choice.

“What happened?” Vik asks as I retake my seat at the table.

“She yelled at me, then shut herself in the closet again.”

“She needs to eat and drink something, she’s dehydrated, her eyes are sunken and her lips are dry,” Dimi says. He’s always been the one to push us all to take care of ourselves. We all know what it’s like to try to sleep with hunger gnawing at our bellies, although that’s not something any of us have felt in a very long time. But it makes sense that he’s more worried about her refusing breakfast, than how clearly she hates us.

“She must be starving, but she didn’t even glance at the food,” Vik points out.

“What do we do if she keeps refusing?” I ask, more worried now than I was before.

“I’ll deal with it,” Dimi says darkly.

“Dimi,” I start.

“She is ours, is she not? What good is she to us if she makes herself ill by throwing a temper tantrum?” he growls.

“I wouldn’t call it a tantrum—” I start.

“She is a twenty-year-old woman refusing to eat and drink because she isn’t happy with her life. That is a temper tantrum,” he snarls.

Glancing at Vik, I find him smirking up at Dimi. Vik is hard to read at the best of times, so right now, he could be amused or plotting annihilation with the exact same look on his face. Turning back to Dimi, I open my mouth to speak, but he pushes back his chair and strides out of the room before I have a chance to protest his flawed thoughts about Alabama’s behavior.

“Whatever he plans to do, is only going to make her angrier at us.” I sigh.

“She’ll get over it.” Vik shrugs.

“Will she? Would you?”

“Once she gets to know us, she’ll see how good she’ll have it here. Big beautiful house, closet full of clothes, anything she could ever want and desire,” Vik says, his smile wide and honest.

“Stupidly, I thought all of that would help sway her too. Now I’m not so sure. We all assumed she didn’t have nice things because she couldn’t afford them. What if she didn’t have nice things because she wasn’t interested in them. What the hell do we do, if all she ever wants is her life back?” I’m panicking and the sound of it is clear in my voice.

“If. And it’s a big if,” Vik says. “But if she can’t adjust, then we use her how we planned and we send her home.” Shrugging nonchalantly, he lifts his coffee mug to his lips and throws the last of it back.

Standing, I leave the dining room and head into our office. The house has plenty of space, more than enough for us each to have separate rooms, but like everything else, we’re used to sharing, and the idea of not working together just never made sense to us.

The differences in our personalities are more obvious in here. Dimi’s desk is older, an antique he imported from Russia. He thinks we don’t know that this was originally his grandfather’s desk, sold off when our families’ homes were emptied, the contents thrown away, discarded, or put up for sale.

It appeared on an online auction site about five years ago, not long after we purchased the island, and he recognized it, bought it, and had it shipped to the US, then to here. The antique desk is immaculately clean and polished to a shine. His laptop, notepad, and pens, are all neatly lined up in the middle. The shelves behind him are an organizational dream, color coded, labeled and then filed. A place for everything and everything in its place.

In complete contrast, Vik’s desk is an explosion of cables, computing equipment, ripped off scraps of paper filled with scribbled notes, and half-drunk energy drinks. It’s a mess, but it’s his mess, and he loses his mind if anyone moves anything.

Every few days the house staff will carefully extract the trash, but beyond that, no one touches his chaos.

My desk is a mixture of the two. My modern, adjustable-height ergonomically designed desk is predominantly clear, except for my large desk plotter that's littered with notes, thoughts, and to-do lists. The shelves behind are hectic, with a mixture of half organized binders and file boxes, interspersed with piles of surveillance equipment, old laptops, and tubs full of flash drives and other bits and bobs.

This office probably says more about us than any other room in the house and I exhale as I slide into my chair, relieved to be home after so long away. We had the house built not long after we bought the island. There was already a property here, but as soon as we stepped foot inside, we knew it wasn't somewhere we could see ourselves living. It was ostentatious and gaudy, with too much self-imposed grandeur for somewhere so beautiful.

We razed the old house to the ground and had this place built in its wake. The three of us own buildings all over the world, property is a great investment, but this house is the first place all of us have ever wanted to call home.

The ground floor was perfect from the time we moved in, but it wasn't until we found Alabama again and remodeled upstairs with her in mind, that it finally felt right. Like we'd been waiting for her the whole time.

I want her to be happy here, and Vik's comment about using her and sending her back to Georgia has niggling doubts squirming to life in my gut. Taking her was about keeping her safe, but there's also a deeper, darker reason that we sought her out in the first place.

She has a purpose for being here that's bigger than the three of us seeing her, wanting her, and taking her. A purpose that doesn't require her to be willing or complicit. There's always a third option, and it's the one that's the least palatable to me. It's a last resort that I hope we don't have to use, but the reality is, if she doesn't step in line, we'll do what we need to do to force her to heel.

Opening up my laptop, I pull up the surveillance notes I made when we first started watching her. She was one of the easiest marks I've ever had, because her life was a series of routines. From the very first day, nothing about her was spontaneous or surprising. She went to work and came home. She bought groceries at the same store every time, shopped for clothes at the same handful of thrift stores, and peered into the same dumpsters on her way to and from work every day.

The only thing that varied in her day-to-day routine was what food Raul would feed her on the days they worked together. I don't know how they became friendly, but there was a comradery with him that she never shared with anyone else in her world.

Clicking through the pages and pages of notes, I find the one I made when I was bored sitting at the back of the bar, discreetly watching her work. It's a list of the things Raul made her and the frequency of how often.

The things he cooked for her weren't fancy, they weren't even the most nutritionally valuable things. In fact, for a while, I'd thought they were completely random choices, based solely on what he was making when she started her shift. Until I realized that there was a pattern.

Along with her routine, I made notes about her appearance, state of mind, and facial expression and judging by his food choices, so did Raul. On days she looked tired, he'd feed her waffles, with syrup and fruit, a sugar fix to give her a boost to get through her shift. When she started to look thin, he'd feed her grilled cheese with bacon and onion rings. If she was angry, or scowling, it'd be bowls of fries, that always seemed to make her smile. Of course, some days, he'd throw something random into the mix, a burger, french toast, wings. But for the most part his choice was directly linked to making her feel better.

If Raul wasn't happily married with two kids, I'd have been worried that he had a thing for her, but after looking into him and his family, I concluded that he was just a good guy. Quickly typing out an email, I arrange for two actors to visit his house and present him with one of those huge checks for a

hundred grand for a fictional competition he'll struggle to remember entering.

I might not have a problem with stalking and kidnapping, but that doesn't make me a monster, and gifting him some money is the least I can do to anonymously thank him for looking after Alabama for us.

There's a handful of unopened emails sitting in my inbox and I slowly open them, replying when I need to, ignoring the ones that hold no interest for me. The final email just has two words written on it.

He's dead.

CHAPTER 11

dimitri

Striding out of the dining room, I head down the corridor and into the boot room where the luggage we brought off the plane with us yesterday is sitting, untouched. The staff have already emptied and laundered the clothes and things from our cases that we sent ahead of our arrival, but they know better than to open these bags.

Ignoring my own bag, I unzip Vik's, rolling my eyes, when I find tape, handcuffs, and a fucking ball gag sitting on the top. Below them is the small leather pouch that I'm looking for, and I lift it out, zipping up the bag again before heading for the kitchen.

Our household staff consist of a couple, Alexander and Roza and their daughter Tanya. Their parents worked for my grandparents in Russia and when we were exiled, they chose to come with us rather than stay behind and have to deal with the shame of working in a less prestigious home within the family.

They are loyal to the core and when I asked them about relocating here, they immediately agreed. Opening up the refrigerator, I grab a small sealed bottle of water and carry it over to the sink. Placing it on the counter beside the leather pouch, I open up the bottom drawer and pull out a tube of superglue.

Moving back to the sink, I open the pouch and take out a syringe and a sealed needle. Opening all of the packaging, I attach the needle to the syringe, then grab the small bottle of

sedative and stab the needle into the top, withdrawing a quarter of the amount I used the last time I sedated her.

Turning the water bottle upside down, I carefully push the tip of the needle through the plastic and inject the sedative into the water. Withdrawing the needle, I open the superglue and fill the minute injection site with glue, sealing the bottle again.

Tipping it the right way up, I shake the bottle, mixing it and ensuring it's completely sealed, before I dispose of the used needle and syringe in the small disposable sharps box that's also in the pouch.

Putting the sedative back into the pouch, I close it and slide it into my pocket. Then I put the glue back into the drawer and offer Roza a pointed look as I stride out of the kitchen without saying a word, the water bottle gripped tightly in my hand. Grabbing my cell, I select a familiar number and hit dial.

"Mr. Belov," the doctor answers on the first ring.

"Dr. Woods, I need you to come to the house."

"Is there a problem? The sedative should have worn off hours ago, is she still unconscious?" His voice is full of concern and fear.

"No, she woke fine. However, she is dehydrated, I'd like you to hook her up to an IV, she needs fluids and is being..." I pause. "Uncooperative."

"Of course, Mr. Belov. I'll get my bag and head straight over."

Ending the call without another word, I stride up the stairs and toward the bedroom. Deactivating the lock, I walk into the room and straight for the closet. The idea of my wife choosing to sleep on the floor rather than in the bed I provided for her is ludicrous. Last night I allowed it, tonight I will not. She is not a common street rat, she is Alena Belova and the Belov's do not sleep in anything but luxury anymore.

Opening the door, I step inside, striding unceremoniously over to the dressing table and crouching down to look beneath

it. Just like I expected, she's curled into the corner, knees bent up to her chest.

"Go away," she hisses weakly.

"You need to drink something," I say, placing the bottle on the floor beside her.

"I'm not eating or drinking anything from you," she growls.

"Examine the bottle, it is unopened, the seal still in place."

"I don't give a fuck—"

Interrupting her I snap, "You will drink the bottle of water, or I will drag you out from there, chain you to the bed, and force it down your fucking throat."

"I'll drink the water out of the tap."

"We're on an island in Brazil, this isn't modern American plumbing, you can't drink the tap water here," I scoff.

Silently I wait, but she doesn't make any move to reach for the bottle. "Fine," I growl. "You prefer to do this the hard way." Lurching forward I make to grab for her, but she reaches for the water and unscrews it, sniffing it before she brings it to her lips.

"All of it," I demand, watching as she thirstily gulps the water down.

It takes her about five minutes, but she finishes the bottle, screwing the top back in place before throwing it at my feet. "There, happy now?" she sasses

"Immensely," I drawl. Pulling the bench out from the center of the room, I sit, leaning forward so I can see her and she can see my face.

"Oh god, are you expecting me to thank you for giving a fuck?" she asks.

Scoffing derisively, I shake my head. "No. Lev likes to believe we saved you, but you and I both know that even though we might have, that's not why we took you."

“So why did you?” she asks.

“Because of who you are,” I tell her. “And because we could,” I admit.

“Who are you?”

“I am Dimitri Belov and the others are Lev Adamovich and Viktor Sorokin.”

“Those are your names but *who* are you?” she asks astutely.

“To you, we’re nothing more than rich villains who stole you. But I suppose to others we may represent something different.”

“Like what?”

“To some, we’re entrepreneurs who made billions before we turned thirty. To others we’re dangerous men who do as we please, because we’re wealthy enough to be above the law.”

Pausing, she rubs at her eyes. “Who are you to the man you think is my father?”

“Clever girl,” I praise. “To Grigoriy Polakoff, we’re probably nothing but an ancient memory.”

“But what...?” she asks, her voice slurred. “But if he remembered...” Her words trail off as her eyes roll back and her head slumps to the side.

Holding my breath, I wait to see if she wakes up again, but her eyelids don’t even flutter, her muscles going lax as all of the tension leaves her.

“Alena.” She doesn’t stir. “Alena,” I call again louder, but still, she doesn’t move or do anything to suggest she can hear me. Bending down, I get onto my knees, then reach for her, running the back of my knuckles over the apple of her cheek.

Her skin is soft, but slightly cool to the touch. Curling my arms under her, I slide her from beneath the table then stand, bringing her with me, her prone body cradled in my arms. Exiting the closet, I walk to the bed, and lower her to the mattress. She’s still in the clothes she was wearing when we

picked her up yesterday and I wrinkle my nose, imagining how dirty she must feel.

Moving down to the end of the bed, I start at her feet, unlacing the scuffed and worn boots and pulling them off, dropping them on the floor. I remove her socks next, smiling silently at the fact that one's pink, while the other is green. Moving to her waist, I pause over the button on her jeans, then reach down and unfasten it, sliding the zipper down before I pull the tight, threadbare denim over her hips, revealing cotton underwear that must originally have been white, but is now a dull gray color. Dragging the jeans off her feet, I drop them to the floor with the other things, then move upward.

Her shirt is black, the raw hem sitting just above her belly button, and clinging to her body like a second skin. I already know that her chest is bare beneath the fabric, but I still suck in an awed breath when I inch the shirt upward exposing her full, high tits and rosy pink nipples.

Lifting her head with one hand, I slide the fabric over her face, pulling it free of her hair and leaving her naked, except for her ugly gray panties. A voice in the back of my mind tells me to leave her underwear on and if I was a better man, I would. But I'm not a good man, I never have been, so I hook my fingers into the waist and slide them down and off, until she's completely exposed to my hungry gaze.

Ignoring the pile of clothes on the floor, I walk into the bathroom and start the bath, running the water until it's the right temperature. Grabbing a cloth, soap, shampoo, and conditioner, I head back into the bedroom and lift her into my arms again. Placing her in the warm water, I wait for her to wake up, but when it's clear she isn't going to, I coat the cloth in soap and then supporting her head with one hand, I bathe her.

Starting with her arms, I rub the soapy cloth over her limbs, cleaning her skin while avoiding her breasts and pussy. When the rest of her is clean, I drop the cloth and apply soap to my palm instead. Stroking my hand over first one breast, then the other, I coat her skin and nipple in soap, learning the curves of each tit before stroking my thumb over her pebbled

nipples. Getting more soap, I slide my hand between her thighs, parting her legs so I can watch as my fingers move between her folds.

Her mound is mostly bare, with just a neat strip of hair down the center. For a moment I consider shaving her, removing all of her hair, so she's smooth, ready to be licked and teased, but eventually decide against it. I want her to be awake and aware when I prepare her body just the way I like it.

Finding her clit, I push back the hood and circle it with my finger, then move lower and slide a single finger into her cunt. She's hot and obscenely tight, her muscles fighting me as I try to push a second in to join the first.

Despite her unconscious state, her cunt is wet, preparing itself even as her body is unaware and I push my fingers in and out, stretching her. It wouldn't take much to lift her from the tub, part her legs and replace my fingers with my cock. I could push my dick into her heat and claim her right here and now on the bathroom floor. But the first time I take her, I want to watch her eyes widen as my dick stretches her. I want to see the moment she realizes she belongs to me. And as tempting as she is, I won't use her when she's unconscious. At least not the first time.

Sliding lower, I find her ass, pressing the tip of my fingers against the ring of muscle. When it doesn't immediately relax, I push a little harder and eventually, the muscle gives way and the tip of my finger slides into her. From the way her body tries to push me back out, it's obvious she doesn't regularly indulge in ass play, but that's something she'll need to learn to love. Because all three of us will be getting in this tight ass of hers and it'll be better for all of us if she's enjoying it as much as we will.

I fuck her ass in slow, shallow thrusts for a moment, then pull my finger free and quickly wash and condition her hair. Once I'm finished, I lift her from the tub and wrap her in a towel, drying as much of her skin as I can. I'm soaked by the time I pull back the covers and lay her back down on the bed,

so I enter the closet and quickly change, pulling on sweats and a shirt, rather than a suit, like I usually wear.

Opening up a drawer in her dresser, I find it full of sexy silk and lace teddies, but no pajamas that weren't intended to be taken off. Giving up on her side of the closet, I pull a soft T-shirt from my dresser and head back to her, carefully pulling it over her head and sliding it down her body.

Returning to the bathroom, I find a hairbrush, then brush out her wet hair, pulling it over her shoulder and plaiting it. I've just pulled the covers up to her waist when Roza knocks on the door, the doctor standing beside her.

"Dr. Wood, come in." I politely order, nodding dismissively at Roza, who glances worriedly at the girl before turning and leaving.

"Is she asleep?" he asks quietly. "I can come back."

"That won't be necessary, please come in."

The doctor's brow furrows, but he steps forward because that's what I'm paying him to do. He doesn't know all the details, but he's the one who calculated the dose of sedative to keep her unconscious while we transported her to the island, and though he doesn't know for certain, he must suspect that she's not here of her own free will.

"She's sedated," I tell him simply without offering any more of an explanation. "I got her to drink some water, but she's still dehydrated so if you could put in an IV, it can be administered while she's asleep."

His lips part and I can see the indecision in his face, but he must decide that the obscene amount of money we're paying him to be the resident doctor for the island—and the fact that he would almost certainly be killed by some rather unpleasant men he owes money to if he were to step foot back onto US soil—outweigh his moral objections.

Stepping up to the side of the bed, he places his leather bag on the comforter next to her and then starts to lift out the items he'll need to insert the IV that will administer the fluids she needs. He even has a folding stand that he pushes together and

hooks the bag of fluid to. I watch as he pushes the needle into her vein, taping it in place then checking the bag before stepping back.

“I’d like you to do a full examination on her too. We couldn’t find any medical records to suggest she’s had any illnesses that have required medical care in the last year, and there’s nothing of concern about her childhood medical records, but I want bloodwork done to check she’s free of all diseases.”

“I don’t...” he starts.

“I’m aware that you don’t have the facilities to do that kind of testing on the island, so my men will escort you to the mainland.”

“Perhaps we should wait,” he starts again.

“Now. Dr. Wood,” I say, my tone flat and full of warning.

Sighing, he nods, then steps forward, pulling out more medical equipment as he starts to examine her. Fifteen minutes later, he slides three vials of blood into his medical bag, and starts to pack away his equipment.

“I’d like you to remove the birth control implant she has in her arm,” I tell him stoically.

“Mr. Belov,” he gasps.

“Either you do it with your medical training and steady hand, or I’ll do it with a knife,” I say, arching a brow.

Exhaling, he pulls a sealed package from his bag, ripping it open and revealing a kidney shaped bowl, with a scalpel, gauze, and a suture kit. His hand is shaking as he examines each arm, finding the spot where the tiny implant is sitting beneath her skin. Turning away from her, he fills a needle with something and injects it into arm, near where he was examining.

“Anything bigger than a scratch on her skin and I’ll mark you in the same way you mark her,” I warn.

His face pales to a sickly gray color, but he drags in a shaky breath, and when he exhales and lifts his hand again, it’s

steady. My eyes watch as he cuts through her skin with the scalpel, making a tiny incision. Taking a pair of metal tweezers I hadn't noticed from the bowl, he pushes them into her arm and after a few moments, pulls out a thin plastic rod about an inch long.

Blood is coating the rod, the tweezers, and dripping down her arm, and I clamp my jaw together, stopping myself from killing him for making her bleed.

Dropping the tweezers into the bowl, he picks up the gauze and presses it against the cut on her arm. "I numbed the area before I made the incision so she won't feel any pain for a few hours and it should be nothing more than sore once it wears off. I don't think it'll need a stitch, but I can put one in, if you wish. Alternatively, as soon as the bleeding stops, I can just put a band-aid."

"Whatever you think best," I tell him stiffly.

Five minutes later, there's a band-aid over the tiny wound on her arm, and Dr. Wood is pointedly avoiding my gaze while he peels off his gloves and drops them into a medical waste bag that he's already put all the other used equipment and needles into.

"There's a helicopter waiting to take you to the testing facility on the mainland. They have assured me the results can be provided within an hour, so I'll await your call."

"Of course, Mr. Belov. I'll call you as soon as I have them. Please let me know if you have any concerns on any other medical related issues."

"Thank you." Dismissing him, my gaze moves back to the girl sleeping in the bed.

CHAPTER 12

alabama

Waking up, my body feels heavy, like I'm being weighed down by something. It's not the normally lethargy that comes with sleep, but a strange otherness that makes me feel like a foreign entity within my own body.

The first thing that I register when my limbs start to feel like my own, is that whatever I'm lying on is comfortable. When I first moved in with Monica, it took weeks for the panic to abate when I woke up warm and dry, safe and alone.

After sleeping on the floor in the closet even for one night, not feeling, hard, cold wood beneath me feels foreign and strange. Blinking my heavy eyes open, I look up at a white ceiling and a modern air conditioning vent. The weight I can feel is actually a heavy comforter that's covering me to mid chest, and the comfort I'm feeling is because I'm lying in the middle of the enormous orgy bed.

Bolting upright I feel a tugging at my arm. Movement to my right makes me realize I'm not alone, and I shriek as I try to climb from the bed. Pain laces up my right arm as I scramble to free myself from the comforter and then there's strong hands on me, holding me down.

"Settle," a familiar voice orders, gruff and annoyed.

I open my mouth to scream, but he lifts a hand and speaks before I can. "You passed out while we were talking, and I called a doctor. You were extremely dehydrated, so Dr. Wood hooked you up to some IV fluid, which is what is currently still attached to your arm. If you rip the needle out, you'll hurt

yourself and will only need to have it reinserted. So, settle down and try to behave, so you don't cause more injury to yourself."

I let him gently reposition me in the bed so I'm close enough to the IV stand that has a half empty bag hanging from it. "A doctor?" I croak, my throat dry.

"Here," he says, opening a bottle of water and putting in a straw before bringing it to my lips. "Drink."

Taking the end of the straw between my lips, I suck, and cold, refreshing water fills my mouth. When I stop drinking, he takes the bottle and places it on the bedside cabinet. Making sure not to disturb the IV, I wiggle up the bed until I'm sitting up, looking down at the gray T-shirt I'm wearing.

"Where are my clothes?"

"The doctor removed them so he could examine you," Dimitri tells me calmly.

"So where are they?"

"He had to cut them from you."

"What?" I gasp.

"You were unconscious, it was an emergency situation." His shrug is so unaffected that I want to scream.

"I passed out, that hardly classes as an emergency," I scoff.

"You have been out for almost four hours," he says coldly. "Dr. Wood was concerned it was something more serious, so he performed a full physical and took bloodwork to rule out more serious conditions. He rushed via helicopter to the mainland to get the results. He called me about an hour ago to inform me that other than the dehydration and some signs of malnutrition, you're in perfect health."

"I'm not malnourished," I sneer, rolling my eyes.

"The doctor didn't even have to weigh you to see that you're underweight. He suggested a carefully monitored diet as well as protein shakes for a while until you get to a healthy weight."

“What happened to my arm?” I ask, looking at the band-aid that’s stuck to my skin.

“My apologies, I scratched you when I had to crawl under the vanity to get you after you passed out. The doctor disinfected it, and then put a band-aid on to keep it clean.”

“Does your doctor know that you kidnapped me and that I’m a prisoner?” I snap.

“Yes,” Dimitri says simply. “If you’re thinking of escaping, you will find that no one on this island will be willing to risk their own lives to save yours. Every man, woman, or child here is loyal to Lev, Vik, and I. They will not help you and if they try, know they will die because of you.”

Ice fills my veins as I stare up into the unyielding eyes of a monster. “So that’s it. I’m supposed to accept that this is my life now, that we’re apparently fucking married, even though I never agreed, or actually attended a wedding, and I’m stuck here on this island with three strangers just because you say so?”

“That’s exactly what you’re going to do, Malishka, because there is no alternative.”

“Can you just go away, please. I want to be on my own,” I gasp, refusing to cry again.

“I will go and arrange for some food for you. I will accept no argument. You will eat. Do you understand?”

Laying my head back on the pillow, I close my eyes and nod. What’s the point of arguing? If what he said is true, then I’m stuck here. A prisoner with no hope of escape. When I hear the sound of the door closing and the lock clicking into place, I open my eyes and take stock of my body.

The arm the IV is attached to feels slightly numb and cold, but otherwise pain free. The place where the band-aid is stuck to my arm is sore, but not really painful. I have the start of a dull headache behind my eyes, but I suppose if I passed out, I might have hit my head, or it could just be tension from everything that’s happened in the last couple of days. The most terrifying ache is the one I feel between my legs. I’m not sore,

it's nothing like the pain I felt after the one and only time I had sex, but things down there definitely don't feel untouched.

Fingers shaking, I push my hand beneath the comforter and between my legs, only now realizing that I'm no longer wearing underwear. Probing, I exhale a relieved breath when I'm not sore to the touch and there's no evidence of any cum having been in or on me—that stuff doesn't just wipe away. What's equally terrifying is that my ass is sore too. I have never done anything that involved anyone or anything going near that hole and to feel that I've been violated in that way has me shaking with fear.

“What's the matter? Are you okay?” Dimitri demands, stalking over to me, his hand poised to touch me.

“No. Don't touch me,” I yell, batting his hand away.

“Stop, why are you upset?”

“Who touched me?” I demand.

“I already told you, the doctor examined you,” he says calmly.

“And did that require an internal examination too?” I snap.

“Yes,” he snaps back. “He performed a full physical, although he suggested we take you to a gynecologist as well, as that is not his area of expertise.”

“What?” I gasp. “He touched me while I was unconscious?”

A smirk tips up the corner of his lips. “Do you have a medical kink, Malishka? Shall I tell you all about how he inserted his speculum into your cunt, how he opened you wide and touched you. What about when he pushed his gloved fingers into your ass to palpate you,” he drawls, his voice dropping to a seductive rasp.

“No, shut up, you sick motherfucker,” I shriek, grimacing as I lift my hands to cover my ears.

I flinch when his fingers wrap around my wrists, gently pulling them away from my face. “Do not hurt yourself,” he scolds.

“You let someone touch me when I was unconscious,” I hiss angrily. “How can I protect myself when I’m passed out, you asshole? How do you know he didn’t do anything fucked up to me?”

“I know exactly what he did, because I was standing beside him as he did it,” he answers.

“You what?” I gasp.

“Dr. Wood works for me, he did as I instructed him to do and only what I instructed him to do. You will learn, Malishka, that I am willing to do whatever is required to keep you healthy and safe. Regardless of your feelings about it.”

There’s a knock at the door and Dimitri stands, marches over, opens it and then returns with a plate filled with an oozing grilled cheese sandwich and a vibrant salad. Placing a napkin over my lap, he settles the plate on top, then gestures to it. “Eat.”

I open my mouth to tell him I’m not hungry, but before I can speak, his eyes narrow in warning.

Sighing, I lift up half of the grilled cheese and take a bite. The bread is warm and crispy, the cheese salty and gooey and delicious, and I can’t help it, I moan as the taste fills my mouth.

“Khoroshey devochkoy,” he utters with a soft smile.

It takes everything in me not to melt into the sound of his voice when he just said whatever he said to me. I don’t know what language it was, or what it meant, but it was the first time that his voice has sounded soothing and soft.

Despite wanting to throw the plate at his face, the food is too good and I end up finishing the grilled cheese.

“The salad,” he prompts, nodding to the pile of chopped veggies.

“I don’t eat anything that’s green.”

“Ridiculous, eat it.”

“No. I don’t like lettuce or cucumber or...” I poke at something that’s mixed in with the lettuce. “Whatever that is.”

“A balanced diet is required to keep you healthy.”

“Well like you said, I’m in pretty good health and I’ve never eaten any of this crap before, so I must not need it.”

His nose wrinkles, but he doesn’t argue when I wipe my fingers on the napkin, then fold it on top of the plate.

“How long does this have to be in for?” I ask, jiggling my arm and making the tube connected to it move.

“Dr. Wood will remove it when the bag is empty.”

“Why am I really here, Dimitri?” I ask.

“I’ve told you—”

“I want the real reason. Not the bullshit excuse about keeping me safe. I want the honest truth. You owe me that much.”

“Fine,” he sighs, pulling his cell from his pocket and typing something. Within minutes, the other two stroll through the bedroom door, looking at me quizzically before turning their questioning gazes to Dimitri.

“Ale—” He stops himself before calling me Alena. “Alabama has asked that we tell her the truth about why she is here. I thought it best that we were all here when I explained.”

“It looks like you’ve been busy.” Vik winks.

“I passed out,” I say, wondering why he didn’t know.

“I told you she looked dehydrated,” Dimitri says pointedly.

Lev looks from Dimitri, to me, then back again. “We’ll talk about her... health later.”

Dimitri nods and I try to figure out what that means, but Lev turns and addresses me. “You’re here because of who your father is,” he says bluntly.

“Does he know you’ve kidnapped me? Does he care? He’s never given a fuck about me before. If you were hoping to ransom me or whatever, I think you really did pick the wrong

person. Send me home and find another one of his kids, someone he actually cares about.”

“Alabama, your father is dead,” Lev says softly.

“Oh. So, I can leave? It’s pretty hard to get a dead man to give you something.” I laugh.

“He’s dead?” Dimitri asks Lev, a gleam of excitement flashing in his eyes.

“Yes. I got word a couple of hours ago,” Lev confirms.

I don’t know what relationship these three men had with the man they believe is my father, but it’s clear none of them are grieving his death as matching smiles stretch across all three men’s faces.

“How long till they start looking?” Vik asks.

“According to my intel, their jet left an hour ago, the flight schedule that was submitted said they were traveling to America,” Lev says, still grinning.

“Hey, if he’s dead, it means you don’t need me anymore. Right?” I ask.

“Oh, Baby, that’s where you’re wrong, him being dead is exactly why we need you.” Vik laughs, his face twisting into a joker style smile that makes me shiver in response.

“Let me tell you a story,” Dimitri says. “Once upon a time there were several families, who all lived and worked together. Instead of one person being in charge, the oldest male relative of each family formed a council of sorts, working together and sharing the money and power they amassed. For generations, the families prospered, powerful, wealthy, and feared by those that thought to oppose them. Then one family got greedy, they didn’t want to share the money and influence all the families together had gained. The oldest male decided that one ruler would be better and he and his descendants preyed on the weaker families, convincing them that he alone should be the king, the ruler, the Pakhan.”

As Dimitri speaks, the smiles slide from the guys’ faces, replaced with angry scowls.

“We were five, when our families were forced to leave the homes we’d lived in for generations and flee to America to start our lives anew. The Pakhan exiled our families and forbade them from ever returning to Mother Russia, the land that was their birthright. Our grandfathers and fathers before us sought revenge, wanting to reclaim the thrones that were theirs by right. But they failed at every turn, because the Pakhan and his Avtoritets had become even more powerful and deadly, until they were almost untouchable.

“Lev, Vik, and I could have chosen a life seeking revenge, but we decided not to. Instead, we focused on succeeding, in forging our own paths; finding our own power and wealth. But once we were rich and powerful, we lost interest in business and control and instead searched for mayhem and destruction for a while. Three years ago, we’d grown bored of chaos and while we were searching for something new to keep our interest, we found you.”

Swallowing thickly, I shake my head.

Scoffing lightly, Lev starts to talk. “You were seventeen, just a few months off turning eighteen and graduating high school. I only saw you twice, but you were different back then. Softer, less wary. We knew who you were, but your aunt helped us. She took you to a clinic and we tested your blood against your father’s to make sure you really were his child. Then before we had a chance to bring you here, you disappeared, gone in the blink of an eye.”

“We searched for you for over a year, but it was like you just vanished. You never went back to school, never used your cell, never called or visited your aunt or any of your friends again. You just ceased to exist. Until a year ago,” Vik says, making goosebumps pebble across my skin.

“Then you just popped up one day, working and living in Columbus. We’ve been watching you ever since.” Dimitri smiles at me, a cunning, terrifying smile.

“Why?” I breathe, the sound barely audible.

“When we first started watching, I don’t think we really knew what we were going to do with you,” Lev admits.

“But once we started, we couldn’t stop.” Viktor smirks.

“Then we found out your father was dying,” Dimitri says. “The laws he put in place say that his crown would pass to any male heir he produced. But he never had a son. He had several wives, but he never had any children, except for you.”

“But I’m a girl,” I whisper.

“Yes, you are,” Viktor says, licking his lips lasciviously.

“Do you know what else the rules your father wrote say?” Dimitri asks, then answers before I have a chance to tell him that I don’t want to know any more at all, that I want him to stop talking and let me go.

“They say that if there’s only a female heir, the crown passes to her husband.”

“So, this is about you wanting this metaphorical crown?” I ask, confused.

“No, Ali, we don’t want the crown,” Viktor says.

Lev shakes his head, his eyes not the calm they’ve been since I woke up, but a crazed maniac hellbent on destruction. “We want to destroy it all.”

Alabama's eyes go wide, then something shutters over them and she closes herself off, a blank mask sliding over her face that dulls her emotions and thoughts down to an expression I've never seen before on her.

"So, you kidnapped me and created this fake marriage, so that you could dangle me on a carrot to the crazy Russian Mafia people and have them think that I'm their boss's sole surviving heir? Then what, you plan to just stroll into Mafia HQ and blow the place to smithereens?"

"In the most basic terms, yes." I nod.

"I'm from the ass back end of fucking nowhere Georgia and even I know that's a stupid fucking idea. Do you seriously think they're going to just let the sons of the men they kicked out of their little boys club and exiled from an entire fucking country just take over, because of some stupid clause written into an antiquated Mafia handbook? If the dude's dead, whoever has taken over will either write their own rules, or they'll already have covered the bases to make sure that some bastard kid of a whore the dead guy fucked can't walk in and lay claim to the castle. I mean, seriously, did you put any thought into this plan at all?"

It's bizarre to watch her spit angry vitriol at us, without even an ounce of emotion on her face. But even though I don't like this blank version of her, I can't help smiling at the patronizing words that are falling from her lips.

“Your father found out he was dying about three weeks ago. Whenever he had a significant victory, he would always raise a glass to himself to celebrate his own impressiveness. His love of expensive whiskey is well known and when a bottle of the infamous Macallan 1926 was put up for auction, he couldn’t resist, spending over a million dollars to own one of only forty bottles of this particular blend that was ever made. What he didn’t know is that the lethal poison Polonium was injected into that particular bottle, making it both his prize and his downfall,” Dimitri says, smiling wistfully. “When he opened that bottle to celebrate how brilliant he was, he sealed his own fate. Polonium is the perfect killer, because by the time you figure out what’s wrong with you, it’s too late, there’s no cure, only an agonizing death.”

“You,” she whispers, failing to hide the horror on her face, “You killed him.”

“No, Malishka, he killed himself. Very few people are so conceited as to celebrate themselves. Had Grigoriy not been a smug, self-serving asshole, the bottle would have remained untouched and he would be alive.”

“The moment he knew he was dying; he told his closest men that he had a daughter and where to find you. Instead of seeking you to take his very last opportunity to meet his daughter in his final days, he gifted you like chattel to his closest Avtoritet, his second In command, Pavel Orlov, he signed your betrothal in his blood.”

“What?” she whispers.

“You and Pavel Orlov are betrothed. The Pakhan’s final gift was you,” Dimitri tells her calmly.

“It’s not the eighteen hundreds, people don’t get betrothed anymore,” she says, shaking her head.

“Maybe not normal people, but in the old country, in the Mafia, they do. Women are traded like cattle, used as broodmares or whores and then discarded or thrown to the made men to use up and kill. Orlov is sixty-five, he’s had four wives and sixteen children. His last wife killed herself after he punished her for giving birth to a baby girl and not the boy he

wanted. He killed his daughter, then locked his wife in a dog cage, cut a hole in the metal of the back and allowed every one of his men to take a turn, three days after she gave birth. She was so traumatized; she threw herself out of a third-floor window the moment they let her out of the cage.”

“Oh my god,” she whispers, covering her mouth with a shaking hand.

“Your father gave you to that man. He knew he was dying and instead of keeping you a secret to protect you, he described in detail how tight your mother’s cunt was when he filled her with his cum. He talked about how he fucked her over and over in every hole and that if her pussy hadn’t been so stretched and destroyed after she pushed you out, he’d planned to bring her to Russia and add her to his stable of whores. He laughed with his men as he told them if you were anywhere near as good as fuck as your mother, that Orlov should enjoy breaking you in as his new bride,” Dimi tells her, his eyes hooded and dark, filled with the same anger we all feel whenever we’re reminded of the man Grigoriy Polakoff is.

“Will you kill Orlov?” she whispers.

“Yes,” Vik answers.

“Why?”

“Because he has the audacity to think you could ever belong to him,” he tells her.

“You didn’t bring me here to protect me, you want to use me too.”

“Yes and no.” Dimi shrugs. “We took you because we needed you to gain access to the inner circle. But that wasn’t the only reason.”

“Then why?” she asks, her voice so quiet I can barely hear her.

“Because you’re ours,” I tell her honestly. I wait for Dimi to object, but the truth is, even though none of us have really ever said we all want her, we do. Vik thinks Dimi and I don’t know that the cameras we placed in her home and work were permanently playing on his phone. Just like Dimi likes to

pretend that he wasn't furious when we found out Grigoriy had gifted Alabama to Pavel fucking Orlov.

If we were all honest, I think we'd agree that from the very first time we saw her at her aunt's house when she was a teenager, we all became consumed by the beautiful, enigmatic girl. She's not a girl now though. She may only be twenty, but she's all woman, and judging by the fact that she's only wearing one of Dimi's shirts and in the bed, rather than hiding under a table in the closet. Dimi clearly reached his limits and did whatever he had to, to get her where he wants her and at least pretending to be compliant.

Clambering up the bed, Vik flops down beside her, propping himself up on his elbow and invading her personal space as he smirks that smirk that's had women throwing their underwear at him our entire lives. "Don't you think it'd be fun to be ours?" he purrs seductively.

"I think one man would be hard work, three kidnappers that are hellbent on using me for revenge and mayhem sounds like a nightmare," she says sarcastically.

"We wouldn't be using you if you were in on the plan too. We could all work together, the four of us. We could destroy the Russian Mafia, blow them to pieces from the inside out," Vik coaxes.

"Until two days ago, I'd never even thought about the Russian Mafia. I don't want to be involved in your destruction," she sighs, shaking her head.

"You've been involved since the day you were born, Alena. This is as much your world as it is ours, and if you're not fighting, then you're losing. We can put you on a plane back to America this afternoon, but I give you less than a week and Orlov or one of his men will have a bag over your head and you bundled in the cargo hold of a plane and out of America before you can say Mother-fucking-Russia. How long do you think it'd take him to break you? How long till he rapes you, fills you with his kid and then locks you in cage for not giving him a son? No one will protect you from him. They

don't care that you're the dead Pakhan's daughter. To them you're just a hole to be used, then thrown away."

She grimaces at Dimi's words, shaking her head to deny them, even though I can see from her face that as much as she doesn't want to admit it, she knows that what he's saying is true.

"Why did my mother have to be such a fucking whore?" she growls, tipping her head back and looking at the ceiling. "I mean turning tricks is the oldest profession in the world, but she was the only prostitute in a town of less than a thousand people. How the hell did she end up getting knocked up by a fucking Mafia boss? You can't make this shit up."

She's rambling in the way I've watched her do a thousand times before, only now I'm not watching her talk to herself, like she did so much while we peered into the room when she thought no one was looking. I'm here, close enough to touch and I want to. I want to reach out and hold her hand, put my palm on her thigh and kiss her. I want to comfort her, and I want her to want it.

"How do you know they won't just kill you all on sight?" she asks, looking to Dimi for answers.

"Because we won't just be walking into the lion's den waving around a DNA test," he says calmly.

"We're business men." Vik smirks.

Scoffing, Alabama gives him the side eye. "I thought you were kidnapers and murderers."

"That too." Vik winks.

"But we're businessmen as well," I add. "The moment his death was announced, we submitted a claim on his estate with you as his next of kin. You are his only surviving relative, except for an elderly aunt. He murdered everyone else in his family the moment he thought they looked like they could be thinking about taking his crown. The moment the claim is substantiated, and it will be, you will become the sole heir to his fortune."

"I don't want his money," she spits.

“Good, because you won’t be touching any of it. His Russian bank accounts have the equivalent of about a hundred thousand dollars in them. His real assets are hidden in offshore accounts that Orlov will have been frantically trying to find and access since your father took his last labored breath. What none of them know is that we drained all of your father’s hidden accounts months ago. Grigoriy was compulsively private, he didn’t trust technology or the internet because he was essentially technologically illiterate, but too prideful to admit that he didn’t know how to do something. He had his lawyer handle all of his affairs that required any kind of online activity. Unfortunately for him, his lawyers weren’t much better at technology than he was and so his legal estate is in a mess. Since we found you again a year ago, we have been slowly taking everything we could from Grigoriy and the rest of the spineless idiots who work for him. The Mafia’s strength is in its ability to close ranks, but for the families that were left behind after we were exiled, appearance is everything.

“Good Mafia bosses cannot be seen to be on the verge of bankruptcy and that’s where we’ve left everyone except for Orlov and your father. The shoulders upon which the Pakhan sits are weakened and now, with your help, we’re going to make the whole thing crumble to the ground,” Dimi announces with a grin.

“If you’ve done all of this already. Why not just destroy them without involving me?” she asks.

“Because we want to see the look on Pavel Orlov’s face when we put a bullet through his skull,” Vik says, his voice full of bloodlust and chaos.

“And the only way you can get close enough to kill him, is with me to get you through the door,” she surmises.

“Yes,” I agree.

“Once he’s dead, I’ll be free, right?” Longing clear in her tone.

“You’ll never be free. Not now. We plan to destroy the Pakhan and his Avtoritets, but we’re not naive enough to think that they won’t rebuild.” Dimi smirks.

“That’s actually what we’re banking on,” I say with a nod.

“I don’t understand?” Her voice sounds strained and I wonder if we’ve put too much on her, when she’s already sick from the sedative.

“As much as I wish we could destroy the Mafia completely, it’s a fool’s dream. The underworld will always need people to control it, to lead and dominate, because without it, everyday life would crumble. Taking out the Pakhan and the families will just pave the way for a new Mafia to be born,” Dimi tells her.

“With you at the helm?” she gasps.

“No,” I say quickly. “We don’t want to rule or be a part of the Mafia. That’s never been our aim. But by hand picking and placing the men we have chosen to create a new Mafia; we can control the narrative right from the off.”

“You’re the Wizard of Oz,” she whispers.

“Exactly,” Vik says excitedly. “We’re the man or men, or a guess men and woman behind the curtain. We’ll know everything, be the ones steering the ship, but no one will know that we orchestrate everything.”

“So why won’t I be safe?” she asks.

“Because no matter where you live, or what you call yourself, you’ll always be Alena Grigoriyovna Polakoff, the daughter of the most feared Pakhan of a brutal Mafia family. Away from this island, you’d spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder, questioning if the person on the street is a friend or a sleeper cell from the old country looking for revenge for your father’s sins. You’ll never be free of your birthright unless you stop being Alena Polakoff and become Alabama Belova, the cosseted, protected wife of a billionaire business mogul.”

Exhaling wearily, she rubs at her eyes with the hand that isn’t restricted by the IV line. “Damned if I do, and fucked if I don’t,” she whispers to herself, shaking her head. “Such a fucking whore.”

“We can protect you,” I tell her.

“We can give you everything your heart or body desires.” Vik winks.

“We won’t ever let you go,” Dimi says, but it comes out like more of a threat than an enticement.

“And if I say no?” she questions.

“We do it anyway,” Dimi says coldly, “We do not need your cooperation, the first strike has already been made, but it would be better for all of us if you were with us, rather than against us. This island, this house, it doesn’t have to be a prison, it can be your palace.”

“With bars on the doors,” she sighs.

“Every life has bars. Your life in Georgia was destroyed by two simple happenstances. Without money and a job, you would have been homeless. Tell me how that life was any broader than this one. The shores of this island might be what contains all of us, but the metaphorical bars on your old life were more binding than the edges of paradise here would be,” I coax.

A knock at the door silences us all and Dimi walks to answer it, talking silently to Roza, then Dr. Wood, before escorting him in. The doctor’s skin is pale, and there’s a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead that I don’t think is from the tropical heat.

Walking over to the bed, he examines Alabama’s arm, then quickly unhooks the IV needle, packing all of the medical supplies away in his bag, before turning and leaving without uttering a word.

“We should leave Alabama to rest,” I announce, looking pointedly to Dimi and Vik. “Join us downstairs for dinner later,” I tell her, then follow Dimi and Vik out of the door.

I don’t activate the lock, but I don’t think she’ll make a run for it. Now she knows who and what we are, I’d like to think she’s intelligent enough to know that running would not only be pointless, but also dangerous for her. Especially now.

Descending the stairs, I follow the others into the office, closing the door before turning and glaring at Dimi. “What the

hell did you do?" I demand.

"What?" He shrugs nonchalantly.

"Why did Dr. Wood look like he was about to piss his fucking pants? When did Alabama pass out and why the fuck didn't you tell us?"

"I told you she looked dehydrated," he says, turning away to sit behind his desk.

My cell beeps and I pull it from my pocket, bringing the screen to life. There's a video file from Vik and glancing at him quizzically I open it.

The video is silent, but I watch as my brother doctors a bottle of water with something in a hypodermic needle. The video cuts to Dimi sitting on the bench in front of the vanity table in the closet while Alabama drinks from a bottle of water. It cuts again, to Dimi carefully pulling her from beneath the table and carrying her into the bedroom. I watch with bated breath as he peels off her clothes then takes her unconscious body into the bathroom.

Hitting pause, I glare at him. "What did you do?"

"Keep watching, you didn't even get to the good part yet." Vik chuckles, his cell in one hand, his other hand palming his cock beneath his pants.

I know I shouldn't, but I hit play and the video starts again. My dick hardens as Dimi bathes her, gently caressing her skin with a cloth, before washing her hair. I'm not expecting it, when he drops the cloth and starts to touch her breasts, cupping each one as her nipples pebble and tighten. My cock twitches and I almost come in my pants when he reaches between her legs and starts to play with her pretty pussy.

"How did she feel?" Vik asks a little breathlessly, his hand still stroking his dick.

"Tight," Dimi croaks. "So fucking tight I could barely get two fingers inside of her."

"Is she a virgin?" I pant, hating myself for asking, but needing to know.

“No, but she’s not a whore either. Her ass was untouched, so god damned tight I could barely get the tip of my finger into her virgin hole. I can’t wait to watch my dick stretch her out. It’ll take some time to train her to take us all, but her body was made for fucking.”

“Jesus,” Vik groans, his dick out of his pants now as he blows his load into a piece of off white fabric.

“You couldn’t have waited to do that in the bathroom?” I snap.

“Why would I wait? Watching Dimi finger her holes her while she was unconscious was hot as fuck. If we’re going to share her, we need to get used to basically living in a lifelong circle jerk.” He laughs.

“Did you...?” I trail off, struggling to find the words to ask my best friend if he raped his fake wife’s unconscious body.

“No,” he answers quickly, knowing what I was asking without me having to actually say the words.

“Good, that would have been. Fuck, that would have been bad.”

“Yeah, rape’s totally bad, but a bit of light fingering, that’s fine,” Vik scoffs, letting the fabric in his hand unfurl until I realize it’s a pair of panties.

“Where the fuck?” I ask.

“They were on the floor.” He smirks. “Do you think she’d wear these for me? I think I like the idea of her wearing panties that are wet with my cum.”

“Throw those things in the fucking trash, the only clothes she’ll wear from now on are the ones we buy for her,” Dimi growls.

“We should have saved the stuff from her apartment. I barely slept, listening to her cry last night.”

“My wife will never wear thrift store or dumpster trash clothes again,” Dimi snarls, his muscles taugth with anger.

“Our wife,” I remind him. “She may have your name, but she’s not just yours, she’s all of ours.”

CHAPTER 14

alabama

The moment they all leave I pull in a shuddering breath, clamping my hand over my mouth to stifle the sound. Fear rushes through my veins, making terror ricochet my entire body as I process everything they just told me.

Part of me doesn't want to believe anything they just said, but what would be the point in them lying? I'm here, their prisoner on an island in the middle of fucking nowhere. I have no way of escaping, and I believe Dimitri was telling me the complete truth when he said that anyone who tries to help me escape will be killed.

The stupid thing is, now that I know why I'm here, the three men that took me feel like the least scary thing about this whole situation. I don't know how my mom got mixed up with a Russian mobster, or if I am this big boss's daughter, but these men believe it to be true. Which means if Grigoriy did give me to his second in command as some kind of fucked-up gift, then I really am in danger. And as much as I don't want to feel even an ounce of gratitude toward my kidnappers, being here, in relative safety, is much better than finding myself as some psycho old guy's new whore.

It's ironic that being the daughter of a prostitute taught me to value my body. I was barely a teenager when I vowed that I'd never follow in my mother's footsteps, and I'd always choose the people that I allow to touch me.

Unfortunately, when you're from a small town where everyone knows your mom used to offer blow jobs in exchange for grocery gift cards, it was almost impossible not

to be judged by her reputation. Teenage boys can be cruel and relentless and by the time I was in eighth grade, I knew none of them would ever treat me with enough respect for me to allow them anywhere near me. So, when I boarded the bus away from Aunt Darla at eighteen, I was a virgin.

There is nothing romantic about being a homeless teenager, and in a city the size of Columbus there are a lot of kids on the streets. I fell foul of lots of hardened, heartless people, until I met Jack. He was nice. He'd run away from home to avoid his abusive father and he wasn't an asshole to me. It's not exactly a movie worthy love story, but sometimes when there was only one bed at the shelter, we'd offer to share. He was always such a gentleman, never touching me or trying to take something I wasn't willing to give.

One day, he stole a bottle of vodka from a convenience store, and we got blackout drunk and fucked in the toilets at the back of a cheap ass sandwich shop. The earth didn't move, and all our problems didn't fade away when he pushed his condom clad dick into me. But it was my choice, and he was nice about it, so I probably have a better first time story than most people do.

A week later, he confessed he was gay, but he wanted to try not to be and he figured if he was going to have sex with a woman, he'd want it to be me. He stopped coming round after that and I don't know what happened to him. A part of me hopes he found a happily ever after, and I'd rather think that than accept the reality that he could be dead, or worse.

I need time to think, but deep down I know that the choice to be a part of this has been taken out of my hands. I don't know if it was Dimitri, Lev, and Viktor who doomed me, or the man who apparently provided half of my DNA, but either way, I'm here and I don't think I can escape.

They promised to keep me safe, but aren't they treating me like chattel too? Just like they said Grigoriy would. I need to know what makes these three men any different than the ones they're trying to destroy.

This isn't my fight, but sometimes you have to lose a few battles to win a war. If they're going to use me to try to defeat the Russian Mafia, whether I agree or not, then making them think I'm on their side can only work in my favor. If they succeed in what they plan to do and destroy the old boys club mafiosi, then maybe when this is all over, they'll let me go or I can sneak away during the victory. If they lose, then I can play the victim that I am and run. Either way, playing along right now is how I'll get away from them in the end.

I don't sleep, my body is already rested from spending so much time unconscious in the last couple of days. So instead, I sit in this insanely large and ridiculously comfortable bed, and try to figure out what I need to do to make them think I'm on their side.

Guys haven't exactly been on my radar since I dragged my life from the gutter and into Monica's apartment. But no matter how much I've tried to deny it, I'm still my mother's daughter. I might be scared of the three men who stole me, but I've still noticed the way they each look at me.

Viktor wants to play with me, Lev wants to take care of me, and Dimitri... well Dimitri wants to own me.

I might be inexperienced when it comes to sex, but I know men. Convincing Viktor and Lev that I want to help will be simple, but convincing Dimitri is another thing altogether. My *husband* is the kind of man normal mothers warn their daughters about. Not my mother, obviously, she'd have told me to suck his dick until he gave up his wallet and his bank account details.

But these three men are a team. It's clear that ultimately Dimitri is in charge, that's why it's him I'm fake married to and not one of the others. To Lev and Viktor, I may be a prisoner, but I'm still a person. To Dimitri I'm a possession and he's clearly the type of man who holds on tight to the things he believes to be his.

When they left me up here, they didn't close the door and I know it was a test to see if I'd run. Honestly, a part of me has

been screaming to do exactly that since they walked away. But the key to my freedom isn't an open door, it's trust. Their trust.

My stomach growls and I glance at the clock. It's almost six and I'm hungry. No one mentioned what time dinner was when they asked me to join them, so I decide just to head downstairs and see if anyone is around.

Throwing back the comforter, I twist my legs to the floor and slide down the edge of the ridiculously high bed. A part of me expects them to barrel through the door and confront me for getting up but when, after several moments, no one comes, I pad into the bathroom.

The bathroom is stunning, luxury at its finest, but I try to ignore how nice everything is and instead decide to risk taking a shower. At some point today, my hair has been braided, but even though I don't smell, I feel dirty. The thought that the silent, scared man who scurried in and removed my IV without ever looking at me touched me while I was unconscious and incapacitated, makes me want to scrub at my skin until I remove all traces of his touch.

Stripping off in a bathroom with no door, in a house where all pretense of privacy has been taken from me, sets my teeth on edge. But if what Dimitri said earlier is true, he watched as the fucking doctor stripped me of my clothes and dignity and examined me inside and out. A part of me wants to cry and wail and shout at the way they violated me, but how can I pretend to be going along with them, if I'm too angry to even be civil?

Instead, I push the fear and horror and trauma of whatever happened to me while I was unconscious to the back of my mind. One day, when I'm free of these men and far away from this fucking island, I'll unpack it and deal with the ordeal, but not today.

Today, I close my eyes, take a deep breath, then peel the shirt up and over my head. Stepping into the shower I turn on the water, luxuriating in the icy liquid soaking me before I scrub my skin raw when the ice turns burning hot.

I wash away the fear, the anger, the pure unmitigated rage at the way my life has been stolen from me, like it was so inconsequential that no one but me will ever care that it's gone. I scrub away the phantom touch of men I don't know, don't trust, and who I never gave permission to put their hands on me. By the time I wrap myself in one of the huge, soft towels I feel stronger, like I've rebuilt a wall around me, a barrier to protect myself from his place and those men.

Stepping back into the bedroom, I search for my clothes that were on the floor, but they're gone, the floor clear and empty. Swallowing down tears, I roll back my shoulders and step into the closet. One entire side of the gargantuan room is filled with women's clothes, but I can tell from a glance that the elegant things that fill the rails are nothing like my usual style, which is an eclectic mix of nineties grunge and boho chic.

Ignoring the side of the closet that is filled with more pastel and silk than I've ever seen in my life, I turn and eye the side filled with men's clothes. Even at a glance, it's obvious whose clothes belong to who, and I eye the rails for a minute, trying to decide how I can put together an outfit that will make me feel more like myself.

In the end, I take boxers from Dimitri's dresser, and a pair of black sweatpants from Lev's section. Pulling them on, I roll the waist to keep them up, then drag a muscle shirt from Viktor's part of the closet. Tying the shirt into a knot at my back, I check out how much side boob I'm showing in the mirror, and decide that as long as my tits aren't bouncing free it's all good.

Staring at my reflection, I take in my outfit. Lev's pants are too big, but they're comfortable and soft. The waistband of Dimitri's boxers is poking out from beneath where I've rolled the top of the pants, and there's a wide band of exposed skin between the top of the pants and Vik's baggy muscle shirt.

My hair is a disaster, but I just finger comb the strands and pull it over my shoulder. Despite how much I've slept, I look tired and there are dark circles beneath my eyes, but then I suppose kidnap and imprisonment isn't exactly R&R.

Steeling myself, I turn and force my feet to walk out of the closet and toward the door that leads to the exit. This room might be my gilded prison, but stepping out of here and toward them seems like more of a death sentence than just staying in this room and hiding.

Inhaling deeply, I take one step at a time until I'm half way down the stairs and realizing that now that I'm out of the bedroom, I have no idea where to go. The house is silent, so I pick a direction and walk. I find the dining room they brought me to at breakfast surprisingly easily, but the table is empty and there's no sign of the guys. Turning back the way I came from, I discover a den with huge comfortable looking couches and a TV that's almost as big as the one they use at the movies, but it's empty too.

Every door is open, except one, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out that's where they are. But before I can lift my fist to knock, I hear the soft patter of footsteps behind me. Spinning around, I find a woman a similar age to me, with black hair and aristocratic features. She's stunning, in a modelesque way that makes me feel small and squat in comparison.

"They do not like to be disturbed when they are in their office," she says with a hint of an accent.

"Oh," I gasp, stupefied and unsure what to say or do now.

"Can I give you a tour of the house, Mrs. Belova?" Her voice is polite, but her manners do nothing to hide the bite in her tone.

"Oh, err," I falter, shocked that even the staff know I'm now fake married. "Yeah, sure."

Her smile says everything she can't. That she only offered to be polite and that she really wishes I hadn't accepted. But dutifully, she silently leads me through the house, pausing at doorways to point out rooms. When we get to the kitchen, she strides inside and then stops beside a woman stirring a pan of something that smells delicious on the stove.

"Mama, have you met Mrs. Belova?" my guide asks.

“Mrs. Belova, are you feeling better?” the older woman asks, her voice heavily accented.

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you,” I tell her, waving away her concern. “But my name is Alabama.” Stepping closer, I hold out my hand to her.

Wiping her hands on a cloth, she takes mine and grips it tightly. “Roza. You’ve already met my daughter Tanya and my husband Alexander looks after the house and grounds.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Can I do anything to help?” I offer.

Both women look at me with blatant surprise. “No, thank you. Mr. Dimitri said you didn’t have any allergies, is that correct?”

“No, not that I’m aware of,” I tell her. “Would it be okay for me to have a glass of soda or a juice or just something sweet, please?”

“Why don’t you take a seat in the den or on the patio and Tanya will bring something out to you,” Roza suggests, coolly.

“Oh, no, I can get it myself if you point me in the direction of the refrigerator. I just didn’t want to help myself without asking permission,” I say quickly.

“Ali, Baby,” Viktor says, appearing behind me and curling a strong arm around my waist.

I jolt away from his touch, but he’s quick, holding me in place, my back pressed against his chest, my butt squashed against his firm thigh.

“You look good in my shirt,” he purrs seductively against my neck, nuzzling his nose over the pulse point that’s fluttering anxiously.

“I was just looking for a soda or a juice or something,” I stammer.

“Tanya, could you get Ali some juice? We’ll be out by the pool,” Viktor says, turning me around and steering me out of the kitchen.

“I could have gotten it myself. I don’t expect her to wait on me,” I say.

“Why wouldn’t they wait on you? That’s their job.”

“Because I’m not one of you or even a guest. I’m a prisoner.”

His laugh is full of mirth and amusement. “You’re Dimi’s wife. You’re their boss.”

“No, I’m not, and I’m not sure a fake wife really counts in this situation.”

“It’s not fake, Ali. It’s completely legal and real. You’re his wife in every way, bar one, but he’ll soon rectify that, then we all get a turn.”

“Forging a marriage certificate doesn’t make me his actual wife, it means I’m his fake, digital wife,” I protest.

“Once we’ve dealt with Orlov and the rest of those assholes, you can have a very real wedding if you want one,” he says, dragging me down onto a huge outdoor sofa overlooking a pool that’s so beautiful if I wasn’t right in front of it, I’d swear it was a picture.

“I don’t want a wedding,” I gasp.

“A wedding could be fun, you could get all dressed up in a big poofy white dress and once all the I do’s are done, I could crawl under your skirt and eat your pussy until you came all over my face.” His tone is so nonchalant and calm, even as he talks about eating me out.

“Viktor,” I rasp.

“Vik, only my mother calls me Viktor.” He chuckles.

“Vik—”

“I’ll get you some bright red, crotchless panties to wear beneath your virginal white dress, then I won’t even have to get you undressed to lick you. Dimi can have the priest and the pomp and circumstance he loves so much and then the moment it’s done; I’ll bend you over the altar and eat your cunt until my face is coated in your juices. Then I’ll feed you

my dick while Lev watches. He likes that... to watch. I like it too. But he'll enjoy watching me choke you with my cock and when my cum is filling your stomach, he'll move in behind you and fuck your wet pussy until it's sloppy and dripping with his cum."

Listening to him makes my chest tight, and each breath I take becomes a ragged gasp. I'm scared. Frightened of the things he's saying, but equally as scared about how much my body is reacting to what he's describing.

My entire sexual experience is one bout of fumbling sex with a gay guy. Unlike other girls, I never experimented in high school. All the bases except a home run are a mystery to me, and listening to Vik talk so freely about the things he would do to me is as terrifying as it is exhilarating.

"You okay, Baby? You're looking a little flushed over there. I know I was talking about the wedding night, but I'm here for any needs you have before then too." He winks.

"I-I-I..." I stutter, finally just closing my mouth and clamping my lips together so no sound can come out.

"Are you needy now, Baby? I can help with that. All you have to do is ask."

I absolutely shouldn't, under any circumstances, be thinking about saying yes, but it's like he's put a spell on me and my mind is suddenly thinking about all the ways a man can pleasure a woman.

"Your drink," Tanya says, interrupting our charged moment. Her forced polite tone is icy enough to pour a bucket of metaphorical freezing water over my charged body, and I shuffle away from Vik, needing distance from his enticing scent and seductive words.

"Thanks, T," Vik says, sounding like he's speaking through gritted teeth.

Putting the glass down on the table with a little more force than necessary, Tanya leaves and silence settles over us like a thick blanket on a hot day.

“So, what were you doing in the kitchen?” Vik asks, shattering the quiet moment.

“I figured it was time to stop sulking in the bedroom. I bumped into Tanya and she offered to give me the tour, we’d just paused in the kitchen when you found us.”

“Not that you don’t look good in my shirt and Lev’s pants, but we picked out an entire closet full of clothes for you.” It’s not exactly a question, but it’s clear he’s expecting a response.

“I’m sure they’re all very nice clothes, but I’m not exactly a pastel silk kind of a girl,” I say, trying to sound both polite and snarky at the same time.

“What if that’s what we expect you to be?” he asks, his lips pursed into a half pout that should make him look ridiculous, but instead makes him seem even more attractive. Vik isn’t classically beautiful, even though he’s incredibly pretty. He’s tall, muscular and built, but it’s his imperfections that somehow make him so appealing. His nose has clearly been broken at some point, so it’s slightly broader at the top. There’s a scar dissecting his eyebrow and another hidden just at the edge of his hairline.

His eyes are a glowing amber color, and his hair is so dark it’s almost black. There’s a few days of scruff lining his jaw, that both softens the lines of his face, and makes him look more menacing at the same time. Vik is an optical illusion that allows him to morph from laughing and harmless, to dark and terrifying in the blink of an eye.

Even barely knowing the three men who kidnapped me, I know that even though Dimitri’s aloofness could be construed as dangerous, Vik is the one who is the most ruthless and lethal.

I need to remember that, even though right now he’s being flirty and playful, he could change in the blink of an eye and probably slit my throat without an ounce of remorse.

“If sweet pastel and blemishless silk is what you want, then you kidnapped the wrong woman,” I tell him softly.

His loud laugh makes me flinch, which in turn only makes him smile wider. “Lev picked the clothes. I’d rather you be naked all the time, and Dimi will dress you how he wants you to look without giving a shit what you want.”

It’s a warning, even if he’s not threatening me, so I nod, letting him know that I heard.

“Drink your juice. We don’t tend to eat ’til late, but if you’re hungry, I’ll have Roza make you something light.”

“No, I’m fine,” I say quickly, sniffing the juice before bringing the glass to my lips and taking a sip. It’s sweet and familiar, although I don’t know what fruit it came from.

“Good?”

“Very. What is it?”

“Probably a mix of mango, guava, and passionfruit, they’re common over here.” Shuffling closer to me, Vik, turns to the side, draping his arm along the back of the sofa, his body relaxed and calm. “So, Alabama, tell me about you.”

“You’ve been the ones stalking me since I was seventeen, I’d say you probably know as much about me as I do. Why don’t you tell me about you?”

“Touché.” He laughs. “But watching isn’t the same as getting to know someone. How about tit for tat. For every question I ask, you get to ask one of me?”

Shrugging, I turn to the side, mirroring his body language and allowing myself a little more space. “Okay, ask away.”

“Where were you for the year in between leaving your aunt’s and turning up in Columbus?”

“In Columbus, I got a bus straight there.”

“But where were you living?”

“I thought it was my turn to ask a question?” I say, arching a brow at him.

Smirking, he waves his hand gesturing for me to go ahead.

“How old are you all?”

“I’m thirty-one, Lev and Dimi are thirty-two. Now answer my question.”

“Everywhere and nowhere.” I smirk.

“Be specific, if you start avoiding my questions, I’ll do the same,” he cautions.

“On the street, in bus depots, in alleys, under bridges and in shelters when I could.” I shrug, because what else can I say? I was homeless. Everywhere and nowhere was probably as specific an answer as I can give him.

“Why?” he asks. “Why did you leave your aunt’s in the first place?”

“You’ll owe me two questions if I answer,” I warn him.

“Fine.” He relents, rolling his eyes.

“She handed me a hundred-dollar bill and a bus ticket when I turned eighteen. Back then I thought she was just a bitch who knew the state checks she’d been getting for looking after me were going to stop. Now I wonder if she knew who my mom was fucking when I was conceived and she assumed that, sooner or later, it’d bring trouble to her door.”

“That fucking bitch,” he says beneath his breath.

“My turn,” I say, tilting my head to the side, faking uncertainty over what to ask him. “Why is getting revenge on the Mafia so important to you?”

His sigh is audible. “We’re not looking for revenge.”

“If you’re not seeking revenge then what is all of this? You murdered the man you think is my dad, then kidnapped me with the sole purpose of using me to get access to the Mafia so you can destroy them.”

“They took from us, now we’re taking something back. It’s not revenge, more evening the score.”

Wow, murder and destruction is what they consider evening the score. “What are you going to do when the score is even? You said this vendetta dates back to when you were all young children. When you’ve killed them all and destroyed

the rest, how will you fill your time?” I know my tone is snippier than I should allow it to be, but I can’t help it.

“I’m not sure,” he admits easily. “We could probably spend a few years pouring all of our obsessive tendencies into your luscious body.” He winks, smirking flirtatiously.

“No thanks.” Wrinkling my nose, I shake my head.

“You don’t think you’d enjoy three virile men pandering to your every need?”

“I’m sure you’ll be bored of me before the score is even.”

“Are we not your type, Baby? What kind of man do you go for?”

“I don’t have a type, men haven’t been on my radar,” I admit.

“Women?” he asks tartly, a slight furrow denting his brow.

“No, I’ve been busy surviving. I haven’t had a lot of time for romance.”

“Ahh.” His brow lifts and he smiles. “So, you’re looking to be romanced. We can do that, Baby, the three of us will treat you like a queen, bow down at your feet and feed from the nectar between your thighs.”

I feel my nose wrinkle and a cringe curl my lips.

“No?” He laughs. “Would you rather be at our feet, mouth open while we decorate all that perfect skin with our cum? You’d still be a queen, but we’d be your kings.”

Heat fills my cheeks and I look down at my hands, not capable of maintaining eye contact with him when he’s talking like this.

“Look at you, so coy and innocent. Are you a virgin, Baby?”

When I don’t move, he grabs my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “I asked you a question, Ali. Has anyone ever put their cock into your tight cunt?”

Steeling my gaze, I refuse to cower and nod.

“Good. I like blood, love watching it pour from a body, knowing it’s slowly going to kill them as the life fades from their eyes. But I don’t want to see your blood. You’re too alive, too vivid and bright. But the others won’t be as pleased as I am. Dimi will pretend not to care, but deep down, he’ll hate that he wasn’t the one to push through that barrier and claim you as his. Lev will be hurt that you trusted someone else with the honor of breaking you in. Who was it? Who shoved their cock through your hymen and declared their own death sentence?”

“No one important,” I whisper, vowing to myself to never utter Jack’s name. I don’t know if he’s even still alive, but I won’t ever send these men in his direction, not over this.

“Dimi won’t like that. He’ll punish you for not telling him. Are you prepared for that? To be punished for not telling us who fucked you first.”

“Punish me how?”

This time, his smirk is all devious mirth. “Who knows? He can be quite the sadist when the mood strikes him. He could hurt you or force so much pleasure on you that you beg him to stop. He could use you, or have one of us do it for him. Whatever he does, you’ll hate him and still beg for more. He’ll fuck your mind as much as your body, and in the end, you won’t know if you hate him or love him, but I promise, when he’s done, you’ll never keep something from us again.”

“If any of you touch me, it’ll be rape,” I tell him, forcing myself to hold his gaze as I speak.

“We won’t force you. We won’t have to. You want us, I can see from the look in your eyes.”

“No.” I shake my head.

“It’s okay to want us. We want you too, why else would we bring you here? We could have held you at any of our properties, we have houses all over the world, but this is our home. It’s completely unknown, not linked to us in any way. It’s so remote, it’s barely more than a dot on a map.”

“You kidnapped me, why would I want you? I hate you, all of you.”

“Hate us all you want; it doesn’t change anything. You’re ours now and it’s only a matter of time until you accept that.”

Moving so quickly I’m taken completely by surprise, he slams his lips to mine, kissing me ruthlessly. He doesn’t want this to be mutual, he wants to take from me and I let him. I don’t kiss him back, I don’t move, but I don’t fight him either. It’s a defeat and a victory for both of us.

One of his hands tangles in my hair, positioning me where he wants me so he can deepen the kiss. His other hand collars my neck and squeezes until I can’t breathe. Gripping at his hand on my throat, I claw and pull, desperate for air. When my vision starts to go black at the edges, he loosens his hold and I gasp for breath, only his lips are still on mine and I rasp until he pulls back and allows me to drag in a shaky breath.

His fingers are still around my throat, but instead of restricting my air, he gently caresses my skin. “You might be our queen, but remember that here, everything is at our liberty. You eat because we feed you, wear clothes that we provide you, and breath because we allow it. Make no mistake, we would prefer you to want us, but we don’t care if you hate us, because a part of us hates you too.”

Releasing me, he stands up and stalks away, his jaw tense and his shoulders rigid. The moment he’s out of sight, I let out a shuddering breath, lifting my hand to touch my tender neck.

“You would do better not to anger them,” Tanya says, stepping out from behind the side of the building where she’d clearly been listening to our conversation.

“He’s insane, they all are.”

She nods, but her smile is soft and warm. She’s not scared of them; she’s looking in the direction Vik went with longing in her eyes.

“Does he know you want him?” I ask her carefully.

“It wouldn’t matter if he did. They brought you here,” she says, swinging her gaze back to me.

“That wasn’t my choice,” I tell her, not wanting to openly say they kidnapped me in case she doesn’t already know.

“I know. But you’re still here.”

“You could help me—”

“No,” she interrupts, shooting me down, just like I knew she would. “Come to the kitchen, you need to ice your neck so it doesn’t bruise. They wouldn’t like that.”

“I don’t care if they like it. If he bruises me, then he should be forced to look at the evidence of his abuse. Hiding it is just enabling him. I won’t do that,” I say as forcefully as I can, even though my voice is raspy and weak.

“That would just anger them further,” she starts.

“I don’t care.” Sighing, I close my eyes, forcing the tears that are threatening to spill to retreat. I won’t cry again, not over this.

“Dinner will be served in the dining room, in thirty minutes. I’ll come and get you when it’s time.”

Nodding, I keep staring at the pool while she leaves.

dimitri

Closing down my computer, I glance at Lev's desk and notice that he's already left. Vik can never sit still for long, and he left not long after Alena came downstairs. I had to force myself not to go after her too, but I refuse to chase after her just because she decided to leave the bedroom.

Our security system showed that all three of us were watching the cameras when she got out of bed and went into the bathroom. We all watched as she peeled my shirt over her head and scrubbed at her skin until it was bright red. A part of me feels like I should feel guilty about touching her while she wasn't awake. I know part of her need to feel clean was because I violated her and then told her it was the doctor, but I don't care. I enjoyed exploring her while she was unaware. I liked positioning her as I wanted her, pushing my fingers into her body and knowing she wouldn't, or couldn't protest.

The urge to slip something into her food at dinner so I can do it again, is so strong that I've had to force myself to stay here behind my desk under the pretense of working, to stop myself from opening my desk drawer and taking out the sedative I've placed in there.

My dick is rock hard at the thought of pushing inside of her and fucking her hard and fast while she sleeps. Jesus, I know how fucked up it is. But right now, it's the only way she'll let me have her, unless I hold her down and take her by force.

We might have kidnapped her, and I might have touched her without her consent, but raping her is a line that I'm

unwilling to cross, at least at the moment. I want her willing and pliant, not fighting and crying. That's Vik's kink, not mine.

That's not to say that I won't enjoy her tears, because I will. I just want them to be tears that roll down her face when I fuck her throat, or when she's begged and begged and she cries from her desperate need to come when she knows she has to wait for permission.

Sharing one woman between the three of us won't be easy, but we've always shared everything and the idea of one of us having a woman the others can't touch was repulsive to us.

Alena isn't like other women. She has a strength that most females don't have. I've met many strong women in my lifetime, but they've all been hard, resilient, and tough. Alena has an inbuilt strength, but she's still soft and fragile with an innocence that I cannot wait to corrupt.

Clicking out of the replay of her in the shower, I open the video file Vik sent to Lev earlier and watch myself on the screen. Alena's body is limp as I strip her naked and carry her into the bathroom.

Pushing down my sweats, I grip my dick, slowly sliding my fist up and down the length as I remember the way her wet heat strangled my fingers and how her tight ass fought not to allow me in.

Teasing myself, I watch the video, pushing myself to the edge, then stopping. By the time I'm watching myself lay her down on the bed, my balls are so tight, I know I'm going to come. Opening my top desk drawer, I pull out a specimen jar and work my dick, until the first spurt of cum bursts from the tip landing in the container.

Working my fist up and down, I milk my cock, until I'm spent and a pool of white creamy cum is sitting in the base of the jar. Screwing the lid on tight, I slide it into my pocket along with a disposable plastic pipette, before closing the drawer.

Standing, I pull my sweats back up, covering my half hard dick, then I head out, locking the office door behind me. Instead of joining the others in the dining room, I go to the kitchen, nodding to Roza and Tanya who are adding garnish to four identical plates.

“Which is hers?” I ask.

Roza’s eyes look wary as she gestures to the plate with a smaller portion on than the others. Nodding, I lift it and carry it to the kitchen island, placing it down, then retrieving the jar and pipette from my pocket. Opening the jar, I suck up some of my cum, then squeeze it onto her food, not enough to affect the taste, but enough that as she eats, she’ll be taking some of me into her with each bite. When I’m happy with my addition to her meal, I slide it next to the other plates and look to Tanya. “Her drink?”

“I was going to pour at the table,” she says, her voice soft and sweet, the way she thinks I like.

“Not anymore, you’ll pour drinks in the kitchen from now on, but anything she eats or drinks will be brought to me first. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Dimitri.” She nods submissively. Walking to the refrigerator, she pulls out a jug of juice and fills a glass, holding it out to me.

Taking it, I add some of my cum, then use the end of the pipette to stir it, before handing it back to her.

“Wine?” I prompt.

Tanya looks to her mother, who nods, her eyes laced with something akin to resentment that she tries to hide. Then she collects four wine glasses, and a bottle of white that Roza has picked to pair with the meal.

Separating one glass from the others, I squeeze some of my cum into the bottom of the glass, then pour the wine over it. “Dessert?”

Tanya collects the small bowl of crème brûlée from the refrigerator and I drizzle my cum over the top of the sugar she’ll burn before she serves it, then hand it back to her.

When I'm finished, I cross to the sink, wash out the remaining cum in the jar, wishing I could force her to let me push it into her cunt or ass but knowing I can't, at least not yet. Eventually, she'll take all of our cum, none of it will be wasted, she'll take it all in one of her holes or swallow it before each meal. But for now, this will have to do.

Dropping the jar and pipette in the trash, I look pointedly at each woman in turn. "Ensure she only eats or drinks from the glasses, plates and bowls I just approved," I warn. Then I leave, taking my place beside Alena at the table.

Roza and Tanya deliver the food and drinks, and I watch, making sure to catch their eyes as they place a plate of food and a glass of juice and wine in front of Alena. Lev is trying to make conversation, but all I can think about is watching her eat the food I laced with my cum. Then my eyes land on the marks on her neck.

"What the fuck happened to your neck?" I snarl.

"Viktor happened," she says curtly, her spine stiff, shoulders rigid.

My gaze reluctantly leaves her, and I turn to look at my brother, arching an eyebrow in silent question.

Smirking, he shrugs. "I was just teaching my Baby a lesson about who provides the liberties she's been gifted."

"Those will bruise," I snap, warningly.

"I hope so," he says, his smirk spreading into a wide smile.

Rolling my eyes at my psycho brother's amusement, I look back to Alena. "Are you in pain? Does it hurt to swallow? I'll call Dr. Wood."

"I'm fine," she says quietly. "I don't need a doctor. A few bruises aren't something new to me. I learned a lesson about Viktor's temper this afternoon, but you all need to understand that if any of you touch me, it will be without my consent. It'll be *rape*. If you can live with that, then I guess I'll have to find a way to as well."

"Alabama," Lev says softly.

“You’ll want it.” Vik, laughs.

Alena’s head snaps around so quickly, I hear it crack. “No, Viktor, I won’t. I might not be locked in a room or restrained, but I’m not here by choice, I’m your *prisoner*,” she sneers. “Not your *queen*. I don’t want your hands on me. I don’t want your lips on mine, or your tongue in my mouth. I certainly don’t want any of your dicks near me. I am the daughter of a prostitute; I know what it’s like to give your body to someone because you see no other choice. But I will never *give* myself to any of you. You can *take*, but if you do, you’ll be raping me. Maybe that’s what gets you off, I don’t know or honestly care, but you taught me a lesson, so I’m happy to school you in return. If I don’t say yes, I’m saying *no*. No means no, it means stop, it means if you carry on, you are taking from me and that is *rape*.”

Once she’s finished her little speech, she slumps back down into her seat, lifts her glass of wine and throws it back, draining the whole thing before slamming it back down onto the table and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

The room fills with a charged silence and I wait for Vik to explode. His temper is always on a hair trigger, but instead of detonating, he shoves back his chair and storms off, his jaw rigid and hard.

No one speaks and after a quiet few moments, Lev starts to eat, filling the nothingness with the sounds of his silverware against the plate and his glass being lifted and placed back down on the table. Joining him, I cut off a piece of chicken and lift it to my lips and eventually Alena follows suit.

I watch every time she swallows, knowing that she’s taking a part of me into her with every mouthful. Vik returns in time for dessert, his expression sullen and hard when he slumps back into his seat, glaring at an oblivious Alena.

When Tanya clears the dessert plates away, I stand, holding my hand out to Alena. Glancing at me, she ignores my offer and stands without my help. Scoffing, I move into step beside her, placing my palm against the base of her spine.

“Watch a movie with us,” I say. It’s not a question, so I don’t phrase it as one, guiding her out of the dining room and toward the den.

Sighing tiredly, she sits down at the end of the couch, curling her legs up underneath her and revealing my boxers beneath Lev’s sweats. I don’t know if she deliberately wore a piece of each of our clothing, but the result is probably a lot sexier than I think she thought it would be.

Lev’s pants are too big, hanging loosely off her hips. She’s rolled the waist to try and keep them up, but all that’s done is showcase my boxers she has on beneath them. I know they’re mine, because I’m the only one of us who only wears Calvin Klein underwear. I know it’s a nineties cliché, but they hug my dick and balls in just the right way, and I refuse to change brands. At some point the fabric that is currently cupping her cunt has been around my dick. That thought shouldn’t be turning me on, but it is.

The shirt she’s wearing is one of Vik’s. It’s a muscle shirt he wears to work out in with a ripped out neck and arm holes. She’s pulled the fabric into a knot at her back, making it tight. The front is low enough for me to see a hint of her small cleavage and the arm holes are wide enough that I can see the swell of her petite tits at the sides and a wide expanse of her flat, almost concave stomach.

I don’t give a fuck about her little no touch speech she gave at dinner. If she pushes me far enough, I think I could live with knowing she wasn’t one hundred percent on board with me touching her. After all, I’ve already violated her in ways she has no idea about.

I’m confident that I could have her screaming my name and begging for my cock, but the thought of her calling anything we do to her rape makes my hackles rise. I’m a competitive man by nature, and I silently challenge myself to make her want me, by any means necessary. I won’t allow her to taint my touch with thoughts of rape, so when I do finally fuck her, it’ll be with her screaming yes so loudly, the people on the mainland will hear her.

“What do you want to watch?” Lev asks her, his smile bright and warm.

Shrugging, she leans down and rests her head on the side of the couch, yawning widely.

“Would you rather watch TV instead? You never seemed like a sports fan when you were working, but I guess you were probably too busy to stop and cheer for your team,” he says, talking as he grabs the remote, then flops down into the recliner beside Alena’s end of the couch.

“I don’t mind what we watch,” she says simply.

Vik sculks into the room and sits down on the opposite end of the couch. It’s clear he’s pissed, and he’s not known for handling his emotions well, so it’s only a matter of time before he loses his shit and explodes, metaphorically or literally.

I don’t know what happened between them earlier. I could watch the security footage if I wanted to, but I’m content to let them figure this out between them. I have no issue with him marking her up a little, but the fingerprints on her neck bother me more than I expected. My mind knows that she’s not just mine, and that sharing her is part of the agreement Vik, Lev, and I made before we brought her here. But knowing that he hurt her enough to leave a mark is an issue the three of us will need to talk about.

Even after watching her every move for a year, I’m still surprised she hasn’t cried more, or begged for freedom. Her fortitude is impressive. So is how calm and controlled she’s been. We were born into a world controlled by men, where women are considered the weak links. Our time in America showed us that the lives our fathers and grandfathers lived were narrow and skewed with chauvinistic ideology, but still, it’s refreshing for my wife to be strong enough to not have become completely irrational, even after everything we’ve put her through.

Lev picks a channel and a basketball game appears on the screen. I’m not a huge fan of the sport, but it’s easy watching, especially, when I’m paying more attention to her than the screen.

Picking the recliner on the other side of the couch, I sit back, my eyes trained on her. I'm not the only one watching, Vik is glaring at her, his nail toying with his lip as he stares intently at her. Lev is the only one even continuing with the pretense of watching the game, although his eyes keep darting to her when he thinks she's not looking.

While we all watch her, she's looking straight ahead, her gaze pointedly fixed on the TV. The sound of the commentator fills the room, and I consider how ridiculous it is that three grown men are all acting like such teenagers, trying to catch a glance of their high school crush.

"We need to talk about how this is going to work," I say, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Alena doesn't sit up or even lift her head, but her eyes slowly turn from the screen to me.

Content that I have her attention, I glance to the others before looking back at her. "You can go wherever you want in the house, except for our office, which is locked. The island is inescapable, only accessible from the air because the coast is mostly too rocky for boats to approach. Apart from the house and grounds, the rest of the island is uninhabited, and the terrain is rough and in places perilous, so do not leave the grounds unless you are accompanied by one of us. Beyond the pool is access onto the beach. At this time of the year the sea is warm, but there are dangerous rip tides not far off shore, so unless you want to drown, don't get into the water without one of us watching out for you."

"I can't swim," she says sadly.

"At all?" Lev asks.

"Nope. Not a lot of pools where I grew up. The richest person in my hometown was the guy who owned the bar," she says sarcastically.

"I can teach you," Lev suggests, his face lighting up like an overeager puppy.

"No thanks," she sighs.

“You need to learn to swim if you want to go in the ocean.” His smile is wide and coaxing.

“If the only way off this island is on a plane, then why would I want to go in the ocean?” she asks deadpan.

“Because you live in a tropical paradise with a pool and the ocean on your doorstep. Tomorrow, we’ll go in the pool and I’ll teach you, we can swim every day, until you’re confident and swimming like a fish,” Lev enthuses.

“Why are you trying to be nice to me?” she asks, finally sitting up and looking at Lev.

“What do you mean?” he asks, his brow furrowed with confusion.

“I mean, why bother? I’m here, you’ve told me there’s no way I can escape and if I did, I’d end up as some psycho mafioso’s broodmare whore. I get it, this is my life now. Y’all brought me here, and now I’m doomed to help you take down the Russian Bratva and more than likely die trying. So why bother being nice? Why don’t you just do what you need to do to get revenge, or even the score or whatever you want to call it? Stop pretending we’re this happy fucking poly family. I’m your prisoner. You can say I’m Dimitri’s wife, or pretty it up any other way, but the truth is, that I’m a prisoner. I’d rather we all just say it how it is than deal with this fake ass brady bunch bullshit.”

Each word lands like a punch and Lev’s smile fades from his face. “I guess we just want you to be happy here,” he says.

Her laugh is low and derisive. “You don’t care if I’m happy or not. You don’t care about me at all. I’m a means to an end. It’s okay, I get it, maybe if I was you, I’d do the same thing. One person’s life to avenge three generations worth of anger. The numbers make sense. I’m mad, but I get it. I just don’t get all of this.” She waves her hand around in front of her, gesturing to all of us and the TV. “Why are we in here, watching basketball, like we’re having a pleasant time hanging out? Why are the staff all calling me Mrs. Belova, like it’s real and not just a con? Why are we bothering with all the subterfuge?”

“You are my wife,” I say.

“Sure, on paper. You explained why and I get it. Like I said, if I was in your position, maybe I’d do the exact same thing. But why are you all acting like this marriage is real, or like I’m in a relationship with all three of you?”

“Because it doesn’t have to be fake,” Lev says softly.

“I got a taste of what it’d be like if this was real when grabby hands over there shoved his tongue into my mouth and I got to feel what it’s like when you almost pass out from lack of oxygen and a necklace of bruises as a reward. I think I’ll stick with my fake wife and prisoner role,” she answers tartly.

“He won’t hurt you again,” Lev protests, leaning toward her.

“Of course he will. You all will. I’ve seen the women who let the men in their lives hurt them. The lie they always swallow is that it won’t happen again. Next, it’ll be my fault that I’m bruised and broken. I’ll have provoked one of you, spoken out of turn, or tiptoed into something I’m not supposed to. You warned me that Orlov would break me, but you three are already trying. What makes you any different than him?”

Lev’s mouth snaps shut and he sits back in his seat, looking at me as if I have all the answers. “The truth is, we’re not that different than Orlov,” I start. “We’re all ruthless businessmen who use women...” I trail off, because I’m not sure what to say.

“Look, it’s none of my business. This is your life, not mine. You took my life. Now, all I have is your revenge and this island. Vik, you were right earlier, everything I have now is at your liberty. Right down to the air I breathe.” She lifts her hand and touches her neck. “But there are a few things that I still have a choice about, so I’m going to choose to be a prisoner. I don’t want to be a part of whatever you’re trying to pretend this is. So, I’m going to go back upstairs to my cell, feel free to lock the door.”

Standing, she strides out of the room, back straight, head up. She doesn’t look like a prisoner; she looks like a goddamn

queen.

CHAPTER 16

vik

“What the fuck did you do to her?” Lev demands the moment she leaves.

“Nothing.” I shrug, refusing to allow him to see all of the anger that’s festering beneath my calm facade.

“She has bruises all over her neck,” he snaps.

“I barely squeezed; she just bruises like a fucking peach.”

“And all the rape talk? She was talking to you,” Dimi says.

“I found her in the kitchen earlier talking to Tanya and Roza.”

“Was she asking them to help her escape?” Dimi asks.

“No. She was asking for a drink. I took her out onto the patio and we were talking, I was asking questions, she was too,” I admit. “She told me she wasn’t a virgin, but wouldn’t tell me the name of the guy who popped her cherry. She told me she hated us, so I kissed her and reminded her that we brought her here and that she’s ours.”

“And her throat?” Lev snaps.

“I thought she’d be into it.” I shrug again.

“She came downstairs, she was in our clothes. She was coming round and you fucked it for all of us,” Lev snarls, glaring at me.

“Fuck you, Lev. Did you really think she was going to wake up from the sedative we pumped her body full of and look at you with hearts in her eyes, ready to spread her legs

and ride your dick? We kidnapped her, she was always going to hate us,” I cry, stomping across to the liquor cabinet and small wet bar we have set up in here. Pouring myself a whiskey, I down it, then pour a second, bringing it to my lips and drinking, letting the burn numb my throat.

“I told you we should have infiltrated her life, if we’d given her a chance to get to know us, she would have come willingly and then she wouldn’t be talking about us raping her and preferring to be a prisoner over being ours,” Lev hisses, his eyes flaring with hurt.

He’d never admit it, but Lev fell for Alabama the first time he saw her. She was almost eighteen, but still a kid, and he was a man who was old enough to know better than to lust over a girl nearly half his age. When we found her again, he wanted to befriend her, to convince her to date one of us, or maybe even move into the loft we tricked her into visiting, then drugged and stole her from.

He pushed again and again to get to know her, but both Dimi and I shot him down. What we’ve done is fucked up enough, it would only have been worse, if we’d had been fucking her, knowing all along we only planned to use her.

Although he’ll never admit it, Dimi is almost as obsessed as Lev is. He didn’t need to force the paperwork and marry her either. We could have used her as bait, rather than spending time laying legal groundwork to claim Polakoff’s estate. But he wanted her to have his name. Alena Belova. It’s not even her real name for fuck’s sake. The woman upstairs is Alabama Delany, and as much as Dimi and Lev are trying to pretend she’s not, she is our fucking prisoner.

Do I want her to be our girl *and* our prisoner? Honestly, I don’t know anymore. Sharing with my brothers is everything I’ve ever wanted. I don’t have the attention span to have a woman of my own, I’m too easily distracted. But having just a third of the woman I’ve compulsively watched 24/7 for the last 365 days, yeah, I want that.

Seeing my marks on her neck, feeling her claw at my hands, desperate for me to allow her to breath, my dick was so

hard I thought I might come in my pants. But watching the anger and pain in her eyes, listening to her say she'll never want my touch, that if I take her, it'll have to be by force. That's not what I want.

When I'd watched her get dressed into our clothes, I thought she was giving us the green light. I'd thought the push and pull, and the banter on the patio was just a game. Knowing it wasn't, just pisses me off.

Polakoff and the new Mafia might have forced our families out of Russia when we were only small children, but our parents and grandparents didn't leave the Bratva way of life behind just because we left the country. I was raised in a patriarchal household. My grandfather ruled my grandmother with a literal firm hand, and my father handled my mother in the exact same way. Now I'm an adult, I recognize that domestic discipline was a part of their lives. The men were in charge and when their wives stepped out of line, they were quickly brought back to heel with corporal punishment.

My mother and grandmother weren't abused, or at least I don't think they were. But bruises weren't uncommon, either. I assumed it was a system that worked for all of them on both a physical and mental level, but now I'm wondering if it was a sex thing, or just a fucked-up control thing. A part of me always assumed I'd have a similar relationship with whoever Lev, Dimi, and I shared, now I have no fucking clue.

I'm thirty-one years old and although I've fucked a lot of women, I've never had a relationship that lasted longer than the fifth date. Alabama was the first woman we'd all agreed we wanted to share, and I might have fucked it up before we even got a chance to start.

"What are we going to do?" Lev asks, his expression downtrodden and sad.

"Nothing," Dimi says.

"What?" Lev argues.

"If she wants to feel like a prisoner, then we let her feel like a prisoner. The plan remains the same. We let the lawyers

do their thing, and wait for Orlov to figure out all the illegal money is gone and all the legal money is Alena's. When he tries to bargain for her, we strike."

"Her name is Alabama. You're only pissing her off more by refusing to use her real name," Lev bites out. "And I thought the whole point of this conversation was to figure out how to stop her feeling like a prisoner?"

"Did your grandfather and father control their wives?" I blurt, wondering why I've never asked this before.

"My grandfather was a fucking asshole. He beat my grandmother black and blue if she dared to step out of line. My father refused to be the same kind of man, he and my mom are close, a team, but I suppose in most things she probably naturally defers to him, but it's not because she fears him, it's because she knows he's always thinking of her," Lev says, the pride for his parents evident in his tone.

"What about yours," I ask Dimi.

"My grandparents had a good marriage, Dedushka led and Babushka followed, because he was the man and that was his role. My parents were not a good match, Mama refused to follow, and Papa refused to accept this about her. Instead of compromising, they fought." Dimi shrugs.

"My parents and grandparents practiced domestic discipline," I confess.

"They what?" Lev asks.

"We've never discussed it, but from what I saw growing up, the men had rules for their women and if they broke them, the women were corrected using corporal punishment."

"What kind of corporal punishment?" Lev asks cautiously.

"Spanking mainly, I think, but mouth washing sometimes, and some mild humiliation with corner time and such. I walked in on my grandma over my grandpa's lap a few times. Honestly, I never really thought much about it until today."

"And was it... was it consensual?" Lev cringes.

“I don’t know about my grandparents, but you’ve seen my parents, they still seem sickeningly in love even after all these years. If he’s doing stuff she doesn’t want, she’s either brainwashed to think she does, or she’s a really fucking good actress.”

“You’ve always known?” Dimi asks.

I nod.

“You’ve never mentioned it before.”

“Honestly, I thought it was just a kinky throwback from their Bratva days. I assumed all of our families had the same kind of relationship.” I chuckle.

“Would you want that with Alabama?” Lev questions.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I assumed if I ever found a woman, I’d want something similar, because it was just what the men in my family do. But until a year ago, I never thought I’d have a woman, or that I’d share her with you pair, or that she’d hate my fucking guts,” I scoff, self-deprecatingly.

“She hates us all, not just you,” Dimi says.

“I don’t think she hates me.” Lev frowns.

“She hates all of us, we just have to figure out how to change her mind,” Dimi says, slapping me on the back as he fills a glass with whiskey and leaves.

CHAPTER 17

alabama

After my epic speech, I stomp out of the room, climb the stairs to the bedroom, then throw myself down face first onto the bed and scream into the comforter, like a teenager whose parents have just grounded them. Only I'm the one who grounded myself and I honestly don't know why.

No, that's a lie. I'm containing myself to this fucking room to prove a point. Except I don't know if the three sexy stooges downstairs have any idea what my point is. They keep talking like we're in the middle of a romantic comedy, not a war film, and I don't know how to handle that.

Dimitri is clearly the one in charge, he's calm to the point of aloofness. Except for this morning when he threatened to drag me out from beneath the table if I refused to drink the bottle of water he brought me. Now I know the full reason why I'm here, his reaction makes sense. You can't use a dead hostage.

Viktor is a fucking psycho. He's clearly the wildcard, not afraid to physically intimidate me to get what he wants, and capable of switching from flirty and sweet, to violent and terrifying in the blink of an eye.

Lev, so far, seems to be the peacemaker. He's always the one reminding me that they want me here, that they're not just using me, that me being here doesn't have to be awful.

What bothers me the most, is that I don't know if the personalities they've shown are really who they are, or if they're just playing a role to make my kidnapping go a certain

way. My body is hyper alert but exhausted at the same time, and I glance at the closet and wonder if I should try to hide under the vanity again tonight.

Sleeping out here in the open is still unappealing, but am I any safer in the closet, when they could just as easily come in there to hurt me if that's what they plan to do? Despite everything I said at dinner, I doubt me informing them that no means no, will stop them from holding me down and raping me if they decide to.

A part of me wishes they really would put me in a cell. Having them define my role as prisoner would actually make things easier for me. If I'm a prisoner, there's at least a hope of finding freedom, but the more they treat me like a permanent resident, the quicker all hope of escape is bleeding out of me. And I need that hope. I need something to cling on to, something to keep me afloat when reality forces me to accept that I might never get off this island and away from these men.

Flopping onto my back, I exhale, wondering how the hell I ended up in this position. A few days ago, I lost my job, my home, and got mugged by junkie assholes. I honestly thought that my luck could only get better... then I woke up here.

If I was a different type of woman, maybe I'd think about seducing one or all of my captors, but I don't know the first thing about being sexy enough to get a man to do anything, let alone help me escape from the very men I'd be seducing.

Roza and Tanya could be helpful. It's clear neither woman is a huge fan of me being here, but would they risk themselves to help me escape? I doubt it. The guards could be an option, but if Dimitri has told them that anyone who tries to help me leave will be killed, I'd be surprised if any of them would assist me either.

It feels like the only way to free myself is to wait it out. Pushing upright, I look down at my outfit and decide as much as I'd rather be fully dressed, I can't sleep in thick sweatpants. Using the bathroom, I slide the sweatpants down and fold them, placing them on the chair in the corner of the room.

Even though I hate being so exposed, I slip beneath the comforter in the big bed, curling up into a ball as close to the edge as I can. Closing my eyes, I try to sleep, but I flinch at every sound. After a while I hear someone enter the room and the sound of quiet rustling fills the air. Freezing, I try to even out my breaths and pretend to be asleep while I wait for one of the bedroom doors to close.

The mattress dips and I snap upright, turning and finding Dimitri, pulling back the comforter and climbing into the other side of the bed.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Getting into bed,” he says calmly.

“Don’t you have a room, with a bed and a door?” I snark, shuffling even farther away until I’m so close to the edge I’m almost falling off.

“You’re in this bed, although we can sleep in my room if you’d prefer,” he says, arching a brow.

“How ’bout you sleep in here, and I’ll sleep in your room, with the door locked and shut?” I suggest derisively, instantly regretting the words the moment they’re out of my mouth.

“I thought prisoners did as they were told?”

“They usually get a cell with locked door,” I snap, cursing myself for not just staying quiet.

“Do you think a locked door would help in this situation? You wouldn’t have the key, we would, you’d only have the illusion of safety.”

“God, you’re all so fucking confusing. I don’t know what you want from me. You’re an asshole, Viktor is a psycho, and Lev is pretending to be nice. Just spell out exactly what the hell you want from me?” I blurt.

“For now, all we want is for you to sleep. If a closed door will make you feel better, then let us find you a door.” Sliding back out of bed, he walks around the edge, then holds out a hand to me. It’s not the first time he’s offered me his hand, but

it's the first time I accept, placing my fingers against his palm, and allowing him to help me slide down from the high bed.

"I won't have sex with you. I meant what I said, if any of you touch me, it'll be without my consent," I warn.

"I won't touch you, beyond holding you in your sleep."

"I don't think I want that either."

"I wasn't offering you a choice. If you want to sleep in my bed, hidden behind the closed door you desire so much, it'll be in my arms." Not waiting for an answer, he smirks, leading me to the third door and opening it.

Following him into the room, I'm surprised to find that it's almost identical to the main part of the bedroom, even the bed is the same, but just a king instead of orgy sized.

"There's a closet full of sleepwear you could have picked, instead of the clothes you wore to dinner."

"I've never worn a nightgown in my life and certainly not a pale pink, lacy one. I'm more comfortable in an old shirt."

"You don't like the clothes we got you?" He sounds genuinely curious.

"Have you been watching me for the last year too?" I ask.

"Yes," he answers easily.

"Have I ever worn pink, or silk, or anything with flowers or girly shit on them?"

"You shopped in thrift stores and dumpsters," he says wrinkling his nose.

"There was pink stuff in the thrift store too, I just never bought any of it. I was poor, but I had options."

"So, you don't like the color. If it was black silk, would it be more palatable?" he asks curiously.

"Maybe. I'd rather have my own clothes from my own closet though."

"My wife will never again be dressed in threadbare rags. I can indulge the color palette, but I will not allow you to dress

like you're homeless."

"I am homeless," I cry. "This isn't my home, and apparently all my stuff is gone. You may not want to admit it, but I am homeless, so who cares what I wear?"

"You're not homeless. If you do not want to think of this place as your home yet, I can understand that. But this house is as much yours as it is mine, Lev, and Vik's. You are my wife, you are Alena Belov now and you can hate it all you want, but that won't change anything."

"Alena Belov doesn't exist, neither does Alena Polakoff. If I ever was her, I stopped before I was even old enough to know what my name was. I'm Alabama Delany, and even though you forged the paperwork, I'm not your wife."

"Alena is a beautiful name," he says, pulling back the comforter, tipping his head and gesturing for me to climb in.

"Beautiful or not. It's not my name," I argue, sighing as I lift one knee onto the mattress.

"I will endeavor to call you Alabama," he says so formally, I have to stop myself from giggling.

"You could always call me Ali, a few people back home used to," I suggest, crawling all the way across the bed and lying down on the edge.

"I will try," he says, the bed dipping as he climbs in behind me.

Even though he warned me he intended to hold me while we sleep, I still tense, going stock still the moment he settles behind me, his arm curling around my waist and pulling me tight into the curve of his body.

"Relax, you have my word, I won't touch you inappropriately."

He's so close, his breath warms the back of my neck, but I nod, unsure why I believe him, but I do.

"Sweet dreams, Malishka."

I don't speak back, but I do exhale and try to make my muscles relax. I don't intend to fall asleep, but it's warm in his arms, feeling the rise and fall of his chest behind me. It's still night when the sound of the door opening wakes me. Blinking in the darkness, I look up and find Viktor standing in the doorway, the light from the main bedroom behind him bright enough for me to know it's him.

He doesn't step any further into the room, just stands in the doorway and looks down at the bed. I don't know if he can tell I'm awake, but he stares right at me. "I'm sorry," he whispers, then turns and leaves, closing the door behind him.

Sleep drags me under again, and the next time I wake up, sunlight is pouring into the room and I'm alone in Dimitri's bed. Rubbing at my eyes, I lift my head and look around, taking in the details I didn't notice last night. The huge bedroom suite must take up the entire floor, because despite there being windows and a balcony leading off the orgy part of the room, there's still a huge window in this room that I hadn't seen when it had been dark.

Pushing off the covers, I realize something has been placed on the bottom of the bed. Sitting up, I spot a pair of dark-blue denim shorts, and a cream knit halter top. It's not black, or grungy, or from my own closet, but it's not pink, silk, or floral.

Lifting up the shorts, I find a scrap of black silk and a note beneath them. Picking up the note first, I roll my eyes when I read what's written on it.

PRISONERS WEAR WHAT THEY'RE TOLD.

D X

Scoffing lightly, I pick up the black fabric next. It's a thong, that's so small, I might as well not bother wearing any underwear. But the silk feels so soft against my fingers that I find myself sliding off the pair of boxers I stole from Dimitri yesterday, and slipping the thong on instead.

The fabric kind of ends up stuck between my butt cheeks, but the string is so thin, I can't really feel it. I know his note is intended to be snarky and sarcastic, but having him lay out

clothes for me to wear is easier than going into that closet full of designer outfits and picking something.

Wearing what I'm told to wear means that I'm not choosing to be okay with being here. It makes me feel more like the prisoner I told them I want to be. It makes the lump of guilt in my chest from sleeping in Dimitri's bed with him dissolve a little.

I'm not agreeing to any of this. I'm just doing what I always do. I'm surviving.

The shorts fit like a second skin, and I try not to think too hard about them watching me carefully and for long enough to know what clothes size I am. The shirt is sort of like a soft, thin knit, bikini top, lined with fabric on the triangles that cover my breasts, so my nipples aren't popping out.

At the back of my mind, I know the clothes I'm wearing probably cost more than the entire contents of my closet back home, but they're much closer to my personal style than anything else I saw when I glanced at all the pastel colored confections hanging on the rail.

Once I'm dressed, I need to pee, so I explore the room a little, finding an attached bathroom and quickly using it. When I open the shutters on the windows, I'm surprised to find that it's actually a door that leads out onto a balcony. The door is unlocked, so I cautiously open it, feeling the heat of the morning sun hit me the moment I step out of the house.

Glancing to the left, I spot two matching doors that open onto the balcony and to the right, it curves around the side of the building. Following it to the right, I end up on the wider balcony that's accessible from the main orgy room doors. When I came out here the first night there was a guard standing on the ground below. Moving to the wall, I peer down and find a different guard standing in the same spot, his gun just as visible as the other guard's had been.

My stomach growls and I wonder if the door to the bedroom is open or closed, but the stubborn part of me refuses to go and look. Last night I fully intended to act like a prisoner and confine myself to the orgy room and attached bathroom,

but I ruined that plan when I allowed Dimitri to lure me to his bedroom just because it had a door.

“Alabama?” Lev calls, his soft tone newly familiar even without seeing his face.

“Out here,” I call back. If it had been Viktor, I might have ignored him, but Lev really hasn’t been anything but nice so far. It might all be an act, but if it isn’t, then he’s the most likely to help me and it’s best to keep him on my side.

“Hey,” he greets me, a bright smile on his face as he opens the doors from the orgy room and steps outside. He’s dressed in a pair of cream shorts and a black and cream patterned shirt. He looks like he’s on vacation. When he was in his suit yesterday, he was every inch the dangerous business man. Today he looks like a rich guy living in a tropical paradise. Which I guess he is.

“Hi.”

“Did you sleep okay?”

Heat fills my cheeks, but I refuse to allow myself to feel embarrassed for sharing Dimitri’s bed last night. If Lev had offered me the illusion of safety that door provided, I’d have taken him up on it too.

“I slept okay. Thanks.”

“Good. You look beautiful. Not that you didn’t look good in our clothes last night, because you did, but you look... Well, you look perfect today,” he says, clumsily falling over his words.

“This was the outfit picked out for your prisoner today,” I say with a hint of a smile.

Lev’s smile falls away. “You can wear anything you want. You’re not a—”

“I’m fine with wearing what I’m told to wear,” I interrupt.

Some of his golden retriever happiness fades and his shoulders slump. “We’re having breakfast on the patio this morning. We’d love it if you’d join us.”

A part of me wants to refuse, but his sad expression tugs on my heart strings, even though I know it shouldn't. This man kidnapped me, he's just as guilty as the other two, but I can't help but feel slightly less angry toward Lev.

"Please," he urges, so earnestly that I find myself nodding.

"If that's what you need me to do," I say, assuaging some of my guilt for going with him, when I should be refusing to leave the room and insisting they treat me like the prisoner I am.

His excited, puppy dog ramblings continue as he hovers at my side on the way down the stairs and through the house to the patio Viktor took me to yesterday. Instead of sitting on the couch, he turns to the right and leads me to a large dining table hidden beneath a shaded canopy. The table is huge, easily big enough to seat twelve, but only four place settings are made up at one end and Lev guides me to sit down to the right of Dimitri. There's a glass of the same type of juice I drank yesterday in front of my setting and I reach for it and take a sip, pointedly ignoring Viktor who is seated opposite me.

"What would you like to eat?" Dimitri asks.

I shrug.

"Roza makes excellent pancakes with a mango sauce," he suggests.

"Sounds great."

"I'll have her add some bacon for protein too."

"Coffee?" Lev asks.

I open my mouth to say yes, when Dimitri interrupts. "No, the caffeine isn't good for her. She's too thin as it is, coffee will suppress her appetite."

Before I have a chance to argue, he pushes up from the table and leaves. The moment he's gone, the rest of us fall silent and I sigh, suddenly exhausted again.

"You slept with Dimi last night? Is it only rape if it's me?" Viktor snaps.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I look out at the pool, ignoring him.

“Are you going to be in Lev’s bed tonight? Are we taking it in turns, will it be rape on my night, or is it okay when it’s my turn to have you?” he huffs angrily.

“Vik,” Lev says, his voice reproachful.

“Nothing to say, Ali? Where’s all that righteous indignation from yesterday? Did Dimi fuck it all out of you?”

Blinking, I slowly slide my gaze to Viktor, making sure to look him right in the eye, before looking away without saying a word.

Dimitri comes back a moment later, sliding a bowl of yogurt with fruit and granola in front of me.

“Eat,” he says when I don’t make any effort to touch it.

“I’ve lost my appetite,” I tell him, leaning back in my chair.

“Vik is just being an asshole, ignore him,” Lev says, pushing the bowl closer to me.

“I think, I’d rather go back upstairs,” I mutter, sliding the chair back and starting to rise.

“Sit down,” Dimitri growls.

“I…” I start.

“Sit down, Malishka. Now.”

Sighing, I sit back down, but don’t move my chair back toward the table.

“Vik, why are you being an asshole to her?” Dimitri demands, turning to look at Viktor.

“Because she gave me that whole speech about hating us and never wanting our touch and then she crawled into your bed and let you fuck her like she was yours,” Viktor spits, glaring angrily at me.

“She didn’t crawl into my bed, or allow me to touch her. I got into the big bed with her. She didn’t particularly want me

to join her, and was uncomfortable with sleeping in the main room because of how exposed it is. I suggested we sleep in my bed, because my room has a door. She reluctantly agreed, after explicitly telling me that she would not consent to me touching her sexually, which I agreed to,” Dimitri tells him, his tone stern, like an adult scolding a child.

“Oh,” Viktor says, his shoulders falling as his anger disintegrates.

“You need to apologize to Alabama,” Lev starts.

“I’m not interested in his apologies. Kidnappers don’t apologize to their captives; it throws off the balance of the relationship. Don’t worry, Viktor, I haven’t forgotten my place here,” I sneer.

“Alabama,” Lev sighs.

“Please don’t tell me I’m not a prisoner, because we both know I am. You won’t let me leave, that’s the literal definition of being a prisoner, and it has nothing to do with your concern for my safety. I understand why I’m here. You need me and I’ll do what you want me to do to help you take down Orlov and his evil villain cronies. But when they’re all dead, I want to leave. I’ll start over somewhere new. Alena Polakoff, Alena Belova, and Alabama Delany will all die. I’ll become someone new. Someone no one will bother looking for.”

“No,” Dimitri snaps.

“Yes. Your revenge shouldn’t ruin the rest of my life. How will you explain me when you meet women and bring them here? Do you expect me to live and die here just because I was useful once for a few weeks? I don’t want to be collateral in your war, so once your enemies are dead, you need to either kill me or let me go.”

“No,” Dimitri growls again.

Shaking my head, I close my eyes, hiding from the emotion that’s threatening to swell up inside of me.

The bowl of yogurt stays untouched in front of me until Tanya takes it, replacing it with a plate with three pancakes drizzled with bright yellow sauce stacked on it.

“Eat,” Dimitri hisses, an edge of warning sliding into his tone.

Sighing loudly, I cut off a sliver and eat it. The pancakes are fluffy and sweet and the sauce is tart and delicious, but I ignore how good it tastes, cutting off a few more slithers before putting my silverware down and refusing to touch it again.

“I thought we could go for a walk on the beach,” Lev suggests, his tone hopeful again.

“I’m tired, I’m going to go and lie down,” I lie, pushing up from my chair and waiting for a moment to see if Dimitri protests. When he doesn’t, I step out from the table and walk away.

CHAPTER 18

dimitri

My jaw clicks from how hard I'm grinding my teeth together. The moment she's out of sight, I turn on my brother. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" I hiss at Vik.

"I don't know. I came upstairs last night and saw her in bed with you and I was fine, a little jealous that she wanted you, but okay. Then I saw her this morning and this anger came over me and I wasn't even in control of what I was saying. Words just kept coming out and I couldn't stop them," Vik groans, running his hands through his hair and tugging at the dark strands.

"She wants to leave," Lev says sadly.

"Of course she wants to leave," I snap. "She was always going to want to leave, until we make her want to stay. If Vik could stop being an asshole for three fucking seconds, that'd be a lot fucking easier. I'm normally the asshole and you're the fucking charismatic one, where the hell has all that charm of yours gone?" I ask my brother.

"What if she only wants you?" he asks, looking me straight in the eye.

"She won't."

"She's your wife, not ours," Lev says, surprising me.

"Trust me, she doesn't give a fuck that the marriage certificate we created has my name on it, not one of yours," I scoff.

“Will you keep her if she wants you, but not all of us?” Vik asks, his eyes narrowed and shrewd.

“She doesn’t want me. I got into bed with her last night, she didn’t come to me. But we’ll make her want all of us,” I insist, unwilling to say what I really feel, which is that sleeping with her in my arms last night changed things for me.

Before that, I wanted to own her, because for so long she’s felt like she belonged to us. But feeling her soft body pressed against me while she slept... now I just want her. I want to fuck her while she’s awake with those expressive eyes of hers looking up at me while I slam into her body, just as much as I want to push into her while she’s unaware, her body taking what I force her to accept.

“How?” Lev asks.

“We don’t give her the space she keeps trying to force between us. If she’s in the bedroom, one of us is too. She wants to sleep behind a door, so we take it in turns inviting her to our beds and if she refuses, we sleep in the big bed with her. We eat together, spend time together, we make sure that from now on, she’s never alone,” I tell them, smiling as the plan comes together in my head.

“She won’t share a bed with me,” Vik says sullenly.

“If she’s worried about sleeping with you, then one of us will offer to play chaperone. Making her feel safe is how we get her to stay.”

“We could all just sleep in the big bed,” Lev suggests hopefully, “That’s why we got it in the first place.”

“She fucking hates us, I don’t think she’s going to agree to sleep in a bed with all three of us,” Vik scoffs.

“She wants to pretend she’s a prisoner. Prisoners don’t get a choice where they sleep. Believing she has no choice is making this easier for her. I ordered her some new clothes to replace all the pink and floral, which she hates. But she wore the clothes I picked for her this morning, because I told her that’s what she had to put on today,” I explain.

“She’s never going to want to stay if she feels like a prisoner,” Lev says exasperated.

“Unless we Stockholm her,” Vik says, rubbing his thumb over his lip thoughtfully.

“Jesus Christ,” Lev hisses. “We want her to want us, not to cause her to have serious mental health issues.”

“Let’s just start by making sure she’s not alone. For the minute, we take away her choices. If she argues, remind her that prisoners do as they are told.” I smirk. “I’ll go and find her this morning. Lev, you can get her for lunch, then start teaching her how to swim, she really does need to learn. Vik, at dinner you can have her, you need to apologize and then spend some time not being an asshole. Tonight, we can explain more about the plan to bring down Orlov. This is her world now, and I think bringing her in to the planning will make her understand that.”

“You need to stop calling her Alena.” Lev points at me.

“I know, I’m trying,” I sigh. Pushing back from the chair, I head into the house and up the stairs to the bedroom. She’s not in the bed, where I expect to find her, but the doors to the balcony are open and as I step closer, I can hear voices.

“Do you know how to use that gun?” she asks.

“Yes, ma’am, I’m a very good shot, you’re in safe hands,” a male voice answers.

“Can you teach me?” she asks, softening her voice until it’s sweet and coy.

“Sure. You want to learn how to shoot?”

“Why not, there isn’t anything else to do here,” she replies, giggling.

“Sure there is. This is paradise, you can fish, swim, we have jet skis, helicopters.”

“Jet skis?” she asks.

“Yeah, Mr. Sorokin has a whole barn full of water toys. You can even surf on the other side of the island.”

“Really? Maybe you could show me sometimes,” she suggests sweetly.

“I—” he starts.

“I’d love to know why you’re flirting with my wife,” I growl, stepping out onto the balcony and glaring down at the guard stationed on the ground below.

“Mr. Belov,” the guard says, snapping his shoulders back into a military stance.

“Dane, right?” I ask, recognizing him as one of the new guards, Greyson, the head of our security recently employed.

“Yes, sir,” he answers immediately.

“Do you know who the woman you were speaking to is?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dimitri,” Alabama says quietly.

“Do not speak,” I say, turning to look at her and silencing her with a single glare.

“So, you were deliberately flirting with my wife?” I ask Dane, my tone cold and lethal.

“No, sir. I was just being friendly, sir,” he answers.

“Unless it is an emergency situation and you need to speak to alert her to an immediate safety request, you do not look at her, you do not speak to her and if you value your fucking life, you do not flirt with her. Do. You. Understand?” I demand.

“Yes, sir,” Dane says, averting his gaze.

Pulling my cell from my pocket, I dial Greyson’s number. “Boss.” He answers on the second ring.

“Send someone to take over from Dane beneath the balcony,” I snap.

“Okay. I’ll have Shaun replace him. Is there a problem?”

“Apparently the men haven’t been made aware that flirting with my wife is an easy way to get shot in the fucking head,” I snarl.

“Jesus, Dimi, did you kill him?” Greyson sighs, sounding aggravated.

“No. I had a good night’s sleep last night, so I’ve spared him for now. But if he or any of the other men so much as look at her again, I’ll rip out their eyes and make them fucking eat them.”

“I’ll spread the word, you crazy motherfucker.” Greyson laughs.

Before I have a chance to end the call, I see Shaun jogging across the grounds. Nodding at me respectfully, he takes Dane’s place beneath the balcony, while the other man strides away, not even glancing back as he rushes to leave.

“He wasn’t flirting with me,” she says quietly.

“Did I not warn you what would happen if anyone here tried to help you leave us?” I growl.

“I didn’t—”

“Do you want his blood on your hands, Malishka? Because I will have him kneel at your feet while I put a bullet through his skull. Do you understand?”

Her face pales as she nods.

“Tell me. I need to hear you say it.”

“I understand,” she whispers, her voice shaky.

“Good, now come,” I snap.

“I’d rather stay here.”

“I’m not asking you,” I growl, grabbing her hand and leading her off the balcony and back into the bedroom. Yanking her toward me, I collar her throat with my palm, keeping her in place with my other hand on her back.

Leaning down I press a bruising kiss to her lips. “You’re ours, Malishka, only ours. This is your one and only warning. Do not flirt with my men, you will not like the result.”

I feel her nod against my mouth, and when I press my lips to hers again, she tentatively kisses me back. I’m not sure if

this is a victory or a setback, but either way I can't resist pressing the kiss a little deeper and feeling her shudder beneath me.

“Do you like seeing me jealous, Malishka? Did you flirt with him to see what we'd do?”

“Why would any of you be jealous?” she whispers.

“Shall I tell you a secret?”

“Yes.”

“You've been ours for so long, I think we'd kill anyone who thought they could take you from us.”

“I'm not yours.”

“Oh, but you are, Malishka. You've been ours since we saw you. You were ours while we watched every single thing you did for the last year. You were ours before we took you, and you'll be ours for the rest of our lives. If you want to be a prisoner that's okay, but you'll be *our* prisoner and you won't flirt with anyone else. Ever.”

“No,” she protests, but it's a weak sound.

“Yes. Shall I fetch the others, they can tell you what they'd have done, although I can guess. Lev would have sent the guard away, then he'd have left, he'd come back, but you'd be able to see the betrayal he felt in his eyes. You'd know you've hurt him. Vik would have pulled out his gun and shot him, then he'd punish you.”

“Punish me?”

I don't know if she's really asking a question, but I answer it anyway.

“He'd strip off your clothes, bend you over his knee and spank you until you were crying and begging for him to forgive you. Then after he was finished, he'd walk you to the corner of the room and push you into it with your nose to the wall and your red punished ass on display.”

Her breathing turns ragged and I pull back so I can see her properly. I'm not expecting her pupils to be blown wide, or her

chest to be heaving up and down. She's scared, but she's turned on too.

"You like that idea, don't you?"

"No." She shakes her head, denying it.

"Vik admitted to us yesterday that his parents and grandparents had an agreement that if their wives stepped out of line, they'd punish them. He thought that all our families worked that way, but it turns out it was just his. I was worried that wasn't something we could ever give him, but now, I think it's exactly what you both need."

"No," she says again.

"Should I bring Dane back and kill him instead?" I muse.

"No," she shrieks.

"You flirted with another man, Little Prisoner. That's not allowed. There has to be consequences and if you don't want me to kill the guard, then you'll put yourself over Vik's knee and let him correct you."

"I'm not letting him... no," she gasps, shaking her head.

"Okay," I concede, pulling out my cell and dialing Greyson's number again.

"Boss," he answers.

"Send Dane back—"

"No." Grabbing the cell from my hands, she lifts it to her ear. "Don't send him back here," she shouts, then ends the call.

"Come then, Little Prisoner, if you've made your choice."

She shakes her head, her eyes pleading with me, but I smirk. "It's his head, or your ass, you pick."

"You do it, not Viktor," she says quietly.

"That's not my kink, Malishka. But don't worry, Lev and I will be there to make sure Vik doesn't take things too far." Grabbing her hand again, I march forward, smiling widely as she rushes to keep up with me.

The door to the office is shut, but I look into the retinal scanner and the lock clicks open. Turning the handle, I pull her into the room, causing both Lev and Vik to look up from their desks.

“What’s going on?” Lev asks, looking to Alabama first, then me.

“I found our little prisoner on the balcony flirting with the guard. I’ve offered her two options. Either we kill the guard, or she allows Vik to punish her,” I tell them, grinning evilly.

“Punish her?” Lev snaps. “How?”

“The way Vik’s family has always punished their wives.” I look at Vik and wink. “Vik, why don’t you bring a chair into the center of the room, I assured Malishka that Lev and I would be here to make sure you don’t take things too far.”

“Dimi,” Lev starts to protest.

“Alabama.” I have to force myself to call her that and not Alena. “Tell Lev which you’d prefer. We can fetch the guard and I can kill him, or you can allow Vik to punish you.”

Closing her eyes, she grits her teeth, then looks to Lev. “I want him to punish me. I won’t have a man’s death on my conscience.”

“Are you sure?” Lev asks her, looking between the rest of us like he’s trying to be the voice of reason in a room full of crazy.

“Yes. Let’s just get this over with. I’m not consenting to sex, or any kind of sexual touching though. Just this... punishment,” she spits out.

“Strip,” Vik says, standing up and stepping out from behind his desk, his eyes alight with controlled excitement.

“Can’t you just—”

“I’m agreeing not to touch you sexually, Ali, but you being naked is part of your punishment. Take off your clothes, fold them and put them on my desk.”

“Come on, Little Prisoner, we’ve all already seen you naked, there are cameras in every room of the house,” I taunt.

She gasps, her expression showing her shock, then anger. Then she steels herself and unties the string holding her top together. Quickly pulling it off, she pushes her shorts and the tiny thong I laid out for her this morning down, letting them drop to the floor before she steps out of them. I never expected her to cower, but watching her pull her shoulders back and look Vik in the eye as he carries a chair over to the center of the room, makes me fucking proud to call her my wife.

“Perfect, Malishka,” I praise, keeping my eyes on hers, making sure she knows I’m not talking about how she looks with no clothes on.

Placing the chair down, Vik sits, spreading his knees wide. “Come here, Ali.”

Inhaling shakily, she closes the distance between them.

“Have you ever been spanked before?” Vik asks.

“No.”

“Then this is going to hurt. You’re going to lay over my lap and I’m going to punish you for flirting with another man.”

“You’re ours, Malishka,” I remind her.

“You belong here,” Lev offers, his eyes worried, but also hopeful.

“You can scream, yell, and cry as much as you want. But you won’t curse, or call any of us names while I’m spanking you, if you do, I’ll add more licks onto the end of your punishment. When I’m done, I’ll help you over to the corner of the room and you’ll stand with your nose pressed into the wall and your red ass on display.”

“Can we just get this over and done with?” she asks.

Reaching out, Vik yanks her forward, half lifting her as he places her face down over one of his thighs, using the other leg to pin her in place.

“Oh my god,” she yells, struggling to find her balance, her hands grasping for something to help stabilize her.

“You can hold onto my leg, or place your hands on the floor, but don’t reach back and try to cover your ass,” Vik says, his voice eerily calm. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she pants.

The first strike of his palm against her ass is startlingly loud and from my position standing in front of them, I see the red handprint bloom to life on her skin.

“Jesus Christ,” she hisses.

I watch as my brother relaxes, his shoulders drooping, like spanking her drained some of the relentless antsy tension he’s always filled with. Lifting his arm, he spanks her again, striking her in a controlled pattern, first one cheek, then the other, moving steadily down her cheeks toward her thighs.

Alabama shrieks, writhes and yells for Vik to stop, but he just calmly spanks her over and over until her cries become sobs.

Spanking has never been my thing. A quick ass smack during sex maybe. A playful tap on butt to get a girl moving, then sure. But the idea of having a woman ass up over my lap and spanking her until her skin is red and hot to the touch, isn’t something I’ve ever really considered wanting.

But watching Vik master Alabama in such a visceral way. Fucking hell, my dick is hard. My hand tingles with phantom pain, like I’m the one whose palm is crashing down against her skin. My mouth is dry and my balls are heavy and my dick hurts, but I just can’t look away.

When her body goes limp, Vik’s spanks slow to heavy thuds rather than sharp slaps. “You belong to us. You’re *our* prisoner, *our* woman, *our* wife. You do not flirt with other men and if we ever find out you have, we’ll make you watch as we put a bullet through his skull, then I’ll punish you until you never look at any other man but us ever again. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she sobs.

“Good girl,” he coos, his tone softening as he caresses her red butt with his hand, soothing her. “You did so well taking your punishment.”

She doesn’t speak, but her sobs soften.

“Come now, almost over,” he says, lifting her upright; holding her while she finds her balance. His touch is almost reverent as he walks her to the corner of the room, positioning her with her face pressed into the wall, her legs shoulder width but stepped back, forcing her red ass onto display.

I can’t hear what he’s saying, but I know he’s speaking to her. Whatever it is, she’s not tensing, or fighting and when he steps away, she stays in position, not moving.

No one speaks as Vik backs up until he’s standing beside my desk, his eyes on the naked woman against the wall.

“What the fuck was that?” Vik asks, his voice so low I can barely hear him.

“You want this kind of relationship with her, don’t you?”

“I never—” he starts.

“I assumed you bringing up your parents and grandparents arrangement was your way of telling us this was something you need. I told her you’d spank her as a threat, but when I saw she wasn’t exactly horrified by the idea, I thought why not?” Shrugging, I force my gaze from Alabama’s ass to Vik. “Was I wrong?”

“No, that was... that was...” He trails off, struggling for words.

“What if she just hates us all more for this?” Lev asks, coming to stand beside us.

“She won’t,” I say with a confidence I don’t entirely believe.

“I’m not spanking her. I refuse to hurt her like that,” Lev growls with a hint of anger.

“I have no interest in spanking her either, although I do like the drugged expression on her face when you stood her

up, naked and softly compliant,” I whisper.

“She took it so beautifully, like she needed it almost as much as I did,” Vik murmurs reverently.

“How long are you planning on leaving her over there?” Lev snaps.

“Just a minute longer. Dimi, you can have her at dinner, I’ll need to be with her this morning.”

“That’s fine, just try not to piss her off again.” I chuckle and Vik snaps his gaze to me and glares.

Turning his attention back to Alabama he calls. “Ali, come here.”

Moving slowly, she turns around and steps forward. It’s like she’s forgotten that she’s naked, because her pace is slow, but it’s not because she’s self-conscious.

“Come on, Baby, all the way here,” Vik coaxes her.

The moment she’s close enough, he carefully reaches for her and pulls her into his chest, wrapping his arms around her tightly. A part of me expects her to fight, but instead she sort of melts into him. After a moment he slowly releases her, turning her and guiding her to me, while he fetches her clothes from his desk.

“Are you okay?” I whisper.

“My ass hurts.”

I chuckle, I can’t help it.

“Would you really have killed that guy?” she asks, tipping her head back to look me in the eye.

“Without a second thought. We’ve all spent a long time wanting you and craving you. You might only be my wife in name right now, but soon, you’ll be ours in every way imaginable. The next time you think about seducing one of the guards, this punishment will seem like a walk in the park.”

A depth of understanding settles in her eyes and, with it, something else dies. I don’t want to break her, but I will if

that's what it takes for her to understand that we won't let her leave, no matter how much she wants to.

Pulling her attention away from me, Vik kneels at her feet, offering her the thong to step into. His actions must remind her that she's naked and she quickly steps into the scrap of silk and lace, trying to bat Vik's hand away when he starts to slide the panties up her thighs.

"I can do it," she argues breathily.

"So can I. And I will, so stop fighting me," he says, his tone still soft and even.

Huffing, she stops trying to push Vik away, and he slides the fabric into place, hiding her pussy from view. Holding her shorts next, he offers them for her to step into, then pulls them up, dragging them over her sore ass as she gasps and hisses in pain.

"No, leave them off, I'd rather prance around in that stupid fucking thong than have denim touching my ass right now," she protests.

"I'm holding myself back from touching you right now, Baby, but if you're only wearing those tiny panties, your ass red and hot from where I spanked you, I'm going to end up losing control. If you've changed your mind and you're good with that, I'll burn every scrap of fabric in the house and keep you naked for the next few years. If not, then the shorts go on," Vik says, matter of factly.

"Fine, you sadist," she hisses, grimacing as he slides the tight shorts over her raw skin, buttoning the waist and zipping up the fly without ever touching her inappropriately.

"I'm not a sadist." He laughs

"My ass would disagree."

"I don't find sexual pleasure in hurting you. But I do enjoy seeing you submit to my dominance by allowing me to punish you for your bad behavior," Vik explains, dropping her top over her head and tying the string to keep it in place.

“So, you’re basically Christian Grey?” she snarks, her eyes sparking to life as her sassy attitude returns.

Vik laughs. “I suppose there are similarities. I grew up watching my father and grandfather disciplining their wives like this. I honestly didn’t realize it wasn’t normal until I was in my teen years. Even then I assumed it was a practice the Bratva used. It was only when I asked my brothers about it yesterday that I found out it wasn’t, and that domestic discipline is just how the men in my family chose to worship their wives.”

“I’m not—” Alabama starts.

“You may not be my wife in the eyes of the law, but in every other way you’re just as much mine as you are Dimi’s or Lev’s. We’ve always known that sharing one woman would make us all happy, and the moment we saw you, we knew that you were ours.”

Seeing Vik like this, calm, peaceful, and without the frenetic energy that keeps him on a knife’s edge of exploding is fucking unbelievable. The only other times I’ve seen him like this is when he was stoned off his gourd, or so drunk he was on the verge of passing out. Knowing that dominating Alabama has that same effect, with much less destructive impact, is startling.

“Come on, let’s go and get a drink and I’ll see if I can find some aloe for your hot ass.” Chuckling, he gently reaches for her hand and leads her out of the room.

alabama

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell them how wet your pussy is,” he’d whispered into my ear as he pushed my face gently into the corner, then positioned me with my legs spread wide and my burning ass on display for them.

What the hell just happened?

One minute I was attempting to flirt with the guard stationed below the balcony, and the next I’m naked, laid over Viktor’s lap while he whaled on my butt. What’s worse is that he wasn’t forcing me to be in that position, I agreed to it. The idea of them killing that poor guard just because I was stupid enough to try and seduce him a little, was so horrifying I think I’d have agreed to anything to save his life.

I knew they felt some level of claim over me, but this morning has made it startlingly obvious that what they feel about me is a hell of a lot more intense than I realized. A part of me was really hoping that eventually they’d let me go. Now it’s clear that the moment they jammed that needle into my neck, any kind of escape from them has been nothing but wishful thinking on my part.

My aunt Darla was a big fan of silent treatment as a form of punishment. She once went a full two months without uttering a word to me. Now, to some people, that might not seem too bad, but it was during summer vacation and as I didn’t have any real friends, I went almost the entirety of my summer break without speaking to a soul.

Over and over, I keep telling them to treat me like a prisoner, but if they were to just leave me alone and make everyone ignore me, that would break me much faster than a spanking would.

Honestly, and I'd never admit it to them, but I've always had a secret fantasy about being spanked. In my head, it'd hurt a lot less and been a lot sexier. But being over Vik's knee ticked a lot more boxes than I was expecting.

Since I woke up on this island, I feel like I've been in emotional whiplash, swinging from fear to anger and back again. Feeling desire with a hint of pain and a dash of humiliation was so different, that it was almost too easy to give in to the new feelings Vik had provoked in me and just bask in them.

The first time his palm landed on my butt, I thought I wouldn't be able to take it, but after a while the pain changed into something else. I wouldn't say I liked it, but I definitely didn't hate it either. At another time with a different guy, I might even say I'd found a kink I liked. But this isn't the time and Viktor definitely isn't the person.

But right now, he's leading me through the house and toward the kitchen and I'm letting him. At breakfast he was an asshole, and I went to the bedroom so angry at all of them, especially him. But now all that animosity seems to have faded and I just feel pleasantly numb.

My mom was a junkie, I understand the draw of oblivion, I saw it a hundred times right after she pushed the needle into her vein. Could this feeling become as addicting?

"Tanya, can you bring two glasses of ice water, a glass of juice, and some snacks out to the patio, please?" Vik calls.

Blinking, I absently notice we're outside the kitchen and Tanya is staring at me with a look of hate that's so pure it actually snaps me out of my euphoric haze.

"Of course, Mr. Vik, I'll bring it right out," she coos meekly, her whole expression changing when she looks up at Viktor.

“She’s in love with you,” I tell him as soon as I’m sitting down. “All of you, I think, but specifically you.”

“I know,” Vik says simply.

“Have you and her...?” I trail off, unsure why I don’t feel like I can just come out and ask.

“Fucked?” he answers for me. “No, I’ve always considered her a little like a younger cousin. When we moved here, we warned them that leaving wasn’t an option. That if they moved to the island they’d be agreeing to live here for the rest of their lives. They’re family, which means they’re a weakness and we can’t risk them leading others back here. We assumed Tanya wouldn’t want to come, but she insisted she did. We didn’t know it was because she hoped living here would mean her becoming more than just our trusted and appreciated staff. If we had, we would never have brought her and now she’s just a little too angry to allow her to leave.”

“So, she’s as much a prisoner as I am?” I murmur.

“She’s nothing like you. She wants us and we don’t want her. But we wanted you so much we took you, and eventually you’ll crave us the same way we do you,” he tells me confidently, his eyes bright with fire.

“Why not just have her pose as me? You said no one else knew about me before you poisoned Grigoriy, so why not forge the DNA results and have her, or someone else be Alena Polakoff?”

“Perhaps we would have. Not Tanya, because your father and the others all knew her as a very young child, but I suppose we could have found another woman. But then we saw you.” He shrugs. “No one else but you would do from that moment onward. I know it’s hard to believe, but from the second we laid eyes on you, we knew that this is exactly where you’d end up.”

“A prisoner with a sore ass,” I say, laughing lightly to myself.

“I went easy on you; it won’t be sore for long. By dinner you’ll be sitting down without wincing.”

“You went easy on me?” I shriek. “That wasn’t easy.”

“Oh, Baby, I assure you that was me being gentle. If I really wanted to punish you, I wouldn’t do it with my hand, I’d do it with my belt.”

Jolting back, I swallow thickly. “Your belt?”

“Yep. I’d start with you over my lap, spanking you with my hand until your ass was bright red and hot to touch, then I’d bend you over my desk, or a chair, or even have one of the others hold you. Then I’d blister your ass with my belt until just the thought of sitting down made you cry.”

“That’s how your grandad and dad treated their wives?”

“I never saw it. Dad never disciplined Mom like that in front of me. But there was a thick leather belt that hung on a hook in my parents’ bedroom and I heard him tell her to go upstairs and get it one day when I was about fifteen.”

“Why?” I breathe, unable to stop myself from asking.

“He found out she was writing letters to the woman your father was married to at the time. They’d been friends before our families were banished and my mom didn’t want to lose touch with her. Dad knew it was dangerous for us to try and contact anyone from back home and he warned us never to try. She ignored him and when he found out, he punished her severely.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. Dad sent me to Dimi’s for a few days. When I got home, they both acted like nothing had happened.”

“Was she okay? Did he... did he hurt her?”

“My parents are the most in love people you’ll ever meet. However he punished her; it was something they both agreed on. She broke a rule and he disciplined her. I thought their relationship was normal, because my mom and dad are the happiest couple I know. She doesn’t resent him for bringing her back in line when she tests the boundaries, and he doesn’t resent her for pushing the limits and breaking the rules.”

I nod, because I guess it does make sense, but absently I wonder if she hates him just a little bit, or if she breaks the rules as an excuse to get him to spank her.

We fall silent when Tanya rounds the corner of the house, carrying a large tray. Placing it down, she puts a glass of ice water in front of each of us and then the glass of juice and a small platter of fruits, slices of meat, cheese, and some nuts in the center of the table. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks, Tanya,” Vik says, smiling politely.

Nodding, she smiles wistfully back at him, then leaves.

“Here, drink this,” Vik says, handing me one of the glasses of water.

Taking it from him, I bring it to my lips and take a sip.

“No, all of it. There can be a sort of come down after a spanking, you need to stay hydrated.” Lifting the bottom of the glass he forces me to drink quickly as the water rushes into my mouth.

“Do you spank all your kidnap victims?” I ask when I’ve downed half the glass and he’s lowered his hand.

“No.” He laughs. “You’re my first kidnappee. But yes, I have spanked women before. Not the way I did with you. It was more of a sex thing when I’ve done it in the past.”

“Oh.” I nod, unsure how to reply to that.

“What was unexpected, is that I enjoyed spanking you, even though I knew it wasn’t going to lead to anything, much more than I’ve ever enjoyed a prequel to sex spanking with other women,” he says distractedly,

“Wow, that’s weird,” I sass before I can stop myself.

“I know,” he agrees, wrinkling his brow in consternation.

“Maybe you are a sadist.” This time I actually slap my hand over my mouth to stop any more words coming out.

His laugh is warm and unexpected. Turning in his seat so he’s sitting sideways and facing me, he reaches out a finger

and runs it along the edge of my jaw. “Maybe it’s just you. I enjoyed having my hand around your throat yesterday too. I enjoyed knowing I was in control of something as tangible as the breath you take. But I’m sorry for hurting you that way.”

“You’re sorry?” I question.

“Yes. I was angry that you’d let someone else into your delectable body, but I shouldn’t have touched you while I was feeling that way. I hurt you pointlessly, and for that I’m sorry. I’m also sorry for being an asshole. Contrary to what I’ve shown you so far, I’m generally considered to be the easy going one of the three of us, but you seem to be somewhat of a trigger for me.”

“Okay?” I say, furrowing my brow. “I’m not sure if you’re sorry that you hurt me, or if you’re just sorry that you were an asshole about it?”

“Do you know what the first thing you did, the first day I watched you was?”

I shake my head.

“You were wearing your uniform, that fucking cheerleader outfit, with chuck taylors and your hair in bunches with those huge cheer bows in them. You were walking to work and some asshole was catcalling at you. He blocked your path, and tried to drag you off the street and into an alley.”

“I remember that,” I admit, shuddering as memories of the feeling of his hands on me and his disgusting whiskey tainted breath fill my mind.

“I shouted at him to let you go and he ran off, down the same alleyway he’d tried to take you into. Instead of following you, I followed him. He wasn’t even sorry, he was singing to himself and smiling. Until that moment, I didn’t realize I was already thinking of you as ours. But the idea that he thought he could put his hands on you. That he could touch what belonged to me and my brothers, infuriated me. So, I slit his throat, then I stood back and watched the life pour out of him.” Sucking in a shallow breath, Viktor looks down at me, his eyes

hooded and so fucking intense, that I feel myself shudder beneath his penetrating gaze.

“I decided then and there that you were going to be mine. Be ours. I’ve been possessive of you ever since. I wasn’t even sure I could share you with my brothers. I’m sorry that I hurt you in anger. I’m sorry that I was an asshole and I’m sorry that I ever suggested that I’d take your body without consent. But know this, Alabama Belova, I will have you. I don’t care if I have to crawl on my knees and beg for a taste, eventually we’ll make you want us just as much as we want you.”

“Viktor,” I sigh.

“Call me Vik, Baby. I won’t touch you sexually without your permission, except for kissing you. I can’t resist those lips and soon you’ll kiss me back, you’ll be so desperate you won’t be able to help yourself. But I promise I’ll never hurt you in anger again. Do you believe me?”

Exhaling, I look up at him and wonder how stupid it would be to tell him I do believe him. I’m not sure he’s sorry for the reason I want him to be, but I believe that he honestly never intended to hurt me just because he was pissed, so I nod. “I believe you. But I don’t want you to kiss me either.”

“You don’t have to kiss me back, but I won’t stop kissing you. I need that connection and if I have to keep my hands off the rest of your body, your lips are the one thing I refuse to give up. It might not feel like it now, but eventually you’ll be happy here. I know feeling like a prisoner is easier for you to deal with than accepting that you’re free within the shores of the island.”

“Freedom means more than an unlocked door,” I argue.

“I know it does. But we weren’t the ones who built your cage, we’re just the ones who put the lock on the door. Sooner or later, who your father is was always going to be revealed and when that happened, you were always going to be taken away from the life you knew. At least, here, you won’t be shackled to a bed while all of Orlov’s guards try you out.”

I shudder as I think of what they said happened to Orlov's young wife. If Vik is right and true freedom was never really an option, then at least being here with these three brutal men is better than the alternative I'd face in my biological father's men's clutches.

"Dimi said you found having your clothes picked out for you easier, because prisoners get told what to do, not given choices. So, for now, until you accept your place in our world, all choices but one will be taken from you. Who you allow to touch you and in what way, is now the only thing you have control over. What you eat and when, who you sleep beside and in which bed. Where you go, who you speak to and even how you wash, are now things we control. Dimi, Lev, and I will tell you exactly what to do and if you don't do it, or you step out of line, I'll bring you back under control just like I did today."

"By spanking me," I breathe.

"Yes, by spanking you. Every expectation will be laid out for you, all you have to do is follow the rules. When you don't, then you'll be disciplined. If you're a good girl who behaves, or a naughty girl who takes her punishment well, then you'll be offered rewards, the choice to accept or decline them will be entirely yours."

"Are you trying to bribe me to behave with sexual treats?" I gasp, a little horrified and still slightly turned on.

Laughing, he tips his head to the side and shrugs. "I guess I am. Let me show you how it works. You took your punishment today like a good girl. You stripped out of your clothes, then lay over my thigh without fighting. Then you let me spank you even though I know it hurt, because you know you deserved to be disciplined for flirting with a guard after Dimi warned you that he'd kill anyone who tried to help you leave us. You put that guard's life at risk, then you saved it by accepting the consequences of your actions. You finished your punishment by putting yourself on display like a sexy ornament in our office. Right now, I think you deserve a reward."

I'm shaking my head before he's even told me what he's offering me.

"I want to strip off your shorts and panties and then spread you wide so I can see your dripping cunt, then I want to suck on your clit until you come."

My breath becomes ragged, and I can feel my heart racing in my chest. A part of me wants to say yes. My body is still needy, reacting dramatically to the spanking and the way he whispered into my ear, revealing he knew about how shamefully turned on I was and promising not to tell the others. But the sane part of my brain is screaming at me to turn him down. He might have promised not to touch me without my consent, but he could be lying. Telling me the only control I have is over who touches me, could just be a way of making me believe I'm safe, only for them to pin me down and rape me.

But if that's what they want, there's literally nothing or no one here to stop them. Vik could have me pinned to the floor with his dick inside me in a matter of moments and instead he's asking permission to get me off.

My mind is whirring, and as much as I want to say yes, because I know a good orgasm would clear my head, I force the word, "no," to come out of my mouth.

"That's a shame," he says, but he's smirking.

"That's it?" I ask, shocked.

"That's it. I offered, you declined. Now drink your juice, then we'll go for a walk along the beach."

Blinking, I wait for the explosion, for him to scream and shout, or hit me. But he looks more amused than anything else.

"Drink," he says, lifting the glass of juice to my lips.

I take a long sip, and he pulls it away, lifting a cube of cheese to my mouth next.

"Eat," he orders.

Parting my lips, I let him feed me and the taste of the delicious tangy cheese coats my tongue. For the next five

minutes, he feeds me bites of juicy melon, spicy salami, and tangy cheese.

“I can’t eat anything else, I’m full,” I protest, wondering if he plans to force me.

“Let’s go down to the beach. We won’t be going in the water, so you won’t need a swimsuit, but did Dimi lay out any shoes?”

“No.”

“Stay here and I’ll go and get you some. Finish your water before I get back,” he orders gently, before getting up and walking away.

“They’re only using you,” Tanya says, stepping around the corner the moment Vik disappears into the house.

“I know,” I agree.

“You know?” Her brow is furrowed, like she expected me to be appalled by her truth.

“Tanya, you know they kidnapped me... right?”

“You want them,” she says, ignoring what I just told her. I don’t know if that means she is very aware that I’m not here by choice and is just ignoring that fact, or if she thinks I’m lying.

“Until two days ago, I had no idea who they were. I want to go home, but apparently that isn’t ever going to happen and they’ve already warned me they’ll kill anyone who tries to help me get away. So, no. I don’t want them,” I snap.

“They’re mine. They’ve always been mine. They love me,” she snaps, once again ignoring everything I just said.

“I understand. If you could just get them to drop me off on the mainland, then I promise you’ll never see me again,” I tell her.

She blinks at me, like I’ve confused the hell out of her, but Vik comes back carrying a pair of sandals before either of us can say anything else and she immediately starts picking up the half-eaten tray of snacks and the glasses.

“Stop,” Vik orders. “Leave the water.”

Putting the glass back on the table, she scurries away with the tray.

“I told you to drink all your water,” he says, raising his brow tauntingly.

“Tanya and I were chatting.”

“Oh really?” he says, sitting back down beside me and lifting the glass of water to my lips.

Opening my mouth, I drink the rest of the liquid and when I’m done, he lowers the glass to the table, leaning forward and capturing my lips with his. I don’t kiss him back, but he’s still smiling when he finally pulls away.

“Come on, the beach is beautiful,” he says, sliding the sandals onto my feet and then taking my hand and gently pulling me up.

“You don’t want to know what she said?” I ask.

“Oh, I saw the entire conversation on the cameras,” he tells me, clearly not concerned.

“She really wants you. If I end up poisoned, it was her,” I snark.

“Don’t worry, Lev is dealing with her,” he assures me.

“He’s not going to kill her, is he?” The words come out of my mouth so easily, that my feet stop moving.

“What?” he asks, stopping and turning to face me.

“You’re not going to kill her, are you? I wasn’t actually trying to get her to help me escape, I was just being a snarky bitch because she wasn’t listening to a word I said.”

“Calm down, Baby. No, we’re not going to kill her. Like I said earlier, she’s basically family.”

“Oh,” I breathe shakily.

“But when your ass is a little less sore, we’ll have to deal with you breaking the rules.”

“It was a joke,” I protest.

“I’m not sure your ass will think it’s that funny.” Smirking, he turns around, tugging me along behind him.

I absolutely, one hundred percent, should protest this whole, do as I say or I’ll spank you thing, he seems to think we’re doing now. But honestly, I’m so fucking confused about how I feel about anything, that going along and doing what I’m told to do is easier than accepting who I am and why I’m here.

I’m all for justice and good prevailing, but when it comes to the Mafia, is anyone truly good? It certainly doesn’t seem so. These three men kidnapped me, they plan to use me to help them infiltrate the Russian Bratva and then destroy them from the inside out, all because their families, who were also Bratva, were kicked out of the clubhouse and have been searching for revenge ever since.

But if Dimitri, Viktor, and Lev are the good guys, then where is the good/bad line in the sand. Dimitri openly admitted that they poisoned the man they believe to be my father. Vik just confessed to murdering a man who harassed me on the street, and none of them looked even slightly perturbed when Dimitri told them he’d offered me the option of him either killing the guard I stupidly flirted with, or allowing Vik to punish me.

If murder and mayhem are what the supposed good guys in this scenario do, then how bad are the bad guys?

I’m just an almost homeless girl from Georgia, I’m not equipped to deal with this much drama.

“Where are we going?” I ask, slightly out of breath.

“I already told you, we’re going to the beach.”

“Why?”

“Because we live in a tropical paradise.” Vik smirks, squeezing my hand as he tows me along.

“Are you going to teach me how to ride a jet-ski?” I ask.

“No,” he scoffs.

“Shoot a gun?”

“Not on the beach, we have a range in one of the outbuildings.”

“You what?”

“We have a practice range set up in one of the barn outbuildings behind the house. If you want to learn to shoot, I’ll teach you.”

“You will?” I can hear how shocked I sound, but really, how crappy a kidnapper must he be to think teaching me to shoot a gun is a good idea?

“Of course. Learning how to shoot is an essential life skill. Do you know any self-defense or any fighting technique?”

“Yeah, I’m a black belt in kick ’em in the balls and run like hell,” I snark.

“Cute.” He winks. “Lev can teach you some basic moves, once he’s taught you how to swim.”

“Urgh,” I groan. “I don’t need to learn to swim.”

“We live on an island,” he says, leaving the *duh* implied.

“Can I swim anywhere from here?”

“Not unless you become an endurance swimmer overnight, and even then, you’d probably drown before you got anywhere useful.”

“Exactly, so what’s the point of me learning to swim?”

His smile is slow and drugging. “You’ll learn to swim, because we told you to.”

A witty retort is on my lips, but it dies away when we step out from behind the pool and the beach in all of its glory reveals itself. I’ve never seen the sea before in real life. There was a swimming hole and a really pretty lake in the town I grew up in, but when all the other kids were hanging out there in the summer, I wasn’t invited. No one’s parents wanted their kids to be friends with the town whore’s daughter.

For a while before my mom died, I had a poster of a white sand, blue sea, clear skied paradise pasted on my wall. When she was clear headed enough to remember I existed, she’d

promise me we'd go there one day. But she overdosed before we ever had a chance.

Aunt Darla's idea of a vacation was taking a day off work and spring cleaning the whole house. Tropical islands and picture perfect beaches weren't exactly on our radar.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Vik says.

"Beautiful," I whisper reverently.

"Kick off your shoes, we can walk along the edge of the water."

Sliding my feet free of the sandals, I bend over to pick them up, but Vik grabs my arm, pulling me away.

"My shoes," I protest.

"Will be there when we get back. This is our island, who is going to take them?" He laughs.

Stepping off the brick paved walkway, my toes sink into the warm, soft sand. The only sand I've ever stood on was in a sandbox and that was hard and gritty. This sand is smooth, almost velvety and, wiggling my toes, I watch the grains sink over my skin.

"Come on," Vik says, tugging at my arm and towing me forward. It doesn't seem like he's noticing the sand, but then he lives here, he's probably used to it. The grains move, swallowing my feet as I try to hurry to keep pace with him, but the closer we get to the sea, the cooler and more compact the sand gets and the easier it is to walk on.

Smiling widely, the man who only this morning was cruel and angry, looks carefree and young. Letting go of my hand, he jogs into the water, splashing through the tiny waves that lap at the shoreline.

His eyes crinkle at the sides, and he purses his lips as he watches me cautiously edge closer to the water. I'm not scared to get wet, but I have a healthy respect for the wildness of the ocean and how easily it could consume me.

The sea is cool, but not cold when the first push of the tide coats my toes. Walking forward, I stop and let the sand sink

beneath me, while the water fills the gaps covering the tops of my feet. Moving again, I step into the water a little deeper, until my feet are submerged and the waves splash against my calves with each step.

“It’ll be warmer later in the day,” Vik says, pulling my attention. “In the morning and late at night, the water’s still cool.”

“What ocean is this?” I ask, my gaze fixed on the sand and water beneath me.

“Atlantic.”

“I’ve never been to the beach before, but if I had, this could have been the same water,” I muse.

“I guess it could, I’ve never thought of that before.” He chuckles. “Do you want to wade out a little deeper?”

“No.” I shake my head, happy to meander through the shallows, feeling the sand move as the tide sucks the water back out to sea.

Vik doesn’t comment, instead he just keeps walking, glancing back at me every few moments, like he’s checking I’m still there. A few hundred yards down the sand, there are loungers with umbrellas set up, and a large wooden building with a wall of glass doors that go from the floor all the way to the ceiling.

“That’s the cabana, there’s a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom in there. We should get some suntan lotion on your skin. Once the sun is fully up, it’s easy to burn without realizing,” Vik says, taking my hand in his and pulling me out of the water and toward the building.

The dry sand has stuck to my wet feet and I pause wondering how to get it off, as Vik opens the cabana and pushes the doors back. The glass easily concertinas, sliding back against the one wall and opening up the entire front of the building. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but inside looks like a feature in a Homes and Gardens magazine, beach house edition. The floors are a soft bleached wood, with a huge white sectional taking up most of the room. Off to the

left is an open plan bleached wood cabinet kitchen and a small island, with bamboo stools lined up beneath the edge.

The space is bigger than the apartment Monica and I shared, it's about the same size as the house I lived in with Aunt Darla.

“Does someone live here?” I ask.

“No.” Vik laughs. “Honestly, we hardly use it, but it's easier to have a space on the beach, than having to walk back to the main house if you need a drink or to use the bathroom.”

“So, this is basically just empty unless someone is on the beach?” I question.

“I guess, yeah, it is. We did consider moving the rest of our families to the island with us, but once they were here, they wouldn't have been able to leave, so it's easier for us to visit them occasionally, than to force them to isolate.”

“Why can you guys come and go, but everyone else here has to stay put?”

“We never travel straight from the island, we have a helicopter that takes us to a yacht, then from the boat we vary our flight departure from Brazil, Peru, Uruguay, Argentina, or a handful of other places. We always travel together under false names and we only ever fly on our own jet, it's easier to stay under the radar that way. If we had family who wanted to fly to New York to go shopping every few weeks, we'd never be able to keep this place private.”

I nod, because it makes sense, but I have to question why the subterfuge? I know they're dangerous men, but why all the secrecy, when they're about to reveal everything to the Bratva?

“There's some sunblock in the bathroom, I'll go and grab it,” he says, not caring about the sand on his feet as he strides past the kitchen and through a door. When he comes back a moment later, he's holding two bottles of lotion. “Come and sit on a stool and I'll put some on your shoulders.”

“I'm covered in sand,” I protest.

“So?”

“So, it’ll get all over the floors.”

Rolling his eyes, he puts the bottles down on the counter, strides over to me and scoops me off my feet. Carrying me bridal style to the stool, he sits me down on it without my feet ever touching the floor. Sitting reignites the burn in my butt cheeks, but I wince silently.

“Shit, Baby, you’re already starting to burn,” he hisses, carefully lifting my hair up as he rubs lotion into my neck, shoulders and back.

A part of me knows I should be protesting him putting his hands on me, but it’s not sexual, he’s just taking care of me. A dead prisoner is a useless prisoner after all. When he’s done with my back, he walks around to face me and holds out the lotion. “Put some on your arms and chest,” he orders.

Taking it from him, I squeeze some into my hands, then rub it onto my arms, chest, face, stomach and legs. He stands and watches me the whole time, taking the bottle back when I’m done.

“Perfect. Now stand up, turn around to face the counter and push down your shorts and panties.”

“What?” I shriek.

“You heard what I said. I need to check there’s no real bruising on your ass from your spanking. I was careful, so there shouldn’t be, but I want to be sure. And I have some aloe to help soothe the burn a little too.”

“I’m fine,” I blurt, shaking my head.

“Little Prisoner, do as you’re told. I’m not going to spank you again right now, I want to check your skin, that’s all.”

When I still don’t move, his brows pull together and he sighs. “Ali, this is happening, so either you can remove your shorts and panties, or I can, your choice.”

Scowling, I carefully slide down from the stool, and turn so my back is to him. Unfastening my shorts, I hook my thumbs into the waist, then slide them and my panties down

together, holding them in place, just below the curve of my butt.

Grabbing the aloe from the counter, he crouches down, examining my butt. When I hear the sound of him squirting liquid out of the bottle he's holding, I brace for his touch, but when it comes, it's not painful, it's the gentle glide of cool, wet liquid over my heated and sore skin.

"You're going to bruise a little, but nothing too bad," he informs me, coating my ass in the cold liquid, before standing up and moving to wash his hands.

I immediately start to pull my shorts up.

"No, not yet. Let the aloe sit for a minute before you put your clothes back on. Next time, we'll do this on the bed, then you can lay and let it completely absorb before you get dressed."

"Next time?" I gasp.

"Come now, Baby, how long do you think you can go without breaking the rules?" He snickers.

"I don't even know what the rules are," I hiss.

"At the moment, it's as simple as doing what we tell you to."

Long moments pass while I stand pressed against the counter with my ass on display for him. But unlike in their office when they all looked their fill at me, now I don't even feel Vik's eyes on me.

"Okay, the aloe should have absorbed enough for you to put your clothes back on. I'll check again before you go to bed and we can always apply some more if we need to."

Quickly dragging my shorts and underwear back on, my skin doesn't feel like it's about to set on fire when the fabric scrapes over my butt and I exhale in relief.

"We can walk a little further, I'll show you where the guards live and the barn with all the water toys," he says, winking at me.

It takes about an hour to follow the beach around the back of the house to where several bungalows are situated. Most of them are locked up, but one has the doors open and a couple of guys are sitting outside in shorts, drinking beers.

“Everything okay, Mr. Sorokin?” one of them shouts when he spots us.

“We’re fine, thanks,” Vik calls back, draping his arm over my shoulder as he guides me toward a path that circles the bungalows. After a few minutes we reach a massive single-story barn. Unlocking the doors, Vik opens them wide, showing me an array of what can only be described as rich men’s toys. There’s several ATVs, four jet skis, surfboards, paddle boards, as well as other water toys and even a couple of small sailboats.

“Why are you showing me this?” I ask.

“We have several emergency protocols in place, one requires you to come to this barn and then be taken by ATV to an exit point. I very much doubt there will ever be a situation where you’d be alone, but just in case, this is where the barn is, and these are the ATV’s. Can you drive?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Dimi will teach you. We don’t have any cars on the island, it’s not big enough to need them, but we have golf carts and ATVs that you can practice in.”

I nod, but my mind is swimming. How can I keep considering myself a prisoner when they’re treating me like I’m really their wife, like I’m one of them?

“We’ll walk back through the grounds; you look like you’re starting to overheat. I should have brought some water with us.” Locking up the barn, he takes my hand and leads me slowly through the lush, tropical landscaped gardens.

“Hey, how was the beach?” Lev asks, jumping up from his seat on the patio the moment we get close enough.

I don’t respond, assuming he’s talking to Vik, but when both men go silent, I lift my head and find them looking at me expectantly. “Oh. Err. Yeah, it was beautiful.” Looking down

at my feet, I remember we left our shoes on the sand. “Our shoes.”

“I’ll go fetch them.” Vik smirks, then looks to Lev. “Our little prisoner needs a drink.”

I expect Vik to just leave, but instead, he curls an arm around my back, dips his head and kisses me. I try really hard not to, but before I can remember why it’s a stupid idea, I kiss him back.

CHAPTER 20

lev

Her skin is slightly flushed and warm from the sun. Absently I wonder if Vik remembered to tell her to apply sun cream, and I open my mouth to ask just as he pulls her into him, dips his head to hers and kisses her.

Bracing, I wait for her to push him away. To scream and yell and possibly punch him, but instead she stills, then she kisses him back. It's only for a moment. It's only the tiniest hint of compliance, but she kisses him and for the third time today my dick goes rock fucking hard.

Vik pulls back almost immediately, keeping their kiss brief, but from the smug look on his face, he just won whatever war he was fighting with her. Smiling, he arches his brow at me, then turns and leaves, humming merrily as he walks away.

Taking out my cell, I drop Roza a text in the group chat we have, asking her to bring us a jug of water and some beers out to the patio. Usually, I'd go and fetch them myself, but after Tanya's little scene earlier, I had to have a very awkward conversation with the girl I've known her whole life and explain that we all love her like family, but that we don't and never will see her as anything more than a cute baby cousin.

Honestly, I'm not sure she heard a word I said and it was clear her mother agreed, because she came to me afterward and said she'd keep Tanya busy in other parts of the house and away from Alabama for a while.

“What do you think of our island?” I ask, gesturing for Ali to sit down on the patio couch, wincing for her when she carefully lowers herself to the seat. After the way Vik whaled on her ass earlier, I’m impressed she can move at all. I can’t deny that watching my brother spank her was fucking sexy. It was. But now that we’re not in the moment, I feel regretful that we stood by and let Vik hurt her again.

When I spoke to Dimi about it, he assured me that this was the perfect solution, but I’m reserving judgment for the moment. As far as I can see, hurting her will only make her hate us more, when we should be wooing her and making her want to stay.

“It’s beautiful here. Although I don’t have anything to compare it to, I’ve never seen the sea or a beach before,” she confesses.

“You haven’t? But Savannah is a gorgeous coastal town, and it’s not too far from Columbus. You never visited?”

“Nope.” She shakes her head. “I grew up in a backwater town about four hours from Columbus. Until the day my aunt handed me a bus ticket, I’d never left the town limits. Although I guess you probably already know that.”

I shrug, not denying it, because we know almost everything about her childhood and obviously every single detail from the last year. But the year she was missing, that year is a mystery. Or it was until she admitted that she’d spent the time predominantly homeless.

“Did you ever dream of traveling?” I ask, hoping to steer the conversation in an easier direction.

“Honestly, not really. Until Darla gave me that bus ticket, I’d assumed I’d just finish high school and get a job in town or something. Mom and I used to talk about seeing the ocean, but then she’d get high and forget all about it.” When she laughs, the sound is bitter and almost self-deprecating.

“Paradise isn’t the worst place to live though, is it?” I ask.

“I guess not,” she says, shrugging, then falling silent when Roza appears with our drinks.

“Thank you,” I say, lifting the jug of water and filling our glasses, before handing one to Alabama.

Drinking it greedily, she empties the glass, placing it back down on the table.

“Another?” I ask.

“Please.”

I fill it again and she drinks half of it, then holds the glass in her hands, staring around her at the huge pool. “Why did you decide to live out here? Obviously, it’s beautiful, but aren’t you bored being out here alone, with only each other for company?”

Inhaling, I take a moment to think about how to answer. “We were only teenagers when the three of us decided that we wouldn’t let thoughts of revenge control our lives. All of us were intelligent, raised by parents who considered anything less than exceptional as failure, so we applied to American colleges. Vik went to MIT, Dimi to Harvard, and I went to Yale. After we’d graduated and Dimi passed the bar, we started our first company. Once it was successful, we sold it and started another. When that succeeded, we sold that one and started over again. After a while constant success got boring, so we sold our most successful company for billions and bought this island.”

Her eyes are wide, like she’s grudgingly impressed. Everything I’m telling her is the truth, it’s just not *all* the truth. I doubt she’d be scared to hear that we paid our way through school by running drugs, fighting for money and thoroughly embracing our Mafia roots. Or that the seed money to start our very first company came from a contract to take out a gang leader. We’ve already confessed to killing her father and admitted we plan to eradicate Orlov and the rest of the founding Bratva families. But I don’t want to remind her of our crimes, I want to paint us as ruthless businessmen, not dangerous criminals.

“But why isolate yourselves here, alone? Surely three attractive, young billionaires would have the pick of models,

actresses and heiresses. So why are you all single? *Are you all single?*”

“We were waiting for you,” I tell her simply, and even though we weren’t acting like monks, it’s true, no other woman before her has ever captured our attention like she has.

Rolling her eyes, she scoffs, turning away. “I bet you tell all your kidnap victims the exact same thing.”

I laugh. “Of course we do, it’s in the *Idiot’s Guide to Kidnapping*. Chapter one, victim flattery.”

Her smile is soft and her laugh barely audible, but it’s there and I see it. “We’re not recluses, we’ve dated, but never seriously. I think early on we knew we’d prefer to share one woman between the three of us, but we never found the right woman, until you. Seeing you, we knew in an instant it was always meant to be you.”

“Why share?” she asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“We’ve always shared everything. When our families first came to America, we all lived together. Not for long, because our families, like all the Bratva, had money hidden, but it took about six months for them to access it. We were three young boys, forced to live in close quarters, we bonded and that bond never failed. I have never had anything that I wasn’t willing to share with my brothers and they feel the same. When we dated in high school, it always felt weird to kiss a girl and then not offer her lips to them. I think Dimi was the first to suggest that finding one girl we all wanted would work better for us, but as soon as he said it, it made sense to me.”

“Do you guys share each other too?” she asks cautiously.

“No. Lev and Dimi are my brothers, not my lovers. Although if my preferences swung in that direction, they’d be my first choice.”

“So have you ever had a relationship with a woman you’ve shared before?”

I wasn’t expecting her to be this curious, but it’s not disgust in her eyes, it’s open intrigue, and that’s more than I could have hoped for after all we’ve put her through.

“We’ve shared women for a night or two, but never long term.”

“Then how do you even know if you’ll want it long term? What happens if after a few months one of you decides they don’t want a third of a woman and leaves?” she asks quickly, her pitch raising in question.

“This isn’t something we’re going into blindly. We’ve spent years talking about how we think this will work. What we all need to be able to balance the others out. What our roles in the relationship would be. We know this is what we want, and we want it with you. I know that bringing you here the way we did hasn’t given you the best first impression of us. But I promise, once Orlov and his supporters are dead, the only important thing in our world will be you and our relationship.”

“And if I’m not interested in being in a four-way relationship with the three of you? What if I’m gay, or A-sexual, or identify as a man. What then?”

“Are you gay or A-sexual or identify as a man?” I ask cautiously.

“No, but—”

“Alabama, there is so much that you don’t know. So much that we need to tell you to give you some idea of the depth of feeling we have for you. And soon we’ll tell you everything but, for now, just know that when we say we know you, it’s because we *know you*. We saw everything, watched everything, observed everything. If you were gay, we’d probably try to convince you to give being bisexual a try. If you were A-sexual, we’d love you anyway and we’d connect with you on a spiritual and mental level, and if you identified as a man, then maybe I’d reconsider which way my sexuality swung. The truth is, we’ll take you however we can. We’ll do anything, be anyone, change everything, just to be yours.”

Sighing, she shakes her head. “If you all made the decision not to let revenge rule your lives, why have you allowed it to ruin mine?”

“We didn’t plan it that way and I hope, eventually, it won’t feel like we ruined anything. Taking out vengeance on your father honestly wasn’t even on our radar, until it literally dropped into our laps. We’ve spent years trying not to allow our families’ past to affect our future and then there it was; this chance to set right all the wrongs that were done to us.”

“My biological father’s head on a platter,” she scoffs.

“Exactly,” I agree. “The moment we saw a chance, we took it and we’ve been rolling downhill with a plan that became so obviously clear the moment we decided it was our time to take charge. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that we had to bring you here this way. I wanted to speak to you when we first saw you again in Columbus, but the others thought it would be harder for you to accept us ultimately bringing you here if you felt like we’d been lying to you for a year.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Nodding, she exhales slowly.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

“Not really.”

“You barely ate at breakfast.”

“Vik force fed me snacks before we went down to the beach.”

“Well, Roza’s been cooking up a storm, and word of warning, never tell her you’re not hungry. I’m not sure if it’s a Russian thing or just a Roza thing, but she’ll take it as a challenge and keep cooking until you give in and eat.”

Standing up, I hold out my hand to her and she eyes it, like it’s a snake ready to strike. Right when I’m about to give up and drop my hand, she tentatively places her fingers against my palm. Holding her reverently, I help her up. I know I should release her now she’s standing, but being this close to her, touching her... it’s intoxicating and I don’t want to let go.

Pushing my fingers through hers, I lace our hands together, then lead her away from the pool and toward the table that’s laid for lunch on the other side of the patio. The weather here is so beautiful that we use the outside dining space almost all

the time. We'd eat dinner out here too, if Roza didn't like to decorate the dining room in the evenings.

Vik is already sitting at the table, but Dimi isn't here yet as I pull out Alabama's chair, only letting go of her hand when she sits. Taking the seat next to hers, I fight the urge to move my chair closer and drape my arm across her shoulders. Being close to her feels right and even if all I ever have is this innocent intimacy, I'll take it.

Dimi strolls onto the patio with a wide grin on his lips as he slides into his seat at the head of the table. "How was your walk?" he asks, focusing all of his attention on Alabama.

"It was nice, thank you," she answers politely.

"Good. Did Lev tell you he's going to give you your first swimming lesson after lunch?" he asks happily.

Alabama's head snaps in my direction and she narrows her eyes as she glares at me. "No, he didn't. I don't need to learn to swim."

"You do and you *will*," Dimi says, turning it into an order.

Bracing, I wait for her to explode, but instead her shoulders slump and her expression becomes almost petulant, making her look exactly like the twenty-year-old she is. Most of the time she's so mature, that I forget she's barely out of her teens. Sadness washes over me as I think about all the things she's missed out on in the last couple of years.

Most eighteen-year-olds are thinking about prom and college applications, but before she'd even had a chance to finish high school, Alabama's aunt kicked her out and she spent a year sleeping rough, starving and fighting to survive at every turn.

It's a fucking miracle that she didn't end up as an addict, a prostitute, or dead. That's the route most homeless teens end up on. But even before I spent a year watching her, I knew she was too strong not to claw her way out of hell.

I'm not entirely sure how she managed to get a job and an apartment, but out of nothing, she forged a life for herself. It

might have been a narrow life in comparison to what we're used to, but it was hers, fought for and won all on her own.

"Today, we'll just get in the water and you can get your bearings. It'll be fun, I promise," I try to reassure her, running my fingertip over the side of her hand.

Roza walks out onto the patio carrying plates of food, and I pull my finger away from her while Roza places food down in front of Dimi, then Vik, leaving and returning with mine and finally Alabama's.

The chicken Caesar salad is delicious and I smile as I watch Alabama eat. She doesn't finish it like the rest of us do, but she eats over half, which is the most food I've seen her eat since she got here.

"Good?" Dimi asks her, a smirk curling the corners of his lips.

"Very," she answers.

Clearing our salad plates, Roza replaces them with wide brimmed bowls full of huge prawns piled onto spicy roasted veggies, drizzled with some kind of oil.

"Thanks, Roza, this looks amazing," I tell her, turning to smile at Alabama and finding her eyes wide, her lips twisted into a grimace. "What's the matter?" I ask.

"It..." She points at the bowl.

"What's up?" Vik asks.

"The heads are still on?" she says, leaning as far back as her seat will allow.

"Would you like me to peel them for you?" Dimi asks, his eyes alight with amusement.

"No. I'm full after the salad." She grimaces, shaking her head.

Ignoring her, Dimi stands, circles the table and then crouches down beside her. Reaching out, he takes one of the prawns from her plate and quickly peels it, discarding the head

and shell into the bowl Roza placed in the middle of the table for that purpose.

“Here,” Dimi says, holding the flesh to her lips.

Her breathing goes shallow and for some reason, I find myself holding my breath, waiting for her to refuse. My dick goes hard as a rock when her lips slowly part and she takes a small bite of the prawn Dimi is holding between his fingers.

“What do you think?” he asks her, leaning in until she’s forced to part her legs to allow him more space.

“Spicy, but good,” she whispers.

“Here,” he says, holding the rest of the meat out for her to eat.

Her lips part and she lets him feed her to the rest, her wary eyes locked with his.

When she swallows, a soft smile splits his lips. Then the fucker brings his hand to his mouth and sucks his fingers.

Before I can offer to peel the rest of the prawns for her, Dimi rises and Vik takes his place, holding the prawn flesh out to her. An intense heat bubbles between the two of them as he holds the food just out of reach, forcing her to lean forward to eat it. Vik’s smile is all seduction and when she swallows the prawn, he presses into her and kisses her.

I don’t know if she kisses him back, because he immediately pulls back, grinning broadly as he jumps up and retakes his seat on the opposite side of the table. There’s one prawn left in her bowl and a part of me wants to feed it to her, but my sensible side warns me not to push her. Especially when the others are doing everything they can to force her to relent to their will.

Taking the prawn from her bowl, I peel it, then place it back on top of her veggies, winking at her when she looks at me in surprise.

The rest of lunch is uneventful and once the plates have been cleared away, both Vik and Dimi press kisses to

Alabama's cheek before excusing themselves to go back to our office.

“Why don't we head upstairs and get changed into our swimwear? We can tan for a little while by the pool before we get in,” I suggest.

Offering her my hand again, I'm half expecting her to ignore it, but instead, she easily slides hers into mine and I lace our fingers together again, leading her up the stairs and into the bedroom.

“There're swimsuits in the second drawer,” I tell her, pulling her into the closet and dropping her hand to open my own dresser and pull out a pair of shorts.

Turning, I expect her to be searching through the huge dresser full of stuff we picked out for her, but instead, she's scowling at the rails of clothes like they've done something to personally affront her.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Why did you buy me all this stuff?”

“Because we wanted you to have nice things.” I shrug, wondering why that isn't obvious.

“But none of this stuff is me. You say you followed me for a whole year, that you know me. That you saw every single thing that I did and said in that time. But if that's true, then why would you buy me all this stuff?”

“Alabama, we watched you trawl the rails at thrift stores and then put things back because you couldn't afford them. We watched you jump into dumpsters and then wear the clothes you stole from them. Honestly, I was excited to buy new things for you. Expensive, luxurious things, because we saw how much you struggled and we wanted you to have everything you could ever want.”

Her expression turns pensive and blinking, she looks up at me. “If you knew even the first thing about me, you'd realize that my whole life, I've craved lots of things, but none of them were ever expensive or luxurious. Each item of clothing I had was something I worked hard to pay for, or found and turned

into something that was exclusively mine. Yes, my clothes might have come out of thrift stores, or dumpsters, but they were mine. All this stuff.” She gestures to the closet full of designer clothes. “None of this is mine. I didn’t earn any of this. Everything on this island is yours, including me. You own this island. You own this house. You own all the toys in the barn and the beach cabana that’s bigger than the house my aunt lives in. You own Roza and Tanya and the guard whose life you were willing to end because of something I did. You three own all of this, and I’m just your latest purchase. Did any of you really think that bribing me with all this expensive stuff would make me feel less angry that you stole me away from my life and dropped me into yours?”

“Honestly,” I say, feeling my chest hollow and all of the happiness from only an hour ago fade away. “Yeah, I thought it might help.”

Her scoff is so derisive, the sound is like a kick to the gut.

“We wanted you, so we took you. There were other ways we could have kept you safe from Orlov’s men, but you’re ours, so we brought you here, and even if you hate us all for the rest of your life, I don’t think any of us will regret making that choice. We could have taken you to our apartment in New York, or a safe house in Connecticut. We could have hidden you in Europe in one of our properties over there, but none of them are as safe as here. On this island, you’re untouchable. This place doesn’t exist to anyone but the locals, and even they don’t care who lives here. On this island is as safe as we can make you, and if bringing you here makes you hate us, then I’d still bring you here over and over again, because I’d rather have you despising us and alive, than being broken by Orlov in Mother-fucking-Russia.” Turning, I open her dresser, pull out the first bathing suit I see and throw it at her, before I turn and storm out of the room.

CHAPTER 21

alabama

I hate that I feel almost bad as I watch him storm away. The suit he threw at me is on the floor at my feet and bending down, I pick it up, looking at the simple black bikini. It's ironic that this is the first thing from the closet that's actually my color.

Sighing, I wonder if I should go after him or just stay here. Today has been a lot and it's barely two p.m. Dealing with these men is exhausting, and the idea of curling up in the comfortable bed I shared with Dimitri last night and just going to sleep is so incredibly tempting.

I feel like I'm on emotional overload. At breakfast I was angry and hostile, but then after everything that happened in the office with the three of them and then spending time with Vik, I almost felt relaxed. There's something about him that's disarming and likable. While I was spending time with him, he made it really hard to remember why I hate him so much.

Being here with them is like being on a rollercoaster. One minute I'm high from their attention and painfully honest bluntness, but then seconds later, I hit the ground with a thud and I'm reminded that being here isn't a choice. They kidnapped me and now they just what...? Expect me to fall in love with them and live happily ever after?

I watched a documentary about victims falling for their captors on the TV. At the time, I thought that what they called Stockholm syndrome was a crock of shit. But now, I'm wondering if those victims' kidnappers were as enigmatic and

brutally charming as these three. Because I can already see how I could end up de-villainizing them.

The problem is, that the more they tell me there's no way off this island, the more I'm starting to believe them. But how do I know it's not all a lie they're telling me so I don't bother searching for a way to escape? For all I know, there could be a police department and an airport on the other side of the island. I could be only miles from freedom, and just have no idea.

Stepping out of the closet, I look around for Lev and when I don't see him, I dart into Dimitri's bedroom and close the door behind me. I know I probably shouldn't be in here, but if they don't want me to be in their space, they should lock their doors. They have them, after all.

Undressing, I pull on the bikini and then look at myself in the mirror. The swimsuit is minute, a tiny bottom with strings that tie at my hips and a top that consists of two tiny triangles that barely cover my nipples, and strings that tie at my back and neck.

My hair is a little lank, the ends uneven from where I cut them myself. My skin is pale and I'm the kind of skinny that doesn't say, *I could be a model*, it says, *I can't afford to eat*.

I've never had one guy show interest in me, let alone three. So, there must be a reason, beyond what they've already told me, to explain why they seem so consumed by me. All of them, individually and together, have told me that I'm theirs, that they know unequivocally that I'm the woman they all want to share. But I don't get it, what could they have seen in me that made them think I'm the girl for them?

In the last year, I haven't dated, flirted, or even spoken to a guy who wasn't someone I worked with or a customer at the bar. I worked and I slept and then I got up and worked again. They must have been bored out of their brains if all they've done is follow me around for the last twelve months.

Sighing, I sit down on the edge of the bed. Everything Lev said has made me feel like an ungrateful bitch, but I didn't ask for this. Not the Russian gangster bio dad, nor the three

looming psychos who kidnapped me for my own good, nor the closet full of designer clothes. None of this was my choice, so if I want to act like a brat, then that's my prerogative. Jesus, anyone else in this situation would still be rocking in a corner.

All of a sudden, I feel exhausted. This entire situation is just too hard. Lifting my feet onto the bed, I roll to my side and exhale. Tucking my hands beneath my cheek I try to figure out how the hell I'm supposed to navigate this alternative universe I've been thrown into.

I must fall asleep, because the next thing I know, the mattress is sinking beside me. Old habits die hard, and I jolt upright, turning, sitting up and pulling my knees to my chest in a single move.

"Easy, Malishka," Dimitri says, reaching out slowly and cupping my cheek in his warm palm.

Blinking, I try to remember how I got here, then my argument with Lev plays on repeat in my mind and I sigh. "Sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"I like finding you half naked in my bed, feel free to do it whenever you please. But I should warn you, Lev is a little upset with you."

"I'm not crazy about him either," I tell him.

"Tell me what you argued about."

"The clothes. Why I'm here. Why none of you actually know anything real about me," I list.

"Ahh." Dimitri nods. "Lev is the most... romantic of us. He likes to believe that the four of us share some kind of cosmic connection. He hoped that you'd be happy to be here."

"Were you and Vik expecting that too?"

His laugh is gruff and low. "No. I knew you'd be angry and scared, but that eventually, you'd make the most of the opportunity that's been afforded you. We have gifted you a fresh start. You'll never have to worry about having enough money, or a roof over your head. You'll never go hungry, or go without the things that you desire. Things between us may not

have started in the most auspicious way, but from tiny acorns, grow huge oak trees.”

“You’re really quoting a greeting card cliché to me?”

Shrugging, he smirks. “Surely it can be a cliché and still be true?”

“I’m not sure I can ever be truly happy, knowing that I’m a prisoner here,” I admit.

“Your birth and DNA made you a prisoner, we just moved you to a prettier prison. We are not your enemy, Malishka, though it may not feel that way right this moment. I could give you a lot of pretty words, but the truth will always be that this is your life now. You can choose to sulk and throw temper tantrums, or you can do as you’ve always done and survive, doing what you have to, to make your life the best it can be.”

It pisses me off more than I can explain, because I know deep down that he’s right. If this is my life now, with no chance for change, then I’ll learn to deal with it and them, but for right now, I’m indulging in a pity party for one and they keep interrupting.

“It’s been two days since I woke up on your couch in a different country and you informed me that my life was obliterated. Maybe in a month or two, I’ll be able to see your side of things and possibly even hate you a little less. But today and for the foreseeable future, I can’t see the bright side. I can’t absolve you of your guilt and tell you I’m okay with having my life ripped away from me. Because I’m not. I’m angry and I’m sad and I’m frustrated and I’m confused and all those feelings aren’t going to go away just because you told me to get over it.” I hadn’t intended to make this my third rant of the day, but once I started speaking the words just wouldn’t stop.

I expect Dimitri to argue like Vik. Or be hurt like Lev. But instead, he nods. “You’re right.”

“I am?”

“You are. You deserve to feel your anger and sadness and frustration and confusion. It’s not our place to refuse you that.

What I must insist on, is you feeling all those things by our side. If you need to be angry, then be angry, the three of us have broad enough shoulders to carry any pain or anger you need to lay on us. If you're sad, then be sad, but know that one of us will comfort you. If you're frustrated, then be frustrated, we can take it, but if you push the boundaries too far, Vik will correct you. If you're confused, then talk to us, ask questions, demand information, immerse yourself in our world until you know all the answers, because like it or not, our world is *your* world now. Our home is *your* home, our bed is *your* bed, our life is *your* life. You were born to stand at our sides, to take the world and own it, not simply survive."

"I hate you," I whisper, emotion clogging my throat. For the last two years I've been numb, and now, when numbness would be useful, I'm thawing and the blood is rushing back in, making everything hurt as it comes back to life.

"I love you," he whispers back.

"No." I shake my head, a single tear falling from my eye.

"Yes, Malishka. I love everything I've seen for the last year and I love everything I'll learn as we get to know each other properly. I love you and, eventually, you'll love me too. You'll love all of us and you won't remember a day when you didn't."

His confidence is so unwavering, that I don't notice when he starts to lean in. His lips find mine and his kiss is dominant and consuming and I kiss him back because I need to feel something that isn't pain.

His tongue fills my mouth and I find myself mimicking his actions, kissing him with almost as much intensity, while one of his hands collars my throat and the other finds my hip. His body crowds in further, until he's half on top of me, his chest above mine, my hard nipples grazing his shirt every time I exhale.

The hand at my neck isn't restricting my breathing, his grip only tight enough to let me know he could stop my air if he wanted to. The hand at my hip is toying with the string holding the side of my bikini bottoms together, rubbing back

and forth over the fabric, teasing how easy it'd be to unfasten it.

My core tightens, and heat pools between my thighs. When Jack and I had sex, it was in a bathroom, both of us fumbling and unsure, eager to experience sex together, even though neither of us had a clue what we were doing.

Dimi isn't unsure or tentative. His hands are confident as they hold me in place and arousal drips from me as I imagine what else he could force my body to do. If I let him, he could give me pleasure, or use me to take his own pleasure and I know he'd make it good.

I've made myself come with my fingers, but honestly it made my hand hurt and I struggled to understand the hype when my orgasms were lackluster at best. Would it be different with him? Even laying here half beneath him, I'm more turned on than I've ever been in my life and he's barely touching me.

"Fuck me," I say against his lips before I can stop myself.

"What?" he asks, pulling back just enough to look down at me.

"You want that, right? You want me? So, fuck me. Make me feel something that isn't hate and anger and..." I shudder as more tears threaten to fall from my eyes. "Pain."

"Spell it out for me, Malishka, so I'm really fucking clear about what you're asking me for right now," he demands.

"I want you to fuck me, Dimitri Belov," I say slowly and clearly.

A devious grin curls the sides of his lips and he sits up, running his finger along the line of my throat as he yanks his shirt over his head and discards it on the floor. His chest is a work of art, tattoos covering every inch of skin, but I don't have a chance to study them, because, he's lifting me up, pulling the strings on my swimsuit and then dragging it off, leaving me naked in the blink of an eye.

"Lie back and spread your legs, I want to look at you," he orders.

A fine tremor runs along my skin, but I ignore it and shuffle up the bed, laying my head down in the middle of the pillows and slowly spreading my legs. My eyes fall closed and I inhale slowly, trying to control my fear.

I'm not sure if a part of me expected him to just start fucking me. That's basically how it was with Jack; but instead, his hot breath hits my thigh a second before his tongue starts a path from my knee to my pussy, leaving a trail of saliva in its wake.

"I can't stop now, but later, I'll shave this hair, we want you smooth down here so we can see exactly what effect we're having on you," he says, pulling my sex apart with his fingers and then running his tongue from my clit to my ass.

I've heard people refer to oral sex, as being *eaten out* and before now, I always thought it was an odd description for the act. Now I get it. Dimi is eating me alive. His mouth is everywhere, sucking, licking, tasting. He's devouring me and, Jesus, I like it.

Fingers probe at my entrance, sliding into my soaked pussy, while his tongue finds my clit, flicking at the sensitive spot until my hips start to move of their own accord, pushing closer to him and silently begging for more.

"You're soaked, Malishka. Your cunt is gushing for me. Come on my fingers and tongue, then I'm going to fuck you until you beg me to stop."

I don't know if it's his words, the rough tone of his voice, or the way his tongue works in time with his fingers. But heat gathers in my stomach, building until it becomes a roiling presence that rolls through me until it feels like my skin is going to be ripped from my muscles. I come with a cry, tears running from my eyes as pleasure overwhelms me, and I twitch and moan beneath him.

"Fuck, your cum is the sweetest thing I've ever tasted."

My eyes are squeezed closed, but I feel him moving and hear the rustling of fabric before he's above me, pushing my legs apart and guiding himself to my entrance. My lids part

and I look up into his startling blue eyes as he rolls his hips and slams into me, filling me in a single thrust.

“Holy fucking shit,” I scream, my body protesting the invasion, as my internal muscles are stretched and forced to take his massive cock.

“Easy, Malishka, relax and take my cock like a good girl,” he coos, pressing his lips to the pounding pulse point in my neck.

“That better be all of it, nothing else is going inside of me,” I pant.

“Barely half.” He laughs. “Your cunt is like a vise.”

Rolling his hips, he slides out, then pushes back in. He does it again, pushing in a little further with each thrust until it feels like his dick is poking through my stomach every time he fills me completely.

“That’s it, Malishka, you were made to take me. You were designed to be worshipped, to be fucked and pumped full of cum. You’re going to take all of me, then you’re going to lick yourself off my cock, before I fill your ass up too.”

I know I absolutely shouldn’t be getting more aroused at his words, but I am, and I feel my body open up to him as he seems to grow even bigger inside of me. Each pump of his hips fills me to capacity, and he lifts my legs, guiding me to hook my ankles behind his back, while he rocks into me, his mouth sucking at my pulse.

“Fuck, yes, look at you taking my cock, like the good little slut that you are. You were made for us, Malishka. It’s why we brought you here, why we’re never going to let you go. You were designed to take us all, to let us love you, let us fuck you, let us worship you.”

Another orgasm starts to grow inside of me, reigniting the flames of the one from earlier, a wildfire that whooshes back to life and quickly burns brighter than ever. This time, when I crest the wave of ecstasy, my body clenches, then releases and I feel liquid flow from me.

“You squirted all over me, Baby, how did it feel? My turn to soak you now, I’m going to fuck my baby into you, I’m going to breed you so fucking hard,” he rasps into my neck, his movement’s becoming stuttered and erratic, until he thrusts hard and deep and I feel the heat of his release inside of me.

Our chests are heaving, my skin is wet with sweat, my pussy, thighs, and ass soaked with a mixture of his cum and whatever the hell he made my body do. We’re a mess, but instead of caring, I swallow mouthfuls of air and bask in the exhilarating feelings that are coursing through me.

My mind is cursing up a blue fit, reminding me that I absolutely should not have fucked one of my captors, but my body couldn’t care less. I needed this. I needed something to help ground me, to make a choice and know that it was all mine, and not manipulated by them or the circumstances they’ve forced me into.

Will I regret this when the sweat’s gone cold and all the good endorphins have drained from my body? Probably. Do I care right this second? Absolutely-fucking-not.

I feel a rush of liquid drip from between my thighs when Dimi pulls his dick out of me, but I’m feeling too lazy to move.

Instead of going to clean up, Dimi slides his hand between my legs, then pushes two of his fingers into my mouth, moving them until my tongue, teeth, and gums are all coated in his cum.

“Eww,” I shriek, batting him away.

“Get used to the taste of me on your tongue, Malishka, it’ll happen often. I wanted to have you lick us off my cock, but I can’t wait to be inside you again.” His hands grab me and he effortlessly flips me onto my stomach, pulling my legs apart and positioning me how he wants me.

“Relax, or this will hurt,” he orders, pushing his hand against my soaked pussy again, before coating my ass in wetness.

“No,” I cry.

“Yes, Malishka. There are three of us and one of you. Some days we’ll take turns, others we’ll all want you at once. One cock in your cunt, one in your ass, one in your mouth. We’ll use each of your holes like you’re our toy and you’ll come over and over, loving every minute. But you need to learn how to take us. You begged me to fuck you, so I will, now hold still or I’ll have Vik come and hold you down.”

Unrelenting fingers probe at my ass and I try to wiggle away, until his palm crashes down on first one ass cheek and then the other, reigniting the burn from earlier. Not pausing, he pulls more and more of his cum from my pussy, using it as lube to coat my ass as he massages the tight ring of muscle, then slides the tip of one of his fingers inside.

“Good girl, push back, show me how well your ass can take my finger.”

I don’t mean to, but I push back and his finger sinks farther inside of me, the taboo feeling morphing into an excited ache. A second finger joins the first and a slight burning mixes with the feeling of fullness.

Reaching over, he grabs something from the dresser beside the bed and I feel cool liquid run between my cheeks as his fingers carefully work it inside of me.

“Holy fuck,” a new male voice says.

“She’s a sight to behold,” Dimi agrees as I try to turn enough to see who else is in the room.

“Ali, Baby,” Vik coos, his voice familiar without the edge of shock.

“Rub her clit and make her come again, I need her relaxed, to stretch her enough to take my cock,” Dimi orders.

I feel, rather than see Vik, kneel down on the floor beside the bed. Then fingers touch my clit and I jolt.

“Fuck, you’re soaked, Baby.” Vik’s laugh is rough and seductive.

“She squirted all over me,” Dimi tells him proudly.

“Did Dimi fill you up, Baby?” Vik asks.

I don't speak, incapable of uttering a word.

"Tell me, Baby. Did he stretch out this tight cunt with his monster cock, then fill you up with his cum?"

"Yes." Nodding, I squirm with desire and discomfort and god knows what else.

"I can tell," Vik murmurs, pushing two fingers into me and fucking me slowly while his other hand circles my clit.

"That's it, Malishka," Dimi praises as he squirts more lube onto my ass, pumping his fingers in and out. "You're going to take three of my fingers, then your ass is going to be full of my cock. I'm so hard, this tight hole is going to milk the cum right out of me."

"Jesus, Dimi, she likes the sound of that, her cunt just clamped down on my fingers," Vik rasps with a low chuckle.

A guttural pained moan falls from me as he pushes a third finger into my ass.

"Easy, Baby," Vik soothes, rubbing my clit intent on making me come.

"It's too much," I groan.

"You can take it, Baby, deep breaths. His dick is a monster, taking the rest of us will be easy after this."

Dimi pulls his fingers from my ass, immediately replacing them with the head of his cock, pushing until my ass stretches enough to accept it.

"Arrr, it hurts," I cry, tensing and trying to push his cock back out again.

"Make her come," Dimi tells Vik, who slides his fingers out of my pussy and starts to rub and tap on my clit in fast circles, distracting me from the pain as Dimi's cock destroys my ass.

I come on a cry that is half pleasure, half pain. The moment I relax, Dimi fills me, fucking me in short, shallow thrusts that feel awful and amazing at the same time. Vik keeps working my clit until I come again and as the first wave

hits, Dimi grunts, shuddering over me as he comes inside of my ass.

The next few minutes are a blur, but when I come back to my senses, I find myself in the middle of the bed with Dimi, naked and snuggled in behind me, and Vik fully dressed lying in front of me, his smile soft.

“Welcome back,” he says with a soft laugh.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice sounding slurred and tired.

“Dimi fucked you senseless.” Laughing again, Vik reaches up and tucks a wayward strand of hair behind my ear.

“Are you okay, Malishka?” Dimi asks, curling an arm around my waist and pushing his hand between my legs to cup my sore sex.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

“I’ll run you a bath after dinner.”

“I don’t think I can move,” I confess.

“That’s okay. Vik can get you a robe and carry you downstairs, I want to eat while I look at how thoroughly well fucked you are.” Dimi chuckles.

“I want you,” Vik whispers, grabbing my chin in his fingers and diverting my attention to him. “I’ll be gentle, but I need you too.”

I consider saying no. I’m not sure my body can take more sex, but instead I nod and Vik’s face lights up, excitement following him as he shucks his clothes and climbs back onto the bed.

“Lean back against Dimi,” Vik orders softly.

I let myself be moved as Dimi rolls to his back, then positions me with my back to his chest, my sore butt between his spread thighs.

“Pull her legs wide,” Vik demands, and Dimi hooks his shins beneath my calves and pulls my legs over, putting me on display for Vik as he eagerly strokes his hard cock. “Open up,

Baby, I need you to get me nice and wet,” he says, kneeling on the bed and tapping my lips with the head of his cock.

I open my mouth, like a good little slut and he pushes his cock between my lips. I suck on instinct and he pulls back, then pushes back into my mouth a few times before he drags his dick completely out, a string of saliva hanging from the head.

“You ready, Baby?” he asks.

He doesn't wait for me to answer, positioning himself between my legs and filling me on a slow, gentle slide. A guess a part of me thought he'd just fuck me, but instead he seduces me, kissing my lips, while Dimi massages my breasts and peppers soft kisses against my neck.

I'm not sure how I went from practically a virgin, to lying against one guy, while another fucks me, but here I am.

Vik coaxes my body back to life, fucking me slow and deep, twisting his hips this way and that, until he finds a spot inside of me that makes me see stars. “There it is, Baby, that's where you need me, isn't it? I want to feel you come on my cock. I want to watch you fall apart before I fill you up.”

Curling his fingers around my throat, he carefully, gently squeezes, restricting my air, until my head becomes light and I struggle for each breath. “Beautiful,” he whispers reverently, as Dimi's fingers find my swollen clit and pinch. I come on a garbled scream, my body spasming, like I've been hit by lightning and ten thousand volts is ricocheting through my nerves.

Vik follows me over the edge, his thrusts speeding up as he fucks me with wild abandon, until he grunts and I feel the hot burn of his cum inside of me. His fingers relax on my throat, the touch becoming soft and reassuring, instead of restricting, and I wilt. My body melts into Dimi's beneath me as Vik collapses on top of me, his weight resting on my pelvis, his cock still inside of me.

“Lev's going to be pissed he missed this.” Vik chuckles, turning his face and claiming my lips with his again.

“Fuck Lev,” I pant.

“You will, soon,” Vik answers, deliberately misunderstanding my words.

“Are you okay, Malishka?” Dimi asks, brushing the hair from the side of my face and reminding me that I’m on top of him, while Vik lies on top of me.

“No,” I answer honestly.

“What? Why? What’s the matter?” Vik asks quickly, lifting his weight from me and staring down at me like I’m about to explode.

“I’m waiting for the regret to kick in. This was a stupid idea; so, it’s only a matter of time before I start hating myself, and then you guys even more.” It’s like I have verbal diarrhea, the truth pouring out of me, my filter well and truly off line.

“What’s to regret?” Dimi asks, his tone confused. But he can’t honestly be that stupid.

“First rule of kidnap club. Don’t have sex with your kidnapper. Everyone knows that,” I say sardonically.

I feel the vibrations from behind me before I hear Dimi’s laugh, a joyful mirth that doesn’t seem to match the usually serious man.

“I love you, Malishka,” he tells me again, still laughing.

“Oh, are we doing this now?” Vik says like an over excited puppy. “I love you too, Ali. I have done since the first time I watched you stand in front of your bathroom mirror and tell yourself you were safe.”

I feel my eyes widen, and then narrow.

“What?” I ask slowly.

“The mirror had a camera built into it,” he says simply, like it’s an innocuous confession.

“The mirror in the bathroom in mine and Monica’s apartment?” I clarify.

“Yes. For the sake of transparency, your entire apartment was rigged with cameras. They were in every room, including your bedroom. When I told you we saw every single thing you did for the last year, I meant *every single thing*.” Winking, he wiggles his eyebrows.

“You fucking assholes were watching my apartment?” I shriek, the haze of great sex evaporating and replaced with outrage.

“And while you were at work. One of us was there every night you were,” Dimi tells me unashamedly.

“Oh my god. You’ve been stalking me.” My mind whirs. They’ve told me over and over that they know me, that they saw everything, but I never dreamed they’d have cameras in my home.

“Yes,” they both say in unison.

“I can’t deal with this. Let me up,” I snap, flapping my arms in an attempt to get away from the men I’m sandwiched between.

“My dick is still in you, Baby.” Vik laughs, and the action seems to make his dick that I’d completely forgotten was inside of me start to harden again.

“Then get it out of me. I can’t believe I let you fuck me,” I gasp.

“No backsies.” Vik smiles. “Now I know how it feels to be inside your hot mouth and cunt, there’s no way I can go back to my hand again.”

“Go fuck Tanya then, she’s gagging for it. I don’t care where you put your cock, as long as you don’t try to put it in me again,” I cry, shoving at his chest as I try to push him away.

“Even if you never let me fuck you again, I still wouldn’t touch Tanya. But regardless, my cock only wants you. It’s only wanted you since I saw you again.”

“What?” I snap, his words, breaking through my anger and causing me to pause.

“I can’t speak for the others, but I haven’t touched another woman since we found you again a year ago. My dick broke that day, and since then it only works for you. He’s a discerning fella, and now that he’s felt what it’s like to be in your sweet heat, I doubt even my hand will do the trick anymore.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I snap.

“I haven’t touched a woman since we found you again either, and I doubt Lev has. I’m pretty sure he’s been a monk since the very first time he saw you, when you were barely an adult. You’re ours and we’re yours. This afternoon was just a taste of how fucking perfect things will be between us. Don’t let something as stupid as cameras in your old apartment ruin this. Because I already told you that there’s cameras in this house too. We’re dangerous men, which makes us paranoid. This whole island is rigged with constant 24/7 surveillance. Keeping you safe is our top priority, so making sure we know everything that’s happening, at any given moment, is how we do it,” Dimi says calmly.

His explanation is so rational, that I almost find myself agreeing with him. But it’s not okay that they put cameras in my apartment. Just like it’s not okay that they kidnapped me, even if in their fucked-up heads it was because they thought they were protecting me, and have feelings for me. “I’m going to wake up soon and this will all just have been a fucked-up dream,” I say aloud.

“If this is a dream, then let’s not wake up. I’m happy to stay here, my dick is half hard, give me five minutes and I’ll be ready for round two. Maybe this time, Dimi can fuck your cunt while I take a turn in your ass,” Vik says hopefully.

“Nothing else is going in my ass,” I shriek, covering my face with my hands. “I can’t believe I let him do that in the first place.”

“You didn’t let me fuck your tight virgin hole,” Dimi growls. “You gifted me you, and I made you mine, although I still need to lay claim to your mouth to possess you completely.”

Vik's dick slides from inside of me and I wince as my sore muscles protest.

"Sorry, Baby, I tried to be careful, but your cunt is swollen. There's no blood, so Dimi didn't tear you up with that monster cock of his, but I'm pretty sure you'll be feeling this for a couple of days." Snickering, he probes at my abused pussy with careful fingers.

"I made sure she was ready before I took her. Plus, she squirted all over me, her body knows exactly how to take me," Dimi tells him, sounding...proud.

"She needs a soak in a hot bath with some Epsom salts," Vik says, lifting off me and smiling down at the sight of me, naked, well used, and sticky with a whole lot of bodily fluid.

"Like mother, like daughter, huh. I really am a whore, just like her," I whisper to myself.

"What did you just say?" Vik demands, his expression turning cold.

"Nothing. Regret just kicked in, reminding me that I just whored myself out to two of the men that ruined my life." Tears fill my eyes, but I blink them away. I asked Dimi to fuck me because I wanted to feel something, and now, I do, I'm just not sure that this is any better than the pain and anger that was on the verge of overwhelming me before.

"You're not a whore," Vik snarls, his teeth gritted.

"Then what am I, if not a whore? I let Dimi shove his dick in my pussy, then my ass, then I laid back and let you fuck me while his cum was still wet on my thighs. I suppose whores usually get paid, but does that count if they've been kidnapped? Maybe instead of prisoner, I should change my title to sex whore."

Grabbing my legs, Vik hoists them into the air, then pins them back so my knees are almost in my face. His hand lands on my ass with so much force, it pushes all the air from my lungs and I puff out a yelp.

"You are not a whore," he snarls, spanking me so hard that all I feel is burning pain.

“Then what the hell am I?” I scream, tears spilling down my cheeks as I feel myself break once again.

“Ours,” he yells, dropping my legs and getting right in my face. “We took you and now you’re ours. We didn’t take a hole to fuck, we claimed our wife and you will learn to accept that and stop feeling guilty for letting us make you ours, when that’s exactly what you are and were always meant to be.”

My lips snap shut and I stare up at the furious man looming over me.

“Say it,” he demands. “Say you’re ours. Take your place and fucking own it. No more tears over stupid shit.”

When I don’t speak, he grabs my chin. “Say it.”

“Vik,” Dimi says softly.

“No,” Vik growls, lifting his gaze over my head to look at Dimi. “She’s naked, lying on you, covered in both of our cum. She’s ours.” His gaze drops to me again. “Say it, Ali, right the fuck now.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“Again,” Dimi demands this time.

“I’m yours.”

“Our what?” Vik asks.

“Your...” I trail off, not sure what they expect me to say. The word whore balances on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t say it.

“Wife. You’re our wife,” Dimi answers.

“Your wife,” I dutifully say, not sure I feel it, but actually preferring it over victim, captive, or whore. Wife comes with a whole lot more expectation than prisoner did, but I’m not sure they’d let me go back to being just their prisoner after today anyway.

“Yes, you’re Alabama Belova, our wife. You live with us, eat with us, sleep with us, and ride our cocks as much as your body will allow. You’re ours, now and forever. It’s time to accept your reality and stop trying to change the

unchangeable. I'll go find you a robe," Vik says, knocking me metaphorically on my ass with his words, then just getting up and strolling his naked ass away.

"He's right, Malishka. The only way you'll ever be free of us is death, and without you, we'd stalk you right into the underworld. It's time to move forward and stop looking back. I know this is a lot, but we took you from a half-life and gave you a full one, learn to embrace it, to love it, because it's the only one you'll have."

CHAPTER 22

vik

The three of us smell like sex as we make our way downstairs and into the dining room. Ali's barefoot and wrapped in the lilac satin robe I fetched her to wear. If I were to lift the fabric and touch her, I'm pretty sure I'll find a mixture of mine and Dimi's cum still dripping from her cunt. She's never looked more fucking beautiful.

Her eyes are puffy from crying, and her lips are slightly swollen from mine and Dimi's kisses. She's stunningly ravished and the smile on my lips refuses to fade as I proudly walk beside her, pulling out her chair on Dimi's right, then taking the one beside her.

Before we came home with Ali, Dimi lived in suits, always perfectly groomed. Shirt free of wrinkles, pants pressed, jacket tailored to perfection. He was the epitome of GQ chic, but to me he always looked stiff and formal. Now, he's barefoot and shirtless in a pair of low slung sweatpants. His usually styled hair is disheveled, and for the first time in longer than I can remember, he looks relaxed.

I haven't looked in a mirror, but I'd bet I look equally as chilled out, wearing Ali's claw marks scratched into my back with smug pride. Lev's eyes widen as he takes in the three of us, his gaze jumping between us, and finally settling on Ali.

His nostrils flare as the smell of debauchery and sex hits him and I swallow down my laugh as anger and jealousy flash across his face. He and Ali argued earlier. I don't really know why, although if I had to guess, I'd say Ali got mouthy and

Lev got his feelings hurt, because Ali refuses to be happy that we stole her.

I bet he's wishing he'd kept his mouth shut, because then maybe she'd be dripping all of our cum from her cunt and ass instead of just mine and Dimi's. Of course, the fucker had to be the first one inside of her. He went up to check on her when she hadn't come down a couple of hours after Lev stormed back into the office. I don't know what happened to get them from arguing to fucking, but now that I've felt her cunt grip my cock and discovered how unbelievable it feels to spill my load inside of her, I don't care how I got there as long as I can go there again.

He was stretching her asshole out when I went upstairs to check on them, and heard the noises coming from his bedroom. I was more than happy to lend a helping hand while he got her ready to take him. But I'd be lying if I said I'm not jealous that he was the first of us to claim her.

"I'll be back in a minute; I need to ask Roza to change the sheets on my bed. I hate to lose the way they smell, but with the way you squirted all over them, and how much we all came, the whole bed is the wet patch," he says, smirking at Lev and winking at Ali as he strolls confidently out of the room.

"You both fucked her?" Lev asks, ignoring her and looking at me.

"Dimi fucked her cunt and then her ass. I got a taste of how her mouth feels around my dick and then I filled her cunt with my cum." Smiling, I wrap my hand around Ali's thigh when she squirms uncomfortably.

"Huh," he says, glancing at Ali, then turning away.

Her entire body stiffens and I glare at the side of his head, ready to stab him with my fork if he ruins this for us, just because he's jealous and on the outs with her.

"Ignore him," I coo, turning in my chair and cupping her cheek with my free hand, while I slide my fingers up her thigh,

pushing her robe out of the way and exposing her creamy thigh to my view.

“Vik,” she says, my name a warning.

“We should show him what he’s missing,” I whisper, parting her folds and gently pushing a finger into her wet heat.

“Vik,” she gasps, the slight whine in her voice reminding me how sore she is.

“Sorry, Baby, after dinner we’ll run a bath and let you soak some of this soreness away. But your body needs to get used to how often we’ll need you.”

Her eyes heat, and then she grimaces and I watch a fresh bout of guilt about choosing to fuck us settle over her. I hate the way she’s feeling right now. I hate that being with us has hurt her, but there’s nothing I can do to change the way she feels, at least not right now.

Pulling my finger from inside of her, I lift it to her mouth and then push it between her lips. “Taste how good the three of us are together. Fucking perfect, Baby, no shame and no guilt allowed.”

“Drinks,” Roza announces, carrying a bottle of wine in one hand and a glass that’s already filled in the other. Placing the full glass in front of Ali, she pours wine into mine, Lev’s, and Dimi’s glasses before striding away, muttering beneath her breath.

“What’s that all about?” I ask, amused as I watch her retreating form.

“Probably the fact that it stinks of sex in here and Alabama’s only wearing a robe. You know Roza likes us to be more formal at dinner,” Lev snaps.

Ali’s shoulders droop and her chin dips, her gaze now focused on the table.

“Enough,” I growl, glaring at Lev. “We get it, you’re pissed and jealous, but do not take it out on Ali. That’s not fair and you fucking know it.”

“She thinks we ruined her life. She hates it here, and she hates all of us. If you think fucking her changes any of that, then you’re a fucking idiot and she’s delusional. Bringing her here was a mistake.”

I’ve known Lev my entire life. I don’t have a single childhood memory that doesn’t involve him, and this is the first time that I’m looking at him and have no idea who he is.

“I’m not really hungry anymore,” Ali says, pushing her chair back and standing.

“No. Fuck him. Don’t let him drive you away just because he’s being a petty little bitch. Eat with us, then we can have that bath and watch a movie in bed.”

“I shouldn’t,” she starts. “He’s right. This isn’t what I want, and I am delusional if I think sex and orgasms can change anything between us.” Pulling away from me, she rushes back into the house.

Exhaling slowly, I stand up and push back from my chair, slowly circling the table until I’m directly in front of my best friend, my brother. “What the fuck is your problem?” I snarl.

“It’s not real, Vik. She hates you and she always will.”

“Of course she hates us, but that doesn’t mean she always will. I am in love with that woman. I have been for over a year, and today she gave me a little bit of herself. We stole her life from her, then we stole her from her life and we dropped her here and told her this is it. This is her present and future and there’s nothing she can do to change it. It’d be more fucked up if she didn’t hate us. But just for a little while today, she accepted this, she accepted me and Dimi. She asked him to fuck her. She. Asked. Him.”

“What?” Lev asks.

“Oh yeah, he didn’t manipulate her into it, she asked him to fuck her. It’s bad enough that she feels guilty for enjoying it, and shame for asking for it, and confused because she doesn’t hate us quite as much as she did before. But then you, you fucking asshole, behave like she did something wrong, and then you tell her that bringing her here was a mistake, when

just for a split second she was starting to not feel like this was a fucking prison.”

“Bullshit,” he snaps.

Seeing red, I pull back my fist and punch him in the face. His head swings to the side and I brace, expecting him to retaliate, but instead he just stares at me, his hand moving to his jaw and rubbing at the spot I struck.

“I deserved that.”

“Yes, you fucking did, you deserve more than one.”

“Well, the first one was free, if you hit me again, I’ll hit you back and Roza really will be pissed,” Lev sighs, sounding tired. “I should go and apologize.”

“You need to stay away from her.” Lifting a finger, I point at him.

“She’s not just yours.”

“I know. But with her, you have the subtlety of a bull in a fucking china shop and I don’t want you ruining any more of the fucking progress we’ve made today. Give her a minute, if she doesn’t come back down, either me or Dimi will go fetch her.”

Dimi strolls back into the room, the huge smile from earlier sliding from his face when he finds Ali’s seat empty and a rapidly darkening bruise on Lev’s jaw.

“What happened? Where’s Malishka?”

“Lev was a dick and she went upstairs.”

“What did you say to her?” he growls, his expression darkening.

“I…” Lev starts.

“He reminded her how much she hates being here and how much she hates us and that no matter how much we fucked her it wouldn’t change anything,” I spit, glaring at my brother, and honestly considering punching him again.

“You did what?” Dimi asks slowly.

“I didn’t...” Lev splutters. “I...” Exhaling, he sinks back into his chair and covers his face with his hands, yanking at his hair. “I fucked up.”

“Why would you say that to her?” Dimi demands.

“Because I spent ten minutes with her and she was spitting hatred at me in every direction, and then you go up an hour later and she comes back down looking like a wet fucking dream, stinking of sex. I’m jealous,” he admits.

“So, you decided to fuck it up for all of us, because she likes us better than you right now?” I ask, scowling at him.

“That wasn’t my plan, but then you started finger fucking her at the table and I lost my mind,” Lev growls, scowling back at me almost as fiercely.

“If you had managed to keep your mouth shut, I’d been about to suggest you could lick her sore cunt better, but you had to be an asshole,” I cry.

“She wouldn’t have wanted me to. She’s pissed at me,” he whines, looking like a kicked puppy.

“Go and apologize and fucking mean it. Do not fuck this up for us, when she’s just starting to come round,” Dimi orders, pointing in the direction of the stairs.

“I don’t—” I start.

“He needs to be the one to smooth things over. He needs to get on his fucking knees and grovel if that’s what it takes. Being inside her was fucking incredible, and I won’t give that up just because he’s an idiot.” Turning to Lev, he skewers him with his gaze. “Fix this, brother.”

Nodding, solemnly, Lev stands and then leaves, his head down, his posture contrite.

“Should one of us...” I trail off, tipping my head toward the ceiling.

“Not yet. We’ll intervene if we have to.”

I nod, sigh, then sit back down, downing my glass of wine, then reaching for hers.

“Don’t drink that,” Dimi snaps.

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Because that’s her glass.”

“So?”

“I mean, you can drink it if you want, but everything she eats or drinks in this house is laced with my cum,” he tells me, smirking.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“I can’t have understood, because I swear you just said her food is laced with your cum.”

“That’s right. It’s mixed into her drinks and drizzled over her food. Everything she puts in her mouth is covered in me.”

My stomach roils with disgust, but I can’t help laughing. “You sick motherfucker. Why the hell would you do that?”

“Because she’s mine,” he says simply. “I want me in her, on her and when her cunt and ass aren’t dripping with me, I want her stomach full too.”

“So, you’re what... jerking off over her salad?” I cringe.

“No, I’m jerking into a cup and then drizzling it over her food and mixing it in with her drinks.”

His expression is placid, like what he just confessed to is the most normal thing in the world.

“I...” My mind blanks and I honestly have no idea what to say.

“You held her over your lap and spanked her ass ’til it was red and hot. I like to touch her when she’s unaware and have her ingest my cum. We all have our kinks.” Arching an imperious eyebrow at me, he dares me to disagree. Instead, I shrug.

“Fair enough. Just make sure our food never gets mixed up. I love you like a fucking brother, but if my food starts tasting extra salty, I’m going to have to kill you.”

His chuckle is full of amusement as he lifts his own glass up and drinks it.

“How did you know she’d go for the spanking?” I ask.

“I already told you, I wasn’t sure she would. I was upstairs and pissed and I just planned to scare her a little, but when I mentioned you taking her in hand, her eyes got wide and not in a scared way, in an intrigued way.”

“We talked when we went to the beach this morning. She agreed that it makes things easier for her to accept, if we take away all of her choices except for the ability to say who touches her and when. I told her that all she has to do is what we tell her to do, but that when she steps out of line, I’ll bring her back to us, the same way I did this morning.”

“By spanking her?” Dimi asks, his brows raised.

“By punishing her. Not always by spanking her, but yes, that’ll be part of it.”

“And she agreed?”

“She did. We upended her life and right now she’s fucking floundering. When you picked her clothes for her, it was easier than her having to accept the clothes we bought her. Although now that I’ve looked at the stuff Lev got her, it really isn’t her style at all. Taking away that choice made her life easier and until she truly accepts being a part of our world and being ours, I think we should carry on making the decisions for her.”

“I won’t go without touching her now I know how it feels,” Dimi says immediately.

Sucking in a breath, I shrug. “It’s the only choice she’s allowed to have, and if she says no, we honor that. We just have to convince her, not to say no.”

Nodding slowly, Dimi sips his wine, his eyes thoughtful.

“Should I go and check on them?” I ask.

“Yes. Hopefully he’s not making things worse for us.”

Bounding up the stairs, I strain my ears, listening to see if I can hear any shouting, but it’s quiet. Too quiet. Stepping

through the open door and into the bedroom, I find Ali in the big bed, rolled into a ball, her back to Lev who is standing with his back against the closet door, staring at her with longing in his eyes.

“Hey,” I say, announcing my presence.

“She won’t come back downstairs,” Lev says quietly.

Without an ounce of preamble, I climb into the bed and roll her to her back, straddling her legs, while I pin her in place with my body.

“Vik,” she whines. “I just need some space.”

“Sorry, Baby, space isn’t allowed when you have three husbands who all want to spend time with you. Roza didn’t bring the first course yet, but if she brings it and we’re not there, she’ll be pissed and we’ll all end up eating cabbage soup and German sausage for a week.”

“I can’t eat with him glaring at me and reminding me I’m a slut who spread her legs for her fucking kidnappers,” she says, her eyes imploring me to just let her wallow in her guilt.

“If you’re a slut, it’s because we want you to be. I’m happy with you being a dirty filthy slut who begs for more cock only minutes after she’s been pumped full of cum. Do you know why?” I don’t wait for her to answer. “Because you have three horny fucking husbands to satisfy. Three cocks to milk multiple times a day. New rule, my sexy little slut, all my cum goes inside you, so if it makes you a slut to take my cock in one of your holes so I can pump you full of my seed every time I get the urge, then I’ll get you a necklace letting everyone know how proud I am to have you as our sexy little cum slut.”

Dipping my head, I take her lips roughly, forcing my tongue into her mouth and fucking her like I fucked her cunt earlier. I hear Lev’s groan, but I don’t look up. I don’t care what he’s doing. He caused this problem, but I’m fixing it.

“Can you take me, Baby? I know you’re sore, but I need inside of you. Lev is going to stand over there and watch without touching you or himself. It’s his punishment for

making you feel bad. I'll fuck your pussy, then come in your ass, okay?"

Her eyes flick to Lev, then to me and I hold back my smile, because she's going to say yes and it's going to drive Lev wild.

"Roll over, Baby, hands and knees. I'm on the verge, so I'll be quick."

Lifting off her, I give her a chance to say no, but she won't. I don't know how I know; I just do. "Lev, go into my room, bottom drawer of my dresser, grab the little bullet vibe that's in there."

Slowly, she rolls over and I strip the robe from her, helping her get into position with her arms out straight, palms flat on the mattress, legs bent, knees spread wide. Her tits are hanging down, her nipples pink, but it's her ass and cunt that capture my attention. Spread wide like this, she's completely on display, her puffy, pink and still glistening with arousal cunt looks sore and her asshole is still slightly stretched from Dimi fucking it less than an hour ago. I absolutely should not be fucking her again, but she needs to see there are consequences for us as well as for her.

"Here," Lev says, handing me the bullet, his eyes between her legs, staring at her cunt.

"Stand over there." I point to the wall, knowing he'll be able to see everything I'm doing to our wife. Turning on the vibe, I hold it up to her cunt, pushing it just into her entrance and watching her body tense when she feels the strong vibrations.

"Look at you, you're still so full of my and Dimi's cum, I bet my cock will just slide right into you."

Pulling the bullet out, I reach beneath her and find her clit, rolling the vibe on and off the bundle of nerves, feeling her body tense then release. Pulling down my pants, I grab my dick and guide it to her entrance, carefully inching into her as I roll the vibe onto her clit and hold it there as I push all the way inside of her.

“You’re going to come for me, my little cum slut. You’re going to come on my cock and then I’m going to fill your ass with my cum,” I growl, pumping into her slowly, feeling her swollen sex grip my dick as her breathing becomes ragged.

“Oh fuck,” she gasps, as I keep the unrelenting pressure of the vibe against her clit, sliding easily in and out of her slick cunt.

“Just like that, Baby, milk my dick, show Lev what he’s missing out on. Come here brother, watch her cunt swallow my cock. She’s fucking perfect, hot and tight and gagging for it, just like the perfect little cum slut she is.”

I feel rather than see him move closer, but Ali’s head lifts and I know she watches him, watching the place where we’re joined.

Clicking the top of the bullet, the vibration intensifies and Ali lets out a guttural cry, her head dropping again as she moves her hips, pushing back into me with every thrust. “Good girl, fuck my cock, make yourself come. I want to hear my little cum slut work for her prize.”

“Arghh,” she groans as I click the vibe again. The sound of buzzing increases, making my whole hand vibrate as I hold it against her abused clit, feeling her pelvis jerk, trying and failing to find relief from the relentless stimulation.

With the hand that’s been holding her hip, I slap her ass and she splinters, crying out her release as she comes with a cry. At the sounds of her pleasure, my balls tighten and I pull out of her cunt, press the head of my cock into her asshole and slam home, ignoring her scream as I blow my load into her ass.

CHAPTER 23

alabama

My muscles quiver with a mixture of pain and pleasure and my arms give out. Slumping down onto my chest, I shiver as aftershocks shoot through my muscles, making me twitch as Vik settles above me, his huge, softening dick wedged in my ass.

“You took me so well, Baby. The perfect little cum slut. You’ll take all my cum from now on. Anytime I need release, I’ll find you and fill one of your holes. I love you so fucking much.”

Vik coos filthy, sweet nothings against my neck, but Lev’s presence feels heavier than the man who is still inside of me. He followed me up here and apologized, but when the silence stretched between us, neither of us had anything to say.

Everything Lev said downstairs was true. I do hate them and I hate being here, and I probably am delusional. But I still let Vik sweet talk me into letting him fuck me again, and now my whole body feels like it’s pulsing with a soreness that I know I’ll be feeling for at least a couple of days.

I let them use my body. But what Lev failed to see is that *I* let *them*. They didn’t take from me; I took from them. If freedom isn’t going to be an option, then I need to forge out a life here, with these men and at least when it comes to sex, it’s on my terms.

“Watch, brother,” Vik says, lifting his weight from my back, and slowly sliding his cock from my ass.

I feel the rush of liquid that follows and cringe thinking about yet more bodily fluids dripping out of me.

“Jesus,” Lev mutters.

“Perfect, isn’t she,” Vik says, his voice low.

“Absolutely perfect,” Lev replies.

“This is what you could have had if you weren’t being a fucking asshole. Now you’re going to have to work harder than ever to make up for making her feel like fucking us was a bad thing. You’ll watch Dimi and I fuck her and pleasure her, every fucking day until she forgives you. You’ll watch our perfect little cum slut wife take load after load of our gifts, knowing that it could be you giving it to her, if you hadn’t made her feel ashamed and guilty for using her husbands like her sex toys.” All of the playful enthusiasm has drained from Vik’s voice and he sounds the same way he did this morning, when he explained why he was spanking me.

Blinking, I force my eyes open and look up at Lev. His gaze is downcast and his shoulders are slumped, but he’s nodding. “I’ll go and let Roza know you’ll be down in a minute,” he says, retreating from the room.

“You’re punishing him,” I whisper.

“Yes,” Vik acknowledges, his voice clear and strong. “He deserves worse, but he’s my brother and I love him. If he was anyone else, I’d fucking kill him, but I can’t do that. But I can’t let him off the hook either. He hurt you, so this is his penance. There is nothing shameful about wanting us. You shouldn’t ever have to feel guilty about embracing your new life, and he made it seem like you should. Making you stop hating us, and eventually, hopefully learning to love us, won’t happen if he keeps being a little bitch, because he’s jealous and stupid. So yes, I’m punishing him and he’ll take it, just like you took your punishment, because we’re a family now and from now on that’s how this family works. We all work together, we all play by the rules and if any of us step out of line, they get punished.”

“Are you going to spank him too?” I giggle, unable to stop myself.

“Hey we’re punishing Lev, not me.” He chuckles. “Let’s go and eat, then I’ll run you a bath and Dimi will give you a massage, you’re too skinny, we need to take care of you.”

Climbing off me, he helps me to my feet, picking up the robe from where he dropped it and helping me into it.

“I need to clean up,” I protest weakly.

“Nope. Go pee, but nothing else. Everything else stays on you and in you, until one of us washes it off. You understand?”

“I’m dripping,” I cringe.

“I have a plug that could help solve that problem, but your ass looks sore, Baby. Your choice.”

“A butt plug?” I gasp.

“Yep.” His smirk is full of salacious excitement.

“No, that’s not... no,” I argue, shaking my head frantically.

“Dimi stretched you out good with his cock, the plug’s smaller than him. But if you don’t like the idea of me plugging your ass, maybe I’ll save it for the next time I have to punish you.”

I feel my eyes widen, and when Vik notices, he laughs. “Don’t worry, Baby, you’ve been such a good girl, no more punishment for you today.”

Scooping me off the floor, he carries me with a hand under my sore ass into the bathroom, placing me down beside the toilet. “Two minutes, then I’m coming back to get you.”

Nodding, I watch him leave, then use the bathroom. Peeing hurts, so does wiping and I feel myself wincing with every step as my sore, well-used muscles clench as I move.

“Come here, Baby, let me help,” Vik says, half cooing, half mocking.

“You broke me,” I groan, letting him pick me up.

“You’ll feel better once you eat.”

I don't protest as he carries me bridal style down the stairs and back into the dining room. A scowling Dimi and a chastened Lev are sitting round the table, salads in front of them. Instead of placing me down in my chair, Vik carries me to Dimi.

"Someone needs some TLC. She thinks we broke her." Smirking, Vik hands me off to Dimi, like I'm a toddler.

"Are you okay, Malishka?" Dimi asks, his expression full of concern as he pulls me into his lap, holding me close.

My mom did the best she could, but I realized early on that although she might tolerate me and possibly even love me in her own way, she loved drugs more. It didn't matter which drug it was, she liked them all, and if given a choice between them and me, she picked them every single time. I was ten when she died and, by that time, I cooked, cleaned, paid the bills when we had the money, patched her up if her clients got rough, and sometimes even bought her drugs for her if her junkie ass was too far gone to score for herself.

After she died, I moved in with Darla and she was okay. She kept a roof over my head, food in my belly and she didn't abuse me in any way. But she never loved me and I never expected her to. She was distant, in a disinterested kind of way. I don't hate her, because she cared enough about me to take me when she didn't have to, and for that I will always be grateful.

But neither my mom nor Darla were the warm, motherly, comforting presence that other people talked about their parental figure being. I don't remember being hugged, or embraced. I lived in my bubble and Mom and then Darla lived in theirs.

I have never, ever, in my twenty years of life, been snuggled on someone's lap the way I am now with Dimitri Belov, my kidnapper and fake husband. For the rest of the meal, both him and Vik coo over me. Taking it in turns to touch me and comfort me, they even try to feed me when they decide I'm not eating enough and I know... I know that I shouldn't like the way they're dotting on me, but I do.

My body is sore because I had sex four times today. I had two different men's cocks in my pussy and my ass and, honestly, I feel sore and a little like roadkill. Sex with Dimi and Vik was nothing at all like losing my virginity to Jack.

With Jack it hurt, but I never got the pleasure to counteract the pain. I wasn't wet, or turned on. Sex with him was just a bodily function, an act. Sex with Dimi and Vik was like a fucking symphony. Just thinking about how they made me feel has my raw and well-used vagina clenching, reminding me with a jolt of pain that we are out of order for at least a day or so.

Beyond the act of losing my virginity, I haven't given sex much thought. I've tried to explore my own body, to figure out what feels good and what doesn't. But having someone else do the things I've tried to do to myself was completely different.

Feeling the weight of the guys above me, behind me, and beneath me. It changed things, heightened the sensations until they felt better, more. I had no idea that the thought of being with two men at once was a turn on for me, until Dimi told Vik to make me come. Having two sets of hands on me and being the focus of two men's attention, and desire, and want, was decedent. And even though I know letting Vik fuck me while Lev was watching was probably a mistake for my ruined vagina, I can't deny how wet it made me having his eyes on me too.

Slut, my mind shouts at me, but Vik's voice fills my thoughts, washing away the self-hatred with his dirty words, praising me for being his perfect cum slut.

If any other man had said that to me, at any other time, it'd be an insult, but somehow, butterflies swarm to life in my stomach as I remember the way he said it, like it was reverent praise.

"Eat dessert, then we'll take you to bed, you're exhausted," Dimi whispers into my ear.

Leaning forward, I take a spoon full of cake and bring it to my lips. It's chocolaty and delicious, but I'm too tired to care,

and I place my spoon back down on the plate and let my head rest against Dimi's shoulder.

The guys chat among themselves, but I don't pay attention, my eyes slowly drifting shut.

When I wake up, I'm warm. Blinking, I find myself being lowered into the tub, warm water lapping at my limbs. Strong arms band around my waist and I'm pulled back against a wet, firm chest.

"Easy, Malishka, you need to let the water soothe your muscles while I clean you," Dimi says, a hint of an accent slipping into his voice.

"I can—"

"Let him take care of you," Vik scolds me softly, holding me in place while Dimi squeezes liquid soap onto a flannel and reaches for my toes. Starting at the bottom, he works his way up my body, bathing me as he cleans away the sweat, cum and lube that's coating my skin. Avoiding my sex, he washes my arms, shoulders, back and breasts before he moves his hands between my thighs.

His touch is gentle and careful as he parts the folds of my sex, and gently cleans me before moving to my ass and cleaning there as well. When he's happy that I'm bodily fluid free, he drops the flannel into the water and then starts at my toes again, massaging my aching muscles until I'm a melted pile of goo.

"Do you want me to wash your hair now or wait 'til the morning?" he asks.

"The morning, I hate sleeping with it wet," I sigh.

"Come on, Baby," Vik says, standing from the water and lifting me with him then placing me on my feet beside the tub.

Wrapping me in a towel, Dimi steers me to the wash hand basin and presses a kiss to my forehead before handing me a toothbrush that's already coated in toothpaste. Standing between the two men, in front of the row of basins, while we all brush our teeth is surreal. When I'm finished, Dimi takes my brush from me and places it in a holder, sliding his in

beside mine. Taking my hand, he leads me out of the bathroom and into the closet, while Vik follows behind us.

Some of my tension returns when I eye the rack of clothes they bought for me, but before it gets a chance to build, Dimi turns me around, hiding the clothes behind me and unceremoniously rips the towel off my naked body.

“Spread your legs, Malishka.”

I’m shaking my head before I can even utter a word.

Smirking, he chuckles. “Don’t worry, I know we’ve used you too roughly today. Your body will get used to how often we need you, but until then, I have some cream that should help relieve some of the soreness.” Dropping to his knees at my feet, he opens a tube of ointment and squeezes some out onto his fingers. Looking up at me expectantly, he arches a brow.

“Spread your legs, Baby. Your husband wants to see his cunt, so he can take proper care of it,” Vik orders, standing behind Dimi, his expression stern.

My feet move without my permission, wiggling apart until Dimi moves into the space I’ve made, his hand sliding between my thighs to cup my sex.

“Wider,” Vik orders.

I move and, this time, I feel fingers probing, then sliding inside of me. There’s an instantaneous cooling sensation inside my pulsing sex, and I puff out a huff of air as Dimi carefully inspects me, coating me in the ointment. When his fingers move to my very sore ass, I jump, trying to get away from his touch.

“Stay still and let Dimi check your ass. He prepped you well, but the first few times, especially with someone the size of him, there can be tearing.”

Dimi’s fingers start probing again and I whimper when he pushes inside of me.

“Easy, Malishka,” he coos.

The cooling sensation coats my ass and I feel myself relax a little.

“Feel better?” Dimi asks.

I nod.

Smiling, he gets to his feet, then turns to Vik. “She’s swollen and sore, but there’s no tearing or damage, we’ll have to be gentle when we fuck her.”

“No, no, no, I’m out of action for at least a couple of days. My pelvis has a pulse,” I protest.

“I’ll go grab you some Tylenol.” Laughing, Vik presses a quick kiss to my temple before he hands something to Dimi and strides out of the closet.

“Soon, we’ll all sleep naked, but for now.” Dimi lifts a shirt over my head and the fabric falls to my knees. The cotton is soft and worn and so much better than any of the fancy silk and lace I’m sure is waiting in my side of the closet.

Pushing my arms through the sleeves, I hug the shirt to my body. “Is this Vik’s shirt?”

“Probably.” Dimi shrugs. “Let’s get into bed, we can pick a show or a movie to watch until you fall asleep.

“In your room?”

“No, it’s fine for the two of us, but it’ll be a squeeze with Vik too. We’ll sleep in the big bed tonight.”

My lips turn down into a frown, but I let him take my hand and guide me into the main room and toward the big bed. Staring behind me, I sigh as I look into Dimi’s smaller, enclosed room.

“How ’bout you guys bunk out here in the big bed and me and my well used vagina take one of your beds?” I suggest, flashing him a bright, fake smile.

“Why does it bother you so much sleeping in the bed we picked for you?”

“It’s too open, too exposed, I’d rather sleep in a broom closet than out here in the middle of the room where it’s so

unprotected.”

“You’re safe here, Malishka. We’re on an island, in the middle of the ocean, in a house guarded by at least a dozen armed men at all times. We have every security measure available on the market, including bulletproof glass and retinal scanner locks on the doors. Sleeping between us, there is nothing and no one that will ever get through us to hurt you.”

“I...” I trail off, knowing that what he’s saying is true.

“We won’t ever let anything hurt you,” he whispers again, pulling me into his chest and hugging me tightly.

Exhaling, I let myself relax into him. I’m not sure when I stopped thinking of him as one of the most dangerous things on this island, but I need to remind myself that I’m safe here... but only for as long as they still want me, or until they use me up and spit me out. I haven’t survived until now by placing my own safety into other people’s hands. No matter how good the sex is, or how nice they are to me, I can’t forget how I got here and how ruthlessly they ripped me from my life without thought.

Eventually I’ll be free again, and when that happens, I can’t allow myself to be soft because they’ve lulled me into a false sense of security. I survived a year living on the streets by keeping my wits about me. Just because, right now, I have a beautiful roof over my head, doesn’t mean I can let my guard down.

Turning my head, I eye Dimitri’s bedroom with longing.

“It bothers you that much?” he asks, obviously sensing my tension.

I nod.

“I’m sorry, Malishka, how about we watch TV in the big bed, then we can talk about our sleeping arrangements later? Now, would you rather Lev not join us? Vik told me about Lev’s punishment.” His lips curl into a smirk. “He hurt you and that isn’t okay, but I think he would like to join us, if that’s alright with you.”

I shrug. “It’s your house, he can do as he pleases.”

“It’s our house, the four of us. But this space is yours, we designed it specifically for you and if you’d rather he stays away, then that’s what he’ll do. He knows he needs to earn your forgiveness.”

I refuse to acknowledge that he just said they designed this orgy space for me, and shrug again. “It’s fine, he wasn’t wrong after all, he just said the things we’re all thinking, but no one else had said.”

“No, Malishka, Lev was very, very wrong and he didn’t mean it, he was just jealous.” Lifting my head, he cradles my cheek in his palm. “Vik thought he’d fucked all of the guilt and shame out of our filthy little cum slut, but I’m sure he’ll be happy to give you another lesson on why it’s never wrong or shameful to want your husbands’ dicks. Then once he’s finished reminding you that we love every filthy cum-filled inch of you, I’ll happily sleep with my dick in your cunt, keeping Vik’s gift deep inside of you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m too sore. Please, no.”

Dimi’s chuckle is full of sadistic amusement. “I can make you like it, even if it hurts. I can help you learn to love the pain.”

Fear prickles the back of my neck and I carefully try to back up, allowing my flight instinct to kick in.

“No?” he questions, tilting his head to the side. “Pain isn’t a kink you think you’d enjoy? I think I can change your mind, but it’s not something I need, and I’d much rather enjoy you than frighten you.”

“I can’t. I don’t want to,” I stumble over my words, trying to sound forceful, and failing.

“Settle, Malishka. Saying no is your only liberty right now. We may not like it if you do, but we will respect it.”

“You will?” I ask, my brow furrowed.

“Yes, we will. Now climb in, Vik will be back with some pain relief for you in a minute and I’ll text Lev to let him know it’s okay if he joins us.”

Climbing tentatively into the huge bed, my limbs feel heavy, and despite the cream Dimi pushed into me relieving the worst of the pain, I still feel sore and achy. Crawling across the mattress, I head for the edge, planning to curl in my own space.

“In the middle,” Dimi says, stopping me.

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

It’s such a grown up thing to say and my instant reaction is to snap back like a petulant child. But even in the short space of time I’ve been here, I already know that I won’t win every war I start. I need to pick my battles and where I sit in this massive bed that’s easily big enough to fit six or seven people, isn’t the hill I want to die on.

I still can’t stop myself from rolling my eyes as I shuffle into the middle of the huge mattress and shimmy under the comforter, pulling it up to my chest.

“Here you go, Baby,” Vik says, striding into the room with a glass of water and a bottle of Tylenol.

“Thank you.” Reaching out I take the pills and water from him, quickly opening the bottle and putting four tablets in my mouth.

“That’s too many,” Vik argues, snatching the Tylenol back from me as I drink the water, washing the chalky pills down.

“It’s fine.” I wave off his concern. “It’s Tylenol, not heroin.”

Brow furrowed, Vik kicks off the towel he had wrapped around his waist, his soft dick bouncing free and lifts the comforter.

“Boxers,” Dimi says, kicking his own pants off.

“No. I hate sleeping in anything, plus, Ali doesn’t care, do you, Baby?”

“I—”

“If Malishka is wearing clothes, we’re all wearing clothes, I don’t want to accidentally end up touching your dick when I’m sleeping.”

“My dick is pretty special,” Vik drawls, winking at me. “But I’d rather Ali was playing with it in her sleep than you. Although, I guess you are the one who has a thing for groping Ali when she’s asleep.”

My head snaps to the side and I look at Dimi. “What does he mean?”

“Ignore him, he thinks he’s funny,” Dimi growls, taking up the position to my right and immediately draping an arm around me, pulling me across the mattress until I’m resting with my cheek on his chest.

Opening my mouth, I start to demand an explanation, then decide right now I can’t handle anything else. Vik strides naked into the closet and comes back out wearing a pair of tight fitting white boxer briefs, that do nothing to hide his rapidly hardening cock.

“What are we watching?” Vik asks, and I blink, looking around for a TV and not finding one.

“Where’s the—” I stop talking when the ceiling suddenly opens and a large TV slides down, hovering in the air at the end of the bed.

Lev slowly steps into the room, his eyes scanning over the three of us sitting together in the bed. I brace myself for his anger or disgust, but the only thing his expression displays is sadness.

“We haven’t decided what to watch yet, any thoughts?” Vik asks Lev, easily including him in this oddly intimate moment.

“The new season of that British baking show started a few weeks ago, we could start that?” Lev suggests.

“Ohhh the bake off,” Vik says excitedly. “I love that show.”

“The one where the English people make cakes?” I ask, turning my head to look at Vik.

“Yes, it’s the greatest, we binge watched the first four seasons back to back, I’ve never been so hungry in my life.” Vik laughs playfully.

Lev walks slowly into the closet, then comes out wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt.

“Get in, bro, it’s about to start,” Vik says, curling in behind me, his arm draped around my waist.

Lev doesn’t speak, but he climbs onto the huge bed and settles himself on the edge. While the rest of us watch crazy British people fail to make beautiful cakes, Lev watches me, his gaze burning into my skin.

Despite the new comradery I’ve discovered with two of my captors, I know I shouldn’t relax around these men. They’re dangerous, crazy, and obsessive, and my body and mind should be on high alert, like I’m in constant danger. But I can’t help the way they disarm me and lull me into a false sense of security.

With my head resting on Dimi’s chest, Vik’s warmth curled up behind me, and Lev’s constant gaze fixed on me, I fall asleep surrounded by villains, and oddly at peace.

CHAPTER 24

lev

As I sit on the edge of the enormous bed Dimi had specially made for us all to share, I can't look away from Alabama, fast asleep and curled between my brothers. I want to be the one she's sleeping on. I want to be the one spooning her from behind, her firm, perfect ass nestled against my dick.

When they all came downstairs, sex ruffled and stinking of depravity and sin, I hadn't intended to say anything, but jealousy got the better of me. I hate that she seems to be falling for my brothers, when all I get from her is anger and reproach.

No matter how well intentioned I try to be, every time I open my mouth, bitter envy spews out, and instead of endearing myself to her, I just make her hate for me a little thicker.

Before we decided to take her, I was the only one who wanted to get to know her in her world. I wanted to give her a chance to *want* to come with us, because she was choosing us. But the others overruled me.

Normally, I'm the voice of reason when Dimi gets too obsessed and Vik gets too thoughtless. I'm the nice one—or as nice as a ruthless, murdering criminal can be.

But instead of showing her that side of me, I can't seem to stop being a fucking asshole. I'm the one who's tried my hardest to make things easier for her, and yet I'm the one who's hurting her the most.

After lunch when we'd come upstairs to get into our swimwear, I'd had a whole afternoon of fun, flirty bonding planned. But instead of getting to spend one on one time with her, I'd seen her disgust at the closet full of clothes I'd picked out for her, gotten angry and said things I shouldn't have said.

Then when they'd come to dinner freshly fucked and half naked, instead of staying quiet and watching Vik put her on display for me, I'd opened my stupid mouth and basically called her a whore. What the hell is wrong with me? She's not a whore. She's the furthest thing from a whore, but I made her feel bad for wanting my brothers, and now I'm suffering the consequences.

Watching Vik push his dick into her earlier, and knowing I wasn't welcome to touch her or join in was torture. I agreed to share her with my brothers, I agreed that she would be ours. Mine, Dimi's, and Vik's, but now that she's here, I hate that she chose to sleep in Dimi's room. I hate that she let Vik spank her and then feed her from his fingers. I hate that she wants them and not me.

The TV is still playing, but I don't care about cakes or bread or whatever the theme is in the episode that's on. All I care about is her. Her lips are parted slightly, her soft breaths too quiet to be audible, but strong enough to ruffle a strand of hair that's fallen over her cheek. She looks different like this. Relaxed in a way I'm not sure I've ever seen her before. Not once in the whole time I've been watching her.

Is it the sex?

She hasn't had a boyfriend or even gone on a date in the last year, although I've watched her pleasure herself many times through the cameras we hid in her bedroom. Maybe she's not sleeping and she's actually passed out. From what Dimi and Vik said, they fucked her three times before they came down to dinner, and then Vik took her again while he was punishing me by making me watch.

They need to be careful not to hurt her. If the last year is anything to go by, she's definitely not used to keeping up with their level of sex drive. My fingers twitch to reach over and

brush the hair off her face. I want her so much. I've wanted her since she was far too young to touch, but now that she's here, so close to being mine, but still so far away, I'm desperate for her. I suppose we're all desperate. The others haven't even looked at another woman in over a year and it's been years for me, not since the very first time we laid eyes on her.

"You hurt her today," Vik whispers.

Nodding, I force myself to lift my gaze, and look away from her. "I know."

"Don't push her away just because she's not acting the way you think she should. That's not fair to her. I know you've created this idea in your head of who she is, and how you thought she'd react to all this. But watching someone and actually knowing them is different, and she's showing us that. If you roll with the punches and take her for who she is, and not who you expected her to be, she'll forgive you for today. If you keep trying to force her into the tiny Ali-shaped box you've made for her, then she'll just keep pushing you away."

I hate it when he's right. Most of the time, his insight into other people is as deep as a puddle. But considering she hated him his morning and was fucking him this afternoon, his insight might actually be accurate and well considered.

"What if she never wants me," I whisper, hating how much of a pussy I sound for even uttering the words out loud.

"She will. We'll make her. She's ours, all of ours, but just stop staying dumb hurtful shit to her and take your punishment like a man."

"I watched you fuck her while my dick was hard as steel and my balls were as blue as a fucking smurf. I took my punishment."

"Oh, that was only the first part. You're going to watch us fuck her over and over until you make her forgive you," Vik says, a smug smile etched across his face.

"The first thing you need to do, is go through her closet and get rid of anything that's fucking pink or floral. I've

ordered some stuff that's more her style, but the clothes seem to be a trigger for her," Dimi says, his voice quiet as he brushes his knuckles over her shoulder softly.

"Get with the program and tell her what to do. She'll listen to orders, and do as she's told. She doesn't want to have to choose to accept this is her life now. So, for the minute, all she has to do is what we tell her to do," Vik whispers.

"I'm not a fucking Dom, I don't want to order her around," I protest weakly.

"This isn't about you," Dimi snaps.

"No one is expecting you to order her to crawl on the floor with a plug up her ass—although that is a nice visual. Just stop treating her like she's your girlfriend. Whether we like it or not, she is our prisoner, at least until she falls for us and chooses to be here. Treating her like this is just a fun vacation, won't work. The only choice she's allowed right now is consenting to or refusing sex. She can say no to any kind of sexual activity, except for kissing, although she doesn't have to kiss back if she chooses not to. Everything else in her world right now is at our discretion," Vik tells me, his expression unusually serious.

"But—" I start.

"I know. You don't like it. You want her to like you. I get it, but the truth is that she doesn't want to be here yet. She wants the freedom she crawled through hell to claim and we stole away from her. We drugged her and flew her to the other side of the world, and then told her this was her life and to deal with it, be happy about it even. If she needs to cling to feeling like she's just doing what she's told, then that's what we give her. We control her until she makes the choice to embrace this life," Dimi says, staring down at her with so much love in his eyes it's scary.

"She wants our touch, we made her feel good and a steady stream of endorphin inducing orgasms will go a long way to making her associate us with pleasure and happiness," Vik says.

Dimi's head nods in agreement. "We bring her into our world, until she's so much a part of us, that it's her world too. Starting tomorrow, after breakfast, we'll talk her through the Orlov situation and let her know what's going to happen next."

Sighing, I nod my agreement. I hate that they're right, but they are. I don't want to be the assertive domineering captor, but if that's what she needs, then maybe I can do it for her. "Are we all sleeping in here tonight?" I ask, glancing in the direction of my bedroom and feeling like I should sleep in there, rather than have Alabama wake up and find me in bed with them.

"Yes. She doesn't like how exposed this bed is, but we need to make her understand that surrounded by us is the safest she'll ever be. Eventually we'll need to take down the walls and just have one big suite up here, that way there's nowhere for her to hide from us and no excuse of wanting doors to feel safe," Dimi says, staring at the dividing walls we had built to allow us each some private space.

"I'm happy to always fuck her with an audience." Vik smirks, shuffling down the bed until his head is resting on the pillow.

Cringing slightly, I shake my head. "If she ever lets me near her, I'd rather have the option of some one-on-one time with her in my own bed, not that I'm against all of us enjoying this bed together. I'd suggest we build her, her own bedroom, but she'd probably lock herself inside."

"We can think about it in the morning. For now, let's just enjoy the first night with all of us together." Dimi repositions Alabama so he's lying down with her half sprawled on top of him. Pulling back the covers, I slide in beside Vik, wanting to be close to her, but feeling the distance between us like it's a gaping canyon, instead of the width of a bed.



WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, I'm facing Vik who is still curled up behind Alabama. The space where Dimi was sleeping is empty, he's up already, probably in the gym or office. Sliding from beneath the covers, I use the bathroom,

then step into the closet, glancing at the rails of clothes hanging with the tags still on.

Looking at them collectively, it's clear that the palate is possibly a little or a lot more pastel than Alabama wore when she was living in Columbus. But we live on a tropical island, so when I ordered the clothes for her, I picked things I thought she'd look beautiful in, against a backdrop of white sand and blue sea.

I guess, maybe, I liked the idea of seeing her dressed a little more feminine. And I suppose, I might have been thinking more about what I liked, than what she'd pick for herself. In my defense, the clothes in here are all haute couture, the type of labels that most women would die to own. I just failed to recognize that expensive dresses and designer labels wouldn't mean anything to her.

Stepping forward, I flip through the rail, grabbing anything that's pink, floral, or super girly and dump them on the floor. By the time I've done the three long hanging rails, there's only a handful of clothes left, but as I glance at them, none of them scream Alabama to me.

Moving to the dressers next, I leave all the lingerie. There're some softer pastel colors but there's also a mix of black, white and red too, and if I ever get to a stage where I get a choice on her underwear, I want her to have all of the things I picked out available to choose from.

I add most of the silk nighties and things to the discard pile too, working systematically through each drawer, until the only things that are left are less frilly and more sexy. Which if I'd have thought about her more when I was shopping for her, is actually much more her style.

Dimi picked out her clothes yesterday, but there was nothing laid out for her in the bedroom when I got up. Opening the dresser again, I pick out a rich emerald-green scrap of a bikini and then take a white button-down shirt from my own closet and head back to the bedroom.

Vik is just starting to stir, when I step up beside the bed, crouching down so I'm eye level with her. Reaching out, I

carefully push her hair, that's a knotted mess, away from her face.

"Alabama," I call softly.

"What time is it?" Vik croaks, lifting the arm that's not pinned beneath Alabama and stretching it above his head.

"Just after nine," I tell him, checking my watch.

"Fuck, I slept like a baby. Must be the empty balls." He laughs to himself. "Ali, Baby, I gotta piss, Honey, time to wake up." Pulling his arm out from underneath her, he rolls across the bed and disappears toward the bathroom.

"Urgh, Vik," she moans, rolling to her side and toward me, until her face is only inches from where my hand is resting on the mattress.

"Alabama," I call again.

"Jesus, I feel like I got hit by a bus," she moans, stretching and then grimacing.

"I'll get you some of the pills Vik brought up last night," I say, spotting them on the bedside cabinet on the other side of the bed. Standing, I circle the mattress and pick up the bottle of pills, then take a bottle of water from the mini refrigerator we have up here. Shaking two pills into my palm, I crouch back down beside the bed and hold them out to her. "Open your eyes, Honey, take these."

Tired eyes blink open and she looks up at me. "Lev?"

"Yeah, Honey, sit up and take these." I try to add a hint of an order into my tone, but I can't demand she do something when she looks this sleep rumped and adorable.

Cautiously, I wait for her to tell me to fuck off, but instead, she slowly wiggles into a seated position, then reaches out and takes the pills from my hand. Unfastening the lid on the water, I hand it to her and she swallows the pills down, our gazes locked.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, tentatively brushing my knuckles over the apple of her cheek. "I'm a jealous asshole. I should never have said anything about you being with the others. I

just wish you wanted me too and I took that out on you. It won't happen again."

"Okay." She nods, but her eyes are wary, like she's waiting for me to say something else to hurt her.

"I picked some clothes for you to wear. We're going to have that first swimming lesson this morning, so get dressed." Managing to add a forcefulness I don't feel to my words, I hand her the bikini and shirt, then step back just as Vik bounds out of the bathroom.

Jumping onto the bed, he drags the comforter off Alabama and crawls over her, dipping his head and claiming her mouth without saying a word. "Morning, Baby, how you feeling?" he asks when he eventually lifts his head.

"Sore. Lev bought me some more Tylenol."

"That's good. I'll put some more ointment on, if you need it."

"No, I—" she starts, but Vik is between her legs, pushing her knees up and apart before she has time to protest.

"Jesus, Baby, you have the prettiest pussy. I like it best full of cum, but it's sexy when it's all pink and swollen like this too. We won't be able to fuck you today, but you'll be fine tomorrow," he assures her, leaning down and running his tongue along her slit.

"How does she taste?" I ask before I can stop myself. Alabama's head snaps to me, like she forgot I was even in the room.

"Like the sweetest fucking honey." Vik laughs. "Can he have a taste, Baby? Apology oral."

"I..." she speaks, her head starting to move like she's going to deny me.

"Please. Let me make you feel good, because my words made you feel bad," I beg.

"I..." she starts again.

“You can suck my dick while he eats your pussy. I have a gift for my little cum slut and if I can’t fuck your cunt or ass, I’m more than happy to give it to you with your lips around my cock.” Not really giving her time to think, he climbs over her, kneels by her head and pulls his dick free of his boxers. “Lev,” he orders.

Snapping out of my reverie I move to the end of the bed, placing first one knee, then the other onto the mattress and crawling between her thighs.

Her legs are still open and I almost groan with how fucking perfect her cunt looks, spread out and offered to me. Lying down, with my chest against the mattress, I carefully curl my palms around the backs of her thighs and push her legs even further apart until her pussy lips separate, putting her even more on display.

Unable to resist any longer, I lean down and lick her from her tiny clit to her red and sore asshole. Her whole body lifts off the bed and she whines loudly.

“See how sorry he is, Baby? He’s going to kiss your cunt and ass better until you come all over his face and while he does it, you’re going to suck my dick until I feed you my cum. Okay?”

“Okay,” she groans as I find her clit with my tongue and lap at it gently.

Vik’s voice become background noise as I feast on her cunt, licking, sucking on her clit and fucking her with my tongue until she can barely keep her hips still.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth, while Lev’s tongue fucks your cunt. He’s got until I come down your throat to make you come.”

Finding her clit again, I work it with my tongue until her hips are jerking up and down, fighting to get away from the pleasure, but never wanting it to end at the same time. When she comes, her hand slaps down onto my head and her entire body goes rigid, then she shudders, tremors twitching through her, while Vik pumps into her mouth ruthlessly.

“Ready for my gift? Make sure you swallow it all,” Vik growls, as his pelvis thrusts forward and he comes on a pained grunt.

No one speaks, and the sound of our panting breaths fills the air. Eventually Vik slides his cock from between Alabama’s lips, and sits down beside her, running his finger along her lips and then pushing it into her mouth.

As she looks up at him, her hand tightens in my hair as if she’s including me in this moment and I fucking melt. I’ll spend my life between her thighs just to be included and wanted. Eating her cunt for the rest of my life wouldn’t be a hardship.

Before I can stop myself, I turn my head and press a kiss to the inside of her thigh, and she looks away from Vik and down to me.

“Thank you,” she mouths.

Smiling, I nod, then sit up, climbing over her and laying down on her other side while Vik takes my place, quickly applying the healing ointment inside her pussy and ass.

“Get dressed, Baby, I’m hungry and Roza won’t plate up ’til we get down there,” Vik orders, rolling off the mattress, kicking his boxers off as he strides into the closet.

Alabama’s eyes are hooded, but she nods, then slowly extricates herself from the bed and walks into the bathroom.

“You’re welcome.” Vik winks, poking his head out of the closet and smirking at me.

“I didn’t think she’d want me to touch her.” My smile is so wide my cheeks are starting to hurt.

“Orgasms are a fucking wonderful thing,” Vik says before disappearing again.

I don’t know why, but I feel compelled to wait for Alabama, even after Vik heads downstairs. When she walks back out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, her skin is flushed pink, and her hair is wet. “Can I help you get dressed?” I ask softly, bracing for her rejection.

“You left me a bikini and a shirt,” she scoffs.

“I’d still like to help.” It’s not an order, but I suppose if she refuses I could make it one. Picking up the bikini bottoms from where they got abandoned during our morning orgasm session, I hold them out. “Come here, step into these.”

I see the moment she accepts that this is what’s happening in her eyes, and her shoulders dip, like all of the tension just drained from them.

Placing a hand on my shoulder, she lifts first one leg, then the other and I slide the bottoms up her thighs and over her ass, until they’re snugly covering her pussy. Pinching the edge of the towel between my fingers, I drag it from around her, dropping it to the floor at her feet and revealing her small, pert breasts.

The moment the towel is gone, she looks at me, her pupils dilated, her eyes heated. She might hate me, but she doesn’t hate me dressing her like this and I am more than okay with that.

Lifting the bikini top over her head, I graze the sides of her breasts as I situate the two triangles of fabric over her tits. “Turn,” I order, my voice gruff as my dick hardens and begs for some attention.

Lifting her hair, I tie the strings together at her back, then tighten the one at her neck, making sure everything’s tight and held in place. I have zero problem with her tits falling out while we’re eating breakfast, but if anyone but the three of us sees her without a top, I’m pretty sure someone will end up dead.

Standing up, I press my body into her from behind, making sure she feels how hard I am. Dropping a kiss to her shoulder, I grab her hips and turn her to face me again, reaching behind me blindly and picking up the shirt I left for her.

Her gaze dips to my crotch, but neither of us acknowledges my hard dick. Instead, she slides her arms into the sleeves of my shirt and I roll the cuffs until they’re short enough not to

cover her hands. “Perfect,” I whisper, hooking her chin with my finger and lifting her mouth to my waiting lips.

For a second, she doesn’t respond, but eventually, her lips move against mine and she kisses me back. A part of me screams, warning me to quit while I’m ahead, but when she pushes her tongue into my mouth and rubs her hard nipples against my chest, I’m incapable of stopping.

When she finally pulls back, I let her, exhaling as my dick screams at me to bend her over the bed and slam inside of her. “Can we start every morning like this?” I ask, my voice rough with need.

Her cheeks turn red and she dips her chin in the most adorable way.

“Come on, let’s go eat. Dimi wants to talk more about the Orlov situation with you, then we can get in the pool.” Not offering her my hand, I reach out and take hers and she curls her fingers around mine, like she’s done it a million times before.

“Good morning, Malishka, you look beautiful,” Dimi tells her when we step out onto the patio. Crooking his finger at her, she looks to me, before she lets go of my hand and slowly walks over to him. As soon as she gets close, he stands up, palms the back of her neck and kisses her roughly until she melts into him, kissing him back without a moment’s hesitation.

A pang of envy tugs at my gut, but with the taste of her cunt still in my mouth, it’s not as bad as it was.

“Come, sit. I’ll go and let Roza know we’re ready to eat,” Dimi says, pulling out the chair at his side for her. When he returns a moment later, he’s carrying a glass of juice, which he places in front of Alabama, kissing her forehead affectionately before taking his seat at the head of the table again.

Vik saunters from the house just as Roza is placing his plate in front of his chair. “Oh, perfect timing.” He smirks, leaning down and pressing a kiss to Alabama’s cheek as soon as he takes his seat beside her.

“We’ve received an email from the lawyers who are handling your father’s estate,” Dimi announces, looking at Alabama.

“Can we not call him my father? I never knew him, so let’s just call him Polakoff, or sperm donor, or just Mafia boss asshole.” Stabbing a strawberry with her fork, she lifts it to her mouth and crunches angrily.

Chuckling, Dimi dips his head in agreement. “As we expected, Orlov has disputed your claim and is demanding we go to Russia.”

“Russia?” she gasps. “I’m not going to Russia. I’ve been kidnapped once, that was bad enough, if I go to Russia, they’ll either kill me or I’ll disappear and end up in a fucking cage.” She shudders dramatically and Vik drapes his arm over the back of her chair, stroking her shoulder reassuringly.

“Right now, we have no intention of going to Russia. This is exactly what we expected to happen. Now we counter move,” Dimi assures her.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, we request the lawyers come to the US. They will of course refuse and we’ll suggest meeting halfway.”

“Where’s halfway?” she asks.

“Alaska, give or take a few hours,” I answer.

“So, we’re going to Alaska?”

“No, we’re not going anywhere,” Dimi says.

“I don’t understand,” she sighs.

“The Mafia is built on money and fear. When Grigoriy exiled our families, he took ownership of their properties and any money they had in banks in Russia. He couldn’t access the money they had in offshore accounts, but he felt that he’d humbled them enough to prevent them ever rising against him again. After making an example of them, he went on to lead the remaining families with an iron fist, demanding that all those below him in the organization pay him a tithe. Running a huge crime syndicate takes time, manpower, and a whole lot of

money, so he gave control of the drugs to one family, the guns to another, the flesh to a third, then he took a percentage of their profits and kept them for himself.”

Alabama nods, like she’s listening carefully, so Dimi continues.

“Think of the Bratva like the hydra monster from legends of old. Each family is a head, each part of the business is another. Removing one family won’t kill the beast, once removed it’ll just grow another head in its place. So instead, what we’re planning on doing is cutting off the blood supply, until each facet withers and dies. Your sperm donor doesn’t care where his tithe comes from, he just demands compliance. So, if say, a new drug supplier enters the board and pulls a percentage of the profit, Polakoff expects his Avtoritets to continue to pay what he feels is owed, regardless of any problems they might face.”

“Okay,” she says slowly.

“For the last year, we have created obstacles in the path of each of his revenue streams. We’ve helped new dealers infiltrate the streets, ensured shipments of guns went missing or were hijacked. We’ve freed hundreds of trafficked women and children and supplied information to the authorities on the families involved with the flesh trade in Russia and across the world. We have put up barriers at every turn, and while each family found their income streams interrupted, Polakoff still demanded his pound of flesh,” Dimi says, a proud smirk tipping his lips.

“Just as we knew they would, the families put their own wealth into the pot, unwilling to admit to the Pakhan how much they were fucking up. Now, months later, their criminal empires are on the verge of collapse, and their competitors are simply waiting to take over.”

“Let me guess, their competitors are the people you plan to have create the new Mafia once Orlov is dead,” she correctly guesses.

“Exactly.” Dimi nods. “This whole plan is a game of chess. Strategic actions, planned a dozen moves ahead. By the time

we dangled the carrot of that rare whiskey in your sperm donor's face, we'd already almost completely brought down his empire and he had no idea. He died, a painful, agonizing death, thinking that his name would live on forever. But instead, he'll be known as the leader whose greed was the death of the Mafia."

"So, what about Orlov?" she asks, absentmindedly picking at the fruit on her plate as she focuses on Dimi.

"We thought about poisoning him too," I admit.

"Why didn't you?" she asks, turning to look at me.

"Because he doesn't deserve a merciful death. The things he's done, poison was too clean for him," Dimi says, a fierce anger lighting his eyes.

"We want to look him in the face as he takes his last breath," Vik growls.

"Why?"

"I wasn't an only child," Vik whispers. "My parents had another child. A daughter, Ivanna. She was eleven years older than me. She'd just turned sixteen when the Pakhan ordered our families out of Russia."

Alabama's face pales, she knows what's coming.

"He made us all leave, except her. He took her, and gifted her to Orlov for his loyalty. She was his first wife."

"You don't have to tell me," she whispers, reaching over and placing her hand on his knee and her cheek on his shoulder, comforting him.

"Our parents still had friends in the old country and they tried to rescue her. He had her chained in a room because she kept trying to get free. He raped her, beat her, tortured her, then he divorced her and put her to work in one of his brothels. By the time my parents' connections found her, there was nothing left of her. She was nothing more than a shell. They got her out and tried to bring her to the US, but she died a month after they got her home. Her body and her spirit gave up on her, too broken to fight to stay alive."

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, lifting her arms and hugging him.

After a moment, he buries his face in her neck and clings to her, silent sobs shaking his back.

“We’re going to kill him,” she says when Vik gets his emotions under control and sits back. “He doesn’t deserve to live. Tell me what we do.”

And just like that, she’s with us, as bloodthirsty and ready for revenge as we are.

alabama

My stomach churns as I remember the feel of Vik's body shaking as he cried into my shoulder. I don't forgive them for bringing me here, but the more they tell me, the more I'm starting to understand why they did it.

Pavel Orlov is a monster and he needs to pay for his sins. The man who impregnated my mother was a greedy, maniacal asshole, but in comparison with the atrocities of his successor, he was a fucking saint.

It bothers me more that I'm not at all bothered that my sperm donor is dead. A part of me thinks that maybe I should feel something, regret at never having known him maybe. But all I feel is nothing. I don't care that he's gone. He meant nothing to me in life, and even less in death.

I've allowed all three of the men who orchestrated his death to touch me. To fuck me, and lick me, and pleasure me, and even though I've felt guilt for doing it, none of that guilt was because they openly told me they murdered my father.

Lev dressed me in this bikini because he wanted to teach me to swim, but after the revelations at breakfast, all of the guys headed to the cushioned loungers by the pool instead of disappearing into their office like they did yesterday.

Dimi removed the shirt I had over my swimsuit, while Lev insisted in coating me in sunscreen. Now I'm laid out with Vik's head resting in my lap, Dimi on a lounge to the right of me and Lev on one to the left.

The mood is quiet, but not somber, more contemplative as we all digest everything we talked about over breakfast. Their plan is oddly simple. Now that they have effectively dismantled the Avtoritets' businesses and left them each on the verge of bankruptcy, they plan to lure Orlov out of Russia by using me as bait.

Not literal bait, because according to my husbands/captors I won't actually be leaving the island, but Orlov won't know that. Apparently, parts of Russia are still backward enough to have literal betrothal contracts. The guys are anticipating that once Orlov finds out all of the money in Polakoff's offshore accounts is now legally mine. Money that, in theory, belongs to the new Pakhan, he'll throw the betrothal paperwork into the ring and demand that I go to Russia and marry the devil.

Obviously, I'm not going to marry him. My new keepers are refusing to even allow me in the same country as him, but they're going to suggest we meet in Alaska to agree on a settlement to buy my way out of the contract. Once he hits US soil, the guys plan to kidnap him and then kill him in a painful and murderous way. All while I stay here and wait for them.

When I'd asked if anyone would go looking for Orlov, they told me that by that point the old Bratva will have been dismantled and the new school Pakhan will be in place, who will claim responsibility for Orlov's death, enabling them to take his crown.

As plans go, I guess it's not too bad. But then, beyond what I've watched in films and read in books, I've never been involved in plotting someone's death before.

For the first time since I woke up with them standing over me in their living room, I feel like one of them, not just a pawn in their game, and I like it. Even before my mom died, I was alone. Aunt Darla tolerated me and then I survived off my own wits until they took me. Now all of a sudden, I'm part of something.

Yesterday Vik called us a family. I'm not sure how captive and capturers become family, but right now, lying here in

comfortable silence with them surrounding me, it's easy to feel the pull and enticement of the idea.

The soft touches, sweet endearments and lust-filled glances are getting to me and I'm starting to wonder how long it'll be until I succumb to them completely. Even Lev, who I was furious at last night, has softened my anger with a morning orgasm, that really is the best way to start any day.

They're wearing me down. It's barely been three days, and the fury I felt has morphed into angry understanding. How long will it take until I look past their sins, and just see the sexy men who think they're in love with me?

The rest of the day passes in companionable quiet. Lev lures me into the pool and teaches me to doggy paddle. It's not elegant or pretty, but he assures me it'll save my life in an emergency.

Having all of their attention focused on me is intense. Vik's pulled me away twice and pushed his dick into my mouth to gift me with his cum. A part of me knows I should feel demeaned when he calls me his little cum slut, then shoves his dick into my throat and fills it with his release, but I'm so turned on I've begged him to fuck me both times.

The first time, he told me he wouldn't fuck me because I was too sore, the second time, he stood me up, then took my place on his knees and licked my clit until I orgasmed with a cry. During lunch, Dimi dragged me onto his lap, and played with my pussy until I came, right then and there on the patio for everyone to see.

I have never orgasmed so many times, in such a short space of time in my entire life and it's glorious. Anyone who says you can have too much of a good thing, has never had three men eager to make you come as often as possible.

My mind and body are so relaxed that after dinner, I actually suggest we get into the big bed and watch some more of the baking show we had on last night. Dimi slides into the shower behind me, washing me, then carefully playing with my pussy and ass until I'm desperate for relief and grinding my butt into his hard dick. "Please," I beg.

“No, Malishka, no more orgasms tonight. Tomorrow, you’ll come with my cock buried in one of your holes. But tonight, you can wait.”

Pouting, I glare at him, washing and conditioning my hair quickly before heading into the closet. Intending to wear one of the guys’ shirts, I aim for Vik’s section only to catch my half of the closet from the corner of my eye.

Spinning around, I stare at the rails in confusion. The collection of frothy pinks, lilacs and floral clothes are gone and in their place are hangers full of reds, blues, blacks and greens. Earth tones, mixed with denim and even a pair of leather trousers that I want to put on now just to see how they feel.

“What do you think? More your style?” Lev asks from behind me, standing at a half lean against the door frame.

“What happened to all the clothes?”

“I changed them for things that were a little more... you.”

“This is...” I pause, running my fingers down the skirt of an elegant black silk dress that’s a classier version of the nineties slip dress, and that I desperately want to try on. “Why?”

“Because even if we pick out every single thing you wear, I still want you to feel like you in it. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and it doesn’t matter if you’re wearing jeans and boots you took from a dumpster, or haute couture, it’s you I want, just as you are.”

My heart starts to race in my chest as I stare dumbfounded at this confusing man. That is quite possibly the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me, and I don’t know if I want to cry, throw myself at him, or run away, because this is all too much.

I asked them to treat me like a prisoner, because it made accepting that I was stuck here easier for me. And it has. Letting them make the choices. Even down to them picking out what I wear, has taken away all the niggling thoughts that I’m okay with what they did. But this. Having an entire new

closet delivered, just because they want me to look and feel beautiful in clothes that are my style, that is the tipping point.

How do you hate men that are that thoughtful?

“Thank you,” I choke out, holding back tears with sheer will and determination.

Nodding, he strides past me, going to my dresser and opening a drawer. Pulling something out, he walks back to me, his eyes locked with mine as he parts my towel and lets it flutter to the floor.

Holding my breath, I wait for him to touch me, knowing that I won't stop him. But instead, he drops a silk nightshirt over my head. The silky fabric falls like water, and I push my arms through the sleeves, then rub my fingers together feeling how soft it is.

“I don't care what you wear, but it turns out, I enjoy dressing you almost as much as I think I'll like stripping you out of your clothes. So, from now on, you'll wait for me and I'll help you. Okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Come and get into bed, I'll brush the tangles from your hair.”

Taking my hand, he leads me into the bedroom, holding back the comforter while I climb in, then getting in behind me, pulling me to sit between his legs while he gently brushes my wet hair.

Dimi strips off his clothes at the end of the bed, not bothering to find a hamper, then sits on my other side, leaving a pouting Vik, to sit on the edge.

Lev insists on drying my wet hair and when he's finished, someone turns on the TV and instead of moving, I lean back against Lev's chest, with Dimi beside me, his fingers playing with mine, while we all watch a stupid baking show until we fall asleep.



I WAKE up to so much pleasure pulsing through my core, that I gasp. I'm lying on my side, my cheek resting on Lev's arm, my one leg pinned to the bed, the other is curled over a hard thigh, as an equally hard cock pumps into me, in slow, deep thrusts.

"Shhh," Dimi coos. "Stay still and take what I give you."

His next thrust hits just the right spot inside of me and I whine. A hand wraps around my throat, squeezing tight enough that my pleasure sounds become silent as he slams into me, fucking me roughly until an orgasm is forced out of me.

Gasping for air, I claw at his hand on my neck, but he doesn't loosen his hold, fucking me unrelentingly, until I come again. Following me over the edge, he pumps his cum into me in short, sharp thrusts. When his hold on my throat loosens, I suck in air, turning to glare at him, the moment I'm free.

"What the fuck was that?" I snap.

"That was me waking our little cum slut up with a morning gift." Smirking, he dips his head to press a gentle kiss to my shoulder.

A pang of lust hits my stomach at his words and the degrading, sexy nickname. I wore the nickname slut with a badge of shame my entire childhood, so for them to have made it into an endearment that turns me on rather than humiliates me, is unexpected.

"I was asleep."

"I know. That sexy little shirt had lifted up and your cunt was begging me to touch it. You parted your legs when I filled you with my fingers, and rolled to your side, opening yourself up and putting yourself in the perfect position for me to slide my cock into your needy hole."

My stomach twinges again, and I swallow the lusty groan that tries to break free.

"Your cunt was made for my cock, Malishka. You were made to take me, to take all of us and you will, over and over again until you can't take any more. Stuffing you full of me when you were asleep was the sexiest thing I've ever done.

And now I've felt the way you grip me when you wake up on the verge of an orgasm, I'll be doing it a lot more. Next time, I might let you sleep the whole way through, so you wake up in the morning, full of my cum, your cunt sore enough to know I've used you, and so desperate for relief that you beg for any cock that's close to you just to sate your need."

"Dimi," I pant.

"Some days, I'll stretch out your ass and then just let your tightness keep my dick warm all night. Then in the morning, I'll lift you off my cock and sit you straight down onto one of my brothers and they can give you your morning gift."

"No," I gasp, unsure why I'm protesting when I can feel my core tightening in anticipation of everything he just described.

"You want that, don't you? To be passed from cock to cock, receiving a gift from each of us before we start our day. I've given you mine this morning, is it Lev's turn next? Do you want him in your cunt, or your ass? Your cunt is stretched and ready; sloppy with my cum. Lev always wakes up hard, climb onto him and sit on his cock."

Lifting me, he pulls back the covers and places me onto Lev's stomach. Just like he said, his pants are tented with his morning wood and I eye it greedily.

Moving closer, Dimi pulls down the waist of Lev's pants, freeing his cock, and my pussy spasms when he grabs the base of Lev's dick and holds it for me.

"Sit on it, I want to watch your cunt spread wide as you take him," he orders.

My movements feel clumsy as I let my orgasm hazed mind direct my body right down onto the head of Lev's dick.

Dimi's cock is large, he's long and thick, the penis to compare all penises to. Lev's is smaller, but thicker and I feel the stretch as I sink down onto him.

"Kiss him," Dimi directs.

Leaning down, I press my lips to Lev's. I feel him tense when he wakes up, and realizes he's inside of me.

"Alabama?" he says, his voice gruff with sleep.

"Our little cum slut was eager for more cock. Show her how well you'll fuck her," Dimi growls, reaching up and stripping my nightshirt over my head.

It takes Lev a minute to take in what's happening, but I can't sit here full of him for any longer without moving. Tentatively, I roll my hips and a soft moan slips from my lips.

"Jesus, Honey," Lev groans, grabbing my hips in his hands and guiding my movements, sliding me on up and down his cock.

"Oh god," I whine as he finds my G-spot and starts grinding his cock against it.

"You're so fucking wet, did Dimi fill you with his cum?"

"Yes," I cry, tipping my head back and curling my spine until the head of his cock is relentlessly working the perfect spot inside of me.

"Do you want my cum?"

"Yes."

"Beg, Honey, beg me to fuck your cunt until I gift you with my cum."

My eyes snap open, but I hadn't even realized I'd closed them. Looking down I'm mesmerized by the intense, feral look in Lev's eyes as he slams me up and down on his cock.

"Please," I gasp.

"You want it?"

"Yes, fuck me, I want your cum," I yell as he moves me like a ragdoll, fucking up into me, while Dimi toys with my nipples.

"Take it, my gift for a greedy little cum slut," he snarls, pulling me down hard on his dick, until I come with a cry. Not stopping, he keeps fucking me, clenching his jaw until he

comes on a masculine roar, filling me with my second lot of hot cum.

Collapsing forward, I bury my nose in his shoulder, inhaling his sexy, man scent of soap with warmth and a hint of spice.

“So perfect,” Dimi praises, as Lev wraps his arms around me, holding me to him.

“Look at all this cum,” Dimi says, running his finger around the point where Lev and I are still joined. “I love seeing your cunt filled with Lev’s cock. Do you think you could take us both?” he asks, pushing a finger into me, alongside Lev’s cock.

A pained whimper falls from my lips and he slides his finger out. “I want to ruin this cunt, Malishka. I want to make it so ours it rejects even the thought of other cocks. Nothing but our dicks, fingers and tongues go in there now. Not even a toy or a tampon. This is ours. Do you understand?”

“You’re crazy.” I laugh.

“Completely crazy for you, yes. But I’m serious. Nothing goes inside this cunt that isn’t attached to one of us. When you bleed, you use a pad, or those period pants. Nothing else goes in here, break that rule and you’ll be punished severely.”

“Lecture her later,” Vik says and I turn to look at him, not even realizing he was awake. “Two down, Ali Baby, one to go. It’s good I don’t mind sloppy cunt, isn’t it? Lift her off you, Lev, but hold her down against your chest.”

“Vik.”

“It’s okay, Baby, I told you last night I’d make you come this morning. So just let Lev hold you down while I use this sloppy hole and give you my gift.”

Grabbing my ass, Lev, slides me up and off his cock, right as Vik climbs over his legs and guides the head of his dick to my entrance.

“Holy fuck, Baby, our little cum slut is dripping already,” Vik groans.

Lev's arms wrap around my back and I bury my face back into his neck as Vik slams forward, jolting me with the force of his invasion.

"Hold her tight, I'm going to pound this pussy until she's screaming my name."

I slept through most of the sex with Dimi, not waking up until I was on the verge of an orgasm. When he ordered me to climb onto Lev's cock, I was eager for more, but now it's like I'm primed, and I come on the second slam of his cock into my channel.

Screaming, I bury my face into Lev's neck, while Vik fucks me hard and fast, not even pausing to allow me to breathe. His palm finds my ass and he spansks me, tipping me into a second orgasm, then a third.

My body gives out and I melt into Lev's chest, while Vik continues to slam into me like he's trying to break me. My core clenches, triggering aftershocks of pleasure to zoom back and forth through my nerves as he finally comes with a roar, pushing so deep I feel his cock in my stomach.

"Let go of her," Vik orders.

Unfurling his arms from around my back, Vik peels me off Lev, pulling me up until my back is pressed against his chest, his dick still filling me. Turning us, he carefully lowers me back down to the mattress so my head is facing the foot of the bed. "Put your weight onto your knees Baby, but keep your chest pressed to the mattress."

Movements sluggish, I push my knees beneath me, turning my cheek to look back toward the headboard where Lev and Dimi are.

Vik slides his cock out, and I feel the rush of liquid gush from me.

"Jesus fuck," Lev murmurs.

"Look at all that," Dimi says, sounding proud.

"Sexiest thing I've ever fucking seen," Vik purrs.

Vik moves so he's sitting beside me, blocking my view of the others in the room. I jump when a finger strokes over my sex, then pushes inside. A second finger joins the first, then a third and my mind can't process the sensation of what I think is three fingers belonging to three different men pumping into my body.

"Do you like having the three of us finger fuck our cum into you, Malishka?" Dimi taunts. "You're going to come again, and force your cunt to suck all our cum back up deep inside of you."

"No," I whine, shaking my head.

"Yes, Honey, one more time, show us what a good slut you are for our cum. Show us how much you want it," Lev coos seductively.

Someone's fingers find my clit, working my body until I'm forced into an orgasm, no matter how hard I fight it. Screaming, I tip over the edge as all three men push their fingers in deep, still stretching me, even after having all three of them inside of me, one after the other.

"Pass me two pillows, I want her hips propped up so no more of our gift escapes," Dimi demands, pushing two soft pillows under my pelvis, a second before my knees give way and my body flops to the bed.

dimitri

I've called myself a selfish bastard a million times over the years that I've been alive, but as I lie here, in bed, with my brothers and our wife, I don't feel selfish. I feel like the luckiest fucker in the world.

I don't know if she's passed out or fallen asleep, or if she's just too wrung out on pleasure to move. But as she lies sprawled on the bed, naked, hips propped up, her body stuffed full of our cum that's hopefully breeding her as we speak, I know there will probably never be a moment more perfect than this.

Yesterday was everything I could have wished for and more. I wasn't expecting Vik to tell Malishka everything about why we all hate Orlov so much. Of course, I knew she deserved to know, but I assumed either Lev or I would explain to her. It's not something Vik ever really talks about. It's still too painful for his family to discuss and they're still dealing with the grief even decades later.

After we told her everything and explained our plan to her, we lounged around the pool and just spent time together. It wasn't a big extravagant day; it was a glimpse into the future we all want. Us and her existing together in peaceful harmony.

After Lev spoke to her in the closet, she picked to sleep on his chest, seeming at ease with his touch and closeness. I'm glad she forgave him so easily. I guess it helps that he was genuinely remorseful and honest enough to admit that his words were fueled by jealousy and not a belief that what he was saying was the truth.

I've always been an early riser, but waking up with her naked ass on display, her nightshirt ruffled around her waist and exposing her to my view, was more temptation than I could handle.

To start with, I'd been careful not to wake her, gently fingering her pussy until she was so wet and ready, I couldn't wait any longer. I don't know why I like touching her while she's unaware, maybe it's knowing I can do or say anything to her and she won't object. Or maybe, it's a control thing, having her completely defenseless. Whatever it is, pushing my dick into her hot, wet heat was fucking bliss.

I never expected this morning to turn into us each taking turns fucking her. When we've shared in the past, we've all preferred to be inside the person at the same time. But lifting our wife from my dick and straight onto Lev's was hot. Then sitting and watching Vik pound into her, while Lev held her down was ever hotter.

Even though my balls are empty and my wife is clearly exhausted, imagining that all the cum we've pumped into her this morning could be mixing together, and getting her pregnant right now, is enough to make my dick hard again.

Before Alabama, babies were never on my radar. I never saw myself with a child, not wanting to pass the burden of my family's past onto a new generation. But that all changed the moment we found her again. Suddenly, I saw a child as something to hope for, not fear.

Malishka is going to be really pissed off when she finds out I had her birth control implant removed. But I'm hoping by the time she realizes; she'll be pregnant and completely in love with us.

Soon I'll have to admit to drugging, touching, and bathing her while she was unconscious, but not today. Today is a day for hedonism and for all four of us to become the family we all so desperately want to be. When the time comes for me to confess my sins, I will. Then I'll take her anger and anything else she needs, until she can forgive me.

“What time is it?” Vik asks, rubbing his palm over her ass, then leaning down to press a kiss to one of her cheeks.

“Early, six thirty a.m., maybe seven a.m.,” Lev answers.

“Anyone up for a morning swim?”

“No,” Malishka moans, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“Yes. You need to practice every day, it’s the quickest way to learn,” Lev reminds her.

“No.” She elongates the word.

“Practice swimming for a while, then we’ll find you a floaty chair and you can float while we do laps,” Lev bargains.

“Urgh.”

Lazing around for another half an hour, Vik eventually bounds out of bed and into the bathroom. When he’s done, he heads into the closet, coming out in a pair of swim shorts, with something bright red gripped in his hands.

“Come on, Baby, get up and put on your swimsuit. The water will make you feel good, I promise,” Vik coaxes, carefully rolling her shoulders to the side, so he can lean down and kiss her.

“I need a shower,” she whines.

“No,” all three of us say at once, in perfect harmony.

“I can’t go in the pool with cum dripping out of me,” she protests.

“You can and you will,” I say decisively. “No showering today. I like the idea of you being sloppy until one of us fucks you again.”

“That’s gross.” She grimaces.

“There is nothing gross about our cum or your pussy. Now get up before I decide your ass needs to experience the same as your cunt this morning,” I warn her.

Rolling fully to her back, she flops her arms down beside her dramatically.

“Here, I’ll help you, Honey,” Lev coos softly, scooping her off the bed bridal style and carrying her to the bathroom.

I have a sudden urge to follow them, but I resist. Instead finding my own swim shorts and pulling them on.

Lev and Alabama are back in the bedroom when I step out of the closet. Leaning back, I rest my ass against the wall and watch as Lev kneels at her feet, holding the thong bikini bottom out for her to step into.

She places her hand on his shoulder while she lifts her feet, and he slides the fabric all the way up her slim thighs, until the strings hook over her hips and the tiny triangle is positioned over her mound.

Standing, he fiddles with the top for a moment, then drops it over her head, making sure the fabric is covering her nipples, before he turns her and tightens the strings until it’s the perfect fit.

Until now, I had no idea how sexy it could be to watch a woman get dressed. But seeing my brother’s huge hands delicately help our wife into her skimpy bikini has my dick twitching in my shorts.

We troop down the stairs as a group, with Malishka at the center. Nothing has ever felt as right as this, and I think even Alabama knows it. The pool is clear and sparkling in the morning sun when we step outside.

Usually, we only have guards spread out on the accessible entrance points of the island. When we brought Alabama here, I had Greyson station them at the escape points, to prevent her from trying to escape.

So, it’s odd to see an armed guard patrolling the gated entrance to the beach.

“You guys get in, I’ll be there in a minute,” I tell the others.

Nodding to me, Vik grabs Alabama off her feet and throws her over his shoulder. Turning, he runs toward the pool, and her squeal of shock and surprise echoes through the quiet morning air.

Pulling my cell from my pocket, I hit dial on Greyson's number and he answers just like always on the second ring. "Dimi."

"Why is there a guard on the beach gate?" I ask without preamble.

"We've had an unidentified aircraft pass overhead twice this morning and a boat pass about twenty-five miles from the shore. We checked out the plane's papers and it seems that a new company has set up on the mainland, taking tourists out to watch the sun come up over the islands. I've informed the owners that the airspace over the island has strictly controlled access and that if they fly over us again, we will shoot them down. But I haven't been able to identify the boat. It hasn't come close enough to the shore to be a threat, but I thought it would be best to put a guard on all entrances and exits, just in case."

"Okay, keep me updated, if we need to, pull more men in, but make sure you trust them and have them sign NDAs before you give them any details."

"Not my first rodeo, boss," he says sarcastically.

"Her safety is everyone's first priority."

"I know," he agrees more solemnly.

"We're expecting to hear from Orlov in the next couple of days, so we'll keep you apprised of our next move."

"Okay, does she stay here, or go with you?"

"She stays here, this is the safest place for her," I snarl, feeling animalistic about the idea of allowing her off the island.

"Fair enough. I'll keep you in the loop once we find out who owns the boat."

I end the call without bothering to say goodbye, and go and join the others. Right now, she is the only important thing I have to do, because if we have to leave here to go and kill Orlov, I need to know she'll be impatiently waiting our return, not glad to see us leave.

The others are already in the water when I drop my cell on a lounge and dive into the pool, swimming half a length under the surface, before submerging a few feet from where Lev is helping Malishka practice her doggy paddling.

Treading water beside them, I watch her, impressed by how quickly she's picking up on the basics. If she practices each day, she'll be swimming properly in a month at this rate. I alternate between watching Alabama and swimming laps for the next half an hour. We all watch with bated breath as she paddles her way from one end of the pool to the other, grabbing onto the side as her chest heaves with exertion.

"Woo, amazing, Honey," Lev cheers, swimming toward her.

"No more, I'm done for today," she says, panting when Lev and I make it to her at the same time.

"That was amazing, I told you, you could do it. I'll go get you that floaty chair," Lev says, kissing her quickly before hauling himself out of the pool and heading to the small pool house shed that holds all the floaties.

"I'm proud of you, Malishka," I tell her, pulling her off the side and into my arms. "Wrap your legs around me, I'll keep us both afloat."

"Don't make me swim anymore, my arms feel like they weigh a ton," she whines, wrapping her legs around me as her arms circle my neck.

"No more swimming for now, I just wanted you in my arms."

"Oh, well, okay," she says, holding me a little tighter as I turn and press her back to the side of the pool.

"I think you deserve a reward, for trying so hard with your swimming."

"What kind of reward?"

I don't know if she realizes she's done it, but her voice has gone husky and seductive.

“The kind that ends with an orgasm. I’ll even let you pick how it happens.”

“I...”

Even though she’s been surprisingly open to the depraved way we’ve used her for the last couple of days. Her cheeks turn pink and she looks down, like she can’t find the words to ask for what she wants.

“You can have my fingers, my tongue, or my cock. Your choice.”

Her gaze snaps up to me again and she bites at her lip. “Tongue,” she whispers.

“Good choice.” Smirking, I grab her beneath her ass and boost her out of the water so she’s sitting on the edge of the pool, her legs dangling over the side. “Shuffle forward, so your ass is hanging over the edge, then lean back on your hands,” I demand.

Following my orders, she positions herself, so her pussy is at chest level when I stand up in the water, her tiny thong bikini bottoms barely covering her cunt.

Stepping between her legs, I pull the fabric to the side, revealing her pretty pussy to my eyes only, my body blocking anyone else from seeing. “Tonight, we shave off this hair, I want to be able to feel and lick nothing but smooth skin,” I order, leaning down and running my tongue between her folds.

She tastes slightly of chlorine, but beneath the chemical water is her sweetness with a hint of saltiness that I know is a combination of all of our cum. Perhaps I should be a little more squeamish about the thought that I’m more than likely tasting my brothers’ jizz. But if I’m licking it from her cunt, I really don’t care.

“Dimi,” she moans loudly.

“Turn your head to look toward the beach. There’s a guard there, if he hears you and looks this way, he’ll see your pussy and I’ll have to kill him. Can you be quiet, or do you need a cock in your mouth to stifle the sound?” I ask, between licks.

Bracing her weight on one hand, she lifts the other to her mouth and covers her lips, letting her head fall back when I find her clit with my tongue. Smiling to myself, I slide two fingers into her core, pumping them in and out while I tongue her clit like it's a sucker and I'm trying to lick my way to the sweet center.

Her mewls start quiet, but soon, even the hand over her mouth doesn't stifle the sounds of pleasure coming from her. I feel the moment her cunt tightens, her muscles fluttering as she tips over the edge, and instead of just covering her mouth, she bites down on the side of her hand, smothering the sound as she comes.

Lifting my head, I catch sight of the guard who should be watching the horizon. Instead, he's turned to face us, his mouth dropped open as he works his hand up and down his cock, watching us unabashedly.

Pressing a kiss to her mound, I pull her swimsuit back in place, then haul myself out of the pool, walking to the lounge without glancing at the guard. In my peripheral vision, I see Vik and Lev moving toward Alabama, but I don't look back. Instead, I take a seat on the lounge I dropped my cell onto and reach beneath it, grabbing the gun that's secured to the frame.

Wrapping my fingers around the cold metal, I rip it free, stand, lift my arm and shoot the guard in the head.

CHAPTER 27

alabama

My mind is spinning as Dimi kisses my pussy, then moves my bikini back into place, covering me. Stepping out from between my legs, he hauls himself out of the pool and Lev and Vik move toward me.

A loud, bang fills the air and I spin around to search for the origin of the noise, watching in slow motion as the guard Dimi pointed out by the beach buckles and crumples to heap on the floor.

I'm screaming before I even realize I'm making a sound, then I'm being pressed against a warm, wet chest and lifted into the air. "Easy, Baby, it's okay. Stop screaming, it's okay," Vik coos.

At some point I must have closed my eyes, because when I open them again, we're sitting on one of the loungers and there's a towel draped over my shoulders.

"I was quiet. Wasn't I quiet? I swear I was quiet," I ramble, trying not to look toward the dead guard, but unable to drag my eyes away.

"Shh, not your fault, shhh," Vik whispers, stroking the back of my head as he pushes my face into his neck.

"Give her to me," Dimi orders, taking me right out of Vik's arms before anyone can agree, or I can protest.

"No," I scream, trying to scramble away from the man who just killed someone in cold blood, because of me.

“Enough, Malishka,” he snaps, grabbing my cheeks and forcing me to still. “Enough.”

My chest is heaving up and down, as I look up into the eyes of the stone cold killer who was making me orgasm only minutes ago. “You killed him. I thought you were joking, I thought it was a game, but you killed him.”

“Yes, I killed him, but not because you were too loud, Malishka. I killed him because instead of doing his job, he had his back to all possible danger and was watching us like we were putting on a live porn show. This was not your fault, it was his.”

“You killed him,” I say again.

His nod is decisive. “Yes. No one gets to see you come, except us.”

“It’s my fault,” I whimper.

“No,” he snaps, shaking my head roughly. “I killed him because he had his hand on his dick when he should have been doing his job. I killed him because I will not allow anyone, not even my closest family or employees to put you at risk.”

“You shot him in the head, you could have just fired him,” I gasp.

“Letting him leave this island would have put our security at jeopardy. Simply firing him wasn’t an option, and he knew that when he accepted this job.”

My chest feels tight and no matter how hard I try; I can’t convince my eyes not to keep looking back to the dead man on the ground. There’s a pool of blood spreading beneath him, because Dimi shot him.

I’m dimly aware of the sounds of someone making a phone call, but I can’t hear what they’re saying, because there’s a buzzing in my ears as I look at the man on the ground. Vik, obscures my view, striding toward the body, water still dripping from his shorts. Pushing his foot beneath the guard’s arm, Vik lifts his leg and flips the man onto his back. I’m too far away to see his features, but I can see the blood-coated hole in the middle of his forehead.

“I’m going to be sick,” I shriek, ripping my arms free from Dimi’s hold to cover my mouth.

I’m lifted off Dimi’s lap and rushed into a small guest bathroom a second before my stomach empties itself into the toilet.

“It’s okay, shh, it’ll all be okay,” Lev soothes, holding my wet hair back with one hand and rubbing my back with the other.

“He’s dead. He’s dead because of me.”

“It’s not your fault. Every single person we employ knows that we pay them well to do a job. His job was to guard the house and look for threats. It was bad enough that he watched Dimi pleasure you, but to have his dick out, thinking he could jerk his tiny little cock over the sight of you coming. Well, he’s lucky Dimi gave him a merciful death. I’d have cut the fucker’s eyeballs out, then choked him to death with them.”

Turning my head, I look up at the man comforting me and realize I don’t know him at all. I don’t know any of them.

“You can’t just go around killing people,” I hiss, grabbing some tissue and wiping my mouth.

“If they try to take you from us, I’ll kill them. If they try to hurt you, I’ll kill them. If they try to lure you away, I’ll kill them. And if they try to take us from you, I’ll burn the entire fucking world to the ground just to make sure that never happens. You’re ours, Alabama, and only ours. No one gets to share, no one gets to look, and no one gets to even think they have a chance. It’s better that everyone on this island, including you, learns that.”

Gone is the sweet, caring guy holding my hair back. Gone is the sexy man, fucking my brains out. Gone is the man who told me with quiet determination that he’d be the one dressing me from now on. Instead, I’m shut in a bathroom with a brutal killer, a man capable of kidnap and coercion. Somehow in the haze of sex and orgasms and emotion, I’d forgotten who they are. I can’t let that happen again.

Lifting me to my feet, he carries me to the counter, and sits me on it. Bending, he opens the cupboard below the basin and pulls out what looks to be a first aid kit, a hairbrush, and some other supplies, including a brand-new, still in the package toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

Opening the toothbrush, he squeezes some paste onto the bristles, then lifts me down, turns me around to face the basin and hands me the brush. Reaching around me, he turns on the faucet, then crowds me, his hard dick pushing into my ass while he watches me brush the taste of vomit from my mouth.

When my teeth are clean and my mouth feels fresh, he takes the toothbrush from me and places it down on the counter. Pulling my hair away from my face, he brushes the knots from my wet hair, until it hangs in a smooth curtain over my back. Curling one arm around my waist, he finds my eyes in the reflection in the mirror. “I see you remembering that we’re monsters. That we drugged you and brought you here. We’re not good men, Alabama, but we don’t pretend to be either. We’ll give you sweet words and soft touches when you need them. Vik will discipline you, and Dimi will slide his cock into your sleeping body and fuck you while you’re completely unaware. And me, well I’ll be the voice of reason. I’ll talk us up and talk you down when needed. What I won’t do is pretend that I’m soft, or harmless. Because I’m neither of those things.”

Pushing between my shoulder blades, he forces my chest down, until my head is almost in the basin and my fingers are clinging to the edge of the counter. Lifting me with his arm around my waist, he pulls my hips back and spreads my legs, positioning me where he wants me.

“Lev,” I protest, glaring at him.

Kicking his swim shorts off, he sweeps my hair to the side and over my shoulder so he can still see my eyes in the mirror. “You’re ours, Honey, built to belong to the three of us. We’ll be as soft as you need, when it’s just the four of us, but never forget that we are the type of men who will do what needs to be done, including killing every single person who tries to stand in the way of our happily ever after.”

Yanking the ties that hold my bikini bottom in place, the fabric falls away, leaving me naked from the waist down. I'm still wet from Dimi licking me to orgasm, but instead of pushing his cock straight into me, he stares at me in the mirror, our gazes locking in the reflection.

“You were made for us. Made to be shared by us. Made to be loved by us. Made to be protected by us and made to be fucked by us.” His dick slams into me, pushing me forward, so my head almost hits the faucet.

“You don't get to pick which bits of us you want, you have to take us all. So, the next time we kill a man for looking at you, you'll stand strong, shoulders back, and know that we did it to protect you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “He didn't have to die.”

Spitting onto his fingers, I feel them press against my ass as he fucks my pussy.

“His job was to guard you, not rub his dick. He failed at his job because he wanted to see you come. He had his cock in his hand. He treated you, *our fucking wife*, like you were putting on a show just for him.”

The sensation of his dick in my pussy and his finger in my ass makes it hard to think. “We were the ones messing about outside where anyone could see,” I groan, pushing back into his thrusts.

“No,” he snarls, pulling his fingers from inside of me. Reaching past me, he grabs the hairbrush off the counter, and a moment later I feel the smooth wooden handle press against my hole.

“Dimi said nothing but us in your cunt, he didn't say anything about your ass.”

My eyes widen as I feel him push the handle of the hairbrush deeper into my hole, pulling it all the way out only to spit on it, then push it back in, lubing my ass with more of his saliva.

“When I'm done filling you up, you're going to walk back out there, naked, with my cum dripping down your legs and

not a single set of eyes except Dimi's and Vik's will be on you, because every person on this island knows who you belong to. They know that we can have a fucking orgy in the middle of the dining table and that they should avert their eyes and leave, or just pretend like it's not happening. He watched. He saw your cunt being licked and finger fucked and he thought he could stroke his tiny dick to the view."

Pushing the hairbrush into me until the broadest part of the handle is lodged deep in my ass, he grabs my hips with his hands, pulling me onto him and hitting the end of the brush with each thrust until I'm whimpering and panting.

"You're for our eyes only. For our touch. For our ears." He punctuates each thrust with his words. "That's why he's dead. That's why he got a bullet between his eyes."

I come with a cry, clenching my eyes tightly shut as he pounds into me. The wooden handle in my ass moves inside of me as he thrusts in and out and I come for a second time, my spine arching as pleasure jolts through my muscles.

"You're ours. That's why we'll kill anyone or anything that tries to claim even the sight of your pleasure."

He comes on a guttural grunt, pushing his cock deep and holding there, the heat of his release burning my stretched and sore muscles.

His weight isn't on me, but I still feel the pressure of him, his gaze weighted and pressing down on me as he waits for me to open my eyes and look at him. What just happened between us, was raw and intense and harsh. He didn't hurt me, but he changed things between us all the same.

It takes me longer than it should to force my eyes to open. I don't really remember when I shut them. Maybe when the stark honesty in his reflected gaze got to be too much? Or when my brain struggled to tie the pleasure he was giving me and the horror of the reason why he was giving it to me together.

Prying my lids apart, the first thing I see is him. His expression is wary, but steely and determined in a way I

haven't seen from him before. His reflection in the artificial light of the bathroom doesn't showcase just how attractive he is, but I look past the chiseled cheekbones and brutish jaw and instead focus on his eyes.

If they're the window to the soul, as so many poetic people have suggested, then Lev's soul is black and marred with death and destruction. That should scare me. It should have me retreating right back under that dressing table and the safety it afforded me on my first night here. But I'm not scared now.

Lev is a dangerous man. But he's not a danger to me. None of them are. A man is dead, and I watched him die. But even though I should be, I'm not scared of Dimi or the others.

"There she is," Lev drawls, his voice gruff.

"Who?"

"Our fucking queen," he whispers reverently. "Now hold on to the counter."

"What? Why..." My words trail to a squeak as he takes hold of the head of the hairbrush and slowly pulls it out of me, dropping it to the floor at our feet.

Reaching up, he unties the strings of my bikini top and pulls it off me, leaving me naked and still impaled on his cock.

Smirking at me in the mirror, he uses his hold on my hips to keep me in place as he slides his softening dick out of me, letting it fall to his thigh with a wet thud. Immediately, liquid seeps from me and I turn looking for some tissue to clean up.

"No. You walk back out to the pool like the well fucked queen that you are. Shoulders back, chin up, completely unashamed. Knowing not a single person on this island will ever look at you. Even if that fucker hadn't completely neglected his duties in the most heinous way, his death was needed to send a message. You are completely and absolutely, off fucking limits."

"I'm not walking through the house and into the garden like this," I argue.

“Yes, you are. If you walk, I’ll put your bikini back on you when we get to the others. If I have to carry you out of here, then when we get to the pool, I’ll drop your warmed up ass onto Vik’s cock and let him put on another show for whoever has to replace the guard we just killed.”

“I hate you so much right now,” I hiss.

His eyes are feral when he nods. “I know.”

“You don’t care?”

“This is a lesson for all of our staff, one they all need to learn. But it’s a lesson for you too. Now I gave you an order, Alabama, open the door and walk back to the pool.”

Clenching my teeth, I ball my hands into fists, fighting the urge to fold in on myself. If I thought Lev would let me at least keep my modesty, I’d try to cover myself with my hands, but I already know he won’t.

Reaching out, I turn the door handle with shaking fingers, then open it. The house feels silent and I don’t see anyone as I pad down the hallway to the dining room, then through the doors and onto the patio. I fight the urge not to run the last few feet to where the guys are laid back on the loungers like nothing has happened.

Glancing toward the beach, I brace to see a body, but it’s gone, the walkway wet, like someone just cleaned it. There’s a different guard stationed in the dead guy’s place, his back to us, his frame relaxed, feet shoulder-width apart, his hands cupped together at the base of his spine.

“Well, hello,” Vik purrs seductively. “Look at you, all deliciously naked.” Pulling me to him the moment I’m close enough, Vik drags me into his lap, his hand immediately dropping between my thighs. “Lookie here, it seems like our little cum slut received another gift.”

“Let me see,” Dimi calls.

Turning me, Vik spreads my legs, putting me on display for Dimi and anyone else around.

“You’ve taken so much cock today, haven’t you, Malishka? Is your well fucked cunt sore?”

“A little,” I answer honestly.

“Where did Lev fuck you?” Dimi demands.

“Do we have to talk about this out here?” I ask, glancing toward the guard. “I think one dead guard is enough for today, don’t you?” I snap, using my arms to free myself from Vik’s hold. “Someone give me some god damned clothes, before I go ask the new guy for his shirt. But don’t worry, I’ll have him shut his eyes before he gives it to me.”

Dimi’s jaw tics and he looks from me to the guard, who is studiously staring at the ocean, his head moving slowly from side to side as he watches the horizon. “I suggest you watch your mouth, Malishka. We might all be in love with you, but that doesn’t mean we’ll tolerate you speaking to us or making threats like that.”

Closing my eyes, I sigh. “Can I go upstairs? I just want to go upstairs,” I ask, hating the weakness in my voice.

“No,” Vik says decisively.

“Please?” I implore him, begging with my eyes.

“No. Go to Lev, he’ll put your bikini back on, then we’ll enjoy the sun until breakfast is ready.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then you can kneel under the table and suck on my cock while we eat,” Vik says, his tone a clear attempt at humor to lighten the mood.

“If anyone tries to put anything in my mouth, I’ll bite it off,” I warn. “My body is my choice and I’m saying no, right now, I’m saying no.”

“That doesn’t sound as convincing as you think when you have Lev’s cum drying on your thighs and your sloppy cunt is full of him,” Dimi says, his eyes warning me to shut up, or face the consequences.

“Come here, Honey, let’s get you dressed.” Lev smiles, but it’s impossible for me not to see the hardness behind his eyes.

“I’m not a child, I don’t need someone to dress me,” I cry, my voice getting more and more shrill.

Lifting me up, Vik carries me to Lev and lowers me to my feet right in front of him. His hold on my hips tightens, keeping me in place, while Lev holds out the bottoms at my feet. At some point he must have retied the strings, because when I reluctantly step in, he slides them up my thighs and over my hips, until I’m covered again.

Standing up, Lev leans in close enough that I can feel his breath on my cheek as he ties the top into place, moving the fabric until he’s sure everything is covered. Pressing a kiss to my temple, he steps back and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from swaying into him.

Even as angry as I am, my body is still craving them and this closeness I’ve felt with them in the last couple of days. A wave of exhaustion washes over me and I sigh, feeling my shoulders slump.

Stepping out from between the two men, I walk to an empty lounge, then sit down on it, twisting until my legs are laid on the cushioned bed. Turning to my side, I put my back to the men who are infecting my mind, bewildering my body and making me question my morals and values.

“Baby,” Vik sighs.

“You want me out here, and I’m out here,” I say tiredly.

Unwittingly, I’ve turned in the direction of the ocean and my gaze has landed on the wet footpath, where less than thirty minutes ago there was a body. Now, it’s clean, the crime washed away with the blood.

These men. These dangerous, enticing men could kill me just as easily, although I know they won’t. Closing my eyes, I swallow down the realization that this is my life now. Captivity, casual murder, and constant control. I’m alive, but I’m not sure if this is a life I can learn to live with.

dimitri

Alabama's breathing evens out as she falls asleep. Having her turn away from us, after begging us to let her go upstairs to get away from us, is driving me crazy. This morning was utter perfection until that stupid motherfucker decided to put his eyes on what's ours.

I haven't told Malishka that the guard was Dane yet. The same one she was flirting with over the balcony. I'm not sure if it being him would make it better or worse for her. But as far as I'm concerned, good fucking riddance. He was someone Greyson brought onboard. Ex-military, on the run from the military police and looking for a fresh start. We gave him that. We gave him a job, a hefty salary and a home in literal paradise, and how did he repay us? By flirting and then jerking off to our woman.

No. That fucker had to die.

She's angry and confused right now, but it was time for her to see who we really are, before she created an image of us being nice guys in her head. We're not. We're criminals—business men and self-made billionaires too—but at heart, we're criminals. If our families hadn't been exiled from Russia, we'd be entrenched in the Bratva, eating, sleeping, and breathing for the family.

This island may be our oasis, but we'll still deal with anyone who crosses us, regardless of if they started as friend or foe. Grabbing my cell from beside me, I open up my email app and start to work through everything that's come in since

last night. Most of it is inconsequential, except for an email from Alabama's father's lawyers.

My eyes go wide as I read through the sternly worded email. Orlov is a slick fucking bastard. Apparently, he has a marriage certificate that predates the one I had created to authenticate mine and Alabama's marriage.

Both of them are fake, but his is really fake, because he's never even seen my Malishka in person, let alone married her. Attached to the email is a copy of their wedding certificate dated six years ago.

Although there are things in place to prevent child marriages, in certain areas of Russia the legal age for marriage is fourteen, which is how old she would have been then. Even knowing that this is all bullshit, my stomach lurches at the idea of my Malishka being forced to marry a man in his sixties when she was little more than a child.

The lawyers are saying that Alabama was kidnapped from her marital home in Russia two years ago, and that they have been searching for her ever since. As she was already married on the date when our fake wedding certificate was issued, they've voided her claim on her father's estate and are demanding her immediate return.

"What's the matter?" Lev asks, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb her sleep.

Passing over my cell, he reads the email, hissing and cursing beneath his breath. When he's finished, he hands the cell to Vik and stares at me expectantly. "What do we do now?"

"We offer to meet in Alaska to hand her over, the plan stays the same," I tell him, my voice cold and firm.

"If they take her to Russia with the marriage certificate, we'll never get her back," Vik snarls.

"She's not going anywhere near Russia. She's not leaving this island. Vik and I will go to Alaska, Lev, you'll stay here with Alabama. We can't risk taking Orlov, but we'll poison

him, same as Polakoff, he'll be back in Russia before he even realizes he's ill."

"That won't work, he'll know something is up when you show up without her," Lev points out.

"Fine, then we'll blow up the plane before they even get to fucking Alaska," I snarl.

"I mean, that's an option. Obviously, not before they get here, unless we can get into Russia and get to the plane beforehand. But we could have them come to Alaska for the meet, take someone as a decoy Ali, then plant something on the plane and boom boom, bye bye the moment they hit international waters," Vik suggests with a careless shrug.

"Who can we use as a decoy Alabama?" Lev asks.

"I'm sure Greyson knows someone who can be easily bought with loose morals and a skillset that'll give her a chance to not die if it turns into a fight." Nodding to myself, I take back my cell from Vik. "I'll call him."

Standing, I stride far enough away that my voice won't disturb Alabama, and hit call. Throughout the entire conversation, my eyes stay fixed to her. She's asleep, but not peaceful. Fine tremors run through her body, making her shudder as her head shakes from side to side and her mouth silently opens and closes.

I tell Greyson what we're planning, and as always, he says he has exactly what we need. I met the head of our security team when I was in college. He wasn't there studying; he was acting as a bodyguard for the daughter of a foreign dignitary. At the time, I'd never even heard of the girl's father and it'd felt like overkill to have a guard following her around campus and even attending class with her.

He's a little older than us, maybe five years, and even without knowing me, he knew exactly what I was. I don't know if it was a case of like recognizing like, or maybe predators can just sense other predators. Either way, we became friends and kept in touch. Money brings power but it also brings people who want to take that power. Successful

people sometimes have enemies, but people like us always do and even for the three of us, with the skill set that we have, it's impossible to be both moving forward and watching your back. The first time someone took a pot shot at Lev, I called Greyson and offered him a job. Now he watches our backs for us and he's probably the only man alive, outside of my brothers, who I'd trust Malishka with. He'd protect her to his dying breath, because that's just the type of man he is.

"Greyson says he knows someone," I tell them as I sit back down on the lounge. I want to go to her and pull her into my arms, but I know that wouldn't help right now. She chose to sit on a separate seat and told us she didn't consent to us touching her, because we wouldn't allow her to leave. She's forcing distance between us by sleeping.

If we were upstairs, her sleep probably wouldn't stop me from claiming her, just like I did this morning. But she clearly said no and as much as I want to, I won't cross that line and touch her, even if I know I can make her like it.

Sighing, I look toward the house, where Roza is setting the table for breakfast. How can it be so early, when it feels like today has already lasted an eternity?

"Should we wake her?" Lev asks.

"Not 'til we have to. What was with you making her walk out here naked anyway?" Vik asks. "Not that I'm complaining about the easy access, but she just watched Dimi kill the perv, probably not the best time for a naked catwalk."

"She was blaming herself. I explained that it didn't matter if we were having a fucking orgy right there in the open, his job was to guard, not ogle. I made her come out here with no clothes on to drill home the fact that the only people who will ever get to see her like that, is us, and that if anyone else does, we'll kill them too, and we won't fucking apologize for it," Lev says passionately.

"Risky," I tell him. "What if Greyson or the new guard that replaced the dead guy had looked?"

“They wouldn’t have. Which I also explained. Our loyal staff would avert their gazes, because they know she belongs to us, and that we won’t tolerate others putting their eyes on her,” Lev snarls.

Pursing my lips, I nod. “How long do you think she’ll be pissy for?”

“Long enough to drive us crazy, but not long enough that any of us go back to smurf balls.” Laughing, Vik slides his much bigger body onto the lounge beside her, not touching her with his hands, but pressing himself right up close behind her.

“Where did you fuck her?” I ask Lev.

“In the guest bathroom. She got sick, so I found her a toothbrush so she could use to freshen up with. She started spouting bullshit, so I bent her over and fucked some sense into her with my dick in her cunt and the handle of a hairbrush in her ass.” He snickers.

“Whose hairbrush was it?” Vik grimaces.

“Who cares whose fucking hairbrush it was? What matters is that she fucking loved feeling my dick in her pussy and something in her ass too. She’ll take us and she’ll love every fucking minute,” Lev enthuses, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

My cell vibrates and I pull it out, finding a text from Greyson.

GREYSON: Female decoy is a go. She’ll meet us in Alaska as soon as we have a date.

Me: Perfect. I’ll keep you updated.

“GREYSON HAS FOUND us an Alabama decoy. I’ll email the lawyer and arrange a drop date. We’re going to need intel on his plane. I’ll find out if he’s using Polakoff’s jet, or if he has his own. Vik, you build an explosive device that can annihilate a plane. Lev, you design a remote detonator. I’ll get our alibis arranged and make sure everyone at that airfield is ours.”

Typing out a reply to the lawyer's email, I express my shock and appall at discovering that Alabama was already married, and explain that I had no idea. Then I tell them that as she's no longer my wife, I'll happily return her to Orlov if he's prepared to meet me halfway.

It feels wrong even to pretend to be willing to give her up. I wouldn't give a fuck if she really was legally married. I still wouldn't ever let her go. Possession is nine-tenths of the law and she's here, with us, on our island, sleeping in our bed, riding our dicks and getting filled with our cum. She's ours, and once all of this is over, I'm going to marry her properly in a huge and very public ceremony, then a private one that binds all four of us together forever.

Glancing over at her sleeping form, a part of me wishes I'd just waited until she was inside to shoot Dane. But she needed to understand that just because we're good to her, doesn't mean we're good people.

We're murderers and criminals and we like it. We had the opportunity to spend our lives being rich and spoiled and all while acting completely within the law. But that's not who we are, not at our core. Our blood is made of death and destruction. It's our heritage, it's our DNA, and as much as we fought becoming just like our parents, we got there in the end anyway.

I don't necessarily enjoy killing. It's not an art form to me, like it is Vik. But I like the control of knowing I can hold a person's life or death in the palm of my hand, without ever considering that it's not my right to choose.

We're not above the law, we just don't care about it enough to play by anyone's rules but our own. Unlike our parents and grandparents while they were alive. Even decades after they were forced from their homeland, they still played by the Bratva's rules. The laws and expectations of the family were so ingrained in them, that they didn't know any other way to live.

Being exiled freed me, Lev, and Vik from those shackles. For us, America really became the land of the free. We grew

up without the familial expectation that would have chained us in the past, and we thrived on that freedom until we became who we are now.

Rich, arrogant, ruthless villains.

I don't ever want Alabama to become like us, but she needs to learn that we're not the same as everyone else, and now neither is she. In the life we live, we're kings among men and we've made her our queen.

She's quiet when we wake her up for breakfast, toying with the food on her plate rather than eating it. My irrational ego whispers that the reason she's not eating it, is because it's the first thing she's consumed in days that hasn't been laced with my cum. After this morning's drama, I hadn't had a chance to jerk off or visit the kitchen. Eventually, I'll have to confess to her that I've been seasoning all of her food and drinks with my jizz, but I'm hoping by the time I do, she'll be bred with our baby and so in love with us that she won't care.

Or maybe I'll just have her suck my dick and come down her throat a few times a day instead. Then I'll never have to tell her and her belly will still be full of me.

"We received an email from Orlov's lawyer," I announce.

Her gaze snaps up.

"Orlov has produced a marriage certificate, proving that you and he were married six years ago. He's suggesting that you were kidnapped, and that both he and your father have spent the last two years searching for you."

The guys stay silent, they already know all of this, but it's fascinating to watch the kaleidoscope of emotions flash across her face. She goes from shock, to disgust, to anger, to fury and I love it. I love seeing the life burst back into her eyes. I'll take her anger over her silence any day.

"He what?" she shrieks. "I would have been fourteen, for fuck's sake."

"In parts of Russia that's old enough to get married," I inform her.

“That’s barbaric.”

Nodding, I agree. “But nevertheless legal. There’s nothing we can do to dispute the legality of the marriage, and as such his claim overrides our claim toward your father’s estate. In addition to refusing our claim, his lawyers are also demanding we return you to him.”

As a horrified expression flashes across her features, I remind myself to warn Malishka never to play poker, because her face is an open book. We all watch as she internally questions if we’d give her to him. Then she remembers what we’ve done to get her here, and how many times we’ve vowed we’ll never let her go, and her features harden into determined anger.

“So, what do we do now?” she asks.

We. Fuck, I love that. Not you or I, but we. Us, the four of us, our family. She’s asking how our family will deal with this. Fucking perfection.

“We’ve sent word of our shock at finding out you’re already married, and have agreed to deliver you back to your husband if he’s willing to meet us in Alaska.”

“So what...? I’m actually going to be bait now?”

“No. You and Lev will stay here. Vik and I, along with our men and a woman who will pose as you, will all go to Alaska.”

“Does he even know what I look like? What happens when he realizes it’s not me?” she asks snarkily.

“While him and his men are busy realizing you’re not there, we’ll plant a bomb on his jet and the moment he hits international waters, we blow the fucker up,” Vik tells her excitedly.

Her jaw actually drops open and she looks between the three of us, like we’re speaking a foreign language.

“Excuse me?”

“Bomb. Big bang.” Vik laughs, miming an explosion with his hands.

“A bomb? What is this? Mission impossible? That’s ridiculous,” she scoffs derisively.

“Small explosive devices are actually one of my specialties,” Vik boasts proudly.

Blinking, her mouth falls open. “So, you’ve done this before?”

He shrugs. “A plane? No. But cars, buildings, safes, containers, even a couple of boats, yes.”

Sighing dramatically, she cups her face with her hands and closes her eyes as if she’s searching for patience. After a long moment, she drops her hands and lifts her chin. “I thought you wanted to kidnap him? You said you planned to torture, maim, and then kill him slowly and painfully for what he did to Vik’s sister.”

“Dead is dead,” Vik tells her before I have a chance to speak. “Would I love to cut him apart piece by piece; dragging his death out for months? Yes. But the important thing is that he’s gone. Although blowing him into a million bits might be quick and possibly a little too painless, ultimately, if he’s dead, I’m happy.”

“Right.” She nods like she agrees, but it’s clear she’s shell shocked and trying not to show it. “One fake marriage wasn’t enough. Now I have two. Two fake husbands before I can even legally drink. Great.” Shaking her head, she sighs. “I don’t want to think about any of this. You guys do whatever you need to do and I’ll just pretend this is all just a luxury vacation. Maybe after this is all over, I’ll wake up in my bed at home, and wonder what the hell kind of nightmare this all was.”

“As soon as he’s dead, we’ll have a proper wedding. You in a white dress, us in tuxedos, the full nine yards,” Lev says softly.

“I don’t want to be married; I’ve never wanted to be married. I don’t want a husband. I don’t want babies. I just want to be a normal twenty-year-old.”

“Tough,” I snarl.

“Tough?” she repeats.

“Yes, tough. You’ll be our wife and you’ll be the mother of our babies and then we’ll all live happily ever fucking after.”

Pushing back from the table, she glares at me, then turns and walks away.

alabama

It's official, my life has become a really bad telenovela. Kidnap, murder, not one, but two fake marriages, and three too hot to be normal guys. All I need now is an identical twin sister I had no idea existed, and I'd officially be in a TV show, or a really outlandish book.

Storming away from the guys, I almost walk straight into Tanya. It's the first time I've seen her in a day or so and she does not look any more pleased to see me than she did the last time we spoke, when she told me the guys were hers.

"Whore," she hisses. "I saw you outside, putting on a show for my men, luring them away from me with your filthy whore cunt."

"Fuck you," I yell, storming past her and toward the stairs. At the last minute, I turn and head toward the TV room, throwing myself dramatically down on the couch. My head is spinning. I have so much fucked-up information whirring around inside of me and I have no idea how to process it all.

Dimi and Vik are going to leave. They're going to Alaska to blow up a plane. Orlov, my bio dad's bestie who also happens to be a psycho, rapist, and abuser, had a fake marriage certificate created to say he married me when I was fourteen. And now, not only am I stuck here with three men that I don't truly hate any more, but apparently, they have plans for a white wedding and a brood of babies.

Nope. No. No way. This is all too much. It's hard enough trying to come to terms with the fact that I don't despise the

guys who kidnapped me anymore. I should. I really, really should. But I don't. Maybe it's all the sex. Or all the orgasms.

So many orgasms.

But now when I think about them, my immediate thought isn't how can I get free of them, it's how many times will they make me come before I fall asleep, safe in their arms.

I'm still angry that they kidnapped me. I'm not so weak minded that I've forgiven them for stealing my life. But a part of me is wondering what was so great about what I left behind. Columbus, Georgia is a nice place, but it's not paradise. I was overworked, underpaid, stressed and broke. Here, I have zero responsibilities; money isn't an issue and I have three men who seem to agree that keeping me full of their cum and in a perpetual orgasm haze, is their full-time job.

All three of them believe that part of the reason they took me was to protect me from my sperm donor's evil buddies. And obviously I'm glad I'm not on my way to Russia. But would any of them have ever looked for me if Dimi, Lev, and Vik hadn't started this war by poisoning Grigoriy? They doomed me and saved me at the same time. Which I guess is a pretty accurate description of how I feel about my life right now. Doomed and saved. Drowning, but soothed by the water.

I'm conflicted. Dimi killed someone, right there in front of me, but he did it because in his own possessive, controlling way, he was protecting me. All three of them are protecting me, but if I wasn't a part of this life they've dragged me into, I wouldn't need their protection. Everything about this oddly compelling relationship I think I'm in with them, is a double edged sword.

I refuse to think about them wanting me to have their babies. That's the me in ten years dilemma. The me of right now is on birth control, and incredibly grateful for free clinics. The wedding thing is a moot point, because to my knowledge there are not many countries that have legal polygamist weddings, so marrying them all isn't something I need to consider.

"Hey," Vik says, stepping into the room.

“Oh Jesus, go away. I need some space to think.”

“You need to think about how you’re speaking to us, Baby. Much more sass and your ass is going to be paying the price,” he drawls, his tone light and amused as he threatens to spank me.

“Fuck you, Vik. This isn’t funny.”

His expression darkens and all of the humor bleeds from his face. I brace to run, the need to flee suddenly bursting to life inside of me, but I’m up and over his shoulder before I even manage to get off the couch.

Flailing, I beat at his back, kicking my legs and clawing at any exposed skin I can find, but his grip doesn’t loosen, he just strides more purposefully toward the office the three of them share.

“Dimi, Lev, office now,” he yells, his voice booming through the house and ricocheting off the walls. Turning to look into the retina scanner on the wall, the door unlocks and he strides inside, walking over to the corner furthest from the door and dumping me onto my feet.

“Nose in the corner, or so help me, Ali, I will make it so you can’t sit down for a week.”

“No,” I yell. “My body, my choice. Now get the fuck away from me,” I yell in his face.

Leaning down, he gets so close his nose is touching mine. “You get to say no to us fucking you. But you don’t get to say no to a punishment when you need one and, Baby, right now you fucking need one. But if one more nasty word comes out of your pretty mouth, I’ll wash it out with soap, then fill your ass with ginger, before I work you over with my belt.”

His anger is so palpable, it taints the air, making the oxygen in the room thicken with tension.

“Now, turn around and put your nose to the wall, now.”

Glaring at him, I turn and step into the wall.

His hand grabs the back of my hair and physically pushes me forward until my nose is pressed into the corner. Holding

me there, he kicks at the inside of my ankles, forcing me to widen my stance and arch my back, bending forward slightly to keep my balance.

I hear the door open and the air thickens further when two sets of footsteps file inside.

“Our girl needs something to bring her back into line. She’s scared and angry and pushing boundaries that I thought she understood not to cross,” Vik says. “Dimi, grab a chair. Lev, go get a leather belt from my closet.”

“No,” I cry.

“And ask Roza if she has a big ginger root in the kitchen.”

The next few minutes pass slowly, but Vik never loosens his hold, keeping me in place with his hand on the back of my head. When the door opens again, I tense.

“Easy, Baby,” Vik coos, his voice calmer now as he releases his hold on my hair. “Stay put, I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

I nod my agreement, fear making my limbs shake.

“Come here, Baby,” he calls a moment later, and I turn away from the wall and find him sitting on the same chair he used the first time he spanked me.

Reluctant feet carry me across the room, stopping in front of my usually jovial man.

“Lev, strip her,” he orders.

I don’t fight it as Lev steps forward and pulls the ties on my bikini, leaving me naked in seconds.

“Do you know what this is?” Vik asks, holding up an oddly shaped vegetable in his hand.

“Ginger, I’m guessing.”

“Yes. Tastes great in food. When carved so the flesh is exposed, it causes a nasty burning sensation rubbed against sensitive skin.”

I shudder, staring at the thing in his hand.

“I know you’re scared, Baby. We’re all a little scared right now and fear is a good thing, it helps keep you alive. But you don’t get to allow that fear to turn you against us. You don’t get to speak to us like we’re trash. Just like we don’t speak to you that way. You don’t get to throw a tantrum and run away from us. You don’t get to say no and take your body from us, just because you’re being a bitch.”

I open my mouth to argue, but he narrows his eyes and silences me.

“Now, in a moment, you’re going to put yourself over my lap and I’m going to punish your sweet ass, and it’s going to hurt. But you have a choice. You can take your spanking like a good girl, then afterward you can apologize for shutting us out and running from us by swallowing a load of each of our cum and thanking us for the gift. Or you can take your spanking with this big ginger plug in your ass, then wear it until I think you’re done, by which point you’ll be sore and sorry, both inside and out.”

“I don’t want to give you all blow jobs,” I say, eyeing the ginger cautiously.

“I didn’t say anything about sucking us off. I said you’d swallow our cum.”

“How bad will the ginger feel?” I ask.

“This once, I’ll let you try it first. Come here.” Crooking his finger, he beckons me to him and I go on shaky legs, moving the two steps until I’m between his spread legs.

“Lay over my thigh.”

Lev steps forward and helps me over Vik’s thigh until my stomach is resting on his leg and my head is dangling down.

“Deep breath in,” Vik orders as he presses something damp and cool against my ass, “and out.”

As I exhale, I feel the ginger push into me, then I wait for something to happen. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but all I feel is fullness.

“How does it feel?” Dimi asks, surprising me and reminding me that he’s here.

“Weird, but fine.”

Vik’s soft chuckle is terrifying. “So, you’re sticking with the ginger?”

“Yes.”

Without any preamble, he starts to spank me, working in a pattern up and down my butt from the fleshy part, down to the point where my ass meets my thighs.

“You need to clench and keep that plug in your ass, if it comes out, I’ll replace it with a bigger one. Lev brought me options and this was the smallest.”

Clenching my cheeks, I let out a squeak of pain when his hand lands on my butt, pushing the ginger farther into my ass. His palm slaps down onto my skin over and over and distracted by the pain of the spanking, I miss the tingly, stinging feeling until it starts to build in intensity.

“You’re doing well, Baby, half way there,” Vik tells me.

When he starts hitting me again, the pattern has changed, and instead he peppers my ass with hard slaps in a seemingly random order. The tingling, stinging seems to be growing to a hot, heavy pulse in my ass and the plug feels like it’s swollen to twice the size.

“Oh god,” I groan when his palm lands on the ginger and the heat morphs into a hot burning sensation.

“Stay still, Baby, if you move, I’ll have to start over and I don’t think you want that.”

Grabbing hold of Vik’s leg, I try to stay still but the pain of his spanks and the burn from the ginger make it impossible not to move, and I jerk and wiggle trying to get away from the unrelenting pain.

“I’m going to stand you up and Lev is going to sit back down in my place. You’re going to put your head in his lap and hold onto him while you take five with the belt.”

“No,” I whine. “Please, please, it hurts,” I sob pitifully.

“Bet you’re wishing you’d taken our cum, aren’t you? The ginger sneaks up on you, doesn’t it? I bet your poor ass is burning right now.”

Someone helps me to my feet and then positions me so my cheek is pressed against Lev’s thigh, the heat of his skin warm beneath me.

I hear the leather swishing through the air before I feel the intense agony as it hits my skin. The second and third strikes come in quick succession and I scream, tears soaking Lev’s leg.

My skin is almost numb when the fourth and final licks hit, but I know I scream out in pain, my legs giving out as I land in a heap on the floor at Lev’s feet.

Almost immediately I’m picked up and held tightly in Vik’s arms. “Shh, Baby, it’s done. You did so well, I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Now that it’s over I try to process the pain. My butt cheeks feel hot, and I know I’ll be sore, maybe even bruised. But the worst pain is from the burning, constant throb of the ginger inside of me.

“Take the ginger out, please, please, it hurts,” I sob.

“No, Baby, not yet,” he says, reaching down and tapping his finger against the ginger, moving it inside of me.

“No. Stop, stop,” I cry.

“Lev’s going to get up and then you’re going to sit down on that hard ass chair, and finish your punishment. If you squirm or try to take the pressure off your hot butt, or that ginger in your ass, you’ll just sit there longer.”

Standing up, Lev steps to the side and Vik guides me to the chair, then stands back, his arms crossed as he watches me carefully lower myself into it. The wooden seat feels awful against my poor butt, but the pressure on the ginger is horrific. A fresh round of tingling starts up, and I know it’s only a matter of time until it becomes an unrelenting burn that’s

going to make me want to stand up and yank the stupid fucking plant out of my ass.

Closing my eyes, it takes everything I have not to move in the seat, planting my feet and forcing all my anger into staying still.

“You’re finished, Baby, come here, let’s get that out of your ass,” Vik says, and I leap up from the chair and rush toward him.

Pushing his hand between my cheeks, he makes a big deal of pulling the plug out, twisting and pumping, until it finally pops free and I’m left with just the awful burn in its wake.

Lifting my chin with a finger, he stares down at me. “We know we’ve thrown a lot at you in a short space of time. But mouthing off and storming away will only ever result in you getting your ass spanked. This might not be the life you’d have chosen for yourself, but it’s the life you’re going to live. You’re going to be our wife and we’re going to enjoy putting babies in this belly. You’re ours and the sooner you learn to accept that, the easier it’s going to be on all of us. Now Lev is going to put you back in that sexy little bikini because dressing you and undressing you like a doll is his new kink.” He chuckles softly. “Then we’re all going to walk back to the den where we’re going to relax for a few hours and not think about all the fucked-up stuff that’s going to be happening in the next few weeks. Okay?”

I want to tell him to fuck off. I want to tell him I hate him and the others. I want to tell him that I’ll never consent to any of them touching me again. But I don’t say any of those things, because a weird lethargy settles over me and instead of spitting some of fury and anger that’s screaming inside of my head, I nod.

The rest of the day passes quickly. The light easiness that had grown between us is gone and in its place is a tense, forced quiet that’s exhausting.

Lev fetches me a long, black cover-up when it’s time for lunch, but I still feel self-conscious knowing my ass is red and

I wince every time I sit on it. We eat in stilted silence, then file as a group back out to the pool.

I want to be alone, but I know if I tell them that, they'll refuse. "I'm tired," I announce. "I think I'll go take a nap."

I know it's an excuse. They know it's an excuse, but it's not so much of an excuse that they can call me on it. Because I do plan to sleep, hoping that oblivion might bring me some clarity.

"Do you want some company?" Vik asks.

No. "If you want."

It's clear from his expression he wants to call me on my lie, but really, what can he even say when I've offered to have company I very clearly don't want?

"I'll come check on you in a little while. Are you still saying no, Malishka?" Dimi asks, his tone a seductive whiskey-smooth drawl.

"Yes."

His jaw tics and his expression hardens. "Sleep well, Alabama."

I don't know why I flinch at the sound of my name on his lips. He calls me Malishka nine times out of ten. I don't even know what it means, but when he started using it, I preferred the nickname over him calling me Alena. But right now, him calling me Alabama feels worse.

"Could someone wake me in a couple of hours? I'd like to take a bath," I ask formally.

"Of course," Lev says equally as politely.

All three of them watch me walk away, and the emotional distance between us seems to build with every step farther away I get. By the time I climb into the huge bed that I hated only a few days ago, tears are filling my eyes and I feel strung out and emotionally overwrought.

It's ridiculous for them to think I'll just accept that this is my new life. It's outrageous for them to tell me how my future

will look without even asking me if that's what I want. It's barbaric to allow Vik to spank me every time I argue against their controlling behavior. But if I hate them as much as I think I should, why do I despise being alone right now? Why does this bed just feel empty and cold without them in it? Why does the thought of being without them make me feel like the sun will never rise again?

Only a few days ago, I crammed myself beneath the vanity table to feel safe, and now the safest place I've ever been was pressed between the three of them while I slept in their arms.

It's been less than a week, but somehow being touched, craved, and adored by them has filled a void inside of me that I had no idea was even there. Their obsession and unyielding determination to own me is changing me and I don't know how to stop it.

I want to hate them. I wish I hated them, because hating them would be better than missing them when they're only downstairs.

I don't want to be the stupid girl who falls head first into Stockholm syndrome for the men who kidnapped her, but I think that's what's happening to me and I don't know if I should fight it, or accept the inevitability of becoming almost as obsessed with them as they are with me.

As my eyes drift shut, I fall into a dream where I chose to come here. I dream of meeting them on the street and knowing they were destined to be mine. I dream of them wooing me until I fall for them all individually and then all of them together, knowing that I'm the luckiest woman in the world to have the love of not one, but three beautiful villains.

It isn't until I wake up that reality bleeds into my fantasy. I didn't come here by choice and I didn't meet them and fall in love. But can I look past how I got here to decide if I ended up in the right place, despite the path that led to me being here?

Padding into the doorless bathroom, I wonder why the lack of privacy doesn't bother me anymore. Dimi told me there are cameras everywhere in this house, even in this bathroom. Any illusion of privacy has been stripped away from me here and

it's jarring to realize that it doesn't fluster me as much as it did just a few days ago. I guess it doesn't make sense to worry about them seeing my body when they've touched every inch of me.

Turning on the faucet, water pours out and starts to slowly fill the enormous tub. Baths were a luxury I haven't really had an opportunity to have in years. Living on the street, I washed wherever and whenever I could. Mine and Monica's apartment didn't have a tub in the tiny bathroom, and even though Darla's house had a tub while I was living there, she rarely let me use it, saying filling the tub cost too much on the utilities.

There's a cabinet full of expensive bath oils, lotions, and washes, all in a variety of feminine fragrances. In movies and books, they always talk about women having a distinctive scent, but I always bought what was on offer, regardless of what it smelled like. Opening each bottle in turn, I smell them, settling on the bottle that's described as gardenia.

I've never smelled a gardenia in real life, but if the flowers really do smell like this oil, then they must be good. Drizzling some of the oil into the stream of water, I watch the steam rise, filling the room with the delicious scent.

Stripping out of my bikini that's been on and off so many times today it's absurd, I step into the tub, sinking down into the warm water and exhaling a ragged breath. My ass is still tender, but apart from the skin being a little red, there's no real evidence of the spanking I took earlier.

Vik's belt hurt like a bitch when he was striking me with it, but the licks haven't left any welts or marks. I feel wrung out, dog tired, and mentally exhausted. I'm still trying to process all the information they've given me in a very short space of time, and honestly my mind is on overload.

Growing up as the daughter of a whore, I thought I had a pretty tight grip on my moral compass. I don't approve of the way my mom kept a roof over our heads, but it's the oldest profession in the world and she worked hard—albeit, on her back.

But I knew from a very young age that I wouldn't be following in her footsteps. I'd rather struggle to survive than ever sell myself. I thought I understood the line between good and bad, and right and wrong.

Only, a man died this morning and I don't feel as affected by it as I should be. These men confessed to murdering the man who provided the other half of my DNA and I didn't really blink at the knowledge that they were the reason he was dead. And I applauded them when they told me that Orlov will die for his sins and all the women he's hurt, including Viktor's sister.

If my moral compass was pointing as strictly north as I thought, surely, I'd be horrified and disgusted by sleeping with murderers? But I'm not horrified. I've slept like a baby, safely tucked between these dangerous, brutal men.

What does that say about me?

Even now, while I'm trying to reflect on how I'm feeling and process everything that's happened, I'm thinking about them. A part of me wishes Vik was sharing the tub with me, that Dimi was spoiling me with attentive touches and the kind of caregiving I've never experienced before, and that Lev was waiting to wrap me in a towel, then dress me in whatever he picks out for me.

How can I possibly be enjoying my captivity?

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back against the side of the tub and breathe in the sweet floral scent emanating from the water. Trying to quiet my whirring mind, I attempt to meditate, but every time I try to clear my thoughts, my villains fill my mind instead.

Rustling grabs my attention and I open my eyes just as Dimi slides his shorts down his hips revealing his rapidly hardening cock.

"I wasn't expecting you to be awake," he says, stepping free of his shorts, completely unashamed of his nakedness.

"I only woke up a few minutes ago," I admit.

Nodding, he gestures for me to slide forward, then climbs into the tub, settling into the water behind me.

“Are you feeling better?” he asks, wrapping his arms around me from behind, and pulling my back against his chest.

“I don’t know,” I confess.

“Are you angry that Viktor punished you?”

“A little, but probably not as much as I should be.”

“Why should you be angry?” he asks, sounding confused.

“Being spanked and hit with a belt while I have ginger burn from the inside out seems like something that should upset me.”

His chuckle is soft. “Perhaps to others it might be something objectionable. But not to you. I doubt you’ll admit it, but you enjoy the boundaries and consequences we’ve laid out for you. If I were to guess, I’d assume your mother wasn’t the type of parent who cared much about rules.”

It’s my turn to laugh and I shake my head. “No. Even when I was very young, I took care of her, not the other way around. She was a junkie whore, but when she remembered I was there, she was actually a surprisingly good mom. Unfortunately, she liked the oblivion of being high more than she liked living in the present. And you’re right. I don’t enjoy being in pain, but having most of my choices taken from me has been oddly freeing. It’s made this fucked-up situation a little easier for me to deal with.”

“I can see how you’d feel that way,” he says, scooping handfuls of water and letting them pour onto my chest to keep me warm. “Are you upset about the guard?”

“I don’t even know his name.”

“His name isn’t important, Malishka. Everyone in life has rules they have to abide by. For most people, that’s the law of the country they live in. This island isn’t governed by the usual laws and consequences, but that doesn’t mean it’s lawless. We set the rules here. Vik, Lev, and I are judge, jury and executioner. The guard broke the rules and the

consequences were steep.” His voice is so calm, so rational, even when he’s talking about cold blooded murder.

“Did he have a family? Will anyone come looking for him?”

“Ailing parents and a younger brother. He was on the run from the military police, but we’ll make sure that his family knows that he’s dead and provide them with a death-in-service package,” he states almost robotically.

“Does that make it okay? Letting his parents know their son is dead and sending them some money to make up for it?” I ask, my tone harsh even to my own ears.

“No,” he answers simply. “But it’s all we can do. Telling them I shot their son in the head for jerking his dick over the sight of you orgasming won’t help them. It won’t bring him back or offer them peace of mind. Letting them know he’s gone and offering them enough money so that they can retire comfortably, is more than he did for them. He stole from them and then went AWOL rather than going back to his unit in Afghanistan. I can’t say if he was a good man or not, I didn’t know him. I think I spoke to him maybe twice in the time since he came into our employment. But I won’t apologize for protecting you. I won’t apologize for coveting you, for shielding you and for putting our family’s needs and care above anyone else’s.”

As callous as his words are, I get it. And he’s right, it’s not wrong for him to want to protect me and us, because despite all the fucked-up obstacles between us, I know this man would do anything to keep me safe.

“Why don’t I hate you anymore?” I ask him almost desperately.

“Because you love me, almost as much as I love you.” His tone is hopeful.

“I don’t love you. I barely know you. But I should hate you and I yet I don’t. I don’t hate any of you. Not even Vik and he totally tricked me with that ginger bullshit.”

His chest vibrates beneath me as he chuckles softly. “I had no idea of the effect it would have, to be honest. But it was a sight to behold, watching him discipline you. I didn’t think it was something that would affect me, but I admit I enjoyed watching.”

“Next time he tries to shove ginger in my ass, I’m going to do the same to all of you.”

“Malishka, your ass is free game, mine is forbidden territory.”

“Seriously, Dimitri, help me understand. Because at the minute I’m not sure if I’m losing my mind, if you’ve drugged me to make me compliant, or if I’m drowning in Stockholm syndrome and the trauma is making you all not seem as bad as you actually are.”

“I can assure you, you’re not currently under the effect of any drugs. As to the other options, I don’t believe you’re losing your mind, although if you feel you need it, I can arrange for a therapist to work with you.”

“Why would you even suggest that?” I snap, turning as much as I can in the tub to face him. “How would I even start to explain our situation to a therapist? *Oh, Doctor, I’m worried I’m going crazy, because I happily spread my legs for the three men who kidnapped me and I miss them when I get a rare moment to spend on my own,*” I blurt sarcastically.

“You missed us? When? Today?” His eyes soften and he brushes his thumb over my jaw. “Vik offered to come nap with you, we would all have come if we’d known you wanted us there.”

“I didn’t want you there. I wanted space, but then...” I trail off, struggling to admit that I’d been lonely and a little lost when they actually allowed me the space I’d desperately needed.

“Space allows you to retreat inside of your head, instead of living in the moment with us. No more space, at least not until you truly don’t hate us.”

“I need to hate you,” I protest.

“Why?”

“Because you’ve taken everything from me.” Tears fill my eyes and I curse my overactive emotions. A year on the streets, barely surviving, and I never broke. Less than a week with these men and I’m a walking hormone, crying at the drop of a hat.

“We took your shitty job and your shitty apartment, with your shitty roommate. We took your shitty clothes and shitty cell phone. But we gave you a family, a real home. We gave you freedom and adventure and safety. You’re right, we did take everything from you, but we’ve replaced it with a thousand times more than you had, and I’m not talking about the clothes or the luxury, I’m talking about the real stuff. We gave you loyalty, love, us.”

Exhaling slowly, I try to control my emotions. “I hate you,” I choke, turning completely and pressing my lips against his.

“I love you too,” he says against my mouth, burying his fingers in my hair and taking control of the kiss.

We make out like teenagers until the water starts to cool and Dimi insists we get out and wash in the shower. He uses a washcloth to clean my skin, then washes and conditions my hair, taking care of me, just like I was craving before he joined me in the bath.

“Thank you,” I whisper when he turns off the water and holds a towel out to me.

“For what, Malishka?”

“For taking care of me.”

“Always,” he says simply.

“Is that another rule?” I laugh.

“Do you want it to be one?”

“Yes,” I confess, staring down at the chipped nail polish on my toes.

“Then it’s a rule.”

Lev is waiting for us when we step back into the bedroom, clothes laid out on the bed beside him. “Come here, Honey,” he orders softly.

When I glance at Dimi, he nods for me to go to Lev, dropping his own towel onto the floor before walking into the closet.

“I want to see you in this dress and know you’re naked beneath it,” Lev purrs, his voice seductive and smoky.

“Okay,” I agree far too easily. The nap, the dreams, and the conversation with Dimi in the bath has all come together to calm me a little. It’s time to admit, at least to myself, that I don’t hate my men. I don’t know them well, and there’s still time for fate to prove how much of an idiot I am, but I can’t hate them, even though they’ve done so many hateful things.

I’m still blocking out all thoughts of marriage and babies, but when I think about them; about us, the panic has abated a little and instead I feel a sense of anticipation. When they brought me here, they took control over my life away from me, but instead of being stifled by their rules and dominance, I’m free and that’s terrifying.

I don’t know all of the details about their past, it’s clear that they are not good men. But even bad men can be good to the people that matter to them and it’s clear that I matter to them.

I matter for possibly the very first time, and I don’t want to push that feeling away. I don’t want to push them away. As Lev slides the dress over my head, I lower my arms around his neck and lean into him, burying my face into his neck and hugging him.

It takes him a moment to curl his arms around me, but when he does, he holds me so tight, I can feel his heart beating.

“I love you,” he whispers.

I don’t say it back. I won’t until I feel it, but I squeeze him to let him know I heard.

“I can wait to hear you say it, but this is enough for now.”

When we eventually separate, he picks up a familiar wooden hairbrush, smirking as he strokes his fingers up the handle before he goes to work brushing the tangles from my wet hair. “Do you want me to dry your hair?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Is there a hair tie anywhere, I’ll just put it in a bun.”

“I’ll grab you one,” he says, pressing a kiss to my shoulder before he stands up and heads for the closet.

Dimi takes Lev’s seat behind me, lifting his hand to toy with the thin straps on the black silk slip dress I’d admired yesterday. “I like this,” he says, running his finger tip over my nipple, down my stomach and thigh to where the fabric ends. Blinking at me rakishly, he dips his fingers beneath the hem, writing his name on the bare skin on my thigh. “Is it still a, no?”

“I don’t know,” I breathe.

“Say yes, and after dinner we’ll bring you up here and the three of us will thoroughly devour you. We’ll kiss, lick, and touch every inch of you, make you come over and over, then fill you with so much of our cum, you’ll be nothing more than our sticky, ravished cum slut, every hole abused, but still eager for more. We’ll destroy every last bit of hate you feel, and replace it with us, and by the time you wake up in the morning, you won’t ever question your place here with us again. You’ll be so owned by us; you might even start to understand just how obsessed with you we really are.”

His voice is soft and low and coaxing. He’s barely touching me, just that finger writing his name, then Lev’s, then Vik’s over and over on my thigh, branding them into my skin. If I was normal, I’d shy away from the kind of depravity he just offered, but since I woke up on this island, I’ve felt anything but normal. His dirty filthy words didn’t disgust me, they excited me. I want to feel them all over me. I’ve had sex with all three of them. I’ve had one touch me while the other fucks me, but I’ve never had all three of them touch me at once.

“Will you all... will you all touch me at once?”

“We’ll all touch you and all use you at once.” His hand pushes between my thighs and I spread my legs, welcoming his touch as I nod, so he can see my consent. “One cock in here.” He pushes a finger into my pussy. “One cock in here.” He slides a finger back, finding my ass and pressing down until the tip slips past the ring of muscle. “And one cock in here.” With his other hand, he pushes two fingers into my mouth, pressing down on my tongue.

“The first time, it’ll be me in your cunt, Lev in your ass and then Vik fucking your face. After you come all over us, we’ll fill you up, then we’ll take turns using our cum slut to find our pleasure. You want that don’t you, Malishka? You want to be our precious cum slut queen? You want to be taken over and over and fucked until you’re so full of us, you can’t take any more?”

“Yes,” I gasp, the word garbled around his fingers, but clear enough for him to hear that I’m both agreeing with his words, and giving him my consent all at once.

“Perfect,” he purrs, his eyes hooded as he leans forward, pulls his fingers from my mouth, and kisses me instead.

Dinner passes in a blur of anticipation. I eat a little of everything that’s put in front of me, but I couldn’t tell you what any of it was. My mind is on edge, my body is tense and I’m excited and ready to get naked.

Unlike me, my guys are calm and relaxed, eating slowly as they torture me. “Dessert?” Lev asks, gesturing to the slice of cheesecake Roza just placed in front of me.

“No thanks.”

“Oh, don’t let it go to waste, it’s creamy and delicious.” Vik smirks, eating some off his fork then exaggeratingly licking his lips.

“I’m full,” I grit out, clenching my thighs together to stop the ache that’s been slowly intensifying, since Dimi described exactly what they’re going to do to me.

“Not yet, but you will be,” Vik says, his eyes on his plate as he salaciously consumes his dessert in the most outlandish way possible.

I’d laugh, if I wasn’t so worked up.

“Are you well, Malishka? You look a little flushed,” Dimi observes, arching an imperious brow at me.

“I am a little warm.”

“Come here, I’ll test your temperature,” he taunts, daring me to deny him.

Pushing back my chair, I rise to my feet and step toward him. Like always, I’m seated directly to his right, so he only has to slide his chair back a few inches to make space for me. I’m not sure what I’m expecting, but it’s not for him to push his hand up my dress, then fill me with two fingers.

“My my, Malishka, you are hot. Sit down,” he orders, turning me to face the table and pulling me into his lap, his hand trapped beneath me, his fingers still pushed inside of my core.

“Is she wet?” Lev asks conversationally.

“She’s dripping.”

Vik’s laugh is low and gleeful and full of amusement. “Wow, Baby, maybe you should go lie down.”

“I think that might be a very good idea. Why don’t you head on up to bed, we’ll come up and check on you in a minute.” Pushing me upright, Dimi pulls his fingers out of me, trailing the evidence of my arousal down the inside of my thigh.

My breath feels uneven as I step away from the table and rush toward the stairs. I’ve never played these types of games before, but I’m guessing they plan to drag this out and torture me by making me wait.

Stepping into the bedroom, I go straight to the bathroom, turning on the faucet and holding my wrists beneath the cold water. After a minute, I dab my cold fingers against the skin of my neck, then stop the water and dry my hands on the towel.

My stomach clenches and my sex pulses with desire. I've only experienced this kind of feeling once before. I was watching porn and got seriously turned on by the way the guy manhandled the girl as he drilled her until she was fake screaming into the camera. The sounds and the sex didn't really do anything for me, but the way he used her made my whole body come to life like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Padding barefoot back into the bedroom I glance at the closet door, wondering if I should get ready for bed or wait for Lev to get here and undress me like he seems to like so much.

Flopping back on the bed, I rub my hands over the perfectly made sheet and grimace. Until this moment I hadn't really considered Roza or maybe even Tanya coming in here to clean, make the bed, and even change the sheets.

Anger flares inside of me when I think of Tanya sniffing our dirty sheets, or stealing the guys' underwear, but it dissolves into nothingness when the door pushes open and the guys stride in.

"Look at you, wife, already laid out and waiting for us. Dimi planned to make you anticipate us for a little longer, but I couldn't wait another minute," Vik says, already unbuttoning his shirt as he strides toward me.

"That dress is too sexy on you to ruin, so go to Lev and let him take it off you," Dimi orders, his shrewd eyes raking over me and taking in every detail of just how desperate I am for them.

Getting up, I try to move gracefully as I close the distance between me and Lev, but I have no idea how to be demure, or sexy. So, I don't drag it out, or try to be something that I'm not, I just bound over to him, too excited to wait.

Gripping the hem of my dress, Lev peels it up my body, exposing me inch by inch until he drags the silk over my head, letting it flutter to a heap on the floor at our feet.

"Go get back on the bed, Honey," he says, turning me and pushing me forward with a gentle hand on the base of my spine.

Lifting one knee, then the other, I climb onto the bed and crawl into the middle, rolling over and propping myself up on my elbows.

My gaze flits between them. Vik is naked, his dick hard, precum already dripping from the head. Lev is shirtless, his hands busily unfastening his pants. Dimi is the only one still fully dressed, his shirt rolled to the elbows and exposing his toned, tattooed forearms.

Once again, I remind myself that I need to spend time actually looking at his tats to see what his two full sleeves depict, but not now. Now is all about this carnal need we have, that's peppering the very air with lust-filled pheromones.

No one has ever explicitly said that Dimi is the one in charge, but the guys look to him before they move, waiting for his nod before they descend on me as one. Strong hands touch me everywhere, stroking my skin, licking my nipples and throat and mound. It's too much and nowhere near enough all at once, and I'm on the verge of begging anyone to touch me where I really need them, when the mattress dips and Dimitri Belov, my first fake husband, joins the game.

"Hold her legs," Dimi orders, settling himself between my spread, and now restrained thighs. Dipping his head, he licks me, the full width of his flattened tongue, tasting me while my two other men hold me wide for him.

I don't know if they discussed how this was going to go before they came up here, but they move in sync. Dimi eats my pussy like it's his last meal, while Vik plays my clit, forcing my body high, then bringing me down, only to build me back up again. Lev tortures my nipples, biting and pinching and teasing me until I explode and light fills my vision and static fills my ears as I come on a cry, twitching against their hold.

"Oh, Baby, you come so fucking prettily," Vik praises.

Moving once again in perfect synchronicity, Dimi flips to his back and the others lift me, placing me over him, his cock lined up at my entrance.

“You ready, Baby? You’re going to sit on Dimi’s cock and I’m going to stretch your ass out,” Vik tells me, placing his hands on my shoulders and pushing me down onto Dimi’s huge and very hard cock.

I’m so wet, my body accepts the intrusion easily and only moments later, I’m impaled and sitting in Dimi’s lap, my pussy stretched around his impressive girth.

“Lean forward so your perfect tits are pressed against Dimi’s chest,” Lev coaxes, stroking my shoulders as he guides me forward.

The moment my cheek lands against Dimi’s hot skin, he curls his arms around me, half hugging me, half restraining me. Hands pull my ass cheeks apart a second before cold lube drips down my crease.

“Easy, Malishka,” Dimi coos when I tense. “Vik is going to stretch your tight little asshole out so Lev can get his fat cock inside of you. You want that, don’t you? To have all your holes filled?”

I nod, but my throat is so dry, I can’t speak.

“Relax,” Vik orders gruffly as he pushes the tip of his finger against the ring of muscle, maintaining the pressure until it slides inside of me. Pushing all the way in to the knuckle, he pulls it straight back out, pours more lube onto me, then does it again, twisting and pumping, spreading the cold lube into my ass.

“Jesus, Honey, your ass looks fucking perfect being finger fucked. I can’t wait to see how well it gapes when I fill it with my cock,” Lev drawls, pushing his hand between my legs and toying with my clit

The combination of Lev’s raspy seductive drawl, Dimi’s cock filling my pussy, and the sensation of Vik’s finger stretching my ass, make sparks of arousal ignite and jump around in my belly.

More lube soaks my crease and I feel the tugging pain as a second finger joins the first, pumping, twisting, and scissoring, stretching my tight channel and preparing me for Lev. I never

thought having my ass fingered would be sexy, but holy crap, it feels good.

“I’m going to come,” I croak, pushing back into Vik and forcing Dimi a little deeper.

“Oh, our little cum slut likes having her ass stretched, come for us, Baby, before Lev fills you with his cock,” Vik purrs.

Pleasure pulses through me and I moan, digging my nails into Dimi’s chest as I ride out the sensations. I’m empty for a long moment as Vik pulls his fingers free, immediately replacing them with the broad head of Lev’s dick pushing against my hole.

My ass easily gives way and he slides into me, the burn from the stretch painful in a delicious way. I struggle to breathe as his dick pushes up against Dimi’s, and the feeling of fullness becomes almost too much.

The bed dips as Vik climbs off it, disappearing into the bathroom before striding back into the room. Climbing onto the bed he positions himself with his knees on either side of Dimi’s head.

“Vik’s going to help you lift your head up, then you’re going to open your mouth and he’s going to fuck your face, while I fuck your cunt and Lev fucks your ass. We want to hear you scream, watch you think you can’t take anymore, and then we want you to squirt all over us, just like you did the first time I fucked you, Malishka. We’re going to fill all your holes with our cum and when we’re done, you’ll belong to us completely. We were never going to let you go, but after this, we’ll be bonded together, eternally tied to each other.”

My lips part, but no words come out. Lifting my chin, Vik thumbs my bottom lip, prompting me to open my mouth. The moment I do, he guides his dick between my lips, holding my head in place while he starts to fuck my face. Like the others were waiting for Vik to set the pace, Lev lifts me from Dimi’s chest, sliding his dick out of my ass as Dimi sinks deeper. When Dimi retreats, Lev pushes forward, alternating their thrusts and keeping me constantly full of cock.

My whine of pleasure is stifled by the hard cock sliding toward the back of my mouth and I gag, spluttering and bringing my hands up to push him back.

Fingers curl around my wrists, pulling them back down by my sides as Vik pulls away from my throat, only to push forward again, gagging me on his cock for a second, before retreating.

“Breathe through your nose, Baby,” Vik warns, dragging my head forward and pushing his cock all the way to the back of my throat, holding me in place until I can’t breathe. I gulp air the moment he allows me, but it’s only a momentary reprieve as he drags me onto his cock again.

Saliva drools from my mouth as he fucks my face in hard, unrelenting thrusts. Dimi and Lev fuck my pussy and my ass, changing the rhythm until I feel so full it hurts. None of them stop when I gag and moan and drool, using my body like it’s their right and I’m nothing more than a toy for their pleasure.

My orgasm builds, pressure mounting inside of me as they slam into me over and over, never pausing, never letting me catch my breath, never stopping.

My heart thuds against my chest, and all the air is sucked out of me as the pressure in my core explodes and I feel the moment I squirt. Arousal gushes out of me, liquid erupting between our bodies as the guys fuck me through it, slamming into me as they chase their own orgasms.

Lev’s body stiffens first and he thrusts deep into my ass, banding an arm around my chest to keep me in place as he groans, heat flooding my ass as he comes inside of me. Vik follows almost immediately after, holding my head down on his cock as his release coats my mouth, sliding straight down my throat.

Dimi’s teeth grit and he finds my clit with his thumb, rubbing at it furiously until I come on a scream. Not stopping, he fucks his dick into me, in short, sharp, brutal slams until he comes on a grunted, “Mine,” filling me up for the third time in less than a minute.

Ragged breaths and quiet pants are the only sounds I can hear as my body slumps, too exhausted and wrung out to stay up on my own.

The guys talk quietly, clearly planning how to untangle this human knot we're in. Dimi shuffles to the side, taking over holding me up, while Lev slides his cock from my ass, the hot rush of liquid following him.

Lifting me off Dimi's cock, Vik rolls me to my front, placing my cheek on his chest as he wedges a pillow beneath my hips, keeping my pelvis propped up and most of the cum trying to escape from inside of me.

My muscles feel like limp noodles and my ass feels sore, but I'm not in any real pain. I feel orgasm drunk and blissfully well used. My throat is sore, my skin is flushed and coated in a fine layer of sweat. My thighs, pussy, and ass feel soaked, but as my guys all curl around me, Vik beneath me, Dimi at my back, Lev beside my legs, his head resting on my butt, I enjoy the warm, lax feeling as I drift into oblivion. Safe and warm and thoroughly fucked.

vik

It's nearly four a.m. and my dick is in Ali's ass, the sound of my thrusts sloppy and wet from how much cum we've pumped into her in the last ten hours.

I feel the moment Lev comes in her pussy and I'm almost glad, because my dick is more than ready to come for the sixth time. Dimi is choking her on his cock, but she's a natural at deep throating, his massive rod pushing into her throat every time she dips down onto him.

She struggles to swallow fast enough as he pumps his release onto her waiting tongue, but he watches her drink him down before he collects the jizz that's trying to drip from her chin and pushes it back between her lips.

Like the good little cum slut that she is, she licks his fingers clean, her eyes wide and filled with so much warmth, I never even thought to dream of her looking at us this way. I thought we'd lost her this morning when Dimi shot that guard, but despite her anger, her fear, and her finally seeing who we are, she came back to us.

My entire life I fought not to become consumed with thoughts of revenge, but revenge found its way to us anyway, and soon we'll be the ones to right the wrongs our families have suffered.

Since my sister faded away, I've pictured how I'd end Pavel Orlov. How I'd rip him limb from limb. How I'd abuse him, like he abused Ivanna. But now, I just want him gone. I want him and all of his men dead, so that they'll never be a

threat to Ali. I want them obliterated from the world, and if that means I blow him up instead of dragging his death out, then so be it. Dead is dead and now that's all I need.

When she orgasms, her entire body clenches so tightly, she drags the cum out of my balls, forcing me over the edge before I even have a chance to try and stop it. Not that I would. We've fucked her so much tonight that I doubt she'll be walking without a limp for a week. Using her like this was decadent and depraved and insane, but it's almost like us sharing this physical connection has settled something in all of us.

"No more, no more," she gasps, shuddering and whimpering as both Lev and I slide out of her at the same time.

"No more," I promise. "Sleep now, Baby, we'll keep you safe."

Flopping inelegantly to the bed, she's asleep in seconds, not even twitching when Dimi slides a pillow under her, raising her hips up, just like he's done every time we've fucked her.

"What's with the pillow?" I ask.

Glancing down at her, he strokes the sweaty, tangled mess of her hair away from her face. "The day after we brought her here and I said she was dehydrated..." Pausing, he stares down at her again. "I drugged her water."

"We know," Lev snaps, rolling his eyes at me.

"Then I had the doctor come and examine her, and remove her birth control implant."

"Holy fuck." I laugh. "I stopped watching the recording when you put clothes on her. You had the doctor remove her birth control? She's going to fucking kill you."

"Dimi, that's..." Lev trails off, stumped to articulate just how fucked up what Dimi has done is.

"She is ours, is she not?" he asks, a hint of his Russian accent and phrasing sneaking into his voice.

“Yes but—” Lev starts.

“She is our wife, our future, the woman we stole away so that we could keep her for ourselves.”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing. Our wife will bear our children, we’ll breed her, fucking her over and over until she’s so full of us, even God himself couldn’t stop us from breeding her.” His eyes spark even in the dim light of the room.

“She’s only twenty,” Lev argues.

“Yes. But we’re not. It’s time for us to be parents. We found our wife; this is the next step. It’s how we keep her. It’s how we tie her to us forever,” Dimi argues.

“She’ll hate you,” I point out, but my heart is racing and my eyes dip to her flat stomach. We’ve each fucked her multiple times. She could already be pregnant; a tiny baby just starting to grow inside of her.

“She’ll forgive me the moment she holds our child in her arms. She wants a family. We’ll give her one. A big, happy family, one mom, three dads and a houseful of babies that all look like her.”

“When was her last period?” I ask, lifting my head and looking at Lev.

For a second, he looks embarrassed, then he shrugs. “I have the dates saved in my calendar.”

“Look,” I urge.

Rolling to the side, he reaches his cell from the bedside cabinet and taps at the screen. His gaze moves across the screen and I watch as he mentally calculates when she’ll be mid cycle and fertile. “I doubt she’ll get pregnant this month.”

“Start tracking her cycle,” I tell him, reaching out and laying a hand over her stomach. “No one tells her about this. Not ’til after she’s full of our baby.”

“I—” Lev starts.

“No,” Dimi hisses. “No one tells her.”

Sighing, Lev rolls toward her, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. “No one tells her.” Then reaching between her spread thighs, he collects all of the cum that is slowly leaking out of her cunt and pushes it back into her.



IT'S BEEN weeks since the first time we shared our wife, and the voracious desire we each have for her hasn't abated. She still hasn't told us she loves us, but that's okay; for now, we're content to watch her thrive on all of the attention we give her, while the three of us secretly compete to put a baby in her belly.

The sun was starting to rise by the time she finally collapsed and fell asleep this morning, her body too exhausted to take anymore. Now it's almost lunchtime, but the entire household has gotten used to us fucking 'til dawn, then sleeping 'til mid-morning. Blinking my eyes open, I immediately seek out Ali, and find her on her side next to me, her eyes closed, her hand beneath her cheek as she sleeps.

She's worn out, but I know the moment she wakes up, she'll be as desperate for us as we are for her. Smiling to myself, I lift my chin and lock eyes with Dimi's. Just like every other morning, his dick is inside of our wife, pumping her full of cum while she sleeps peacefully. His hips are barely moving, but when he notices me, he lifts his thigh a little higher, putting Ali's wet slit on display for me, his massive dick stretching her wide.

Ali's sexily rumped when she finally wakes up. Some mornings we insist she eat breakfast still coated in all the gifts we've given her during the night, and she accepts our dominance with nothing more than a pout and a wrinkle of her nose. Unlike other women we've fucked as a group before, Ali doesn't show favoritism. She naturally moves between us, sharing herself equally with each of us.

She showers with Dimi, lets Lev dress her like she's his personal doll and then flops down into my lap, not bothering with her own chair at the table, content to sit with me and take bites from my plate.

I don't know if she even realizes how perfect she is for us, but I hope so. She's only been awake for a couple of hours, but it's clear she's still tired, nuzzling her cheek against mine and yawning.

"You should take a nap, Malishka," Dimi says, holding out a hand to her.

"I'm not sure I can move," she groans, lifting her hand to reach for Dimi, then letting it flop back down to her lap dramatically.

"Would you like me to carry you to bed?" he asks, a playful smile tipping the corners of his lips.

"Are you going to nap too?"

"No, Baby, we really have to get some work done," I tell her.

"Oh."

"You can nap on the couch in our office, if you'd like?" Lev suggests.

"Is that weird? I should probably just go sleep in the bed."

"Carry her," Dimi orders, and I curl my arms around her and stand, carrying her through the house and into our office.

The only times she's been in here, have been when I've had her over my lap, her ass bared and ready to be punished. But I find that I like the idea of her wanting to nap in here, to be close to us.

Knowing she'd want to be comfortable, Lev dressed her in loose fitting linen shorts and a matching baggy button down shirt this morning. She looks adorable, but still sexy, braless, with her nipples just visible through the opaque fabric.

The couch is leather, so Dimi fetches a throw blanket, covering the cushions so she can lay down comfortably. Lowering her to her feet, she sways, and I grab her hips to steady her.

"Go to Lev, Malishka," Dimi says.

Blinking at him, her brow furrows adorably, like a confused little kitten, but she dutifully steps to Lev, who makes quick work of stripping her clothes off her, leaving her once again naked. Stepping forward, Dimi lifts her up, then takes her to the couch, laying her down before bending her knees and kneeling between them.

“No, Dimi, I’m too sore,” she croaks.

“Shh, Malishka, I’m not going to fuck you, I just need to fill you up, all you need to do is lay there and accept my gift, okay?”

Nodding, her eyes spark with arousal.

Pulling down his pants, Dimi frees his cock and fists it, sliding his hand up and down the length. Biting her lip, she watches him work himself over, her eyes darting between his cock and his face as he jerks roughly, racing to get to the finish line.

His brows pull together and I know he’s close. I expect him to come on her tits, or order her to open her mouth, but instead, he pushes the head of his cock inside of her and comes with a grunt. Lifting her hips, he slides a wedge shaped pillow that I have never seen before beneath her ass and pulls out.

She looks obscene, her knees pulled up, her legs spread wide, her pussy still puffy and swollen from all the cock she took last night, and once again creamy with Dimi’s cum. My dick hardens so fucking quickly, my head spins and I stumble toward her, lowering my pants as I motion for Dimi to move so I can take his place.

Wrapping my fingers around my dick, I squeeze, staring intently at the cream pied pussy only inches from me as I jerk my dick in long, fast strokes. It barely takes me two minutes until I feel the telltale tingling in my balls, and just like Dimi, I push the head of my cock into her entrance and blow my load, adding my cum to my brother’s.

I don’t remember moving, but the next time I blink, Lev has taken my place, the head of his cock weeping as the first

spurt of cum hits her mound before he pushes into her, releasing the rest of his jizz into her sloppy cunt.

The moment Lev pulls out, Dimi steps forward, finding her clit with his finger and rubbing her until she comes on a garbled cry, her body tensing, her stomach clenching as her pussy grips our cum and pulls it further into her.

As the grip of her orgasm wanes, he presses a kiss on the end of her nose. “The perfect little cum slut, accepting all of our gifts. Go to sleep, Malishka.”

Her expression is glazed, but she opens her mouth to speak.

Covering her lips with a finger, Dimi smirks. “All our cum is for you now. I couldn’t wait a moment longer and I know I’ll enjoy my work when I can look over and watch you sleeping naked across the room, knowing you’re sated and full of us.”

“You’re such a kinky little psycho.” She giggles.

His brow furrows before he smiles and shrugs. “Your kinky little psycho.”

Laughing, she shuffles to her side, never questioning the cushion beneath her as she closes her eyes.

It takes me an hour to be able to drag my eyes away from the sight of my woman sleeping naked across the room. She’s so exhausted she fell asleep almost immediately and Dimi covered her with a blanket, but it’s proved almost impossible to concentrate when she’s so close.

Eventually, work drags my attention from her and I check my emails, replying where I need to, then I work on finalizing the plans for the bomb for Orlov’s plane. I like explosives. As a kid I liked to set things on fire, but from the first time I accidentally lit a fire too close to a drum full of gas, I’ve been obsessed with the excitement of making things go boom.

There’s an art to the precision of making an explosion do exactly what you need it to do. I can blow the hinges off a safe, or bring down an entire building. I once designed an explosive device that could be swallowed, and detonated while

it was inside someone. After I submitted the patent, I was offered millions to sell it, but that one's all mine, at least for the moment.

I'm not a genius, by any stretch of the imagination, but I am a bit of a rain man when it comes to the mechanics of bombs. It's an oddly specific skill set that, for most people, wouldn't be much use, but for me, it's helped me kill people hundreds of times.

People assume that contract killing is all sniper rifles and drive-by shootings, but for the most part, the best hired assassins are the ones who can make death seem like a random accident. And I'm one of the best.

If death were art, then just call me Picasso.

Ali stirs while I'm absorbed with my research. Our contacts in Russia sent us all the details for the jets at Orlov's disposal and I designed a device that can be calibrated in seconds to fit whichever jet he arrives in.

"What are you doing?" she asks, the blanket wrapped around her as she wanders behind me, her eyes looking at the three screens I have turned on in front of me.

"Designing a bomb," I say with a smirk.

Without pause, she leans down and kisses me, her lips soft and pliant. "I know I should be more upset about the whole death and destruction vibe you have going on right now, but I start to hate you all again when I think about you killing people, so I'm going to pretend I didn't see how excited you are to blow up a plane full of people." Turning, she looks to my brother. "Lev, will you come with me to get food?"

Laughing softly, I watch Lev jump out of his seat and rush to her, so happy that she's asking him for something that he'd probably get her anything she wanted.

"Sure, Honey, what are you hungry for?" he asks.

"Is there any chance Roza has peanut butter and jelly hidden behind all that fancy ass food?"

“Let’s go and see.” Taking her hand, he leads her from the room, still only wearing the blanket.

“She seems happy, doesn’t she?” I ask Dimi.

“She does. She was made for us, and she’s starting to understand that. I’m sure she’ll slip from time to time, but we just need to keep reminding her why she’s so perfect. Why do we love her so much.”

alabama

It's been a month since I woke up on their couch with the three of them standing over me, telling me I was theirs. Thirty days doesn't seem like that long, but it turns out it's long enough to change everything.

I'm not so deeply entrenched in my Stockholm syndrome that I don't have days where I hate them, this island, and that they forced this life on me. But for the most part I'm happy in my captivity, which has been hard for me to admit.

Without work, bills, and starvation to fight every day, I've found it difficult to settle into this new life as the indulged pet that they treat me as. The three of them still work, although I don't really know what they do. When I ask, they give me a technical explanation about stocks, shares, and the exchange which I don't understand. But the gist is, that they're so rich it's almost impossible for them not to make money without putting any real effort into it.

For the most part, my life consists of eating, swimming and being fucked so often that I feel like I have their cum dripping out of me constantly, no matter how much I shower. Three men is a lot. Three men with their libidos is basically a full time job.

Sometimes I wonder if I really am just as much of a whore as my mom was. She accepted cash, drugs, and sometimes gift cards in exchange for spreading her legs. My men feed me, clothe me, pamper me, then use me as their cosseted cum slut. So, what makes me different to her?

The situation with Orlov is hanging over our heads like a black cloud threatening to ruin the blue skied paradise we live in. Dimi has been going back and forth with Orlov's lawyers, negotiating my return to my second fake husband. The Russians are demanding that I be put on a commercial flight back to Russia, while Dimi insists the only way he'll hand me over is in person in Anchorage, which is a few hours from where they believe we live.

Footage from the home the guys actually do own in Alaska has shown masked, armed men trying to infiltrate the property twice already and Lev has had to leave a fake trail, showing Dimi and I traveling across the world, just to stop them from realizing we're not there.

Both Dimi and the staff have been calling me Mrs. Belova since I got here, but I hadn't realized that, that's not even my real fake married name. Nope, apparently on my first fake wedding certificate I'm Mrs. Dimitri Galen, the wife of a billionaire, sixth generation Russian immigrant. Dimitri Galen, my fake husband, owns a law firm in New York, but we fake live in Alaska where he's semi-retired and enjoying the spoils of his successful business with me, his fake wife at his side.

At this point I have so many fake names, fake husbands, and fake lives that I'm finding it almost impossible to keep up with all the lies. But the guys don't seem fazed, they just keep assuring me that the island we live on is untraceable and even if it was found, there's nothing that links it to them or any of their forged or real identities. But the longer this goes on, the more tense I become.

My men started their plan to destroy the Bratva long before they kidnapped me and brought me here. For over a year, they've been gradually destroying each string in the Mafia's bow, and now that the Bratva's operations are being challenged on every front by men stronger, richer, and more powerful than them, they're scrambling for money to hold up the foundation that the guys have been slowly rotting out from beneath them.

Apparently, my sperm donor trusted his closest advisers about as much as he trusted the rest of his family; who he

murdered one by one to prevent them from ever trying to usurp him. So now that he's dead, Orlov, who was his second in command, doesn't know how to get access to the offshore assets he thinks will save his newly acquired empire.

What he doesn't know is that the guys discovered and drained all of the hidden account before Grigoriy Polakoff even breathed his last breath. There's no mountain of money, no floating door to save him. There's only death, he just doesn't know it yet.

"He's agreed," Dimi announces as he strides out to the pool where I'm lounging and Lev is swimming.

"Who's agreed?" I ask.

"Orlov. He's agreed to the meet."

"Really?" I gasp.

"When?" Lev asks, pulling himself out of the pool, his muscles flexing as he strains.

"In three days."

"Three days, that's okay, everything is set, I'll start letting people know," Vik says, leaning down to kiss me before he strides purposefully away.

"Your drinks," Tanya says, holding a tray with four glasses on.

"Thanks," Dimi says dismissively.

Her eyes find me and a faint scowl twists her expression. One moment she's placing a glass on the table beside me, the next, the entire tray of red berry smoothies is all over me, the cold, thick substance coating me from the neck down.

"What the hell?" Lev yells, grabbing a towel to clean me up.

"I'm so sorry," Tanya cries. "The tray was wet and the glasses slid, let me help you."

"No," I snap. "I'm fine. I'll go shower this off." I swear she smirks as she collects the spilled glasses and scurries away.

I haven't told the guys about how much of a hostile bitch Tanya has become. She never says anything directly to me, but I see the way she glares and scowls at me. More than once, I've found my things missing or destroyed, but whenever the guys question what's happened, it all seems like an accident or coincidence.

Tanya isn't the first bitchy woman I've dealt with, but she is the first one I've been forced to share an island with. I've been considering talking to the guys and suggesting they let her leave, but even though she hates me being here and clearly wants to snag my men for her own, this is her home. I'm also a little worried that if I tell them she's bugging me, they'll kill her, and I don't need anyone else's death on my conscience.

I'm hoping she'll eventually get over this grudge she has against me, in the meantime, she's not violent, and there's been no hints she plans to steal my skin and wear it to pretend to be me, so ignoring her makes the most sense.

I'm barely in the bathroom before Lev appears. He takes his duty as my personal dresser and undresser seriously, and my bikini is on the floor in the blink of an eye. Lev follows me into the shower, reaching for the soap and squeezing it into his hand. Carefully, he washes all the remnants of the sticky drink from me, then shampoos and conditions my hair, making sure all of the chlorine is washed away.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Glad this thing with Orlov is almost over, but..." I trail off.

"Are you worried?"

"Yes," I admit.

"Orlov can't get to you here, that's why we brought you to our island, to keep you safe," he says, cupping my cheeks and leaning down to press a soft, reassuring kiss to my wet lips.

"But Dimi and Vik aren't going to be here, they're going to be in Alaska," I say, hearing the panic in my voice. I haven't told them yet, it's been hard enough to accept it myself, but I've fallen hard for my three captors. They never gave me a

choice, their constant affection, attention, and obsession has forced my hate to change and grow.

I'm never alone, never given an ounce of space, and I like it. I like the family we've become and the thought of watching them leave me, knowing they're going to be in danger, is terrifying.

"They'll be fine. They know what they're doing and, in a week, this will all be over," Lev says, speaking low and soft.

"Why can't you send someone else? Surely it doesn't need to be them?"

"Honey, you're killing me here," he says, pulling me into his huge wide chest and holding me tight.

Tears drip from my eyes and I don't fight it. Coming here has unlocked the emotional mess I'd locked deep inside of me and now I cry at everything. I even cry at the stupid British baking show we're still binge watching.

"Hey, hey, it's going to be fine, they'll only be gone for a couple of days, then they'll come home to us."

Home. Is this place home? The answer comes easily. *Yes, it is.* This is my home, these men are my family, and them not coming back to me, isn't an option.

A day later, I watch them load their luggage into the small boat that will take them to the bigger boat which will take them to the airport. According to Dimi it'll take them two days to get to Alaska, even though they could fly direct in about seventeen hours.

"Stay," I whisper against Dimi's ear.

"Malishka," he groans, pulling me in for a hug, his hand dropping to squeeze my ass and making a fresh pool of cum drip out of me. We've spent all night indulging in each other and my body is sore, sated, and thoroughly well used, but it's not enough, and I cling to him before throwing myself at Vik and holding him just as tight.

"Just pay someone to shoot him or something," I plead, a growing sense of dread pooling in my stomach.

“Baby, you know it has to be us. Lev will look after you and we’ll be home before you even have a chance to miss us,” Vik tells me, lifting my chin and kissing me quickly, before passing me back to Dimi and striding down the small jetty to climb into the boat.

“Be good, Malishka. I love you,” Dimi coos into my lips, kissing me hard, then pulling away and leaving without looking back.

Four armed guards, including Greyson, the head of the guys’ security team climb in beside my men and the boat immediately pulls away, speeding off into the open sea and away from us.

“Come on, Honey, shall we take a swim? Or we could watch a movie or just hang out by the pool?”

“I have a really bad feeling about this, Lev. I really wish I hated you all right now, because then I wouldn’t care. But I don’t hate you, I just really hate them leaving,” I blurt, my words a garbled mess as tears fall from my eyes.

Scooping me up off the ground, I wrap my arms around his neck, and my legs around his waist, clinging to him like a monkey. “Ice cream, that baklava you love so much, and a duvet day. How’s that sound?”

“Our bed is swimming in jizz,” I say petulantly.

“I asked Roza to change the sheets before we came down to see the guys off, it’ll be clean, fresh, and jizz free by the time we get back.” Lev laughs.

“I don’t hate you,” I cry into his shoulder.

“I don’t hate you either, Honey.”

The first day is agony. They warned us we probably wouldn’t hear from them because they’d be in the air for most of it, but I still obsessively check Lev’s cell phone for any new messages.

Vik calls the moment they land in the US, but only long enough to tell us they got there safe and that Orlov’s flight was due at eleven thirty a.m. the next day.

I wake up the next morning to the sound of pounding on the bedroom door. In the weeks I've been here, no one has ever come to our room, ever.

Lev jumps up and out of bed, leaving me to pull the sheets to my neck to cover how very naked I am.

"What?" he barks, unlocking the door and yanking it open.

"Sir, there's been several light aircraft sightings traversing the island and a boat was spotted, sitting just beyond the reef," a crisp male voice reports.

"Fuck. Okay, give me two minutes, I'll meet you at command," Lev says, shutting the door and marching into the closet. He comes out, fully dressed a few minutes later. "Honey, get some clothes on, I need you to be ready, just in case this is a threat."

"Okay." I nod.

Kissing me briefly, he leaves, locking the door behind him. Climbing out of bed I head for the closet. Anxiety hits me the moment I step inside. The last time I picked my own clothes was when I took things from the guys' closet rather than wearing any of the flowery shit Lev had picked for me.

Now the rails are full of beautiful clothes, but my hands still freeze inches away from touching anything. "This is ridiculous," I say aloud, grabbing the linen shorts and shirt set that I liked so much the first time he dressed me in them, that Lev ordered me two more sets in different colors.

Most of the time, I don't bother with underwear, but today I grab panties and a bra, and slip them on before getting dressed. My heart starts to race when I realize I have no idea if I have any shoes here. I've only worn sandals once since I came to the island, the rest of the time I've been barefoot.

Searching the closet, I curse. There're no shoes anywhere on display, but there must be some somewhere. How the fuck can I not know if I have shoes? Even homeless, I always had two pairs of shoes, just in case one got stolen. I've gotten soft since my men kidnapped me, so soft that I don't even have an escape plan for when things go south.

I've been so consumed with how isolated we are here, that the thought of someone coming here to hurt us never even crossed my mind. Opening each cupboard and drawer, I eventually find a rotating shoe cupboard filled full of delicate sandals and heels. At the back is a pair of rubber slides and I grab them, shoving my feet in them, before heading downstairs.

I don't know where command is, so I go in search of Roza, hoping she'll be able to point me in the right direction. Instead of Roza, I find Tanya in the dining room, her eyes wide and filled with fear.

"Come on. Mr. Lev sent me to find you, there are people trying to get onto the island, they have guns. We have to get to the evacuation point," she pants, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the kitchen.

"Where is he? I need to find him," I argue, trying to pull my arm free of her hold.

"He's fighting, they're on the beach, he told me to get you to safety. He made me promise. Come on, Mama and Papa are waiting, there's a boat there for us. Protocol is to get into open water, then wait for a signal to either head to the next island, or come home. But we have to go, please."

Eyeing the doors that lead out to the beach, I consider making a run for it. But her grip tightens.

"Please, Mrs. Belova, please, I promised him I'll get you to safety." Tears fill her eyes as she pleads with me.

"Okay, let's go," I agree, letting her pull me out of the kitchen door and across the manicured lawns.

I've never been to this side of the house before, we mainly wander along the beach if we're going out for a walk, but the grass is short and easy to run across as we head down a path that curls into the trees that surround the front of the grounds.

"This way?" I ask.

"Yes, there's a shed that's actually a hidden boathouse, Mama and Papa are there already, Papa can drive the boat until we get the signal."

We run along the path for five minutes until the trees separate and we're standing in front of a wooden shed, the doors open enough for me to see a small boat inside. There's no real shore or beach here, the water just butts up to the land and the shed is sheltered by trees that obscure it on both sides. Ahead of us is ocean as far as the eye can see, the perfect hidden spot to escape from if you need to.

Shooing me forward, she pushes me into the dimly lit shed and onto the floating walkway around the boat.

I know something is wrong the moment I step inside, but Tanya follows me in, closing the door behind her and blocking the exit.

"Get into the boat, Alabama," she spits, all traces of fear gone and replaced with angry disdain.

"No." I shake my head.

Reaching her hand behind her, she pulls a handgun from the back of her jeans and holds it out, pointing at me. "Don't make me shoot you. You're worthless to me dead," she snarls, waving the gun and gesturing for me to step into the deck of the boat.

Glancing at the water, I question if I can jump in and swim to safety, but although I can now at least swim enough to save me from drowning in calm water, the sea is rough around the island. I'd sink in minutes if I had to survive in the angry waves that hit a few hundred feet from shore.

"Get in the fucking boat," she screams.

Keeping my eyes on hers, I side step onto the boat. By the time I realize we're not the only people in here, it's already too late.

CHAPTER 32

dimitri

Being stuck in the air with no way of contacting Lev and Alabama is a fucking nightmare. We got word late last night from Russia that the jet we were supposed to meet was full of Bratva foot soldiers sent to kill us, and that Orlov had been seen boarding another plane toward South America.

We left some of our men behind to take care of the plane. We're still going to blow it up, unfortunately it just won't have the man we planned to destroy on it. Turning, I look at Vik, watching as he continues to hit redial on his cell, frantically trying to get in touch with Lev.

Someone has blocked the cell signal to the island, and we can't speak to them or warn them that they might be at risk. That island has been our safe haven for years and the thought of it being found, or my brother and our wife being in danger in the one place in the world we promised her she'd be safe, makes me feel sick.

We've been flying all night, not bothering to hide our journey, so panicked and desperate to get back to our family that we've ignored all of our usual safety measures. We're an hour from landing in Brazil when my cell lets out an ear piercing shriek.

"What the hell is that?" Vik asks, looking up from his cell for the first time in hours.

"It's Alabama's tracker," I choke out.

"What the fuck does that mean? Is she okay?"

“I set up an alert to tell me if she left the perimeter of the island.”

“She’s not on the island anymore?” His eyes are wide and filled with more fear than I’ve ever seen in them before.

I shake my head. “No, she’s not.”

“Where is she?” he demands.

Turning my cell, I show him the app, the flashing dot signaling her location and moving out to the middle of the ocean.

Pandemonium strikes when the beach is suddenly full of armed men with mini oxygen tanks clenched in their mouths. Pulling my gun out, I aim and fire, killing the first man and immediately moving to the next. I kill three men before the rest even have time to lift their guns.

The problem with Bratva soldiers is that they may be good mercenaries, but they don't have the skill set of our team of ex-military guards.

The gun fight is relatively short and bloody. Two of our team get hit with stray bullets but neither have serious injuries, while the invading frog team are all dead. The planes flying overhead must have been a distraction while the soldiers came ashore, but I still have two of the guards head to higher ground, ready to take down the planes if they come near again.

The earpiece in my ear confirms that no more soldiers have been spotted, although a small boat was seen a few miles off shore. For now, one small boat shouldn't pose too much of a threat, not in comparison to the twenty armed soldiers invading from the fucking ocean.

Slapping Greyson's second, Diego, on the back, I turn and head toward the house. I should have sent Ali to the safe room before I left, but we haven't even told her it exists because we thought this place was impenetrable.

The house is quiet when I enter, and I eventually find Roza, Tanya, and Alexander all carrying their emergency

backpacks, and waiting at the evacuation point with a guard I recognize but whose name I don't know.

“Where's Alabama?” I demand.

“We thought she was with you,” Tanya says, her voice shaky.

“What?” I roar, turning and sprinting upstairs, rushing through each room, shouting her name as I search for her.

She's not here. The house is empty and I have no idea where she'd go if she was looking for a place to hide. Remembering the tracker we haven't had any reason to use, I pull out my cell and open the app, but my cell flashes no signal and the app can't update.

Frantic, I run back to the security command offices, bursting into the building, my chest heaving with exertion.

“Satellite phone,” I demand, searching out Diego in the room full of people. “Is your cell working? Is anyone's cell working?”

The room fills with noise as the men pull out their cell phones, then shake their heads.

“No signal, sir. Here,” he says, handing me one of the cache of satellite phones we keep charged and ready. My hands shake as I dial Dimi's number and he answers on the first ring.

“Tell me you're with her,” he demands.

“No. We were attacked, diversion planes overhead to hide the twenty soldiers swimming in with underwater fucking assault rifles.”

“Where is she?” he growls.

“She's gone. I left her in the bedroom. I didn't know,” I ramble, my heart beating so hard I can't breathe. “The cell signal is down; I can't use the tracker.”

“She's in the middle of the ocean about thirty miles out. Did she run?” he demands.

“I don't know,” I admit.

“We’re about to land in Rio, we have a helicopter on standby. Get in a fucking boat and catch up to her. If she’s run, tie her up and take her home.”

“What if she hasn’t run?”

“Then we’ll rip whoever tried to take her from us apart strip by fucking strip.”

alabama

My head bangs against the floor of the boat as we bounce through the angry ocean waves. After Tanya forced me onto the deck, someone jabbed a needle into my neck then dumped me on the floor.

I can see, hear, and think, but I can't move or speak. My limbs are completely paralyzed, frozen lumps of rock that I can't even feel, let alone move.

"What will you do with her?" Tanya had asked the guy.

"My long lost wife and I will be returning to Russia so she can give me access to my money. Once I have it, I'll strap her legs to the sides of a bed, and let my guards use her until she bleeds to death," he'd said, laughing coldly.

"My money?" Tanya asked shakily.

"Here." He'd thrown her a thick envelope and without even looking back at me, she'd turned and ran, leaving me at the mercy of who I'm presuming is Pavel Orlov.

Ignoring me, he'd stepped over my prone body, moving to the boat's controls and starting the engine. Checking his watch, he'd waited until the sound of gunfire filled the air, then he'd pushed a lever and the boat had surged forward, the front lifting out of the water as we zoomed away from the boat house and out to sea.

Now twenty minutes later, while he concentrates on bouncing through the waves, I take the time to look at him. His hair is mostly gray with darker streaks, hinting that he was probably dark haired when he was younger. His face is drawn,

deep frown lines etched into his skin, giving him a permanently scowling downturned expression.

He's wearing a black suit with a white shirt, and his shoes are shiny, like they've been polished until you can see your face in the leather. It's odd attire for a tropical island, but maybe the Bratva has a dress code?

If I wasn't drugged, paralyzed, and being kidnapped once again, I doubt I'd be particularly scared of him, but then looks can be deceiving. I bet if he were to smile every now and then, he might even look like a nice old man. But there's nothing nice about Pavel Orlov.

If I could move, I could fight, I could give myself a chance at survival. Instead, I'm on the floor, stolen again, only this time I have a life that's worth fighting for. I have a home and a family and three men who love me, who I love. I can't give up. This drug will wear off sooner or later and when it does, I'm going to kill him. I'm going to murder this man and I won't feel even an ounce of guilt for it.

vik

Popping out the clip, I check my gun for the tenth time since we boarded this helicopter. Unlike me, Dimi is stock still, his expression hard and shuttered. He's shut down, but I've seen him this way before. Despite appearances, he's at his best when he's this empty shell, blocking out his emotions and working on pure anger-fueled instincts.

"She didn't run," I say again.

He doesn't say a word, or even glance in my direction, so I say it again. "She didn't run. Someone took her. They came onto our island; our home, and they took our woman. Whoever it was is going to die."

Dimi has his cell held out in front of him, the tracking app active, the dot indicating Ali's location flashing and moving steadily. They've only covered about fifty miles since the app alerted us that Ali had left the island, so whatever kind of boat she's on, it can only be small, a fast speedboat, or a fishing boat.

Right now, they're still heading out into open water, so they must be planning to meet with a larger boat, rather than head to the next closest island. The pilot of the helicopter is moving fast, his GPS connected to the tracking app, so we're following their route, and should see them in the next few minutes.

Sliding to the edge of the seat, I open the door, holding on to the handle as I look down, hoping to see a boat or

something in the water below. When we fly over a huge yacht, anchored up, I know this is where the boat Ali's on is headed.

"Look," I say, pointing out the yacht.

Dimi nods, his face hard, but I swear some of the stone cracks. There's no way Ali could have arranged to meet a super yacht out in the middle of the ocean. She's had no access to any communication with the outside world since we brought her home. No cell, no computer, not even a landline she could try to access help with. We even disabled the browser on the TVs just in case she figured out how to access her email and call for help.

Telling the pilot to fly past the yacht, so we don't arouse any suspicion, we turn back toward the island and keep searching.

CHAPTER 36

lev

We led Alabama to believe that escaping the island was impossible, but of course that wasn't strictly true. Part of the reason that we've stayed by her side is to ensure she never had a chance to explore. I'm sure given an opportunity; she'd have found the hangar full of light aircraft and the small harbor full of camouflaged boats we keep just in case we need them.

When we first moved to the island, Dimi bought himself a fast as fuck power boat. He used it a handful of times before he got bored of almost killing himself every time he took it out and it's been sitting here ever since.

I'm more than glad he decided to buy the fucking thing when I'm clear of the reef and opening the throttle up, pushing it to over a hundred miles an hour in a few seconds. The engine sounds like a plane taking off, but I swear I hear Diego say a prayer as we fly through the water. Activating the GPS system on the boat, I sync it with the tracker under Alabama's skin and turn toward her, pushing the boat in her direction.

This boat might be the fastest we own, but behind me is an army of very angry fucking soldiers, pissed that their principal, the person every single one of them was tasked to protect above all others, was taken from under our noses while we were distracted by amateurs in rubber suits.

It's been forty-five minutes since the attack on the beach, twenty minutes since we left the dock and started chasing, but so far there's been no sight of her and I know time is running out. It'll be much harder to find her if she gets into a bigger, faster boat, or worse an airplane or helicopter.

I spot the small speedboat on the horizon, almost at the same time that I see the helicopter coming in from the east.

“There,” I shout, pointing to the smaller vessel. Grabbing the sat phone, I dial Dimi. “That better be you above her, else we have a fucking problem.”

“It’s us. Now how are we doing this?”

CHAPTER 37

alabama

I heard the sound of something, but the slapping of the boat hitting the waves as Orlov pushes the engine to its limits drowns it out until it's almost overhead. It's high in the sky, but I see it, a helicopter.

More sound and then a boat flies past us, going so fast I barely glimpse it.

"Fuck," Orlov curses, throwing the boat to the right and causing me to roll across the floor, hitting the side and then bouncing back as we straighten again.

The loud boat zooms past again, and a wall of water is left in its wake as it goes out of view.

Orlov spins the boat again, sending me sprawling as he tries and fails to outmaneuver the boat that's chasing us.

My heart swells with hope that it's my guys. If I could speak, I'd be screaming their names, calling for them to help me, but my voice is as paralyzed as my body, heavy and stolen by the drugs he injected into me.

The fast boat corrals Orlov, cutting his attempt to flee off at every turn until we're forced to stop. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," Orlov screams. "You stupid fucking cunt, this is all your fault," he cries, grabbing me by the hair and hauling my immobile body upward.

"I'll kill her," he yells, almost dropping my dead weight to the floor as he waves a gun around erratically.

“Let her go and we’ll kill you quickly,” I hear Lev shout and then I see him. He’s standing on the front of a boat, his eyes frantically searching me for injury, his brow furrowing when he notices my limbs hanging, unmoving.

“You can’t kill me.” He cackles, shaking me like a rag doll. “I’m the Pakhan, I’m the ruler. I’m the fucking king.”

“No, you were the king’s lapdog. The impotent little puppy he fed scraps to while he feasted. You’re nothing, Orlov. Look how easily we destroyed your little empire, we barely worked up a sweat,” Dimi says, his voice steely and cold.

Orlov whirls around, dragging me with him, his gun waving manically while he tries to decide who the biggest threat is.

I don’t know how they got here, but both Dimi and Vik are on the other end of the boat, water dripping from them, their expressions furious and intense, arms raised, guns pointing straight at us.

Before I know what’s happening, I’m airborne. Flying through the air and hitting the water like a stone. Without the use of my arms and legs, I sink, water filling my mouth and nose as I start to drown, unable to even try and save myself.

Keeping my eyes open the silence wraps me up, cocooning me and protecting me as I prepare to die. I feel more than see when one of my men dives in after me, strong arms wrapping around me and pulling us both toward the surface.

My lungs are burning when my head breaches the surface, sweet oxygen battling to push the water out as I cough and splutter, willing my tongue back to life so I could spit out the disgusting taste of the saltwater.

I hear the gunshot as I’m passed to another set of hands and dragged onto another boat, my heart racing, and fear pulsing through my numb nerve endings.

“Malishka, talk to me. Alabama, tell me you’re okay. Please, please. You have to be okay. What the fuck did he do to you?” Dimi screams, his body coming over me, his face

only inches from mine, his hands shaking as he reaches down and cups my face.

“What’s wrong with her. What the fuck is wrong with her?”

“He drugged her,” I hear someone shout. “It’s a paralytic, she’s conscious, but she can’t move.”

“That fucking bastard,” Dimi screams before focusing back on me again. “It’s going to be okay, Malishka. You’ll be okay, it’s going to be okay. Blink if you can understand me.”

It takes so much effort, but I force my eyes to close, then open again.

Tears spill from his eyes. “Thank fuck. Oh, thank fuck. Malishka, I thought I’d lost you. I can’t lose you; we can’t lose you.”

I force out another blink just as Lev and Vik appear above me. Vik is covered in red blood, his chest heaving, and I want to demand to know if he’s okay, if he’s hurt. If Orlov is dead, or if he escaped, but all I can do is stare, right into the eyes of the three men I love.

epilogue

I don't know if I pass out, or fall asleep, but the next time I open my eyes, I'm in our big bed, surrounded by my men.

"Hey, Honey," Lev says.

Opening my mouth, I brace myself for my voice to still be gone, but instead I croak out. "Hey."

"Oh, thank fuck," he says, cupping my face as he hugs me carefully. "We were so worried. I'm so fucking sorry. We promised you were safe and you were taken right from the island, right under my nose."

Lev's frantic apology wakes the others and I find myself in the center of a four-way hug, my big scary men all reduced to apologetic teddy bears in this moment.

"Orlov?" I ask.

"Dead," Vik says, decisively.

"After he dropped you into the water, Dimi dived in after you and Vik shot him, he didn't stand a chance." Lev smiles.

"He's gone?" I ask, needing to hear it again.

"I shot him in the head, then cut his heart out with my knife," Vik tells me coldly.

"Dead." I half laugh, half croak.

"Dead," Dimi agrees.

"Here, Honey," Lev says, holding a cup with a straw to my lips.

Cool, refreshing water fills my mouth, coating my throat as I swallow and I exhale happily.

“The doctor said that there shouldn’t be any side effects from the drug he used, although you may feel groggy for a couple of days, because we’re not sure how much he injected you with.”

“Tanya,” I hiss.

“Tanya?” Vik asks, confusion clear on his face. “Tanya’s fine, her and her parents were waiting at the evacuation point, they never got anywhere near the danger.”

“She took me to him. She said...” Coughing, I clear my throat. “She said Lev told her to take me to the boat shed through the trees, then she pulled a gun and forced me onto the boat. Orlov came up behind me and stabbed that needle into my neck.”

“She what?” Dimi’s growl is so low it’s almost animalistic.

“He gave her money, an envelope full, and she walked away and left me there, knowing he planned to use me then dispose of me.”

Pulling his cell from his pocket, Lev dials a number, then lifts it to his ear. “Detain Tanya, Roza, and Alexander. I want them out of the house, separate cells.”

It’s the first time I’ve seen a glimpse of how equally lethal my usually softly spoken man is, and I shudder, but it’s not fear, it’s an odd mix of lust and appreciation.

“I love you,” I blurt, looking to Lev, then Vik, then finally Dimi. “I love you all and I know I shouldn’t, and I know it’s wrong after everything you’ve done. But I can’t help it. I love you all so fucking much.”

“I love you too, Alabama. I have since the moment I first saw you,” Lev says, cupping the back of my head and pressing a soft, sweet kiss against my lips, that leaves me wanting more.

“Ali, Baby, you know I love you. I’m a crazy motherfucker, but I’m yours for the rest of our fucking lives.”

Vik cups both of my cheeks, sliding his tongue between my lips, teasing me and taunting me until I kiss him back.

I'm breathless when he releases me and my gaze slides to Dimi. "I love you, Dimitri," I tell him, knowing that he needs the words, probably more than the others.

"I didn't know I was capable of loving anything, until you. I'll never give you up. I'll never let you leave us. I'll follow you to the very depths of hell and drag you back to us. Love barely feels like enough, but I love you too, Malishka."

His kiss is pure possession and ownership. He doesn't give like Lev, or coax like Vik. He takes and I eagerly submit. These three men took everything from me, but they gave me so much more. They're not good men, and nothing about the love we share is normal, but who gives a fuck? They stole me, then won me, and our happily ever after is the prize. Me and my three beautiful villains.

The End... sort of.

Ten Minutes later

"SERIOUSLY?" I cry, squeezing Lev's cock just a little too tightly.

"The doctor said a week of bed rest and no strenuous exercise." Vik laughs.

"We're in a bed," I purr, seductively.

"Behave, Malishka," Dimi warns.

"You don't like it when I behave."

"You need to take care of yourself and the baby," Dimi says.

Blinking, I freeze. "What baby?" I ask slowly.

"Yeah." Vik chuckles, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Dimi has a few things to tell you."

The end for real this time....

Unless you want more.

I do.

If you agree, then let me know ;)

acknowledgments

My very first reverse harem!!!! I've wanted to write a why choose novel for years, but it just never fit in with my schedule and so it never happened until now!

I wrote this book in thirty-five days and it's a whopping 109,000 words, but the moment I started writing, this story fell out and honestly, I'm obsessed with it.

The ending of this book leaves an awful lot of questions unanswered and some plots hanging wide open. The reason for this is because, honestly, this group has so much more story to tell and I wanted to carry on writing. Instead, I decided to give them a happy ending but leave the opportunity to write more if you guys love this unconventional family as much as I do.

A few thank you's...

The lovely May Sage, thank you for wanting me to be a part of this set, I loved being a part of filthy elites and I'm so excited for this new set to come out.

Sarah Stanley, thank you for being just as filthy and fucked up as I am and telling me where the depravity line I shouldn't cross is. I love you for always being on this journey with me.

Bekah, thank you so much for helping make sure the Russian was accurate in this book, I really appreciate your help.

As I'm writing this, the cover for this book hasn't been made, but I know Kirsty at the Pretty Little Design Company is going to knock it out of the park and I can't wait to see it.

Ellie my awesome proofreader and savior on this one, you are fabulous, your work is always flawless, I love working with you, and hopefully long may it continue.

Finally, to all the readers who'll love this book and those who read it, because they wanted to see just how dirty my

mind is. I see you; I appreciate you and I couldn't do this without you.

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Editor – Lynn Schwartz

Iris Hughes glared at the dead end in front of her.

“What in the actual *fuck*?” she whispered in disbelief, diverting her glare down to the satnav—or *GPS* as they called it here—on her dashboard.

“Please continue straight ahead for another 1.2 kilometers,” the robotic voice unhelpfully informed her. Ugh, why hadn’t she taken the time to switch to miles before starting her journey? She’d completely forgotten that South Africa used the metric system. But aside from that, she had more immediate problems.

“Straight ahead? There *is* no straight ahead.” Iris cast a strained look at the overgrown forest around her—the sun had set ten minutes ago—it was rapidly getting dark and the trees were starting to loom threateningly. She couldn’t afford to get lost, not at this time of day, on an unfamiliar road, in a foreign country.

“*Shitshitshit*,” she muttered, reaching for her mobile, hoping the phone’s GPS would be more forthcoming than the one in the car.

She peered at the screen, alarmed to note that the battery was in the red. Not great. Since the charging cable was somewhere in her luggage in the car’s boot.

“Genius move, Iris,” she groaned. When she’d picked the car up at the airport hours and hours and *hours* ago, she’d considered going through her bags to try and find the damned cable, but in the end had decided that getting on the road faster

would be best. It now looked like that decision had come back to bite her in the bum. Her phone hadn't been charged since before she'd boarded her flight some twenty-something hours ago. She'd used it only sparingly on the cramped, eons-long flight over, but despite her valiant attempts to save it, the battery—at only five percent—was on its last gasp.

Praying that it wouldn't die on her, she hastily put the address into the search bar, and it immediately calibrated a different route to the car's satnav.

“Bastard,” she growled at the car. It looked like she'd have to backtrack and take a turn she'd passed about half a mile back.

Still swearing underneath her breath, she put the car in reverse. There wasn't enough room to turn around on this narrow, overgrown road, which meant she'd have to drive in reverse until she came to the turnoff. Thankfully, the car had a rearview camera and she periodically checked the image and the mirrors as she drove. The camera lens was foggy and didn't provide her with a clear view of the road, and so it came as no surprise when one of the back tires hit something unseen and the car rocked alarmingly.

“Damn it,” she muttered, swerving slightly to avoid the front wheel hitting the same obstacle. The car was “limping”—for lack of a better word—along now, telling Iris that the affected tire must have sustained serious damage.

She braked and peered onto the gravel track in front of the car, looking for whatever had caused the problem. She winced when she spotted what looked like a tree branch just off to the side of the road. *Ugh*, it must have fallen shortly after she'd already passed this spot on her way to that blasted dead end because it definitely hadn't been there before.

It was frighteningly windy outside—the strong gusts buffeted her tiny rental car even while she stood there pondering the wisdom of getting out and checking the tire. She couldn't very well continue driving without assessing the damage, but the thought of getting out into the darkness that had enveloped her surroundings in such a short time was more

than a little daunting. If one branch had fallen, surely there was a danger of more dropping. It couldn't possibly be safe out there. Iris had researched the Knysna area in the Western Cape of South Africa on her flight over from London and knew that the area was populated by wild cats, caracals, leopards—and most fearsome of all—honey badgers.

What if there was a honey badger out there looking to fuck some shit up? She couldn't risk it.

She put her foot back on the accelerator and inched along slowly, trying to ignore the flapping, grinding sound coming from the left rear wheel.

Crap, the car was starting to wobble badly. Iris braked again and this time switched the car off, before dropping her forehead and thumping it softly on the padded steering wheel.

She was going to have to get out and check.

“Dear God, please don't let me be eaten by a wild animal, thank you, amen.” She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door, only to have it rudely snatched out of her grasp by the violent wind.

This was going to suck.

The wind tore at her clothes, snatched her breath from her lungs, and extended icy, intrusive fingers into any gaps between her clothing and skin.

It was ice cold. This was South Africa; shouldn't it be warm or something? Why was it so damned cold? She felt cheated and indignant about this shitty weather. Were all those pretty pictures she'd seen of Cape Town during her quick online research of the area a total lie? So far, she wasn't at all impressed with anything about the place. Nothing but gray skies, overcrowded roads, and stormy oceans.

Oh, and really rude, impatient drivers.

She could get all of that back home.

She glared down at the completely flat rear tire balefully and screamed in frustration. Annoyingly, the sound was torn away by the wind.

Jesus, had her biological father ever had to work this hard on any of his assignments? Because this felt like piling on.

She knew the car had a spare. It had been drilled into her by her dad—the one who'd raised her—to always check for that when renting a car, but she doubted she'd be able to get the tire changed in this crazy wind. Her best option was to walk while she still had enough battery power on her phone to follow the GPS.

She checked the map again... it looked like a ten-to-fifteen-minute walk. Probably closer to half an hour in this weather, lugging her small carry-on bag that at least contained a pair of clean undies. She could call a tow truck or mechanic in the morning and get the rest of her stuff then too. For now, it would be best to get to the house and shelter.

Provided the GPS was right this time. And her phone didn't die. And she didn't tumble off a cliff in this blackness—because putting on her phone's flashlight when the battery was this low was not an option.

God, maybe she should just stay in the car, dig out her cable, charge her phone, and call for help in the morning. Surely that would be the best option?

But it had only just gone six p.m. and the sun wouldn't rise until just before eight in the morning, and she was not keen on staying out here for fourteen hours. Also—she checked her phone—yeah, there was no mobile service out here. Which meant she'd have to trek to Trystan Abbott's place before calling for a tow truck anyway. Might as well bite the bullet and do it now. Better than spending an uncomfortable night in the car.

“This is so dumb,” she told herself as she got her carry-on wheeie suitcase out of the boot. “This is how people get murdered. Or eaten by animals. Or abducted by aliens. Or attacked by sharks, or zombies, or frikking vampires.”

Still, she was going to do this. She had to do this—it was the shittier of the two options available to her, but the most logical one.

She zipped up the puffer jacket she'd bought at the airport after discovering how cold it was, and put one resolute foot in front of the other as she continued to backtrack until she came to the turn she hadn't even noticed earlier.

A reckless five-second switch to her phone's flashlight told Iris that the road was lined with tall skeletal trees whose bare branches entangled many meters above her to form a brittle canopy above the road. The branches squeaked and scraped against each other in the strong wind, which was now blowing straight at her. The occasional gunshot-loud *crack* warned her that more branches were likely breaking and falling, making this foolhardy course of action even more treacherous.

One bright spot, the GPS didn't seem to indicate any cliffs in the surrounding area, but that didn't preclude deep ditches and holes, of course.

And now that the thought had crossed her mind, she kept imagining herself plunging into one with every step she took.

Thankfully, the howling of the wind was loud enough to drown out any potential howling from animals, which meant it was easier to put the threat of death by animal mauling and predation from her mind.

Sometimes she cursed her over-active imagination.

In fact, it was the absolute worst thing for her to have. She was trying to be a journalist over here, not an author of gruesome horrors.

She could use this in her feature. Set the scene...

It was there—among the dead trees, stormy seas, and wild animals—that I finally tracked down the elusive Trystan Abbott. The legendary actor hiding in a remote cottage in the wilds of—

What was that?

She stopped dead in her tracks and canted her head to the side as she tried to ignore the wind and listen for the sound she thought she'd heard beneath the cacophonous wind.

A growl. She was sure of it—a low, menacing growl that—

There it was again.

Oh God, she glanced down at her phone. According to the map, the house was straight ahead, just fifty meters away. She couldn't see it. But it had to be there. It just had to.

She picked up the pace, but felt almost certain she was being stalked. She was practically running by now and when the trees abruptly ended and the gravel road changed to paving beneath her feet, she let out a grateful cry at first sight of the huge, creepy house, with its unlit windows, and dropped her case as she darted through a small garden toward what looked like a back door.

She pounded frantically at the door, but the lights remained dark.

She hammered on the door again.

“Open up. Please. Open the door!”

She heard the growl again, louder, closer. She gulped in terror and switched her phone to flashlight mode and swung around. *There!* By the fence. Eyes, illuminated by the light. She kept the flashlight focused in that direction, striving for a better look, when the phone finally died on her, plunging her into absolute darkness with a creature that looked about waist high to her five-foot-four-inch height.

She mewled in terror and plastered her back to the door, her left hand reaching for the doorknob, hoping that someone who lived this far from the rest of humanity would keep his doors unlocked. But the doorknob didn't turn and the door wouldn't budge.

Iris closed her eyes and asked for forgiveness for all her sins. She hoped her parents would understand what had driven her to come all this way. Hoped they wouldn't be too disappointed in her... chasing a man, a story, a dream she wasn't even sure was her own.

She was only twenty-six. She still had so much she wanted to do, so much to see, so much to—

The door swung inward behind her back and Iris, weak-kneed and terrified plummeted backward into the void.

She hit the floor—arse first—*hard* and sat there for a moment trying to get her bearings. It was still dark and something huge stood above her, and for a second's blind panic she was sure it was the creature, until she recognized the two tall, solid structures straddled on either side of her waist as legs.

Long denim-clad legs.

“*Oh, thank you, Jesus,*” she breathed the reverent prayer as she smiled up at the man standing above her. She couldn't *quite* see his face or expression in the dim light, but knew it had to be Trystan Abbott.

“Not quite.” The curt voice was at odds with what she'd been expecting, and she blinked up at him.

“What?”

“Not quite Jesus,” he elaborated. “Probably the exact opposite.”

Huh?

“Mr. Abbott?” She pushed clumsily to her feet, a little put out when he didn't offer to help her up. For that matter, had he *stepped aside* when she'd lost her balance at the door? It had all been quite confusing in the moment, but now that the panic was receding she was almost certain he had. When he could easily have caught her.

He answered her question with two of his own. “Who the fuck are you? And what are you doing here?”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze—able to see much better now that her eyes had adjusted to the gloom—and couldn't stop her mouth from dropping open in shock. She stared, aware that the astonishment on her face had to be insultingly apparent to this hulking man in front of her.

“M-Mr. Abbott?” Her voice trailed off uncertainly and she continued to stare, looking for anything familiar in this man's

face. This couldn't possibly be the same man who'd been voted Sexiest Man in the Universe three years in a row.

That Trystan Abbott had the kind of classic leading-man good looks that harkened back to an era when Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn had lit up the silver screen with their charisma and incomparable allure.

This guy—looking much older than his thirty-one years—had a long, unkempt beard and shaggy hair just brushing his big, broad shoulders and—while appearing clean enough—neither looked like they'd seen a comb in weeks. His lips were pressed into a thin, bloodless line, and his eyes—those familiar, famous molten silver eyes, the only things remotely resembling the man she was here to speak with—were narrowed into an intimidating glare. None of the magnetism and charm Trystan Abbott was famed for was evident in that frosty gaze, and a shudder of unease crept down Iris's spine. She'd had fond imaginings of witty discourse over cozy cups of coffee or tea. Free-flowing conversation, punctuated by the easy chatter and frequent laughter that had characterized all of the man's previous interviews.

"Who are you?" he asked again, impatience rippling along the edges of the question.

"M-my name is Iris Hughes." She fumbled around in her jacket pockets, hoping to magically produce a business card, but all she could find was used, crumpled up tissues, the receipt for the jacket, and a crisp pink South African banknote with a lion and cub printed on one side and a benevolently smiling Nelson Mandela on the other.

She stared blindly down at the useless bounty in her hands, wondering what her next move should be.

Don't be silly, Iris, she scolded herself. Just tell him why you're here.

That was easier said than done when one of the most famous men in the world was looming above her with that formidable glower marring his brow and narrowing his eyes. Her tongue and brain both seemed to have deserted her—not

awesome when she'd hoped to dazzle him with her professionalism.

“Your, *uh*, that is, Mr. Quinn said he'd cleared this with you? The interview? I'm here for the interview?” God, why did everything she say have to sound like a nervous question.

The chill that shuddered down her spine had little to do with the weather and everything to do with the added layer of frost that instantly transformed his silvery gaze into ice.

“Fuck off,” he instructed with a snarl. “You're not welcome here.”

He stepped back and moved to shut the door. Iris panicked and reacted without thinking, wedging her foot in the door before he could close it. She muffled her pained yelp when he slammed the damned heavy door on her trained foot.

His glower got even darker when he grasped what she'd done and he—thankfully—eased the door back, removing the pressure. It had been an idiotic move and she had no one but herself to blame for her throbbing foot. But she refused to remove it, knowing that he would have no qualms about closing the door in her face.

“I have nowhere to go,” she told him before he could say another word. Her words were rushed, desperate. “You have to let me in.”

“I don't have to do a goddamned thing. *You*, on the other hand, need to remove your grubby self from my damned back porch.”

“No, you don't understand. I can't leave. My car has a flat.”

“That sounds like a you problem.”

“Mr. Abbott... Look, your manager, Hunter Quinn, told me where to find you. It's my understanding that he'd arranged for me to stay here for the next three weeks. He said you were fine with that.”

The sound torn from his chest *could* conceivably have been considered a laugh, if Iris hadn't—like the rest of the

world—been very familiar with Trystan Abbott’s infectious chuckle. Instead, the noise he produced sounded menacing and feral and she flinched in reaction.

“I won’t tell you again,” he warned. “Fuck off, or I’ll physically toss you out on your ass.”

His words made her pause as she wondered if this hulking man was capable of physical violence. She took an involuntary step back and he slammed the door in her face, the wood coming within an inch of her nose.

She gasped in outrage and—as she cast a quick glance around at her dark, blustery surroundings—no small amount of fear.

She thumped at the door with the side of her fist.

“You can’t leave me out here! Open up, please. Call Mr. Quinn... he’ll clear this up.”

The door remained firmly shut. She tried the handle.

Locked.

She redoubled her efforts, knocking and kicking at the wooden door in fear and frustration.

She heard a low, ominous growl from much too close behind her, and it reminded her that she was not alone out here and she screamed, the sound high-pitched and bloodcurdling.

The door was immediately snatched open again and she sagged in relief.

“Please, I think there’s a wolf or wild animal out here. Let me in.”

He peered into the darkness over her shoulder and refocused on her face with a sinister little sneer.

“Well, try not to let it eat you! You might give it indigestion.”

“You can’t leave me out here to face whatever that is,” she said in horror. “It’s illegal.”

“So’s trespassing, but that doesn’t seem to bother you.”

“You invited me to come.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Well, your manager did. He speaks on your behalf, right? I never...” Her voice trailed off on a helpless whimper. “Oh God, please just let me in. I’m sure it’s a wolf. He’s been watching me from the treeline.”

“For fuck’s sake, just piss off back to where you came from.” His accent was mostly Americanized, but—despite her distraction and distress—Iris could still pick up an Aussie twang beneath that meticulously cultivated Hollywood drawl.

“We’re in the middle of nowhere. My car is half a mile away. My phone is dead. I have nowhere to go and no way to get there. Just let me stay the night. If you really want me to leave I’ll make a plan in the morning.”

He laughed again, the same awful sound as before.

“Yeah right, and let you snoop around my house tonight? I don’t think so.”

“At least let me charge my phone, I can call an Uber or something.”

“Again... these are not my problems. You got yourself here, you can get yourself the hell out of here too. I don’t care how you do it.”

“Without a GPS, I’ll get lost. I could fall off a cliff. Die. That wild animal could maim or kill me.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure the people who give a fuck about you will eventually send out a search party to find your corpse in the woods.”

“That’s not remotely funny.”

“I look like I’m kidding?” he asked without expression.

He looked as serious as a heart attack and that terrified her. He could quite conceivably leave her out here to fend for herself.

What a nightmare.

Strengthening her resolve, Iris allowed her shoulders to drop and in a quick move taught to her by her younger brother, fainted to the left and—when he reacted by instinctively moving in that direction—ducked under his arm and into the kitchen. Once safely inside, she immediately darted behind the kitchen counter in an effort to put a barrier between them.

His back stiffened and he clenched his fists before turning to face her, murder in his eyes.

“Just one night. I’ll sleep on the floor. I promise not to make a sound. Just call Mr. Quinn, he’ll clear this up.”

“You’re trespassing and if you don’t get out of my house right fucking now I *will* have you arrested.”

“Oh, please do,” she invited with an insouciance she didn’t feel. Truthfully, the thought of being arrested and locked into a small space made her hair stand on end. But she wouldn’t let *him* see that. “At least then I’d have a ride out of here and a place to sleep tonight.”

He stared at her for an interminable moment and nodded decisively. He dragged his phone out of his front jeans pocket and swiped at the screen before he tapped a few times and then lifted the device to his ear.

“Although,” she said, and his arm halted halfway up to his ear. “If you *do* call the police and someone recognizes you, how long before your private and cozy little hidey-hole is inundated by the public and press?”

“What the hell do you call this, if not an invasion of my privacy?”

“I’m one person, here to conduct an interview on your and Mr. Quinn’s terms. You have all the control. You lose that the second you lose your anonymity.”

His lips tightened and she felt a little thrill of victory when his thumb viciously jabbed at the *call end* button. He shoved the phone back in his pocket and nodded.

“Fine... follow me.”

Go, me! Iris's inner voice cheered, as she meekly followed the big man out of the dark kitchen. He led her down a long, poorly lit hallway, into a darkened room, toward a closed door. Once there, he stood aside and held out a hand inviting her to open the door.

"You can stay there."

"Thank you so much, I promise I won't be a bother," she said, her giddy relief evident in her voice. "In the morning, perhaps you'd be willing to revisit the idea of an interview, especially after you have a look at my correspondence with Mr. Quinn, which will clear up this misunderstanding."

She pulled the door inward, still earnestly speaking to him over her shoulder as she walked through it. "And if you agree to..."

She stopped talking as she registered the cold air on her skin. A hand on her back shoved her roughly all the way through the door. It took her brain a second to absorb what was happening and, by the time she understood that she was outside again, the door had been shut and the lock engaged.

She appeared to have been led through a side door into a dark garden. She took a second to get her bearings—she had to be on the side of the house somewhere. She wasn't entirely sure how to get out of this space. There seemed to be a high hedge surrounding the patch of grass and trees, but there was no shelter from the elements. She'd been better off on the back porch, which had some cover and a swinging love seat.

But that... that *creature* was there. And Iris wasn't sure she wanted to venture back there again. There had to be another way into the house. Returning to the car without even the meager light of her phone was not an option, and she wasn't entirely confident of how to get back to the vehicle anyway. It was sleep outside in the cold and wind and, possibly, rain, with a wild animal on the loose, or do some actual breaking and entering.

Trystan Abbott had changed his mind about calling the police earlier, after she'd mentioned the possible loss of privacy if he did so. His reaction had revealed more to her than

he'd likely intended to. He didn't want anyone to know he was here. And he wouldn't call the police because of that.

Which meant he wasn't likely to have her arrested for making her way back inside. And if she was wrong about that, then Iris only hoped that the police would be more reasonable than the elusive celebrity. They'd likely believe her story once she provided them with the correspondence between her and Hunter Quinn. It was irrefutable evidence of her right to be here.

Iris thumped at the door in frustration.

“At least turn on the outdoor lights!” she yelled, more irritated than scared right now.

Seriously, what a dick. To think, she'd once been a fan of this arrogant asshole. Not anymore. How excited she'd been when Hunter Quinn had agreed to allow her exclusive access to his most prized client. What an idiot she'd been.

She hadn't once stopped to wonder why *her*? An unseasoned journalist with zero bylines to her name. He'd taken one look at her, listened to her eagerly espouse her admiration of Trystan Abbott's phenomenal talent, and had leaned back with a sharklike smile and said that she was the exact type of writer he needed to do this in-depth piece.

Naturally, Iris had leaped at the opportunity. What a feather in her cap. Now she suspected that he'd chosen her because he thought she was easily manipulated. After all, an obvious fangirl like her would never have a bad word to say about his problematic client.

But that was before Iris had realized what a surly, uncommunicative hermit Trystan Abbott had become. Now she was intrigued to find out what had happened to cause this change in him. Unless ... she tilted her head, brain working overtime as she thought about it, had he always been this way? Had that handsome, genial, joking man been the facade behind which this antisocial grouch had been hiding all along?

She thumped at the door in frustration.

“Come *on*. Turn the lights on. *Please!*” she demanded again, but it remained pitch black. She hovered uncertainly, not sure which way to turn or where to go.

This was terrible and Iris literally had no clue what to do next. Oh, how she wished she were back home, having dinner at her parents’ house, fighting over the last roast potato with her brother. She would happily listen to her dad champion the benefits of running the business with him if it meant no longer being in this place.

The wind gusted around her, tearing at her clothes and hair, stealing the breath from her lips. She hugged herself in a futile attempt to trap the warmth and stamped her feet as she tried to think.

It was hard to concentrate when she was terrified. She kept looking back at the door, hoping he’d be standing there with a *hah, gotcha!* grin on his face, but as the minutes ticked by she resigned herself to the fact that this was not going to happen.

In fact, she wouldn’t be surprised if he’d dismissed all thought of her from his brain and gone to bed.

“You can’t stand out here all night, Iris,” she berated herself. “Just move. In any direction. Anything is better than this.”

She took a step forward and her foot immediately sank into something icy and wet.

“*Fuck, shit! Fuck!*” She lifted her foot and shook it. Her trainer had offered absolutely no protection from the water and her foot was completely soaked. Her toes had gone instantly numb from the cold. Probably a good thing, since it meant she no longer felt the pain after having it slammed in a door. God, this was just what she needed.

She took a couple of steps backward, away from whatever the hell body of water lay in front of her, and once again stood there indecisively.

She heard a sound to her left and her head swung in that direction, but all she could see was the dark, high outline of the hedge against the slightly lighter sky. The sound came

again, rustling in that hedge, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up straight.

“Go away,” she whispered. Then raised her voice and tried again. The thready, quavering sound that emerged from her throat was embarrassing, but at least it could be heard over the wind. “Go *away!*”

There was a soft, chuffing, animalistic sound in response and she backed up slowly as a dark shape separated itself from the hedge and prowled toward her.

“Get back,” she implored, taking another step backward, but this time her wet trainer skidded against something slick on the paving and she lost her balance, and fell .

She impacted the hard ground with a pained *oof* and the massive dark silhouette saw its opportunity and surged toward her with a whining growl.

This is it, she lamented to herself, terrified as she lifted her arms to her face to protect her head from harm. She curled into a ball, hoping to make herself as small a target as possible. *This is how I die.*

Once again Iris’s thoughts swirled to her family, her parents who had sacrificed so much for her and her brother. Her brother, who liked to act like a tough, independent guy but who called her every Sunday, *just to talk*. This would destroy them.

She mustered up enough resentment and anger to consider Trystan Abbott’s role in her downfall and she cursed him with every fiber of her being, but she refused to allow her last thought to be of that horrible man, and instead held the image of her family bright in her mind.

The massive *thing* stood above her, four paws straddling her body and Iris braced herself for unimaginable pain. She would have screamed if she’d had the breath for it, but she had none.

She would go out with not even a whimper.

two

Iris felt hot, foul breath wash over her face, immediately followed by something warm and wet on her cheek.

Blood?

It turned out she had some breath left after all because she released it in a high-pitched scream. The creature above her stilled for a second before lowering its head again and this time the warm wetness stroked up from her open mouth to her forehead.

“Oh. Oh... ew, no... stop that!” Iris cried, her terror instantly turning to disgust as she realized that instead of being mauled, she was being licked to death. So gross. She pushed at the large shaggy head of what she now recognized as a massive dog and turned her face away from his tongue and wet nose. Ugh, she was almost certain he’d licked her gums while she’d been screaming.

How disgusting.

“Get away, Rover,” she commanded, feeling foolish for having thought he was a wolf. *Were* there even wolves in South Africa? The dog’s entire body was vibrating with the force of his tail wagging and he was still trying his best to lick every available surface of her skin. “No. Sit. Down!”

The last two commands yielded immediate results as the dog stepped away and, as far as she could tell in the darkness, sat obediently, before lowering himself into a down position.

“You’re a good dog,” she said automatically, and—now that her eyes were adjusting to the gloom—she could see the happy swipe of his tail at the obviously recognizable compliment. Iris sat up and reached for the gigantic floof, scratching the wiry fur around his perky ears, and moving her hand further down to discover a collar. “Do you belong to that horrible man in there? Does he just leave you out here at night? That doesn’t seem right.”

She felt around the front of the collar, looking for a tag of some sort, not that she’d be able to read it in the dark but...

Aah, there it was. A flat disk that Iris hoped was microchipped and tuned into an electronic pet door.

Fido over here was massive. Probably taller than Iris if he was to stand on his hind legs. If there was a pet entrance, it would be large enough for her to fit through.

“Where’s your doggy door, boy? Can you show me? Can you take me inside?”

The full moon broke through the clouds to reveal an endearing fuzzy face, with a lolling tongue. The pooch tilted his head at the sound of her voice, his ears pricking attentively. He was a lanky, scruffy looking gray boy, with shaggy hair, and lively golden eyes.

“Come on, boy, let’s go home,” Iris invited again, and the dog continued to stare at her quizzically.

“Uh...” Iris wracked her brain, trying to figure out what would make him go inside. “Ball?”

He jumped up, turned in a circle—immediately getting her hopes up—but, after one rotation, sat down to stare at her again.

“Right. Okay. What about food? Are you hungry?” His head cocked comically at the last word, and he whined and shifted excitedly from paw to paw. “Yes, you’re hungry, aren’t you? I am too. Let’s go and get some food!”

He nuzzled her hand with his big wet nose and then sat back with an expectant stare.

“Oh. No. I don’t have the food out here. But we can get some inside, can’t we?”

More staring.

“Come on, show me how you get into the house.”

This pup just wasn’t getting it. He gave Iris’s hand a sympathetic lick and she groaned in frustration. She scratched his head and wondered what to do next.

The moon disappeared again, leaving everything pitch black. The wind died down abruptly and, after a brief lull, the skies opened up.

Iris yelped as the icy deluge instantly drenched her. The dog got up and shook himself vigorously, adding some dog-scented moisture to Iris’s already soaked clothing. She sensed him moving away and Iris panicked, not wanting to lose her way into the house.

“Stay, boy,” she implored. “Come here.”

To her eternal gratitude she felt his big, furry body bump against her thigh reassuringly. He really was massive. She slid her hand up his narrow back toward his neck and lightly gripped his ruff. She didn’t want to take hold of his collar in case he considered it a prompt to stay.

“Let’s go.”

His muscles tensed and he started walking.

“I’m putting all my faith in you right now, boy,” she told him. “You could be leading me further into the woods only to abandon me there. Please don’t do that. Don’t be an asshole like your owner. Be a better boy than him. Be the goodest boy ever.”

The dog continued to amble along lazily, seemingly unperturbed by the heavy rain. Finally, after what felt like an endless amount of walking, they rounded the huge dark house and the ground started to slope downward...

Oh God, was she going to wind up over the side of a cliff after all?

But no, the stony ground beneath her feet gave way to gravel and then paving. And just ahead of them, she could see light creeping out from beneath a shroud of darkness, possibly a garage door?

The dog trotted toward the left and to Iris's relief a little door slid open as they approached, and the meter-by-half-meter square was more than big enough for her to crawl through. She stopped the dog, by tightening her hold on his ruff and when the mutt obediently came to a halt, Iris undid the collar and crouched to crawl through the opening. She remained close to the door so that the dog could walk through it as well. Once they were both safely inside, she refastened the collar around the dog's neck. After blinking a few times to adjust to the brightness in the garage, she gawked at the fleet of cars standing like silent metallic sentinels in neat rows within the brightly lit space.

Gleaming, sporty cars that had to be worth millions upon millions of pounds. She gaped, awed by the staggering display of wealth and found herself wondering why no one had known about Trystan Abbott's little bolt-hole in South Africa. Or even about his obsession with sports cars. It seemed like something that would have been revealed before in the many articles about the man. And yet, Iris hadn't found a single reference to either.

Curious.

She shrugged it off for the moment. She had much weightier matters to consider right now. Staying out of sight for one thing. She wasn't going to chance being kicked out into the cold again. Something told her that if he tossed her out a second time, she would not find her way back inside again. And God knew, she wouldn't survive the night out in the elements. Well, maybe she would, but it would be unpleasant and she'd likely develop bronchial pneumonia, or something equally nasty, as a consequence.

"What next, boy? I should probably find something dry to wear... Do you think your master is asleep yet?" The dog looked up at her with a quizzical tilt of his head and a thought

occurred to Iris. “What’s your name? It must be on your tag, right?”

She reached for the collar again and checked the round silver tag.

Luna.

“Oh, you’re a girl. Sorry, sweetheart. You’re so big, I naturally assumed you were a lad. Terribly gender normative of me, I know. Luna, such a pretty name for a very pretty, good girl.”

The dog’s tail lazily swept the polished concrete floor.

“How long should I stay down here before your master heads off to bed, do you think?”

The dog yawned expansively, displaying a daunting array of sharp white teeth. Iris gulped, grateful that Luna had proven to be such a darling, despite her terrifying first impression.

“And your dickhead of a master must have *known* I was referring to you, yet he chose to leave me out there completely petrified and expecting the absolute worse. That must have given him a nice little laugh.”

Although, she couldn’t quite imagine the bearded, hulking, formidably unsmiling man she’d encountered earlier finding anything amusing.

She wandered around the garage, inspecting the cars, and trying not to think about how very cold she was. She daredn’t touch any of the vehicles for fear of setting off alarms, and she held her hands tightly clasped behind her back as she leaned over the bonnet of a metallic green Aston Martin DB12. She wouldn’t have known what it was if her brother hadn’t been salivating over a magazine spread of this exact car a few months ago.

The personalized number plate on the front was puzzling. It read MILESH5-WP. A quick glance around at the other cars confirmed that they all had the same registration plates, with only the numbers differing. They ranged from MILESH1 to MILESH8, with one car—a bright red Mini Cooper—tagged as CHARIH1-WP.

How odd.

It niggled at something in her memory banks, but the more she worried at it the more elusive it became. She shoved it aside for now, hoping it would come to her later when she was a bit more relaxed. Although, right now, she wondered if she'd ever feel relaxed again. And warm. She doubted very much that she'd ever be warm again.

Luna got up and shook herself before ambling toward the single flight of stairs leading up to an open door. It was dark beyond that door, and Iris wondered if she should follow the dog. Surely Trystan Abbott wouldn't be lurking around in a dark room, so it should be relatively safe up there.

An involuntary shiver wracked her body and sent her teeth chattering. And warmer... it'll hopefully be warmer up there.

The dog was halfway up the stairs before Iris decided to follow her. It was ice cold down here, probably because it was underground. If she avoided any well-lit areas, she could well find a room to hole up in tonight and figure out what to do in the morning.

Right now, she was exhausted, frozen to the bone, as well as mentally and emotionally fried. She just needed a few hours to recharge her battery before facing the monster that was Trystan Abbott again.

She snuck up the stairs as stealthily as possible, wincing whenever one of the wooden steps creaked beneath her tread.

When she tentatively poked her head around the door at the top of the stairs, it was to find the darkened kitchen that he'd hastily shepherded her through earlier. At least it was somewhat familiar territory. Slurping sounds coming from the corner closest to the back door told her that Luna was enjoying a drink of water. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, which was only broken by ambient light coming from a standing lamp in a long hallway, she saw Luna circle in a massive wicker dog bed, before sinking down with a contented sigh. The pooch then proceeded to lick her unmentionables with noisy gusto.

Iris left her to it and looked around the kitchen once again for a clue as to where to go next. She peeked down the dimly lit hallway and could see light coming from beneath the doorway at the far end of the corridor.

Danger! Keep AWAY!

Nope, she was definitely not going anywhere near that area. To her left was another—shorter—corridor that led to a closed door. She slowly made her way toward that door, careful to avoid bumping into any obstacles.

After what felt like an eternity, she gratefully closed her hand over the doorknob.

“*Fuck!*” The involuntary whispered exclamation burst from her lips when the hinges creaked, the noise resonating like a thunderclap in the night. And even while she froze, she told herself there was no way he would have heard that, not with the way the wind was howling and the rain lashing outside.

The weather seemed to have worsened since she’d found her way into the house, which made her resentment mount. He had gone to *bed*, believing she was out there in this. What kind of conscienceless prick could sleep knowing that he’d tossed someone out into this weather without any warmth or shelter or even a fucking light?

She gritted her teeth and determinedly pushed the door even wider before stepping inside.

She had no idea where she was because she couldn’t see in the blackness. She was going to have to risk a light. She felt along the wall to her left and found the light switch fairly quickly.

The room flooded with warm light.

Oh.

It seemed to be a self-contained suite of some sort, with a kitchenette, a tiny round dining table and a living room. She could see a bedroom and bathroom through a pair of open doors on the right.

It was tastefully decorated and comfortable. While it was extremely cold in here, there were—praise *Jesus!*—a couple of radiator heaters stashed in a corner next to the sofa.

This was perfect, it was far enough away from *him* for Iris to stay undetected for a while. Though she doubted the kitchen was stocked.

She carefully and quietly shut the door behind her. She switched on one of the table lamps next to the sofa before turning off the brighter overhead light. There, that was better. At least this wouldn't be as obvious to spot if he were to wander into the kitchen for a midnight snack or something. She would cover the threshold of the door with a towel or blanket later to block out even more light.

She shuddered again, the cold creeping into her bones. She moved the heaters to different areas in the open-plan room and put them each on their highest setting, but she knew it would take a while for them to properly heat up the place. She did a quick tour of the bedroom and bathroom. The double bed had been stripped, but fresh linens were stored in the ottoman at its foot. There were sweats in the closet. Iris could tell at a glance that they were too big for her, but she wasn't fussy—she was just happy to have a change of clothes for now.

Iris fought back a pang of loss as she thought of her little neon pink carry-on case that had been left out in the rain. She hadn't spared it a thought when she'd ducked into the kitchen earlier, confident that she'd retrieve it once she and Trystan Abbott had resolved their misunderstanding. But it was still out there, probably ruined by the rain, with the change of clothes in there undoubtedly destroyed as well.

Luckily, she had her passport and phone safely stowed in her puffer jacket pocket.

She fished out her phone and stared at the dead device for a second, before heading to the little kitchen, where a quick root around the drawers yielded positive results. She latched onto the coiled charger cable with a muted, triumphant cry and left her phone charging on the bedside table.

She retreated to the bathroom and shimmied out of her clothes. God, wet denim was almost impossible to get out of, but in the end—after a lot of squirming and wriggling—she managed to divest herself of the garment. The rest of her clothing soon followed, all chucked into a sodden heap on the tiled floor next to the laundry basket.

It was as she stood there, naked, nipples and flesh pebbled, with a blue tinge to her damp, pale skin, that the bathroom door—which she'd closed out of habit—slammed open with such violence it rebounded off the wall and shattered one of the lovely porcelain tiles. Iris's fight or flight instinct deserted her completely, while she defaulted to the lesser-known *freeze in utter panic* instinct.

Trystan Abbott stood framed in the doorway, his bearded face a study in rage and hostility.

Iris abruptly became hyperaware of the fact that she was naked and squealed—the sound pathetic and high-pitched—and crossed one arm over her boobs and cupped her other hand over her other bits. His eyes dropped, as if her movements had only now brought his attention to her nudity, and his lip curled in mocking contempt.

“Don't fucking flatter yourself. You have nothing there to tempt me, lady.”

Iris could have curled up in a ball of utter humiliation.

Like she didn't know that. Trystan Abbott had been involved with some of the most beautiful women in the world and, while Iris mostly liked the way she looked, she knew she hardly compared to supermodels and A-list actresses.

Whatever. This horrible man's opinion of her looks didn't matter to her. What mattered was that she was nude and he was in her space.

“This is an egregious invasion of privacy,” she said and then immediately wished the ridiculous statement back, when he bristled in outrage. Oh man, he looked on the verge of snorting flames... Iris could practically smell the brimstone.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? You’re intruding and *I’m* the one invading *your* privacy?”

Fair point.

He clenched his fists and his eyes gave her another sweeping once-over before he—mercifully—tugged an outrageously fluffy bath sheet off a railing to throw at her in disgust.

“Cover yourself up. I don’t know if this is some desperate, pathetic attempt at seduction, but I’m not interested.”

What? How in the hell had he arrived at that conclusion? She glowered at him as she gratefully—and hastily—half-turned away from him to wrap the towel around her shivering body.

“I’m only *desperate* to get w-w-warm and d-dry,” she spluttered, annoyed when none of her outrage made it into her voice. Instead, she sounded timid and terrified. “So don’t *you* f-flatter yourself.”

Something that could have been considered amusement in anyone else sparked in his eyes. But that couldn’t be the case since Iris was quite sure that Trystan Abbott was an unfeeling, soulless monster. Human emotion was beyond him.

“I should toss you out on your bare ass,” he said, the sentiment all the more chilling because of the lack of emotion in that detached voice. She had no doubt that he was capable of doing exactly that and the notion terrified her.

“No. Please.” The naked plea emerged on a whisper and she couldn’t disguise her fear from him.

He glared at her for a long, silent moment, those famous eyes unreadable, his expression grim.

“I’m calling the cops. Until they get here, you’re not allowed to leave this space.”

Iris sagged in relief. It was better than being kicked out into the cold and stormy dark again.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, you’re going to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. I don’t imagine being stuck in jail in a foreign land is very pleasant.”

Being in jail probably wasn’t very pleasant, regardless of the country within which one found oneself incarcerated, but Iris wasn’t about to mouth off in this situation, and she nodded meekly.

“I understand.”

She wasn’t particularly concerned about the police. She was certain that the misunderstanding would be cleared up as soon as she was able to reach his manager.

He backed out of the bathroom, maintaining eye contact as he did so. Luna was sitting on the plush rug in the middle of the cozy living room, patiently waiting for her master. He dropped a cursory pat on the tall dog’s head. She got up, shook herself, and followed him toward the door.

Iris stood framed in the bathroom doorway, watching the duo pensively, somewhat relieved that he hadn’t made good on his threat to kick her out again. She doubted he would have given her time to dress had he decided on that course.

This was really much be—

Her thoughts ground to a halt as he removed the key from the inside of the suite door.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice raised in alarm.

“Ensuring that you stay put this time.”

“You can’t mean to lock me in here?”

“Can’t I?” His lips curled and her blood ran cold at the sinister intent she could see in his eyes. “I did say you’re not allowed to leave this space, didn’t I?”

“I won’t go anywhere, I’ll stay right here. Locking me in is unnecessary.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he sneered. “You think I’d give you free rein over my personal space, allow you to go

snooping through my private things?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You just broke into my home.”

“Only because I didn’t fancy catching my death out there.”

“I’m happy I won’t be finding out if that flare for the dramatic reflects in your journalism.”

She ground her teeth again. God, she thought she might actually hate him.

It didn’t help that his sentiment reflected her own self-doubt of... God, was it just an hour ago? It felt like this ordeal had been stretching out for hours, days, fucking *months*.

“I’m not exaggerating,” she said, hating the juvenile sulky tone soaked through her words. “Have you been out there? It’s grim.”

His shoulders lifted in unconcern and he called Luna to heel, before they both stepped through the door.

“Don’t lock me in here, Mr. Abbott. Please. I won’t be—”

He shut the door in the middle of her plea and Iris stared at the closed door in consternation and alarm, moaning in horror when she heard the decisive turn of the key.

“Okay, it’s okay,” she consoled herself. “You’re fine. You’re safe, soon to be warm. At least you’re not out in this crazy storm.”

Even as she said the words the wind gusted, and rain and hail lashed against the windows. Iris shuddered. She told herself that was definitely an improvement on the situation she’d found herself in half an hour ago.

But she couldn’t stop staring at the closed—*locked*—door.

“Plenty of space,” she told herself out loud. “There’s plenty of space in here. There’s light. There’s heat. Windows. Other ways out. This is fine. You’re fine.”

Verbalizing the positives helped calm her somewhat and she concentrated on her deep-breathing techniques, which

helped.

After a few long fraught moments, she was finally able to unstick her feet from the floor and turn away from the door. It was just for one night. Everything would be worked out tomorrow, then all of this would be a distant memory.

One night in a locked room was a piece of cake. She'd be fine.

"Totally fine," she whispered.

She was shivering violently by now, and she slowly made her way back to the bathroom. There was nothing she could do except finally have that life-saving hot shower.



FORTY MINUTES LATER—AFTER the most satisfying shower of her life—Iris made her way to the kitchenette, hoping against hope to find some food.

She kept her gaze firmly averted from the locked door. If she concentrated hard enough, she could almost trick herself into forgetting it was there.

She'd unearthed a blow-dryer from the bathroom vanity and rough-dried her wavy hair into a riot of staticky curls. The sweat suit she'd found was simultaneously too big and too small. It stretched obscenely over Iris's butt and thighs, while being too long in the arms and legs and too tight over her chest. She'd had to fold the sleeves and legs of the garments several times. The owner of the clothes was definitely taller and slimmer than Iris who was curvy with a tendency toward plumpness.

Iris checked the fridge first. No luck. The blindingly white and bright interior was devoid of even the smears of food from days gone by.

"So clean," Iris marveled and then sighed. She checked the freezer. Same result.

The cupboards yielded a box of unopened crackers, a couple of months past its expiry date, and—*joy*—a can of

baked beans. There was also an open box of *rooibos* herbal tea and a half-full jar of instant coffee.

Her stomach growled impatiently at the sight of the meager bounty, and she was salivating by the time she managed to get the can opened. She blitzed the contents in the microwave, preferring to have a warm meal, made a cup of tea, *sans* sugar and milk—since those items were nowhere to be found—and sat down to enjoy her humble feast.

Once she had assuaged her immediate hunger, she pushed herself from the table to check on her phone. It wasn't fully charged, but it had enough juice so she could check her messages and attempt to reach out to Hunter Quinn. She took it back to the table and scrolled through her messages and emails, while finishing the rest of her meal.

She hoped that Mr. Quinn would sort out the confusion with his client tonight, so Iris would not be stuck in this room tomorrow as well, but just in case, she had set some beans and crackers aside for breakfast.

After messaging her parents and best friend, Evan, she sent a text to Hunter Quinn.

Hi! This is Iris Hughes. There seems to have been an unfortunate miscommunication. Mr. Abbott wasn't expecting me and he hasn't responded well to my presence. Please could you call him to clear up this misunderstanding? He's kind of threatening to have me arrested. Thanks so much.

She stared at the text for a while, but it remained unread.

“Come on, Iris,” she chastised herself. “A watched pot never boils.”

Iris was a big believer in self-motivation. She often verbalized her problems and thoughts to herself—it was just easier for her to work out solutions that way. It did mean that she was often muttering to herself and giving herself little pep talks. She was aware that it made her seem a bit of an odd duck, but she was way past caring what people thought of her.

She checked the time. It was close to midnight. God, it had been a long, *long* twenty-four hours and Iris desperately

needed to sleep. Mr. Quinn lived in London which was an hour behind South Africa at the moment. She didn't think he was the type of man to be in bed by eleven p.m. on a Friday night, but it *was* pretty late to be expecting people to check their texts immediately.

PS. I'm really sorry to be texting you this late.

She stared at the second message in satisfaction. Her mother would be proud. Iris's parents had raised her to always be considerate of others.

She set aside the phone for now. Her parents had already sent a reply to her previous message, dramatically thanking the gods that she was safe, and then immediately following that up with a voice note asking if she had enough warm clothing. She grimaced—of course her *parents* would know that the weather here sucked. And, of *course*, they would have expected her to be aware of that fact too. Yes, Iris had known that she was flying into winter, but she'd expected it to be a mere nod to the season. Light-cardigan weather at best. Not this ice-cold hellscape.

She reassured (lied to) her parents about being more than prepared. And deflected their further questions about the mysterious assignment she was on, telling them via voice note that they would soon understand the need for secrecy.

They didn't push her further, wishing her a good night and admonishing her to call them in the morning and to stay in regular contact.

Hoping that her next call wouldn't be from jail, begging for bail money, Iris promised them that she would text and call regularly.

Evan hadn't yet replied, and Iris knew her bestie was probably out having a ball somewhere.

She cleaned the sparse dishes she'd used and went to the bedroom where she put her phone back on charge. After haphazardly making the bed—exhaustion making her movements sluggish—Iris crept under the covers and instantly fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

three

Iris had a moment's disorientation when she opened her eyes the following morning. A few seconds later memories of the previous night came flooding back and she went from pleasantly warm and sleepy to alert and tense in an instant.

She jerked upright and grabbed up her phone to check her texts. Nothing from Mr. Quinn. Worse, her messages to him remained unread.

Shit.

She would try emailing him and then calling him.

It had just gone eight a.m. here. It was probably a little too early to call him on a Saturday morning. But if she sent an email to his business account—the only address she had for him—he'd probably only check it on Monday morning. That meant—if Trystan Abbott was true to his word—Iris could quite conceivably spend the weekend in a jail cell.

God, she couldn't do that. She literally *couldn't*. She wouldn't survive it.

She was legitimately starting to freak out now. She only hoped that The Dickhead—as she'd start to think of her reluctant host—was in a more reasonable frame of mind this morning. Hopefully he'd be in the mood to give her a fair hearing.

She pushed the covers down over her legs with a groan. Seriously, she'd much rather bury her head under the warm comforter and not surface again until she knew for sure that

the situation with The Dickhead—*TDH* for short—was resolved. But she knew nothing could be fixed by hiding her head in the sand, or under the comforter, as it were. She had to be proactive about this and figure this shit out.

She got out of bed and bit back a yelp when her bare feet hit the icy tiles.

She had nothing to wear on her feet, her trainers and socks had been left sodden after the misadventures of the night before and she hadn't found any type of footwear in the closet belonging to her mystery benefactor with the statuesque supermodel proportions.

All of which meant Iris had no option but to brave the cold floor in her bare feet. Not ideal.

She stumbled her way to the door and tried the handle again, just in case TDH'd had an attack of conscience and unlocked the door while she was asleep.

No such luck.

She hated this. Last night she'd been too exhausted to fully comprehend what being locked in here meant, but this morning she wanted to crawl out of her skin at the sheer terror of being trapped.

She needed to clear up this misunderstanding as soon as possible. She had to make that unreasonable man listen to her.

She put her ear to the wood, hoping to hear some signs of life. She heard faint music, and the low gravelly undertone of *his* voice. Which meant he was out there, awake, aware, and basically ignoring her very existence.

Ooh, but that burned. It annoyed the ever-loving *hell* out of her.

She whipped out her phone and dialed Mr. Quinn's private number. It went straight to voicemail and Iris gritted her teeth as she left her message.

"Mr. Quinn? Uhm... Hi, this is Iris Hughes. As I stated in my text message, Mr. Abbott was not expecting me. He's accused me of trespassing and has locked me in a—uhm—

well, it's quite a nice suite of rooms actually. But I'm still his prisoner and this just isn't on. He's threatened to call the police. At this point I wish he would do it and that they'd get here soon because I'm going to have to report him for false imprisonment, or kidnapping, or something. The situation is really deteriorating quite badly and I'd appreciate it if you'd—y'know—call him to straighten this out? Please? Thank you ever so much. Uh... goodbye?"

She disconnected the call, annoyed with the deference she'd heard in her own voice during that call. She'd meant to sound tough, no-nonsense, not like some meek out-of-her-depth little lamb.

Ugh. Typical.

"Iris Hughes, legend in her own mind."

She started banging on the door.

"Mr. Abbott, let me out, please." Iris was proud of how level her voice was. How reasonable her tone. No sign of her incipient panic. "We need to talk."

She stopped to listen again and the low rumbly voice had gone silent.

A few seconds later she heard the scrabbling of huge paws on the wooden floors down the hall, the eager running steps came ever closer until she could hear her wet snuffling at the door, following by a scratch and whine.

At least *someone* was on her side.

"Hello Luna, puppy, can you please ask The Dickhead to let me out? I'll give you all the treats in the world if you could do me that solid."

"Bribing my dog isn't going to get you very far." The deep voice on the other side of the door caused her to squeak in alarm. *Shit*, how the hell had he managed to get to the door without making a sound? Was he some light-footed elf or something? "And calling me a dickhead isn't doing anything to ingratiate you to me either."

Iris glared at the door, wishing she could incinerate the solid wooden slab between them with the force of her fury.

“I’m done trying to ingratiate myself to you. I demand you let me out! This is proper kidnapping.”

“As opposed to? Improper kidnapping?” There was absolutely zero inflection in his voice.

“Look, when are the police coming? I’m going to counter arrest your entitled superstar arse for kidnapping.”

“Blackmail? Have we finally unearthed your real reason for coming all this way?”

“My *real* reason for coming all this way, you arrogant jerk, was to interview you, as per an arrangement made via your manager. An arrangement *you* allegedly agreed to, by the way.”

“So you keep insisting.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you,” Iris said in helpless frustration. “That was the arrangement. Maybe you should call him.”

“Convenient for you that you showed up just as Quinny left for his annual spiritual retreat, isn’t it?” Sarcasm was rife in his words and Iris clenched her fists.

“It’s not convenient at *all*. Do you have the number of this retreat? This is urgent, we need to clear it up.”

“I don’t need to clear anything up. The burden of proof is on you.”

“Well, then give me the number and *I’ll* call him.”

TDH made a snorting sound that, on anyone else, could be considered a laugh.

“Right, like you don’t fucking know he’s on silent retreat at a Buddhist monastery in Nepal.”

“He’s... what?”

“Un-a-vail-able right now,” TDH emphasized each syllable in true dick-ish fashion, and with no lack of smug satisfaction.

Iris's mouth opened and closed in shock. Who the hell did shit like that? Real people didn't swan off to Nepal to meditate with silent monks, come *on*.

"B-but he *can't* be. I spoke to him on Thursday before I left for the airport. He assured me that everything had been arranged."

"*Suuure*, he did."

Iris's legs gave way and she slid down the door in a gelatinous, disbelieving puddle of despondency.

"Then open the door and I'll show you the emails and texts he sent me."

"Electronic correspondence can be faked," he said, sounding bored.

Iris's head dropped into her hands and she stifled a sob.

"You said the burden of proof is on me," she said, her voice hoarse with tears. "How can I prove anything to you when you won't even look at the evidence?"

He remained silent for a long while and she was just wondering if he was still there, when he spoke, "I prefer not to waste my time."

"Fine, you don't have to believe me, I'm happy to leave. Please, just open this door." Her voice was soft and pleading. "As soon as I've arranged a tow truck for my rental car, I'll leave and never darken your door again."

"Easier said than done, lady. The storm won't let up till tomorrow. You're lucky as hell you crossed the bridge from town before the rain started because the river broke its banks and swept the bridge and most of the road away. There are also felled trees blocking the roads. We're cut off for at least two weeks until they're able to fix the roads and repair the bridge. Repairs can only start after the storm passes and they're forecasting two more cutoff low-pressure fronts following in quick succession after this one. So, two weeks is an optimistic prediction."

“W-what?” Iris’s voice shook as she considered her situation. To be stuck here—with *him*—for two weeks or more, was a horrific possibility. And—dear *God*—what if he chose to keep her locked up that entire time? Iris wasn’t sure she’d stay sane if he did.

He was so fucking hateful she doubted he’d even share his food with her. Would he just leave her in this room to slowly starve to death? And when they finally came looking for her, would he justify his actions as self-defense?

So sorry, Your Honor, but she was an intruder. I feared for my life and privacy. I couldn’t feed her because it meant opening the door and possibly exposing myself to her toxic presence.

“I don’t want to die,” she whimpered quietly.

“What?” She could hear the consternation in his voice and wondered if she’d misunderstood the implications of the news he’d just imparted.

“Are you going to keep me locked in this room until the roads are cleared?” It was hard to keep the nausea at bay at the mere thought of being trapped within these restrictive walls.

Silence.

“I-I need my bags.”

More silence.

“I need my medication.”

“What medication?” His voice was gruff and teeming with suspicion.

“Buspirone. Anti-anxiety medication.” She offered the personal information reluctantly, but he needed to understand the urgency. She didn’t take it often, but kept the prescription filled just in case.

This situation definitely qualified as stressful, and if she was going to remain locked in here, she was going to need her meds.

“I have some in my jacket pocket,” she explained. “I transferred them from my handbag—I didn’t want to weigh myself down with too many things from the car—but the rest is in my big suitcase in the car.”

“Anti-anxiety meds? What triggers the anxiety?” he asked. The question sounded like it was torn from him by a thousand hellhounds.

“*Stress*,” she emphasized. “You know, like the stress that comes from being unjustifiably imprisoned when you suffer from a fear of being locked in?”

“That so?” He didn’t sound at all sympathetic, or convinced. “What else?”

“Hunger—by the way there’s no food in here.”

“I see. Any other triggers?”

PMS—the fluctuating hormones could send her spiraling some months, while during others she would be perfectly fine—but she wasn’t about to disclose that information to Grumpasaurus sex—uhm—*rex* over there.

“This conversation is about to be a trigger if we don’t change the subject,” she muttered under her breath. She didn’t often speak of her anxiety—she lived an active, normal life in spite of it. But she *did* need her meds in case of flare-ups. And she definitely needed it for what she recognized was going to be a *very* challenging few days, possibly weeks, in this man’s company.

“Look, it doesn’t matter what triggers the anxiety. With my meds I can keep it at bay.”

She could almost feel the air from his loud, exasperated sigh through the door.

The lock turned in the door and it swung outward before she had a chance to react. Two seconds later, she was staring up at the tall, brooding, bearded Trystan Abbott, who was glowering down at her huddled form on the floor.

She wasn’t sure—because of the bushy beard—but she was almost certain his lips thinned at the sight of her.

“You’re a weird fucking chick,” he said almost to himself, before turning away from her to haul her big, bright, pink hard-shelled suitcase into the room. He lifted it clear over her head and dropped it on the floor by the kitchen counter.

Iris scrambled to her feet and stared at the open door, poised for flight, before his harsh voice stopped her in her tracks.

“You can run, sure, but you’ll find yourself out in the storm again, with no way back to the nearest town. And rest assured, once you’re out there, you won’t be allowed back in here. So, what’s it to be? You can make a run for it—and believe me, that’s *my* personal favorite option—and wander around, in the rain and howling wind, with hundred-year-old trees being torn up all around you, flash floods, and mudslides, until *maybe* you make it to town alive. Or stay here in this room and out of my fucking way until the police can finally reach us and arrest your ass.”

“If I could just get a tow truck for my car.”

He sighed dramatically.

“Jesus Christ, you’re a little slow on the uptake, aren’t you? No truck can get here, the road is gone. For that matter, so’s your car. A tree totaled it during the night.”

“What?” Iris felt the blood drain from her head at that bit of news.

“Your rental... it’s toast. Luckily, just the roof and hood, which meant I could get into the trunk to retrieve this pink monstrosity.” He indicated toward her suitcase. But Iris was too preoccupied to take offense at the slight against her beloved neon pink luggage.

“I was going to stay in the car last night, but thought I’d take my chances and walk here instead,” she said, mostly speaking to herself.

“Well then, I guess you cheated death four times last night. First the river, then the car crushing and then the big bad wolf.”

That diverted her train of thought enough to raise her eyes to his pitiless face.

“What was the fourth time?”

His eyes were shards of silver ice and his lips were pressed into a thin line before he said, voice quiet and intense, “Me, sugarplum... The last woman who thought she could manipulate me *died*, lady. So don’t *fuck* with me.”

What?

Was he referring to Trish Nesbitt? Iris had meant to ask him about Ms. Nesbitt’s death during the interview. It had been an accident. Why would he imply that he’d had something to do with that?

“You mean Ms. Nesbitt? But that was an accident. Why—”

“No.” That was it, just a single, implacable word. And it effectively shut her up.

“There will be no questions,” he continued after a long pause. “No answers. No fucking interview. You will stay in this room. We will not speak. And when the time comes, you’re to face criminal charges. That’s it. End of.”

He stalked to the door, all big, bristling male, and Iris noticed for the first time that he was wearing a pair of faded jeans paired with a red and black plaid flannel shirt.

She felt a nervous giggle rise up in her throat and clapped a hand over her mouth to suppress it. Too late. A soft, merry little chortle escaped, and he whirled around to pin her with a glare.

“What the fuck is so funny?”

She pressed her lips together and dropped her hand before shaking her head.

“N-nothing.” But the word emerged on another traitorous burble of laughter. God, he looked *pissed* off. And Iris could have cursed her irreverent sense of humor for choosing this time to surface.

“It’s just the hair”—*Oh God, Iris*, she begged herself. *Shut up!*—“and the b-beard and the whole lumberjack ensemble”—*Jesus please, strike me mute and spare me from this folly*—“You’ve really committed to this crazy hermit shit, haven’t you?”

Gah, too late! Why did she have to have a chronic case of *foot-in-mouthitis*?

TDH’s face froze, only the slight twitch below his left eye served as proof that he was still alive, as he continued to stare at her with zero expression on his face.

“You’re here only because you’ve forced your way into my house and now somehow, by default, I’ve become responsible for your health and well-being. I’m trying—even though it goes against my own desires—to be a decent human being. But you’re treading a *very* fine line. And it won’t take much to remind me that I actually have fuck all responsibility toward you and kick you the hell out.”

Iris clamped her lips together and nodded curtly. Right. Point made. No more hot takes from her then.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “Thank you for taking me in.”

Jeez, was she really thanking her jailer for imprisoning her right now? Talk about your classic gaslighting job.

His eyes narrowed on her face, as if he were trying to gauge her sincerity.

Apparently, he didn’t like what he saw because he muttered something foul beneath his breath before he shook his head and strode toward the door.

“Please, don’t lock the door.” She directed her plea at his broad back, and he stopped in his tracks, his shoulders tensing.

“You have everything you need in here. There’s no need for you to roam around the house. You stay in here, out of my way, out of my life, and out of my business. Trust me, we’ll both be happier for it.”

“I promise I’ll stay in here, you don’t have to lock the door.”

“If you’ll stay in here anyway, then me locking the door won’t make a difference, will it?” The question was almost silky, despite the gruffness of his stupid lumberjack/Batman voice.

“It will make a difference to me,” she countered, before adding in sheer desperation, “I have cleithrophobia. It’s a fear of being confined.”

“Bullshit. You just made that up.”

With that, he closed the door and Iris remained tense, breath bated until... the key turned in the lock. She swallowed back a sob, and her shoulders sank.

It wasn’t a lie. She *was* cleithrophobic. Even though there was plenty of space in here, the thought of being trapped, of being unable to move about freely, or to leave anytime she wanted scraped at her nerve endings and left her feeling on edge and short of breath. The pills helped calm her, but if her situation didn’t improve, her increasing fear and anxiety would override the medication.

This was her worst nightmare.

She didn’t even want to consider how she’d react if he carried out his threat to have her arrested. She didn’t think she could stand being kept in a jail cell.

Last night she’d been too tired to really think about it, and there’d been a sense of optimism, the absolute belief that everything would be sorted out in the morning. Today, there was only the prospect of two endless weeks imprisoned within just these walls. With nothing for company except her own thoughts. And God knew, her thoughts tended to veer toward histrionics and chaos rather than calm and logic.

She was about to descend into a chaotic whirlpool of worst-case scenarios when the lock clicked again. Her head whipped up and her heart leapt in the hope that he’d changed his mind. The door opened and a big, veined hand clutching her smaller carry-on suitcase appeared around the edge of the wood. The case was deposited on the floor, and nudged inward, before the door abruptly shut and locked again.

The hope in her chest shriveled and died, but she shoved it aside and focused on her case. It matched the big one. Neon pink and hard shelled. It looked none the worse for wear and for the first time Iris dared to hope that the interior had remained dry despite the deluge that had fallen—was still falling—from the skies over the course of the last twelve hours.

There was mud caked around the wheels and the bottom of the case, but it was still sealed.

Her laptop was in the case and Iris sent up a quick prayer to every deity she could think of before rolling the case to the small sitting room, sinking down onto the carpet, laying the small bag on its side, and unzipping it slowly.

She held her breath as she opened it, and then exhaled slowly as she cast an eye over the not-at-all wet—or even slightly damp—interior. Her laptop was in its protective lime green neoprene sleeve, the surface of which was dry to the touch.

She carefully unzipped the bag, and her laptop was nestled in there, looking just fine.

Iris exhaled slowly, thankful for this one good thing that had happened in the last forty-eight hours.

She considered the new title of her article.

How I Was Imprisoned by That Surly Bastard, Trystan Abbott.

Okay, that was a little rough... but it was only a working title. Still, if TDH wouldn't sit down to the agreed-upon interview with her, then she would have to write an honest account of her extremely negative experience with him. And he wouldn't be able to deny any of it. Because if he made good on his promise to have her arrested, then Iris would have her newly acquired future criminal record to back up the facts of her story.

She inhaled deeply, trying to center herself, and lay her big suitcase beside the smaller one. She eyed the cable tie for a

moment, before grabbing a pair of kitchen scissors from the knife rack. She had her bag open in no time at all.

She spent the next half-hour pleasantly occupied with packing her clothes into the small closet and chest of drawers in the bedroom. It soothed her to have some familiar things around. Her laptop sat on the round dining table and her e-reader on the nightstand. Her toiletries and cosmetics were dotted around the bedroom and bathroom. She changed into her favorite jeans, and an oversized fluorescent yellow hoodie. She'd packed enough clothes to last for at least two weeks, and twice as many panties and bras.

Mr. Quinn had arranged for her to spend three weeks with his client, but Iris wasn't always the most organized of people and she'd been concerned that she may have under packed for the trip. But she was happy to note that she'd brought enough warm clothing and underwear to last for the duration of her stay. Hoodies, cardigans, jeans and sweatpants, lots of short-sleeved tees though—she rolled her eyes at the sight of those—and a flippin' *bikini*, of all things.

She'd also packed—thank the gods of small things—socks! So many, many warm pairs of thick socks. She immediately rolled a pair onto her cold, numb feet and spent a few minutes massaging some warmth back into her extremities.

Once she was fully unpacked, she tucked her suitcases into an out-of-the-way corner in the small living room and curled up with her laptop on the big easy chair facing the front door, hoping to find an email from Mr. Quinn. She didn't necessarily believe Trystan Abbott about his manager being uncontactable. It beggared belief that an important, busy man like Mr. Quinn wouldn't check his phone at least once a day.

She swore beneath her breath when she realized that she wasn't—of course—connected to the Wi-Fi, and picked up her phone instead.

“*Shit!*” Looked like her international roaming data plan had run out. Her own fault for cheaping out and getting a plan that was good for only twenty-four hours. She'd fully expected

to have access to TDH's Wi-Fi after arrival and hadn't seen the need to switch out SIM cards or get a more comprehensive roaming plan. Now she was as cut off as she'd been when her battery had died.

She needed to remain in contact with family and friends, people who loved her—it was essential to her mental and emotional well-being—if she was to remain trapped in here.

She stared into space for a few moments, dreading yet another frustrating interaction with TDH, but knowing that she'd have to bow down to the inevitable and attempt to persuade him to share the Wi-Fi password with her. She was still considering her current predicament—choosing for the moment not to dwell on the bigger picture—when the key turned in the lock, catching her off-guard.

She didn't have time to react, before the door opened—without warning—and *he* stepped into the suite with a tray balanced on one brawny forearm.

He didn't spare her so much as a glance, merely stepping inside, taking a few strides to the dining room table and placing the tray on it. Luna followed him into the room, and padded over to where Iris was sitting. The dog's head was the same height as Iris's and she booped her wet nose against Iris's cheek, clearly demanding an ear scratch.

For a moment, Iris forgot all her woes and giggled. She tucked her laptop between her bum and the side of the chair and used both hands to frame the dog's endearing face.

"You're such a sweetheart," she crooned into the dog's ear, before giving her the scratches she deserved.

"Luna, let's go," TDH called the dog in his most commanding Batman voice, and Luna spared him just one glance, before blatantly opting to ignore him in favor of Iris's scratches. "Come on, Luna."

"Please, can she stay with me for a while?" Iris asked, hating the beseeching note in her voice. But maybe, with Luna's companionship, the room would stop shrinking with every breath she took.

“No.”

“I promise not to trick her into revealing any of your deepest darkest secrets.”

He looked directly at her for the first time since entering the room and visibly flinched at the sight of her.

What the heck?

“Jesus, I didn’t think I’d ever see a color more hideous than your luggage, but that hoodie has it beaten by miles.”

Iris gasped.

“How *rude*,” she spluttered. “We can’t all walk around in mopey blacks, grays, and neutrals, like you. Some people happen to *like* color.”

“There’s color and then there’s whatever the fuck that is,” he said, pointing at her hoodie. He looked more animated than she’d seen him since arriving here. “You look like a glowstick.”

“Just because I’m your prisoner doesn’t give you license to relentlessly mock me.”

His face tightened and his eyes went flat, as if her words had reminded him of exactly who she was and what she was doing there. Iris instantly regretted the loss of that bit of animation from his expression, and now wished she’d bantered with him instead of getting so offended. But she was exhausted, stressed, and quite honestly, petrified that she was going to wind up in jail at the end of all this. The uncertainty was eating at her, and the fear and vulnerability had her on the verge of a panic attack.

“Eat your breakfast,” he snapped, jerking his head toward the tray on the table, and Iris registered the food for the first time. She wasn’t sure exactly what it was he’d brought her to eat, but her eyes flooded with tears of gratitude.

He took a step back, appearing uncomfortable at the sight of her tears.

“Thank you so much,” she whispered. Her words were punctuated by her growling stomach and his brow lowered at

the sound. She swiped at her wet eyes, embarrassed by her weepiness. “I wasn’t sure if you’d bring me any food and there’s not much to eat in here.”

His frown turned into a glower and he moved his shoulders in a jerky, awkward up-down motion.

“It’s not my intention to starve you,” he muttered. “I’ll bring your lunch at one.”

“Can Luna stay until then?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“I said no. Luna, *come*.” The dog gave Iris’s knuckles a regretful lick and turned toward her owner. She walked, with almost defiant slowness, toward where he stood waiting at the door and gave a last little whine before vacating the room.

He turned to follow the dog, dragging the door behind him in the same movement.

“No, wait,” she called, remembering something. She was shocked when he actually paused, not looking at her, merely waiting. “Can I have the Wi-Fi password? I need to stay in contact with my family, or they’ll worry.”

He didn’t reply. Didn’t acknowledge her request in any way at all. Instead, he shut the door with a quiet click and, a few long moments later, locked it.

Iris moaned. A quiet, despairing sound. Her entire body collapsed in on itself as the oppressive weight of the walls and ceilings closed in on her. She focused on her breathing, hoping it would tamp down the dread burgeoning in her chest.

When the panic didn’t subside fast enough this time, she rushed to a window and slid it up until she was able to lean her upper body all the way out. She didn’t care about the rain—from which the eaves provided some protection—or cold, instead she focused on the ground beneath the window. She could leave if she needed to, she could climb out of this window and be free. It wasn’t so bad. She had options. She was fine.

It helped and as the panic subsided, she realized she was damp and actually shivering from the icy cold. She retreated inside, and—despite the plummeting temperature in the room—left the window partly open.

four

Once she'd managed to get her panic attack under control, Iris tucked into the rapidly cooling breakfast. It wasn't anything fancy, two grilled cheese sandwiches and coffee. Nonetheless, she was grateful for such basic human courtesy from her jailer and scarfed down the meal like the starving woman she was.

She downed a couple of pills after the meal and—once she felt a little more in control—shut the window because it was freezing. She took solace in the fact that she could open it at any time. And that thought helped.

For now.

After that she wandered from bathroom to bedroom to living room to kitchen in an endless loop. She occasionally paused at the windows to glare out at the rain, willing it to stop. She knew she could climb out of one of the windows and make her way into the main part of the house, but she could pretty much predict TDH's reaction to any such move from her, and she didn't want to find herself out on her arse, trying to navigate her way—on foot—back to town in this relentless downpour.

She finally stopped her restless pacing because it didn't help—instead it heightened her anxiety and she had to remain calm. She collapsed onto the sofa and picked up the TV remote to flip through some channels, pausing every so often when something caught her interest. Eventually she stopped at what appeared to be a soap opera. They weren't speaking English—Iris couldn't quite place the language, it had a vaguely Germanic sound to it, so it was probably Afrikaans—

but there were subtitles. Ooh, it looked like someone's baby had been kidnapped.

Iris grabbed up a scatter cushion and hugged it to her chest as she watched the drama unfold. It was a fascinating insight into South African society... well, the interaction between characters was fascinating. She imagined that babies being kidnapped by jealous ex-lovers likely wasn't a common occurrence in everyday life here. It was fun to try and differentiate between the languages spoken. Iris had a good ear for languages and, so far, had picked up at least three separate dialects.

One twenty-five-minute installment flowed into the next, and before she knew it, Iris had watched five episodes. She was disappointed to realize that there were no other episodes forthcoming and assumed it was an omnibus of the week's quota.

It was a diverting way to spend a couple of hours, and had—*mostly*—kept her mind off the locked door. But now she was back to her dismal reality.

She switched off the TV and sighed, restlessness and boredom and prickling anxiety immediately setting in. She considered taking more pills, but tamped down the urge. She'd wait until after dinner. She was going to have to battle her way through this.

Iris wasn't used to having nothing to do—she lived an active life. Back home, when she wasn't occupied with her many freelance editing projects, she was helping her parents, or volunteering at various animal shelters. She rarely found herself at loose ends.

How she wished she had an editing project to sink her teeth into right now. But she'd finished up all her jobs after landing this dream assignment and had temporarily closed up shop to come here.

She'd hoped this would lead to bigger, better things. A career in entertainment journalism, maybe. She laughed bitterly at her naivete. All she'd be getting from this nightmare was a criminal record.

She buried her face in her hands, ready to give in to the ever-lurking tears, when she heard light scratching and sniffing at the door. Her head jerked up and she darted to the door to peek through the keyhole. All she could see was Luna's big, shiny black nose, and she smiled.

"Hey girl," she whispered, so thankful to have the dog there. "Thank you for visiting me. It makes me feel less lonely. I wish TDH would let you in to stay with me for a while." The last emerged on a wistful note and she sighed. She slid down the wall and sat flat on her bum, next to the door. She was reassured to hear Luna still snuffling at the keyhole, and continued talking to the dog.

"I wonder what my mum and dad are doing right now? Probably run off their feet at the Bhandari wedding. They'll be catering for a thousand guests. Gosh, my parents were so excited to land that contract. But you can be damned sure Robbie will be bitching about working today, especially at an event that size. He'll moan even more than usual because I'm not there to help."

She smiled fondly—missing her family so much it ached—and picked at the cuticle on her thumb.

"He's ten years younger than me, you see. Only sixteen. He resents having to spend his weekends and spare time waiting tables at our parents' catering events. He wants to be like the rest of his mates. We don't have much in common, but that's one teenage resentment we share. I was the same. I was such an asshole about it too. Even more so than Robbie."

She thought back to all the times she'd flared up at her parents about having to work on Fridays and Saturdays. She'd been such a bitch. And deliberately hurtful.

She shook off the thought. She was depressed enough right now without fueling that despondency with familial regrets.

She sat wrapped up in her memories for a long moment before a soft scratch at the door—followed by a quiet whine—jerked her from her thoughts.

“Sorry, Luna,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I got a bit bogged down there. I think I’m homesick. I’m not usually one to wallow in my own misery, but this situation is a little ridiculous, and I feel like I deserve at least a day of *what the fuckness* before I drag myself out of it.”

She heard a sharp whistle, followed by a curt, “Let’s go, girl!”

Luna’s paws scabbled on the floors and Iris heard her retreating without so much as a farewell sniff.

“Hey, where are you guys going?” she called, with no real hope of having her question acknowledged. “Can I come too?”

No response from either Luna or her horrible master, instead she heard a door slamming in the distance.

Did they really just go out in this shit weather? She hurried over to the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of them, even though the door had slammed on the other side of the house.

It was pelting down and the wind hadn’t calmed at all. If anything, it seemed worse. Why would they venture out in this mess?

What if something happened to the damned fool man? Did she even care? If he got himself injured or killed, she’d be fine. Even better than she was now, really, because she’d be able to climb out of this very window and make her way into the main house where she’d have access to food and possibly a phone.

She was imagining a scenario whereby she heroically rescued him—with Luna’s assistance—from the bottom of a steep hill when she heard the door opening again, immediately followed by fast, urgent footfalls heading her way. Seconds later the key rotated in the lock, and she turned from the window just as the door pushed inward.

Trystan Abbott stepped into the room. He was wearing a dark green heavy-duty oilskin rain jacket—the type fishermen on boats used—water was streaming off it in rivulets and leaving puddles on the floor. The man himself looked even

bigger in the wet-weather gear and appeared to be bristling with agitation.

Immediately alarmed, Iris took a couple of steps toward him, before coming to an uncertain halt.

“What’s wrong? Is Luna okay?”

No sooner had she asked the question than the big dog nosed her way into the room and Iris’s shoulders dropped in relief.

“I need your help,” TDH said, storming forward and grabbing her hand without any warning. Taken aback by the unsolicited contact—as well as by the iciness of his skin against hers—Iris didn’t immediately protest. She was dragged halfway to the door before she dug her heels in and slowed down their progress. He stopped, his head whipped around, and he pinned her with an intimidating glare.

“My help with what?” Iris asked, matching his glare with one of her own.

“Laying sandbags in front of the garage doors to mitigate the effects of the flooding.”

“What flooding?” she asked, alarmed. “Are we safe here?”

He sighed, the sound short and irritated and really bloody condescending.

“The house itself is pretty high, so the possibility of it flooding is minimal. The garage, however, is underground.”

“Seems shortsighted,” she couldn’t help but retort, and he gave her another annoyed glower.

“Stop fucking mouthing off and get a move on.”

“Maybe if you were less rude to me, I’d consider helping you save your millions of pounds worth of cars. Until then, I’m quite content to stay in my prison cell.”

Only she wasn’t. Iris was dying to get out, but she figured she had some bargaining power here, which she ought to take advantage of.

He eyed her for a speculative moment, then shrugged in unconcern and dropped her hand.

“Fine, you’ll probably slow me down anyway.”

Shit, didn’t the guy understand the fine art of negotiation?

“You’re supposed to offer me something to sweeten the deal,” she informed him, folding her arms over her chest.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t need your help that desperately.”

“Sure you do,” she negated. “You came pounding in here reeking of panic and desperation. You’re worried about your precious cars, aren’t you?”

“Thought you’d jump at the opportunity to make yourself useful and get out of this room for a while. That prospect *should* have been enough of a deal sweetener.”

Ugh... he was right about the latter. Why was she risking the possibility of him changing his mind?

Nonetheless, she had some leverage and she needed to use it. “I’d help for the Wi-Fi password.”

He crossed his beefy arms over his massive chest and his unkempt beard twitched as his top lip curled.

“Sure.”

His easy acquiescence threw her, and she blinked up at him, her mouth slightly agape.

“What?”

“I said ‘sure’,” he repeated.

Iris’s stomach sank and she gave him a dejected frown.

“You were going to give it to me anyway, weren’t you?”

The wicked gleam in his eyes told her she was right, but he didn’t admit as much out loud. Damn it, she should have asked for something else, like visitation rights with Luna... or leaving the door unlocked.

What a letdown. She’d been so certain she had the upper hand, but no, he held all the cards. She was so damned frantic

to get out of this room that even if he'd refused to give her the password, she would still have conceded. And he knew it.

"Put on some shoes," he said, after a glance down at her socks.

He made no acknowledgment of, or apology for, the fact that he'd been about to drag her out into the wet and cold without shoes.

Iris grumbled under her breath as she went to the closet to drag out her hiking boots, which she'd nearly not brought because of how heavy they are. But she'd had some romantic notion of joining Trystan Abbott on long hikes, while they amicably chatted about his life, loves, and losses.

Such foolish, optimistic whimsy.

He eyed her boots when she rejoined him at the front door.

"Those are surprisingly practical," he acknowledged, almost begrudgingly, and Iris did her best to disguise her rolling eyes from him.

Unsuccessfully.

"What's with that expression?" he demanded to know, and she huffed an impatient sigh.

"I'm not sure why you're surprised by my choice of *practical* shoes when you know nothing about me." She used air quotes around the word practical just because she figured it would annoy him. Sure enough, his eyes flashed at the gesture.

"You don't strike me as a very practical person. You trekked across unknown terrain, in the dark and the rain, armed with nothing but a phone flashlight... thinking that your intrusion would be welcomed by someone who'd clearly sought the most isolated place he could find in order to avoid human contact. Not very practical or—y'know—clever."

"My decision to trek here through the dark, and *wind*—it only started raining after you tossed me out into the storm—was validated if what you said about the car being crushed is true."

He didn't respond, merely leveled a malevolent look at her before turning abruptly. "Do you have anything waterproof? A rain slicker? Jacket?"

Her lips thinned and her silence spoke for her. Same as his insufferable, smug, know-it-all snort spoke for him.

"Now, packing some kind of waterproof gear when traveling to an area infamous for its winter storms would definitely have been considered a practical, clever move."

Arrogant prick.

"I don't have anything that'll fit you," he said, running an assessing glance over her frame.

"I'll be fine. I can bear a little rain." Only it wasn't a little rain. There was a seriously scary amount of water falling from the sky right now.

"If you say so," he said with a disinterested shrug. "Follow me."

He led the way through the hallway back toward the kitchen. It was interesting to see the house in the gloomy light of a rainy day. Last night everything had been dark and a little terrifying but today she found herself astonished by how lovely this house was. The colors were bright and fresh—cream, sage, and the palest of pinks as an accent hue. It was unexpected and not at all what she would have pictured for Trystan Abbott's home.

They hastened past a wall of framed photos and Iris's steps slowed as she tried to take in the images. Clearly annoyed with her lingering, he backtracked a few steps and grabbed her hand to drag her along behind him.

The contact—like before—startled her. What the hell was up with these caveman tactics?

"Hey, *mister*, it's not okay to just grab a woman like that," she gasped, fighting to keep up, and simultaneously trying to pull her arm from his unrelenting grip.

"And it's not okay to snoop around people's private shit."

“They’re photos. On display. They’re there to be looked at. Why else go to the trouble of printing, framing and hanging them?”

“They’re to be looked at by invited guests, which you are not.” He didn’t even bother to glance back at her as he said that, instead hauling her to the kitchen door leading outside.

She hesitated just inside the door, staring up at the gunmetal gray sky and the constant torrent of water streaming down from it. The man in front of her stopped as well and turned back to stare at her for a long moment before his shoulders lifted and fell in what looked like a heavy sigh.

Before she knew what his intention was he had dragged his raincoat off and draped it over her shoulders like a cape, fastening only the top two buttons at her throat and tugging the hood up over her head.

“It’s hopeless trying to put your arms in the sleeves,” he muttered, half to himself. “It’s miles too big. And it’ll be impossible to roll up, so this’ll have to do until we get to the shed.”

“You don’t have to do this,” she protested half-heartedly, but he ignored her and continued forward.

Iris followed him. The jacket helped, but the front of her hoodie and her jeans were still getting soaked. At least her shoulders and head remained dry, as long as she kept the hood from blowing back.

At that point—regretting every decision that had led to this miserable moment in her life—Iris was helpless to do anything other than keep her eyes trained on Trystan Abbott’s broad shoulders and follow meekly.

Alarmingly, there was water flowing pretty rapidly over the toes of her boots, and the fast-running streams seemed to get deeper as they progressed further downhill into the garden.

He led her to the large-ish shed and she waited, shivering, while he unlocked the padlock on the doors. He turned to face her after swinging the doors open. Even though it was quieter inside the—blessedly dry—shed, the wind and rain were still a

constant roar, and it was hard to hear him, but Iris kept her eyes glued to his face, afraid of missing some important instruction.

“There are two wheelbarrows,” he all but shouted down at her. “We’ll fill the first one together. I’ll wheel it down to the garage where I’ll offload and stack the bags. We can get an efficient production line type of system going like that. You fill the empty wheelbarrow whenever I bring it back, while I wheel the one you just filled to the garage for offloading.”

Iris dubiously eyed the *very* many bright orange sandbags heaped against the back wall of the shed. They weren’t very big, but they looked heavy as hell. Iris was of medium height and weight, and not particularly strong, and she wasn’t sure she’d get the wheelbarrow loaded by the time he was done stacking the sandbags.

Still, since she’d managed to lug her twenty-five-kilogram suitcase around for short distances at a time, she could probably heave sandbags into a wheelbarrow if she had to. She just wouldn’t be very fast at it.

“How heavy are those bags?” she asked, pushing the hood off her head when it kept slipping down over her eyes. In the meantime, she tried very hard not to notice how his flannel shirt was plastered to his muscular chest and shoulders, leaving not much to the imagination.

He gave her another once-over—again appearing unimpressed with what he saw—and lifted his shoulders.

“About fifteen kilograms. You look weak and soft as hell, but you’ll probably be able to manage that.”

“I’m not weak and soft,” she retorted sharply.

“No?” Now it was his turn to look dubious.

“No, I can do this,” she told him through chattering teeth. God, she was freezing. It felt like cold and wet had been pretty much her constant state of being since arriving in this godawful place. She turned toward the bags and fumbled with one, her frigid, numb fingers struggling to get a grip around the edges of the bag.

He made an impatient sound behind her and brushed by her to pick up two bags at once and load them into one of the empty wheelbarrows.

Show-off.

Iris was finally able to wedge her fingers beneath the bag and managed—with an embarrassing groan and a great deal of effort—to lift it. She couldn't quite straighten her back and did a humiliating crouched little crab walk to the wheelbarrow, where—with gargantuan effort—she heaved it a bit higher to dump it on top of the *six* bags he'd already put in there.

He didn't acknowledge her paltry contribution. Instead he continued to steadily fill the wheelbarrow, six bags for every one of hers. She managed to double her pace after a couple of warm-up bags, but she was still much slower than he was.

She shrugged out of the raincoat, hoping she would move faster without having its cumbersome heaviness hamper her movements, but that didn't help.

The first wheelbarrow was filled within minutes—thanks to him—and he gave a pointed glare at the empty one, before leveling a critical look at her.

Yeah, message received.

Get your arse in gear, Iris!

“Wait,” she called as he turned to leave. “Don't you want to put your jacket back on?”

He shook his head.

“No point, I'm soaked through already. And it'll only slow me down.”

He was gone before she could reply and she rolled her eyes at the tough-guy routine before getting to work.

She managed to get a good rhythm going and had the second wheelbarrow almost half-filled by the time he returned with his now-empty one.

He stood glowering at her hard work for a second.

“It’s half-empty,” he said. The impatience snapping around the edges of his words curled her hands into tight fists.

“It’s half-full,” she corrected. “And I’m going as fast as I can.”

“Knew you’d be useless at this.”

The unfair words snatched her breath from her chest as anger heated her from the inside out.

“I’m doing the best I can, you-you *prick!* You’re twice my size. You can’t expect me to have the same strength and speed as you.”

“I get the feeling you’ve spent most of your life whining about how unfair life is and how you just can’t seem to catch a break. Complaining seems to be your natural state.”

“*Nothing* about these last few days has been normal, so excuse me for being vocal about how shit it’s all been.”

“Nobody to blame but yourself,” he said with an unconcerned shrug, bypassing her to grab a couple of sandbags.

“And y’know...” she said, huffing and groaning as she lifted another bag herself. “*You*. And your clearly incompetent manager.”

“Lift with your knees,” he instructed, as he watched her bend at the waist to grab the corners of a bag and drag it to the wheelbarrow, where she lifted it the short distance into the barrow bed. “You’ll fuck up your back if you keep doing it that way.”

“This is the easiest way for me to do it,” she argued, even though she was starting to feel the burn in her lower back already and her arms were in the process of turning to jelly.

“Try squatting when you grab the bag and then pushing up with your knees.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted stubbornly. She’d been lifting with her knees until the last few bags when her thighs had started to tremble with each squat. After nearly falling just before he’d

returned, she'd started in on this less-practical method. It was getting the job done. She'd worry about the pain later.

She could feel disapproval oozing from his very pores, but refused to look at him. He struck her as the type of man who was used to being deferred to and obeyed. He wouldn't appreciate being blatantly ignored.

But she didn't care. It was clear the interview was a no-go, so she didn't have to suck up to him. She was his unwilling prisoner and she wasn't about to be pleasant to her jailer.

She deliberately avoided eye contact as she dragged bag after bag to the wheelbarrow, refusing to acknowledge her shaking arms and thighs, or the burning sensation in her back and chest.

He left with the filled wheelbarrow and she started on the empty one. When he next returned it was three-quarters full. He didn't say anything, merely filled the rest of it, while she switched her focus to the empty wheelbarrow. They worked silently, side by side, for another hour.

Iris's entire body was one massive ache by then and she was going through the motions, moving like an unthinking automaton and barely registering his comings and goings while she worked.

When he returned with the wheelbarrow for the umpteenth time, Iris jerkily moved to retrieve another bag, but his hand on her elbow stayed the movement.

"We're out of bags," he said, and she blinked, gazing at the empty corner uncomprehendingly. "Why don't you sit over here while I stack these last few? I'll be right back."

He led her to a rickety wooden bench, probably stored in the shed because it had seen better days. She had zero control over her movements and was grateful to him for leading her to the bench as she wouldn't have been able to make it there under her own steam.

When she sat down, a silent scream of agony reverberated through her brain as her muscles protested the new movement after more than an hour of the same repetitive motions. Iris

watched him disappear into the gloom and rain and knew that if he didn't return, she would be wholly incapable of going in search of him.

For the first time since they'd left the house, she found herself curious about Luna's whereabouts. The dog hadn't followed them outside and Iris wondered if it was because TDH had locked her in the house to prevent the canine from being underfoot while they worked.

Luna was a pleasant subject with which to occupy her wandering mind, and Iris wondered how old the dog was. Did she often travel with her owner? Iris hadn't really heard anything about him having a dog before. Usually celebrity-owned dogs achieved a degree of fame as well. And an oversized dog like Luna would surely have been noticed by the media.

Iris was idly mulling over the dog when Trystan Abbot reappeared, his hulking frame blocking out the sullen light in the doorway.

"Let's go," he commanded her in that no-nonsense, irritating way of his.

But, since Iris was incapable of moving, she attempted to deflect his attention. "What kind of dog is Luna?"

His head tilted as he watched at her. She couldn't read the expression on his face, not with the light behind him, but she sensed his curiosity.

He shocked the hell out of her when he deigned to reply. "Irish wolfhound."

"How old is she?"

"Two." Another easy reply. He propped a shoulder against the doorframe and folded his beefy arms over his chest, while he continued to stare at her. The rain had to be pelting against his back, but he gave no sign that it bothered him.

"And you've had her since she was a puppy?"

"Hmm."

"Does she often travel with you?"

“Hmm.”

Not very forthcoming, but she took it to mean yes.

“Why an Irish wolfhound?”

His shoulders shifted. “Why not?”

“Why are you answering my questions?” The question was out before she even knew she was going to ask it, her brain as sluggish as her body.

“Because it’s a very obvious delaying tactic,” he said, pushing away from the doorframe and coming toward her. He moved with the sinuous flexibility of a man who knew his body—and its limitations—very well. She’d never seen anything quite as sexy as that intent prowling gait of his.

“Delaying tactic?” she repeated. Yet another delaying tactic. It was embarrassingly obvious, and she almost imagined she caught the fleeting glimpse of a grin beneath that beard.

“You can’t move, can you?” he asked, lowering himself into a lithe squat in front of her. Crowding her with his heat and masculinity and bulk. His large hands were resting on the bench on either side of her hips and his face was inches away from hers.

The clean scent of fabric softener wafted up from his soaked clothing, combined with something woody—his shampoo or soap maybe. God, he smelled amazing. No expensive aftershave or cologne here. Just soap, and detergent, and outdoors, and *man*.

She swallowed past the painful lump that had lodged in her throat.

This was Trystan Abbot, hottest man on the planet according to several well-known publications, as well as the thousands of fan-run social media accounts dedicated to him. Not to mention the hundreds of millions of people scattered across the globe who flocked to see his movies every year.

The guy was undeniably charismatic, sexy, and a feast for the eyes. And—after the kidnapping and imprisonment and

arseholery of the last twenty-four hours—Iris had lost sight of exactly who it was she was dealing with. But right now, despite his grumpiness and this whole lumberjack-hermit thing he had going on she was very conscious that the man in front of her was, in fact, a multiple-award-winning movie star.

“How bad is it?” he asked, an unfamiliar gentleness seeping into his voice.

“What?” She couldn’t quite keep up with the conversation. Not when she was so exhausted and in pain and overwhelmingly aware of who he was.

“The pain? How bad is it?”

Oh.

She stared down at her hands, which were resting palm up on her lap, fingers curled into claws.

“Well, I don’t think I can bend my fingers,” she admitted. “And I’m not sure I can lift my arms. My thighs feel like jelly and I very much doubt my legs’ll be able to support my weight. And my back...”

Her words faded into a moan as she finally acknowledged how bad her back was.

He sighed deeply, the exhalation emerging on a quiet grunt.

“C’mon, let’s get you inside.”

One of his arms encircled her waist, and the other slid beneath her thighs. And within seconds—in an impressive show of strength—he effortlessly went from a squat to standing upright, with her in his arms.

As if she hadn’t been awed enough by his strength and stamina after all the heavy lifting she’d seen him do already today.

“You don’t have to carry me,” she protested, and he had the nerve to laugh at her. It wasn’t much of a laugh, just an incredulous little huff, but it was definitely mocking.

“What do you propose I do then? Load you into one of the wheelbarrows and push you uphill back to the house?”

“I’m heavy.”

“You’re certainly not light,” he agreed. So rude. “But I’ll manage.”

five

Iris knew there was no arguing with him over the matter. It was going to happen whether she wanted it to or not. And frankly, she was relieved. She really didn't think she was able to walk the distance back to the house without her legs giving way.

She was shivering—his body heat no match for the icy torrent of rain—and she curled one arm around his neck and lowered her cheek to his chest, covering her face with her free hand in a futile attempt to keep herself protected from the rain.

They'd foolishly left the oilskin behind.

She couldn't see where they were going, was just acutely cognizant of the steady, confident movements of the man who held her so securely in his arms.

In a matter of mere minutes, they were out of the rain and she lowered her hand and lifted her head to take in their surroundings. They were back in the kitchen, probably dripping all over the floor. Luna was making happy whining sounds of greeting.

Iris waited for him to put her down, but he didn't. After quietly commanding Luna to *stay*, he continued to walk through the kitchen, down the hall... back to her prison, she supposed. She was of no more use to him, no point keeping her around any longer than he had to. But he strode right past her door and continued down the hall before turning into a different room. It looked like a guest bedroom. Decorated in russets and browns.

“Wha—?”

He ignored her squawk of surprise and walked her directly into the en suite bathroom.

“You don’t have a tub in your suite. And I think you need a warm soak,” he said, as he sat her down on the commode. He rolled up his sleeves, perched his butt on the bath’s narrow rim, and opened the faucet, occasionally holding a hand beneath the stream of water to check the temperature, and adjusting accordingly.

Oh God, the massive soaker tub looked so damned appealing Iris actually moaned in longing at the sight of it.

He rummaged through the vanity cupboard while the tub filled with steaming hot water and made a soft sound of triumph when he found bath salts. He liberally sprinkled them into the water and agitated it with his hand. The scent of bergamot and jasmine immediately permeated the bathroom.

“Strip,” he commanded her curtly and, for the first time since he took charge in the shed, Iris truly balked.

“Not with you here.”

His eyes were incredulous as he turned to stare at her.

“Yes, with me here.”

“No.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before, remember?”

Iris’s cheeks lit with the fires of hell as she recalled the moment he’d slammed into the bathroom last night.

“Well, I don’t *want* you to see me naked again.”

“Do you think you’re capable of getting out of your clothing without my assistance?”

Her lips thinned as she considered the question. And humiliatingly, the answer was a resounding *no*. The hoodie wouldn’t be a problem, but the button fly of her boyfriend jeans would be a challenge. Well, not so much a challenge as an insurmountable obstacle. There was no way she’d be able to undo those buttons with her numb, aching fingers.

She shrugged out of her moisture-heavy hoodie—dropping it to the tiled floor with a wet *thwack*—leaving only the soaked-through black tank top she wore beneath it.

Thereafter she was at a loss, staring helplessly down at her double-knotted boots while trembling violently, her chattering teeth and shuddering breath the only noise in the room.

Trystan Abbott shocked the hell out of her, when—with a quiet grunt—he sank to his knees in front of her and made quick work of unlacing her boots, then he encircled her ankle in his large hand.

“Lift.”

Incapable of doing anything other than obey, Iris dropped a hand to his broad shoulder for balance and lifted her foot while he tugged the boot off quickly and tossed it aside. He repeated the process with the other foot.

Then he remained kneeling there, at face level with her stomach. He said nothing and for a long moment he just sat there, staring at the soaked cotton tank top she wore. Thank God it was black or she’d be giving him quite the peep show—since she hadn’t bothered with a bra.

“Let’s do this,” he finally spoke, raising his face to meet her eyes. She could see the grim determination in his expression and the steely resolve in those beautiful eyes.

Before she could register his words and the meaning behind them, he slipped his left hand between the waistband of her jeans and her cold goosefleshed abdomen.

Iris sucked in a shocked breath when she felt the cold backs of his long fingers brush against her sensitive flesh.

Oh, God! This was so humiliating.

He grasped the placket of her jeans between thumb and forefinger, his knuckles flexing against her tummy at the move. Iris gritted her teeth, refusing to react in any way. This was purely impersonal. He was doing it because it needed to be done. And as such, Iris needed to treat this intimate touch as nothing more than a clinical necessity. Like visiting her

doctor's office. Yes, that was it! This was *exactly* the same as Dr. Herbert's touch.

Only... Dr. Herbert was seventy, wore ill-fitting dentures, sported the world's most unconvincing comb-over, and had known Iris since she was a baby. While the man kneeling at her feet was in his prime, gorgeous, and the world's biggest movie star. And *he* currently had a big, assertive hand tucked into the waistband of her jeans—the blunt tips of his fingers intimately close to the top of her bikini panties—while his other fingers undid the stubborn buttons of her jeans.

Iris couldn't help it—she moaned and covered her face with both hands.

“This is so embarrassing,” she said, her voice muffled by her hands.

He didn't respond, merely peeled her wet jeans down her generous hips.

Iris squealed in horror when she realized her panties were starting to slide down with the denim.

“Oh, for the love of Jesus, *please* stop,” she pleaded, and his hands stilled on her hips. Where before they'd gripped the top of her jeans, he now flattened them against her rounded hips and held them there, staring up at her quizzically.

“Think you can manage from here?” he asked after a beat of silence and she blinked, surprised by the question. No. Not surprised by the question, but by the odd tremble in his voice when he asked said question.

“I think so,” she said on a whisper. He looked unconvinced and she nodded assertively. “Yes, I can.”

He pushed lithely to his feet and towered above her once more, too damned close for comfort.

“Uhm, what about...” He made a vague gesture and Iris cocked her head as she tried to decipher what it could mean.

“What about *what?*”

He took a step back, waved his fingers at her chest before his eyes dropped to where he was pointing. They seemed to

snag there and—baffled—Iris followed his gaze down before hastily folding her arms over her very, *very* hard nipples. She wished she could say the reaction was entirely due to the cold and wet, but... she disguised a little shudder as she remembered the feeling of his fingers sliding down her abdomen. Her frikking stupidly sensitive abdomen, which had always been one of her *wind me up and watch me pop* erogenous zones.

“Your bra,” he stated after another weird little silence. “Can you—”

“Not wearing one,” she said curtly, then immediately wished the words back. His lips curled into what looked like a full-on smirk and he opened his mouth to say something, but she hijacked his words before he could utter them.

“Don’t say it,” she bit out irritably, and this time he was the one to fold his arms over his chest as he waited for her to continue. Which she did, with a bitter note of self-deprecation in her voice. “I clearly don’t need one, right? That *is* what you were going to say? Or some nasty variation of the same. Yes?”

He held up his hands in surrender and took another step back.

“Get into that tub before you turn into a papsicle—get it? —*papsicle* because you’re a blood-sucking leech of a pap?”

She gritted her teeth so hard she felt something in her jaw pop. God, *ouch*, she wasn’t going to be doing that again anytime soon.

“I’m not a pap,” she snapped at him.

“You should own that shit. Even a rat doesn’t deny that it’s a rat and belongs with other rats.”

“What a dumb analogy. You know, people are always raving about your intellect and emotional intelligence, but I confess, I haven’t seen much—or *any*—of that on display since arriving here. All I’ve seen is a mean, bitter asshole of a guy wallowing in his self-inflicted misery.”

This time he was the one who gritted his teeth and Iris wondered if she’d actually hit a nerve.

“If I’m mean and bitter it’s because I have an unwelcome intruder in my space. You’re here on sufferance, lady”—as if she needed the reminder—“so tread fucking lightly. Hurry up and get warmed up so that I can get you out of my hair again.”

He turned away from her and stalked out of the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him, which was why she knew he hadn’t gone any further than the attached guest bedroom.

“You’re not going to give me more privacy than that?”

“Nope.” His voice drifted back insouciantly. “You can shut the door, but I have the key, so you can’t lock it.”

Iris eyed the open door. She could see only a sliver of the bedroom and she doubted he was able to see much of anything through that small gap. Besides, she was terrified that if she *did* shut the door, he would lock it. And she didn’t think she could stand it if he did that. She’d rather take her chances with the door ajar.

Decision made, she shrugged—eager to get into the bath—and clumsily shoved the jeans down her legs, before gingerly removing her tank top. She was sinking into the almost unbearably hot water mere moments later. She nearly added more cold water but she acclimatized quite quickly, despite the uncomfortable pins and needles skittering across her naked flesh.

Eventually, she was able to settle herself completely into the water with a blissful sigh. She lay there for a long time, allowing the heat to seep into her bones. Despite her shower last night, this was the first time she felt like she’d truly thawed since arriving here.

It was wonderful.

She hummed quietly to herself as she scooped water up over her arms, shoulders, and neck... allowing herself a moment of peace. Blocking her situation, and the awful man in the other room, out of her mind for a few precious minutes.

Just a few precious minutes, before...

“Hurry the fuck up, will you? I’d like to get warmed up as well.”

She sighed regretfully and shook her head.

“Nobody’s stopping you. Don’t worry about me, I’ll find my way back to my room.”

Silence. There was a beat of blissful silence, during which Iris allowed herself to relax again.

Then, “If you’re not done in five minutes I’m coming in there and hauling your ass out of that bathtub.”

Of course he was.

Iris clicked her tongue and idly soaped herself before—after way too short a time—she reluctantly rinsed off, got up, and wrapped a towel around her comfortably warm body.

There was an oversized fluffy, white bathrobe hanging from a hook behind the door and—after toweling herself vigorously—Iris dropped the massive plush bath sheet into the laundry hamper and shrugged into the robe.

She threw her shoulders back and lifted her head before pushing the door open and stepping back into the bedroom.

He was waiting for her there. Well, it appeared that he’d left the room long enough to at least divest himself of his own wet clothes. He was now wearing a pair of clingy light gray sweatpants—oh *mama*—and a form-fitting black T-shirt. He still looked pretty cold though. His hair was wet and she could see the gooseflesh pebbling his skin even with a couple of meters between them.

He was sitting on the edge of the large bed, his gaze trained on her face. His focus so intent, it was a little intimidating.

“You were in there for nearly fifteen minutes,” he grouched.

“I could easily have stayed in there for another fifteen, if you hadn’t been such a time tyrant.”

His beard twitched—what was happening under there? Was he grinding his teeth, chewing the inside of his cheek, clenching his jaw? It was anybody's guess.

“The beard's a bit of overkill, no? Is it meant to be a disguise? Not like anybody will find you out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“*You* did.”

“Thanks to your manager.”

“So you keep saying.”

Iris made a disdainful sound in the back of her throat.

“I'm ready to be escorted back to my prison cell now,” she informed him, with a haughty toss of her damp hair. *God*, she really wasn't—the thought of returning to that room made her skin crawl. Her bravado was a total bluff.

“Your Medusa-like curls seem to have multiplied.” The observation was almost wrenched from him, and Iris raised a self-conscious hand to her hair. Usually she had highly controllable, gentle waves, but her hair became a different creature when it got wet and was allowed to dry without any kind of intervention. The waves morphed into crazy spiral curls that sprouted in all directions, without any care or concern for structure and organization.

“It's not very polite to comment on my physical appearance.”

He lifted an incredulous brow at her criticism. “You literally just commented on mine. Why are *you* allowed these licenses but not me?”

Iris blinked and then nodded slowly, acknowledging his point.

“You're right... I'm sorry. I think sometimes it's easy to lose sight of the fact that public figures deserve the same consideration as the rest of the population. I was being a hypocrite.”

He stared at her, his probing gaze alit with a healthy dose of skepticism.

“I mean it,” she insisted, not appreciating his blatant disbelief. Iris took pride in her honesty and rarely said what she didn’t mean. That candor didn’t always work in her favor but she was incapable of dissembling. And this man had accused her of being a liar from the get-go, which was *infuriating*.

“So, you don’t think the beard is —what’d you call it?— overkill?”

“What?” *That* was his takeaway from her apology? Seriously, talking to him was like trying to communicate with an alien species. “No, I *meant* that. I just ... shouldn’t have said it. My brain-to-mouth filter sometimes malfunctions. I shouldn’t have commented on your appearance. It was rude. I allowed myself to be provoked into saying something that was better left unsaid.”

“So, you’re blaming *me* for provoking you into speaking your mind? I did no such thing. I have to say, this is an extremely bizarre apology.”

“It’s an honest apology,” she corrected him. “I’m sorry I said what I did about your beard. And that *crazy hermit* comment I made last night was uncalled for as well. And hurtful.”

“I don’t care enough about your opinions to be hurt by them,” he told her stiffly.

Iris worried her plump lower lip with her teeth before lifting her shoulders in a minute shrug—hating that *she* cared enough about his opinion to actually be wounded by that stupid comment.

“Fair enough. I apologize regardless.”

She swallowed painfully, while he stared at her again, a long, scraping regard that made her skin prickle and her nerve endings feel raw. Eventually he nodded—an acceptance of her apology perhaps?—and grasped her elbow in a firm, but loose grip. His hand so cold she could feel it through the thick fabric of the bathrobe.

Iris had to be getting used to his unsolicited touches because she barely reacted to it this time. In fact, she almost liked the proprietary hold. Ugh, maybe she was developing Stockholm syndrome or something.

He marched her back to her room without a word, and once there, he stood in the doorway and watched her for a moment before saying, “I’ll bring you some lunch after I’ve had a shower.”

“Thank you.”

Another long stare and then he stepped back and slammed the door in her face. She held her breath for a few seconds, hoping... until she heard the key turn in the lock. Her breath escaped on a slow, dejected sigh and her shoulders dropped. Deep breaths... she could do this. She’d done it before.

She turned back to stare at her cell. It looked cozy. Spacious. Not prison-like at all, but it was fast becoming the equivalent of a dungeon to Iris. She *hated* it. Hated not being able to just open the door and leave anytime she wanted to.

She pushed down the panic that threatened to claw its way out of her throat in the form of a scream, and headed straight for the window. She shoved it up and inhaled deeply. So much for that warm bath... the frigid air immediately chilled her again. But she didn’t care. She stood there for a long moment, staring at the ground just a meter below the windowsill. And after a few more deep breaths, stepped back and shut the window again, shivering but better.

She walked to the sofa and picked up her laptop. Maybe she could distract herself from obsessing over that locked door by writing. She also needed to update her journal. When she was a teenager and starting to exhibit her anxiety issues her school counsellor, Mrs. Crowley, had encouraged her to start a journal to keep track of her *events*—as the woman called them. The idea was to be as detailed as possible in her entries so that they could attempt to identify what specific interactions or incidents triggered her panic attacks.

Iris had found it to be therapeutic and had kept a journal ever since.

TDH still hadn't given her the Wi-Fi password as promised, but she didn't need Wi-Fi to write.



“HEY.”

The deep, intrusive voice didn't register at first as Iris continued to tap industriously away at her keyboard.

“*Hey*, lady! I brought your lunch.”

Her body jerked in fright and her eyes flew up to stare at the man hovering just inside the doorway. He was clutching yet another tray in his massive paws and had a dish towel slung over one broad shoulder, and...

She blinked a few times as she stared at his face uncomprehendingly. Specifically at the neatly trimmed beard.

It was still too long, but he'd definitely gone through some effort to tidy it up a bit. The bushiness had been somewhat tamed. There was a line of pale skin visible from his throat to the corner of his mouth where the hair didn't grow. It hadn't been as noticeable with the longer, bushier beard, but now it was obvious that he had a nasty scar hidden under the scruff. It must be as a result of his accident. Iris did her level best not to stare, but she knew she wasn't very successful when his jaw tightened and his brow lowered into an almost defensive glower.

His burning eyes bored into hers in unmistakable challenge and Iris pinched her lips between her teeth to refrain from commenting. The scar fueled her curiosity, but the trimmed beard was a surprise as well. Had he cut it because of her earlier comments? It didn't seem likely. Trystan Abbot surely didn't give one shit about her opinion. He'd even said as much. Yet... the timing was suspicious.

He put the tray down on the table with enough force to cause the dishes to rattle.

“Thank you,” she said beneath her breath and the swift downward jerk of his head was the only indication that he'd heard her. “Where's Luna?”

“You’re obsessed with my dog. Cut it out.”

“I like dogs,” she said, rolling her eyes. The man was pricklier, and more ill-tempered, than a rabid porcupine. “And Luna is a friendly face in enemy territory. I appreciate her. I wish you’d let her stay with me for a bit. She’s good company.”

He ignored her. So predictable.

Iris sighed and set aside her laptop—the writing had thankfully succeeded in distracting her from her circumstances—and rolled herself off the sofa, wincing with the movement. Her muscles were really starting to protest even the smallest of movements.

“Drink more fluids,” Mr. Unsolicited Advice offered begrudgingly. “It’ll help with the cramps.”

“I have been,” Iris said as she limped her way to the table where he still stood. He was as tense as a coiled spring and looked ready to bolt at any second. This was probably longer than he wanted to interact with her, which begged the question: *Why was he still here?*

Iris eyed the laden tray avariciously, her mouth flooding with saliva at the sight and smell of the generous portions of rustic meaty stew and home-baked bread.

“This looks and smells amazing,” Iris said, and her stomach growled in agreement. “You made it yourself?”

“You see anyone else around?” The words were short, his tone impatient, but Iris gave him a sanguine look that she knew would probably annoy him.

“I haven’t seen much of anything since I’ve been here. For all I know you could have a dozen guests and a full complement of house staff.”

“Up until *you* crash-landed on our doorstep, Luna and I were blissfully and happily alone.”

“Not even your bodyguard? That hot Aussie guy? That seems irresponsible.”

“Yeah, trust me, I have regrets about leaving him behind. Chance wouldn’t have let you come within a hundred yards of the house.”

“Why *did* you leave him behind?” she asked, tilting her head curiously as she watched him closely to gauge his reaction. As expected, his eyes immediately shuttered and his body went rigid.

“This was supposed to be a safe place.” The intense, resentful words spilled from his lips almost involuntarily. “A private place. But you fucking vultures keep tracking me down.”

Stung, Iris retreated into silence, not sure how to respond to that. There were those who argued that public figures couldn’t expect privacy, that they belonged to everyone, and—as such—their lives were diverting fodder for the greedy and entitled masses to feast on.

Iris had never been one of those people. She’d come here expecting a story, and admission into Trystan Abbott’s private sanctum and inner circle. But she’d believed that she had his explicit consent to step into his life and his spotlight for a short period of time. She would never have come here otherwise. And she hated that he believed that she had such a wanton disregard for his right to privacy.

“If you’d be willing to look at them,” she broached the subject tentatively, hoping he’d listen this time and not shut her down immediately as he had last time she’d brought up the subject. “Like I mentioned before, I do have correspondence between myself and Mr. Quinn.”

His already furled brow furrowed even more, and it was hard not to scurry away from such an impressive display of masculine outrage. She stood her ground though, so close to him that she was getting a crick in her neck from the height difference between them as she tried to maintain eye contact.

Shockingly, *he* was the one who looked away first. He took a couple of steps backward.

“Eat your lunch.”

Worrying at her lip with her teeth, Iris watched him retreat, disappointed that he hadn't responded to her suggestion about the correspondence between her and Hunter Quinn. She tried to ignore the sound of the key in the lock, hoping that if she didn't hear it she could trick herself into believing that it wasn't locked.

But the sound of the key turning reverberated through her brain like a bullet shattering a silent night. Her shoulders tensed and she tried to distract herself with thoughts of her jailer.

She wondered about that scar—it looked pretty bad. How severe had his injuries been? Newspapers had only reported that he was in a stable condition. A few horribly invasive pictures had surfaced of him in hospital immediately after the accident. There had been others as well, of Trish Nesbitt, that had turned Iris's stomach. She couldn't understand how someone could have taken pictures like that. Evan had pored over those images with morbid curiosity, often trying to show them to Iris—who had literally gagged after one quick glance at a picture of the—clearly dead—woman. Her friend had then mocked Iris for having the wrong constitution for this job.

She shook her head and dragged a chair out from underneath the dining table before sitting down to have the meal provided for her. She found a Post-it note with the Wi-Fi password scribbled on it beneath the bread basket, and quickly signed into the Wi-Fi while she scarfed down the delicious meal.

Trystan Abbott was a good cook.

Who knew?

She sent quick apologies to her parents and Evan—who'd finally surfaced from her hangover—explaining that she'd been without Wi-Fi for a while.

Evan threatened to *cut a bitch* if Iris didn't give immediate details about where she was and who she was interviewing. Iris grimaced, wishing she hadn't teased her friend about this big reveal. It didn't feel right to divulge any information until

she'd cleared up this misunderstanding between herself and the two powerful men.

Iris: I can't tell you anything yet, Ev. I'm sorry. Shit got a little complicated and I have to see if I've actually still got the interview before I can reveal anything more.

Her friend sent half a dozen poop emojis in response and Iris grinned.

Iris: Tell me what you got up to last night? You get lucky?

Evan: 'Course I did (eye roll)

Iris: That's my girl! Who was the lucky guy? Girl? Anyone I know?

Evan: Hooked up with a hottie at that summer charity event I told you I was going to. Haven't seen her before. Doubt I'll see her again. But she was fun.

Iris grinned. It was hard to keep up with Evan sometimes, and she often wondered why her friend hung out with her. Evan was cool, edgy, interesting and she knew exactly what she wanted from life. She worked as a junior executive assistant to the editor of an up-and-coming gossip magazine. And she'd once told Iris that she meant to have the woman's job in two years, come hell or high water. Evan was such a driven and determined woman that Iris didn't for a second doubt that she'd achieve her goals with time to spare.

It was hard not to be envious of her friend, whom she'd met at uni. They had the same dream, but Evan was miles ahead of Iris. Iris had spent so much time—during and after university—helping out with the catering business that, before she'd known it, four years had passed, and she was still in exactly the same place. Writing the occasional freelance article while working for her parents. Evan, in the meantime, had interned at *Vogue*, *GQ* and *Glamour*. Before landing this job at *Looker* magazine.

She was constantly regaling Iris with stories of glitzy celebrity parties, borrowed designer finery, dressing to the nines, and dating/sleeping with influential, beautiful people. Iris didn't envy any of that since she'd never been interested in

being on trend and knowing the “right kind” of people. All she’d ever wanted to do was the work. She didn’t care about the fast, glamorous life that came with it. She was—and always would be—a homebody. And while Evan had often inferred that Iris didn’t have the right attitude or the cutthroat mentality required for this kind of work, Iris had always felt that all she needed was an opportunity to prove what she could do.

If Evan were here instead of Iris, she would have charmed—and quite possibly seduced—Trystan Abbott out of his foul mood by now. And she’d have convinced him of her credentials and legitimacy in no time flat. She would have become his pampered guest and he would never have asked pretty, fragile Evan to hoist sandbags into a wheelbarrow.

Iris sighed wistfully. Annoyed that she was comparing herself with her best friend. Something she’d promised herself she would never do.

She was just going at a different pace. Evan didn’t have the commitments Iris did. She was from a wealthy, powerful family. She’d never been asked to sacrifice any of her needs or wants for the sake of the family business. That had been one of the many fundamental differences between them, and Iris had long ago accepted that comparing herself with Evan would only lead to grief and discontent. Instead, she celebrated her friend’s wins and achievements and tried not to come down too hard on herself for being nowhere near the same level as Evan as far as career goals went.

This was supposed to be a great—if not equalizer then at least—step up for Iris. Her big break. And it was all falling apart around her.

She scrolled through the many pics Ev had sent and smiled a little wistfully at how perfect and happy her beautiful friend looked in each picture.

Evan: It was a total celeb fest. A-listers everywhere. There was even a rumor that Trystan Abbott was coming, but he was a no-show.

Iris snorted at that text. Trystan Abbott had been too busy tormenting *her* last night to think about some fancy charity gala in London.

She sent a shocked emoji in response to Evan's text, not sure what else to say or do when she knew exactly where Trystan Abbott had been last night.

She replied to a couple of texts from her mom and dad and one from her brother.

Robbie: The fuck you do with my black sleeveless hoodie?!!!

Huh?

Iris: How should I know where your hoodie is? Ask Mum.

His only reply was a middle-finger emoji, which Iris stared at for a second before shrugging and moving on from the text. She didn't wear his clothes; they were all miles too big for her. And she shared a small flat with two other women, so she never had access to Robbie's clothing anyway. Sometimes he'd blame her for the most random shit. But Iris liked to believe it was because he missed her and accusing her of clothing theft was his way of staying in contact with her.

She finished her—now lukewarm—stew and got up with a pained groan, picking up the tray and hobbling to the sink to do the dishes.

That done, she tried to stretch for a few minutes hoping it would help, but it only seemed to make things worse, before giving up and heading back to the sofa and her laptop.

The rest of the day was uneventful. TDH returned once more with her dinner—at about seven that evening—and said not one word to her. Luna remained conspicuous in her absence. And, despite being able to message family and friends, Iris felt crushingly alone.

After her reluctant host dropped the tray and escaped with ego-bruising swiftness, Iris picked at the meal of lemon and garlic butter basted fish fillets, with baked baby potatoes and a crunchy, fresh salad. Iris couldn't quite identify the light white-fleshed fish, but the meal was yet another winner from her warden. The fish was perfectly cooked and delicately seasoned but Iris lacked the appetite to do it justice.

She had messaged and tried calling Hunter Quinn several more times—no luck. She knew it was probably futile, he likely *was* on that bizarre-sounding silent retreat, but attempting to contact him made Iris feel somewhat in control. And maybe she was crazy for trying, but it was better than doing nothing at all.

She had also tried to do some research on the accident that had been the catalyst for Trystan fleeing the public eye, but there was nothing new to be found. A single-car accident, two victims, one fatality. The driver—Trish Nesbitt—had died, but was found to have had no narcotics or alcohol in her system. The only other person involved in the accident had remained tight-lipped about it and had eventually fallen off the face of the earth.

All of which she'd known before coming here, and all of which told her precisely nothing. Iris crawled into bed feeling unsettled, unhappy, and uncertain. This felt like a bigger story than she'd anticipated, like more responsibility than she knew what to do with. It felt grave, weighty, and like she could do serious damage if she fucked it up in any way.

As she lay in bed that night, she acknowledged to herself that she didn't feel that curl of excitement her biological father had often described when he was working on a big story. She didn't have that pressing need to find out everything there was to know about said story, every minute detail that could possibly lead to the biggest scoop of her life.

She didn't *want* to know. She wanted to leave it alone, undiscovered, buried with Trish Nesbitt and unspoken by Trystan Abbott. It felt like the worst kind of prying, and she didn't feel any driving instinct to uncover it.

This felt a long way off from the fun puff piece she'd imagined it would be. This was someone's life. Someone's *death*. And Iris didn't think she had any right to trample all over Trish Nesbitt's grave.

"Worst time ever to discover that maybe this isn't what you want to do with your life, Iris, you dolt," she groaned into the darkness. The rain had abated somewhat, but the wind was still howling, whistling through the trees and the eaves of the big house.

She covered her face with her hands and prayed for sleep, but between the eerie whistling wind, the feeling of being helpless and trapped, and the clamoring thoughts in her brain, that blessed oblivion was a long way off.



WHEN TRYSTAN BROUGHT her breakfast the following morning, Iris remained seated on the sofa, miserably wrapped around the hot-water bottle she'd discovered in the bedroom closet.

Every muscle in her body hurt and her back was in spasm. She shifted to press the bag into the small of her back,

muffling a groan as she watched him enter the room, without sparing her a glance.

Trystan. Somewhere between yesterday and this morning Iris had stopped thinking of him as TDH or by his full name. She wasn't sure how it had happened, or why, but she was uncomfortable with the fact that she now thought of him as just Trystan. It made him seem more human, approachable... which meant she had to tread carefully because she knew he'd hate it if he comprehended where her thoughts had roamed.

Trystan.

Grumpy, hot, reticent, aloof *Trystan.*

He remained silent as he lowered the tray to the table and turned to leave, not even glancing at her before hot-footing it back to the door. Once there, he hesitated. His jaw flexed beneath that now-short black beard. Iris was inspecting the scar—but it was hard to see it clearly with the beard in the way—and fretting about the type of injury that would have caused it when he turned his head and caught her staring. He pinned her with an almost resentful glower.

She quickly averted her gaze and he actually *growled* in response to her evasion. The low, animalistic sound had her eyes snapping back up to his and there was a smoldering satisfaction in his stare when she met his eyes this time.

What the hell was going on with *him* this morning?

The silence stretched between them for an endless moment until, “You’re not going to ask after Luna?”

“Why?” Iris asked, alarmed. “Is she hurt?”

“She’s fine.”

Iris stared at him in confusion, not sure what to say.

“You’re always asking if she can stay with you.”

Always, as if they already had some cozy little routine in place just two days into her imprisonment.

“What would be the point?” She fought—unsuccessfully—to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “You’d just say no.”

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked, his eyes raking over her crumpled form.

“Absolutely nothing. All sunshine and roses here,” she said with a twist of her lips. She started to make a dismissive gesture with her arm, but aborted the movement halfway through. She grimaced and tucked the aching appendage close to her torso.

“You’re in pain.” He was crouched in front of her within seconds. How the hell did he move so fast? It wasn’t normal. “How bad?”

“Pretty bad,” she admitted in a miserable little voice.

“Where does it hurt the most?” His voice was neutral, unemotional but his gaze remained pinned to hers, following her eyes when she tried to evade that uncomfortable, probing molten silver stare.

“My back,” she admitted with a shuddering sigh, her eyes burning as she fought to hold back her tears.

“Right. Okay.” He dropped his hands on the sofa on either side of her hips and seemed to think for a moment before he nodded decisively. Just a fast, jerky up-down motion of his head.

“Do you have anything that can double as a swimsuit?”

“What?” His question baffled her and she stared at him like he’d grown an extra head. Was he crazy? A swimsuit? Why would she need a swimsuit? The rain had stopped during the night, but it was still gray and cold and windy out there.

“Humor me, okay?”

“I do have something,” she conceded reluctantly, thinking of the ridiculous bikini she’d packed. “Why?”

“There’s a hot tub in the natatorium.”

“The *natatorium*?”

“A room containing an indoor swimming pool.”

She glared at him, offended that he’d felt the need to explain.

“I *know* what a natatorium is, I was just surprised to learn that you had one.”

“Why? You see what it’s like in winter. And it’s great to be able get a few laps in every day, regardless of the weather. I think an indoor swimming pool is essential in a place like this.”

“Hmm... Your idea of essential and mine differ greatly.” She knew she sounded tart and judgy, but seriously, an indoor pool? Nobody truly *needed* an indoor pool. Still, that hot tub he’d mentioned sounded like paradise round about now, so maybe she should get off her high horse and just be grateful he had a frikking *natatorium* tucked away in his holiday hideaway.

He didn’t respond to her comment, merely continued to stare at her and they both simultaneously became aware of the fact that one of his long thumbs was absently stroking her thigh through the stretchy fabric of her sweatpants. Her mouth dropped open and his eyes widened as he jerked his hand away as if he’d been scalded.

Meanwhile, Iris felt as if she *had* been scalded. She could still feel the firm stroke of that thumb against her flesh, the heat from his hand seared into her skin like a brand.

He leaped to his feet and shoved his hands into his sweatpants pockets, lowering his head to glare down at her.

“Eat your breakfast and then get changed. I’ll return for you in half an hour.”



HE WAS as good as his word. Back in exactly thirty minutes, while Iris sat waiting—after having painfully struggled into the bright pink and white string bikini in record-breaking time—on the sofa. She felt outrageously exposed, despite the warm, thick bathrobe she wore over the scandalously tiny bikini.

She was just thinking that maybe a pair of boy shorts and a black bra would be a little more conservative when he stepped back into the room.

“You ready?” he asked, eyeing her modestly covered, huddled form skeptically. She nodded wordlessly, feeling tongue-tied, nervous, and ridiculous.

A slight movement behind him—in the open door—caught her eye, and her face lit up at the sight of Luna.

“*Luna*, I’m so happy to see you!” The dog ambled over to her and stoically accepted Iris’s enthusiastic hug.

Shockingly, Trystan allowed the interaction without calling Luna away. He remained standing by the door, waiting with every appearance of patience.

Because of that seeming patience, Iris didn’t feel the perverse need to make him wait any longer and shakily pushed to her feet. To her surprise he moved toward her, covering the distance in a few short strides, until he was hovering right beside her, hands slightly outstretched as if to catch her if she fell.

She eyed those big, capable hands in horror and amusement, not at all sure what his intentions were right now.

“Do you need help?” The tight awkwardness in his voice told her that he wasn’t certain of his next move either.

“I think I’m okay to walk,” she said, taking one wobbly step before he made an impatient grunting sound and closed his hand around her elbow in support.

This time she didn’t even bother calling him out on the grabbiness because she was actually grateful for the aid. And truthfully, she didn’t really mind it, not even when she’d mentioned it to him before. She’d just felt the need to establish boundaries even though she hadn’t felt truly threatened by his bossy touch.

She allowed him to steer her toward the door, even though she hardly needed direction out of the room. Her phone beeped as they slowly made their way to the door and she pulled it out of her pocket with her free hand to check the incoming message.

He stopped walking abruptly and she lifted her head in confusion, only to find him glaring down at the phone in her

hand.

“Leave that behind.”

“What? My *phone*? But...”

“No recording devices allowed in the rest of the house.”

Was he joking? One look at his grim face told her what a ridiculous question that was. Despite evidence she’d seen to the contrary in the past, Trystan Abbott did not seem to possess much in the way of a sense of humor. Those interviews of an approachable and laughing Trystan Abbott had to have been staged.

“Recording device? It’s my phone.”

“It’s a camera. And an audio recorder. It stays in the room.”

“You’re paranoid,” she protested. As indictments went it was pretty weak, but it was all she could come up with right now in the face of this outrageousness.

“I don’t think so. I’m cautious around someone who has invaded my privacy and tried to feed me a pack of lies. You can use your phone in your own room...”

“My prison cell, you mean? And don’t you *dare* call me a liar! I haven’t lied to you, not once. I told you I have messages and texts from Mr. Quinn but you’re being a dick about even looking at them. Here, I’ll show you...”

She swiped at her phone, frantically looking for even *one* of those messages to shove into his face, but he calmly took the phone from her and held it behind his back.

“*Hey*, give that back!” she tried to grab it, but he lifted it above his head, flouting her attempts to take the device back from him.

She stopped reaching for her phone. It would be impossible to get it from him and she was merely making an idiot of herself in the process.

She’d never truly hated anyone in her life before, not even the people who had made her life a living hell back in school,

but Iris was definitely leaning toward that emotion with this man.

“When you’re alone,” he continued doggedly, as if her outraged interruption hadn’t even happened, which *infuriated* Iris even more. He disregarded the daggers flying at him from her eyes. “Call your family, laugh at cat memes, shop for more horrendous clothes... do whatever the fuck you want on that thing. But your phone doesn’t leave this room. If it *ever* manages to find its way out, I’m confiscating it. And if I see anything on social media about where you are, or about me, I’m destroying it and moving your *prison cell* to the shed. We clear?”

Great. Just like that he’d gone back to being TDH. Iris was grateful for that—she preferred TDH to Trystan. At least with TDH, what you saw was what you got.

But *Trystan* was dangerous. He had too much power and if he put his mind to it, he could destroy Iris *and* her family. And while she didn’t care about her nonexistent professional reputation, she very much cared about her family and the business her parents had worked so hard to make a success of. If she got on the wrong side of this man, he could tear that all apart without even blinking.

He handed her phone back and Iris’s lips tightened as she pointedly placed it on the small dining table on their way out of the door. She kept her focus on Luna, ignoring him as he led her from the room.

She hated that his grip was gentle on her arm, hated that he walked slowly out of consideration for the pain she was in. She hated the contradiction and wished he’d remain consistent in his arseholery. Because when he was considerate, it made him feel approachable, made her think they could talk, that she could be herself and joke and laugh with him.

Then, when he turned around and shut her down like she was less than human, it stung. It even hurt. And it shouldn’t. Not when he meant nothing to her.

“OH,” Iris’s gasp was soft, even reverent, as she took in the high vaulted glass ceilings of the natatorium with its gorgeous,

golden exposed beams. The temperature-controlled room reminded her of a greenhouse, with three glass walls to complement the glass ceiling. They had a view of the forest and the lake from this room and the stonework was the color of beach sand. The pool was half-Olympic-sized at the very least. There was a round spa sunk into its far side. Wooden benches and huge, leafy plants added ambiance and comfort to the space, and there was a glass-fronted cedar-wood sauna on this side of the room.

“This is amazing,” she whispered, her eyes huge as she looked around. She loved how lush and green it looked outside, despite the sullen gray clouds above.

“C’mon,” he urged, leading her toward the opposite end of the massive dark blue pool. Before she knew it, she was standing at the side of the spa—which was a few shades darker than the pool—and she could see the mosaics highlighting the shelved seating that ran all-round the tub. “Climb in, I’ll switch on the jets.”

“I really appreciate this,” she told him earnestly, ditching the robe without thinking, and then immediately regretting her rashness when he froze halfway through turning away.

Froze... and stared.

“That’s very—uh—*bright*,” he said, his words stumbling into one another like drunken sailors. He blinked at the two tiny pink and white triangles cupping her small boobs, before dropping his eyes to her gently rounded stomach, which—she regretted—had always had a bit of sag to it no matter how many crunches and sit-ups she did. She’d eventually given up on the dream of having an ab-tastic toned and taut tummy. She was happy enough with her curves to not stress the shit she couldn’t change without some kind of surgical intervention.

His wandering eyes slid away from her stomach—and dropped to her generous hips, then fell to the triangle at her crotch before jerking back up to her face.

“*This* is what you brought for swimming? In the Cape? In winter?” He finally managed to ask in hoarse incredulity, and Iris was rebelliously happy that she’d resisted the urge to fold

her arms over her small boobs with their hard nipples. For a few seconds there, she'd mistakenly believed he was gawking at her body, when in fact, he'd been horrified by her choice of bathing apparel.

Please. As if the likes of Trystan Abbott would ever be gawking at someone the caliber of ordinary, curvy Iris Hughes.

She immediately berated herself for the appalling lack of self-esteem that thought had betrayed. She'd worked very hard on her body positivity, and on loving herself and the way she looked. She'd be damned if she'd let one scathing put-down from a man with unrealistic beauty standards undo years of hard work.

She frowned as she stared at him, with his stupid beard and his big body and his beautiful eyes and face, and acknowledged that—those beauty standards were unrealistic for 99% of humankind. *Trystan Abbott*, however, could date any of those otherworldly goddess-like creatures if he wanted. Well, he *had* dated very many of them. A gorgeous array of supermodels, actresses, athletes, even a frikking *princess*—the man's only real criteria seemed to be that his sexual partners be as beautiful as he.

“What's going through that complicated, crazy brain of yours right now?” he asked, and her eyes widened at his almost affectionate question.

“I was thinking that I'm happy I brought this bathing suit. No matter how unsuitable it may seem to you. Since it's coming in handy right now.” She tilted her head defiantly and stepped into the blissfully warm water, and when she sat down she was submerged up to her neck. Her long sigh was filled with sheer contentment.

He watched her with an odd, indecipherable expression on his face before he turned to stride to a panel in the wall next to the sauna.

Iris made a delighted sound when the water bubbled to life, the jets exactly what she needed for her sore muscles.

She was shocked and a little horrified when Trystan—yes, he was back to *Trystan* again—joined her at the hot tub and shucked out of his clothes to reveal black board shorts beneath his sweatpants.

Iris tried not to gawk at the veritable feast of male perfection on display in front of her right now. Tight butt with long, strong, muscular legs and thighs combined with washboard abs, broad shoulders, chest and back. He had beautifully veined forearms and bulging biceps and triceps. There was zero fat on him. Everything was muscle, bone, and sinew.

She'd seen him wearing even less in movies, but nothing could prepare any human being for the reality of seeing Trystan Abbott in the flesh, so to speak. It was like seeing pictures of the painted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in books and on the Internet all your life, and then finally witnessing the real deal with your own eyes. There was just no comparison.

Iris had *not* expected him to join her, but he sank into the water with his own version of a blissed-out sigh—a harsh, broken groan—and sat down across from her. He was far enough away for them to not even accidentally brush against each other, but it still felt too close. And too intimate. Way, way, *way* too intimate.

She studied him carefully, not sure what—if anything—to say. His head was tilted back and his eyes were shut, and she was happy to have a few moments of relative privacy to have a minor freak-out about her current bizarre reality.

She was in a hot tub with TRYSTAN ABBOTT! How was this her life right now?

All too soon, he lifted his head and opened his eyes, pinning her to the spot with his interrogative gaze. He'd caught her staring, but didn't seem to think anything of it. And Iris recognized that this was a man who was probably used to being gawked at on a daily basis. She was just being like everyone else on the planet.

The only people who wouldn't stare were those he worked with and those with whom he was intimately acquainted.

Family, friends, familiars... Iris wasn't even an acquaintance. She didn't matter to him. And she never would.

"Are those aggressively pink splotches meant to be lips?" His question was confusing and unexpected, and she wasn't sure what the hell he meant.

"What?"

"On your bikini?"

Why was he asking about her bikini? In fact, why was he thinking about it at all?

"They're lipstick kisses."

"Right."

"They're cute."

"Right. Lipstick kisses all over your tits and ass. Cute. Got it."

She gritted her teeth—she *really* had to stop doing that—and refrained from asking him what that was supposed to mean.

Because his voice had been dripping with... *something*. Disdain? Sarcasm? Mockery? Whatever it was, it hadn't been anything positive.

"Thank you," she said instead, surprising and confusing him, if his expression was anything to go by.

"For what?"

"This," she said, idly waving her hand through the water. "It's heavenly."

He made a noncommittal grunting sound.

"So, I can't ask you anything because you'd lose your shit and accuse me of spying or some other unreasonable thing... but, I mean, you could ask *me* something. A few questions to ease your mind about who I am."

"I have absolutely no interest in finding out anything more than I already know about you."

"Oh."

She sank into wounded silence, while berating herself for allowing this man, who meant nothing to her, to once again hurt her dumb, sensitive feelings.

The awkward silence remained unbroken for a good few minutes before the man across from her sighed softly.

“Do you have a dog of your own at home to console you after your inevitable breakup with Luna?”

The unexpected question was silly and whimsical but Iris recognized—and appreciated—it for the attempted olive branch that it was.

“No. I’ve never had a dog. I’ve always wanted one but my dad is allergic to animal dander. So, no pets at all.”

“Your dad? Stanford Carter?”

“How do you know my father’s name?” she asked, stunned. They didn’t share a last name—obviously—and the only people who really knew of her familial relationship with the notorious Stanford Carter were her family, and Evan.

“One phone call to my security team, some half-assed Internet searches, and I knew everything I needed to know about you.”

“Everything except the fact that your manager arranged for me to be here.”

He ignored that. “Your father was a first-class bastard. He destroyed marriages, careers, lives without blinking. All for the almighty buck. And you wonder why the fuck I would never consent to an interview with you? Even if Quinny had for some fucked-up, brain fart of a reason arranged this, I would *never* have agreed to it. Not with your sleazy pedigree.”

“My father was a great man... he was a wonderful journalist”—TDH scoffed at the word—“who enriched lives and kept the masses informed.”

“He shoveled through shit to find the most sordid details about people’s lives and laid them bare for public consumption. A real prince. Is that why you don’t use his last name? Because you *know* nobody with any self-respect would

ever agree to be interviewed by someone with such close ties to that bottom-feeding piece of filth?”

“I don’t have to sit here and listen to this unprovoked defamation of both my character, and my father’s,” Iris said, her voice vibrating with indignation and humiliation. In truth, she was more affronted by his assassination of *her* character than she was by anything he’d said about her biological father.

Stanford Carter hadn’t been a saint—he’d been ruthless in his pursuit of a story. To the exclusion of all else. He’d often neglected to show up for weekends, or visits, with Iris when he was on the trail of some scandalous story or the other. And Iris could understand why Trystan would feel that way about him. In fact, when Iris had seen those truly awful, invasive images of Trish Nesbitt and Trystan after their accident, it had struck her as something her father would have done. And that certainty had revolted her.

Despite her defense of him—which had been a knee-jerk reaction to Trystan’s contempt—Iris had never truly aspired to emulate the man who’d fathered her by following exactly in his footsteps. She was seeking legitimacy, and if she did follow this path she wanted to be perceived as a journalist with ethics and integrity.

She pushed to her feet, but her heel skidded on the slick surface of the spa bottom and she lost her balance.

He went from sitting to standing in a second, his strong arms closing around her from behind before she even registered how close she’d come to falling and possibly striking her head on the side of the small heated pool.

His lightning-fast reflexes saved her and—while her brain played catch-up with what could have happened—her body reacted to all that sexy, hot, naked flesh pressed up against her back.

Her breath stuttered in her chest, and her already hard nipples contracted even more, while heat and moisture pooled between her legs. She instinctively clenched her thighs and arched closer to his hard heat.

But when her common sense *finally* caught up with her shameless body, a mere second later, she gasped in humiliation and attempted to extract herself from his tight hold. Hoping against hope he hadn't noticed her embarrassing reaction to his nearness.

He didn't let her go, though. His strong arms remained clamped around her upper body, pinning her own arms to her side, his chest plastered against her back, his groin pushed up against the small of her back.

He was panting in her ear, harsh, gasping breaths, as if he'd overexerted himself, which made no sense, since he'd gone completely still after the short, rapid burst of movement to catch her.

"Let go of me," she gritted out from between clenched teeth, but he remained silent while his hoarse breathing finally leveled out, becoming more even and quieter.

He relaxed his hold, releasing her arms, one large, capable hand drifting down to spread over her torso, while the other dropped to her waist.

"You okay?" he asked, his breath fluttering against the curls at her temple.

"I will be when you let me go." Her voice was husky, unconvincing, and she barely suppressed a moan when the hand at her torso stroked soothing circles over her sensitive flesh.

He was still pressed intimately close to her, so it was impossible to miss the stirring against the small of her back. Was he... getting *hard*?

Before she could figure it out, he released his grip and stepped away from her. She turned quickly, but he was already seated, and watching her with that focused, intent expression back on his face.

"Sit down."

Folding her arms defensively over her stupidly achy nipples, Iris refused to comply and glared down at him with a defiant tilt of her jaw.

“No. I’m ready to go back to my prison cell.”

God, she couldn’t think of anything she wanted less, but he’d touched a nerve. She was such a confused mess, following in the footsteps of a father she really did not respect at all, wanting to show him up, and prove to the world that she was a better person than he’d been. It was fucked up... *she* was fucked up. Out here trapped in the middle of nowhere, in pursuit of a dream she didn’t believe in. And did not want.

She needed space to sort through her cluttered brain, and she needed to be *out* of Trystan Abbott’s disturbing company. She couldn’t think when he was around and actively antagonizing her.

His lips twitched and his eyes—still fixed on her face—flickered.

“I’ve read some of your work,” he said, ignoring her demand. “What little there is of it.”

His words surprised her as she had no body of work readily available on the Internet. In fact, she had nothing out there for public consumption that she could think of off the top of her head and wasn’t sure to what he was referring.

“What work?”

“There’s the poetry you wrote for your university paper.”

“Oh my *God*.” She sank back onto the seat and covered her face with her hands. She couldn’t believe that any of those abysmal poems were actually available online. They were truly awful and dripping with teenaged angst and despair. “I thought they’d all been taken down.”

“The Internet is forever, Miss Hughes.” It was the first time he’d actually said her name. She’d honestly believed he’d forgotten it until he’d dropped those truth bombs about her father.

“So, it seems.”

“For a budding journalist, you have surprisingly little content online, not a smart move. No blogs, vlogs, TikTok, Instagram. Other people your age are gagging to reveal their

every shallow opinion to the world. Someone with your... *ambitions* should be even keener to share every puerile thought.”

This was better—it felt like familiar territory. Iris relaxed marginally, slumping against the wall of the spa and allowing herself to enjoy the soothing jets once more. Maybe she should continue to nurse her outrage over what he’d said earlier, but Iris never could maintain a good mad. She was too cheerful and optimistic for that. Besides, it was hard to remain angry when she agreed with so much of what he’d said about her father.

“There’s a mere five-year age gap between us so you don’t have to make yourself sound like Father Time in comparison to me,” she told him with a sympathetic little moue. “Cut yourself some slack, you’re only a little past your sell-by date.”

“I’m in my fucking prime, you little witch. I’m not so shallow and vain that I’ll be stricken with despair and doubt by the mere inference that I’m old. Back to my point, why don’t you have more of an online presence?”

“Because I don’t have time to sit around maintaining social media accounts. I work. I help my family, I...” she stopped. Nope. No! She was here to interview *him*, not vice versa. He didn’t need to know about her life.

But there was *one* thing she needed to correct.

“My dad,” she began, and watched his magnificent shoulders stiffen and his face go still. He looked like he couldn’t quite believe that she’d dared bring up her father again. “The one allergic to animal dander? His name is Jason Hughes. He’s my stepfather, and he’s been my dad since I was seven years old. He raised me, nurtured me, loved me, and is the only father I’ve ever really known. I’m shocked your *extensive* research into my life didn’t reveal that most basic fact about me. Jason Hughes is my dad while Stanford Carter is the man who blew into and out of my life once or twice a year for my first thirteen years. But I got my talent and love of writing from him and I owe it to myself, and to him, to explore

that talent. This interview with you was my opportunity to do that. To honor my biological father in some way *and* make my real dad proud of me.”

He stared at her, eyes narrowed, his straight, white teeth chewing at his bottom lip as he appeared to consider her words. He didn't say anything for a long time before his shoulders shifted. The play of muscles across that broad, tanned expanse captivated Iris and stole her breath away.

“Seems to me that the kind of man you describe your stepdad to be would already be proud of you, regardless of your achievements. While the type of man I *know* your biological father to have been wouldn't give an actual fuck about your achievements because he'd likely only ever seen you as an extension of himself. Emulating a fucker like that should be very low down on your list of priorities.”

She hated that his words were a reflection of everything she'd believed herself, but never dared to acknowledge. Stanford Carter had showed little to no interest in her academic achievements, had never read any of her school essays, or poems, or stories. He'd glanced at them whenever she'd proudly handed them to him and patted her on the head, and said things like, “Like father, like daughter” or “That's my girl” or “Of course you got an A, you're a chip off the old block.”

Her every achievement had been an opportunity for him to talk about himself. She'd known it, she'd seen it, but until now, until this awful man had laid that obvious truth bare with just a few cruel words, Iris had hoarded all of those non-compliments close and held them up as proof that her father had loved her and had been proud of her.

She dropped her gaze to the water, refusing to let him see how much the obvious truth had devastated her. She didn't say a word for a few long minutes, and he allowed the silence to simmer between them.

SEVEN

“Come on,” Trystan said a while later. “We’re turning into prunes. Some time in the sauna, stretches, and you’ll feel much better.”

“I already feel better, thank you,” she said, the words stilted and overly polite. “The sauna might not be necessary.”

His brow pleated and he shook his head.

“No, you’ll likely stiffen up again once your muscles cool down. Trust me on this, I’ve had to deal with this type of pain enough times while bulking up for roles.”

Iris hesitated for a few seconds before nodding and pushing to her feet. He helped her out of the pool and led her to the sauna, handing her a thick white towel at the entrance.

“You should strip out of the wet bikini,” he said, his eyes flicking down over her body as he spoke. “Wrap yourself in this.”

“But I’ll be naked.” She sounded like an outraged old maid, but she couldn’t help herself.

His lips twitched with what looked suspiciously like humor and he lifted his closed fist to his mouth and coughed—laughed?—before speaking. “Not naked. You’ll be wearing the towel.”

“Are *you* coming in as well?”

“I am.”

“But...” Her protest petered out beneath the weight of his penetrative stare.

“I assure you, you’ll be perfectly safe with me, Miss Hughes.”

God, she’d been here for two days and this man had already seen her fully—and near—naked three times. He might be quite at home with casual nudity, but that wasn’t her. She’d never nonchalantly slip out of her clothing in front of someone who was essentially a stranger to her, and she didn’t care if he found that gauche or naive. They inhabited very different universes and had very different ideas of what constituted normal.

And did he really have to keep reminding her that he had no interest in her? Okay, she was fair enough to acknowledge that *maybe* it was his way of reassuring her, since she tended to get all hysterical every time this naked shit happened. But couldn’t he reassure her by saying stuff like, “*While I find you irresistible, Miss Hughes, I will manfully abstain from touching you! Even though it pains me to do so!*”?

She smothered a giggle at the preposterous thought but it was a welcome distraction from her current awkward reality.

“Fine,” she blurted out, fighting back a blush as she snatched the towel from him. “But you’re going to have to turn around.”

He folded his arms over his chest and turned, presenting her with a fine view of his gorgeous, muscular back and that famous *perfect* arse.

She allowed herself a hypocritical moment of gawking before hastily wrapping the towel around her body and attempting to slide out of her wet bikini. She made it harder on herself by trying to shimmy out of the wet costume from beneath the towel, but after a few minutes of struggling, and soft cursing, she was free of the bathing suit.

“Can I turn around?”

“Uh, yes. Okay.” Her face was bright red from exertion and embarrassment and she was panting from the rigorous

activity. He turned and gave her a leisurely inspection, forcing her to clutch the towel even tighter over her chest.

His stare dropped to the pink and white bits of wet fabric and string she held clutched in one hand.

“You can toss those in the laundry basket,” he said, tilting his chin toward a bamboo hamper she hadn’t noticed beside the sauna door.

“Thanks.”

Her eyes didn’t know where to focus—he had so much gleaming golden skin on display—and she didn’t want to be caught staring. Not after making such a fuss about her own nudity. It had been easier in the spa when he’d been submerged up to his clavicles. Now that body, which had had millions of women swooning after a full-frontal nude scene in his last movie, was fully on display in all its ridiculous magnificence.

He grabbed another—smaller—towel from the shelves next to the hamper and—without warning—turned away from her, hooked his thumbs into the sides of his wet board shorts, and unceremoniously tugged them down over that perfectly sculpted butt. He bent at the waist as he dragged them down past his thighs to his knees before he stepped out of them and picked them up.

Iris, who’d made a choking sound as soon as she’d understood what was happening, had one hand clamped over her mouth, eyes glued to the man, willing herself to look away but quite unable to physically do so.

He turned toward her and a muffled squeak sounded from behind her hand. She squeezed her eyes shut, not sure if he was going to make use of that towel or not.

“You can look,” he invited, laughter threaded through his voice.

Iris opened one eye cautiously and sighed in quiet relief, before opening the other. He’d fastened the towel around his hips, but the inadequate scrap of cloth only provided the barest nod to modesty. It was little bigger than a hand towel and

gaped over one thickly muscled thigh. It was also very short, and only just covered his bits ... although she couldn't be too sure of that because she didn't want to stare too long at the spot where he bulged against the front of the towel.

Iris wasn't a novice when it came to men, but the few guys she'd been with had been mere boys compared to this man. Trystan was bigger—all over—and more self-assured in his masculinity than any of her boyfriends had been. His magnetism and self-confidence were overwhelming and Iris found herself a little out of her depth around him. Especially when he was wearing nothing but a towel that seemed to be staying put through sheer force of will.

“Shall we?” he asked, holding the sauna door open for her. She ran her damp palms over the front of her fluffy towel and nodded, stepping past him into the hot and humid room that smelled faintly of cedar wood and eucalyptus—the latter of which she assumed was from essential oils.

She sat herself down on the lowest bench, tucking her knees and feet primly together and resting her palms on her thighs. She knew she probably resembled a schoolgirl posing for a class picture, but she couldn't help it. She was so tense. If he believed this would relax her, he was sorely mistaken. This was probably one of the tensest, most stressful situations in which she'd ever found herself.

He looked at her for a long moment, a smirk on his arrogant, handsome face, before he shook his head and sat diagonally across—and a level up—from her.

No, he didn't sit. He sprawled. Spreading himself out, arms stretched across the top of the bench, thighs apart, with the towel tucked between them. Every muscle bulging and gleaming and displayed to perfection.

It was annoying how he could look so goddamned flawless without even trying.

Iris folded her arms across her chest and purposely looked away from him, even though he'd quite intentionally placed himself right in her line of sight, perhaps out of some pathological need to be stared at.

“I *did* enjoy your zombie apocalypse short story,” he said a moment later, succeeding in dragging her eyes back up to him in horror.

“You *read* that? How? Where?”

“Found it on a random little website unimaginatively called *The Write Stuff*.”

She barely concealed a grimace at that information. The now-defunct site had been operated by her ex-boyfriend Claude. He’d been her first serious boyfriend and they’d met during their first year of uni. He’d loved that dumb story and had tried to convince her to turn it into a weekly serial for his website.

“It was a unique take. Decently written, if a tad overwrought in places. It would actually make a good movie if it were properly fleshed out and you spent more time on character development and less on the gory specifics. You’re a bloodthirsty little thing, aren’t you? Have you checked if it’s even medically possible to suck someone’s brains out through their eye sockets?”

“Surely you could? Your optic nerve connects to the brain, doesn’t it?”

“So, the optic nerve would act as some kind of siphon?” he looked thoughtful as he considered that graphic and absurd thought.

What even *was* this conversation?

“I really thought that website no longer existed.”

“Why are you so consistently appalled at the thought of having any of your work available online? It’s a pretty bizarre reaction for someone hoping to make her mark in entertainment journalism. You can’t be shy about having your work out there for the world to see. And praise. And rip to shreds.”

He made a fair point.

Only...

“Only none of what you found actually showcases my capabilities,” she said.

“I beg to differ. The poetry was shit, I’ll give you that. But that zombie thing... confining the action to a space colony? The claustrophobic intensity? Brilliant. I wanted more. You should have serialized it.”

“My boyfriend said the same thing,” she admitted, not sure if he was mocking her or not.

“Boyfriend?”

Wow, Iris stared in bemusement as he leaned forward, every single muscle in his body tensing. She really wanted to touch him, stroke her hands and fingers over those hard slabs of flesh, gleaming with moisture from the pool and now from the steam. Would his skin feel as velvety smooth as it looked? Everything about him was so damned tempting, and Iris was shocked by how very much she wanted to stroke, and pet, and caress...

“What boyfriend?” His words barely penetrated the lustful haze which held Iris enthralled.

“What?” she asked, feeling sluggish, her body and brain unfamiliar to her.

“Tell me about the boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?”

“The one who said you should serialize your story.”

“Claude? He’s not my boyfriend. Not anymore, at least. Not for a long time.”

“Do you have one?”

“One what?” This conversation was bizarre and Iris was having a really hard time following it.

“A boyfriend,” he repeated with strained patience.

“No.” Her brain cleared enough for her to add, “Why do you ask?”

His shoulders shifted, and the play of muscles across that broad expanse instantly distracted her.

“Just curious. Wondering what kind of boyfriend would let you roam around in the wilderness by yourself while you tracked down an international sex symbol with the intention of spending weeks alone with him.”

“Did you just refer to yourself as an international sex symbol?”

“Merely repeating what others have said.”

“Are you flattered by the label?”

His face closed up and his lips tightened.

“This isn’t an interview.”

Iris clamped her mouth shut and diverted her eyes once again.

“Right.”

“How’s your back?” he asked after a moment. Then, when she continued to mutinously stare at the condensation beaded on the glass door, “Don’t be childish now, Hughes, look at me and answer the question.”

“It’s fine,” she said, still not looking at him. He made a quiet sound of frustration.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

“Why do you so desperately need to be looked at?” she countered, angling her jaw upwards. “Do you miss having an audience?”

The silence seethed and—curious though she was to see his reaction—Iris maintained her stubborn focus on the door.

“I don’t need an audience.”

“Of course, you do. It’s why you do what you do. You enjoy having the adulation of the masses, don’t you?”

“Is that your best guess, Hughes? Some cheap, predictable psychobabble about what you think makes me tick? You know fuck all about me. You’ve seen me in a few movies, read or

watched some interviews, and believe you know everything about me? You're a fucking child if you think everything you've seen and heard about me is true."

Iris finally gave him her eyes, which he then held trapped in his own furious, burning gaze.

"Why won't you enlighten me then?" she invited, her voice curt.

"Because you're nothing to me. Nobody. Why should I reveal any part of who I am to you? What the fuck makes you think you're so goddamned special? You're nothing but a little wannabe journalist with zero credentials and even less experience. Added to that, you're the spawn of one of the worst human beings to have ever befouled this planet with his existence. You're literally the last person on earth I'd ever confide in."

"You're getting repetitive," she told him. Refusing to let him provoke her again. "My father's the devil, I'm Satan's spawn, blah, blah... I heard the same boring rant not more than half an hour ago."

There was a gleam of—was that *appreciation*?—in his eyes and for the first time since she'd arrived, his lips stretched into that famous Abbott grin.

"Very well done, Hughes. You won't get very far with paper-thin skin in this industry."

His praise confused her and she glared at him warily, not sure what to make of it.

"I'm tired. I think I'd like to go back to my room now." Right now, even the oppressive hell that was her room seemed preferable to his disagreeable presence.

"Do you really prefer what you refer to as your prison cell over a sauna and my company?" His stare was contemplative, but his question without inflection, and Iris wasn't sure if she'd offended him.

Nor did she care.

"Yes."

God, that was such a *lie*. It was literally the second last place she'd rather be right now. But since *this* right here was the last place she wanted to be, she had no other choice than to return to her stifling, terrifying solitary confinement.

His eyebrows shot to his hairline.

“Very well. But you have to do some stretching when you get back to your room to prevent your back from seizing up again.”

Iris nodded and pushed to her feet. The movement was easy and relatively painless.

Honesty compelled her to admit, “I really do feel a *lot* better. Thank you.”

“You’ve already thanked me. Several times already, in fact. But I should be the one to thank *you* ...” His voice was gruff, as if the words tasted foreign on his tongue. “For your help yesterday.”

“Like I had a choice,” she muttered, still salty about the damned forced labor. His beard twitched as his jaw clenched and his lips thinned. Gosh, for an actor, he was terrible at hiding his emotions. Then again, he clearly didn’t care if she knew he was pissed off with her or not. Probably preferred it if she did.

“You had a choice,” he reminded her. “I was happy for you to stay in your room, but you wanted to negotiate for better conditions.”

“All I got was a Wi-Fi password you were going to give me anyway.”

“Not my fault you’re a terrible negotiator.” He got up and lithely descended the single step down. “Anyway, the sandbags did the trick, the flooding slowed down to a trickle.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said, a little distracted when he came to stand right beside her. Her nose was level with one flat brown nipple, and her eyes were riveted to those impressive pecs mere inches away. He was standing so close she could smell the faint hint of chlorine from the hot tub on his skin.

Her eyes tracked over the dark hair lightly sprinkled across his chest and abs... from where her rapt gaze helplessly followed the happy little trail wending its way down from his belly button—an innie, her favorite—to where it disappeared under the low-riding towel which looked in serious danger of slipping.

“For someone who accused me of needing an audience, you sure do seem to enjoy enabling my alleged thirst for attention by staring at me.” His low voice rumbled almost directly into her ear, and startled her into jerking her head up.

“Fuuuck!” he yelled.

“Ow!” she yelped at the same time.

Her abrupt move had sent the top of her head straight into his jaw and they both felt the impact keenly. They stepped away from each other, Iris rubbing her throbbing crown, while Trystan had his palm cupped over his jaw.

“Jesus, you have a hard head.”

“You have a harder jaw. You’d think that the beard would have provided some cushioning, but nope,” she complained. “Is my head bleeding? I feel like it’s bleeding.”

His hand dropped from his jaw and he reached out to cup her face. Alarmed, Iris jerked away from his touch.

“What are you doing?”

“Let me look,” he commanded with a scowl. Iris remained tense while he gingerly palmed her cheeks and angled her head downward. One of his hands continued to cradle her cheek, while the other parted the hair on her scalp. His touch was gentle, soothing, and seemed completely at odds with the abrupt man she knew him to be.

“It’s not bleeding, but you’re going to have a lump about the size of a goose egg.”

“This entire trip has been nothing but hazardous to my health so far,” she grumbled.

“Look at it this way,” he said, his fingers still entangled in her hair, while his other hand continued to cradle her cheek,

his long thumb now idly tracing the line of her cheekbone and sending shivers of sensation skittering over her skin. “You avoided being crushed to death by a falling tree on day one. That’s a win.”

Iris fought back a smile but couldn’t disguise the betraying twitch of her lips. His eyes were drawn to the movement of her lips. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and his pupils dilated to the point where only a sliver of silver remained. His head lowered, until the merest breath separated his mouth from hers, and Iris choked back a moan.

“T-Trystan?” His name emerged on a whisper of uncertainty, and he shuddered—a full-body ripple that caused gooseflesh to visibly pebble his skin—then blinked, before shaking his head as if to clear it.

He dropped his hands and took a deliberate step away from her, leaving her feeling bereft, as if she’d lost something precious.

“I didn’t realize we were on a first-name basis, Hughes,” he said, that awful, detached coldness back in his voice, and Iris sucked in a pained breath. That one frigid statement hurting more than anything he’d said about her biological father earlier.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Abbott,” she apologized, hating that the stiffness in her voice betrayed her hurt. So much for cultivating a thicker skin. “You’re right, of course. I won’t forget myself like that again.”

He chose not to acknowledge her apology and instead opened the sauna door. He grabbed their robes from the hook outside the door and handed the smaller one to her.

“Put this on,” he said while shrugging into his and thankfully—*tragically*—covering himself up and removing all that tempting flesh from her lascivious gaze. “Stay warm until you get back to your room, then get into some sweats, do those stretches, and spend the rest of the morning taking it easy. Okay?”

She was too busy shrugging into her robe, while keeping her towel from slipping, to do more than grunt in response to his bossiness.

“*Hughes!*”

His sharp tone immediately drew her attention.

“What?”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“About the sweats and stretches and stuff? Yes.”

He looked somewhat mollified as he nodded. “Good. Some acknowledgment next time.”

She saluted him smartly, “Yes, oh lord and master!”

“Christ, you’re annoying,” he grumbled. “Let’s go.”

She meekly trailed behind him, her eyes happily exploring the house as they made their way from the natatorium back to her room. He must be distracted because he hadn’t taken hold of her elbow to hastily steer her along as he’d done the previous few times she’d been allowed out of her cell.

Her eyes snagged on a framed picture of a happily smiling couple in their wedding finery and Iris finally understood what people meant when they referred to a *lightbulb* moment, because it felt like someone had just flicked a switch in her brain.

“This isn’t your house.” The words were out before she could curtail them, and he stopped walking abruptly. Iris careened into his hard back, but it felt like bouncing off an immovable tree trunk for all the impact her momentum had made on his sturdy frame.

“Fuck.” The soft word resonated with heartfelt regret. “You’re just incapable of minding your own business, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t realize you knew Miles Hollingsworth,” she said.

He turned toward her, clamping both hands onto her upper arms, and looming over her to glare down into her face.

She stared back at him unblinkingly, too accustomed to his bluster by now to be daunted.

“And you’re going to forget that little factoid as soon as you’re back in your room.”

“But why? It’s not like he’s some kind of mafia kingpin. The man is a genius. How do you know him?”

“You think I can’t hang out with geniuses?”

“Genii,” she corrected, just to irritate him.

“You know damned well geniuses is right too,” he ground out from between clenched teeth.

“Well, how do you know Miles Hollingsworth? Is he your financial advisor or something?”

“You know so much about him, you’d know he’s not a fucking financial advisor.”

No, he wasn’t. Miles Hollingsworth was the former CEO of Hollingsworth Holdings Inc. A powerful, wealthy, self-made man who’d founded one of the largest holding companies in Europe. He’d caused a sensation a couple of years ago when he’d effectively retired at thirty-five, married his former housekeeper, and moved to... well to *here* apparently.

That explained the cars in the garage. MilesH for Miles Hollingsworth. Which meant the Mini Cooper had to belong to his wife, Charity.

“Have you known him long?” Iris asked chattily, as he released one of her arms, but kept the other imprisoned to march her back to her room at twice the speed they’d been going earlier.

He didn’t reply.

“You don’t seem like you’d have much in common,” she continued, starting to huff slightly as she practically ran to keep up with his long-legged stride. “Are you renting this house or something?”

That question broke his stride and he threw her an incredulous look before shaking his head and carrying on walking.

“Why’d you look at me like that?” she asked when they finally reached her door, which he opened impatiently.

“You’re deluded if you think Miles Hollingsworth needs to rent out his home.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes no sense,” she acknowledged, chagrined.

A not-so-subtle shove between her shoulder blades caught her by surprise and sent her stumbling into the room.

“Hey, come on, man! Enough with the manhandling,” she spluttered, furiously turning to face him with clenched fists. He looked shocked and contrite at the same time.

“Fuck, that was... shit. Hughes, I didn’t realize...” A dull flush crept up his cheeks and he looked absolutely stricken. “There’s no excuse, that was unforgivable. I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

What?

“Uhm, no, I lost my footing. But no more shoving, okay?”

“Honest to God, I meant to give you just the gentlest of nudges.”

“No more nudging either.” He lifted his hands in surrender.

“I promise.”

“So... about Miles Hollingsworth.”

Iris was curious by nature, one of the other reasons she’d believed journalism was the right career choice for her. But she now knew her curiosity wasn’t fueled by the driving need to know all the facts—no, she was just nosy and loved a good gossip.

That nosiness, combined with boredom, along with a deep reluctance to be trapped in this room once again were only a few of the reasons she kept prodding Trystan about Miles Hollingsworth, despite his obvious reluctance to divulge any

information to her. Iris purely hoped to keep him talking and to delay her inevitable imprisonment in this awful room.

“No.”

The harshly spoken word foiled her sad—and obvious—delay tactic. He stepped back, slammed the door in her face, and a few seconds later the lock clicked in place.



“THANKS FOR LUNCH, you make a great tuna mayo toastie,” Iris said, when Trystan collected the lunchtime tray four hours later. She was so eager for some conversation and companionship that even *his* company would be preferable to the increasingly horrific claustrophobic confines of this room.

Instead of nodding curtly and leaving, as was his habit, he stared down at the tray for a moment and then lifted his eyes to meet hers.

“My mom’s recipe,” he said, and Iris’s eyebrows shot up at the reluctantly conceded personal information. “You didn’t have to clean the dishes.”

“I didn’t mind,” she said. “Besides, I was bored. It gave me something to do.”

“Did you do those stretches this morning?”

Iris winced at the memory of those painful stretches. She was *not* as diligent with her daily stretching as she ought to be. She went to yoga only occasionally when Evan dragged her out to a class, but Iris would never be *that* girl. She was reasonably fit, she walked a lot, and worked out once or twice a week. She did the bare minimum to stay healthy and keep herself in acceptable shape, but she wasn’t religious about it. And leading up to this trip, she’d been so distracted she’d skipped a few gym sessions.

And she’d felt it while stretching this morning. But she’d forced herself to do it, despite the pain, because Trystan had been right, it would help. It *had* helped, but God it had sucked.

“Yes.”

“And how’s your head?”

It took Iris a moment to figure out why he was asking her that, but when she remembered she rubbed the top of her head ruefully.

“There’s barely even a lump, actually. It throbbed for a while after I returned to the room, but the pain faded not too long after that.”

“Good,” he hovered awkwardly for a few moments, before saying, almost impulsively, “I’m taking Luna out for a walk soon. Would you like to join us? It may help with any residual stiffness you have.”

Would she? What a dumb question.

Iris had spent the morning writing, then reading, then neatening up the already neat suite. Anything to keep it together. But nothing had been able to alleviate her frustration, restlessness, and the fear of losing all control of her emotional and mental stability. Her medication was barely helping her keep it together.

Calls home hadn’t helped. Her parents kept pushing her for answers about where she was. And who could blame them? She’d built it up to be this huge thing, promising them a revelation that would blow their minds, and now she was being secretive about it.

Hunter Quinn had—unsurprisingly—still not responded to any of her messages. Iris had pretty much given up on that front.

Evan had been to yet another party last night and all she’d talked about was how *amazing* it had been. She’d spent a good deal of time name-dropping, talking about some guy she’d fucked, and then bitching about her boss for another half an hour after that.

She hadn’t once asked Iris how she was doing. Which Iris wouldn’t normally have noticed, only she’d really needed to talk about her increasing doubts about her career choice. That was when she’d recognized that most of their conversations centered around Evan and *her* life. Iris had picked up on this in the past but had always thought this was because her own life

was so dull in comparison, but now that she had so much time with her thoughts, the disparity troubled her.

She set aside her disturbing contemplations about her friend and focused on Trystan's question.

"Oh, yes *please*," she replied, the words stumbling over each other in her panic that he would change his mind.

"It's not raining, but the wind is icy, so bundle up. And wear those boots from yesterday, the ground is muddy and a little treacherous."

"Okay."

"I'll be back for you in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be ready."

eight

He was careful not to touch her. That was the first thing Iris noticed when he came for her exactly fifteen minutes later. He walked close beside her and she could practically feel his big hand hovering above the small of her back, but no contact was made. He walked slower than his usual breakneck pace as he shepherded her, with just his body, through a spacious living room toward the very same door he'd tricked her through her first night here.

“Why aren't you trying to shuffle me through here at your usual record-breaking pace? I mean I'm seeing *things*. Like those travel pics on the mantel.” She nodded toward the framed images above a gorgeous stone hearth that looked like it would be heavenly when in use. “And that fireplace. Do you enjoy that fireplace every night while I'm huddled in front of a measly radiator heater?”

“There's no point in trying to hide our surroundings from you anymore, since you know whose house it is.”

Iris honestly didn't know why it had been such a big secret in the first place. But she wasn't going to ask because she knew he wouldn't answer. Worse, he'd get pissed off with her for asking in the first place. And she couldn't risk him rescinding the offer of a walk. It would destroy her morale.

“And I haven't used the fireplace at all since I've been here.”

“God, what a crime,” she said with a disgusted click of her tongue. “What's wrong with you? It's there to be enjoyed.”

“Seems like a lot of work for just one person.”

“And a dog. Think about Luna, she’d *love* it.”

Luna’s tail swept indolently back and forth at the sound of her name.

Trystan’s lips curled as he unlocked the front door and stepped aside to allow her through.

Iris cast the open door a jaundiced look before turning her narrowed eyes on him.

“You’re not going to slam the door behind me as soon as I step through it, are you?”

The curl of his lips turned into a fully fledged grin before he ruthlessly curbed it and flattened his mouth. But the gleam of amusement was still evident in his eyes when he raised his brows at her in challenge.

“What do you think?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning a shoulder against the doorframe while he waited for her next move.

Iris’s eyes went from his smug face to the lush, wet, green landscape just beyond the front door and back again. The weather was gray and blustery, and the unwelcoming iciness was quickly seeping in through the front door, but the thought of getting some fresh air and, for *once*, not being drenched in the process, was too tempting to resist.

She threw back her shoulders, lifted her chin, and stepped over the threshold. She sucked in a breath at the shock of frigid air that hit the exposed skin of her face, and laughed in sheer exhilaration and joy when she exhaled an impressive cloud of steam seconds later.

“Oh my *God*,” she squealed. “It’s so cold. I didn’t think it could get that cold here.”

She was sure she heard him mutter, “That would explain the itsy-bitsy bikini.”

But when she asked him what he’d said he gave her a wide-eyed innocent look and said, “I didn’t say a damned thing.”

Iris didn't call him out on the blatant lie—or the terrible acting—instead she eagerly took in her surroundings.

“It's so pretty out here,” she exclaimed. They were standing in a courtyard surrounded by a neatly trimmed six-foot-high camellia hedge. She only recognized them because camellias were her mother's favorite flower, and the pale pink blooms prolifically dotted the entire length of the hedge. She hadn't known that the flowers *could* bloom in weather this cold, but how beautiful they looked in that verdant hedge, which surrounded a lovely natural pond. The space was alive with color from the myriad of winter-blooming plants and shrubs dotted all around the garden.

“This is so different than I'd imagined it to be,” she said with an incredulous laugh. “The other night it was so dark out here I couldn't see a thing. It was so creepy. All I could see was the outline of the hedges... and I stepped into the pond.”

She shuddered at the unpleasant memory and her happy smile slipped.

Trystan was watching her closely, his hands shoved into his jacket pockets, while his breath clouded the air in front of him.

“You used Luna's tag to get inside, right?” he asked, and the question startled her. They hadn't talked about that night at all before now.

“Yes. She scared the bejesus out of me,” Iris admitted with another laugh. This one was edged with remembered fear. “She approached from over there”—she pointed toward the far end of the garden—“And I took a step back, but my wet shoe skidded on some moss, I think, and I went down. Landed on my back. It's a miracle I didn't hit my head. And she came to stand right above me.”

This time the sound that emerged from her throat—while still attempting to be a laugh—was choked.

“I was so certain I was going to die... Foolish, I know,” she tried to lighten her tone and failed dismally. “Who could

be scared of such a sweetheart, right? But it was pitch black and she was huge and I was terrified. But then she licked me.”

This time her laugh was genuine and filled with warmth.

“I was screaming, and—grossly—got some dog tongue in my mouth. That shut me up really quickly. Luna and I became pals after that. And when it started raining, she led me inside.”

He hadn’t moved throughout her retelling, standing about a meter and a half away from her, hands still in his pockets, legs braced apart, eyes intent on her face. It was unnerving being pinned beneath that silvery gaze, especially when his expression remained stark and enigmatic.

“All that for a story.” His voice lacked inflection but Iris couldn’t help but bristle defensively at the comment.

“At that point the story was the last thing on my mind. I was cold and exhausted, confused by your lack of welcome, and terrified I’d be forced to try and find my way back to the car in the dark. I didn’t even know which direction I’d have to go to get there.

“I didn’t care about the story,” she repeated, her voice small and getting that annoying telltale squeak it did when she was on the verge of tears. Worse, she felt her nose and the back of her throat start to burn as her eyes went blurry. “I was just *really* scared. And desperately wished I were back home.”

Iris turned away from him, focusing her attention on Luna who was sniffing around the courtyard. She quickly pressed her burning eyes with the heels of her hands, willing the tears away while she tried to regain her composure.

Showing a great deal more tact and consideration than she’d come to expect from him, Trystan remained silent, but Iris was hyperaware of his presence just behind her.

“Do you—” His dark velvet voice sounded rough with gravel, and he paused to clear his throat before continuing. “Do you want to see the car?”

Once she was certain she had herself back under control, Iris turned to face him.

“Yes. I’d like to see it, and to see if the walk there is less harrowing by daylight. I kept expecting to plummet off a cliff, or something.”

“No cliffs around here,” he promised her gravely. “You were in more danger from the trees.”

“I know that now.”

“It’s this way,” he said, and turned to lead her out of the courtyard. Luna happily darted ahead, stopping to sniff at practically every shrub and tree en route.

There were smaller broken branches and even more enormous limbs littering the long, muddy drive leading up to the house, and Iris stared in horror at every progressively larger one they passed.

The road back to the car was a lot shorter than she remembered. Only about ten minutes. But in the dark, with the wind and low light, and so many ways for her to have wandered off the path and become lost, Iris was genuinely amazed that she’d made it to the house at all that night.

She grew quieter and quieter as their walk continued and when she reached the car, she stared—feeling lightheaded, and faintly nauseous—at the flattened piece of scrap metal with the gigantic dead oak tree sprawled across it.

“*Whoa,*” Trystan exclaimed when she swayed slightly and—forgetting himself—he took her elbow to steady her. “You okay?”

“No. Part of me thought you were lying or exaggerating, but this is... I so very nearly chose to stay in the car that night.”

“But you didn’t,” he told her in a fierce undertone. “You *didn’t*, Iris. You bravely chose to head out in terrible weather, armed only with your phone’s flashlight, and you made it to what should have been a safe haven. You’re alive and well because you had the courage to do that. I don’t know what *I* would have done. Stayed in the car probably. But *you* didn’t. You got out and you walked, while lugging that ridiculous pink case behind you. You confronted a beast, and despite how

frightening and confusing that must have been, you still cleverly managed to find your way into a sheltered space.”

“Luna’s not a beast,” she defended the dog fondly.

She was shocked when he responded with a quiet, “I wasn’t referring to Luna.”

“Oh.”

For the first time since they’d arrived at the car she looked at him, and it was to find him staring down at her with fierce eyes. His face was grim, but those eyes, they were ablaze with a naked emotion that Iris was unable to decipher.

Instead, in her confusion, she latched onto the most minor detail among the many bewildering things he’d just said.

“You called me Iris.”

“And you called me Trystan,” he reminded her with a half-smile. “Guess that makes us even.”

“I didn’t think you knew my first name.” She knew it was a silly thing to say.

“You literally told me when we first met. I even googled you, remember?”

Of course she did, but somehow hearing him use her first name was still a shock.

“You were so angry, I wasn’t sure you even heard me.”

“I heard you.” He didn’t elaborate, but inspected her face carefully. “Feeling better?”

She nodded, then immediately regretted it when he removed his warm hand from her elbow.

“Let’s check out the lake,” he suggested. “The water is choppy, angry, and cloudy with silt but it’s better than standing here staring at your pancaked rental.”

She moaned.

“Ugh, it’s a rental,” she repeated, cringing at the reminder. She’d have to call the rental agency in the morning and attempt to explain this crazy situation.

“They’ll have insurance against shit like this. Don’t worry about it.”

He started walking again. Luna led the way, a giant tree branch in her mouth. The dog didn’t seem to expect either of them to throw it—good thing too because it was longer than Iris’s arm and looked pretty heavy—she was just content to carry it around in her mouth.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Iris whispered in awe as they continued to walk. She could see the lake gleaming in the distance. She didn’t have a very good view of it from her room, so this would be the first time she would get a proper look at it.

“Why are you whispering?” Trystan whispered back, a mocking edge in his hissed question.

She threw him an appreciative grin and shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she said in a normal, if still somewhat low, voice. “It feels like we’re the only people in the world out here. Just us three. There’s something reverential about it, like being in nature’s cathedral. Part of me feels like we should show it an appropriate amount of wonderment and respect. It just lends itself to hushed tones, don’t you think?”

“I get it.”

The reply was quiet, simple, and none of the mocking tone of before lingered in the three words.

When they reached the lake, they simply stood there, side by side, close enough to almost brush arms, but not touching at all. The strong wind tore at Iris’s clothes, sprayed a fine mist from the crests of the waves over her, stole her breath, and ruthlessly dallied with her riotous curls.

It was splendid.

“I love this,” she yelled into the wind, but it tore her words away.

“What?” She heard his faint question and looked at him with a wide grin, before cupping her hands around her mouth and repeating the words.

His wild grin likely matched hers and he nodded. She saw his mouth form the words *me too*, but the wind whipped his voice away.

They stood there for a long time until the spray from the white caps started to mix with a moderate drizzle and they both began to shiver.

At that point Trystan reached for her again, only this time he didn't grab her upper arm or elbow, this time his hand closed around hers. The move was unconscious, as was Iris's easy acceptance of it, and they slowly walked back to the house hand in hand.

It was only when they reached the kitchen door that they simultaneously became aware of the intimacy of the gesture. Trystan quickly released her hand and Iris shoved the offending appendage into her jacket pocket, trying not to dwell on the warm, pleasant tingling on her flesh where his palm had kissed hers. She watched him fumble with the door handle for a few seconds before he allowed her to precede him through the door. Then he blocked Luna's way.

"No. Drop it," he commanded the dog, referring to the tree branch she'd lugged all the way back to the house with her. She'd put it down only to do her business and occasionally sniff around shrubs, but had picked it up every time they'd continued on their walk.

Now she was staring up at Trystan with pleading eyes as he refused her entry into the house with her new best friend.

"Luna, drop it. It's not coming into the house." Iris watched from around Trystan's arm as Luna whined plaintively. The dog finally heaved a long-suffering sigh and gently placed the branch on the welcome mat outside the door.

She affected an air of injured dignity as she trotted past Iris and Trystan with her head held high.

Trystan shut the door as soon as the dog was inside.

"You could have let her keep it for a while," Iris said, and Trystan snorted.

“Don’t be fooled by those puppy-dog eyes. She couldn’t give a fuck about the stick. If I allowed her to do that every time we came back from a walk, we’d have a fair to middling pile of discarded wet wood littered about the house. She loses interest in the damned things less than a minute after she gets her way. That’s a lesson I learned the hard way.”

Iris giggled and cast a fond glance at the dog who had settled into her basket and was contentedly licking herself.

Her smile faded and she idly traced her fingers along the edge of the faintly blue-veined waterfall white marble countertop.

“Thank you for allowing me to join you on your walk. I enjoyed it.”

He nodded but said nothing, keeping his gaze fixed on her face. It was unnerving how often he just stared at her like she was some weird, exotic species of bug he’d picked up in the forest and he wasn’t quite sure what to make of.

“I suppose I should be getting back to my room now,” she offered, reluctance weighing down each word. After the lovely, carefree afternoon surrounded by so much beauty and open space the thought of returning to a confined area choked her up. But maybe he’d change his mind about locking her in this time. Maybe he’d recognize how cruel it was to keep her trapped.

“Yes.” He didn’t move.

“Okay,” she said, also not moving.

Even though the island served as a barrier between them he still felt uncomfortably close, likely because of that probing stare, and Iris shifted her weight from foot to foot.

“You should change into some dry clothes,” he said.

“That’s nothing new,” Iris said, as she plucked at her damp jacket. “Does it ever stop raining here?”

“Apparently it’s been wetter than usual this year,” he said, and Iris wondered at the inane conversation. “I’ve been to the Western Cape a few times before, but always in summer and

usually for work. Never during winter. I was forewarned by Miles and Sam to prepare for some pretty extreme cold and rain, but this is even worse than I'd expected."

"Sam?" Iris shouldn't have asked—she knew she shouldn't have. Since Trystan wasn't likely to intentionally reveal any new information to her if he could help it. It had obviously been an unconscious slip of the tongue.

And that was confirmed when he once again went stone-faced and tensed.

"I'm sorry. None of my business," she backtracked hastily.

"I'm..." He paused, seeming to search for the right words. "Ever since the accident—Trish's death—every interaction with the press has been negative and intrusive. I don't want to talk to journalists. Not about her, or the accident, or anything really. Not yet. Maybe not ever. And every time I talk to you I can't lose sight of the fact that you're one of *them*."

"But—" Her brain was racing as she mulled over his unexpectedly candid confession. His eyes had darkened, his expression was moody, body language closed off. "You'll have to deal with them eventually. Press junkets for movies, promotional interviews and the like. You can't avoid the press forever. Not in your line of work."

"Then maybe it's time I find a new line of work." The words were spoken so quietly that Iris wasn't certain she'd heard him correctly. But one look into those roiling eyes told her she hadn't been mistaken and she gasped in shock.

"You can't be serious?" Why would he say something like this to her? Was it some kind of trick? Or test? He *had* to know that this was the kind of scoop that any journalist worth their salt would kill to have.

"As a heart attack."

Forgetting for a moment what this information could do for her career, Iris stared at him for a long, long moment and shook her head.

"That would be a shame, Trystan," she said. "You're extremely talented."

“You going to write about this?”

“As you have reminded me time and time again, you haven’t consented to an interview with me,” she reminded him. “Mr. Quinn’s promises mean nothing in light of that fact.”

“There are many who wouldn’t let that stop them.”

“I like to consider myself a woman of integrity. We were having a conversation, private and off the record.”

He nodded again, a curt jerk of his jaw. Something sparked in his eyes—satisfaction? triumph?—Iris wasn’t sure what. And once again she had the distinct feeling that she was being tested.

And she didn’t like it. Was he toying with her? Of course he was. The naive, inexperienced wannabe journalist who was ridiculously eager to please the big movie star whom she had once borderline hero-worshipped.

He’d just admitted that he could never lose sight of the fact that she was one of *them*. The enemy. Why would he divulge such a secret to someone he clearly didn’t trust and had no respect for?

“You’re playing games with me. I don’t like it.” The statement was blunt, to the point, and his eyes reflected his surprise at the straightforward comment.

Trystan clearly was used to people who obfuscated, and played the same manipulative games he did, but Iris didn’t pussyfoot around. She spoke her mind, regardless of the consequences. And while she was inexperienced in her field, she wasn’t going to allow him to manipulate and walk all over her.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because until now you’ve been religiously cautious about what you say around me. You’ve done everything short of blindfolding me to prevent me seeing anything to do with the house before today—”

“Shit, blindfolding you would have been an ideal solution. Why didn’t *I* think of that?” he interrupted her on a lazy drawl and she shot him an irritated glare.

“So, I don’t buy this sudden about-face,” she continued, ignoring his flippant question. “Why would you divulge such extremely personal information to *me* of all people? What game are you playing?”

“Let’s get you back to your room,” he said with a wicked grin. “It’s time for your afternoon nap. You’re getting cranky.”

“I’m not a child,” she snapped.

“You resemble one. With that mop of wild curls. And those ridiculously wide and innocent eyes. You look like a girl playing at being an adult. And it’s hard to reconcile the innocence in those eyes with that *mouth*, and with those generous curves in that tiny, incendiary bikini. You’re a fucking study in contradictions, and I’m starting to wonder if Quinny...” He clammed up abruptly, while Iris blinked up at him shock.

What did he mean about her mouth? And her curves? Were those compliments? He’d sounded extremely pissed off when he’d said them and it left Iris more confused than ever.

He made a sweeping *you first* gesture with his arm, and Iris—though keen to escape his frustrating presence—led the way back to her room with leaden, reluctant feet.

She tried not to dwell on the fact that she was now thinking of the cage as *her* room. This twisted situation was fast becoming normal and it made her uneasy. When she reached her door, she stopped and instead of opening it—unwilling to freely step into her own prison—she turned to face him. But she was taken aback by how closely he’d followed her. He was mere inches away, his big body sending off waves of heat, and even steam thanks to his wet clothes. She could smell his woodsy aftershave, feel his soft even breath ruffle the hair at the top of her head, hear the soft ticking coming from the old-fashioned platinum-and-leather-strapped wristwatch he wore.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly, appearing confused by her abrupt stop.

“H-have you heard anything about when we can expect the roads to be passable again?” she asked, a little mortified by the unsteadiness of her voice.

“I called a friend in town this morning. Seems like the original estimate of two weeks is right. The road isn’t a priority right now because this is the only house down here. If someone had been injured or if we were in dire need of supplies they would arrange a helicopter, but since neither of those scenarios is the case here, it would be a waste of much-needed emergency resources to dispatch any kind of airborne rescue vehicle to us.”

“You can’t arrange a private helicopter?”

“Why would I? I have food, clean drinking water, solar- and generator-powered electricity. I’m perfectly fine cut off from the world. In fact, I’m happy to be out of physical reach of the rest of humanity for now.”

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“You don’t want me here.”

“I don’t. But I can deal for two weeks. Especially since I’ve found a way to keep you out of my way.”

“So, you’re just going to keep me locked up for the entire two weeks?” The notion was too unbearable for her brain to wrap around.

“I think I’ve been more than generous. You’ve had spa time, sauna time, free meals, and a hike. You have access to the Wi-Fi, and a television... think of it as a vacation.”

“I told you before, I have cleithrophobia. It’s kind of like claustrophobia but it’s a fear of being trapped.”

“Come *on*,” he scoffed and the dismissive tone in his voice set her teeth on edge. “You expect me to believe that? It’s entirely too conveniently specific to your situation. Anyway, you’re hardly in a tiny prison cell. You have a kitchen, living

room, bedroom, and bathroom. Beautiful views, windows that open and close. You're hardly trapped in a small enclosed space."

"But I can't leave," she said, trying to keep the panic she could hear edging its way into her voice at bay.

"You can't leave the room, no. But if you want to leave the house, I told you before, you're more than welcome to try and hoof it back to town. The weather has cleared up a bit, so maybe the river would have calmed down somewhat. Although if the lake this afternoon was any indication, I doubt the river would be much better. And there's more heavy rain forecast for Wednesday. So, if you want to leave, it's best to do so within the next three days."

His eyes were glued to her face, head tilted, as he waited for her response. He was still way too close for comfort.

"That's not really a choice, is it? Stay locked in this room, or take my chances out there."

"It's only two weeks, Hughes. You'll be fine." He reached past her, his arm brushing against hers. The contact made her jump, but she immediately felt foolish when she grasped that he was only reaching for the door handle behind her. She heard the faint creak of the door as it swung open, and she dropped her gaze to the floor as she concentrated very hard on keeping her tears at bay.

When she felt like she had her emotions under control, she took a step back, then turned on her heel, and walked into the suite of rooms with stiff shoulders and her head held high. She fought to keep her nausea at bay, and bit back a scream.

"Iris?" She tensed at the sound of her name on his lips, but refused to turn and face him, not with tears welling in her eyes. "I'll bring in your dinner shortly."

She nodded, not trusting her voice, and waited for the door to shut.

Nothing.

What was he waiting for? The anticipation was torturous.

“Is there...” He paused, as if he were trying to gather his thoughts. “Do you have any requests? For dinner? I didn’t think to ask before. Do you have any food allergies? Or maybe you’re vegan or pescatarian, or something.”

Iris swallowed thickly and shook her head again. Still, he didn’t leave. Maybe he needed to hear it.

“I have no food allergies,” she said, her voice subdued. “No preferences. Whatever you make is fine. Thank you.”

“Okay.”

She could feel him watching her, but refused to turn around and meet his eyes. Instead, she waited—every muscle tense and on edge—for the door to close and the key to turn.

Her phobia had always been mild before now. Controllable. But every day in this room made it worse, and knowing that she would have to endure this for two weeks was unbearable. Her skin felt too tight, her heart was racing, she fought back the shudders, but she was determined to keep her shit together until after he left.

She refused to let him see her break.

“I’ll see you soon.” God, *why* was he still here? And still talking?

In the end, she couldn’t stand it anymore and she spoke, her voice hoarse with fear and panic.

“Please, Trystan. *Please* don’t lock the door.”

Her low, desperate plea was met with silence.

He didn’t acknowledge her words in any way. *Finally*, interminable seconds later the door shut. Softly. Gently.

And—after another long moment—the lock clicked.

Iris exhaled the breath she’d unconsciously been holding. It emerged on a despairing sob. The trembling began seconds later.

Full-body shudders that she tried to control by wrapping her arms around her. It didn’t work and she sank to the floor

right where she stood, curling in on herself as she tried to keep the panic and fear at bay.

Her breath came in harsh gasps.

“You can do this, you can do this, you can do this.” She repeated the soft, panicked mantra over and over and over again.

But no matter how often she repeated it, she could not bring herself to believe it.

The following three days were difficult for Iris. Every day was harder than the last. Trystan always came for her after breakfast, when she would join him and Luna on their daily walks. It was the highlight of her day, but it always made returning to her forced solitude and imprisonment that much harder. She had declined the walk the day before, citing exhaustion, but she'd sensed Trystan's confusion and concern.

He hadn't said anything though, instead he strove to remain impersonal with her and continued to discourage any questions. Conversation between them on their walks centered around Luna and their surroundings.

He'd also steadfastly refused to let Luna spend any time in her room with her, and once their walk was done, Iris had nothing but a long day of stark loneliness to look forward to, only occasionally broken by Luna's visits to her door.

It was wearing her down. There'd been no word from Hunter Quinn, and Trystan still refused to even look at Iris's emails from his manager. They were at an impasse and Iris, already worn down and depressed just from trying to maintain her mental health, could see no way forward for them from here.

"You didn't touch your food," Trystan said when he collected Iris's breakfast tray on Wednesday morning.

She was sitting on the sofa, her back to him, staring out of the window at yet another gray morning. She was beginning to

actively hate this place where the sun never shone and the wind was always howling.

“Iris?” Trystan’s sharp voice penetrated her funk and she gave him her profile.

“Yes?”

“I said you didn’t eat your food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You have to be hungry, you didn’t eat your dinner last night.”

“I wasn’t hungry then either.”

Trystan made a gruff, annoyed sound and he was kneeling in front of her before she’d even registered that he’d moved. He was staring into her face, and she listlessly turned her head to avoid his eyes, but this time he caught her jaw in a firm but gentle grip and kept her face still for his probing gaze to thoroughly inspect.

“You’ve been crying.”

Her lips quivered before she pinched them between her teeth.

“No.” She still had *some* pride and it stung that he could so easily tell that she’d shed tears. “I just... I can’t sleep. I’m tired.”

“Okay. But you’ve also been crying.”

She hated feeling so nakedly vulnerable in front of him and dragged her feet up onto the couch to hug her knees to her chest with one arm. She tugged her chin out of his grasp and buried her face in her knees. She curled her other arm over the top of her head, folding herself into a protective little ball, away from those silver eyes that missed no detail.

“Come on, Hughes,” he whispered, and she felt the light touch of his fingers on her hair. “You’ve got more spunk than this.”

“You don’t know me,” she whispered, her voice hoarse from the tears she’d already spilled.

“Of course I know you. You’re the woman who walked away from the relative safety of her car in gale force winds, through dark, unfamiliar woods. You fought a wolf, bested a beast, broke into a house and fought your way to safety against all odds. You can brave anything.”

Not this.

Iris had always believed she was brave. Despite not standing up to her high school bullies, or to her parents about working at the catering business. Despite her phobias, and her uneasy concern that her lifelong dream of pursuing a career in journalism was the wrong one for her, she’d always possessed an innate belief that she was a strong person. A woman of conviction.

But she’d never been tested like this before. So much for immersion therapy, because facing her worst fear day after day did not make it conquerable. It just made her weaker, more frightened, and unable to function.

Every day was a little worse than the last. And she wasn’t sure how she was going to cling to her sanity. She’d tried writing, but couldn’t concentrate. She spent hours staring blankly at the screen. She dreaded sleeping because the nightmares were terrifying. In the end all she could do was stay awake, staring into the dark, the locked door looming bigger and bigger in her mind until it was all she could think about. All she could focus on. Daylight brought no relief. She frequently opened the window and leaned out as far as she could, desperate for fresh air, until the cold drove her to close it again.

But she continued to open it every half hour—despite the iciness—just to breathe. It was the only thing keeping her sane right now. The knowledge that she could leave through that window if she became desperate enough. That she could walk away and maybe find her way to town.

It was mad, but it was fast becoming the only viable option available to her.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she wasn’t initially aware that Trystan was talking, but his voice gradually

penetrated her self-imposed huddle of solitude.

“—raining, so we can’t really go for a walk today, but I thought you might want to see the cinema room. We could watch a movie? Have some popcorn?”

His hand was buried in her curls by now, his fingers stroking her scalp. His other hand was flat on her back, moving in soothing circles.

“Iris? Would you like that?”

She lifted her head and his hand fell away, but the other one continued to rub her back gently.

“Why would you...” She wasn’t sure how to finish the question. And in the end, stared at him mutely. He seemed to understand though, and his shoulders lifted.

“I don’t like watching movies alone. So, what do you say? You wanna join Luna and me for a movie day?”

She nodded and his lips lifted.

“Good.”

“What are you in the mood for?” Trystan asked after Iris had curled up on one of the massive recliners in the cinema room. She’d crept out of her melancholy enough to appreciate the sheer magnificence of this room.

It was decadence pure and simple. The screen took up an entire wall and there were two rows of six comfortable recliners, each with a fold-away tray and a cup holder. And in the third row were three reclining love seats for couples to share.

There was a popcorn machine, already filled with freshly popped kernels, the smell of which made Iris’s mouth water. Now that she was out of that stifling locked room her appetite was returning with a vengeance.

Trystan was fussing around her for some reason, draping a plush blanket over her lap, bringing her a raspberry slushy and a carton of warm popcorn.

“It’s lightly salted. Would you prefer butter or another flavor?”

“No, thank you, this is perfect.”

Luna had sunk down to snooze directly in front of Iris’s seat, and Iris occasionally ran her socked foot over the dog’s flank.

“So, what would you like to watch? Miles has a great variety of movies and shows.”

“I’m not fussy, you choose.” She didn’t care what they watched, as long as it kept her here.

He sat down in the recliner next to hers, kicking off his trainers and going full sprawl. He lifted what looked like a tablet from a small side table and swiped the screen a few times. He made a soft sound of approval before glancing over at Iris.

“You okay with scary movies?”

“I like scary movies.”

He nodded and swiped again, before putting the tablet aside. The lights dimmed, and Iris curled her legs under her bum and snuggled cozily beneath the warm blanket as she stared at the screen.

She shoveled handfuls of popcorn at a time into her mouth, occasionally sharing with Luna, and happily washed it down with her slushy as she became invested in the story.

“Oh my God, she’s a moron,” she groaned out loud about forty minutes in when the female lead made the classic ‘hello, is anybody there’ blunder.

“Why do you say that?” Trystan—who’d been largely silent throughout the film—asked curiously.

“She lives alone. If you think someone is in your *empty* house, you don’t ask if anybody is there. You get the hell out.”

“Fair point. Although...” He left the word hanging, the sentence incomplete, and it was enough to distract her from the movie.

“Although what?”

“The other night when you snuck back into the house. I heard an anomalous noise, and—I’m sorry to say—I asked if someone was there.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth in horrified glee.

“You *didn’t*.”

“I totally did. I knew it wasn’t Luna.”

“How did you know that?”

“My dog is smart, but I’m pretty sure she can’t turn door handles.”

“I tried to be so quiet. How are your ears so crazy good? With the wind and rain and everything, it couldn’t have been that noticeable.”

“It wasn’t. But I was already on alert after our initial meeting.”

“And you really asked if someone was there?”

“I think it’s instinctual.”

“It’s dumb. If I’d been an ax murderer, intent on slaughtering you, your question would have alerted me that you were aware of my presence.”

“Luckily for me, your only intentions right then were getting naked and showering.”

She fought back a furious blush, and lost. Fortunately, it was too dark in the room for him to see her crimson face.

“I was trying to get warm.”

A discordant screech, echoing from the surround-sound speakers made them both jump, and they refocused on the screen where the character was clutching her chest in shock after having unearthed a body in the dumbwaiter.

“If you live alone and move into an ancient house with a dumbwaiter, the house is *probably* too big for you,” Iris observed caustically.

“Aah, you’re one of those,” Trystan said, taking a slurp of his slushy.

“One of what?” Iris prompted, when he didn’t elaborate.

“A plot apart picker. Someone who tears apart the minutest details in a movie as they’re watching it.”

“I’m *not*,” she protested indignantly. “I don’t pick plots apart. Not usually. But scary movies bring out the worst in me. I think it’s my way of coping with the tension and fear. If I can point out an implausibility, I’m better able to remember that none of it is real. Although it doesn’t really work, since I always wind up checking cupboards and under the bed for monsters and boogeymen after watching a scary movie anyway.”

“Seriously?” Now it was his turn to sound gleeful.

“Ssh, we’re missing the film,” she said, trying to divert his attention. His knowing chuckle told her he knew exactly what she was doing, but he let it go. Filching some of her popcorn, he settled back down in his seat to watch.

The rest of the movie was only occasionally interrupted by Iris’s moans of disapproval and her squeaks of fear whenever something truly frightening happened.

Trystan immediately put on a lighthearted romantic comedy after the horror movie. A *palate cleanser*, he called it. Iris, who wasn’t a big fan of romcoms—and exhausted after several nights of poor sleep—dozed through most of it. She startled awake when the end credits were rolling, and sat up in confusion.

“What happened?”

“Movie’s over,” Trystan said, after a jaw-popping yawn. “Don’t blame you for snoring your way through it, it was godawful.”

“Are you allowed to be that critical? I mean isn’t there some kind of professional code that dictates that you say only nice or noncommittal things about other people’s movies?”

He snort-laughed at that.

“I enjoy watching movies and I have opinions, same as everyone else. But I would *never* publicly slam a movie. I know how much work goes into making them. But this isn’t a public space and, as such, I’m allowed to voice a private observation without fear that it’ll be spread all over the gossip rags tomorrow.”

Another test? Maybe. Maybe not. It was too exhausting analyzing every little thing he said for potential land mines and snares.

He stretched luxuriously and yawned, another huge yawn that triggered one of her own.

“I’m starving. Want to help me with lunch?” he asked, and Iris—keen to delay the return to her torture chamber—nodded eagerly.

“Yes, please.”

“You any good in a kitchen?” he asked, as he got up and then held out a hand to help her up.

She stared at that big, capable hand for an uncertain moment, before taking it. His fingers closed around hers—strong and familiar—and he waited for her to unfold her legs before giving her a helpful tug up. She yelped and stumbled into his arms when her right ankle buckled.

His arms wrapped around her waist as he caught her.

“You okay?”

“My foot’s asleep,” she moaned, gingerly testing her weight on it before yelping again. “Ugh, pins and needles.”

“That’s the worst,” he murmured into her ear. “Take your time, I’ve got you.”

They stood like that for a few moments, while she gradually placed more weight on her foot as the tingling subsided. He held her comfortably, his arms loose around her waist, his big hands splayed in the small of her back, the tips just resting above the curve of her butt.

They were both wearing sweatpants and hoodies but even with all that fleecy fabric between them, she was still keenly

aware of that large hard body pressed so close to hers.

She brought her hands up between them, flattening her palms against his chest.

“I’m okay now,” she whispered, casting her eyes downward, uncomfortable with his piercing stare that seemed to miss nothing.

He held onto her for a beat longer, his hands moving upward to cup her waist.

“Hey, Iris?” His chest vibrated against her hands as he spoke.

“Yes?”

“I really, *really* hate it when you hide your eyes from me.”

Her brow furrowed at the comment and she lifted her head to stare at him in confusion. He made a deep, rumbling sound of approval when she met his gaze.

“That’s better. I like seeing that defiant spark in them when you’re pissed off with me. When you hide your eyes, I worry that you’re on the verge of tears.”

“Why would you care if I cried? At best I’m an unwelcome guest in your temporary home. At worst I’m an intruder who tried to lie her way into an interview with you.”

“This is a... difficult situation. And I’m trying to be fair. I feel like I’ve found a workable solution for both of us, at least until this can be straightened out. I don’t think that’s so unreasonable.”

It wasn’t unreasonable. Not at all. Iris was the one with the problem and no matter how much she tried to explain it to him, she doubted he’d ever truly grasp how distressing it was for her to be locked in that room.

“You’re not being unreasonable, or unfair. But my phobia isn’t rational. I can’t reason my way out of it. I wish I could.”

His arms fell away from her waist and he stepped back, leaving Iris cold and bereft. She wrapped her own arms around

her body in an attempt to keep that dreadful, lonely coldness at bay.

“I don’t know you, Iris. I can’t trust you. You understand that, don’t you? I can’t allow you to roam freely around my space. I can’t afford to be so blindly foolish. You’re asking me to believe that you suffer from a phobia that very opportunely means you can’t stay in a locked room? You see how highly suspicious that is, right? How could you even board a plane to come here in the first place, if that were the case?”

She nearly hadn’t, but a combination of medication, an aisle seat, deep-breathing exercises, as well as the excitement at the prospect of meeting and interviewing Trystan Abbott had helped her fight through her debilitating fear.

About halfway through the flight, when she’d realized that she was well on her way to South Africa and that she hadn’t lost her shit even a little, she’d felt so damned powerful and triumphant and proud. It had been a huge boost to her self-esteem. The flight hadn’t been easy by any means, but once she’d understood that she could do it—that she *was* doing it—Iris had felt almost invincible.

Only to find herself here, and right back to square one with her phobia.

“I don’t understand why Mr. Quinn didn’t message or email you about my arrival,” she said wearily, tired of having the same dead-end conversation with him. “If you would allow me to, I could show you my correspondence with him.”

“I told you before, electronic correspondence is easily faked,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Of course it is,” Iris said with a dejected sigh, really not in the mood for this conversation again either. This wasn’t even a misunderstanding anymore—it was the willful stubborn insistence of one party not to believe a single word the other said. There was no arguing with that. No reasoning. He didn’t want to believe her and so—no matter what proof she offered to support her argument—he wouldn’t.

“You asked if I was any good in the kitchen,” she said, changing the subject. She ignored the astonishment in his usually enigmatic gaze, knowing he’d expected her to continue arguing her case. Iris felt a swell of satisfaction that she’d managed to surprise him. He was too smug in his belief that he knew everything there was to know about her and what motivated her.

“My parents own a catering and events company. They started off as caterers and I grew up knowing my way around a kitchen. I’m a pretty decent cook, nowhere near as good as my dad, of course. He’s a genius in the kitchen. My mum’s better with the admin.”

“Well, I’m happy for you to recreate one of your dad’s recipes for lunch. I’m pretty fed up of cooking. As you may have noticed, I’m not the most creative of cooks.”

“You do okay,” she said and he grinned.

“If that’s not damning someone with faint praise, I don’t know what is.” He chuckled in genuine amusement.

“Are you sure you trust me to cook. Not afraid I’ll drug you and snoop around your house while you’re unconscious?”

His smile broadened, lively amusement still lingering in his eyes.

“Well, I *wasn’t* until you asked me that question,” he said, his tone mocking. “Come on, time to dazzle me with your culinary abilities.”



IT WAS a pleasure to cook in the massive state-of-the-art kitchen. It was truly a chef’s space, with everything she could possibly need right at her fingertips. She’d been honest when she’d boasted about being a decent cook. She happily whipped up a chicken korma—one of her dad’s specialties—from scratch, with butter naan and raita as sides.

Trystan proved an able sous chef, happily chopping and dicing anything she needed him to. He remained largely silent, while Iris regaled him with stories of her family’s business and

some of the more outlandish events they'd planned and catered.

"I'm actually a little sorry I missed the Bhandari wedding this past weekend. It's one of the biggest events we've ever catered. Over a thousand guests. Dad was really chuffed we got the contract.

"I went to school with the bride, Shruti. She and I were never really friends, she was more popular than me. I didn't have many friends at school, I always had my head stuck in a book or I'd be staring into space thinking up crazy stories. The other kids thought I was a bit weird."

"Did they bully you?" It was the first time he'd spoken in ages, and it made her aware of how long she'd been prattling on inanely.

"Sorry, you must be bored to tears. I do tend to go on a bit when given free rein to talk."

"If I were bored to tears I wouldn't be asking questions, now would I?"

Fair point.

"What was the question?" she asked, prevaricating.

"Were you bullied?"

"A little," she admitted. She ignored his annoyed hiss when she deliberately looked away from him to "check" on the curry simmering away on the gas stove top for the second time in under a minute.

"A little?" he repeated and she inhaled shakily, before forcing herself to meet that all-seeing gaze.

"Okay, a lot. Usually small things, like name-calling and taking or breaking my stuff. They made fun of my braces, my hair, my body. My parents being in the service industry. Nothing was off limits to them.

"I didn't want a phone, and I had no social media accounts because I knew the online bullying would be relentless if I did. And it became yet another thing for them to mock me about.

“Then one Friday afternoon, just after the final bell, Shruti—the ringleader—and her cohorts shoved me into a supply room and locked the door. The teachers were all in a staff meeting and the other kids had mostly gone home already. Any student who did hear my panicked screams daren’t go against Shruti and her minions. It felt like I was locked in there, in the dark, for hours. But in reality it was only forty minutes or so. That’s how long it took for my form teacher to return to the classroom and find me there. I was a wreck. I’d...”

She stopped talking, not sure she wanted to tell him anymore, her face blossoming with color.

“What?” His voice quiet, reassuring, and interested. His eyes were gentle.

She breathed out a shuddering sigh and shrugged. Her fingers tracing the veins in the marble-top counter.

“I’d wet myself. No other students were there to witness it, but... I was so scared they’d find out. That it would be another thing for them to mock me about.”

“How old were you?”

She’d been so absorbed in the memories that she’d mostly put behind her that the question, uttered in that dark, brooding voice, startled her. She jumped and looked at him. She was getting so used to being in his company every day that it no longer seemed surreal that she was standing here in Trystan Abbott’s presence.

“It started when I was fourteen and didn’t stop until I started my A-levels at seventeen. They were the longest three years of my life. I was fifteen at the time of that particular incident.”

“So, you were sorry to miss the wedding because you planned to spit in the champagne fountain, right?” he asked and—after the meander down shitty memory lane—his dry wit was very welcome. Iris burst into laughter and he watched her for a moment, his eyes alight with an indefinable emotion, before he joined in on the laughter.

“Not gonna lie, the thought definitely occurred to me,” she admitted with a chuckle. “But honestly? I wanted to witness the spectacle. All the gorgeous saris, the colors, the food. I fully intended to remain out of the bride’s sight, though. I wanted to avoid the inevitable snarky comments. She really is *such* a bitch. And going by the few times I’d encountered her over the past few years, the last decade has done nothing to improve her disposition at all.”

“Do you work for your parents full time?” he asked, while removing a couple of plates from a kitchen cabinet.

“No. I help out most weekends, and when they’re short-staffed, but I’m a freelance editor. I work mostly with indie authors, and have a decent—and growing—client base.”

He set the table, while she turned off the gas cooker to give the curry a few minutes to cool down.

“Sounds like a thriving business.”

“It is. I earn good money and enjoy the work. But...”

“You want to write your own stories,” he completed for her, and she blinked at him in surprise.

“I—no... I mean, I want to be a journalist. I have a level 3 diploma in multimedia journalism, I’ve just never had the opportunity to—”

“Iris, you seem like a determined woman. Someone who usually achieves what she sets out to do. You’re what? Twenty-six? And you’ve been pfaftering around editing, working for your parents, doing anything except what you say you so desperately want to do. I’d think that by now you would have at least worked or interned at any number of publications or news agencies. But you haven’t. Why not?”

“The time was never right. My dad went through a bad spell with his health a few years ago and I needed to help out more with the business.” Even to her own ears, her excuses sounded flimsy. Because, quite honestly, she’d had numerous solid opportunities to work as a junior reporter at several local newspapers, and she’d turned down internships at two national news broadcasters. She’d always used family commitments as

a convenient excuse not to grab those chances, and now she could clearly see how much she'd been bullshitting herself.

“If I didn't want to be a journalist, I wouldn't be stuck in this godforsaken place with you, now would I?” she asked, throwing the question down like a gauntlet between them. Instead of bristling like she'd expected him to do, he canted his head as he leisurely perused her hot, agitated face.

“You make a valid point, Hughes. I clearly don't know what the fuck I'm talking about.” Infuriatingly, he sounded like he was humoring her and that rubbed Iris up the wrong way.

“You don't,” she told him, anger making her voice quiver. “You have no idea what motivates me.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

“No, you don't,” she denied, her voice heated and her words curt.

His eyes argued with her, but he chose not to verbalize what he was thinking.

“Wine?” he asked instead, reaching for a pair of long-stemmed glasses.

She stared at him, hating to let this go, needing to convince him of her commitment to her chosen career path. But knowing she couldn't make a solid case when she, herself, doubted her choices.

“Iris?” He prompted and she inhaled deeply, hating how much she loved the sound of her name on his lips.

“Red please,” she said in response to his earlier question, and turned to retrieve the raita from the fridge.

They sat down to lunch at the quaint, cozy banquette in the kitchen and ate silently for a while, soft jazzy music playing in the background and alleviating the strained silence between them.

“Sam is my security advisor,” Trystan volunteered unexpectedly after he was about halfway through his meal. Up

until that point he'd only complimented her on the food, before they'd lapsed into silence.

It was odd that he'd choose this moment to refer to the name he'd mentioned three days ago.

"Oh? I thought that Australian guy, Chance, was." The big, blond Australian bodyguard had caused a minor sensation in the gossip magazines when he'd first started shadowing Trystan about a year ago. People had been sighing over his good looks, rhapsodizing over his brawny body, and the sight of him with Trystan had soon become common. There was even rampant speculation that the two men were hot for each other. Which had resulted in a lot of erotic fan fiction centered around Trystan and his bodyguard.

"Chance works for Sam. One of the reasons I chose not to have Chance here was because Sam lives in town, and he was reasonably confident that I'd be perfectly safe here. Chance is staying with Sam while I'm here, on call in case I choose to venture out into the world. But I wanted—needed—to be alone.

"In fact, Sam and Miles Hollingsworth are good friends. Miles is merely a passing acquaintance of mine. We'd met at a few charity functions and he seems like a decent guy, but we're not what I'd call intimates.

"Sam knew I needed someplace private to stay and—since Miles and his wife are in London for the next six months—Sam asked Miles if I could stay here while he and his wife are out of the country. So, no... Miles Hollingsworth is *not* my financial advisor." The last was offered with a faint smile but Iris was baffled by this sudden flood of previously withheld information, and was unable to return the gesture.

"I see," she said, not really seeing at all. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

"You asked." His answer was both simple and immensely complicated at the same time.

Why had he suddenly decided to start answering her questions? Or more specifically why that one?

And would he answer another question if she merely *asked*.

Only one way to find out.

“Speaking of Australians,” she began. “Are you aware that your fancy American accent has been slipping steadily by the day?”

He surprised her by looking not one whit offended by that question, and then shocked her even further by laughing.

“I tried so fucking hard to get rid of my native accent when I was starting out because Quinny believed that it would limit my opportunities. It became almost second nature to disguise it.

“By the time I was big enough for it to no longer matter, it had become commonplace to speak in that godawful hybrid accent. But when I’m back in Oz, or spending time with my family, or away from the US, my natural accent starts to reassert itself. In fact, I’m hoping to shed the American one completely. It was the worst advice Quinny ever gave me. And that’s saying a lot, since he is partially responsible for one of my biggest flops. Although, to be fair, we’ve been together from the start, and we were young and inexperienced with a lot to learn back then.”

“Your biggest flop? You mean *Eagle-Man*?” Iris asked, with a sympathetic wince, even though she was trying hard not to laugh at the memory of that embarrassment of a movie. It had been one of his earlier films and it would have been a death knell to the career of any less-talented and—let’s be honest here—less *hot* actor.

He glared at her.

“Do you *mind*? I like to pretend that atrocity does not exist.”

“I don’t blame you. But it’s really not as bad as *Night of the Killer Wētās*. Although, I have to admit, I really loved that one.”

“That was an indie. Come on, I was doing a favor for a friend. I was young and stupid, how the hell was I supposed to

know those wētās would come back to bite me in the ass? No matter, I stand by my decision to make that one. It has a certain charm. And it has a devout, hardcore fandom. But fucking *Eagle-Man*? Jesus, it had a decent budget and had no business turning out as dire as it did.”

Iris laughed—the sound joyful and contagious—and after a while he let go of his feigned indignation to join her.

It was a pleasant way to spend the afternoon, and after lunch he brought out a deck of cards and they played a few games of gin rummy.

It was heading into early evening, and getting dark, when he finally put the cards away. They cleaned the kitchen together and he fed Luna.

“I have a couple of phone calls to make,” he told her once the kitchen was restored to neatness.

She stared at him blankly, not sure why he was telling her that. She wasn’t stopping him from making his calls.

“Iris, I’ll need you to return to your room,” he elaborated, and her heart sank to the soles of her feet. She’d been having such a great time; they’d been getting along so well—he’d felt almost like a friend—that she hadn’t for a second contemplated the reality that he’d go back to being her jailer once he was done entertaining himself with her.

“I could stay in the kitchen with Luna,” she suggested, misery lending a wobble to her voice.

Why was he doing this to her? Somehow this felt worse than before.

Yesterday and the days before, despite their companionable—mostly silent—walks, she hadn’t enjoyed his company and therefore hadn’t fooled herself into believing that maybe he was starting to like and trust her. He’d remained at an emotional distance and she’d been okay with that. It kept her from liking and trusting *him*.

He’d been an adversary, an enemy, and that had made his actions understandable.

But this... *this* was cruel.

“Are you going to lock the door?” she asked him, lifting her chin and straightening her shoulders in an effort to hide her panic from him.

“I have to. But I promise you, I’m just down the hall. You’re not alone. Tomorrow we’ll walk Luna together. Would you like that?”

She hated the achingly gentle tone of voice he was using, hated how he was speaking to her like she was a child in need of humoring. Hated that he had no clue, not one single fucking idea of how bad things got for her in that room. He thought she was exaggerating, that she was being childish, that she was making up some ridiculous excuse to avoid being locked in her room. How could he *still* believe that after she’d confided in him about being locked in the supply room?

His hand was in the small of her back and he was exerting only the slightest of pressure—not shoving, not *nudging*—to get her to walk. Her feet moved leaden, reluctant, but they moved... carrying her back to that awful place.

The walk back to the room felt interminable but was over in the blink of an eye. Before she knew it, she was standing in the room, staring at him, as he loomed in the doorway—a large, dark and threatening figure—with the light from the hallway streaming in behind him.

She stood there on shaking legs, her eyes pleading with him when her voice failed.

“I’ll bring your dinner later,” he said.

I’m not hungry, the words wouldn’t emerge from her locked throat.

“Iris,” he whispered, his voice sounding as despairing as she felt. “Stop looking at me like that, I can’t...”

He shook his head, swallowing down whatever he’d been about to say.

He stepped into the room and cupped her face with his hands.

“I’ll be back soon, okay?” He dropped his forehead to hers and—in a move that *finally* shocked her out of her numbness—dropped a hard, almost angry, kiss on her unprepared lips.

She gasped, and when her lips parted, his tongue slid into her mouth—just a brief foray—leaving a trail of slick fire in its wake.

The kiss was over before it even properly began and he stepped back an instant later.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—” He swallowed thickly and shook his head in frustration, while she continued to stare at him in mute shock. “Christ, this is such a fucking mess.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face and retreated, slamming the door in his wake.

She jumped at the harsh sound and then—when the door locked—she sobbed. A quiet, despairing, hopeless sound.

Sleep eluded him.

Trystan tossed and turned all night, haunted by the memory of Iris's face. She hadn't touched the leftover curry he'd taken to her room after his failed attempt to reach Quinny.

She'd barely seemed to register his presence in her room, remaining curled up in that defensive little ball on the sofa. He'd tried to convince himself that it wasn't his problem, that *she* wasn't his problem. If she didn't want to eat, then he didn't—*shouldn't*—fucking care...

Only, something about the way she'd sat there, silently rocking herself in what he assumed was an attempt at self-soothing had made him want to scoop her up and cradle her in his lap.

Another part of him had resented her histrionics. She was being dramatic, she had plenty of space, plenty of diversions, she was fine. It wasn't a tiny, dark supply room, for fuck's sake. Even though he'd asked about the bullying, Trystan recognized that she must have shared that story in an attempt to manipulate him into giving her, her way. But Trystan had been burned too many times by the paparazzi. They went to fucking extremes to get to him.

After the accident one of them had literally cut himself to get into the same emergency room as Trystan. From there he'd managed to get pictures of Trystan, bloodied and unconscious, as well as Trish in the morgue. He'd had others posing as

doctors and nurses. One had even brought her infant daughter in with a feigned emergency.

It had been a fucking battle keeping those images out of the gutter press. In the end, a few of them had inevitably oozed their way into the less reputable gossip rags. And it had been impossible to keep the pictures of Trish in the car off the Internet. Trystan's face had been blurred out because they'd known he would sue their asses, but Trish had been fair game. And her family had to live with the knowledge that images of their loved one's dead body were littered across the web for anybody to gawk at.

So, this shit Iris was trying to pull was fucking amateur hour.

That hadn't been terror in her eyes—she was just a more skilled actress than he'd given her credit for.

He sat up in bed with a groan, scrubbing his hands over his face, disliking the feel of his beard on his palms. He was tempted to shave the damned thing off, but the thought of fully revealing his scar prevented him from doing so.

He shouldn't have kissed her.

What the fuck had he been thinking? He was making one ridiculous mistake after the other with this woman. She wasn't the sweet, innocent thing she pretended to be. She was cold, calculating, her father's daughter. No matter what stories she told about the *real* father who'd raised her, blood would always tell.

But she came in a refreshingly cute package, and that was proving to be his undoing. He didn't go for cute, never had. He didn't go for sweet or innocent either, so her act should in no way appeal to him and yet ...

That mop of adorable dark brown curls, combined with her silky smooth, gold-tinged skin, a pouty mouth that resembled a deep pink rosebud on the verge of blooming, and fuck, those killer curves.

The memory of her generously proportioned body in that tiny pink and white bikini drove him fucking insane. He didn't

know how the hell he'd managed to keep his hands off her that day by the pool when all that tempting golden brown skin had been right there for the stroking.

He hadn't realized that small and curvy could rev his engine like that until Iris had barreled her unwelcome way into his life.

He groaned again as he belatedly registered the erection throbbing between his thighs. Not his first since she'd shown up at his doorstep, and he very much doubted it would be his last.

He picked up his phone to check the time. Just after six-thirty in the morning. It was still pitch black out, but Trystan knew there was little point in trying to get any sleep now. He got out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants, ignoring his persistent hard-on.

The rain had started up again about half an hour ago—for the first time in three days—initially just a few hard drops, but now it was a steady downpour. They'd never get that fucking bridge fixed at this rate.

He padded his way barefoot and shirtless in the dark toward the kitchen, but stopped abruptly at the sight of Luna silhouetted in the dim light.

Shit, no wonder she had terrified Iris so badly that first night. In the dark she did resemble a wolf.

The dog was standing outside Iris's room. Her tail and ears were down, and she was whining slightly.

"What's wrong, girl?" he asked softly, coming to a stop beside his dog. He put a hand on her ruff, and was alarmed to note that she was quivering. "What's going on?"

The dog whined and pawed at Iris's door.

Trystan stared at the door, a feeling of deep unease unfurling in his gut.

He knocked quietly.

No answer.

Of course there'd be no answer—she was asleep.

“Iris?” he called, knocking a little louder.

No response.

She was sleeping, like he and Luna should be. It was way too early and too cold to be standing in hallways knocking and pawing at people's doors.

He hesitated, but when Luna whimpered and scratched the wood again, he shook his head and swore silently at himself.

He'd just take a look to reassure himself, and his dog, that she was okay. She was asleep—she'd never know that he'd snuck in like some creepy stalker while she was at her most vulnerable.

He unlocked the door with a quiet *snick* and stepped into the room.

The first thing that struck him was the frigid cold.

“Christ Almighty,” he muttered to himself, as the iciness hit his naked skin. Why the fuck was it so cold in here?

He flicked on the living room light and immediately spotted the open window.

“For fuck's sake, Iris,” he swore underneath his breath. “How could you leave the window open in this weather?”

He hurried over to close it, and then glanced around the empty room.

Something about the eerie stillness wasn't right. Even if Iris was asleep in the bedroom, it was just too oppressively silent in here.

“Iris?” He could hear panic creeping into his voice as he made his way to the bedroom. The door wasn't closed, and it didn't take him long to realize that she wasn't in bed. He hurried to the bathroom, but that room was dark and empty as well.

“Shit, shit... oh *fuck*, Iris. What did you do?” He surged back to the window and yanked it back up to peer out into the absolute darkness out there.

He was aware of his breath coming in short, panicky gulps as he desperately stared into the blackness hoping to spot her. He'd never expected her to call his bluff. Not in weather like this. He recalled his flippant invitation that she try to *hoof it back to town* if she really didn't want to stay in a locked room.

Well, apparently, she'd decided that fucking risking her life out in this mess was better than staying locked up in this room.

And he'd driven her to it. Driven her out in this weather, in the dark, because he wouldn't listen to her, wouldn't believe that her extreme terror of being trapped was so huge, so irrational, that she would do literally anything to escape it.

When had she left? How long had she been out in this? The rain had started only half an hour ago but before that it had been relatively calm, even the wind had died down.

Trystan ran to his room and yanked on his clothes and boots.

She didn't have any waterproof clothes. She'd be soaked by now. And cold. She'd be so cold. He couldn't stand the thought of it.

His breath came in desperate gasps as he made his way to the back door. He had to believe she'd head back to her car and follow the road from there. Because it was the only logical course of action for her to take. The route was familiar and she would know the general direction back to town. But in the dark, she could trip, get disoriented, turned around. She could find herself lost in the blink of an eye.

And even if she did somehow manage to head in the right direction, that fucking river was impassible. She'd never be able to safely cross it.

He dragged on his oil slicker and grabbed his heavy-duty flashlight.

Luna had been following him on his mad dash through the house, and she whined in disapproval when he told her to stay. He eyed the unhappy dog for a moment.

"Would you be able to find her if I can't, girl?" he asked. "Can you find our Iris?"

The dog chuffed softly. She had never really shown any kind of aptitude for scent games, but she might well be his best chance of finding Iris fast.

Mind made up, he put on her collar and leash, and they both headed out into the rapidly building storm.

“*Iris!*” His voice was instantly swallowed up by the dull roar of the rain and wind. But it didn’t stop him from calling her name every few meters in the hopes that somehow she would hear him.

Luna had been pulling at the leash since the moment they’d left the yard, and Trystan let her lead, hoping against hope that she was actually taking him toward Iris and not chasing some small animal.

The dog *was* heading in the direction of Iris’s car, which gave him hope. The rain was getting so bad he could barely see five feet in front of him, and he worried that they could walk right past her and not catch so much as a glimpse of her.

“*Iris!*”

He would never forgive himself if something happened to her. She could die out here. Get lost never to be found again. He couldn’t live with that.

They’d been walking for nearly half an hour and the pre-dawn sky was starting to lighten. It was, thankfully, becoming easier to see. Luna abruptly veered away from the path that would take them to the car and headed in the direction of the river instead.

The river which had been little more than a stream when Trystan had first arrived, but was now a raging, roiling, furious force of nature.

Trystan heard it before he saw it, the whooshing roar of the turbulent waters. But when he took the turn that would bring the river in sight, his blood froze in his veins.

There she stood, right on the verge of that murky, gray, fast-moving, angry beast. God, she looked so tiny standing there, a fragile little thing wearing too few layers, and a jacket that was nowhere near waterproof enough for this weather.

She was too close to the water—the bank was muddy, unstable—all it would take was one misstep to send her tumbling into that mess of tree trunks, branches, and other debris. She would be swallowed up, and she would disappear immediately and be forever lost.

All that vibrant energy. That wide, beautiful, slightly naughty smile, that delightful high-pitched giggle, the irreverent sense of humor. Her annoying, insatiable curiosity. Her talent, her beauty, her pure, bright light—it would all be snuffed out in one terrible instant.

“Iris, please!” he shouted, his voice hoarse with fear. *“Get back!”*

She didn’t—couldn’t—hear him above the noise of the river. She shifted from foot to foot and even from this distance he could see her anxiety.

She wanted to cross—she was clearly desperate to cross—and he worried that the same illogical fear that had sent her fleeing into the darkness and the storm would drive her to attempt it.

“Iris, baby, please, step back. Oh God...” The last emerged on a terrified whimper. If she decided to go, he’d never get to her in time. Horror and fear, like living panicked things, clawed at his throat, setting off his gag reflex.

Images of Trish Nesbitt’s cold, bloodied, and lifeless face moments after the accident that had claimed her life flashed through his head.

Not Iris. Never iris. He couldn’t fucking stand it.

“Luna. Sit. Stay.” He didn’t check to see if the dog obeyed, but he was confident her training would kick in and she would sit and wait for them.

He zigzagged down the embankment, half-stumbling, half-running and losing his balance in the mud several times to land on his hands and knees. Each time, he pushed himself back up and continued resolutely forward. He was desperate to reach her, and get her back to warmth and safety.

It felt like forever, during which he prayed to every god he could think of to keep her safe for him. Just until he could reach her and take over the job from them.

He sobbed in relief when he finally got near enough to close his hands around her elbows and wrench her back from the river.

He felt her body tensing in shock at his unexpected touch and—once he'd dragged her a safe distance from the water's edge—he whirled her around and closed his arms around her trembling body.

He couldn't speak, couldn't do anything more than hold her close, one hand tightly fisted in her wet curls, and the other clamped around her waist.

“You're okay, you're okay,” he gasped when he finally found his voice. “I've got you. You're okay, Iris.”

She was shaking violently, her small hands fisted against his chest. He lifted his head to peer into her pale, terrified face.

“Trystan. N-No! *Please*. I can't... I can't go back. Please don't make me go back—” The abject terror in her eyes broke him. How had he not seen this before? How could he have remained so blind to such absolute, raw fear.

“It's okay, sugar.” His voice was hoarse with emotion, and shaking in reaction to her severe distress. His hand left her hair to palm her cheek and she flinched away from him, which just about tore his heart from his chest. “You don't have to be afraid, okay? I swear to God, Iris, you never have to be afraid again. I promise you that. But we *have* to go back. We need to get you home and warm, okay? We'll talk later.”

He wasn't sure she could hear him above the noise from the river and the rain, and even if she had heard him, he wasn't entirely certain she was able to understand him right now. She looked like she was in shock, her mental and emotional state altered. He doubted very much she was able to form a coherent thought.

Trystan was consumed by the urgent need to get her out of the rain, warm, dry, safe... her well-being was inextricably

linked to his right now.

She pushed at his chest, straining her body toward the river.

“I have to go. Please, let me go. I have to leave. I’ll go to town, I’ll be fine.”

That she actively fought him in her desperation to cross that deadly river, rather than return to a locked room, spoke volumes. There was no faking this level of fear. Trystan had effectively been torturing this sweet, vibrant woman every time he’d turned the key in that door. And he wasn’t sure how to cope with that knowledge. He didn’t know if he’d ever be able to forgive himself for that.

He lifted her struggling body into his arms. She was weak with cold and offered little real resistance, yet Trystan staggered beneath her slight weight, as the long, panicked walk in the driving rain and the urgent stumbling sprint down the embankment to reach her caught up with him.

He planted his legs apart and inhaled deeply, searching for the last remnants of his strength. He refused to let her walk back since she clearly didn’t have much more left in the tank. This was Trystan’s fault and getting Iris and Luna back to safety was on him and no one else.

He secured his hold around her violently shivering body and started the slow trudge back up the slippery embankment.

It was tough going—he slid back a few paces for every few feet he advanced—exhaustion soon slumped his shoulders and had his lungs bellowing.

Iris—after her initial burst of defiant energy—appeared barely aware of her surroundings, and that, combined with her obvious exhaustion and weakness, frightened Trystan.

He gritted his teeth and dug deep, fighting through the pain and fear and fatigue, finding reserves he hadn’t even known he possessed as he battled his way to the top of that damned slope to where Luna sat patiently waiting for them.

The dog leaped to her feet when he finally reached her, her tail wagging happily as she circled Trystan and Iris to sniff and

lick whatever skin she could find.

Trystan allowed himself a moment to catch his breath, while his eyes searched Iris's cold, pale face. Her eyes were shut, and she'd gone limp in his arms. The fact that she hadn't uttered so much as a token protest while he'd battled his way up that hill told him how very out of it she was. And now, one look at her face in the sullen morning light confirmed that she'd lost consciousness.

He panicked, juggling her in his arms as he bent his leg and frantically shifted her weight partially to his knee, freeing up his hand somewhat to search her wrist for a pulse. He nearly wept in relief when he felt it strong, and little too fast, beneath his fingers.

"Thank God. Okay, sweetheart," he murmured, as he readjusted her weight, uncaring that she couldn't hear him. "Let's get you home."

THE WALK back to the house was interminable. Trystan nearly dropped to his knees beneath the mantle of utter exhaustion several times, but—fueled by his determination to get Iris warm and safe again—he persevered. By the time he reached the back door, Iris was beginning to stir in his arms.

"Wha—what's happen...?"

"Ssh, relax," he whispered soothingly, as he eased through the kitchen door and out of the rain. He stopped only to awkwardly shut the door behind them, refusing to let go of his charge while he took care of the task. The closed door instantly muffled the relentless racket of the pounding rain, and Trystan heaved a sigh of relief at the cessation of noise.

He walked her straight to his bedroom, calling Luna to follow. He impatiently kicked his way through the closed door, and went directly to the bathroom, where he gingerly deposited his precious cargo on the toilet seat before reaching for a thick, fluffy bath sheet and making short work of drying Luna with it.

"Go lie down," he commanded the still-damp dog, and Luna instantly obeyed, retreating to his room to find her spot

by the heater. Trystan immediately refocused on Iris, who appeared to be listing to one side as she seemed to float in and out of consciousness.

“Shit,” he muttered, closing the distance between himself and her in an instant. “Iris, stand up, help me get you out of these wet things, okay?”

With a combination of coaxing and minor bullying he managed to get her up, and started maneuvering her uncooperative, heavy limbs through sleeves and trouser legs, until she was clad in just a tiny pair of silky blue panties and a wispy lacy pink push-up bra that left very little to the imagination.

He glared down at the woefully inadequate pile of wet clothing at their feet. She’d been wearing only a long-sleeved T-shirt under a thicker flannel shirt and the black puffer jacket she was so fond of. Combined with a pair of now-sodden jeans. Her only remotely suitable attire for the weather was her hiking boots.

She was soaked to the bone and as he stared at her wet, goosefleshed, shivering body, he choked back a distraught sob.

He peeled off his own clothes, keeping on his boxers, and lifted her into his arms to carry her into the huge shower.

She made a weak sound of protest at his actions, showing some signs of life as she feebly batted at his hands when he set her on her feet in the glass cubicle.

“I’m sorry, but these have to come off, sweetheart. I need to get you warm, okay?” He quickly and efficiently divested her of her bra and panties, and this time she didn’t even protest. Her listlessness frightened him and his hands shook with a combination of panic and cold as he turned on the faucet, starting with a gentle, lukewarm spray and gradually turning the heat up, in an effort to avoid shocking her system.

Hypothermia was a real concern, and he rubbed her limp arms briskly before gathering her close and wrapping his arms around her still-shuddering body. His hands felt like

enormous, clumsy paws as he stroked her back in rough circular motions.

Her trembling gradually subsided and he felt the warmth start to creep back into her skin. Her small, pert breasts with their dark cold-hardened nipples were pressed against his chest, but there was nothing remotely sexual about this embrace.

Her vulnerability set off every protective instinct Trystan had. She seemed so fucking fragile that Trystan was finally willing to battle the very demons that had driven him to this cold, isolated place, if it meant keeping her safe. Those same demons had turned him into a monster who couldn't recognize genuine fear in someone else when he saw it.

Day after day he'd locked her in that fucking room, ignoring her pleas, blind to her terror and ignorant to her building desperation. Always so fucking convinced of his blamelessness, and so dismissive of her attempts to explain what she was feeling.

When her trembling finally stopped, he turned off the shower.

"Don't move," he whispered, not sure if she heard or understood him. He stepped out to grab several towels from the warming rack. He was back with her seconds later and enfolded a large bath sheet around her small body.

He stepped out of his wet shorts as unobtrusively as he could, keeping his movements slow and deliberate, not wanting to alarm her or have her question his intentions. He wrapped a smaller towel around his waist in no time, and used the last towel he'd grabbed to clumsily wrap her hair.

"I'm sorry, this probably won't dry the way you want it to," he said, keeping his voice low, calm, and gentle, in an effort to keep her from panicking, even though she barely seemed aware of her surroundings "But I don't think you should sleep with a wet head, especially not after the ordeal you've just been through, so I want to get your hair as dry as possible."

Her silent acquiescence to everything he was doing was alarming him. Earlier he could dismiss it as shock and cold—now her passivity was starting to really concern him.

He led her back to the room and sat her down on the edge of the bed.

“Feeling better? Warmer?”

Her gaze was cast downward and she didn’t seem to hear him.

“Iris?” He sat down beside her and used his thumb and forefinger to tilt her head upward. She still wouldn’t meet his eyes, her pretty eyes—pupils blown—focused on the wall behind him.

He’d intended to make her a hot drink, warm up her insides now that the immediate danger of hypothermia had passed, but that wide, unfixated gaze alarmed him.

“Iris, look at me, c’mon,” he coaxed. She was slow to react but her eyes eventually swung toward him and he heaved a sigh of relief. “Are you still cold?”

“Sleepy,” she muttered from between lips that barely moved.

“I know, sugar,” he whispered. “Let’s get you to bed.”

He got up and tugged her to her feet. He pulled back the covers and ushered her into the bed. He wasted a few precious seconds to don a pair of boxer briefs, and climbed in behind her to spoon against her much smaller body.

She didn’t protest because she was out as soon as her head hit her pillow, while Trystan was left awake with his own tumultuous thoughts.

He switched off the bedside lamp, and thankfully his block-out curtains managed to keep out the gray morning light.

He listened to the rain, gentler now, but ever-present. How long had she been out there? The thought of her stumbling her way around in the dark, wet, cold brought a fresh surge of

nauseating guilt and remorse. If she'd lost her footing, taken a wrong turn...

Jesus, it didn't bear contemplation. And yet, he couldn't stop his mind from going there. And he shuddered as he considered the fact that she could have slipped, fallen, and disappeared into that river, and he would never have known. Never have found her. She would be gone.

The worst of it was Trystan had never harbored any real concern that she would snoop around or find any personal information to turn against him. It wasn't even his *house*, for God's sake! He had no personal effects lying around. He'd kept her in that room out of sheer perverse stubbornness. He'd imprisoned her to teach her a lesson, punishing her for the sins of her father—and every other pap of similar ilk. And most egregious of all, he'd locked her away because he'd relished his punishing self-imposed isolation, and had resented Iris because of how much he'd begun to enjoy her company and her refreshing irreverence. And also because he'd known that the more time he spent with her, the less likely he was to keep his hands to himself. It had felt safer to keep her tucked away, out of sight—even though she was never really out of mind.

He sighed heavily, his arms tightening around her small body. Her head wrap was coming loose and he reluctantly moved one arm from her waist to tug the towel off and toss it to the floor. Her hair—soft and fragrant—had exploded into a mass of adorable curls, and he allowed himself an undeserved moment of sheer indulgence as he buried his face in that soft cloud and inhaled her addictive scent deep into his lungs.

He held it for a beat before exhaling softly, trying to release all his fear and tension in that single breath. It didn't quite work, but he felt calmer, more centered.

Iris was okay. She was safe, alive... *warm*. Trystan didn't deserve to take comfort and feel peace at her presence in his bed, but—call him a selfish fucking bastard if you wanted—he did. He had a lot to make up for, but she was here, in his arms, and Trystan would fight the devil himself to keep her there.

eleven

Iris opened her eyes to an unfamiliar wall. It was gloomy, but despite the poor light she could tell that the wall was dark blue and not the creamy off-white to which she'd become accustomed these last few days.

She *should* have felt refreshed after what had to have been her first real sleep since her arrival but instead she felt exhausted... and anxious.

Although the anxiety was nothing new, not when every day brought with it seeping dread and building panic at the stark reality of being trapped in a room where the walls felt like they were closing in more and more every day.

But today's anxiety felt different, and as she became aware of the heavy male body spooned behind her, she began to get an inclination as to where the dread and anxiety stemmed from.

She was confused. This man—who was giving off enough heat to power a furnace—was pressed so close to her, it was hard to figure out where he ended and she began. His bent knee was thrust between her thighs and his other leg was thrown across hers. One of his long arms was under her neck, while the other was draped over her waist, his hand pressed between her—*naked*—breasts.

Yes, she was naked . And he was very close to naked. Hard to miss that fact with the amount of hot, bare flesh plastered against her back.

Oh, and he had an erection. The fabric of whatever underwear he was wearing did very little to conceal that fact. He wasn't grinding it against her or anything like that, but it was tapping insistently—almost politely—against the small of her back.

Please ma'am, would you let me in?

The absurd notion had her snorting and she felt him tense behind her.

“Iris.” The instantly familiar voice was gravelly with sleep and despite the placating tone in that single word, Iris went still as a statue. Even her breathing stalled.

Of course she'd known that it was Trystan Abbott in bed with her. Who the hell else could it have been? But the confirmation still shook her.

What the hell was going on here?

She tried to remember what had happened last night, but—while attempting to remember sent feelings of breathless panic, desperate fear, and pulsating anxiety threading through her veins—the memory remained elusive.

She didn't try *too* hard though, the negative feelings convincing her not to prod too much right now. It would come back soon enough.

“Are you okay?” Trystan asked into her hair... and did he just drop a kiss onto her head? “How do you feel?”

Iris didn't *think* they'd had sex. She was certain she'd remember that. And her body would definitely know. But what other explanation could there be for this level of intimacy?

“I'm not sure,” she admitted. “Why am I here? And why are we in bed together?”

He laughed quietly, but the sound was almost despairing.

“I like how you always get straight to the point.”

He did? That was news to her. She'd always thought her bluntness annoyed him.

“What do you remember about last night?” he asked, somber now, all trace of laughter gone from his voice.

Iris searched her memory. They’d watched movies all afternoon, talked, joked, laughed and then he’d—he’d...

Her breathing came faster as remembered fear and panic flooded her brain. She began trembling, teeth chattering with the intense vibrations of her shaking.

“You locked me in again,” she said in a small, broken voice that would have embarrassed her if she hadn’t been so very distraught at the memory that brought her fear surging back as if she were locked in right now.

She was aware of him talking, his hold on her tighter, his voice urgent, but soothing.

“—open. Do you hear me, Iris? The door is unlocked. And open. You’re fine, you’re okay. You can leave anytime you want to.”

“W-what?”

“Look,” he instructed her, pointing toward the door, which looked wrong. It was crookedly hanging off the hinges. “It’s open. It’s unlocked. You’re fine.”

“It’s broken,” she pointed out nonsensically, and he chuckled, a rusty, relieved sound.

“Yeah, I had to get in here in a hurry and my hands weren’t free.”

“You kicked the door in,” she remembered. It was all a bit vague, but she did remember that. “You could have hurt yourself. Broken your foot, or sprained your ankle, or something. That was really reckless.”

“You scolding me right now, Hughes?” he asked, no heat in his voice at all.

“You should be more careful. Why did you do that?”

“At the time I was a little preoccupied with trying to get you warm.”

“Oh God,” she whispered in horror and humiliation as the events of last night finally came flooding back. “Oh my God, Trystan. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You weren’t thinking, sweet,” he said, his voice achingly gentle, no reprimand in those words. His chest heaved as he sighed again, and he turned her around with tender hands until she was facing him, her breasts brushing against his hard chest. His erection prodding against her thigh.

But he was ignoring that and so would she. Despite her screaming awareness of the impudent damned thing.

“I put us both in so much danger,” she moaned, covering her face with her hands. “All *three* of us. Luna was there too, wasn’t she?”

“She’s the one who found you.”

Iris sobbed, the sound despairing and broken. Another one followed.

“No, Iris, sweetheart, please don’t cry.”

But she couldn’t help it. The floodgates opened and she wept. Days of ever-increasing fear, followed by the illogical terror that had shut down the rational parts of her brain until all that was left was an overpowering need to escape, to flee...

In her mind, self-preservation had meant getting out of that room, despite the fact that it was the absolute worst thing she could have done. There had been no rhyme or reason to her fear. Her overwhelming instinct was to get out and she’d stared out into the cold, black night and had convinced herself that—because it wasn’t raining or windy—it was safe and she would be fine.

And once she was out, she’d kept going... no thought in her mind other than, if she could just get to town, everything would be fine. She’d be safe.

“I don’t know why I did that,” she said, her voice muffled against his chest. “I was so *scared*. I can’t even explain it, I just know that I’ve never felt such terror in my life before.”

“It was cold and wet and dark, nobody can blame you for being scared, Iris. I was pretty fucking terrified too. When I saw you standing there. Right next to that river. *Jesus.*”

He shuddered at the recollection.

“No,” she shook her head in denial, aware that his beautiful chest was slick with her tears. “That’s not what I meant. Being in that room. Locked in. Trapped. *That’s* what scared me. I wanted out so desperately, I didn’t even consider the consequences of leaving through that window. And that’s what really scares me now. I had no thought of self-preservation. I nearly killed myself—*and* you—because of what I *know* is a stupid, irrational fear.”

“It’s not stupid and irrational to you, Iris. And I don’t blame you for what happened. Phobias aren’t rational. You tried to tell me that, and I refused to listen. Worse, I refused to believe you. That’s *my* fault, okay?”

She nodded, and swiped at her face.

“I got your chest all wet,” she pointed out mournfully.

“It’ll dry.”

He was stroking her back and Iris was once again reminded of their nudity. And now, after the initial storm of regret, fear and despair had passed, it was all she could think about.

“I’m naked,” she blurted the obvious fact without preamble. His hand paused its stroking for a moment before he continued.

“I needed to get you warmed up as fast as possible. That meant a hot shower.”

“You’re nearly naked too.” Gosh she sounded like a complete idiot, but her brain seemed to have malfunctioned and she wasn’t entirely sure what to do with this information, or about the situation right now.

“Skin on skin is the quick and dirty method of getting, and staying, warm.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was completely necessary, only... it’s a little weird now, no?”

“Are you uncomfortable?”

God, no... she was so comfortable and relaxed, she felt like she was on the verge of melting into a pool of gooey liquid. But there was the *other* matter to consider.

She tried to find a delicate way of phrasing it, but in the end her candidness won out, as always.

“You have an erection.”

“Yes. Can’t really help that, though. Hashtag-woke-up-like-this. But don’t worry, it’s over here, minding its own business. And not worthy of your concern, or your attention.”

His words startled a delighted laugh out of her and she looked up to see his lips curve into a smile.

“You’ve had a traumatic, draining experience, Iris. Get some more sleep. I’ll be here if you need me.”

She felt like she should protest, like she should at least insist on going to her own bed, but she felt so warm and snug and safe she really didn’t want to and so snuggled closer, trying not to notice how that extremely persistent hard-on of his briefly slid between her thighs as she wriggled against him.

He muffled a groan and she went still at the sound.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured and he inhaled deeply before releasing the breath slowly.

“It’s all good. I’m just...” He went silent and she waited for him to complete the sentence, but he left it hanging.

“Just what?” she asked after nearly a full minute had passed.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. About me. I’m fine.” His strained voice made a liar of him, but Iris’s lids were growing heavier and her brain was fogging over. She wanted to pursue the matter but she was asleep before her mind could formulate a response.



WHEN NEXT SHE AWOKE, Iris found herself alone in Trystan's bed. She was sprawled on her stomach in the middle of the mattress and she yawned as she pushed herself up.

The room was dark. And something told her it was very late at night, or possibly very early in the morning. God, how long had she slept? And where was Trystan? Had her restless movements while sleeping sent him in search of a different bed? Who could blame him? She tended to hog the bed and covers because she was unused to sharing.

She reached over to the nightstand and found the switch for the lamp. Half of the room flooded with warm light, and Iris was gratified to note that one of her oversized hoodies—a lime green one—had been draped at the foot of the bed. Silently thanking Trystan for his thoughtfulness, she tugged the warm, fleecy garment over her head and padded to the bathroom.

After taking care of her immediate needs, she checked herself out in the mirror and nearly screamed at the sight. God, what had he done with her *hair*? It was a tangled, frizzy mess of unruly curls. It was going to take forever to detangle it.

Ugh, that was a problem for later. Right now, her stomach was actively trying to eat her spine, and she needed food. She padded to the door, which was still crookedly hanging from the hinges, and thankfully *unlocked*. She eyed the damage for a moment, remembering the moment he'd kicked it in.

It had been an extreme action, but—now that her memory was less hazy—Iris could recall his panic and desperation.

It had confused her, that urgency. It still did. Yes, she'd been cold, in shock, but she meant nothing to him. And he'd mentioned on several occasions that his preference would be for her to try and head back to town.

Granted, he wouldn't have expected her to do it in pitch black, stormy weather, but she still found his level of concern surprising.

She made her way to the kitchen, shuddering when she passed the closed door to her room on the way. Nausea surged

to her throat at the thought of returning to it, but she knew she'd eventually have to go back in there. Her one consolation was that it was unlikely that Trystan would lock her in again.

She heard talking before she got to the kitchen and she smiled in anticipation, certain that it was Trystan speaking to Luna... but something in his tone of voice gave her pause and she stopped just outside the door.

“What were you thinking? Why did you send her out here? Was it some twisted game? I...” There was a pause as whomever he was on the line with—and it wasn't hard to guess it was Mr. Quinn—interrupted him. “What the fuck do you mean you thought she'd get me out my rut? You mean she was a sacrificial lamb you thought I'd have fun toying with, don't you? That's twisted, Quinny. I didn't need to be shaken out of my rut... I'm not in a rut. I'm re-evaluating. And I need you to respect my space and allow me to do that in privacy. I didn't fucking *want* her here. She lacks

experience and even *before* I knew who her father was, I told you to cancel it.”

Iris gasped, her hand going to her mouth, and Trystan abruptly stopped speaking, obviously hearing the faint sound.

Aware that the jig was up and that she'd been caught eavesdropping, Iris stepped into the kitchen where Trystan stood facing the door, his mobile phone still plastered to his ear. His eyes were wide as he stared at her, face pale, lips thinned.

“I'll call you back,” he barked into the phone, before swiping at the screen and tossing it to the counter.

“How're you feeling, Iris?” he asked, his voice dark and intent.

“That was Mr. Quinn, wasn't it?” she asked, pointing a shaky finger at the phone on the counter. He tossed the device an impatient glare before closing the distance between them in a few short strides.

“How are you?” he repeated the question, cupping her face and tilting it upward to stare into her eyes.

“You knew who I was when I first arrived, didn’t you?” she demanded to know, her sluggish brain finally making sense of his words. “You told him to cancel the interview, only he didn’t, and when I showed up you were angry with him *and* with me. Then you accused me of being an intruder when you knew *full well* that I was exactly who I said I was.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” he murmured, his hands still gentle on her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks.

Furious, Iris yanked her head out of his grasp and shoved at his stupidly big, immovable chest with the heels of her hands for good measure. Naturally, he didn’t budge.

“We’ll discuss it *now*,” she insisted, stepping away from him and planting her hands on her hips as she glared up at him. “You knew who I was, you *knew* I had a legitimate reason for being here, but you left me out in the rain and the cold! And then when I *did* get into the house, you accused me of trespassing, threatened me with arrest, and kept me locked in that awful fucking room for days on end. I’ve been here for a week, and not once in that time did you think to set my mind at ease and admit that you’d known about the interview all along. Instead, I was left for hours at a time, worrying about what would happen when the police finally came for me. Imagining being locked in a prison cell, exacerbating the terror I already felt of being trapped in that room.”

His throat moved as he swallowed, his face even paler than before, his silvery eyes stormy and troubled.

“I-I was furious with Quinny for ignoring my wishes. And I was pissed off with you as well, for being here, for distracting me from my—”

“Your what?” she interrupted him shortly. “From your melodramatic moping? Because that’s what you were doing, hiding here, away from the world, with a major case of the sads. Something terrible happened to you, and I’m sorry about that, but that doesn’t mean you get to treat the rest of humanity like shit. It doesn’t mean you get to treat *me* like I’m somehow awful for having ambition, and for being excited about an

interview that more seasoned journalists would be creaming over.”

“You’re right.”

“And I don’t think that...” she stopped as his words sank in, and tilted her head as she eyed him speculatively. “What did you say?”

“I said you’re right. I was being a fucking dick. And I’m —” He shoved his hands into his hoodie pocket as he glared fiercely into her face. Always so damned intense. “I made a lot of mistakes with you, Iris. I treated you badly. And I regret that. I wish... I hope...”

He was really struggling to verbalize whatever was going on in that clever brain of his and Iris remained silent, waiting, not sure if prompting him would send him skittering back into his brittle shell again.

“I know that I’ve said and done some truly shitty and unforgivable things, and I hope that we could possibly start over?”

“Oh, just a clean slate, you mean? Forget everything you did, move on, and pretend it never happened?” Must be great to be a guy like Trystan Abbott. How often did this work for him? Just wave the magic Zero Consequences wand and start over.

She shook her head, and gave a short, incredulous bark of laughter.

“I can’t simply forget what you did to me, Trystan. And right now, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to forgive it, not after everything that has happened. But what I *can* do is set it aside for the duration of my stay here, if only to make life more tolerable for both of us. We don’t have to be friends, we don’t have to be anything. We just have to get through however long we have left here together and then move on with our lives. That would be simplest, I think.”

“What about the interview?”

“You don’t want to do it, I respect your decision.”

“And that’s it?”

“Frankly, I don’t care anymore. I just want this ordeal to end so that I can go home.”

He dipped his head and for once *he* was the one avoiding her eyes.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

Thrown by the abrupt switch in topics, Iris blinked in confusion.

“What?”

“It’s only four in the morning, but you’ve slept for nearly twenty-four hours. You must be starving.”

It was ridiculously prosaic after the intensity of the last few minutes, but she *was* hungry and she did need to eat. And since she’d—only moments before—resolved to set the matter aside for now, she might as well focus on something she had some control over. Sulking and not talking to him would achieve nothing and exacerbate an already complicated situation.

“I am, yes.”

“I’ll whip up some breakfast,” he said. “Have a seat.”

“I could help,” she offered, and he eyed her for a moment, as if he were evaluating her condition. Eventually, he nodded.

“I’m making omelets. Why don’t you fix the coffee and toast and set the table?”

Happy to have something to do, she sprang into action.

They didn’t speak much while they each went about their individual tasks, but the silence between them was surprisingly companionable. Luna was asleep in her basket close to the back door, clearly disdainful of so much activity this early in the morning.

“Do you live with your family?” The question, coming as it did off the back of a nearly ten-minute-long silence between them, surprised Iris. She looked up from the mug of coffee she was pouring, but his back was to her as he fried the omelets.

“No. I share a flat with two women in South Croydon. I’m shocked your *comprehensive* background check on me didn’t tell you that.” She couldn’t resist the barb.

“If it had, I wouldn’t be asking,” he responded evenly, before continuing. “Sharing for how long now?”

“Nearly three years.”

“And you get along with them?”

“For the most part. Nobody’s ever late with the rent, we’re respectful of each other’s space, we don’t nick one another’s stuff. It has worked out better than any of us imagined it would. Especially considering we were total strangers when we moved in together.”

“I shared an apartment with my mates Dazza—Darryl—and Quinny during and after college,” he volunteered the information freely, as he slid the omelets onto a couple of waiting plates on the counter next to the stove top. He carried the plates to the banquette, while Iris brought over the coffee and toast. “Those were some of the best years of my life.”

Once they were seated, he smiled fondly and continued speaking while he buttered a slice of toast. “Dazza’s the one who wrote and directed *Night of the Killer Wētās*. He went on to do some pretty amazing shit after that.”

“Are you talking about Darryl Constanza?” New Zealander Darryl Constanza was one of the most acclaimed directors in the world right now—three of his last eight movies had won best picture awards. Everybody knew that the two men were friends, and had been since childhood—when they’d met shortly after Darryl’s family had moved to Australia—Iris just hadn’t realized that Constanza had directed that terrible movie.

“Yeah, he’s a good mate.”

“He directed *Wētās*?”

“He went by the name Daz Stanza back then. He had aspirations of being an actor and thought it would be a cool stage name. Thank God he eventually listened to Quinny and me when we convinced him it was terrible. But the bastard is

lucky, I will be forever associated with that movie, while he got off scot-free.”

“I didn’t realize you and Mr. Quinn went so far back,” Iris said, sipping her coffee.

“Yeah, he and Dazza are my best mates. They have been since we were kids. Quinny has a good head for business, and he managed both Dazza and me when we were starting out.”

“I feel like that’s something I should have known.”

“Not many people know. Quinny kept it on the down-low. He had his reasons back when we were up and coming, and after all these years there’s no point in revealing how close we really are.”

Iris mulled over his words, while Trystan watched her in that unnerving way of his. This time she called him out on it. “Why do you keep staring at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, like you’re mentally taking me apart to see what makes me tick, before very methodically putting me back together again.”

He cleared his throat and lifted his shoulders, his cheeks going red, and this time Iris was the one who stared as she tried to figure out what had triggered that reaction. He replied before she could work it out.

“I-I like looking at you.”

She gaped at him, jaw going slack, eyes popping, head tilted.

“I don’t understand,” she admitted, and he grinned.

“Nothing *to* understand, Hughes,” Trystan said. He sliced off a piece of omelet with the side of his fork and popped it into his mouth. He chewed slowly and deliberately, while Iris waited impatiently for him to elaborate. “I just *like* looking at you. You have a very interesting face, and I enjoy the way your individual features fit together.”

“And that’s why you keep staring at me?”

“Why else would I be doing it?”

“I don’t know... to unsettle me?”

He chuckled and took another bite of his omelet.

“From day one, I found you—I don’t know—*enjoyable* to look at. Your face is so expressive, with those doe eyes that project your every thought and feeling, and that mobile mouth that looks like a furred rose on the brink of blossoming, and I’m quite... helpless to do anything *but* stare in absolute wonder.”

“I have a question,” she announced, choosing to ignore the inflammatory comments that had sent butterflies aflutter in her stomach. “I presume I’m allowed to ask questions without you immediately assuming I’m in interview mode?”

His lips twitched at her dramatic announcement and he waved a hand in her direction, inviting her continue.

“Have you been able to contact Mr. Quinn this entire time?”

“The other evening—after movies—was the first time I’d tried,” he admitted. “He really is on a retreat. But he does periodically check his phone. I was lucky that he answered immediately when I called. I think he was hoping to hear I was ready to go back to work. He’s been pushing for this big publicity tour to promote *Cryo Cop*.”

Cryo Cop was Trystan’s upcoming movie—his and Trish Nesbitt’s—and it was premiering in a month. Iris had had every intention of questioning him about the lack of publicity around the much-anticipated release in her now never-to-be interview. But it was Trish Nesbitt’s last movie and that, along with Trystan’s apparent disappearance, had already created a lot of buzz around the film.

Iris mulled over his words for a moment—they rang with sincerity—and she found herself believing him.

“I heard you accuse Mr. Quinn of using me to get you out of a rut,” she said. “Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s a meddling bastard who thinks that I just need to be shaken out of my funk before I’ll be ready to start working again.”

“And he thought *I* could do that?” Jeez, how deluded was Mr. Quinn? And why Iris? She was a perfectly ordinary woman, possessing none of the charms of the other women toward whom Trystan regularly seemed to gravitate. Then again, maybe she was looking at this the wrong way. Maybe that wasn’t the kind of diversion he meant— maybe he’d always intended for Iris to antagonize Trystan. Especially if he’d known who her father had been.

“To be fair,” Trystan said slowly, as he lifted his cup and took a long sip, leaving her hanging. He lowered the cup and eyed her squarely. “You’ve already done it. Have been doing it, *are* doing it right now. You’ve dragged me kicking and screaming out of—how did you put it?—out of the sads. And, for a gloriously satisfying instant, straight into the mads. With you here, all I’ve been able to think of was how much you annoy me, amuse me, entertain me. And I resented the hell out of you for that because I’m *supposed* to be here to wallow in my guilt and grief and misery. Not come up with flimsy excuses to keep spending time with you. And certainly *not* spend hours fantasizing about what it would be like to shut you up by kissing that perfect mouth.”

Uh, *what?*

“But...” How did she even respond to that? This was not something the Iris Hugheses of the world ever expected to hear from the Trystan Abbottses. In the end all she could come up with was a single-word question, “*Why?*”

“Why what?”

“Why me? Is it because you’ve been so alone and bored these last few months that you were ripe for a distraction?”

“Hardly,” he said, finishing off the last of his omelet. “You have to know that you’re hardly the first person to have approached Quinny for an interview since the accident? He could have picked anyone else, if that were the case.”

“So, to Mr. Quinn, I was only some court jester to amuse his prized client out of the doldrums? What about the interview? He knew you didn’t want to do it, but he sent me here regardless? Where would that have left me? Professionally?” The magnitude of Hunter Quinn’s manipulation was staggering and infuriating.

“I don’t know how Quinny expected this to go. I don’t believe he thought it all the way through. But it *is* telling that he arranged for it to take place right when he was uncontactable,” Trystan said, but Iris wasn’t sure if she could trust him to tell the truth right now.

“Is this what rich and powerful men do for kicks?” she asked, her voice bitter. “Manipulate ordinary people like puppets?”

“Iris, if you’re referring to yourself as *ordinary*, I beg to differ.”

“You know nothing about me, Trystan,” she pushed her half-eaten plate of food aside and surged to her feet. “You’re so far removed from the real world and real people that I’m some kind of novelty to you. But that will quickly wear off and you’ll get bored. I’d sooner skip ahead to that part, if you don’t mind... it’ll save us both a whole lot of awkwardness. Thanks for breakfast. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to be alone.”

twelve

Iris didn't wait for Trystan's reply instead she turned and left the kitchen. It was still dark outside, but for once it was silent. No wind and no rain. The quiet was so unfamiliar it was eerie, and gooseflesh skittered up and down Iris's spine as she retreated to her room.

She had no intention of staying there—the traumatic memories of the last few days were still too fresh in her mind for that—but she needed her laptop, some underwear, and leggings. She'd been walking around in just the thigh-length hoodie, and no underwear. She'd tried not to think about it, even though she couldn't help feeling awkward as hell since she knew that Trystan had to have been aware of her lack of panties. After all, *he* was the one who'd omitted her underwear when he'd brought her the hoodie.

Then again, maybe he'd been reluctant to sift through her undies. Some men were squeamish when it came to things like that.

She hastily dragged on a pair of panties and some thick leggings, before grabbing her headphones, laptop, and charger, and fleeing from the room again.

It was only as she settled into what looked like a solarium that she thought about her phone.

She'd taken it with her last night but hadn't seen it since. She had a sinking feeling that she'd lost it somewhere in her mad dash toward the river. She'd have to email her parents to let them know she would be out of touch for a while.

She did that and shot one off to Evan too. She hadn't heard from her friend in a couple of days, and wondered if she was okay. The other woman liked to regale Iris with the minutia of her life, and it was unusual for her to remain out of touch, especially during the week when she was bored at work and not distracted by her social life.

Correspondence done, she updated her journal, bitching about Trystan's duplicity as well as Mr. Quinn's manipulation. She didn't hold back since she could be as brutal as she liked in the privacy of her journal and her entries were filled with vitriol.

As she read through the entry she'd written just hours before fleeing into the cold, wet night, it was clear from her language that she'd been spiraling.

She'd written about Trystan, spending time with him, enjoying his company, feeling optimistic that maybe he was starting to like and trust her, and then the feeling of utter betrayal when he'd locked her in that room.

I don't know how to feel. I can't breathe, I can't think, I'm suffocating, choking on my fear; my skin is too tight on my body and I know it's just a matter of time before I burst out of it. I'm scared, terrified, I have to get out of here before that happens. Before I lose myself.

Jesus. She stopped reading, shaking her head at the sheer irrationality of her thought processes. She'd been perfectly safe in that room, she'd nearly died out there in the dark, and yet she'd chosen *out there* as the lesser of two evils.

It scared her. She'd never endangered herself like that before. But then, she'd never found herself in a situation like this before either. She'd never before had to deal with being locked in day after day after day. And what had started as a controllable condition had rapidly escalated through the roof.

She shook her head and saved and closed her journal before opening her manuscript. The silly story she was working on was just for fun, but it was diverting and kept her mind occupied.

“WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON?” The deep voice dragged Iris back to the present with a jolt and she looked up from her laptop to stare blankly at the tall man who was sitting in the chair opposite the sofa where she’d set up office.

She blinked a few times, her mind still swimming with plot lines and bits of snatched dialogue between characters.

“How long have you been sitting there?” she finally asked, her voice thick from disuse... for that matter how long had *she* been sitting there? She’d lost all track of time—it was fully daylight now—and she felt stiff from being seated in one position for so long.

“I’ve been here, reading, for nearly forty minutes. I didn’t want to disturb you, but I thought maybe you needed a break.”

“What’s the time?” She set her laptop aside and got up to stretch her legs, wincing a bit when her limbs protested the movement.

“About eight-thirty.”

Which meant Iris had been sitting there, wholly absorbed in her writing, for nearly two-and-a-half hours. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d done that. It excited her, and all she could think of was getting back to it.

“So, what are you working on?” he asked again.

She ambled over to the window and looked out. It wasn’t raining and—wonder of wonders— patches of blue were peeking through the clouds.

“A story.” She tossed the words nonchalantly over her shoulder.

“About?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not about you,” she sniped, turning back to face him.

He didn’t respond to that, merely stared, his beautiful eyes filled with gentle censure, and that annoyed Iris because it made her feel irrationally guilty. Which, in turn, made her feel defensive because if anyone should feel guilty here it should be Trystan.

“I need a new room,” she muttered, and the expression in his gaze morphed into concern.

“Of course,” he said. “Pick one and I’ll move your bags.”

“That’s fine, I’ll move my own bags.”

“Don’t be silly, Iris, I’m happy to do it.”

She nodded and picked up her laptop. As she headed toward the door, she was aware of him getting up as well, and her gaze flew up to meet his in alarm.

“What are you doing? Are you following me?”

“If I’m to bring your bags, I’ll need to know which room you’re moving to.” His tone of voice was so reasonable it made her feel immediately churlish and paranoid.

She didn’t say anything in response, but as she exited the very pretty light- and plant-filled solarium he ushered her to the left.

“The spare bedrooms are down this way,” he told her. She mutely turned in the direction he’d indicated and was utterly unsurprised to discover that the two spare bedrooms were on either side of *his* room.

Because, *of course*, they were.

“There are only two spare bedrooms in this gigantic house?” she asked skeptically.

“There are four other bedrooms, excluding the suite you were staying in, but they’re in the Hollingsworths’ private living quarters. They’ve requested that I—and any of my guests—make use of this wing of the house only.”

“Oh. I’m not your guest though.”

“Neither are you theirs.”

Fair enough.

“In that case, this room is fine,” Iris said, picking the smaller of the two. The one Trystan had led her to—God, had it really only been five days ago?—after they’d spent the morning hauling sandbags. A comfortable space dressed in

russets and browns, with a queen-sized bed and a small en suite bathroom.

Trystan nodded and turned to walk away.

Iris ventured into the lovely room. Whomever had decorated this house had amazing taste, everything had definitely been designed with comfort in mind.

Trystan returned shortly with her handbag slung over one shoulder and her suitcases rolling behind him. Luna ambled lazily along behind him, curious about the activity.

“Thank you,” Iris said.

He nodded, dropping her handbag on the bed and standing in the middle of the room with his hands thrust into the pockets of the black dropped-crotch fleecy joggers he was wearing. He stared at her moodily from beneath the fall of pitch-black hair that had flopped to his forehead.

“Iris, it occurs to me that I haven’t—*uhm*—I haven’t apologized.” His voice was gruff, filled with awkward self-consciousness.

“Hmm,” she hummed noncommittally. “That had occurred to me as well.”

His shoulders hunched defensively and his brow lowered. His lips tightened and his beard bristled as his jaw clenched.

Iris waited. Wondering if he would follow through.

“I’m sorry.”

“For?”

“Every goddamned thing.”

“I think,” she mused, shoving her hands into her hoodie’s front pocket. “I’m going to need specifics.”

“Fuck.” The word emerged on a sigh, and he stepped toward her, crowding her. But Iris refused to back down, standing her ground, and waiting.

“I’m sorry for sending you back out into the storm that first night,” he said. “And I’m so fucking sorry for locking you

in that room when I knew full well who you were. I was being a bastard and I had no excuse, other than that I didn't want to deal with a nosy reporter in my space. And I'm sorry for continuing to do so, even after discovering that I enjoyed your company and that you weren't what I thought you would be.

"I was wrong. I was a fucking prick. And I'm ashamed of myself for not believing you when you told me about your phobia. I'll never forget the horror I felt when I realized what I'd driven you to. You scared fucking years off my life and I never want to feel like that again."

As apologies went it was pretty good and a lot more comprehensive than she'd been expecting.

"I know you said you'd be unable to forgive me for all that I've done, but you deserve an apology regardless. I fucked up. I know I did. And if I had it to do all over again, knowing what I now know, I'd change so fucking much."

"What do you now know?" Her question was a whisper and he shifted infinitesimally closer to her, leaving mere inches between his big body and hers.

"I know that I look at you and I fucking *ache* to do this," he admitted hoarsely, lifting his hands to cup her face. She loved it when he did that—it made her feel cared for, cherished... *Weak* with longing. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and his blazing eyes fell to her lips. "And this..."

The last word was muffled as he lowered his lips to hers, capturing her soft *oh* in the sweetest, gentlest of kisses.

It was exploratory, uncertain, not at all the type of kiss she would've expected from a confident, sexy man like Trystan Abbott, but she appreciated it because she recognized the question in the embrace. He was waiting for her permission to take it further.

And Iris, curious to discover more, parted her lips slightly, and flicked her tongue over the sensual curve of his lower lip.

He groaned, the small gesture from her emboldening him. One of his hands dropped to her waist and he tugged her closer, until she was pressed against him, his erection

throbbing against her stomach. His tongue surged into her mouth, a living flame, setting everything in its path on fire.

The bristles of his beard abraded her face, and Iris wasn't sure if she liked it or not. It wasn't unpleasant, just unfamiliar, and as he deepened the kiss she forgot about the curious sensation, and went up onto her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He made an urgent, muffled sound against her mouth, and before she knew it his other hand was at her waist as well, and he'd hoisted her off her feet.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and he made a deep sound of satisfaction before carrying her to the bed. He propped a hand on the mattress before planting a knee on the bed and lowering Iris onto her back.

He was braced above her, his weight supported by that one hand and knee, his mouth still devouring hers with the single-minded focus of a man who'd been starving for weeks.

Her legs remained wrapped around his waist and when he brought his other knee up onto the bed, he lowered himself until his hardness was grinding against her aching core.

Iris couldn't find her breath and her hands moved from where they'd been entangled in the long, silky hair at the nape of his neck, downward toward his hard thrusting behind. Her fingers dug into the taut muscles she found there as she tried to guide his movements, frantically pulling him against her as she pushed her aching pussy up against his hard, hot cock.

She dragged her mouth away from his, uttering wordless, incoherent little pleas.

A small rational part of her brain was reeling in shock. This was too fast. It usually took Iris a while to even get close to an orgasm, but here she was, on the brink of coming after one kiss and some frantic dry humping. And that with a man with whom she was mostly still pissed off. She didn't understand what was going on with her. This was completely uncharacteristic behavior for her.

If she'd been capable of rational thought perhaps she'd be embarrassed, but right now she didn't care about how she *should* feel, not when she was so entirely focused on how she *was* feeling.

“Fuck... *Iris*,” Trystan's voice was breathless and he sounded shaken to his core, as he continued to thrust against her.

It wasn't satisfying either of them. The position was wrong, they weren't getting enough traction, and they had way too many layers between them.

He fumbled with his pants, dragging them down past his narrow hips, and she helped him, pushing at them until his cock was free, stiff and throbbing between them.

He went to work on her leggings next, dragging them and her panties down to her knees.

“Is this okay? Are you okay?” he asked urgently. Breathlessly.

“Okay. It's okay,” she assured, and—because she couldn't part her thighs thanks to the leggings that were now bunched around her knees—he lifted her legs and draped them over one of his shoulders. He leaned forward—hands braced on either side of her torso—positioning his penis between her thighs and sawing his shaft between her pussy lips, the thick column of flesh dragging over the hard knot of her clit and ringing a cry of relief from Iris's lips.

“*Oh*,” she whimpered. “That feels so good.”

She was helpless in this position with her knees pushed to her chest, she was wholly reliant on him to give her the pleasure she craved.

And he did not disappoint.

He continued to slide against her, using his cock head to scoop the creamy wetness flowing from her entrance to ease his path.

Iris was a wreck by now and his relentless stroking of her clitoris soon sent her crashing into her first orgasm. But he

didn't let up, instead he continued to thrust himself against her spasming flesh, his eyes boring into hers with a feverish intensity that she found herself unable to look away from.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he gritted out from between clenched teeth, dropping a hard kiss on her lips, before bringing his head up to stare at her again.

"Oh, oh... *oh*, Trystan," she wept, as she came again, and this time was even more intense than the last. Her eyes drifted shut as she mindlessly humped against his hot cock.

"Don't close your eyes, Iris. Look at me," he demanded gruffly and she forced herself to refocus, punch drunk and reeling. She was barely able to see straight, but he grunted in satisfaction when she met his eyes again. She lifted a palm to cup his grim, intense, beautiful face reverently... and was fascinated when he fell apart completely at her gentle touch.

His face clenched; it was the only word she could think of to describe the violent jolt of emotion that flickered across that handsome face. And his body went tense and still, as his mouth opened on a silent cry.

He throbbed wildly between her thighs, and Iris felt his cum land in hot streams on her belly, and probably on the hoodie that he'd pushed up to beneath her breasts.

His climax seemed to last for ages, and when his arms finally gave in and he fell to the side, her mound and belly were slick with his seed.

He dragged her hoodie off and tossed it aside. He made an appreciative sound at the sight of her bare breasts and simply stared at them for a long time, before dropping a reverent kiss on each contracted tip. He lifted his head with clear reluctance and tugged his own T-shirt over his head before bunching the garment in his fist and roughly cleaning his cum off her abdomen with it.

"Sorry. I made a huge fucking mess," he muttered, sounding self-conscious.

"S'fine," Iris said, her eyes starting to drift shut. The unfamiliar position, along with the intensity of two powerful

orgasms, had left her wrung out and as limp as a noodle.

He tossed his T-shirt in the same direction as her hoodie, and hastily dragged her into his arms, as if he were afraid she'd protest his touch if he left her to think about it for too long. But Iris was incapable of rational thought right now. She kicked her leggings and underwear off, snuggled close to his warm, hard body, and instantly fell asleep.

WHEN IRIS next opened her eyes, it was to find herself staring straight into a pair of familiar molten silver ones.

"You okay?" he asked gruffly and she smiled, stretching lazily beneath the covers that he must have dragged over them while she was sleeping.

"You going to ask me that every time I wake up next to you?"

"I don't know," he countered. "Are you planning to wake up next to me a lot in the future?"

She sighed and her smile slipped. "Now *that* is what I would call a loaded question."

"I didn't mean for this to happen," he said with a sigh of his own. "I mean, I don't regret it or anything, but it was really just meant to be a kiss."

"Some kiss."

"Tell me about it," he muttered. "I don't know what happened. I've never lost control like that before."

"I mean, as first kisses go, it was... explosive."

"I like the sound of that," he said, with a warm smile. "A first kiss implies that more will follow."

Iris chewed on her lip, not sure how to respond to that. Not like she didn't want to kiss him again and again and again, but she wasn't sure it would be good for her mental or emotional health.

His smile faded when the silence went on for too long, and a frown flickered across his forehead. He made an awkward

little humming sound in the back of his throat before asking, “How do you feel?”

“Sated.”

“I mean about what happened.”

“I enjoyed it. It doesn’t really have to be any more than that, does it?”

He didn’t look happy with her response and Iris sat up, clutching the duvet to her chest.

“Trystan, we’re both adults with healthy sexual appetites. We’d just been through an intense experience and I think this was just a way for us to work through some of that extreme emotional distress.”

“Right.” His eyes were troubled as they ran over her face, but he didn’t say anything more. He frowned and propped himself up on an elbow to cup her cheek, his thumb gently stroked her cheekbone.

“Your skin didn’t react well to my beard,” he muttered. “Does it hurt?”

She shook her head, only now becoming aware of a slight tingle on her cheeks and in her neck.

“It looks uncomfortable.” He seemed unhappy, as he inspected her face carefully, his fingers tender against her abraded skin. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said and done plenty of things to apologize for, Trystan,” she told him, a small smile on her lips. “But this isn’t one of them.”

He sat up next to her, the duvet slipping to his hips, leaving that impressive upper body on display, and Iris greedily looked her fill. He’d kept his shirt on earlier, which had been a crying shame. Now her hands longed to explore that beautiful expanse of tanned, muscled flesh, but she wasn’t sure where they went from here.

“I think it’s time for a shower,” she said and he quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Together?”

She laughed at the optimistic question.

“Nice try, mister,” she said, snatching up a pillow to cover her nudity as she climbed out of bed. She stood next to the bed and stared down at Trystan, who remained propped up against the headboard. The duvet had slid an inch further south, but Iris kept her gaze determinedly on his face and continued to speak. “But I think maybe we both need some time to think about what just happened.”

“It’ll be impossible for me to do anything *but* that,” he said with a little grimace. “Look, I know this is all a bit much and you’re justifiably angry with me. I get it, I really do. I behaved reprehensibly but, Iris, I really fucking want you. I have practically since day one, which is why I’ve been so damned hell-bent on keeping you at a distance.”

“I think...” She paused, choosing her words very carefully. “That, while what just happened was lovely, Trystan, that’s probably as far as it goes for us.”

“Why?” His question was edged with frustration.

“Because I believe you see me as some kind of challenge, a prize to be won... someone taboo and off limits to you. I don’t belong in your world. And judging from the way you’ve cut yourself off here, isolated yourself from your charmed life and your glamorous friends, my ordinariness is appealing and different—and what you believe you want right now. You *think* you crave normality, but what you *really* need is to go back to your reality and face whatever demons drove you away in the first place.”

“You need to stop psychoanalyzing me, Iris. Why I’m here is none of your fucking business.”

“Trystan, you’ve run away from your life and your responsibilities to hide in this godforsaken place like a big old chicken. You need to stop behaving like a two-year-old having a tantrum and, together with your shitty manager, figure out what you’re going to do about your future.

“Because while what he did to me was wrong, it was also an act of desperation. The bastard is so damned keen to get your attention and snatch you back to the real world that he dragged my unwitting arse straight into your mess. So, *excuse* me if you think I’m out of line, but this became my business when your manager tricked me into coming here and *you* chose to deny knowing about my reasons for being here.”

She turned away from him, heading toward the bathroom, trying not to care that her bare butt was on display. After all, he’d seen pretty much all there was to see of her by now and she knew that her self-consciousness was a little absurd under the circumstances.

He remained silent after her impassioned rebuke, and Iris was almost convinced he would allow her to have the last say, until she reached the en suite door.

“Iris?”

She paused in the doorway, shoulders tensed and back braced, as she waited for whatever he had to say. She refused to turn and face him, even though she knew by now how crazy it drove him when she wouldn’t look at him.

She could sense his aggravation and frustration in the long pause before he finally spoke again. “Your most ridiculous assumption lies in your belief that I think you’re ordinary. I think I may have mentioned before that nothing could be further from the truth.”

She couldn’t help it, his words—spoken with such passionate sincerity—forced her to turn and face him. She needed to see for herself if the feeling she’d heard in his voice was visible in his eyes, or on his face.

But disappointingly, his expression revealed not a single emotion. His eyes seared into hers and she actually found herself flinching beneath the scorching ferocity of that gaze.

She remained silent in the wake of his astonishing words, not entirely sure what to make of them. In the end, she turned away and stepped into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her with quiet deliberation.

thirteen

Iris remained in her room for the rest of the day and most of the following one. Luna had come scratching at the bedroom door about an hour after Iris's awkward, silent breakfast with Trystan.

Iris had let the dog in and Luna was now stretched out on the bed—taking up pretty much all of the mattress space—and snoring away contentedly. Iris had retreated to the comfortable easy chair in the corner and, after updating her journal, had tried writing a few chapters. But her concentration was blown, and she couldn't stop thinking about Trystan, and the things they had done to each other yesterday.

Worse, she couldn't stop fantasizing about doing it, and so much more, again. Was she being foolish in denying them both what they so desperately wanted? Probably, but she couldn't allow herself to be vulnerable around a man like Trystan Abbott. He would soon come to his senses and realize that everything she'd said was true. He didn't really want her, he wanted what he thought she represented. And Iris didn't think she'd be able to survive being carelessly discarded by him. He'd become too real to her.

Iris shook herself as she realized that she'd been staring into space for a good five minutes. She sighed and set aside her laptop, curling up in the chair with her knees tucked against her chest.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't hear the quiet knock on her door at first. Luna's gentle *woof*

snatched her back to reality and her head jerked up when the knock sounded again.

“Yes?” she called hoarsely. “Come in.”

The door opened and Trystan stepped into the room. Iris stared at him unblinkingly for a long, blank moment. He had shaved, and her stomach did a horrible flip-flop as she stared into that very familiar face. This was *THE* Trystan Abbott. And for a second, she felt a pang of loss that *her* Trystan had disappeared so completely... and then she finally saw it, the scar bisecting the clean line of his jaw. Without the beard it was more noticeable, a physical reminder of the accident that had killed Trish Nesbitt.

She dragged her eyes away from that still pink, slightly raised thin keloid. It sliced diagonally up from just below his Adam’s apple to the left corner of his mouth and Iris swallowed, her fingers literally twitching as she ached to touch him there, to soothe the wound that had almost completely healed, but for the physical reminder it had left behind. It did not detract one bit from his good looks. Where before his features had been perfect, Iris found that the scar simply added to his undeniable charismatic sex appeal.

“Iris?” He prompted impatiently, and she was snatched from her mooning, to meet his eyes. He looked self-conscious and achingly vulnerable; his eyes filled with naked fear.

“Trystan, it’s—”

“It’s Quinny,” he interrupted, his voice harsh. “For you. He says he can’t reach you on your phone.” She noticed only then that he held his mobile phone out to her.

“I lost my phone. That night.” She didn’t have to elaborate—he’d know exactly which night she meant. She was confused and out of sorts, still distracted by the scar. She took the phone from him and he immediately retreated, slamming out of the room.

She sighed. Well, that was something that would need to be resolved quickly. He clearly had the wrong idea about why she’d been staring.

She lifted the phone and was surprised to see Hunter Quinn's face on screen. She hadn't expected a video call.

She schooled her features into neutrality, even though her face wanted to default into a pissed-off scowl.

"Yes?" she barked, unable to keep the annoyance from her voice.

"Miss Hughes, I see you've been trying to reach me and—"

"You *knew* I would be trying to reach you once your client discovered that I'd shown up on his doorstep unannounced and you *chose* to go on some stupid silent retreat right when I was due to arrive here. I'm pretty sure that the timing wasn't a coincidence."

He stared at her, clearly taken aback by her immediate offensive. Before now, she'd been nothing but polite and professional toward him.

"This entire situation has been sorely lacking in professionalism, and I must say I'm *very* disappointed in you, Mr. Quinn. You allowed me to walk into this situation like a lamb into the wolf's den. Do you even know what hell I've been through since arriving here?"

"Trystan has informed me, yes." His voice and demeanor were surprisingly subdued and that disconcerted Iris. She'd expected suave apologies, schmoozing, spin-doctoring, but what she got was, "I'm so sorry, Miss Hughes, I was out of line. So was Trystan. I should never have put you in this position. It was unconscionable. And you're right, it was unprofessional. I was just—" He swallowed and shook his head almost helplessly. "I mean, you've seen him. I don't know... I'm not sure how to fix it."

"What did you think sending *me* here would accomplish?"

He scrubbed a hand over his mouth.

"You have a sincerity, an earnestness that I thought would appeal to him."

“Did you think I’d fall into bed with him, and somehow seduce him out of his depression?”

“What?” He looked genuinely shocked. “No. Nothing like that. I simply hoped that he’d respond to your—well, there’s no easy way to put it— you appeared to hero-worship him. It was sweet, so fucking pure and innocent and I wanted to remind him that there were people like you out there, people who enjoyed his work. I hoped he’d remember everything he used to love about his job.”

“The adulation, you mean?” she asked cynically, and he shook his head.

“No, in the beginning, he took real joy in what he did. He hasn’t in a long time, since before the accident. You seem to carry that joy with you. And I’d hoped he would recognize it, respond to it... and—yeah—it was fucking stupid. I used you. And it was wrong. Rest assured, Trystan has already torn me a new one and ...” His deep blue eyes shadowed and a flicker of sadness crossed his face. “Well, there will be consequences for my actions. I just wanted to sincerely apologize to you. Whatever story you decide to write—”

“There won’t be a story.”

“What?”

“Trystan refused to do the interview, and I won’t write about him if he doesn’t want me to.”

“You could still write about your stay with—”

“No. I can’t. I won’t. If he wants privacy, that’s what he’ll be getting from me. That’s what he *should* have gotten from you.”

He had the grace to look ashamed, and his eyes were downcast as he nodded. When he lifted his gaze again, he had the tiniest of smiles on his lips.

“I was right about you, though,” he said. “You’re good for him. This is the first time in a long time I’ve seen him so passionate about anything. And even though it meant him ripping me a new asshole and firing me, it was worth it just for that. Because, regardless of what you may think of me, Miss

Hughes, I love him. He's one of my best friends, and I'm glad to see some of that spark back in him."

"Wait, he *fired* you? But—"

He smiled again. "Goodbye, Miss Hughes."

The screen went blank before she could say anything in response to that. She stared at the phone for a long moment before shaking her head and swearing beneath her breath.

She surged to her feet and stalked out of the room in search of Trystan.

She found him in the solarium, hands in the pockets of yet another pair of obscenely butt-hugging gray sweatpants, staring out at the lake.

"You idiot," she launched into him as soon as she caught sight of him, and he turned to face her in surprise. She marched right up to him and thrust the phone against his chest.

He took it automatically and stared at her in consternation as she planted her hands on her hips and glared up at him.

"You fired your best friend? *Why?*"

"Why?" he repeated, his voice incredulous. "You're seriously asking me that?"

"Of course I am. He has your best interests at heart, he cares about you. Yes, he's an idiot, but that's no reason to fire him."

"Iris, you nearly died the other night!"

"I'm well aware of that," she retorted. "But Mr. Quinn isn't the reason I was out in that storm."

"He might not be directly responsible, and ninety-nine-point nine percent of the blame lies on my shoulders. I know that, but that one percent falls on him, and that's unacceptable to me."

"Trystan, he's your friend."

"And *you're* my—" He cut himself off, staring at her in mute frustration, clearly not sure how to end that sentence.

“I’m your nothing,” she finished it for him. “No, that’s not right, I’m your unwanted guest. A complete stranger to you and as such, you had no way of knowing I’d react the way I did.”

“You tried to tell me.”

“To be honest”—and Iris was always honest to a fault. It would be so easy to keep blaming and punishing him, he might even deserve it, but that wasn’t who she was—“It had never been that bad before. Even *I* didn’t know I’d react like that.”

“But you did react like that, sweetheart. And that’s on me. And on Quinny for sending you here in the first place. He knew I wasn’t myself, knew I was irritable and unreasonable. Before coming here I’d been unfairly ripping into—and snapping and snarling at—everyone around me. He had no reason to believe I’d behave any differently with you. I can’t trust his judgment anymore. Not after Trish and now this.”

She sighed and her gaze roamed over his face, coming to rest on that scar on his jaw. He lifted a self-conscious hand to it and she shook her head, her own hand intercepting his and pulling it away from his face.

“Don’t,” she implored and he stood there, raw dread and insecurity in his eyes, as he allowed her to look at him. After a long moment, she ran trembling fingertips over the raised flesh and he leaned helplessly into her touch. “I knew this was there, I saw it after you trimmed the beard. I didn’t recognize the extent of the damage until you shaved though.”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing convulsively and betraying his apprehension.

“Are you going to have it surgically removed?” she asked and his eyes flickered, before he shook his head.

“Why not?”

“Trish can’t get her life back, why the fuck should I get my face back?”

Iris sucked her lower lip into her mouth and kept her gaze locked onto his before she sighed and took his hand again.

“Come,” she urged, tugging him toward a sofa. “Sit with me.”

He followed almost passively and sat down next to her. She turned to face him, her eyes probing his troubled gaze again.

“Did you love her?” She held her breath, not really wanting to know and yet needing to.

“Love her?” he repeated. “Who? Trish?”

“Yes.”

His eyes darkened and he shook his head resolutely. His denouncement was immediate and unequivocal “No. Absolutely not.”

Well, denials didn’t get more vehement than that, and Iris felt a heady sense of relief, which didn’t last long when he continued with, “But I should’ve and that’s the problem.”

“Explain.” He hesitated and she squeezed his hand. “Please, Trystan, I want to understand what’s going on with you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re hurting and I want to know how to make it better.”

His mouth trembled and shockingly his eyes flooded with moisture. He blinked rapidly, looking self-conscious about the moment of vulnerability.

“In light of everything that has happened between us and everything that I’ve done to you, Iris, you might have difficulty believing this,” he said, his voice choked. “But you make it better just by being here.”

Oh God, how the hell was she supposed to resist this man when he said things like that?

“Please tell me what happened with Trish.” She wasn’t sure he would, and so was surprised and relieved when he started speaking without even the slightest of hesitations.

“We met while working on *Cryo Cop*.” Iris nodded. This was common knowledge; the press had been abuzz about the apparent chemistry between two of Hollywood’s brightest and most beautiful stars. And then, when they’d started dating just a few short months later everyone had been speculating about secret weddings, possible pregnancies. The rumor mill had been agog, the paparazzi had stalked them, their star appeal had gone through the roof.

“Trish and I got along, we enjoyed each other’s company, we had fun and had some great on-screen chemistry... then her manager and Quinny decided a good way to generate buzz for the movie would be to fabricate a behind-the-scenes romance between us. That was all it was at first, a little light flirtation in public, a few dinners, being seen out together, attending functions as a couple. Nothing serious, just enough to fuel public interest. One night, it got physical. I drove her home, and we fell into bed together.” Iris nodded, swallowing down a wave of nausea at the thought of him with the beautiful Trish Nesbitt, which was ridiculous since she’d known about their relationship. “I immediately knew that it was a mistake. We were colleagues, friends. And I didn’t want sex muddling that up. It felt wrong, and very uncomfortable. I was on autopilot, y’know? Insert tab A into slot B type of shit, just going through the motions. But she seemed so into it. I kept asking her if it was okay, if she was sure because *I* didn’t feel like it was okay and I absolutely wasn’t sure about it. And... *fuck*, I should have called a halt to it. I don’t know why I didn’t.

“Safe to say it was the world’s most mediocre sex, for both of us. From beginning to end I just wanted it to be over and I couldn’t understand why I felt that way. Afterward, we had an awkward discussion about our relationship boundaries. And we agreed that it could never happen again. Well, I *thought* she agreed with me. But after that she was—I don’t know—more physical in public, more brazen with her hands and mouth. I was surprised. Shocked. So fucking uncomfortable. She was such a great woman, she appeared so grounded and stable. But —” His head moved, a short jerk of denial, as if he were still trying to wrap his head around these memories.

“The night of the accident we were at a premiere party, and as we pulled up she told me she was in love with me.” His brow lowered and his eyes went distant, as if he were so immersed in his memories that he no longer saw Iris. “It came out of left field. I was shocked and, as a result, I wasn’t as kind as I should have been. At that point, I’d been trying to ease out of the agreement with her for weeks. I’d spoken to Quinny about how we could end it. I knew she was getting too emotionally invested. And I tried to be sensitive to her feelings, but then she started showing up at my home, in my *bed*, for fuck’s sake!

“We’d made the commitment to go to the party together months before, and I didn’t want to humiliate her by not showing up. But by then, the situation had escalated so badly, I knew it had to be our last social event together. I’d told Quinny and her manager beforehand, told them I was ready for a public break-up. They could paint me as the bad guy, I didn’t fucking care. I was done.”

He made a quiet, despairing sound in the back of his throat, his hand tightening around hers almost to the point of pain, but Iris said nothing, not wanting to distract him.

“The night of the party, after she told me she loved me, I slammed out of the car and dragged her to a private room. Once there, I told her I didn’t feel the same way, that I never would. That she was delusional if she thought what we’d had was in any way real. I was ... cruel. But I was frantic by then. I didn’t know how to handle the situation any longer. She was a fellow professional. I tried to respect that, but her behavior frightened me. I felt stalked. Hunted.

“She went eerily calm after I exploded. She apologized for misunderstanding the situation and I thought, ‘Finally, she gets it. Thank God.’ I thought that was that. We left the room and spent the party doing separate things. We’d gone in my car, and I felt obligated to drive her home. When we were both ready to leave, she offered to drive because I’d had a couple of drinks. I agreed because I wasn’t in the mood for another confrontation. But once we were in the car... her demeanor changed.

“She went from relatively pleasant to almost catatonic and, I don’t know... I can’t describe it. I’d never seen anything like that in my life before. She was lifeless, almost robotic. And she was speeding. I wasn’t drunk, I wasn’t even slightly buzzed. I was sober, but like I said, I’d agreed to let her drive because she was insistent and I didn’t want another argument. I just wanted to get the evening over and done with and move on with my life.

“I told her to slow down. It was about three in the morning. The roads were empty...”

He stopped speaking, again getting that faraway blank look in his eyes.

“Trystan?” Iris whispered. Her voice jerked him from wherever he’d gone and his eyes were tormented as they swept over her face.

He gulped in a breath of air like a man deprived of oxygen, and when he spoke again his voice was shaky, almost reedy.

“I haven’t told anyone else,” he admitted. “Not even Quinny or Dazza. It was just... so—” His words failed him and his lips thinned as he retreated into silence again. Not for long though and this time she didn’t have to prompt him. He continued as though compelled to. “She told me she loved me. That I belonged to her. That if she couldn’t have me n-no one else could, then she jerked the steering wheel and drove the car straight into a tree.”

The silence was broken only by his harsh gasping breaths. Iris, however, found herself quite unable to breathe as the shock of his words stole the air from her lungs and left her reeling in horror.

She desperately cast about for something—*anything*—to say, but he spoke before she could, “It wasn’t at all how I’d imagined something like that would be. Like the movies”—his mouth twisted in irony—“make it seem. I was fully aware throughout it all. I was in pain, bleeding, I knew something was wrong with my face, but the shock kept me from recognizing the full extent of my injury.”

His fingers absently brushed over his scar. “They told me the shard of glass that caused this missed my carotid by half an inch. But I didn’t know that at the time, of course. I didn’t care about me right then. I was more concerned about Trish and she was—” His face spasmed in grief and horror, and Iris’s hands went up to cup his jaw, her thumb tracing the ridge of his scar. “Trish was groaning, her face and head were...” He shook his head and made a low, despairing sound, as if he were reliving the moment. “I couldn’t help her, my arms felt like lead. I tried to reach for her, to stem the bleeding, but she was gone seconds later. And even then, I didn’t pass out. I wish I had, but I remained conscious, trapped with her corpse until the rescue services arrived. I was told it was under five minutes. It felt like five hours. The first person to arrive was a pap...” Now it was Iris’s turn to moan in horror. “He took pictures while I begged him to call an ambulance. To this day I’m not sure if he was the one who called 911 or not. The rest you know. Trish died. And I lived. But there were times”—his voice was bleak and Iris wanted to stop him from saying what she knew he would say next. Only, her throat had seized up and her eyes were blurry with tears and when he said the inevitable, her horror emerged on a broken sob—“there were times I desperately wished I hadn’t lived. Because having her death on my conscience is eating away at my soul.”

“Trystan, no,” she moaned, her face wet with tears. She leaned toward him and pressed her lips to his for a brief, heartfelt kiss. “Please, don’t say that. You didn’t kill her, her death does *not* belong on your conscience.”

“I knew she was troubled, Iris, I should have helped her. But all I could think of was getting her the hell away from me. I should have left her alone. I should never have slept with her when she was so broken.”

“You didn’t know. How could you have?”

“I can’t forgive myself for not seeing it until it was too late. I felt like the worst kind of abuser. She was vulnerable and I used her.”

“You had consensual sex, there was no coercion or manipulation involved. Did you make any promises to her

when you got together?”

His eyes flickered uncertainly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean did you talk about having a long-term or permanent relationship with her?”

“No, from the very beginning we were clear on it being a promotional stunt. When it got intimate, we both agreed afterwards that it shouldn’t have happened,” he tilted his head as if he was remembering something. “In fact, Trish was the one who instigated the sex. When I protested beforehand that we were making a mistake, she kissed me and said something along the lines of, ‘If only all mistakes could be such harmless fun.’ That’s what she called it, *harmless fun*.” His lips twisted at the memory. “I came here to try and make sense of it all, get my head straight, think about where I go from here.”

“You didn’t come here to do *more* than that, did you?” she asked because it needed to be asked, but his look of shock and horror gave her the answer before he could verbalize it.

“No, sugar, not at all. I was angry at myself, the world, at Quinny for coming up with the idea of faking a relationship with her in the first place. And I dreaded anything to do with *Cryo Cop*. All interviews would center around Trish, the accident, my relationship with her. Her manager wanted me to claim that we were engaged. Can you fucking believe that? Quinny told him to fuck off and threatened to sue him if he leaked the lie. I was grateful for that at least because at the time I just wanted to be left the fuck alone. I still do.”

“And then I came along and disturbed your peace,” Iris murmured, absolutely appalled. It was so much worse than she’d ever believed.

“No, Iris, then you came along and I finally started to feel alive again. And yeah, I’m not gonna lie, it pissed me the hell off. I’d gotten so used to walking around feeling half-dead, that when this wet, bedraggled little dynamo showed up at my door, screaming about wolves and cliffs and dying phone batteries, I was unprepared for the fucking jolt of electricity straight to my heart. You woke me up, and I didn’t like it. And to my eternal shame, I treated you dreadfully as a result.

Suddenly I was starting to feel things again. Things like irritation, amusement, curiosity, desire, and fear. And that unsettled me. It fucking terrified me.

“When you ran off into the storm, I knew that I’d failed you as well. Once again, I’d missed the signs... no, this time I’d *willfully* ignored them. I could have gotten you killed too and that fucking destroys me, Iris. It felt like that night with Trish all over again. Only *so* much worse because you’re someone I’ve come to care for a great deal in an absurdly short span of time. I know you think I’m making that shit up, or that I’m craving normalcy or whatever the fuck bullshit you said earlier, but it’s more than that, Iris. You make me feel—” He paused as if he were searching for the correct word, then he smiled, a small, beautiful smile and repeated it, this time with a period at the end, “You make me feel.”

She sobbed, and her replying smile was a tearful, trembling mess.

“Trystan,” she whispered. “I’m not Trish Nesbitt, I’m nothing like her. I allowed my phobia to get the better of me, and responded in an irrational manner. I didn’t go out into that storm to kill myself; on the contrary, it was an illogical act of self-preservation. I’m *so* sorry it triggered memories of that awful night for you.”

“No, sugar, you don’t ever apologize to me for that night. Never, you hear me? It wasn’t your fault.”

“Oh, Trystan,” she murmured, her lips curling into a sweet smile. He leaned forward and then stayed the movement, his mouth a breath away from hers.

He waited and Iris closed the gap, her lips making contact with his in a soft, hungry kiss. His hands tunneled into her hair as he pulled her head closer to feast on her mouth.

When they came up for air again, she was straddling his lap and his lips were suckling at the sensitive skin of her neck.

“Iris, baby,” he groaned against her skin. “I want to fuck you.”

She moaned helplessly and thrust herself against him.

“No,” he whispered, tugging at her hair to pull her head back, exposing more of her neck to his hungry lips. “I want to do much more than that. I want to love you. Will you let me do that, Iris? Will you let me love you?”

“Yes,” she breathed, while his lips explored the sensitive skin of her throat.

“Thank Christ ... because I fucking *ache* for you,” he whispered. Iris, who was enthusiastically grinding herself up against his big, thick shaft, could tell exactly how *much* he ached for her, if that very large erection was any indication.

“Show me how much you ache for me, Trystan,” she encouraged and he growled deep in his throat, before getting up and lifting her in the process. It was yet another thrilling show of strength that reminded her of the time he’d picked her up in the shed—what felt like months ago—and she squealed in delight, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck and her legs around his waist as he carried her toward his bedroom.

Luna, who’d been sleeping in the kitchen, got up to follow them, but Trystan commanded her to stay, as he very quickly made his way to the bedroom and gently deposited Iris onto his king-sized bed.

“God, the colors you wear are seriously blinding,” he said with a half-laugh, taking in her electric blue long-sleeved T-shirt, which she’d combined with a pair of fluorescent pink leggings and neon yellow leg warmers. “You’re an ‘80s throwback.”

“Keep it up, mate, and you’ll be getting no nookie.” She stretched luxuriously on his bed, parting her thighs slightly in invitation.

He laughed, the sound lighthearted and filled with joy.

“You always look beautiful, no matter how brightly adorned you are,” he told her, settling between her thighs, his erection hot and heavy against the crotch seam of her leggings.

He kissed her and she sighed in contentment, opening her mouth for his tongue and languidly returning his kiss, stroke for stroke. Her hands burrowed beneath his black Nirvana T-

shirt, finding the smooth, taut skin beneath and exploring the perfect musculature of his back and chest.

“You’re beautiful too,” she whispered after he let her up for a breath. She ran her lips over his freshly shaved jaw, and sighed as his stubble scraped against the sensitive skin around her mouth.

“Why’d you shave?” she asked and he lifted his head at the question, his gaze probing.

“Don’t you like it?” He sounded genuinely dismayed at the prospect and she laughed softly.

“Trystan, you have to know you’re gorgeous with or without the beard. I’d just grown used to it, and I felt like it was a version of you only *I* got to see. *This* Trystan is instantly recognizable and beloved by millions—”

“Fuck the millions,” he interrupted harshly. “I’d rather be beloved by one.”

“But that’s not your reality.”

“It *is* if that one is the only one who truly matters to *me*.”

fourteen

Trystan's words confused her, maybe even scared her a little, and she ran her fingers through his silky hair, still much longer than he usually wore it—at least that was still hers alone. She kissed his beautiful, stubborn jaw, and ran her tongue up the line of his scar.

He tensed.

“Every part of you is beautiful, Trystan,” she murmured against his mouth. “Inside and out.”

He exhaled, a soft, shuddering sound that resembled a sob, and his kiss was filled with reverence.

“I adore you,” he whispered, peppering her neck with gentle, lingering kisses. He unhurriedly dragged her T-shirt up, and those same kisses followed the trail of exposed skin, starting at her belly button and moving up over her torso, skirting around her bra, just skimming over the skin above the lacy cups before he whisked her shirt up and away.

Then he knelt between her legs and simply stared at her for a long, long time. His eyes falling to her balconette bra, where her dark nipples were beaded and visible through the white lace. He swallowed loudly, his chest starting to visibly heave as his large hands moved to completely engulf those small mounds. Her nipples scraped against the lace of her bra as the weight of his large hands settled on her breasts and she cried out at the unbearable sensation.

His lips quirked wickedly as he thumbed aside the lace of one cup and exposed her breast to his lascivious gaze.

“Fuck me, you’re gorgeous,” he groaned, lowering his head until she could feel his warm breath on the puckered tip of that breast. “You have the prettiest little tits. I need to taste them, to suck these tempting dark brown peaks into my mouth. I want to swallow them down, scrape them with my teeth, bite them, suck them, fucking devour them...”

God, if words could make her come, those ones would... she was panting by now, thrusting her chest toward that aching close mouth, *needing* him to do what he said he wanted to do.

“Please,” she begged, her hands trying to tug his head down toward her chest. “Trystan, please, *please*... do that.”

“Do what, sugar?” he asked sweetly, and she glowered at him.

“The kissing and biting and devouring,” she said, and he chuckled before lowering his mouth to her breast and sucking her nipple into his mouth.

It was so wonderful that Iris nearly came out of her skin.

“Aah, my God, please, *more*.” She felt his lips widening into a smile, before he increased the suction, adding just the smallest scrape of his teeth to the sensation. The top of Iris’s head just about blew off, her back bowed as she tried to push herself closer, and she frantically rubbed her clit against his hardness, wanting so much more than this, while at the same time finding *just* this to be exactly the right amount of stimulation to set off her first intense orgasm.

Her breath caught and held in her chest for a long fraught moment as her climax washed over her in a tsunami of sensation.

Trystan groaned when he recognized what was happening to her and he shuddered against her while she came against his cock, with his mouth clamped over her nipple. When she finally went limp, he lifted his lips from the distended nub and removed her bra wordlessly, chucking it aside before tugging her leggings and sodden panties down her limp legs.

He quickly removed his own shirt and sweatpants and his cock landed, hot and heavy and naked against her thigh.

That was when he froze.

“*Fuck*,” he said, along with a few more things that turned the air blue, and Iris blinked up at him in hazy confusion.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have condoms. I didn’t think I’d be having sex on this trip, it—”

“Oh,” she blinked as she struggled to think. No condoms. That was bad but... “I have one. In my handbag.”

“Your handbag?” he repeated, his eyes immediately sparking with hope. “Where?”

“Room, hurry up,” she urged, slapping his arse to get him moving. He laughed and leaped from the bed naked and magnificent, his angry-looking cock swaying as it led the way out of the room. He was back thirty seconds later with her tote in hand.

“Christ, it’s cold out there,” he said with a shudder, tossing her bag at her. She sat up lethargically, annoyed at being forced to move while in the middle of her glorious post-orgasmic haze, and rummaged around until she found the one sad little condom that had been in her bag for nearly a year.

“This is the only one,” she said. “So, you’d better make it count, mister.”

He grinned.

“Miles might have some stocked around here somewhere. I’ll dig them out later. But for now...” He took the foil square from her and tore off the corner of the packaging with his strong white teeth. He removed and donned the condom efficiently, and knelt between her splayed thighs, cock twitching while he stared down at her wet, pulsing femininity with an appreciative gleam in his eyes.

“Damn it, I wanted to taste that pretty pussy,” he muttered regretfully, then perked right up. “But it’ll be my little treat for later.”

He lifted one of her legs to his shoulder and leaned over and into her.

“You ready to come on my cock, sweetheart?”

“Confident bastard, aren’t you?” she laughed and he gave her an unrepentant grin, which faded when he pushed into her. It was a snug fit as he was bigger than she’d expected, and it verged on discomfort as the broad head of his penis wedged itself into her tight channel.

“You okay?” he asked, beads of sweat popping up on his forehead, as he focused on her face, seeming attuned to the minutest change in her expression.

“Hmm,” she moaned, not quite capable of speech.

“If you need me to stop or slow down, tell me, okay? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Don’t stop,” she said quickly, immediately worried that he’d withdraw.

“Only if you tell me to.”

“I won’t.”

He smiled. “Okay, then I won’t.”

He worked his way into her, slowly, as gently as he could. His thumb was on her clit, while his mouth alternated between her nipples, making her wriggle in reaction to the overstimulation. Her hips were moving, tiny micro thrusts that sent him deeper and deeper into her body until—at *last*—he was there, fully buried inside of her.

He grunted in satisfaction and she sighed, as she adapted to his magnificent size.

“You feel *so* good,” she whispered and he gave her a strained smile.

“Iris, you...” He didn’t seem able to complete what he wanted to say and merely shook his head.

Iris would have pushed him to say whatever it was he wanted to, but she was so immersed in sensation, she couldn’t form a coherent thought of her own. He dragged his length all

the way out of her slick, sensitive channel and she sucked in a harsh breath, which she released when he slammed his way back in.

Her free leg bent at the knee and she planted her foot on the mattress to give herself purchase as she raised her hips to meet his hard, demanding thrusts. Her hands were exploring his chest, back, and butt, while her mouth licked and sucked at his nipples, neck, and mouth.

She was in bliss, orgasm followed orgasm and she never wanted it to end, but shortly after her third climax, Trystan shuddered in her arms, his head dropped to her shoulder, and his thrusts lost all rhythm. He plowed into her one last time and kept his throbbing length buried deep inside of her as he came with a low, helpless cry that Iris only barely recognized as her name.



TRYSTAN WOKE to the wet heat of Iris's soft mouth on his cock. Her small hand was encircled around the base, while she suckled on his glans like it was the sweetest of lollipops. Her tongue snaked around the corona, sending him arching off the bed with a helpless groan. His hands went to her hair, his fingers twining themselves into the soft, bouncy curls.

“Iris,” he murmured, reverently, his eyes fixated on that plump, suctioning rosebud of a mouth as it drove him to distraction. “I swear to Christ, you're killing me, sugar. Murdering me with that perfect mouth of yours.”

She lifted her eyes to his and grinned, a huge, satisfied shit-eating grin, before she quite deliberately snaked her tongue over the weeping slit of his dick.

A shudder worked its way down his spine and he made a sound that would have embarrassed him at any other time. A helpless, weak, almost keening sound.

“This isn't fair,” he grouched. “If you get to feast, I should too. Slide that pussy over here and plant it on my mouth, I'm starving for you.”

She made a little sound of denial and to his utter devastation lifted her lips from his pulsating penis to say the most absurd thing, “I haven’t showered yet.”

“Neither have I. What the fuck does that matter? I guarantee you’ll still taste as sweet as sugar. Now stop saying ridiculous shit and shimmy on over.”

She hesitated for a split second longer, before thankfully complying. Trystan made a deep sound of satisfaction, when he finally had access to the mauve and pink perfection of her pretty little pussy, and immediately went to work. Using his tongue, lips, and teeth to devour her tender, sensitive flesh.

He kept her on the edge, making it last, taking her to the brink and then bringing her back down. He lost track of how long he worked on her. He was so wholly engrossed in giving her pleasure, he almost forgot about his own.

She moaned, her hips pistoning wildly whenever he did something that she really enjoyed and he lingered in those spots longer, driving her to distraction. She gamely tried to keep sucking his painfully hard, throbbing cock, but she kept losing concentration, and Trystan figured if he ever wanted to get off, he’d have to finish her first.

He relentlessly consumed her spasming, delicious flesh, suckling her distended clit while plunging his fingers into her dripping, hot pussy. He felt her clench around him and hooked his fingers upward, finding the spot his cock had discovered last night, and sending her tumbling wildly over the edge.

She was screaming his name, forming incoherent pleas for mercy, while simultaneously begging God to release her. She was wild and beautiful, and he was fucking awed by her.

When she finally came down from what had—to all intents and purposes—looked, and felt, like an epic orgasm to Trystan, she dropped her head on his thigh, her small body shuddering, while her soft flesh quivered gently against his lips. He continued to kiss her and lap at her, loving the taste of her creamy spend, as he eased her out of it.

She lifted her head and looked back at him.

“I think you literally killed me for a few seconds there,” she said breathlessly, and he grinned. Her hand was still possessively curled around his hard shaft, and she murmured a soft *oh* as if she’d only just remembered what she’d been doing before.

“Did you forget about my poor, neglected cock, sugar?” he asked with a laugh. “I don’t know if my ego can stand that.”

“Please, I’m sure your ego will survive,” she said with a scoffing little laugh. “If your insufferable little smirk is anything to go by, you *know* that you just rocked my world.”

“Only fair, since you’ve been rocking mine from the moment you showed up on my doorstep, so—” She shut him up by taking him deep into her mouth and he groaned in helpless pleasure, his head dropping back on the pillow.

She was as ruthless and relentless as he’d been and by the time she *eventually* swallowed down every last drop he had to offer, Trystan was a wreck who barely knew his own name. Afterwards, as he gathered her close, he knew he was so far gone for this woman he would never be able to let her go.



FOUR DAYS LATER, Iris was writing in the solarium, her feet propped on Trystan’s lap while he read a John Grisham novel. His free hand was idly playing with her toes while he read. Luna was sprawled on the floor next to the couch, contentedly snoring away.

It was a comfortable and domestic routine that they’d fallen into these last few days. They made love every night—Trystan had thankfully found a box of condoms in one of the rooms in the Hollingsworths’ private section—they made breakfast together in the mornings and walked Luna after the meal, exploring their beautiful surroundings. It hadn’t rained since the night she’d fled into the storm, and every day—while still cold, and often blustery—revealed more and more of the beauty and appeal of this place.

After their walk they usually retreated to the solarium where she would write and he would read. They often sat close

to each other, petting, touching, stroking... as if it was unbearable to be apart and without physical contact for too long.

Trystan's phone rang. Sadly they'd never found Iris's, even though they looked for it every day on their walks. The sound of the ringing phone was so rare—he usually only received texts or emails—and so intrusive that Iris's head shot up in surprise.

Trystan set the book face down on his lap and picked his device up from the side table. He stared at the screen then his face lit up with a grin as he swiped to answer.

“Dazza, mate! How the fuck have you been?”

“Tryst, nice to see you're still alive, you wanker.” The voice coming from the speaker had a thick Australian accent. “I thought we'd lost you to the wilds of South Africa. I heard the weather has been fucking dire in your part of the world.”

“Yeah, we've had some major storms, been cut off, spotty Wi-Fi, y'know the deal.” Interestingly, Trystan's accent thickened as well while he spoke to his friend. He looked up from the screen and noticed Iris's interested expression and his grin widened. “Hey, Daz, you wanna meet my girl?”

Iris's eyes widened and she frantically shook her head and mouthed *no*. She was wearing one of his hoodies, which was miles too big for her, and her hair was a mess as usual. She self-consciously patted at her curls and shook her head again, more adamantly this time.

“Girl? What fucking girl, Tryst? You went up there alone and you've been cut off. Have you lost your marbles out there in the isolated wild, mate?” There was genuine concern in the man's voice.

“Iris, say hi to Dazza,” Trystan said, his grin huge and beautiful, and Iris narrowed her eyes at him, promising him swift retribution, before plastering a smile onto her own lips just moments before he swung the phone around to face her. She stared into the startled face of a handsome blond man

about Trystan's age, his jaw covered in light brown scruff, his blue eyes wide in surprise.

“Oh *hey*, so you're an actual woman.”

Iris burst into laughter at the trivial observation.

“Hi, yes, my name's Iris. I'm happy to meet you.”

“Yeah, I'm Darryl... how the fuck are you there? When I spoke to that wanker last he was all alone, with a storm bearing down on him.”

“I showed up in the middle of that storm. I've been stuck here with his grumpy arse since then.”

“Hey,” Trystan exclaimed in mock outrage, and she threw him a happy smile.

“But how? Why?” Darryl looked confused and justifiably suspicious. Iris couldn't blame him. If her emotionally fragile, vulnerable—not to mention *world* famous—friend suddenly introduced her to an utter stranger who seemed to have appeared out of thin air under questionable circumstances, she'd be wary as well.

“I'll let Trystan explain,” she said softly. “I really am happy to meet you. Trystan talks about you a lot. And I have to confess, I kind of harbor a secret love for *Night of the Killer Wētās*.”

He still looked wary but said, “Aah, so you're one of that lot.”

She laughed at his disgruntled response and handed the phone back to Trystan. She closed her laptop, swung her legs from Trystan's lap, and got up. He caught her hand as she passed him and brought it to his lips to plant a tender kiss on her knuckles.

She reciprocated by ruffling his hair affectionately and leaving the room.

But not before she heard, “What the fuck, Trystan? Who is she? You can't simply let—”

She winced and shut the door behind her, knowing her presence here would take a lot of explaining from both Trystan *and* Hunter Quinn. And even then, Darryl Constanza would probably still doubt that she and Trystan shared anything real.

Iris sighed as she put her laptop on the kitchen table and stared out at the immense yellowwood tree in the backyard. Not that she could blame the man for his suspicion and doubt, when Iris herself harbored similar doubts about this thing between her and Trystan.

She found herself falling deeper and deeper for him every day, but how could it possibly be real? She hesitated to call it love. Just days ago, he'd been imprisoning her in her room. Now she was entertaining notions of love. It was laughable, it was incongruous... but oh *God*, it felt so real.

They were in each other's company twenty-four hours a day. And such propinquity could well be responsible for amplifying every emotion. It was hard to trust your feelings in a situation like this.

And yet when she looked at him, Iris wanted to believe that what they had could work, that what they had could survive the skepticism of close family and friends. And worse still, the close scrutiny of the public and press. Iris didn't think she could handle the publicity of being seen on Trystan Abbott's arm. She was an innately private person, and she didn't respond well to being the center of attention.

But that was part and parcel of who and what he was.

His strong arms wrapped around her waist and his warm, hard body slotted against her back. She hadn't heard him come in, but she welcomed his embrace, leaning back against him while he bent down to notch his jaw in the nook between her shoulder and neck.

"I'm sorry about that. Quinny and Dazza have been protective since the accident."

She smiled and turned her head to plant a kiss on his stubbled cheek. He'd stuck to being clean-shaven, and part of

Iris still missed the wild man who had met her at the door that first night.

“I don’t blame him, you’re *you* and I’m me. It would be hard for anyone to reconcile the idea of the two of us together.”

He made an impatient sound at the back of his throat and turned her around to face him. His arms remained loosely wrapped around her waist.

“The fuck does that mean?” he demanded to know once he was able to glower down into her eyes.

“Trystan, your friend’s reaction is just a sample of how it would be in the real world. We don’t make sense together.”

“We make sense to *me*,” he said vehemently. “You make me happy, Iris.”

“Yes, I make you happy *here*. Now. In this place. Out there, I feel like I’ll hold you back. I don’t want your life. I don’t want the limelight, the glamor, the premiere parties, the press, the invasive questions about myself, my family, and friends. I can’t do that. Not even for you.”

“Iris, I’m falling for you. No, that’s not true. I’ve already fallen for you. *Hard*. I don’t want to consider a life without you. I refuse to.”

“How can you say that? You barely know me. You don’t know my family, my friends. You don’t know if I like sushi.”

His lips quirked at the last one.

“What? Why sushi?” he asked, momentarily diverted. And she shrugged irritably.

“It feels like the type of thing that could make or break a couple. You have two types of people, those who love sushi and those who don’t. There’s no in between.”

He laughed and the sound rang with pleasure.

“You’re full of enchanting surprises, sugar, I can’t remember the last time I laughed as much as when I’m with you. And you wonder why I love you?”

She went silent at his words, and his eyes darkened at the question he saw in hers.

“What did you think I *meant* when I said I’ve fallen for you, Iris? I’m in love with you.”

She stared up at him, wanting to believe, not knowing how it could possibly be real. “It’s too fast.”

“It’s been ten days. My parents fell in love after two dates, they were married a month after their first meeting. Nobody thought it would last. They celebrated their thirty-fourth wedding anniversary this year. They’ve had three kids and are sickeningly happy together.”

“See? I didn’t know that about you, about your family. There’s so much we don’t know about each other.”

“You know now because I told you. These are things we’ll learn as we go along. I just want you to give us a fair chance, Iris. Don’t give up because you think the obstacles are insurmountable. They’re there to be overcome and we can do that together.”

“You’re a romantic, Trystan Abbott. Who knew?” she said, her words laced with affection. “Let’s not talk about this now, okay? Let’s just enjoy each other and our time together.”

He dropped his forehead on hers, his warm breath washing over her lips.

“We’ll have to talk about it sometime, sugar, but I’m happy to put the conversation on hold for a while.” He hooked his hands beneath her armpits and lifted her onto the counter so they were, happily, at the same eye level. “Now, how about you tell me more about this sushi theory of yours?”



“SAM SAYS they’ve started working on the road and bridge,” Trystan told Iris a couple of days later over breakfast. She’d been reading an email from her parents filled with news of work, Mum’s arthritis, and Robbie’s crush on one of the new waitstaff her dad had hired.

“What?” she asked, still focused on the email.

“Looks like the road and bridge will be fixed soon,” he repeated, and her stomach dropped as the specter of what she now thought of as The Real World loomed ever closer.

“Oh.”

“I was wondering,” he began, sounding almost tentative, which was unusual for him.

When he didn’t continue, she bumped his shin with her toe, “What, Trystan? Spit it out.”

“I was wondering if you’d let me read what you’ve been working on,” he muttered, and her lips quirked at the almost embarrassed request.

“Why?”

“Because you look so engrossed when you’re busy with it, and so excited at times. I don’t know if you realize how often you smile when you’re writing. And it’s a part of you I want to know more about.”

She chewed at the inside of her lip as she considered it.

“I mean, it’s rough. And incomplete... and it needs editing.”

“I’ll bear all of that in mind.”

She swallowed and stared into those earnest eyes. And then she sighed.

“Do you have an e-reader?” She’d only ever seen him read physical books borrowed from the Hollingsworths’ extensive collection.

“I do.”

“I’ll email it to you and you can send it to your e-reader.” His lips stretched into a broad grin.

“I can’t wait to read it.”

fifteen

Trystan lay horizontally across the bed, his head resting on Iris's stomach while he held his e-reader aloft, reading her manuscript.

She was stroking her fingers through his hair, trying not to freak out too much at the thought of him reading her silly story. It was all well and good when she was writing it just for her own amusement, but having someone whose opinion she actually valued read it was a little terrifying.

He made a sound in the back of his throat and her hand paused.

“What?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“You grunted, why?”

“Iris, kindly shut the fuck up, will you? I'm trying to read here.”

She muttered beneath her breath and went back to sifting her fingers through his silky hair, tensing every time he inhaled sharply, or made any kind of sound. He appeared to be wholly absorbed and soon—despite her tension—Iris got bored, and her mind drifted. Before long, she was fast asleep.

The familiar weight of his body settling over hers, and the soft press of his lips on her cheek woke her.

“Whazzappening?” she mumbled, and Trystan's mouth moved to her neck to drop another kiss against the sensitive

flesh there. He was familiar with all of her erogenous zones by now and knew exactly how to take her from quietly and pleasantly aroused, to wild and screaming in seconds. Fortunately, he appeared focused on soft and tender this time, pressing gentle open-mouthed kisses up her neck toward the spot beneath her ear that always made her moan.

“Finished reading,” he whispered, nipping her earlobe and she snapped out of the sexual haze in an instant, slamming her palms against his chest to push his heavy, uncooperative body away from hers.

“You did?” He groaned when she wriggled her way out from under him, and he rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with one brawny forearm. “Well? What did you think?”

His sensual lips curled up at the corners.

“I think that I’m in love with a genius.” He shifted his arm until it was curled around the top of his head and stared at her in awe and admiration.

“Shut up,” she laughed, shoving at his shoulder playfully. She was becoming more and more comfortable with his freely offered declarations of love and was reacting to the *genius* part of his statement.

“It’s true, you’re brilliant. And I’m not sure why you’re so goddamned insecure about your talent. You’ve been hiding your light under a bushel, sweetheart. Why are you editing when you should be writing?”

“It’s a big leap, putting my work out there. You’re right, I should have more of an online presence. I should belong to writing groups, and be on forums and just trying harder, but it’s so much easier to write for my own pleasure. And after so many years of being bullied and ridiculed I worry that I have a thin skin, that I won’t be able to handle the criticism.”

“You’re the most contrary woman I know. You came all the way out here to interview a recluse and tell *his* sad story. How is telling one of your own any different?”

“Because mine are fiction. Telling someone else’s story, telling the truth... that feels easier. Safer. I wouldn’t be

spotlighting myself. I would be directing the attention firmly onto another person. This..." She gestured toward his e-reader on the nightstand. "It's personal. It comes from me."

"And like you, it's amazing."

"It's a frivolous, gory tale about a werewolf. It's nothing serious."

"Don't get me wrong, Iris ... It does need work. It's rough, a little clunky in places. Your protagonist is mopey as fuck, but God, it's compelling. And it's different. Werewolves have been done to death across all genres but this feels fresh. Using her newfound instincts to help with her police work, keeping her secret from her partner and her family. Then there's her pregnancy and how her lycanthropy could possibly affect her fetus. I want more."

She smiled shyly and he hooked a hand around her head to drag her down for a hard kiss.

"And there are *definitely* some familiar aspects to the story. She got lost in a storm, huh? Stalked by a large animal?"

"Nowhere near as sweet as Luna."

He dragged her onto him and she happily straddled his waist, her hands braced on his chest.

"You should be writing fiction full time, sugar. Not dallying in journalism, not editing, not waiting tables for your parents."

"I have to pay the bills somehow," she laughed.

"Hmm." The hum was noncommittal as he closed his arms around her and tugged her down to lie on his chest. She rested her cheek on a well-defined pec, listening to the comforting, steady beat of his heart. The fingers of one of his hands idly played with her curls, while the other rested on her bum, kneading the flesh there almost absently.

They lay like that for a while. Neither of them speaking, just enjoying each other's closeness.

"When I said that I thought maybe it was time for a new line of work I was serious," Trystan said into the silence. "I

don't think I can do this anymore. I don't *want* to do it anymore. Even before Trish's death I've been feeling apathetic about it. I find myself loathing it. Despising everything that goes with it. The lack of privacy, the people constantly vying for my attention, men and women throwing themselves at me. I'm just so fucking *tired* of it all. That's one of the reasons I believe in us, Iris. I could be just a regular guy, and you wouldn't have to worry about all the other shit that goes along with dating someone like the man I was before. No invasive press, or screaming fans, or long periods apart while I'm on location."

She propped her chin on the back of her hand to look into his face. He had to know that this was just a lovely dream, that he couldn't just take a step back and be forgotten. He had one of the most recognizable faces in the world and that wasn't going to change anytime soon. She didn't point that out to him and instead she watched him thoughtfully.

"What would you do?" she asked.

His shoulders shifted and he shook his head, the gesture almost helpless.

"I mean, I wouldn't have to do anything, really. I've made enough money for several lifetimes and I'll be earning a fortune off residuals for the rest of my life."

"You'd be bored out of your mind in no time," she scoffed.

"I kind of like carpentry, I could make high-end furniture."

"Like a reverse Harrison Ford," she mused. "I could see it. These gorgeous hands were practically made for artisanal work—you'd create beautiful furniture. I still don't think it's quite you though."

"What do *you* think I should do?"

She smiled and kissed his jaw, her mouth landing on his scar. She liked kissing him there—it made her feel like she was healing it a little more with every affectionate peck. It was stupidly whimsical, but she was prone to occasional—okay, more like frequent—flights of fantasy.

“I need to give it a little more consideration, but for now I think you should help me fix dinner after which, we should cuddle up in the cinema room and watch a movie. My choice.”

He laughed and palmed her face to give her a long, sweet kiss before rolling her off him and swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

“Maybe I should be a chef,” he suggested, smothering a yawn.

“You’re a good cook, but you don’t have enough imagination in the kitchen, I’m afraid,” she told him, her voice filled with feigned regret, and she giggled when he swatted her arse on their way out of the room.



“CHRIST ALMIGHTY,” Trystan groaned when Iris gleefully pushed the start button on her chosen movie. “Where the fuck did you dig this old thing out from?”

“I rented it off one of the streaming services,” she said as she crept under his arm, nestling her head in the crook between his shoulder and armpit, huddling beneath the fleecy blanket as she settled in to watch the movie.

“Fuck, Iris, why would you want to torture me like this?”

“Ssh,” she hissed as the title shimmered onto the screen in a drippy, creepy font: *Night of The Killer Wētās*. “It’s starting.” He swore beneath his breath and dug a fistful of popcorn out of her bowl.

She squealed in delight when a *painfully* young Trystan Abbott appeared on the screen in his debut role. He’d been just twenty-one at the time of filming, not yet as big and muscular as he was now. He’d been a tall, skinny, good-looking young man, with striking eyes and moody dark looks. There were hints of the beauty to come, glimpses of his talent in the earnest delivery of every terrible line, and it was clear that he—and every other cast member—were having the time of their lives.

Trystan hooted beside her when Hunter Quinn—the boom operator—appeared in shot, gave the camera a deer-in-the-headlights look and awkwardly edged his way back out of sight. And laughed uproariously when his friend Darryl—who’d cast himself as the hero’s self-sacrificing best friend—died dramatically after having his face gorily chewed off by a gigantic, obviously fake wētā.

The production values were appalling, the special effects horrendous, the acting mostly subpar, but some of the writing was brilliant. Trystan’s talent shone through though, as did Darryl Constanza’s directing skills. There was a reason this train smash of a movie was a cult classic. And it lay in the occasional witty one-liner, the obviously innate acting ability of a future leading man, and the hilarious on-and off-screen gaffes of the inexperienced cast and crew. It was endearing, and it was entertaining from beginning to end.

When the end credits rolled, Trystan remained silent and Iris, who was idly stroking his arm, murmured, “*That* is what you should be doing, Trystan. What you love. I don’t mean the *Cryo Cops* and the super-hero big-budget stuff, I mean passion projects alongside people you enjoy working with. As you so smugly boasted earlier, you have enough wealth for several lifetimes. You don’t need the money, so why not work on movies you’d enjoy doing? Quirky, off-the-wall arthouse ventures that showcase your talent more than they do your outstanding body.

“Rediscover the love you once had for your craft. Because you *did* love it at some point, that much has always been apparent. And maybe re-hire your idiot manager so that he can help you find these roles you love. He knows you better than most people. He’d know what to look for.”

Trystan was staring at her with something like reverence in his eyes. He blinked rapidly for a few moments before speaking, his voice hoarse with emotion, “I’m beginning to think my manager’s not quite an idiot. Because he certainly knew what the fuck he was doing when he sent you to me, Iris.”

“Do *not* remind me of what that duplicitous bastard did, Trystan, or I’ll want to punch his pretty face all over again.”

“You think he’s pretty?” Trystan asked with a glower, looking seriously aggravated at the notion that she might find one of his best friends attractive.

“Don’t worry, darling, he’s not as cute as you.”

He looked momentarily appeased before his brow lowered again. “What about Dazza?”

“He’s too surfer boy-ish for me,” she placated. “I like my men dark and glowery, and moody as fuck.”

“And don’t you forget it,” he warned in a dark, moody voice and she laughed happily.

“Now are you going to take me to bed, mister? Or am I going to have to seduce you on this uncomfortable love seat?”

He growled and picked her up caveman style. She squealed, laughing uncontrollably all the way back to the bedroom.

“CAN I BORROW YOUR PHONE?” Iris asked Trystan two days later after they’d returned from their post-breakfast walk. It was a glorious day, with blue skies and moderate temperatures ranging in the mid-teens. They were back in the kitchen now, facing each other across the island. “I want to call my parents. I haven’t spoken to them in a week and I think they need to hear my voice. They like to pretend they’re cool, but I know they’ve been concerned about me. More so since I lost my phone. They probably think I’ve been kidnapped or something, despite my constant messages and emails. I think it would be good for them to see that I’m okay.”

“You don’t have to explain, Iris,” he said with a chuckle, handing his device over. “Of course you can call them. I’m sorry; I should have offered sooner. If you want to catch up with your friend, Evan, afterward, you can call her too.”

Iris had told Trystan she was concerned about Evan’s silence. Her friend had only responded to one of her emails, and it had been a curt two-line message.

“I’ll give you some privacy,” he said, turning to go and Iris hesitated. She’d spoken to both of his best friends, and had self-consciously participated in a group call with his parents and older brother, Dan, the night before. While *her* parents and best friend still had no clue why she was here and who she was with.

“No, stay. I think it’s time I tell my parents why I’m here, but be warned, they won’t be cool about it.”

“I don’t blame them. Their daughter has been trapped and alone with a strange man. It would make any parent uncomfortable.”

She stared at him for a beat and then burst into laughter.

“Oh my God, it’s so cute that you’re actually serious right now,” she said, clutching her sides after nearly busting a gut laughing. He looked confused and that set her off again.

“Trystan, sweetheart.” God, he really was adorable at times. His eyes sparked in pleasure at the sound of the endearment, and she vowed to call him that more often. “When I say my parents aren’t going to be cool about it, I mean they’re going to lose their collective shit when they realize that I’m with *you*. Dad’s a massive fan, he’s watched every one of your movies. And mum—” she grimaced. “I think she has a wee crush on you, actually. Which could get awkward.”

“Is she as hot as you?” Trystan asked with a wicked grin and Iris gasped in horror.

“Don’t you even dare... Just shut *up* about my mum’s potential hotness! *Ew!*”

He laughed. “I’ll be on my best behavior, I swear. I’m fucking great with parents.”

“Fine, but stay out of sight until I’ve explained the situation to them.” She sat down at the banquette and he squeezed in next to her. He unlocked his phone and she quickly dialed her mother’s number before she could change her mind.

“How do you know the number? I haven’t got a single number memorized.”

“Mum made me recite it over and over again when I was a kid. It hasn’t changed since. She was paranoid about—” The phone was answered abruptly and her mother’s ear and graying brown hair appeared on-screen.

“Hello? Hello? Who’s this?”

“Mum? *Mum*, it’s me! Move the phone away from your ear, for God’s sake, Mum. It’s a video call.”

“Hello? *Iris*? Is that you? Jason, it’s Iris! Whose number is this? Are you okay?”

Iris cast her eyes heavenward and prayed for strength before trying again.

“Mum, it’s a video call, move the phone away from your ear.”

She heard Trystan smother a chuckle and glared at him.

Her mother finally moved the phone but the image was a bit blurry thanks to her having rubbed her ear against the camera lens.

“Oh, there you are. You look warm and healthy. We’ve been so worried about you... *Jason*, Iris is on the phone.”

“Is that Iris?” her father called, before he appeared on screen beside her mother. Iris smiled at the sight of their endearing faces. Her mother so pretty, with her graying brunette hair and pale brown skin, her father so dapper in his bow tie, his blond head balding, his eyes a faded gray. She’d missed them so much.

“Hello, my darling,” her father said, his voice warm with love and affection. “We’ve missed you. When will you finish up this top-secret job and come home?”

“About that... I need to explain about the job,” Iris said, happy he’d given her the opening. “I came here to interview Trystan Abbott.”

“What?” Her father looked blank and her mother’s jaw literally dropped.

“Who?” her mother asked in a faint voice.

“Uhm, Trystan Abbott, but the interview was cancelled. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. It just didn’t feel right to divulge the information when I knew the interview wasn’t happening any longer and the situation was a little volatile.”

“Volatile? What does that mean?” Her father sounded concerned. “Are you in danger?”

“God, no, Dad, of course not. I just meant that—”

“If I may,” Trystan murmured, and she cast a helpless look his way and sighed before nodding. He scooped over into view and her mother actually yelped.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, he’s sitting right there,” she muttered, then actually crossed herself as if he were Satan himself. Trystan’s lips twitched.

“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Hughes. I’m afraid when Iris says the situation was volatile, she means that I was behaving like a—and please do excuse my language—a total dick toward her. I didn’t want to be interviewed and wasn’t very pleasant about it, I’m afraid.”

Her parents still looked a little shell-shocked to see him, but her father rallied faster than her mother.

“Have you been treating my daughter poorly, Mr. Abbott?” His voice was thick with displeasure, and it was a little disconcerting to see her usually mild-mannered father narrow his eyes intimidatingly at a man she knew he admired.

“Call me Trystan, please, and in answer to your question, I wasn’t very kind to her at first. But you know Iris, it’s impossible to continue being an asshole around her. And let me tell you, I tried my damndest. I wanted to meet you both so that I could inform you that your daughter has changed my life. And to thank you in person for raising such an amazing woman.”

Iris found it hard to swallow past the lump in her throat as she stared at this man who had *undoubtedly* changed her life as well. She would never be the same after this. And she damned sure knew that she didn't want to face the rest of her life without him.

Her parents looked confused, even alarmed, and Iris leaped in to do some damage control.

“Long story short, my reason for being here no longer exists, but until they fix the roads I can't leave. Trystan has been kind enough to host me, despite my showing up pretty much unannounced on his doorstep.”

“Best thing that ever happened to me,” Trystan inserted happily and Iris facepalmed before facing her parents again with a determined smile.

“So, as you can see, I'm fine. Nothing at all for you to worry about and hopefully I'll be home soon. Now what's been happening with Robbie? And how's business? Any interesting events coming up?”

“You want us to talk about that with *Trystan Abbott* sitting there?” her mother asked in horror.

“Just pretend he's not here,” Iris waved her concern off with a breezy hand gesture.

“But he's *right* there,” her mother pointed out unnecessarily.

Trystan snorted again, and when Iris slanted him a glance he was suspiciously straight-faced.

Her parents somewhat hesitantly began to tell her about Robbie's crush, about a few new interesting upcoming events. The geyser at home had burst. Mrs. Desmond next door had fallen and broken her hip.

They soon grew comfortable with Trystan's quiet presence, and conversation flowed freely between Iris and her parents.

Until...

“So, Mr. Abbott, why won't you let my daughter interview you?” Rosa Hughes abruptly shifted topic, and both Trystan

and Iris froze. “She’s ever so good at what she does. She once interviewed Mrs. O’Malley down the road for her primary school newspaper. And everybody said she was the cutest little reporter, with her earnest questions about Mrs. O’Malley’s missing rabbit. The rabbit was found not two days after the story ran.”

“*Mum*, please ...” Iris groaned, writhing in embarrassment. Her mother always whipped out the rabbit story when she spoke about Iris’s journalism career. That, to the older woman, was the pinnacle of Iris’s achievements. Then again, Iris hadn’t given them much else to brag about after that when it came to her chosen career.

“It’s not about Iris, Mrs. Hughes. I agree that your daughter is extremely talented. It’s about me. I’m not in the best place right now. I have a lot of decisions to make about my future and I’d rather not talk to any reporters until after I’ve made them.”

Her mother’s face contorted in sympathy, and she nodded. Iris tensed, knowing what would come next.

“Is it because of that accident? I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

To his credit, Trystan merely nodded curtly in response to her words.

“Thank you, and yes, it’s partly about that and partly because I have to make changes. I have to create a safe space in my life for someone vitally important to me,” Iris’s head swung sharply toward him, but he kept his gaze fixed on the screen.

“I wish you luck with that. It was ever so nice meeting you. Jason would agree, but I think he’s a little starstruck right now. He’s never this quiet.”

“I’m quiet because I can’t get a word in edgewise, woman,” her father grumbled, and Trystan chuckled. “Now if you’re done embarrassing our daughter, I have something to say to Mr. Abbott.”

“Of course,” Trystan nodded with a smile, which her father didn’t return.

“If you break my little girl’s heart, young man, I’ll break your legs. And don’t think I can’t, I know three different types of martial arts.”

“*Dad...*”

“Jason, what—”

Trystan ignored the shocked exclamations from both women and nodded solemnly at the thin, balding fifty-something-year-old man glaring daggers at him through the screen.

“If she’d give me her heart, sir, it would be my greatest treasure and I would keep it safe for the rest of my life. But until the day she entrusts it to me, it’s not mine to break.”

Her father seemed satisfied with that answer, and once again Iris felt herself on the verge of tears at Trystan’s words.

Her parents rang off shortly after that. Her mother—who appeared deep in thought—said goodbye with an absent *I love you*.

After the call ended, Iris and Trystan sat side by side in silence. She fidgeted with his phone, turning it over and over again in her hands. She wasn’t sure what to say to him and, to his credit, he allowed her the space to process.

“I’ll leave you to speak to your friend in privacy,” he said after a long while and she nodded in gratitude, not sure she could go through the same thing with Evan.

“You’re where? With whom?”

“I can’t tell you where exactly, Ev, but my interview was supposed to be with Trystan Abbott.”

“Trystan Abbott? *The* Trystan Abbott? *Seriously?* Oh my God, you lucky bitch! I would give my eye teeth and my left tit to land a plum assignment like that. Tell me everything ...Is he really that fucking hot in real life? Who are you selling the story to? I have first dibs, right? Jesus, my boss is going to piss herself with envy, and I’ll finally get the promotion I deserve. Maybe I’ll even get *her* job!”

“I’m not doing the story.” Iris was frowning. Evan’s instantly avaricious response bothered her.

“What? Why not?”

“He didn’t consent to the interview. His agent was mistaken.” She chose her words carefully, a little wary after the other woman’s initial giddy reaction. It had been all about *Evan* and how this interview would impact *her* career.

What the hell?

It reminded Iris of how her father had often used her achievements to prop himself up. In fact, Evan was more like Stanford Carter than Iris could ever be. She made no secret of the fact that she admired Iris’s father greatly. Evan had always spoken about how lucky Iris had been to have a mentor like Stanford Carter, and Iris had never corrected her, choosing to let the other woman believe that her father had cared enough

to guide Iris in any way. When it couldn't be further from the truth.

Now, when she thought back on her years of friendship with Evan, she comprehended how often the other woman had spoken of Stanford Carter, how she'd always asked questions about him, researched his career, and had even made a scrapbook of clippings of all his stories to *share* with Iris. Not give, merely share.

Now, Iris wondered if Evan had befriended her because of who Iris's father had been. If the other woman had believed that it would help her get ahead somehow.

"But you've been there with him, alone, for two weeks... You have a story, Iris. Even without the interview."

"No. I don't. I refuse to write about him without his explicit consent."

"Oh my God, you're so soft. The fucking opportunity of a lifetime and you're wasting it. You don't deserve this chance; you don't have a clue what to do with it. Do you want to be a journalist or not? Because let me tell you, this is getting fucking embarrassing. Your dad is probably rolling over in his grave right now at what a wimp his daughter is."

Iris blinked at her friend's face in horror—Evan's expression had twisted in disgust and contempt and Iris barely recognized her.

"Uhm, Evan, I have to go. The connection is bad and—"

"Wait, so you're calling me from *his* number, right?" Iris's stomach plummeted at the question. How could she have been so stupid? "If you won't do the interview, do you think he'd mind if I WhatsApped him? Asked him a few questions? See if he'd be open to having a chat with me?"

"Please don't do that," Iris whispered in horror.

"Iris, I'm more experienced than you. Maybe he's reluctant to be interviewed by a complete novice, but I have some credentials at least. I'll even share the byline with you."

Iris hated that it had taken her this long to recognize that the person she'd considered her best friend was just another bully, and had *always* been a bully. Only she'd been slyer about it, with her subtle little put-downs, her gentle concern about how Iris just wasn't tough enough for the industry. Everything she'd ever said and done had been to make herself look and feel more important by making Iris feel small.

Now, as Evan continued to plot and plan and ponder ways to snatch Iris's so-called big fish right out from under her nose, her callous disregard of Trystan's wishes infuriated Iris and stirred up her protective instinct. Evan was never getting her greedy hooks into Trystan. Not if Iris had anything to do with it.

"Evan, back the fuck off!" Iris snapped, shutting the other woman up, and Evan's mouth dropped open. "As soon as I hang up this phone, I'll be blocking your number. There will be no contacting him with unsolicited requests for interviews. *Ever*. Am I making myself clear?"

"Jesus, when the fuck did you get so selfish, Iris? You're the one who doesn't want the interview, why not give it to someone who does?"

"Goodbye, Evan," Iris disconnected the call without another word and instantly blocked and deleted the woman's number from Trystan's phone. She then had a moment's panic that Evan could somehow track down the phone's GPS location and went into his location services, which she discovered were already switched off.

She heaved a sigh of relief and then shuddered in reaction. The thought of the ugliness of the real world intruding here, in this safe haven Trystan had found for himself, was disturbing and she hated that she'd been the one to nearly ruin it for him.

Of course, there was no guarantee that Evan wouldn't just try to contact him from a different number. Nausea surged in the pit of her stomach and Iris actually retched at the thought, and her hand flew to her mouth as she fought back the urge to vomit.

Trystan sauntered back into the kitchen and when he saw her sitting there, pale and trembling, rushed toward her.

“What’s wrong? Iris?” She stared at him, panic and sorrow rendering her temporarily mute. Her silence alarmed Trystan. “C’mon, sugar, talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

“I th-think I messed up,” she whispered. “Evan, she...” she tried to explain but everything came out in an incoherent, jumbled mess. He seemed to get the gist of it though and made soothing noises while she spoke.

“It’s okay, sugar, my number isn’t traceable, and no unsolicited messages from strange numbers will ever make it past the firewall. Don’t worry about it. I’m so sorry about your friend, though.”

“Time to make better friends, I guess,” she whispered shakily, trying to hide her grief from him. But he knew her well enough by now to see straight through her facade, and he tugged her to her feet to enfold her in a hug.



“SO, IT’S OFFICIAL,” Trystan told her the following morning at breakfast, after checking his messages. “The road and bridge will be fully repaired by tomorrow morning. They estimate that it’ll be done by about nine a.m.”

Iris didn’t know how to react to that. What was supposed to happen now?

“I should probably contact the rental company about getting a new car,” she finally said.

Her proclamation was met with utter silence and she lifted her head to find him staring mutely at her, his eyes blazing with emotion.

“Trystan, don’t look at me like that,” she admonished. “I have to go home at some point. I can’t stay here forever.”

“You don’t *have* to do anything, Iris. Of course you can stay here, with me... for as long as you fucking want.”

“*You* have to go home at some point too. And what then? Do I just travel from place to place with you like some—I

don't know—some good luck talisman?"

"I don't see why not." He tried to play it off as a joke, but it fell flat.

"Trystan, I am *not*—nor will I ever be—an extension of you! I'm my own person, you don't get to cart me around like a personal possession."

"Fuck, Iris, I don't want that. I want you to live with me, *be* with me. Write, edit, do whatever you want, but do it with *me* by your side. As my partner, my lover... even my *wife*. I'll take you any way I can get you because I don't want to lose you."

"That wouldn't work," she said and he swore, the expletive loud and violent, startling Luna into lifting her head to stare at him quizzically.

"How do you *know* it won't work when you won't even give us a chance? You're running scared about us. You're a lot of things, Iris Hughes, but you're not a coward... so don't chicken out over this."

"Trystan, what I meant by that is *your* vision of what a life together would be for us is flawed, and it's doomed to fail—" She tried to reason with him, but he interrupted her.

"No, we can make it work. Iris and Trystan's world, the two of us and no one else. I told you, I don't have to go back to my old life. I want a new one with you. But I need you to be brave, Iris. For us. I need you to be that woman who faced a wolf and a beast in the same night and survived. No, *thrived*. I can't be the only one willing to fight for what we have and for what we could build."

She swallowed down a sob but couldn't prevent the tear from slipping down her cheek. His tormented gaze tracked its path and he reached out to catch it on his thumb.

"I love you, Iris," he whispered, his voice taut with pain. "And I want you to stay with me."

Iris's eyes memorized each beautiful feature individually, lovingly brushing over the hills and valleys of that gorgeous face. Her gaze snagged on the scar. This man. This beautiful,

terrified man, who was still here hiding from his ghosts, afraid to face his future. He wasn't even aware of what he was asking of her, what he was asking of himself, and if they were ever going to stand a chance Iris had to make him understand.

"I love *you*, Trystan, and I want you to come away with me."

His breath stuttered in his lungs and halted completely. His hand crept up to the center of his chest and absently rubbed at the spot just above his heart.

"You're hiding, Trystan," she whispered. "You're still hiding from the ghost of who you were. And you're asking me to hide with you. I *do* want to be with you, but I refuse to hide here—or anywhere else—with you. If you want a life with me then you've got to be prepared to *live* it with me. You've got to forgive yourself for Trish Nesbitt. You have to fix your life and your career. And I don't mean by becoming a carpenter, or whatever the hell else. That's not who you are. Telling *me* to be brave, while you're using me as an excuse to live a life of obscurity because *you're* afraid to face your demons, is just the height of hypocrisy.

"You told my parents you have to find a way to create a safe space in your life for me. But you can't do that while you're hiding in places like this. It's amazing here, it's beautiful, private, and it feels like we're the only two people left on the face of the earth, but it's not home. And if we're going to be together, we need to figure out where home will be. Because it's *not* here, or any place similar to here. For us to truly know if we'll work, we can't be the only people on earth. We need to be out there, in the real world. Where everybody thinks they own a part of you.

"It'll test us, but it'll also make us stronger and if we survive all the tough times ahead, we'll know that we're made for each other. I *do* want to fight for us. But the fight is out there. Not here."

She pushed herself up from the table and gave him a bittersweet smile.

“So no, I won’t stay with you, Trystan. But I do hope you’ll come with me.”

She didn’t give him a chance to reply, knowing he would need time to ruminate over her words, and she turned on her heel to walk out of the room.



IRIS WAS PRETTY busy for the rest of the day. She booked a flight home in two days’ time and made a reservation at a hotel in George, close to the airport, for the next night. She also called the rental company about a new car and arranged for a taxi to pick her up and take her to the rental shop in town. She sent her parents and flatmates the news that she’d be home soon. She didn’t see Trystan at all. She’d missed the walk with him and Luna and felt a pang of loss at the thought of this possibly having been her last opportunity to walk with them. She blinked back tears at the thought, and refocused on packing her bags. She had so much crap scattered all over the house.

She and Trystan had been sharing a room since the first night they’d made love and that’s where most of her stuff was. After she packed her bags, she moved them to the guest room that she hadn’t occupied in nearly ten days. Something told her she’d be sleeping there tonight.

Trystan remained elusive, but Luna started following her around, as if sensing that she was going somewhere. In the end, Iris simply curled up on the sofa in the solarium while Luna rested her heavy head on Iris’s lap.

She stroked the dog’s big, shaggy head, crying silently as she did so.

“I’m going to miss you so much, girl. You’ve been the best, goodest girl. Take care of your dad for me when I’m gone, okay? Keep him out of the sads. That’s your job, okay?”

She wrapped her arms around the dog’s neck and hugged her close, taking comfort in her solid strength and lovely doggy smell.

Eventually Iris got hungry and padded toward the kitchen, hoping to find him there, ready for dinner. But the kitchen was empty and cold. Iris made herself a quick sandwich and ate it standing at the counter.

It was nearly nine when she walked toward his bedroom door. It was closed and there was no light shining from beneath it. Iris exhaled on a shuddering sigh and with slumped shoulders walked toward her own room.

That night was the first in a long time that she spent alone, and she wept into her pillow before finally falling asleep.



“GOOD MORNING,” Trystan greeted the following day when Iris walked into the kitchen at nine a.m. Her taxi would be there in an hour, and she had time for a quick bite and one last stroll to the lake before she had to leave.

“Morning,” she muttered, avoiding his eyes. Hers were swollen from the tears she’d shed last night, and she’d rather he not see that.

“Iris,” his tone was admonishing, and she knew it was because she refused to look at him, but she didn’t give a damn. He’d put her through hell last night with his cold-shoulder treatment just because she’d had the gall to lay out her own terms for their relationship, and now he wanted to play nice again?

She shoved a couple of slices of bread in the toaster and tapped her nails impatiently against the marble countertop while she waited for it to pop. She buttered it and smeared it with strawberry jam before grabbing a mug of coffee and sitting at the island to eat, instead of at the banquette with him, as she’d done on so many other mornings.

She heard his deep sigh from behind her, but ignored him.

“You’re mad at me.”

“Ya think?” she muttered beneath her breath.

“I know.” His deep voice came from directly behind her and she yelped in shock and nearly choked on her toast.

“God, you scared me! Was it necessary to sneak up on me?” she seethed, turning toward him to blister him with a look.

“I didn’t sneak You were so focused on ignoring me, you simply didn’t notice me coming up behind you.”

“I have to finish my breakfast. My taxi will be here in forty minutes.”

“It won’t. I cancelled it,” he said, and she gaped at him.

“What? How could you even do that? How did you know which taxi company I contacted.”

“There’s only one in town.”

“But why would you... Is this your way of trying to keep me here against my will?”

“Jesus, no, not at all. I made other arrangements. A taxi wasn’t needed.”

“I don’t need you to make my arrangements for me.”

“Iris, I was making the arrangements for *us*.”

“Wait. What?”

“Well, you did ask me to come away with you, didn’t you? I couldn’t just up and leave. I needed to arrange our flight, contact Chance to come and fetch us, make sure Luna’s travel documents are still in order, pack, rehire Quinny, then set him to work getting my apartment in London livable for us. Then I also had to contact Miles about shutting down this place. Thankfully, he said to just lock up and go. His mother and stepdad live close by and will sort it out. All in all, it was fucking exhausting. I fell into bed at eight then woke up this morning only to discover that *you* didn’t come to bed last night. What the fuck, Iris?”

“Wait, so you’re coming with me?”

“Of course I am. Was there ever a doubt?”

“Well... yes,” she said. “When you made no effort to talk to me after our initial discussion yesterday, I assumed you

needed more time to think. Then when you simply disappeared for the rest of the day, I thought I had my answer.”

“You actually thought I could say no to you? That I’d choose staying here, in this lonely place, without you? Iris, did you miss the part where I said I love you?”

Her lips spread into a wide smile and she launched herself into his arms.

“Oh my God, so we’re really going to do this?” she said in a voice that quavered in disbelief and her hand went to her stomach as she was hit by a sudden bout of queasiness.

“Hey, don’t go getting cold feet on me now,” Trystan chastised, and she gulped and shook her head.

“No, I’m fine. We’re doing this. We’re going out there and people will know I kissed Trystan Abbott—the movie star.” He rolled his eyes and teasingly tugged at one of her curls.

“People will know I kissed Iris Hughes—talented, future bestselling author.”

“It’s a little intimidating,” she admitted, and he looped an arm around her neck and kissed the top of her head.

“Storm in a teacup,” he predicted.

“And what was that you said about a flat in London? I *have* a flat.”

“Iris, sugar, I love you, but I’m not sharing a flat with you and your two flatmates. On this one, I’m afraid I can’t compromise.”

“Where’s the flat?”

“Knightsbridge.”

“Oh, *of course*, he has a flat in Knightsbridge,” she muttered sarcastically to herself, rolling her eyes. “When did your life get so fucking surreal, Iris?”

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose.

“Eat your toast. Chance will be here shortly. I’ll bring out the bags and do last checks.”

It was all happening so fast; it was hard to believe they were leaving. She truly loved it here—the place had really grown on her—and she hoped they'd be able to return sometime... preferably in summer.

She ate while he collected their bags and went down into the basement garage to fiddle around with a few things. He returned to pilfer a slice of her toast, before continuing with his little tasks.

“There’s a ton of food in the fridge, so I’ll leave the electricity on. I assume Miles’s family will know what to do with it.

Before too long, she’d finished her breakfast and cleaned the dishes, which gave her some time to wander from room to room, ostensibly to see if she’d left anything behind, but really to say goodbye.

When she came to the suite of rooms that had been her prison for those first few awful nights she paused and sucked in a deep breath before stepping inside. She’d expected... *something*. But all she felt was mild surprise that she’d built it up to be this awful place, when in reality it was really just a pleasant little living area for a teen, or perhaps a housekeeper.

Iris laughed quietly underneath her breath and exited the room without a backward glance. The events that had led to that horrible night had taken place a lifetime ago. And the two people caught up in the middle of all that drama had changed because of each other, *for* each other, and they were both the better for of it.

She walked to the front of the house where Trystan stood waiting, Luna on a leash beside him. He held out his hand to her and she took it without hesitation.

“Ready?” he asked, and she smiled at him and nodded.

“I love you, Trystan.”

His eyes wrinkled at the corners, and he smiled in appreciation.

“Not as much as I love *you*, Iris.”

A car slowly made its way up the drive toward them, the first sign of The Real World they'd seen in weeks.

Iris and Trystan—and Luna—stepped out into the sunshine prepared to face that world together.

The End

To learn more about Miles and Charity Hollingsworth their story, [The Best Next Thing](#) is now available on Kindle Unlimited. If angst, heartache, and alpha(hole) heroes are your scene please try [The Unwanted Wife](#), [Don't Pretend I'm Yours](#), and [A Ruthless Proposition](#). All available on Kindle Unlimited.

about the author

With over a million books sold, Natasha Anders has been drawing praise and attention as a unique voice in romance since 2012. Her first novel, *The Unwanted Wife*, was a bestselling sensation and remains a consistent favorite among readers. Her 2017 novel, *The Wingman*, the first in her new Alpha Men trilogy, was a finalist for a 2018 Romance Writers of America RITA Award.

Born in Cape Town, South Africa, Anders spent nine years as an associate English teacher in Niigata, Japan, where she became a legendary karaoke diva. Anders currently lives in Cape Town with her temperamental chihuahua, Maia; her cute budgies, Baxter and Hudson; sweet little chihuahua Hana; and her little wingman, adorable parrotlet, Mason.

Readers can connect with her through her linktree:
<https://linktr.ee/NatashaAnders>

vengeance is mine

LEE SAVINO

VENGEANCE IS MINE

“They said I could choose my reward. I choose you.”

It was a simple job: go to a wedding. Execute the groom.

Then I saw the bride, wearing a mountain of white satin, her lacy veil now spattered with blood.

Instead of running away screaming like the rest of the wedding party, she raised her chin and stared at me, a challenge in her dark eyes. I felt a flicker of feeling in my cold, dark heart...

Then she shot me. And I knew...

I had to make her mine.

Vengeance is Mine is a stand alone dark romance with adult themes, starring an obsessed hitman, a heroine bent on vengeance, and an HEA (happily ever after).

content warnings

Murder, death of a beloved parent (in the past), abduction/seduction, non- and dubious consent, sensory deprivation and torture, cage confinement, knife play, blood play, butt stuff, decapitation.

CHAPTER 1

lula

The air at the altar of the church is thick and heavy, compressed from decades of Sunday sermons. It smells like pompous preaching and unanswered prayers, with an aftertaste of stale lemony furniture polish. The only sounds are the occasional coughs and creaks from guests shifting in the wooden pews.

Under the crime against fashion that is my wedding gown, I shift from foot to foot. Tacky white satin heels pinch my feet, and the once rich red carpet I'm standing on has faded to an anemic pink, too thin to cushion anything. My head is completely shrouded by the traditional veil, so no one can see my resting bitch face.

My groom, David, stands at my side. A snowfall of dandruff dusts the shoulders of his dark suit, and his nostrils are dusted white from the cocaine habit he's hoping to hide. Every few seconds, his eyes slide towards me, checking to make sure I'm still beside him. When he sees that I am, he blinks, and his dull brown eyes brighten like he can't believe his luck. As far as he's concerned, I'm a dream girl he conjured from his fantasies, sleek and elegant and soft-spoken... and way, way out of his league. Yet willing, nay insisting, we marry. A mythical creature, like a unicorn. Blink, and I'll disappear.

If I'm lucky, all the guests will be wondering how he snared me, and not how whirlwind our courtship was or why the bride's side of the church is completely empty.

The organ notes die with a sound like an accordion falling down the stairs. The minister clears his throat.

“Dearly beloved,” he intones. I can smell his halitosis from here.

David’s great aunt Eunice, his only living relative, booked this venue. In the interest of speed, I let her plan everything except my dress. She dug the veil I’m wearing out of storage and ordered the peonies in my bouquet. I told her I was allergic to peonies. She either didn’t care or did it on purpose. She thinks there’s something off about me, about this whole wedding.

For a fossil, Eunice is pretty sharp. She senses a con, but her grand nephew is properly fooled. As far as he’s concerned, I’m his true love. I’ve sold the image of a soft-spoken, smitten virgin so well, I’m impressed with myself. I deserve an acting reward for how well I’ve pretended his touch doesn’t make my skin crawl.

Eunice glares at me from the front pew, and I freeze my fidgeting until I resemble a mannequin in a bridal shop window, stiff and swathed in white. I chose my dress. It’s huge and puffy with yards of itchy crinoline and lace. Perfect for my plan.

The minister is droning on about love and commitment and all the things that don’t apply to this marriage. I want to tell him to hurry up. The sooner I’m married, the sooner I can roofie my groom and go hunting for the quarry I really want. *Stephanos.*

We’re halfway through the most boring ceremony in the world when the bang of doors opening echoes from the foyer to the altar. The minister coughs and falls silent, fumbling in his train of thought. The pews creak as curious guests turn as one to investigate.

A late arrival? I remain staring at the minister, ignoring the interruption. It’s only when David turns and frowns, his pasty skin blanching further, that I turn, too.

A man prowls up the aisle from the back of the church, wearing a dark suit and a viper's smile. He has white blond hair, close-cropped to his head. Shadows lie in the hollows under his eyes and cheekbones. The sleek suit obscures the breadth of his shoulders and the athleticism of the powerful body underneath.

A jolt runs through me. His features are perfect, so perfect, it hurts to look at him. Judging from the way women in the audience suck in a breath, I'm not the only one who thinks so. But I might be the only one who notices the feral tilt to his smile and the intense light in his eyes. He looks more hungry than happy. Expectant.

Years of instincts honed from being around dangerous men tell me this man belongs in their ranks.

The church is quiet, the only sound a candle guttering out in its candelabra. Eunice has turned her glare to the latecomer, pressing her lips together until they're white. Whoever this is, she either disapproves of him, his interruption, or both.

Is this the best man? He's striding straight to the altar toward us like an oncoming storm.

And the closer he gets, the taller he looms. He's taller than David, who towers over me.

He doesn't spare me a glance but steps smoothly up to David, who licks his lips, obviously unsure how to respond.

The newcomer murmurs, "Stefanos sends his regards." With practiced grace, he pulls David into a one-armed hug, his right arm clamping around David's shoulders while his left arm folds between them.

In the man's embrace, David's body jerks hard, and a half gasp, half gurgle escapes his parted lips. The intruder releases David and steps back. Metal flashes between the dark suits.

David folds forwards, a bright spurt of cartoonishly red blood spurting from his chest. The ketchup-colored liquid spatters my veil, and the white satin of my gown soaks up the droplets.

The intruder stands aside, a hint of amusement in his serpentine smile. David crashes to the floor, choking on his own blood.

My ears are ringing. Someone is screaming, and there are panicked cries and scrambling feet in the pews. The chaplain's Bible thuds onto the ancient carpet. His shoes make no sound as he flees, leaving me as the only witness to watch the light fade from David's eyes.

Blood speckles David's gray face and soaks his white shirt. The knife got him in the heart. That's not an easy strike. It takes force to push a blade through someone's ribs, through the pericardium, and into the beating, vital organ. And this man did it with the coolness of someone hugging a brother to congratulate him on his wedding day.

There's not going to be a wedding, not anymore. The guests are gone, fleeing what they can rightly guess is a mob execution. A metallic taste is in my mouth, and my empty stomach is roiling. The echo of slammed doors dies away, and I stand speckled with my betrothed's blood, my plan for vengeance dying at my feet.

How am I going to get close to Stephanos now? David was the closest tie I had. Except...

Stephanos sends his regards.

Stephanos ordered this hit. I've made a study of the top tier of his gang, and I don't recognize this ice-eyed hitman. In a rustle of satin, I turn to face him.

Up close, his beauty is sharp and striking. He's beautiful like a well-balanced knife is beautiful. In the way a Sig Sauer pistol or a F-22 Raptor is beautiful. Stunning and deadly.

The killer still hasn't looked at me. I might as well be an object on the altar—a candelabra or a tablecloth—for all the attention he's paid me. If this was a hit on my life, if I was the actual target, he would've made his move by now.

Right?

That smug curve to his lips tells me he likes killing and the thrill of the hunt. Everything in me screams to run or fight.

Adrenaline floods my veins. My fingers flex, aching to reach for a weapon. But I hold the rest of me still, waiting to make my choice. Each second, I gather more information and expand my choices.

The hitman finally looks at me, and his blue eyes snag on my lips. I painted them red, a color bright enough to be seen under the stupid veil. His gaze trolls up and down my body, taking in my stained gown and the thick shroud over my features. There's no flicker of recognition on his face.

If the hitman doesn't know me, does he just see a bride standing over her love, too shocked to scream? I probably should run or cry. I've spent too much time calculating my next moves. I need to play my part.

But those arctic eyes freeze me. His head cocks to the side, and for a moment, I think he'll speak.

But he doesn't. What he does is kneel to check the dead man's eyes for proof of life. With cruel casualness, he wipes his blade clean on David's tuxedo pant leg. Then he rises, gives me a smile, and strolls back the way he came.

The pool of David's blood has reached my foot. I back away, cataloging my emotions. Horror. Annoyance. A resigned sort of calm.

I toss the bouquet of peonies into the closest pew, pick up my dress and stride away. Toward the front of the church, not the back. I don't want to be caught in the tangle of David's friends and his lone relative, none of whom had the wherewithal to stand strong.

David was my way to get Stephanos. I had hoped Stephanos would show up at the wedding so I could execute him during the reception. Barring that, I intended to spend my 'honeymoon' setting a trap and springing it.

I'll need more than luck to get so close again. If my plan is going to work, I'll need a new way in. Soon, immediately, before my cousin Royal tracks me down. He's the head of the *Regis Famiglia* now and has never approved of my quest for vengeance.

Stephanos sends his regards. Ironically, my best lead is the blond hitman. I shiver as I think of him. Those piercing eyes, that powerful frame. So beautiful and so cold.

I rub my chest and automatically grasp the delicate necklace at my throat, a tiny sword that rests between my breasts. I kiss the small pommel for good luck and tuck it back into place.

I stride out of the church, ready to call a cab and head to a safe house for a change of clothes and a glass of whiskey while I rework my plan. Marrying David was supposed to be the beginning of the end. Now, I'm back where I started. And I look like a damn runaway bride. A runaway bride covered in blood spatter.

Fuck my life.

I don't get more than a few steps out the door before someone seizes me from behind, immobilizing me in strong arms. I see a glint of metal, and in a smooth, practiced move, my attacker raises a knife past my blood-speckled bodice to rest at my throat.

"Not so fast, beautiful," the hitman rasps in my ear. "You're coming with me."

CHAPTER 2

victor

The bride is a warm bundle in my arms, if not exactly willing. Her feet drag, but she doesn't put up a fight as I bundle her into the backseat of the waiting car. This job came with a driver, but there's a divider between him and the backseat. I'll have plenty of privacy to play with my new toy.

She settles into the car seat beside me, filling the space with mounds and mounds of white satin. A bride on her wedding day, representing love and innocence and purity and all the things I've never experienced. All the things the world withholds from a soulless man like me.

But now I have her in my clutches. My blood heats, and I have to force myself to slow down, remain cool and in control. She is a prize like no other. A triumph I wish to savor as long as possible.

The car pulls away from the curb, and the bride's back hits the seat. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, making the delicate silver chain around her neck ripple. The necklace caught my eye in the church, the charm unusual—a tiny weapon. Too long to be a regular dagger, too short to be a sword. An old-fashioned poniard.

I extend a finger and brush the toothpick-sharp tip of the blade and, with it, her skin. Her chest prickles with goosebumps, and my prize's breath hisses behind the veil.

She's not unaffected by me. Her slight reaction is a blood-bright flag unfurling before a bull. Adrenaline pounds through me, and my cock stirs. My palms itch to unwrap my gift.

I grasp the edge of the veil and lift it. My movements are slow and tender, a mockery of what a groom's should be. Once again, she surprises me. She doesn't fight me, doesn't slap my hand away. She holds still, her chest moving faster in her tight bodice.

She has the loveliest eyes, dark and velvety. She's striking rather than pretty, her jaw narrow but strong, and her nose sharp as a stiletto. Her makeup is subtle and perfect, except for those bold, blood-red lips. Not a hair of her sleek updo is out of place. For a witness to a knifing and a victim of kidnapping, she's the very picture of calm.

I want to crack her apart. I killed her groom in front of her, and she made no sound. I thought she was in shock at first, but she's remained calm.

Who is she? I researched the wedding but focused more on the layout of the church. The target was a civilian, a nobody. At first glance, his wife-to-be and guests were the same.

But this woman who wears a mini knife around her neck is more than who she seems.

I relax in my seat, letting her speak first. The car turns down an alley, weaving through the city and making its way east.

"Why?" she finally asks.

I cock my head. "Why what?"

"Why did you kill him?"

"It was a job. Nothing personal." A disappointing target, who didn't even fight back.

She snorts. "A knife to the heart? A bullet would have been easier."

My brows raise. With each passing moment, she's proving herself an enigma. Is she dangerous, like me? I hope so. Conquering her will be the sweetest challenge.

"I prefer a blade. It's more intimate. Respectful." I pat my jacket lining, where my preferred killing knife is secured.

“So you’re a psychopath.”

My gut kicks with an unexpected laugh. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“I guess it’s useful in your line of work.”

“My line of work?”

“You’re a hitman. You said it wasn’t personal.” She sounds impatient, as if she knows I’m being deliberately obtuse.

I was prepared for hysterics. Messy tears, blotchy skin, panicked thrashing. Even a mafia princess would lose her cool and make threats or pleas for her life.

Her controlled reactions are unexpected and so much more delicious.

“And what about you? I killed your groom in front of you.”

“I’m in shock.” She does not sound like she’s in shock. She sounds like I interrupted her lunch.

What will she look like with her lipstick smeared from my kisses, her hair wild?

Soon I will know. My groin tightens at the thought. The monster in me roars, ready to roam free. I keep him leashed a little longer. My prey is close beside me but still wary. I want her fiery and fighting, as desperate for me as I am for her.

I’ve always wondered what it would be like to sample a bride on her wedding day. To touch her, feast on her, make her moan. My work offers me many depraved delights, but I’ve never experienced this one.

But now I have the chance. The fact that this bride might hate me only tempts me more.

I seduce her, on her wedding night, mere hours after slaughtering her betrothed.

And I will make her enjoy it.

Her veil tumbles over her brow, and she shoves it up again. I brush her hand away. Slowly, carefully, I remove each

hairpin, holding her gaze.

After three pins, she looks out her window, but the red staining her olive cheeks isn't from her makeup. Finally, a reaction.

I separate the veil from her head, roll down my window, and let the wind snag the filmy white fabric. It blows away, dancing in the car's wake like a ghost. "Better?"

"Much."

I shift closer, taking up more than my fair share of the bench seat. She glares at me. I raise my chin, daring her to comment.

For a long moment, electricity crackles between us. I want to push her back onto the seat and claim her now. Only years of reigning in my basest impulses allows me to deny the animal attraction that's making my heart pump faster in her presence.

Judging by the goosebumps breaking out over the mounds of her delicious breasts in the tight, white bodice, she's feeling something similar. Perhaps it's simply fear, but as someone who trades in death, terror is a useful tool. It can make a person love or hate you. Or both at the same time. Best of all, the symptoms of fear—the shortening of breath and elevated pulse—are easily confused by the body as arousal.

"What is your name?" I ask.

She presses her lips together before answering. "Vera. Yours?"

I cock my head to the side, deciding if I should tell her. "Do you really want to know?"

I let her think through the implications. Common sense says if a kidnapper lets you know his face and name, he does not intend for you to live long.

She knows this. She hesitates, and licks her lips as she thinks things through. The sight of her tongue sends a stab of arousal through my core. I shift in the seat, needing to adjust

myself to relieve the pressure of my pants on my rapidly swelling cock.

“Yes,” she says, and so seals her fate. My arousal is a red haze, rising like the blood lust I usually feel when I kill my quarry.

I can't stop the cruel smile twisting my lips as I tell her, “Victor.”

She gives the slightest nod. Still so careful, so controlled, just like she was at the altar, where she first caught my attention. Her groom was dead, the wedding guests had fled, and she faced me silently. No screaming, no crying. No emotion. But I could sense her mind working under the veil.

If only I could slice her open, reveal her thoughts. But now is not the time for the knife. I'll have to use other weapons at my disposal to prize her apart. My words, my lips. My cock.

“You still haven't told me why you killed him.”

“Your betrothed? That's between him and Stephanos. I'm just the messenger.”

“Did it have to be in the middle of the wedding?”

“I was told to make it public. A spectacle. A warning not to embezzle from the Greek mob.”

“Idiot,” she mutters, and I know she's not talking about me. Only a fool would siphon money from Stephanos.

“Is that any way to speak of your intended?”

She bites one red lip. Makes a decision. “We weren't together that long.”

That explains her lack of grief. My challenge to seduce her just became a million times easier. “Then you're welcome. For the rescue. You know what they say... ‘Marry in haste...’”

She avoids my gaze, shaking her head.

“This dress doesn't suit you.” I take liberties, grazing a finger over her bodice, letting it swirl over her breast. She glares like she wants to bite me.

I wish she would.

“Are you always so well armed?” I tap the necklace charm and smirk.

“Always.”

I continue my exploration of her body, testing her reactions. The dress really is awful. It must have been a hand-me-down, something old, because why would she choose to wear such a thing? She would look better in armor. Something sleek and silvery. Modern.

Something worthy of the dagger at her throat.

The car reaches a stop sign and, with the barest pause, rolls through. The most important rule of leaving a crime scene is not to break any laws. I'll have to speak with Stephanos about his getaway protocol. He's not the most disciplined of leaders. It's a wonder he's hung onto his turf for so long.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere we can be alone.” I pause, waiting for her to fight me. I set a hand on her midriff, caressing her through the stiff bodice. She stiffens, but not before I feel a tremor run through her.

The ice princess is not as frozen as she seems.

I dip my head to nuzzle her hair. Her perfume is complex, something expensive, but underneath is her pure essence. I inhale her scent, greedy for more. I tighten my grip on her, needing to rip off the confining dress. There should be nothing between me and her bare skin. My cock is a steel bar, threatening to rip my pants. Soon I will seek out her damp and secret places, to lick and suck her essence straight from the source.

The car makes its final turn. Up ahead is the bland, five-story apartment building where I make my home. I slide my palm down the curve of her breast, seeking the slight swell of her nipple under the layers of fabric.

She turns from me to stare out the window. Searching for escape? I trace a line from her nipple to the silver chain,

pushing the charm aside so I can kiss the smooth line of her neck. Under my lips, her skin quivers.

As the car glides to a stop, my prize asks the question I've been waiting for. "Why did you take me?"

"Stephanos told me I could choose my reward." I touch my lips to her pulse. "I choose you."

CHAPTER 3

lula

I choose you, he says, like that explains it all. Does he know who I am? My last name is Romano, so he might not know my connection to the Regis family, even if he read the wedding program. He asked for my name, and I gave a fake one—Vera, my mother's name. A reminder to myself of the reason I'm here. My motivation and purpose. *My plan.*

Victor's taken me to an industrial part of town, a concrete jungle. Not a soul is on the streets, and there are barely any cars around. I get a glimpse of the driver as my captor pulls me from the car: male, with a shaved head and a full, bushy beard, his gaze fixed steadfastly forward. *Nothing to see here.* No help will come from him.

I can't run. I'll get about five steps in these shoes before Victor, the knife-loving psycho, grabs me. Better to keep playing this dangerous game.

Stephanos told me I could choose my reward. I have a hard time believing Victor would choose me as his reward, not knowing who I am. But in the backseat of the car, his interest in me had less to do with my pedigree and more to do with my body.

My treacherous body. My face still burns with the heat of my blush. *Stop it. Stop crushing on a killer.*

Victor's shadow falls over me. He smells like snow, sharp and fresh and cold. His lips are plump, but the rest of his features—cheekbones, jaw, nose—are too sharp to be human,

like he's a fae king who stepped into our world and made it his winter court.

He puts a large hand at my back, and my skin tingles under my bodice. He raises a white-blond brow with an amused twist to his mouth. He's waiting to see if I'll try to run.

But... my libido gasps. He's so pretty...

He holds out a hand, and I almost accept it. *Stop it!*

My body keeps on betraying me as my heel twists under me, and I fall into my captor. He scoops me up in his arms and carries me, bridal style, to the front door. And like a simpering fool, I wind my arms around his neck, feeling safe and secure against him.

To anyone watching, we look like a newly married couple. Is he playing it up for any cameras? Building a case that I went with him willingly?

Probably not. When you've murdered as many people as Victor probably has, adding a kidnapping charge is no big deal.

He frees a hand for a handprint scanner to enter the building. *A keypad. Interesting.* It transforms this boring, concrete block apartment building into a villain's lair. A hitman like Victor would require nothing less.

The doors open to a sleek, square-shaped foyer, empty of anything but an elevator door and another keypad to enter it.

"Almost there, beautiful," Victor murmurs, and I blink to keep from rolling my eyes. Just because he's carrying me like a bride doesn't mean I've forgotten who he is to me. I should be fighting to get away.

Later. Victor is my best chance at getting to Stephanos. Going along with him is as good as infiltrating the Petropoulos gang. I just have to survive.

The elevator requires a third handprint before it takes us to the top floor, the doors opening directly into a dimly lit penthouse. Subtle overhead lights blink on as Victor carries me over the threshold. The air is a few degrees cooler than I

expected, or maybe it's the cold, sterile nature of the decor. Most of the cavernous space is one giant room with gray concrete floors, stainless steel appliances, and white leather couches. Everything is shiny, modern, and spotless. There's a long table made from a single quartz slab, clean enough to perform surgery on. Victor could kill someone in here and easily wipe up the blood.

Maybe he already has.

"So, I'm here." My voice echoes in the massive space. "Now what?"

"You know what." His voice drops to a deeper register, and I want to roll my eyes. Except, once again, my libido is falling for it.

Since when are sexy psychopaths my type?

A strand of hair has escaped its updo, and he reaches out and winds it around his finger, rubbing his thumb over it. I resist a shiver. I am not wondering what his fingers would feel like on my naked skin. I am *not*.

"This is some Richard the Third-level fetish. Seducing a bride after you kill her groom?"

"You were having second thoughts. That is what you told me, no?" The more I talk to him, the more I detect an Eastern European accent. Not Ukrainian, but something close.

"That doesn't mean I wanted him dead."

"And yet you stood by and did nothing. No crying. No hysterics. Just rearranging your schedule in your head." Victor's glacier-blue eyes fasten on mine, intent on prising me apart.

"You make me sound so cold." And even though my exact reputation in La Famiglia is as a frigid mafia princess known for her sharp-tongued disdain, it hurts to be called callous.

"No, beautiful." He plucks at the long satin sleeve of my dress with his long fingers, and I can't hold my shiver back. "You're the opposite of cold."

My blush blooms hotter. Dammit. I can hide my thoughts but not my libido, which, after years of lying dormant, has come roaring to life. It's been a while since I've had a one-night stand. I seduced David by gazing adoringly up at him through my lashes and pretending to laugh at his bad jokes. I got him to the altar by promising to hand over my virginity (Ha!) once I was legally his.

In short, my sex life has had quite a dry spell, and now my body is ready to throw itself at this man, the blood on his hands be damned.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“I promise no harm will come to you this night.”

I don't know why, but I believe him. But the lawyer in me has to close all loopholes. “And in the morning?”

He doesn't answer right away, only toys with my hair.

“Victor?” I wait, rubbing the sword charm of my necklace between a thumb and forefinger.

“We shall see.”

This is the reason I believe him. He's careful about what he promises. If he's telling the truth, I have a twelve-hour window to escape.

No problem. There's a foolproof way to stay alive and send my captor to sleep.

I'm going to seduce him.

He steps closer, and the force of his presence, his striking good looks and intensity, makes me wobble.

I cast about for something to distract him. Something other than me. I'm his entertainment for the night, but I need a minute to gird my loins and get ready to perform.

“I need to use the restroom,” I say, smoothing a hand over my necklace.

He steps back and waves a hand toward a room beyond the kitchen. He's got that slight smile back, the one that says he

knows I'm stalling for time. That's fine. I'd rather him think I'm reluctant than guess what I'm really about.

The bathroom mirror shows a surprisingly vibrant-looking bride. There's pink in my cheeks, thanks to Victor's exploratory touches. My arousal will work to my benefit.

I just won't examine my reaction to him too closely.

There's blood on my dress. I forgot about that. Victor swung out of the way on the altar, out of the spray, but I was close enough to get spattered. The rust-colored stains already look old.

I do my business and use the sounds of the flushing toilet and running water to cover the real reason I needed a private moment. Bending over, I haul up my dress and unstrap the handgun holster hidden on my right thigh.

Are you always so well-armed?

Always.

I palm the butt of the compact weapon and let its cool weight give me strength. I strapped this gun to my leg, hoping Stephanos would come to the wedding and I could blow him away at the reception. The Sig Sauer P365 is my baby, the smallest gun I own. I'm lucky I wasn't strip-searched in the car, but my reprieve won't last long. Judging by the way Victor was looking at me, he's taking me to bed, and soon.

I could come out shooting and end the night before it begins. But then I won't get a chance to set a trap for Stephanos.

Carefully, so as not to make any telltale creaks, I open the cabinet under the sink and hide the weapon and holster behind a neat stack of toilet paper. Then I rise and wash my hands, and not a moment too soon.

The door handle turns, and Victor saunters in. I didn't lock the door on purpose—in case the clicking sound alerted him to the fact that I had something to hide. I expected him to respect my need for privacy.

My reprieve is over.

I meet his gaze in the mirror. My cheeks flush even further. With my red lips, I look more than ready to play seductress. “Help me with my dress?”

He steps forward, crowding me. I lean over the bathroom counter until the sword on my necklace points into the sink and stare at Victor in the mirror. His favorite knife makes its appearance, flashing between us. Every muscle in me goes rigid.

Victor slides the knife up the back of my dress, slicing off the old-fashioned buttons. The dress sags, the puffed sleeves wilting off my shoulders. I go to strip them off, but Victor tsks, “No,” and waves the knife, his icy eyes holding mine in the mirror. “Do not move.” He sets the blade at my back against my skin. Close enough to shave the soft hairs there. “Do not even breathe.” He slices the rest of the bindings away.

The weight of the fabric makes the dress fall with a heavy, rustling sound, leaving me naked but for my sheer stockings, garter belt, bra, and panties.

I had a plan for my wedding night. A few bottles of wine and a bit of Rohypnol in David’s glass, and I could spill a little blood on the sheets and coo to him in the morning that he was amazing. Idiot that he was, he’d believe it. He believed when I said I loved him, that I was a virgin, and that I’d give myself fully to him as soon as we were married.

For my own pleasure, I wore my favorite set of sheer lingerie in a bright, cheerful color. *Something blue*. The exact color of Victor’s eyes.

I don’t believe in fate, not like my cousin Royal. But if I did, I’d say she’s up to something. The bitch.

In his dark suit, Victor makes a somber frame for my naked self. The black of his pupils has grown to swallow up the blue. He murmurs something in his native tongue. A curse or a compliment, something low and soothing to steady me as he traces his long fingers over my back and shoulders, down my arms. It’d be more relaxing if he wasn’t still holding the knife.

I swallow and dig for my courage. Before I can turn, he presses into my back, pinning my hips against the sink. I can't stop the flare of fear in my eyes. He glides his hand over the flat of my stomach, the handle of his knife imprinting my skin. "So beautiful," he murmurs into the curve of my shoulder, kissing the tender junction at the base of my neck.

It'd be so easy for him to bring up the knife and hold it to my throat, looking deep into my eyes and slicing my jugular while murmuring sweet nothings into my ears. He could so easily do it, but something tells me he won't. I don't know why I'm so sure. I lean into my captor's strong embrace, letting my breasts rise and fall in time to my rapid heartbeat. I didn't take the time to kick off my heels, and with their added inches, I'm tall enough that his cock probes my backside.

Then he kicks my legs apart. I watch Death's beautiful face, helpless to stop him as he slips his left hand between my legs. His eyes widen when he discovers my secret, the one I've been keeping from him.

I'm so fucking wet, wetter than I've ever been before. Does the threat of being stabbed turn me on? Is the fear an aphrodisiac, making me crave the basest proof that I'm alive?

He holds me between his hands, his right hand on my belly, the knife an unspoken threat, his left stroking over the soaked gusset of my La Perla panties in a come-hither motion. Arousal flares deep in my belly. I hold out for several long minutes, but when his middle finger presses through the fabric to tease my sensitive opening, my eyes flutter and almost close.

"Look at me," he orders, and I obey, grateful for the harsh rasp of his voice. Better to not lose myself. Better to not take my eyes off my adversary.

He dips his head, breathes in deeply, and drops a kiss on my shoulder. He brings the knife up and across my collarbone to my bra strap and, with a small *snick*, bares my left breast. Goosebumps rise all over my chest, and he rubs at them, finding my nipple and thumbing it. I swallow my breath and hold still. The knife blade is *right there*. And he knows I'm

aware of it, that I'm afraid. With a cruel twist to his lips, he flips the blade in midair and palms the sharp edge to use the handle as a second digit, pinching my nipple between it and his thumb.

It's too much. I cum in a rush, shaking silently. Heat and a pink stain flood my chest. I stifle my cries but can't hide my reaction from him.

I just came in my captor's arms.

He releases my nipple and flips the knife again to use the blade to slice away my panties. The rest of my bra is next. He spares the garter belt and stockings, but they only emphasize how naked and vulnerable I am before him.

He raises his left hand, the one that made me cum. My pussy soaked his cuff. He licks my essence off his fingers, watching my face in the mirror.

Once more, he palms the sharp edge of the knife before lowering it between my legs. He presses the handle into me. The base of the knife slides in smoothly, my juices easing the way.

I jerk in his arms, and he clamps his free arm around me, holding me between him and the sink. We make a pretty picture—a naked woman, her chest flushed from orgasm, and a beautiful man behind her, securing her against his powerful, suit-clad frame. You just have to look closely to see the tip of a knife in his hand and the monster lurking in the corner of his smile.

He slides the knife handle in and out of me, fucking me so deep I feel it behind my belly button. He knows just how to angle the weapon, how to drag it across the sweet spots inside me. I shudder, fighting my rising orgasm.

“Don't resist, beautiful,” he breathes, drawing the handle out and pushing it back in. My soaked pussy makes a squelching sound. “Surrender.”

A series of thrusts with the knife handle trigger my G-spot, and it's all over. I come again, this time with a low, breathless rush of air, not quite a moan.

“So quiet.” Victor laughs softly in my ear. “So controlled. I’m going to make you scream for me.”

He tips me forward and braces his left hand on my hip. Teetering off balance, I slap a hand against the mirror to hold me upright and look into my own dark eyes. My cheeks are flushed red. My captor made me come, not once, but twice.

And he’s not done.

Victor plants his right hand on the mirror next to mine. He’s still holding the knife, the handle slick and shiny with my cum, and the long blade clinks against the glass.

My gun’s right under the sink. It’d take me a moment to grab it, but I could distract him and do it at any time. But he promised I’d survive tonight.

His breathing is harsh, puffing against my hair. He tugs at his clothes with his free hand, baring only the essential part of him to plunge into me. A hitch, an adjustment, and he presses his hand over mine, pinning me with his body and his gaze. The head of his cock nudges my entrance, and my pussy weeps with need. With one long thrust, he stabs his cock into me, driving me to my tiptoes. I bow over the counter, my necklace clinking on the marble, my cries echoing in the small space. I lose contact with the floor and one heel, then the other drops to the floor. Victor wraps his arm around my midriff, propping me higher. I’m taller than the average woman and no lightweight, but I feel like a rag doll, plucked off the ground, dangling in from his hold. A toy in his hands. Victor drives into me, and I take it all, my mouth open and red lips rounded. He strokes into me, a merciless pounding beat.

And I cum, bouncing and quivering on his rod. A pin in my updo comes loose, and my dark hair tumbles down, veiling my face. I toss my head back and forth, trying to shake the strands of hair away from my eyes. The sword dances under my throat.

“Yes,” Victor growls and I realize I’m whimpering *No, no, no*. My arousal is rising again, an inexorable wave of pleasure threatening to tow me under. My pussy clenches on his dick, trying to suck him in deeper.

I slap the mirror again and again, fighting to gain purchase and angle my hips to take more of Victor's giant dick. It's swollen further inside me, knocking at my cervix and so deep I go cross-eyed. Heat blooms in my head and core, and I'm cumming again, the spasms sending Victor over the edge. He pushes me up until my body drapes over the counter, and my cheek is plastered against the mirror. I focus on the knife blade shining inches from my face.

And then it's over, and he's cumming, his cock pulsing inside me hard enough to set off another round of mini orgasms inside me. I slump down, too wrung out to prop myself up.

He gathers me into his arms, stroking the hair out of my eyes. For a moment, he cups my cheek with his big hand.

Then he pushes me to my knees. I sink onto the thick Persian rug that covers the tile, narrowly avoiding kneeling on my fallen heels. Victor's cock bobs in front of my face, shockingly dark compared to the paleness of the rest of him, huge and hard and slick with my own essence. I open my mouth, but he steps back and sets the knife handle at my lips.

"Lick," he orders, gathering my hair in his hands. Arousal surges through me, thundering in my ears, and I lean forward and extend my tongue. I lick up the smooth handle, tasting myself. When he pushes, forcing my head back, I relax my throat and allow him to penetrate me with his knife all the way to the heel.

My eyes flare with slight panic, and his own hooded ones grow heavy in response. *Sadist*. I ignore the needy throb in my already well-used pussy and dig my fingers into the folds of his pant legs, my senses swimming with him. He's fucking my mouth with the knife he used to kill David only hours ago. And I'm doing my best to choke it down.

Finally, he releases me, sliding the knife out of my mouth. He swipes a thumb across my lower lip, and I remember I'm wearing my favorite color lipstick. Dark red, the color of spilled blood. Too bold for regular use and too bold for a bride. My own tiny act of defiance.

Victor murmurs something in his native tongue, soft and crooning like a lullaby. “Good girl.” He slides a hand up my cheek, and I fight not to press into it, to accept his approval. I need to remember what I’m doing here.

Seduce him. Survive.

Never surrender.

His cock is inches away from my face. Makes my insides cramp just thinking about it invading me. I’m glad I’m on birth control.

If I plan to seduce him, I better start now. I reach for his cock, and he tugs me back by my hair. “No. Not here. I’m not through with you.”

He hauls me up by my arms and tosses me over his shoulder. My dark hair tumbles over my face, my eyes flashing to my wary reflection before he flips the light and carries me from the room.

CHAPTER 4

victor

My prize doesn't struggle as I carry her to where I want her. My bedroom. I lay her on the bed and fix her with a pointed finger. "Stay."

She glares at me, and I pause, waiting for her rebellion with my head tilted to the side. "Unless you want me to tie you to the bed?"

She looks like she might argue but stops when I raise a hand to undo my cufflinks and toss them on a dresser. I start on my jacket and dress shirt buttons, and she leans back, drinking in each new inch of my exposed chest. I turn my head to hide a grin. I thought she might like a show.

I fucked her without undressing, too impatient to be balls deep in her. There's something about her that brings out the beast in me. I've never been so swollen with need, so out of control.

There's no need to rush. She is mine as long as I wish it. I've never wanted a woman past one night, but if that's not long enough to quench my desire for her, then there's no reason I can't keep her longer. Indefinitely.

Forever.

I blink away the fantasy of her lying in my bed, hair unfurled on the pillow, blinking in the morning light. I don't need to imagine her when she's right here, naked on my bed, laid out like a sacrifice.

"Spread your legs," I command, propping a foot on the stool at the base of my bed to untie my shoes. "Show me that

pretty pussy.”

She deliberates with her chin tipped down. I remove my shoes and socks before it's clear she's not going to obey.

Excellent.

“What, shy?” I drawl. “You came hard enough on my knife not so long ago. And again on my cock.”

Her nostrils flare as she visibly bites back a response. I make quick work of the rest of my clothes and stalk to the bed. My shadow falls over her, but she doesn't flinch. She raises her chin to challenge me, and I grip it in my palm. Her eyes are dark with desire. “Are you going to fight me?”

Her tongue touches her upper lip. “No.” Her voice is heavy, husky. “No, I want this.”

“If you want this,” I grip my cock with my free hand, an obscene gesture that makes it clear what we're talking about, “then you obey.”

With her jaw in my grasp, she can't shake her head. But she does roll her eyes. I tighten my grip on her face. “No?”

She presses up to her knees. Even on the bed, she can't match my height, but she doesn't back down. “You don't want that.”

I slide my hand from her jaw to her throat. If she gets the threat, she doesn't acknowledge it. She presses her hands to my bare skin. A shock runs through me at her touch, my body trembling like a racehorse ready to run. She smirks like she knows her control over me.

“Obeying is the quickest way for you to be bored with me. And if you're bored, I die.”

“You think so?”

She slides a hand south and replaces my fingers on my cock with her own. “I know so.”

“You don't seem afraid.” I release her neck to trace her lips. The corner of her mouth curls under my finger.

“Maybe I like a challenge too.” She squeezes my cock, and I groan deep in my throat. I have to fight not to thrust into her palm. Naked but for a garter belt and stockings, on her knees, she’s found the upper hand.

Not for long. I grip her hair and draw her back until she’s lying on the bed. She loses her grip on my dick, and I loom over her. “Nice try.”

I ease her knees apart and let my hand fall, smacking her dead on her pussy. She throws her head back, her neck working on a silent cry. “That’s for not following instructions.”

Her chest heaves, but she doesn’t let a sound slip. I slide two fingers up and down her folds. She’s soaking wet, filled with my cum. She can hide many things from me, but her pussy does not lie.

Her reactions leave me wanting. Her breath trembles, but no cry or moan escapes.

I stroke her slick flesh, studying her solemn face. “Who taught you to be so quiet?”

She shakes her head slightly and doesn’t answer.

“This will not do.” With my free hand, I massage her scalp until her eyelids droop. “I want to hear you. Your cries and sobs, everything in between.” Her lips part, her breath growing languid. “Can you do that for me?”

“I’ve never done it before,” she whispers.

“So tense.” I’ve half-folded her in my arms. It’d be an innocent pose if I didn’t have my fingers circling her clit. “So in control. What would it be like to give yourself to me?”

Her eyes flick open. “So you can knife me in my sleep?”

“My knife is over there.” I nod to my dresser. “If I wanted to kill you, I’d have done it before now.”

She barks out a laugh and relaxes more. “I guess you’re right.” She leans back. The sword on her necklace is askew, poking into her collarbone, and she straightens it before

stretching her arms overhead. Her back arches, pushing her breasts up on display. “How do you want me?”

“Like this.” With her draped backward, I can play with her pussy as long as I want. “But let go, beautiful.” I paint her red lips with her own juices and reposition myself between her legs. “And scream for me.”



LULA

VICTOR LOWERS his blond head between my knees. I clench up automatically, but the giant hitman is surprisingly gentle. He strokes his fingers up and down my sex, delving into the folds. He finds my clit and circles it, forcing my already wrung-out body to stir. My arousal lifts its head.

He’s right. He’s unarmed, his knife out of reach. But his body is lethal all on its own. In the dappled shadows untouched by the low light, his large frame is impossibly beautiful. His torso is a work of art, each muscle sleek and refined. I crane my head and get a glimpse of his perfect ass right as he swipes his tongue up my center.

“Ooooooh.” The barest moan slips out of me.

He chuckles straight into my pussy. “That’s it, my beauty. Let me know what you like.”

For a heartless assassin, he’s pretty considerate. But there’s nothing polite about the way he presses his face into me, tongue fucking my entrance. My hips rock of their own volition, riding him. The breadth of his powerful shoulders is the only thing stopping me from squeezing his head in a vise grip with my thighs.

Is this the time to make my move? My gun is rooms away, and he can still overpower me.

Victor angles his head, nibbling the inside of my thigh while his fingers twist inside me. I’m so fucking wet.

He reaches up and squeezes my breast. “You’re thinking too much.” He rises over me, a dark god in his natural lair. The light gilds his hair. “And you need to pay attention.” He rubs

the inner wall of my pussy, massaging my G-spot and tugging my orgasm closer. “To me. And only me.” He dips down to cover my breast with his mouth. The heat makes me melt into the bed. I want to fight it, to push him away, but his fingers and mouth are magic, turning the world hazy. I couldn’t fight him if I tried.

His teeth find my nipple, and I gasp at the slight pinch. My pussy clamps down on his fingers.

“So it’s a touch of pain that does it,” Victor muses, his mouth still between my breasts. “I wonder...” His fingers turn cruel, pinching my flesh, his thumb at my clit, and the rest of his fingers stretching my entrance. It’s almost too much, and I’m gasping, my mouth open as if that will allow my pussy to widen and accept him.

He bites my nipple again, scraping the tender bud, and it’s too much. The points of pain at my breast and core light up, the sensation combining and cascading through me. White heat fills me, shocking every nerve ending. I cum, jerking hard enough to levitate off the bed. Victor pins me, crooning praise and pressing kisses to my breasts.

I come down slowly, my ears ringing from my cries. My groin aches from the constant onslaught of orgasms.

“Very good. So beautiful.” Two of his fingers are still inside of me, but he’s eased the pressure of his thumb. He’s got the whole of me in the palm of his hand.

“My god,” I croak. “I’ve come more tonight with you than with all of my other lovers... combined.”

“That says less about me than it does about them.”

My laugh blooms bright in the dark. “You’re right. Oh god.” His shadow falls over me, and I cover my face with my hands. “I slept with my fiancé’s killer.”

“And enjoyed it. A better wedding night than you expected?”

Yes. I clamp my lips shut. If he wants me to admit that, he’ll have to wait a long time.

He takes my silence as a challenge and tugs me closer by my legs, angling his hips and guiding his cock to glide deep into me. He props my legs over his shoulders, and I'm grateful for my religious yoga practice as he leans over me, bending me in half. My body is his plaything, a doll, a toy to prop the way he wants. I can claim to hate it, but as the head of his cock stretches my entrance, I can't deny the heat of arousal flooding me. I want his weight on me, the muscles heavy and honed to perfection. I want his hands on me, his fingers cruel and clever from their deadly work.

I want him. I can lie to him, but I can't lie to myself. The brutal burn of shame only makes the pleasure more exquisite.

I shout to the ceiling as he plunges into me, filling me to the brim and sending me spiraling higher and higher. My body snaps and sizzles like an exposed wire, and my cries echo on and on into the night.

CHAPTER 5

lula

I wake slowly, the taste of cotton in my mouth and a heavy soreness in my limbs. I raise my head, blinking in the hazy gray light, and the slight movement sends twinges through my core, reminding me of the hours I spent impaled on Victor's monster dick.

All night. He fucked me with a knife handle. And then he just plain fucked me.

Scream for me, he ordered, and I did. My throat is raw from crying out. He ate me out and fucked me over and over again. And I orgasmed.

A lot.

And I want to do it again.

Victor lies beside me, tangled in the sheets. His broad body looks no less powerful now that it's at rest, but his face is peaceful. The boyish, white-blond hair is at odds with the sculpted perfection of his face. He's lovely, too lovely for words, an angel fallen to earth.

I've seen him hunt his quarry, a killer intent on his prey. I've seen him amused and arrogant, smirking as he alternately taunts me or commands me to obey. It was easy to hate him then. But watching him sleep, his large form denting the bed and his pale eyelashes fanned out on his cheeks, tender feelings stir inside me. What would it be like to wake up to someone like this, morning after morning, day after day?

It's a crazy thought. I need to harden myself. To be ready to do what I must. Victor is a pawn in this game of vengeance.

A means to an end. Our time is finished.

There's no use dreaming of what might have been.

I rise silently and pad to the bathroom to do my business. The shreds of my wedding dress lie in piles on the floor. I'll have to borrow clothes.

I touch my chest and realize my necklace is gone. Fallen off or ripped from me in the throes of passion, but I don't have time to search for it.

I slip on the white satin heels—the only item of clothing to survive the night—and crouch to pull out my gun.

Forget Victor. I'm closer to Stephanos than I've ever been. Time to set the trap and close in for the kill.

VICTOR

I WAKE with a sense of languid peace and the taste of defiled bride in my mouth. My eyes and body feel heavy, like I slept solid and haven't moved for hours. I haven't had a full night's sleep in a long, long time. Maybe not since I was a baby.

The bride—Vera—banished my bad dreams.

She's awake now, moving around in the apartment. Trying to escape? As much as I wanted to wake up with a beautiful naked woman stretched out beside me, I wanted to know what she would do if I left her to her own ends.

I didn't expect to sleep so deeply. Perhaps I should have tied her up before succumbing to slumber.

Perhaps I will tonight. I've never wanted more than one night with a woman, but this one is different. She contains a puzzle I have yet to solve.

Something stabs my palm, and I open it, unsurprised to see the tiny dagger poking the muscle under my thumb. I turn it so it bisects my palm from top to bottom. I tore her necklace off while I rode her and gripped it all night while I slept.

Soft steps sound in the hallway, and I relax into the bed. She didn't leave. I wonder at the sense of relief rushing through me. Another puzzle for me to piece together.

The door swings open, and I raise my head, ready to greet her with a smile.

The first thing to enter is the tiny barrel of a gray pistol. It's small, delicate, and suited to Vera's fine-boned hand. Vera appears next in an intriguing new outfit—my tan trench coat and her heels. Is she naked underneath? The sight of her inspires a whole new round of fantasies.

She's pointing the weapon straight at my chest.

So this is what she was hiding under all that white satin. I was too obsessed with my win, too assured of my victory, to pat her down.

Are you always so well-armed?

The dagger in my fist bites my skin. I tighten my grip, unwilling to show her what I'm holding and start to sit up.

“No,” she barks, steadying the gun. “Stay there.”

“What is this?”

“You had your fun; now it's my turn.”

I settle back on the pillows, smirking. “You had fun too, beautiful.”

She ignores this, though the faint color cresting her cheeks tells me she's not as unaffected as she wants to be. “Don't move. Don't even breathe.” She reaches into the pocket of my coat and holds up a small black cell. “What's the code?”

It's the burner I've been using for this contract. I was planning on dumping it today after contacting Stephanos to ensure I received the last payment.

“You're full of surprises.” I give her the code. She taps it in without looking.

I could rush and tackle her. I might catch a bullet, or I might not. She hasn't proven whether she can even shoot.

But then I'll never know what happens next.

We stare at each other, the pistol between us.

She didn't kill me in my sleep or when I forced her into the car. She didn't try to stop her groom's death, either. Last night, she let me strip her down and fuck her to orgasm. Over and over.

"If you're unhappy with my lovemaking, there's no need to shoot me." I relax back on the bed. "Come and let me make it up to you."

"Shut up." There's no flicker of emotion on her face. I can't see the wheels of deliberation turning inside her mind, but I know she's trying to figure out what to do with me.

What is her endgame? No matter how things unfold, it's clear: Vera's the most interesting thing that's happened to me in years.

"There are handcuffs in the side drawer—" I meant to give her an option, but she interrupts.

"Were you going to kill me?"

"Not last night. Not today. Not as long as you proved interesting."

"Thank you for your honesty." She nods. She's come to a decision. "It's nothing personal."

Something bites me in the gut a second before my ears register the crack of a gunshot.



LULA

BY THE TIME I make it to Three Diner, I'm limping in my high heels. Walking ten blocks from Victor's building was enough to give me blisters.

I replayed shooting Victor the whole time. His pained grunt was the only sound to escape his gritted teeth, but his eyes drove needles of ice my way. I didn't stay and wait for the blood to well up from the wound in his naked chest, but in my mind's eye, the movie plays on. The rich, wine-colored stain spreads on the white sheets to the soundtrack of the big man's labored breathing.

Victor is the first person I've shot, but he won't be the last. He was a pit stop on my road to vengeance, and I'm done with him. There's no turning back.

I'll just have to ignore the way my body aches from the orgasms he gave me.

My destination is a long, low building on the edge of Unitatem University. It looks like a trailer and an Airstream had a baby, and the result is this silver-sided diner. The pink neon "3" sign has marked its spot for over fifty years.

I slap my palm on the door frame and walk in, Victor's trench coat fluttering around my stocking-clad calves. I'm bare-assed underneath, like a call girl catering to her client's specific fantasy. Only my stockings, shoes, and garter belt survived Victor's blade, and this morning, I didn't spend any time rifling through Victor's drawers for clothes. I grabbed a coat and his burner phone, shot him, and left.

My aim is good—years of going to the range with my father's men ensured that. I could've targeted the T-zone, the spot between the eyebrows. A bullet there means instant death. Clean and quick. Too good for a cold-blooded murderer like Victor.

But something stayed my hand.

I shot him in the stomach. Gut wounds lead to a slow and painful death. But if he can drag himself to a phone and get to a doctor in time... I'd put his survival rate at fifty/fifty.

I refuse to feel guilty. Victor would feel no regret about cutting me down. There's no reason I should spare him a second thought. I only knew him for one night.

But... oh, what a night.

The diner is dark inside, with most of the light coming from the freezer chest to my right, illuminating racks and racks of fluffy-topped lemon meringue pies. The diner decor is straight out of the 1950s because that's the last time this place was renovated. Faded red leather booths and metal tables line the window side. A long bar with red-topped metal stools line the other. The walls are painted teal and surprisingly clean.

The air is pure *eau de pomme frites*. If they could bottle it into a perfume, I'd wear it every day.

“Party of one?” The waitress grabs a plastic menu without looking at me. The servers here are notoriously rude, but no customer would dare say anything about it. “Booth or bar?” She’s got the rasp of a seventy-year-old smoker, and her pink and white short-sleeved uniform shows off the dark tattoos whorling up both arms.

“Booth, please.” Just because the service here is rude doesn’t mean I get to be.

The waitress hustles away without checking to make sure that I follow. I clip-clop after her in my stupid heels. The place is empty save for an old timer at the bar who hasn’t left his spot in four decades and two workmen in a nearby booth. The two men glance up at me as I pass and instantly look away. I must have my ice-princess face back on. Either that, or they know not to look at customers of Three Diner too closely.

“Coffee?” the waitress asks, slapping the menu in front of me.

“Please. And the special, when you get a chance. Number three.”

Her fake lashes don’t flicker as I give the code. She nods at the menu and walks off.

I drum my nails on the metal table top. The scent of scrambled eggs and homestyle fries makes my mouth water, but if I eat now, I’ll fall asleep. I check the lapels of Victor’s coat to make sure it hasn’t gaped open to give those workmen a peep show.

Three Diner has three owners. I don’t know who I’ll get today. The eldest, the younger sister, or the daughter they adopted together.

In less than five minutes, a young, redheaded woman in dark glasses glides into the booth opposite me. She’s pale and tall, her arms too thin in the pink and white uniform. The waitress swings by to serve us both cups of coffee, and the young woman waits until she leaves to speak.

“Lucrezia Romano,” she says in a melodious tone. Her hair clashes with the pink in her uniform but frames her face perfectly. She’s startlingly lovely, but none of the workmen give her so much as a glance. Not that she noticed them. She’s blind under those dark, round John Lennon glasses.

“You asked for the special?” Her voice rings like a bell across a city square.

“I did,” I confirm.

“How can we help you?”

“I have an appointment today at noon. With Stephanos.”

Her lips pinch together. “My mothers told me you’ve been here before asking for his location.”

“Now I have it.” I set the burner phone Victor unlocked for me on the table. I impersonated Victor enough to get Stephanos to send over the meeting place, a restaurant on the edge of his territory. “I pay the tithe.”

“You have for some time, or so my mothers tell me. You’ve been on this quest for so long.” Her voice echoes strangely, as if we’re in a grand cathedral and not a cramped diner. “I will give you the choice now to turn back.”

I lean in. “There is no turning back. I know Stephanos murdered my mother. It’s taken me years to uncover this information, and by the time I did, my father was too old to do anything about it.”

“And your brother?”

I don’t ask how she knows about Gino. I just scoff.

She nods. “Your quest is true. We will aid you, but we require a boon.” She slides the burner phone back towards me. “Speak to your cousin. He knows you’re a frequent patron of ours. He’s been calling for you. Use the phone booth in the corner.”

I head to the phone booth and settle in. As soon as I sit down, the phone in front of me rings with a bright sound. I wince and pick it up.

“Lula.” Royal uses my family nickname. “Where are you?”

“You know where I am. I’m surprised you don’t have eyes on this place.”

“I heard about the wedding. You didn’t invite me?”

“I knew you wouldn’t approve.”

He curses in Italian, softly enough that I know his wife Leah must be just out of earshot. “This is madness,” he says. “What can I say or do to turn you back?”

“There’s nothing,” my voice chokes up. “Tell my brother that it’s over.”

“I could kill your father for putting you on this crazy quest.”

“He’s already dead.” And so am I. Royal and I both know there’s little chance I’ll come back from this. I’m going to walk into Stephanos’ lair with all the weapons I can carry.

“At least tell me your plan. I can send backup. I will support you in this.”

“No, you can’t. You don’t have enough men.” Our family is still reeling from the stupid moves his father made. “And we still don’t know who the mole is.” While he was in charge, Royal’s father had gone so far as to make deals with Stephanos. We did our best to sever the relationship, but now and again, shipments would go missing.

“Whoever it is will run to Stephanos and warn him as soon as you give the word about our plan.”

Royal curses.

I’m right, and he knows it.

“Lula, per l’amor di Dio—”

Instead of hanging up, I place the phone down, letting Royal continue to try to convince the empty booth not to walk into the lion’s den alone.

Royal will never forgive me for what I'm about to do. But it won't matter because I'll be dead.

Something clicks, and a secret panel opens in front of my legs, offering a black briefcase. I lean down and take it. It's heavier than it looks, but I steel my arm and carry it out of the phone booth.

The redhead is waiting. "Follow me." She leads me back through the kitchen, past two stocky, short-order cooks with tattoo sleeves. The scent of French fries and fried meat is strongest here, and the air has an oily thickness to it that makes it feel like grease is coating my skin.

Near the back door, a white-haired woman with a red bandana wrapped around her head sits hunched over a big silver bowl, peeling potatoes. A mountain of brown peels is piled next to her. My guide stops in front of her. We both wait in respectful silence for the old woman to raise her head.

"Madonna," I murmur.

"Oh no, not me," the old woman cackles and nods to the far side of the kitchen, where a tall woman stands, Viking-blonde hair with threads of gray streaking through it pulled back, stirring a large pot of soup. "That would be that one. And I see you've met our young one. I'm the other."

"It is an honor." I bow my head.

The old woman narrows her eyes. "I knew your mother. Her name was Vera, was it not?"

"Yes."

"You seek the truth, and you seek her. May you find both in the end." She pats my cheek with a clawed hand.

The young red-headed woman leads me out the back door, where a discreet black car is waiting. A burly man in dark glasses sits in the driver's seat.

"He will drop you off," she tells me, the dark glasses turned to my face. I imagine her blind eyes underneath, big and wide and unblinking as an owl's.

"Thank you," I say.

“Consider services rendered,” she intones in that high-priestess voice. “Your tithe will be terminated at the end of the day.”

I don't bother to tell her there's no point, that I've left a significant portion of my will to the diner and the three women who run it.

My mother was the one who first took me to Three Diner when I was little. I sat in the booth and swung my legs, too short to reach the floor. I drank a milkshake as my mother spoke in whispers, first to the tattooed waitress and then to the Viking-blonde woman who came out of the back with the scent of fry oil. She never told me why we were there. To this day, I don't know. But I'll never forget what she told me.

“The diner is a place for women who need help.”

It gives me hope to know the diner will be there for women in need long after I am gone.

Once I'm safe in the backseat of the car, I give the driver the address of our destination. The car glides a few feet and turns onto the main road. As the diner's dark neon sign disappears in the rearview mirror, I balance the briefcase on my legs and open it.

The weapons are packed in the foam like jewels, black and sleek and deadly. A fully loaded Sig 320 with a suppressor underneath. Extra bullets for my P365. A holster for both. And a small silver tube that turns out to be lipstick in my favorite dark red shade.

By the time we reach the rundown restaurant where Stephanos holds court, I'm fully armed, the Sig 320 deep in the pocket of the trench coat, my P365 strapped to my thigh, and a fresh coat of war paint on my lips.

“Cut through here,” I order, and the driver obeys, taking a sharp turn down an alley that's barely an inch wider than our car. I hold my breath as if that will help us squeeze through. We reach the street, and he stops the car.

“Fates be with you,” he says.

I slide out of the car, tightening the belt of Victor's coat so it's secure around me, and march past the dumpsters to the restaurant where Stephanos waits. As I get closer, I slow my steps, letting my hips roll suggestively under my coat. The chilly air licks up my bare legs as I find a side door and slip inside.

Inside, dust motes dance in the air. The restaurant is dim and filled with faded decor and the stench of stale cigarettes. There are stains on the carpet that make me shudder to think of the state of the kitchens. The cooks and workers are too busy banging pots and pans and cursing to notice me. I float to the front and into the heart of the restaurant, past stacked chairs and an empty hostess stand.

The place isn't open yet and probably doesn't do much business besides host Stephanos' business meetings and launder his money. He has a bunch of these places in his territory and moves between them constantly. His paranoia keeps him alive. It certainly kept me from tracking him down sooner and putting a bullet between his eyes.

There's a light on in the back of the restaurant, and the sound of muttered voices filters out as I approach it. Two big men with unshaven chins stand guard outside a back room. They turn in unison and still as they clock me. Twin cigarettes flare in the shadows.

"Can I help yous, sweetheart?"

"I'm here about a birthday surprise?" I keep my voice low and purring, with a slight Jersey Shore accent. I pose, putting my weight on my left leg, the one with my small Sig Sauer strapped to my thigh, and let my right one peek out of the coat, flashing my knee and garter strap. Both men's eyes snap down. I toss back my hair and part the top of the coat enough to give them a glimpse of the swell of my breasts without compromising the tight belt around my waist. I lick my lips and flutter my lashes.

Sexy call girl, that's me.

"C'mere." One of the men crooks his finger, and I sway towards him.

If he pats me down, I'll have to shoot him in the gut and make a run for it. I let his eyes crawl over me for one long minute.

He just pats my bottom. "Have fun in there." He smirks.

I let my lips curve up. "Maybe I'll find you when I'm done." I wink and sashay past him, down the hall towards the room towards the murmur of male voices. My heartbeat booms in my ears.

There's an emergency exit at the end of the hall. I could glide down and escape through it, walk a few blocks away, and call Royal for backup. He'd come and help me, and in the end, he'd take me home.

Instead, I take a deep breath and turn into the larger room. It's a room within a room, with booths lining four low walls to form a smaller square with a dark corridor around the perimeter for waitresses to scurry back and forth. At the back wall, a group of men sit along one long table. Cigar smoke hangs heavy in the air, even though it's still morning.

"He's late. The fuck," someone, probably Stephanos, is muttering. "Bruno, go call him."

A giant with a shaved head—Bruno—rises obediently. A minute earlier, Bruno would be sitting, blinking sleepily into his tiny white espresso cup. A few minutes later, he'd be out of the room, and I'd have had a clear shot.

Instead, his big, shaven head snaps up, eyes fastening on me. Instead of a call girl, he sees what I actually am: a threat. Years of instinct kick in. "Oi!" he shouts.

I let my coat fall open, and for a blissful second, every man's eyes freeze on my naked breasts long enough for me to draw the gun in my pocket and crack off a shot.

I aim for the man who gave Bruno the order. The only clear photos of my nemesis are from a few years ago. But this has to be Stephanos, mean-eyed, squat, and ugly, with a few thin gray hairs clinging to his balding scalp.

My first shot clips his shoulder. He bellows, and I'm already aiming for his heart. But it doesn't matter because

Bruno flips the table.

Cups and saucers go flying, men bellow, and wood splinters around me. I duck into one of the booths and return fire.

Bullets whizz around me. The two men who were supposed to be guarding the door run in, guns drawn to eliminate the threat, and get mowed down in the crossfire. One does a grisly dance in front of me, blasted on both sides by my Sig and friendly fire.

Bodies slump between us. More men are running, fleeing to save their own skin. It doesn't matter.

Somewhere behind the shield of a heavy restaurant table, Stephanos is on the floor, groaning. This is my chance to end him, and it's slipping away from me.

I grab a chair to cover me and dart to a closer booth.

Bruno rises, howling, with a gun in either hand. I cringe away from the double barrels. He fires, and I dive behind one of the low walls. Something bites my thigh. Pain blasts up my leg and recedes to nothing, numbed by adrenaline.

Smoke fills the dingy restaurant. The gunfire cracks, so close and loud I might as well be deaf.

Through the screen of gray air and muffled sounds, I return fire until the Sig is out. I should've asked the diner ladies for an assault rifle. Ears ringing, I grab my backup out of its holster, but in the time it takes to do so, Bruno grabs his boss and drags him off the floor. They're gone, disappearing behind the opposite wall. I could chase them all the way to the front of the restaurant, but Bruno will take his last stand there, and I'll probably have to shoot my way through his rallied troops while Stephanos jumps into a getaway car and makes his cowardly escape.

The smoke is clearing. The floor is littered with black mounds of dead mobsters in dark suits. One of them gurgles, and the stench of blood and shit stains the air.

I rise and dash past the far wall. No one shoots. No one stops me. But I'm sobbing as I hit the emergency door and

emerge into the bright day, trying not to think of how, for the second time in twenty-four hours, my plan for vengeance is bleeding out on the floor.

CHAPTER 6

lula

Three months later...

AS FAR AS safe houses go, a three-story house on the river isn't bad. Here, I do my work on a secure server, mostly contracts for businesses or land deals that Royal makes with one of the other families that rule Metropolis. Rebuilding what our idiot fathers gambled away.

An hour after my shootout with Bruno, Royal picked me up and brought me to his home. He sent men to the restaurant, but the place was cleared out, with only a few bodies left on the floor. We had a shouting fight that he won, and then he brought me straight here under the cover of night.

Rumor on the street is that Stephanos is still alive, suffering minor injuries from a bullet to the shoulder. He's convalescing the same way he's survived the past few decades, by burrowing deep into Metropolis' underworld like a rat. He's spent a lifetime avoiding the four main crime Families, carving out a living on the edges of our territory, scavenging for scraps, and he's good at it.

My mother's death is still unavenged. But I'm alive and hidden from retaliation in a safe house Royal insisted on. I have a desk and a row machine on the deck facing the water. It's boring in a Zen way.

Today, the heat is a heavy blanket in the air, making the afternoon hours stretch long and lazy. It's perfect for naps but less perfect for trying to focus on contract law. Alas, contract law is what pays the bills.

My phone rings, and I reach for it, only to realize it's not my cell. It's another phone I keep tucked away like a dirty secret—the burner I took from Victor after our night together. I don't know why I held on to it, much less kept it charged and close by. It sits in its own bottom drawer, and now it's buzzing angrily, waiting for me to make a decision. I snatch it up and answer it, but keep quiet as I hold it to my ear.

The moment is charged with electricity. There's a twinge in my thigh right where I was wounded in the shootout.

There's silence on the other end of the line. I bite my lip to keep from shrieking. Who is this? Who called me? As far as I know, only Victor used this phone and only to contact Stephanos. It's standard protocol for a professional hitman—buy a burner phone, use it for a single job, then toss it. I never tried using the phone to lock onto Stephanos. I didn't think it would work. Could he be calling now?

I'm about to say something when I hear a slight sound. A sigh, a heavy gust of labored breathing, and then one word.

“Vera.”

I hang up and let the burner phone fall into its drawer with a clatter. Adrenaline blasts up my arms, screaming at me to *run, run, run!*

I know who called me. That rasping voice filled with the threat of revenge could only be Victor.

My small Sig Sauer lives in another drawer, always loaded. The cool weight settles into my palm. I switch off the safety and set off on a jerky walk around the house, checking locks, closing the sliding door that leads to the deck, and arming the security system. I search each room, gun first, and deconstruct every shadow.

I end up in the kitchen. I keep my gun close, safety still off. The trees between me and the river sway, sending shadows flickering across the glass panes of the French doors. Any moment, I expect the dark shapes to morph into a six-foot-something hitman with a cruel smile. But they never do.

He's not here. Of course, he isn't. He's not a bogeyman haunting me.

He's not dead, either, apparently. A part of me hoped he wasn't. Another shameful part conjures him up regularly as a nighttime companion. In the hours between sleeping and waking, my subconscious recalls the orgasms he gave me and makes new fantasies. I wake throbbing with arousal and stroke myself to completion, always with Victor's name on my tongue when I come.

Try as I might, I haven't been able to exorcize him completely. And now he's called me.

I'm safe here. Royal equipped this place with the best of the best. He posted a guard for a while before I argued that two dark-haired men lurking in the driveway would draw more attention from the wealthy neighbors than a standoffish single woman living alone. I promised to be careful. Then I took him to the range and showed him my shooting scores, and he finally backed off.

Dusk falls. I eat my dinner of yogurt and a handful of walnuts at the kitchen counter, watching the sun's golden fingers stretch across the water, slowly losing its battle with the oncoming night.

I realize I'm rubbing my chest and drop my hand. I miss my sword necklace. I could replace it, but I want my old one back.

I drink a glass of water, then give in to my cravings and open a bottle of wine. A brassy merlot, bold enough to wash the rest of my jitters away.

My phone rings again. I jump ten feet into the air before I realize it's my real one.

"Royal," I answer. "Checking in so soon?" We had a phone meeting only this morning.

"I can't check in on my favorite cousin?" His voice is warm. He's always happier at night after he's been home for a few hours with his wife.

“Oh, so now I’m your favorite? You only say that because I negotiated that deal right from under the Vesuvi’s nose.”

“I poured some prosecco to celebrate.”

“I’ve got my red wine.” I hold up my glass in an unseen toast. “But don’t expect the deal to hold them.”

“I do not. The best way to deal with the Vesuvi is blunt force. But you have a knack for legal warfare.” There’s a long pause, and I know the subject he’s going to broach next. “Lula, we’ve spoken of this before—”

Here it comes. I take a big swallow of merlot.

“But it’s been long enough. It’s time for you to accept your rightful place.”

“A woman can’t be consigliere. The men won’t have it.” If my father was alive, he’d be turning purple at the mere thought of all the work I do for La Famiglia.

“It’s a new day. Our fathers are gone.” Mine is dead, and Royal’s is as good as dead, stuck in prison.

“There’ll still be pushback.”

“Who’s afraid of pushback? You?”

I bite back my automatic response. Royal knows how to push my buttons. I’m already doing the work of a consigliere without the official recognition and a seat at the table. But something holds me back.

“We are not our fathers,” Royal continues. “We must forge ahead.”

He’s right. I can’t give him a logical reason for my refusal. How can I explain that I’m still bound to and eaten alive by the past? I can’t lie to him, but I can’t tell him the truth.

I’m saved by an unusual sound, one that sends alarm prickling up my spine. The whisper of gravel crunching in the driveway outside.

I set down my wine and grab my gun in the same second, my body tense and focused. “Hang on, someone’s coming.”

“Stay on the line,” Royal orders.

“Will do.” I didn’t get a chance to tell him about the call from Victor. Royal doesn’t even know about the burner phone. An oversight? Or some stupid desire to try to keep a piece of Victor to myself?

A thick line of trees surrounds the house, screening me from my neighbors on either side. The yard is full of delicate Japanese maples, and there’s a flash of bright orange between the leaves. “Never mind. It’s only Gino.” My younger brother.

Royal curses in Italian.

“Yeah. I’ll tell him.”

“Call me after.” He hangs up, and I put the safety on my gun before disarming the security system and unlocking the door.

“I almost shot you,” I call to Gino. He’s parked his car—a Halloween-orange Corvette, not conspicuous at all—at an angle in the driveway, taking up two whole car spaces and blocking the nondescript gray sedan Royal lent me with the house. Not that I need to drive anywhere. Once a week, I give my grocery list to Enzo, Royal’s right-hand man, and he sends an underling to bring me whatever I need to survive another week.

He stomps up the stairs, his hands empty. Of course, they are. He never brings me anything. Whenever Royal comes, he brings baskets full of baked goods—raspberry scones, chocolate cupcakes, even tricolored Neopolitan rainbow cookies, when his wife is feeling fancy.

Gino wasn’t raised to give. He only takes.

I turn and walk further into the house without greeting him. He finds me in the kitchen, pouring myself more wine. To speak to Gino, I’ll need it.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I say without looking up. “My answer’s still no.”

“Lula.” A grown man’s voice shouldn’t have such a needling edge or childish whine. “I need it.”

“That trust isn’t yours. Papa set it aside to care for the house.” Probably for this exact reason. “You got the lion’s share of the inheritance. Have you spent it already?”

He scowls, and I know the answer. With dark hair and dark eyes, his features are graceful while still being masculine. He’s too handsome for his own good. It’s gotten him further in life than it should. Being a man in a man’s world gets him the rest of the way, but leave it to Gino to want more.

“Call Royal.” I feel mildly bad about making my younger brother Royal’s problem, but Gino will actually listen to the head of the family. “Ask him for a job.”

Gino checks my fridge like he’s a teenager in his parents’ home. He plucks out a yogurt and stares at it like it’s poison before putting it back. He slouches around, poking in empty breadbaskets, but I keep the kitchen empty of temptation. I have a hidden chocolate stash, of course, but anything Royal brings me gets eaten right away.

“Can we order a pizza?”

“Giovanni. No. This is a safe house.” I wave my arms. Most of the time, I eschew the whole Italian “talk with my hands” cliché, but Gino brings out the worst in me. “The whole point of this place is to hide. Which is why you can’t just show up here whenever you want.”

“Can you talk to Royal for me?”

“You’re a grown man.”

“He gives me grunt work. He doesn’t respect me.”

“Getting your big sis to speak for you is a sure way to earn it.” My voice is as dry as my merlot. “Look, Gino, being family only gets you so far. You have to start from the bottom and work your way up.”

“You didn’t.”

“I went to law school.” Again, with the hand waving. Anything to drive my point into my brother’s stupid, beautiful head. “And even then, I had to work my way up.” How many hours did I spend doing grunt work for the senior partners? I

can't explain one hundred-hour work weeks to Gino. He couldn't compute.

I'm rubbing the bare spot above my breasts again.

Gino pouts. It was cute when he was younger, but a man of his age shouldn't do it. "But you—"

A slight breeze has me throwing up a hand to interrupt Gino and turning to spot the source of fresh air. I shut and locked every door earlier. "What's that?"

I head to the front hall and curse. The front door is wide open. "Gino, what part of 'safe house' do you not understand?" I slam the door and lock it. I hover my finger over the screen pad of the highly sensitive alarm system but don't set it. Knowing Gino, he'll decide to walk onto the deck and set it off accidentally. I'll wait to arm it until after he's gone.

"Of all the stupid, idiotic—yes, I know those are synonyms—things to do, you—" I return to the kitchen, but Gino is gone.

"Gino?"

No answer. It's like he disappeared. Probably poking around, looking for the hard liquor. He's good at finding what he wants when he puts his mind to it.

I grab my glass and swig some wine. Night has fallen, and the house is full of darkness. I usually keep most of the lights off, and I've never felt like the inky corners were hiding anything sinister.

Tonight is different. I'm still on high alert from the phone call and Gino's surprise visit. I flip on the overhead, brighter kitchen lights. That's when I notice the counter is empty. My Sig Sauer is gone.

He's here.

Victor has come for me.

CHAPTER 7

lula

I whirl and race to the safety of the front entrance.

I sense rather than hear an explosion of movement behind me, the shadows separating, convalescing, becoming a man. Becoming Victor.

The door looms ahead of me. I'm so close. Five more steps, and I'll hit the alarm. Then I'll unlock the front door and escape to safety.

Three more steps. Two. One—

A strong arm wraps around my front, wrenching me back against my attacker's giant frame. I struggle but am pinned. My bare feet kick ineffectively.

A deep voice purrs in my ear. "Vera. Or should I say, *Lucrezia*."

The bottom falls out of my stomach.

He knows. He knows my real name.

He knows everything.

There's a story among hunters that the instant prey knows it's about to die, it surrenders. I mean to fight, but something in me relaxes against my captor. Recognizing the rightness of his embrace.

But no. I need to fight. Before I start thrashing in earnest, something pricks my neck. A needle. I'd slap at it like a stinging insect, but I'm clamped in Victor's hold. In the next second, darkness rushes over and pulls me under.



I HEAR a leaky faucet somewhere nearby. Water falling from a great height into an empty sink. In the dead quiet of the room, each drop lands with a sound as loud as a gong. *Plink. Plink. Plink.*

That's why it's called water torture. Grab a prisoner, restrain him, and wear him down.

I blink and blink, but my surroundings are nothing but fuzzy shapes. A bright light overhead. A cold, hard, flat surface underneath me. I go to move, but my ankles and wrists are tethered. I'm splayed like da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, all my vulnerable bits exposed.

A shadow falls over me, and I flinch, but there's nowhere to go. I might as well be a corpse, dead on a slab.

I probably will be one shortly. Right now, my cousin Royal is tearing through the safe house. Will he find Gino? Or Gino's body? I do feel regret. I didn't do enough to protect my brother.

Never mind that my brother is a grown man, and I'm in a worse predicament than him. My future promises to be full of blood, bright lights, and lots and lots of pain.

The shadow over me hasn't moved. It's a source of warmth, though, and part of me wants to strain closer. "Drink," Victor rasps and sets something at my lips. A straw. I suck down liquid because my throat is screaming for it. Too late, I realize that he could be drugging me again. But no, if he wanted to drug me, he'd just stick another needle in my neck. There's a certain cold logic to fatalism. I can guess well enough why I'm here.

I shot Victor, and now he's kidnapped and taken me somewhere he can make the rest of my life painful and very short.

It makes sense. *He who lives by the sword...* I've planned my life around the arc of vengeance, and now here I am, helping someone else complete their own revenge arc.

The water helps clear my vision. Victor stands over me. His white-blond hair is longer now but does nothing to soften the harsh perfection of his sharp features. Only the lush curve of his lips keeps him from looking alien with all of his pointy angles. His lips are soft, too, if I remember correctly. The way they grazed my skin—

Despite my chilled limbs, warmth curls through me. Then I meet his arctic gaze and freeze again.

He studies me like a scientist would study a beetle pinned to a card. There's a certain tenderness in the way he wipes a spilled drop of water from the corner of my mouth. But maybe it's practical instead of kindness. Wouldn't want your victims to die of something as banal as dehydration when there are plenty of more interesting ways to torture them to death.

As soon as I can speak, I croak, "You're alive."

"Yes." He moves so his face is in shadow, and there's no emotion in his voice. Not that he lets much show on his face. "Despite your best efforts."

"So am I." I raise my head and look around. I'm naked, my body shockingly tanned in this cold, sterile place. The cuffs encircling my wrists and ankles are steel half circles that look sautered right to the table. The room is long and low-ceilinged, without windows, and only white walls, silver cabinets, and glaring fluorescent lights. Like a lab. "You haven't killed me." *Yet.*

Victor steps away, and the harsh overhead light blinds me. I turn my head and blink rapidly. My brain is scrambling to figure a way out of this.

He's fully dressed, of course, in simple slacks and a T-shirt that's nondescript in a stealth-wealth sort of way. All black. A good color to hide blood.

How many victims have died in this room? I inhale, but I only smell cleaning chemicals. Sanitation, the professional murderer's best friend.

"Why would I kill you?" He touches me then, wrapping a long, graceful finger around my ankle. My heart leaps, every

cell in my body straining towards his touch, his warmth. I'm laid out like a cadaver, but his touch reminds me I'm alive.

He strokes the inside of my leg like I'm an object he acquired at great expense. "There's no fun in that."

"So you're not going to kill me, then?" I try to scoff, but my voice wavers.

"Do you want to die?"

"Everyone dies." My answer comes too quickly. He removes his hand.

"No, beautiful. You will not die tonight."

One night. I have one night. My heart beats a sad, fragile rhythm like a moth with broken wings fluttering toward a light.

I seduced him once. Could I do it again? My body suddenly thinks that's why we're here. All it took was Victor's touch and his delicious scent. It's not cologne; it's just him. A fresh, sexy cocktail of pheromones perfectly calibrated to entice me.

My core throbs with a second, shadowy beat. A wave of lust turns my nakedness and my bound wrists and ankles into a kinky game.

I take a deep breath and let it roll through me, elongating my torso and arching my breasts. I lick my lips, ready to speak, but he beats me to it.

"No, my little liar. I'm not going to kill you. I'm going to break you."

VICTOR

LUCREZIA ROMANO, daughter of Giovanni and Vera Romano, scion of the Regis family. A mafia princess by birth. A lawyer by training. *Lula* to her family.

My prisoner. She lies on my table with her silky dark hair pooled around her head. A Madonna in repose, but for her sharp gaze flitting around the room. Searching for escape. Naked and bolted to the table, she is still mentally throwing

herself against the walls of her cage. Figuring out her next steps.

I will have to stay ten moves ahead to win this game. She is my equal in every way. The bullet she put in my belly is proof of that.

The healed wound in my gut twinges as I move around the table.

“Break me? What do you mean?” She looks up at me through her lashes.

I grip her face and let my thumb stroke the line of her jaw. “Oh no, beautiful. I know your tricks. You will not make me forget myself again.”

She quivers like a rabbit. A small part of me wants to unlock the steel cuffs and gather her close. Shush her until she relaxes in my arms.

I’ve never had such weakness around anyone before. It is a novel sensation.

Another part of me knows she’s playing a part, allowing me to see what emotions she wants me to see—the better to bend me to her will. But I have too many elaborate plans and ways I will wreak my revenge.

“How will you break me?”

“You want to know my plan? Do I owe you the truth? Vera?”

Her dark eyes turn flinty. “Did you expect me to give you my real name?”

“What was the name on the marriage certificate? Fake?”

After a moment, she nods.

“No wonder I turned up so little information on you. It should have been a clue to do more research.” I wind my hand in her hair, wrapping the silky skein around my palm until I tug her head to the side. “Oh, beautiful, what am I to do with you?”

“You could let me go.”

“So you can run out and right into danger? What were you thinking, cornering Stephanos like that? In his lair with his strength at its fullest? And with only a few guns and no backup?”

With me pinning her hair, she can't look at me, but she smiles at the wall, all serenity. “That's exactly what my cousin asked me. It seemed like a decent course of action at the time.”

I move my hand, shaking her gently. “You're too smart to believe that. You will tell me the truth.”

She blows out a breath. “All right then. It seemed like the only way.”

“That's why you seduced that man, David. You wanted to use him to get to Stephanos. It would have worked if he hadn't been embezzling money.” I can imagine her strapping the gun under her wedding dress. So much scheming just to put a bullet in Stephanos' head. “You picked an idiot for your plan.”

“I know.” Her raised voice bounces off the walls. “That's why I rushed Stephanos the next morning. I didn't work so hard, get so far, for it to just end.”

“Is that what you thought when I took you? That you had another way in?”

She's silent. It's true.

I knew I was a means to an end, but it still annoys me. The most memorable night of my life and she offered me nothing of herself. Only her body. And in the morning, she walked away.

She won't walk away again so easily.

“Well, now you're over your head, little liar. And the only thing that will save you is how well you obey.”

She closes her eyes.

She thinks I am going to torture her. And I am. But not in the way she thinks.

I turn to survey my tools, my weapons of delicate destruction. My knives are honed to perfection, and I have a

bevy of new items bought specifically for her. I was trained by a butcher. I know exactly how to draw and quarter and dissect someone.

Grooves around the table edges will allow any blood to drain away, and when I'm working, I keep a large sheet of plastic underfoot. Easier for clean up.

I didn't lay the plastic down this time. I don't need it. There are subtler ways of mutilating someone.

When I turn back, she's opened her eyes again.

"One question. The man at the house when you took me..." She hesitates, perhaps trying to figure out how long I have kept her. Down here, there is no day or night. This deprivation is part of the plan to break her. "He was my brother. Is my brother. Is he...?"

"Alive. At least, that's how I left him. If he's since rolled his garish sports car off a cliff, it is out of my hands."

"Fair enough. Let's get this over with." She sets her face in a stoic mask, ready for the worst.

She has no idea what I intend to do with her. The depths I will drag her down to. I've spent every waking moment since we met obsessing over her. I won't be content until she has repaid those moments with her own time.

I rap the metal table and hold up a hand in a signal I'll use to cue her to give me her attention. "This is my workshop. This room is soundproof." Well insulated against my victim's screams. It also has its own heating and cooling system. A sink. A shower. And a few feet away from me, in a corner she can't see, a pallet in a cage.

She cranes her head to take half the room in. "Looks like Frankenstein's lab."

"And you will be my new creation. For the time being, this is your home. Eventually, you will earn a better one, as well as a place in my bed."

"How will I earn it?"

I select my first torture implement and hold it up to the light to inspect it. I let the metal catch the light and flash it around the room for her to see. "First, you scream for me."

CHAPTER 8

lula

Victor sets down the tool he was holding, something silver and vicious-looking. When he trails his fingers up and down my torso, I'm so on edge that I flinch from his comforting touch.

"Shhhh," he shushes me. "We'll start off easy."

"I bet you say that to all your victims." How many people has he had on this table to carve into until they beg for death?

He fondles my breasts, and I close my eyes again, goosebumps prickling over my body.

"No, beautiful. You will want to watch this." He holds up what looks like small silver tweezers in one hand while the other rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Then, he clamps it with the tweezer's padded end. Pain bites into me and subsides almost immediately. I clench my jaw. Is it better to holler loudly now and pretend I'm more sensitive than I am?

No, I decide, watching him study me and stroke my chest, tracing the spot where my sword necklace used to lie. He wants my real responses. Faking it will make him angry.

Not that this is a game I can win. I've calculated my odds of survival at less than ten percent.

He clamps my other nipple and reaches under the table. There's a whirring sound, and the table starts to rise. Victor waits for it to finish its movement, stroking my leg. His fingers find the raised edge of my most recent scar, and I suck in a breath.

He reaches down and stops the table from moving, leaning down to study the slight scar on my thigh.

“What is this?” he murmurs, almost to himself. “Who hurt you?” He raises his head, making it clear the question was aimed at me.

“It was stupid.” I shake my head and remember his admonishment to be truthful. “My one souvenir from the shootout with Bruno.” A reminder that I got so close to Stephanos only to fail. “There were chairs and tables in the way, and in all the shooting, there was shrapnel.” It wasn’t even a bullet. It was a splinter.

I admit this to Victor, but he doesn’t laugh. He nods, looking thoughtful.

“I misjudged him,” I admit. “Stephanos. I never knew he’d have men who’d be so loyal.”

“Ah. Yes. Bruno. He is loyal. Like a puppy you raise to tear out men’s throats but also to eat from your hand.”

He touches the button under the table, and it continues to rise before tipping forward. I’m on an incline with my head higher than my feet, my weight supported by the steel table and little metal platforms under my heels. With the slight pull of gravity, the tweezer clamps hang from my nipples.

Victor takes a moment to toy with them. “Easy, right?” He unclamps my first nipple, and I suck in a breath. Blood flows back into the tender bud. “Now, let’s try these.” He holds up a new pair of wicked-looking clamps with tiny screws on one end and little chains on the other. Each chain is tipped with a tiny black jewel. “They’re not as bad as the clover clamps. We’ll work our way up to those.”

He leans in close, his breath caressing my face as he clamps me. First, he twists my nipples this way and that, lifting my full breasts until my back arches off the table. I should hate being manhandled like this, but something about his intense attention mesmerizes me. Every touch stokes the heated longing deep in my core. I try to fight it, but it’s inexorable, like a rising tide.

It's a relief when he's finished. He plays with the dangling jewels, then tightens the screws. The sharp sting steals my breath.

"Too much?" He watches my expression. "Breathe through it." He drops his hand, stroking the tops of my thighs. "Vera. Breathe."

"Don't call me that." I almost laugh. "That was my mother's name."

"All right, then. Lula." He purrs my nickname. I've never heard anyone speak it outside of family. It sounds different on the lips of a man who's been inside me. A melodic rise and fall, a line of a song. "You must breathe for me. Otherwise, you might lose consciousness, and what's the fun in that?"

"I thought you'd like me unconscious. Or dead."

"The dead feel no pain." He tightens the screws another millimeter. "What do you know of endorphins?"

"Feel-good chemicals. The body's response to pain."

"Natural morphine. The body releases a load at a time. A round of pain, another load. More time, an increase in pain, another load." Another turn of the screws. My belly is taut as if that will help disperse the sting. "Eventually, you will grow high from it. That is where you will be malleable to me." He puts his face close to me, nuzzling my cheek like a lover. "I will take you to the edge of what you can endure, again and again. Then, I will stretch your limits until you can take more."

"How?"

"Like this." And he puts his hand on my pussy.

Goosebumps break out all over my body. His soothing touches do their job, filling me up with liquid arousal. I'm wet for him. Despite myself, I flex my hips and push into his palm.

"That's it." He rewards me with a little rub. He knows just how to touch me, where to slide his fingers to collect my juices and scratch the itch that awakens more need in me. His lips brush my jaw, their softness belying the cruelty of the

clamps. I'm stretched between multiple points of sensation—his kisses, his touch, the stinging pain in my nipples. Suspended between heaven and hell.

He drops his head and sucks lightly on my neck. His fingers grow more insistent, pressing into me. He uses his thumb and forefinger to rub my inner and outer walls until I'm shaking. When he withdraws his fingers, I whimper.

He brushes my clit. "Shall I clamp you right here?" I shudder, and he soothes me. "I could make it feel good."

I bite my lip to keep from begging. I'd rather him cut out my tongue than loosen it.

If I were honest, truly honest, I'd tell him that I don't want the highs, the ecstasy. I don't want to crave him. I want this to hurt.

"Or I could use a binder clip," he offers. "Make you scream. Wait for you to go numb and then pull the clip off very slowly."

My knees buckle. As I fall, he drives his fingers into me, holding me up like a puppet. He wrenches an orgasm from me this way, brutally stretching me while kissing me softly.

I snap my teeth on his upper lip and bite until I taste blood.

He releases me and plugs my nose until I unclench my jaw. I lick his blood from my lips, spread it across my teeth and give him a bloody grin.

His eyes are icy slits. "Very well. We'll do this the hard way."



VICTOR

MY CAPTIVE LOOKS LIKE A SUPERHEROINE, beautiful and defiant, with her glossy hair spilling over her shoulders. She's still halfway upright, tilted backward so her weight is on the table, not the steel bonds.

She's so lovely like this. The only thing I'd add is the necklace she used to wear. The one I sleep with every night.

Maybe if she's good, I'll return it to her.

I check her limbs to make sure her circulation is all right while she glares at me. My lip throbs, and there's a distant echo in my gut.

"Okay?" I press my thumb to the tip of my forefinger, creating a crooked O. In time, she'll learn this unspoken signal means *Okay* or *Go ahead*.

She salutes me with her middle fingers.

"Still not ready to obey," I say with satisfaction. I'd hoped she'd fight. Fighting is ninety percent of the fun.

She bares her teeth at me. They're still stained red.

I select a flogger and snap it. I bought all these toys for her and tested their impact against my own thighs. I start small, flicking the flogger so it lands lightly on her chest and belly, bringing a flush to her skin.

"Is that all you got?" She sounds bored.

I finish with the red flogger and swap it for a black one with heavier strands. I let it fall in waves, focusing on painting her red. There's a clock on the far wall, in my line of sight only. I time myself, finding a rhythm and counting down the moments until her body hits a threshold and releases an endorphin load. The only sound is the impact of the leather, a constant, thrumming rain. Her eyelids grow heavy. Both of us are breathing heavily but also more deeply and in sync.

When I pause to check her, running my hands over her heated limbs, her lips part in a sigh. She wakes up a little when I check her pussy, whining a little when I slide a single digit into her soaked channel. Not enough to push her to orgasm, just enough to stimulate her. I remove my finger and lick it clean.

She's ready for more pain.

I use the same black flogger, but this time, I snap the strands so they bite her sides. She arches her back, mouth open in a silent cry. This is just how I imagined her, night after night. Lula naked, at my mercy, succumbing to sensation. The

fantasy got me through months of convalescence. The only thing missing now is the stark red lipstick.

The flogger bites her breasts, leaving faint red lines. She'll look like she swam in a sea of jellyfish.

She has silvery stretch marks on her thighs. I target them next.

Depending on the angle and force of the flogger strands, I can make the hits sting, prick like a volley of needles, or let them soothe the skin, drumming down in a rhythmic rain. I cycle through this, increasing intensity and then backing off. Her mouth is lax and soft, lips parted to suck in more air. Her eyes are almost closed.

There's nothing in the world beyond her prone body—the heat shimmering off her, the sweat rolling down her back. A twitch of her eyebrow. I am made and remade in the rise and fall of her chest.

Even when I work to master her, it's me who is in thrall.

I step close, scenting the sweet bloom of her arousal, and stroke her. She hums a sigh, letting her head loll.

“You're doing so well. Good girl.”

Her black brows knot. A part of her wants to reject the compliment. She'll come to crave them in time.

I twist the screws on her nipple clamps tighter, watching the tiny muscles in her face jump.

Another round of flogging, another turn of the screws. There's sweat beading on my back now. My shoulders are warm with the heat of a good workout. My cock is an iron bar, hanging awkwardly down my leg. I run the hard ridge of my palm down my length, savor the painful pleasure, and get back to work.

I let the flogger cleave her psyche open, filling her world with pain. She'll be awash with it, full to the brim, and floating on the ocean until the golden tide of her neurotransmitters transforms the sensation into euphoria. Agony to ecstasy in the span of a simple flogging.

I have many plans for her. Ropes, chains, blindfolds and bindings, even a cage. But all these serve one purpose, one end. Surrender.

She's close. We're nearing the end. I drop the flogger and return to her side to stroke her reddened flesh. Her skin glows with heat, singeing my palms, and her flesh is raw enough that the kindest touch is cruel. I croon to her as I give the screws a final twist, letting her poor, abused nipples feel the maximum pinch of the spring-loaded teeth. She hums a moan but endures.

I check her vitals and give her more water before returning to my row of implements to choose my final weapon. A dragon tail.

The black leather cracks like lightning and bites like the serpent. I let the pointed end taste her skin over and over in increasingly painful pops. She shouts and writhes, but when I step close to admire the blooming red roses on her skin, her pussy gushes into my hand. I tease her until she's panting but pull away before she goes over the edge.

Time for my finale. I crack the whip and flick the nipple clamp off her right breast. Her body snaps upward like she's a puppet, and someone cut all but the middle string leading from her navel. Her cries are high and breathy. I wait until she comes down to let the dragon tail bite one more time and send the left nipple clamp flying. Her heels thrum against the table, an orgasm surging through her like an electric shock.

I drop the whip.

"Lula, are you with me?"

I squeeze her fingers and wait until she presses mine in return. "You did so well, my beauty." I lay a hand on her stomach, and she shudders so prettily. I can't take it anymore. I shove my pants open and take myself in hand.

She's dazed, floating in subspace now. I lean in and lick her tortured right breast. She draws a juddering breath, and I switch to the left one, my tongue circling her tender nipple. Her unhappy mewl only spurs me on. It's not until she lets out

a sob that the pleasure gathered at the base of my spine breaches the dam. I let the orgasm take me and spurt my seed over her reddened flesh. I collect some and paint her lips with it. She's earned this much.

“You'll have to earn my cock,” I tell her and am gratified by the flicker of disappointment in her eyes.

CHAPTER 9

lula

I float in a haze of nothing. My eyes are open, but the images are blurred and unfocused, like I'm looking at the world through rain-spattered glass. I reach for my anger, my readiness, but it slips through my fingers. My own body drugged me as effectively as Victor did with a needle earlier today. Or was it yesterday?

Water laps at my legs, washing my scourged flesh. It hurts and soothes, much like everything Victor's done to me.

My captor has me in his arms. I'm taller for a woman, with strong thighs and an ample backside, but next to Victor, I'm petite. I feel every inch of the height difference between us.

Together, we sink into the bath. He's got me cradled close, and for once, I'm grateful for his proximity. My strength is gone. If he wasn't holding me, I would slip under the water and drown.

I don't know how long we soak together. The bath is Roman style, big enough to fit Victor one and a half times or one of him and all of me. There's a bright flash of metal in the corner of my eye, but I am too limp and wrung out to wince at the intimidating sight of the straight razor. He sets it to my ankle, and it takes me a moment to realize that he's shaving me.

I have thick, dark hair and splurged for laser hair removal for my underarms but didn't bother treating anywhere else. If I want my legs smooth, I have to shave them practically every other day.

He shaves me carefully, drawing the blade up my leg in smooth strokes. I keep as still as possible, resigned to my fate.

Other than a few blotches, the red on my shins and thighs has quickly faded to pink. My breasts bore the brunt of his punishment.

I didn't know I could cum from pain.

But I don't want to think about that.

I lick my lips. He's given me plenty to drink, but it takes a few tries to find my voice. "What time is it?"

"Late. Or early."

"You're not going to tell me."

He raises his hand in my line of sight, presses his fingers together and makes a chopping motion. "You don't need to know." He smooths his hand over my knees, the razor following in the wake of his touch. "You don't need to know anything, sweet Lula, except how to please me."

I scoff, but I know he's right. I'm becoming attuned to the shift in his moods and his postures. I will study him like the prey studies the hunter if it means my very survival.

His dick is hard under my backside as he parts my legs, guiding the razor over my sensitive inner thighs. I'm breathing faster now.

"It's all right," he murmurs. "I'll be gentle." And he is. With deft and nimble movements, he shaves my pussy bare. Is it my imagination, or does his knife linger a moment over my femoral artery? One easy slice, and I'd bleed out in his arms.

But then his fun will be over. I have the feeling his plot for revenge has only just begun.

"Why knives?" I ask because I'm too high from my orgasms to keep my barriers up. Which I'm sure is what he counted on.

"Why not?" He sounds amused. "They're strong yet versatile. Simple, easy to hide. People use them every day but forget how deadly they are. But if they handle them too

carelessly..." He holds up the blade and presses it to his thumb, shaving a layer of skin from the callouses there. "They exact a price."

"But... why not a gun?"

"You prefer guns, don't you, my lethal little one?" He kisses my temple and sets the blade at my pussy, angling it to scrape away the dark hairs there. I try not to breathe.

"They're expedient," I say when I can.

"Who taught you to shoot? Your father?"

"No. My father didn't approve at first." I'm distantly aware I'm spilling too much information, but the bridle I keep on my tongue is long gone. "But there was no stopping me. I made one of my uncle's men take me to the shooting range until my father relented and gave me a gun."

"He didn't encourage you?"

"He thought it was amusing." My voice is hard.

"He underestimated you."

"Yes." Like every other man in my life. Except Royal. And now, maybe Victor.

"And now you are an excellent shot."

"I missed Stephanos."

"You got closer to him than anyone has. He's better at hiding and surviving than anything else."

"So I've heard." This is why my father and uncle gave up on avenging my mother decades ago. Until I learned the truth of her murder and decided to do it myself. "And it still wasn't good enough."

"Do not punish yourself." He sets the blade aside with a clink and palms my bare pussy. His lips find my ear. "That is for me to do."

His long, skilled fingers glide up and down my sex, drawing out threads of arousal.

"Did your fiancé ever touch you like this?"

I can't stop my sharp laugh. "David? No. I never even let him touch me. How do you think I got him to the altar so quickly?"

Victor hums and touches me more, taking what I've refused to give any lover. I try to stay his hand, and he captures my wrists with his large left hand, keeping his right one free to rub me. Under the thick blanket of fatigue, my pussy throbs under his touch. My orgasm threatens.

I rock my head from side to side, resisting. "No..."

"Yes. Just one more, Lula. And then I'll let you rest. I'll be done with you for at least a little while."

The hard cock under my ass says otherwise, but I have no choice. I melt into the strong cage of his body and allow him to wring another round of climaxes from my exhausted body.



I WAKE on my back and raise my head. I'm still in Victor's murder dungeon, with the same gray shadows and dim lights. The long, steel rods of my enclosure separated me from the rest of the room, but I slept comfortably for being in a cage.

I'm on a soft pallet directly on the concrete floor. There's no blanket, but it's warmer now than the night before. Or maybe my naked flesh is still warm from the flogging and bath.

There are no windows or natural light. No sign of what day or time it is. No way of knowing how long I slept.

The memory of last night comes back to me, and I squeeze my eyes shut. His big, capable hands guided the knife over my slick, sensitive flesh, shaving me. Baring me. I was sensation-drunk, and he knew just how to touch me. He could've asked anything of me, and I probably would've done it.

I need to shore up my defenses against him, but I have no idea how.

It's not the pain I'm afraid of. It's the orgasms. And his prying mind, slicing open my psyche, seeing and cataloging every hope and desire.

I sit up, and Victor immediately appears in his psychopath-relaxing-at-home outfit of loose black clothing. His feet are bare as he squats to come to eye level with me.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” I reply automatically. The side of his mouth draws up at my politeness, but I figure it can’t hurt to be courteous. Until I figure out a way to kill him.

“Any pain?” His gaze lingers on the red blotches on my chest.

I shrug. “I’m sore. Like a mild case of sunburn.”

“Very good.” He makes the *Okay* symbol with his thumb and pointer finger. “You will tell me if the pain is too much.”

I barely stop myself from rolling my eyes. “So you can hurt me more?”

He clucks, angling his head to the side so the light lovingly highlights the planes of his beautiful face. “I do not want you to hurt all the time. Only when I wish it.”

“Right.” I glance down at my naked self. My shaved pussy looks paler against the rest of my skin. Humiliation is a bitter taste in my mouth, but what’s worse is how my pussy pulses, aching to be filled. His cruel smile, the sexy rasp of his voice, his perfect face fills me with need. He’s a monster holding me captive, I shouldn’t feel this way.

He smirks down at me as if he knows what I’m thinking. How part of me likes being naked and helpless in contrast to his powerful, clothed form. As if he knows the depths of my desire for him.

Rage surges within me, and I stoke it, needing its heat. “Do I get clothes?”

“When you earn them.” He offers me a bottle of water, already unscrewed, with a straw sticking out of the top. I reach for it, and he shakes his head, holding it for me and praising me like I’m a wild animal he’s coaxed to drink from his hand. “Good girl.” His pointer finger taps his thumb a few times.

He's trying to train me with hand gestures, like a dog. I hate it but make a careful note of each one.

I drink the entire bottle, grateful he's not adding water deprivation to the torture routine.

"More?" he offers, and I decline politely, hoping he'll keep me hydrated as needed.

He makes a come hither motion with his four fingers pressed together. Another damn hand signal. "Turn around and put your hands through the bar."

I hesitate.

"Good girls get rewards." Again, he makes two taps with his forefinger on his thumb before reaching behind him for a white paper bag. When he opens it, the scent of fried food wafts over me, and my stomach convulses and growls so loudly that the sound echoes.

"That's from Three Diner."

"Yes. I learned you went there after you... left me. But they would not speak to me."

My throat tightens. I fight the vision of a baby-pink uniform spattered with blood. "Did you hurt them?"

"I had no reason to." He motions, and I scoot around and lean against the bars. He grabs my wrists and links them together. I crane my head but can't quite see more than black leather cuffs. They're soft and snug, joined by a short chain. I'm able to relax my arms without wrenching my shoulders. Could be worse.

He has me turn back to him and kneel so he can feed me by hand, one bite of burger at a time.

"Gonna kill me with cholesterol?" I joke between French fries.

"You will need the sustenance," he informs me. My stomach flips at his intent expression, but the trepidation isn't enough to dull my appetite.

After the meal and a little more water, he wipes my face. I look past him to a small sink beside a door. The small room beyond seems to hold a toilet.

Victor catches me looking and raises a brow, waiting for me to ask.

“I need to use the bathroom.” I lower my eyes, not sure if I’m feigning humiliation. I’m already naked and kneeling, locked in a cage.

“You can have anything your heart desires.” He produces a black leather contraption—two straps wrapped around a silver ring. “As long as you please me.”

He motions me forward with the same *Come* signal and has me kneel up and hold still while he affixes the ring gag. With the straps buckled tight, my lips are rounded into a forced “O,” and my heart trips.

“Okay?” he asks, with the corresponding hand signal. I nod. It’s that or try to talk around the gag.

Victor shoves his pants down and shows me the beautiful monster of his cock—long and uncut and turgid—and my heart stutters. My mouth is already open, ready for him, and I’m drooling around the metal ring.

The first taste of him is sweet. He glides deeper, spearing my mouth, and I breathe in the wintry scent of him, tasting salt. He reaches through the cage bars to grip my hair and control my movements. “Breathe through your nose.” His harsh direction is a mercy as he fills me with his length, tipping my head back until he’s knocking on the entrance of my throat. My chest surges, and I bite down on the metal until my teeth ache.

“Good, good girl.” He eases out, giving me a moment to gasp. He taps his thumb and forefinger together a few times before swiping a thumb at the corner of my eye, collecting my tears. He tastes them and gives me the *Come* signal. “Again.”

After a few rounds of this, my knees are aching, but my throat has gone soft enough to let him in. Tears streak down my cheeks, and I let them because they seem to please him. At

long last, he presses my head against the bars and spurts down my throat.

“Perfection,” he pronounces and massages my face after removing the gag. “You’re doing well, Lula.”

And despite myself, I feel a stab of pride.



VICTOR

I HAVE to help Lula upright. I collared and blindfolded her before I allowed her out of the cage. Her nostrils flared like a frightened mare. She’s more tense now than she was in her cage, her arm rigid in my grasp. She hates to be out of control.

She’ll grow accustomed to this life. Moving gracefully through my home, naked for my pleasure, kneeling as often and for as long as I like, and obeying my hand signal’s silent commands. One day, perhaps, she will crawl for me and beg to be caged, to be chained.

I unclip one of her hands and allow her to use the bathroom with the door slightly cracked. The privacy is more than she deserves, considering her history of hiding weapons under sinks. But that was my oversight.

When I tell her time is up and open the door, she doesn’t seem grateful.

“How long are you going to keep me like this?” she asks, glaring at me. She’s removed the blindfold, a liberty she’ll be punished for, but she allows me to secure her free arm behind her.

“It’s up to you. My bed is ready for us. But first, I will train you to submit the way I like.”

Her lips press together.

“Surrender now. It’ll go easier for you.” When she doesn’t respond, I take her arm and guide her past me. She goes obediently enough but rears back when she sees what’s waiting for her.

The steel table is gone from the middle of the room, pushed to the side and hidden from view. In its place is a Saint Andrew's cross. Made of sturdy dark wood and padded with black leather, the X shape seems to fill the space.

I give her a moment, enjoying the music of her harsh breathing. Then I draw her forward to stand before the cross.

“As long as it takes, Lula. I won't stop until you beg me to make you mine.”

CHAPTER 10

lula

I press my cheek to the leather cross. It slips a little because the surface is slick with my sweat. Overhead, my arms sag in their bonds. My back is in flames. Victor warmed me up with a light flogger, then quickly moved to a heavier one. As soon as I got used to the thuddy rhythm of the strands, he changed the angle of the strokes so it felt like stinging rain. He hasn't touched my nipples, but they throb in sympathy with my abused backside.

And now he has a crop. He showed me the implement before tapping it on my calves and the backs of my thighs. He pops it harder on the fleshy swell of my ass, making me growl. The crop peppers my back and rear, leaving spots of fire, and as much as I hate the pain, I love the heat it leaves.

The crop prods the side of my breasts. "Breathe, Lula," he says, and I brace for the sting. The leather flap kisses the side of my left and then right breast. I snarl, straining against my cuffs.

"Smarts, doesn't it?"

"Fuck you," I mutter.

"So impolite. Where are your manners?"

Something wide and rectangular presses against my ass and then claps down harder. I shout. "Oh, you bastard."

Another hard smack to my opposite rear cheek, but I was expecting it. He stops to give me a sip of water, and I glare at him. "Kinky fucker. Do you do this with all your victims?"

“Just you.”

“So I’m special.”

“Very.”

He steps behind me again, a monster looming behind me. Something soft falls on my face, and I rear back.

“Shhh, it’s just the blindfold.” He draws the strip of silk tight over my eyes, and the world drops away. There’s no light, no movement, not even a sense of shapes or shadows. It’s darker than night.

I’d rather endure hours of pain than have my sight taken from me this way. I bite my lip to keep from begging.

Victor shifts behind me. I tune into the slight rustle of his clothes and the soft huff of his breathing. He steps closer, his clothing brushing my back, and goosebumps run down my skin.

He runs his hands down my sides, circling the sore weals his crop left on my backside. There’s nothing for me to see or focus on except the cool, tickling trail his fingers leave on my skin. It’s soothing, inevitable. He takes time stroking down my calves, even my ankles. His touch is gentle, but I tremble, wanting to resist. To fight. He presses himself against my back, awakening the sting and, worse, an intense craving deep in my gut. He slides his hands around my front and traces light circles there. It’s sweet and sensual, and my body is confused. Is this my enemy? Or my lover?

“Stop,” I whisper. “No.”

“No?” He stills, glued to my back from nape to knee. “Not this?” His fingers ghost down the vee of my legs, towards my shaved pussy. “Or this?” The lightest touch on my folds.

I shake my head but can’t bring myself to protest.

He drops his lips to my bare shoulder. “It’s all right, little liar. But I still need to punish you for removing the blindfold.”

He steps away, and I’m filled with relief. Let him beat me, mark me, etch his rage on my skin. Just don’t make me like it or crave it.

Don't make me cum.

“Shall I use the flogger?” Soft suede trails over my back. “The paddle? Or the crop? Shall we try something new?”

There's no use answering. Anything I say will make it worse.

I rub my head against the leather, wishing I could dislodge the blindfold.

“Bad girl.” He grips my hair and draws my head back. I let him so as not to wrench my neck. “I'll put you in a posture collar if you do that.”

More bondage. He's been lenient so far. Things could be so much worse. “I won't,” I say. “I'll be good.”

“Yes, you will. I know just how to keep you sweet.”

He leaves and returns to fit something around my waist and legs. It feels like a harness with a wide section to cover my pussy. Some sort of chastity belt? I'm happy with anything that keeps him from playing with my pussy and giving me pleasure.

He tightens the contraption. I rise to tiptoe but can't escape the panel pressing against me.

“How does this feel?” he asks.

The thing between my legs comes to life, vibrating right against my clit. I yelp and push upwards as if that will allow me to escape it.

“Excellent.” He steps away and spends the next interminable minutes adjusting the speed and intensity of the vibrations, finally settling on a swelling buzz that rises and falls in uneven waves. Heat fills my belly but settles at a gentle simmer. Without my vision, there's nothing but the insistent and random stimulation between my legs. I lean against the cross, rubbing my nipples on the sturdy frame in an attempt to get a spark, a sting, something that will trigger my climax.

This is torture of the sweetest kind.

The toy buzzes as he resumes flogging me, and sensations collide until I don't know which is which: the sting in my back, the tickling at my clit, or the tightening in my core muscles. There are no boundaries between them and the rising tide of my climax, threatening to consume me.

I angle my hips, desperate to rub against the cross. If I can push at the panel between my legs and press it closer, I can get some relief. But it's no use. As soon as I push my pelvis forward, Victor stops the vibration.

"Naughty girl." Victor comes to hold my hip and pat me with the paddle again. He swats me until I'm dancing from right foot to left, trying to get away. Then, he amps up the vibrator, transforming the pain to golden and perfect pressure. My clit swells, my orgasm darting just within reach—

The vibration dies.

"No," I mumble, despite myself. "Please."

"Since you ask so nicely... beg for your punishment. And I'll give you a reward."

My thoughts trip and fall over themselves. I take too long to answer, and Victor steps away again.

"Very well." He switches to the heavier flogger, letting the strands fall in a wall of knotted ends that knock the breath out of me. The blows leave me numb at first, the pain rushing in too late.

I curse, but eventually, my anger runs out. I'm lost in the darkness, and at least the pain gives me something to focus on. It flares in the distance, a bright, wicked light.

Besides, focusing on the pain lets me ignore what else is happening in my body. Some strange alchemy is happening, transforming all sensations to the deep, insistent ache between my legs.

Eventually, the pain isn't enough to keep me tied to the present. It becomes one giant, surging ocean, and I'm lost in the rise and fall of the waves.

I can't see, but I can hear. Without realizing it, I start to hum. The sound is another vibration, a pleasing counterpoint to the one between my legs.

I barely hear Victor calling my name. His cheek rubs mine, and I lean into the pleasant prick of stubble.

“Still with me?” He cups my breasts and kisses my sweaty neck. I press into his palms and bow my head, letting him trail his mouth over the tender spots. He could cut my throat. He could bite me and make me bleed. Instead, he's kissing me with impossibly soft lips. I want to hate it, but I don't. It feels so good.

When he steps away, I want to cry. I wait for another round of flogging, but nothing comes. The vibrator on my clit surges higher and higher. I pant through it, my hips jutting forward as if I can ride the invisible waves. All too soon, they die away.

“Tell me what you want, beautiful. Tell me, and I'll give it to you.”

“Please. I want to cum.” My voice sounds far away.

He loosens the harness, and I almost cry. The straps and panel fall away, but in their place, Victor puts his hand.

“Beg me,” he hisses. His voice is all malice, but his long fingers are already working between my legs, bringing me bliss.

“Please, please, please,” I whisper over and over. It doesn't feel like defeat. It feels right, like the natural next step. Like I've been underwater, finally broke the surface, and it's time to take a sweet inhale. It's not surrender. It's what I need to survive.

He strums my clit just right, pulling my moans out of me like music.

“Yes,” I say. “More.”

His fingers plunge into my soaked channel. It's almost enough. My orgasm is bright and shining and within reach. And he slips his free hand around my breast and tweaks my sore nipple.

I cum, shaking against the cross, mouth open. Howls fill my ears. As I come down from the peak, I realize the sound is coming from me.

Victor moves close to me, and my arms drop. Victor frees my ankles next and scoops me up. I'm still blindfolded—in the dark and off balance. I grab at him, clinging to my captor like he's the only thing tethering me to the earth.

“I need to taste you.”

I'm laid out on a table and strapped down again, but I don't care because my legs are pulled apart, and Victor is there, oh, he's there, and his hot mouth is on my folds, and his tongue presses in. I throw back my head and scream. He licks and probes and devours me, and my orgasm swells again, no gentle tide this time but a tidal wave that's crashing over me, destroying everything in its path.

I can't see anything, and it's cruel. Every squeeze of his hand, every soft swipe of his tongue, is all magnified a millionfold. It's cruel to deny me the sight of Victor's intent face: his mouth hidden by the swell of my sex, his eyes on mine, and his pupils blown, the icy blue of his irises consumed by lust.

I don't know how long he eats me, how many orgasms I have, or whether it was one long, continuous orgasm. I only know that it's a mercy when he finally takes his mouth away.

“Lula,” he growls, and the flogger falls again, warming my front. Then it's the crop, biting at my breasts. It hurts and feels good. I arch my back, accepting the pain, feeling the connection to him any way I can. I want to feel him, to touch him. Pain or pleasure don't matter. I want more, more, more.

His thumb nudges my clit, and I realize he's stopped striking me. My body is throbbing. I am scoured by sensation, devoured by it, and every nerve is singing. I imagine my body lying on the padded platform, no metal table this time, my skin a painting of pink and red and my pussy a pale target. I feel Victor lean over me, his pale head at my collarbone, dragging down my breasts. His tongue probes my belly button, and I let

out a long, low groan. The barest amount of penetration feels so damn good.

“Do you want me, Lula? In this pretty pussy?” He pets it, and every stroke of his fingers is delicious. “Will you be good for me?”

In the distance, an alarm bell is ringing. Under the silk, I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Good girls get to come on my cock.” His fingers slip down into the cleft of my ass. “Bad girls get something else.” The tips find my back hole, tickling the tight skin there. A shock runs through me.

“Has anyone ever taken you here?” He leans close, whispering like a lover. I hold my breath as he circles my rim. I clench my buttocks, but it’s no use. He’s pressing in, and his finger is so slick from my pussy that he’s able to breach the tight ring of muscle. Just a millimeter but it burns. “Have they? Answer me, Lula.”

“No.”

“I will be your first.” He sounds so confident that a tremor goes through me. “Soon.” His hand falls away, and I feel relief, but it’s short-lived.

He steps away, and the crop falls again, this time on my unprotected pussy. He alternates smacking it and using it to probe my folds. He uses it to work me up to orgasm again, and it’s wonderful and awful. When he finally releases me from the table and gathers me into his arms, I cling to him like he’s my anchor in the ocean. If I let go, I’ll drown.



LULA

“WHY STEPHANOS?” We’re in the shower after another long session on the table and then the cross. We’ve fallen into a routine: he ties me up and works me over. Every time he gives me an instruction, he uses the hand signals I’ve now memorized. I’m made to beg for my orgasm, and then he gives me so many I beg him to stop. I wake up in the cage. I’m fed

and watered and allowed some privacy, but he's always near. He bathes me himself, either in the bath or, this time, in the shower. Sometimes, he keeps me blindfolded. And he always keeps me shaved.

There's no more talk of earning privileges, but I know he's keeping track of my behavior. Sometimes when I beg him to stop, he shows mercy and doesn't make me cum. Instead of figuring out how to free myself, grab one of his many knives and plunge it into his heart, I find myself thinking of ways I can please him. And as much as I tell myself that pleasing him will lead to more freedom, which will give me a chance to escape, it's only a partial truth.

He's wearing me down.

"Lula," Victor sing-songs and tweaks my nipple. He's introduced me to the clover clamps, and I've never known such pain. I go to great lengths to keep him happy when I'm wearing them.

What was he asking me? "Stephanos? He's our enemy."

"He's a petty thief compared to the Regis family. A fly buzzing around a pack of lions."

"He's stolen from us."

"He's stolen from all the families. For many years. He's a scavenger. It's not enough to explain your lifelong vendetta."

It seems impossible that Victor doesn't know of my mother's death. It's more likely that he knows and is toying with me, wanting me to bare myself and my reasons to him. "Maybe I don't like thieves."

He smacks my ass. The sound echoes in the tiled space. "You defend them for a living. Don't lie to me." His hand cups my rear, massaging it. "You know I do not allow lies between us." His touch grows bolder, slipping into the crevice of my ass. With a foot, he nudges my feet apart and bows me forward so he can play with my ass. He's been encroaching on this forbidden territory more often, in the deepest part of a pain session when I'm too limp to protest. He pushes his fingers deep into my cleft, finding the slick skin of my seam and

massaging. It feels weirdly good. I press my palms against the tile, partly to brace myself and partly to pretend I can push the sensation away.

“You know I’ll find out eventually,” he taunts, the blunt edge of his knuckle pressing onto my rim. He has long, elegant fingers, but they feel impossibly huge when he works one into my ass.

“If you won’t tell me why you went after Stephanos, you will tell me why you ran into danger so recklessly and without backup. Practically unarmed.”

“I wasn’t—”

“It was stupid.” He stops threatening to penetrate my ass and grips it hard, squeezing so tight I’m sure I’ll have violet bruises on my skin. “One word and you’d have the full might of the Regis family behind you. And maybe even the other families if you formed an alliance.”

I swallowed. I never thought of an alliance. But get too many people involved, and there would be a chance that Stephanos wouldn’t die from one of my bullets.

“So why, Lula? Why were you so foolish? I’m sure your cousin would back you up—”

“There’s a mole!” My voice rings out, too bright and loud, and I bite my lip to keep from saying any more. Victor’s not a judge I have to convince by making my case. He’s my captor, and every second, every hour, he worms deeper into my psyche.

“Ah.” Victor lets his hand fall away. “A mole. That explains why Stephanos has survived all this time.”

“He’s a rat.”

“Who attracts other rats. Have you uncovered this mole?”

“If I had, I would’ve had backup. I wouldn’t have done something so... so stupid.”

“Suicidal.” His voice is flat, but he presses himself to my back. I rise, and he grips my hips, pulling me gently against him. He’s hard—he’s always hard. It takes an inhuman effort

to sate him, and he's been holding back during my torture sessions. I arch my back, leaning into him, but he doesn't kick my feet apart and take me. He picks up the soap and lets his hands roam up my chest, sliding over my skin under the pretense of washing me. I hold my breath and let him touch me. It feels wonderful, and I know this is part of his plan to break me. In a minute, he'll drop the soap and take up the straight razor, gliding it over my skin and smoothing my stubble away. There's no part of me that he hasn't thoroughly touched. No part that he doesn't own.

"That was the worst part," he rasps in my ear after a long while. I blink and realize I've drifted off. I'm unsteady on my feet, still leaning against him as the shower beats down in a gentle rain. He must have a massive hot water tank.

"What was?"

"Sitting as the doctor stitched me up, learning you'd wandered into Stephanos' lair wearing nothing but two guns and my coat."

"I wore heels and stockings too," I correct, not wanting him to miss out on the full visual. He plucks my nipples in retaliation, and I welcome the sting. I need something to pull me out of my haze.

"I waited and waited for word of what happened to you."

"Why?"

"You know why."

I could deny that I do, but it's obvious. He wanted me alive so he could kill me himself. Sometimes, when I wake up on my pallet in the cage, I'm surprised I'm still alive.

"And then I learned you were still alive and safe. Secured in the Regis family's stronghold."

"Not so secure," I mutter, remembering how easily he found me.

"There is no fortress that can keep me out. It was only a matter of time." He skates a hand down my front until he cups my pussy. He pushes two fingers into me and tugs forward,

roughly massaging my G-spot until my damn body shakes like the last autumn leaf on a branch. “And while I searched for you, I imagined what I’d do to you. How I’d train you to please me.”

As his fingers delve deep, stretching me, he rubs the heel of his palm over my clit, frigging me in rough, scrubbing movements. Like my orgasm will be a punishment. With my sex raw from the orgasms he gave me earlier, maybe it will be. “How I’d punish you for leaving. For nearly throwing your life away.”

“Not for trying to kill you?”

“No, Lula.” He releases my cunt, leaving me on the brink. It’s both a relief and a torment. I grit my teeth to bite back my moan. “We both know you didn’t try to kill me.”

“I shot you.”

“In the gut.” He takes a handful of my wet hair and tugs my head back. In this position, I’m vulnerable. But it feels good, too, the pinch of pain at my skull from his fist in my hair and the water washing over my upturned face.

His teeth score my throat.

“I’ve never killed before. Maybe that’s why I missed Stephanos.” My voice wobbles. After all my practice and long hours at the range, I proved too soft-hearted. Too weak.

“Perhaps. But you didn’t miss me. You could’ve shot me between the eyes. Instant death.” He guides my head down so he can take the nape of my neck between his teeth. Like a lion disciplining a lioness. “Or in the heart. But you didn’t, did you?”

“Maybe I wanted you to suffer.”

“You left your mark on me, but you wanted me to live? Because deep down you knew.”

I jerk back, jabbing my elbows into his solid frame. I haven’t fought him before, wanting to wait until he’s truly off guard, and this isn’t a real or very serious attempt. We’re both naked in the shower, but he’s twice as large as me and more

confident in hand-to-hand combat. An elbow in the gut won't incapacitate him, not even if I get lucky and poke him right in his healing wound. My struggles are futile.

But I have to shut him up.

My feet slip on the tile as I push myself away, finding a corner to brace my back in. He's on me immediately, grabbing my wrists as I claw at him, closing in and pinning my legs so I can't kick. I snarl, teeth bared, and he shoves me flush against the wall, my wrists caught in his grip and secured over my head. He's taller than me and monstrously strong, using every inch of his body to trap me. Both of my wrists fit into his left hand, leaving his right one free to collar my neck. In the end, I'm imprisoned between him and the shower tile.

I can't move, but I can glare at him. If looks could kill, he'd be bleeding out. He studies me and smiles, water streaming down his brutally beautiful face. His lips are close to mine. If he tries to kiss me, I'll bite through his tongue.

"You could've killed me," he purrs. "And you didn't. You know why?"

I surge against him and use the little space I gain to twist away from him. He slams me front-first against the tile, his dick jabbing my back. His chuckle echoes around the shower.

"You liked me, Lula. You didn't want me to die."

"You weren't worth another bullet."

He presses into me more, keeping me pinned while he shifts his right hand to get a better grip on my throat. "You hoped I would live. And you knew if I did, I would come for you. A part of you must have wanted it."

"No."

"Do not lie to me." His fingers press in, constricting my airway. I fight but can't move much.

This is it. He's going to kill me. He knows just where to squeeze, to choke me, and I'm helpless, dangling in his arms.

"Admit it," he growls into my ear. "You wanted me."

“No.”

“You wanted to return to me.”

“No...” My voice is growing fainter, my brain screaming for air. I claw at the tile, but I’m getting weaker and weaker. The air is gone from my lungs and, with it, my strength.

“You need to be claimed like this, to be owned.” His voice comes from far away.

I’m dying. He’s killing me. I’m at the end.

“Lula...”

I open my mouth and croak with the ghost of my last breath. “Do it.”

“Fuck,” he snarls and releases his grip. Sweet, precious air rushes in, and I rise with it like a freed balloon floating into the sky. I’m weightless as Victor lifts me, hitching me up the wall so he can part my legs and slam his cock into my cunt. It feels so good, so right. I’d never taken a man bare before Victor, and it’s wrong but perfect.

He fucks me higher and higher, and I come with my head somewhere in the stratosphere, my cheek sliding against the tile.

CHAPTER 11

lula

“Lula, stay with me.”

There is no Lula. She’s gone, eaten up by ecstasy. I don’t recognize myself. I barely recognize my own name. There are no boundaries between me and the outside world. Nothing left of my defenses. Victor fucked them away.

A small, primitive part of me recognizes that I’m being dried and carried out of the shower. He fucked me there, choked me, and I welcomed it. I welcomed death.

But he didn’t kill me. He shattered me in pieces, and it’s fine because I’m not myself anymore.

“Speak to me, little one.”

I snort. I’m not that little. I have a slender torso but ample breasts and an even bigger backside. Leah’s muffins go straight to my hips. Only hours of rowing keep them off my thighs.

I must say all this out loud because Victor replies, “Noted.” He sounds amused. “But you are little to me.”

He lays me down, and I sink into the soft, cloud-like surface. He leans over me, a shadowy shape. Victor. The victor in our little game. In our fight to the death.

I should’ve known it would end like this. With him standing over me, a bloodied knife...

Something prods my lips. A straw. “Drink, beautiful.”

I do, and when I’m done, I say, “I’m not beautiful.”

He sighs from somewhere overhead. “Must you argue?”

“Yes. I was born to argue. I might as well die doing it.”

I’m rolled and wrapped in something fuzzy and warm. A blanket. There are words for so many things, words I already know, but everything’s floating just out of reach.

“Enough, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart?

“Shhh.” Victor tucks the blanket around me. “It’s time to rest. I pushed you too far.”

Wasn’t that the point?

“If you don’t stop talking, I will gag you.”

I didn’t realize I was still talking. My throat is raw. Victor gets me more water and climbs into bed with me. His arms cradle me, pulling me against the solid wall of his body. I close my eyes and let myself drift...

And it occurs to me that I’ve never been held this close before, not since I was young. Before my mother died, and my world turned cold.

“It was for my mother,” I say. “That’s why I targeted Stephanos.”

“I know.”

“I knew it! I knew you knew.”

“Yes, little one, you were right.” A kiss on my temple.

“He killed her outside of the pasta makers,” I tell him. Words bubble out of me like I’m a bottle of champagne, newly uncorked. “It was meant to look like the Vesuvis did it. But I dug and figured out... I found out...”

Victor touches me, and I realize my face is wet.

“It was him,” I say. My eyes are burning, so I keep them closed. “He wanted to kill her. To incite a war.”

“Shhhh.”

There's a monster in my chest, clawing out of me, but I finish what I have to tell him. "She was on her way to pick me up from school and stopped to get fresh cavatelli. My favorite." And then it hurts too much. I can't say any more.

A long time later, Victor says. "It's not your fault. You know that, right?"

I don't know anything.

"You're going to be all right, my Lucrezia. You will heal from this."

"You can't tell me what to do." I mold my fingers into the chopping hand gesture in case he doesn't get it. *No*.

His laugh is a gust of wintry wind on my face. "Very well. You will decide for yourself."

That sounds better.

"Now go to sleep. We can argue more in the morning. As much as you like."

I yawn, but I'm suddenly more awake. My pain has leaked away, gone like it's never been. I wiggle my hips, trying to nestle deeper into the bedclothes, only to realize I'm rubbing against Victor. I give up and sigh. "I can't sleep."

"Yes, you can."

"I don't want to. When I wake up, you'll hurt me again."

"Yes. But you like it when I hurt you."

"You're not supposed to know that."

"Is it not obvious?"

I grit my teeth, trying to summon some rage. There's only exhaustion. "You're going to win. And I hate it."

"There is no losing. Not between us."

"It doesn't feel that way." Hovering just overhead is a heavy gray fog. Exhaustion ready to smother me. I hold it back a little longer. "You said you'd break me. And now I'm not me anymore."

"What does that mean?"

“I don’t exist. I need to fight. If I’m not fighting, I’m not alive.”

“Is that why you hunt your mother’s killer?”

It is, but I’ve never thought of it that way before. The only way I survived that great loss was by committing myself to avenging her death. The goal drove me forward so I would have something to live for.

“You think I’m pathetic.”

“No, my Lucrezia. Not that. Never that.” He pulls me even tighter to him, tying me to reality even as his warmth threatens to pull me into sleep. “Enough of this. Let me tell you something real.”

As I float away, he follows me, telling me the story of a boy who loved knives and lived above a butcher shop and whose mother let the butcher hurt her until the boy grew up and killed him and any other man who would prey upon them. And they lived happily ever after, the end.



VICTOR

I WAIT A LONG WHILE, dozing on and off with Lula in my arms. After a REM cycle, I slide away, careful not to wake her. There’s no worry of that, though. She’s sleeping soundly. I take her vitals, and she barely stirs. I email an update to my doctor, the one who patched me up the first time I had Lula as a guest, who’s advising me on the sleep/sexual torture protocol I’m cycling her through and helping me keep tabs on her health.

With her dark hair spread over the pillow and black lashes fanned over her tanned cheeks, she looks like an angel fallen to earth. Her lips are plush and pouting, her expression sweeter than she’d allow if she was awake. I trace her brow line, and she frowns as if frustrated by the gentle touch.

I turned up the heat before I climbed into bed with her, but now I lower it and cover her with a weighted blanket so she’ll sleep well.

Before I leave, I turn on the camera in the corner that streams an encrypted feed to a private website. The doctor will monitor her while I'm gone. And I can log in and check on her while she sleeps.

I would stay, but I have business to attend to.

It's been three months since Lula surprised Stephanos and wounded him; he's gone to ground where even I cannot find him. Not that I tried too hard. I was more focused on Lula.

But now that I have her secure, it's time for me to collect what I'm owed.

My contacts have traced the remnants of Stephanos' gang to a shuttered hole-in-the-wall restaurant called Primo Pizzeria. I cased the joint two nights ago and set up cameras so I could study the henchmen in their natural territory. I haven't done a complete watch-through of the footage, only a few hours to get a sense of the players and their hierarchy and roles. I will do my homework more thoroughly the next time Lula sleeps, but I have all the information I need for this afternoon's work.

I first approach the Pizzeria from the front. The windows and door are covered in ancient, sun-browned newspapers. I set a sleek black briefcase right on the stoop, slim enough to sit in the shadows and go unnoticed until the proper time.

Then, I retrace my steps and slip up the fetid alley, avoiding crumpled beer cans and cast-off takeout containers. The back door is cracked, and in one silent motion, I ease my way inside.

Gruff voices echo through the empty kitchen. I don't try to hide myself but simply walk into the main seating area, right up to the men lounging in a circle of chairs.

"Good morning," I murmur. Instantly, four of the five men reach to snap their weapons up and train them on me.

The fifth one fumbles his and drops it on the floor. It hits the toe of his tennis shoe and spins across the floor, stopping a few inches from my boot. I raise a brow.

"Who the fuck are you?"

I spread my arms to show I hold no visible weapons. “A friend.”

I wait calmly until the wiry, curly-haired man in the center spits out his cigarette and lowers his gun. “Hey, I know you. You’re that hitman Stephanos hired to bump the suit.”

“Yes. You may call me Victor.”

The wiry man narrows his eyes at me for a moment, then relaxes. “I’m Spiro. That’s Uzi, Kill Zone, Bruiser, and Joe.” He gestures to each of his friends in turn.

“A pleasure.” They’re all scowling at me with varying degrees of distrust. I raise my bare palms to show my intent. “May I?”

When no one says anything, I bend down slowly and pick up the gun. “Kill Zone?” I offer it to the man who dropped it. He blinks slowly and takes it.

Uzi still has his weapon trained on me.

“I remember there being more of you the last time I visited,” I muse. “Where is the gentleman who drove me from the wedding?”

“That was Johnson,” Joe pipes up. He’s a big, ugly man wearing a white tank top under an ill-fitting suit jacket. He’s broad in the shoulder and tall, but not as tall as Uzi. “Got hit by a bullet in the shootout at Cavalli’s. You know, the one with the broad.” He mimes a woman opening her coat. He’s speaking of Lula, and it’s all I can do to keep myself from flicking a knife into his throat.

When I first heard the story of the naked woman who walked into Cavalli’s and started shooting, I was filled with both pride and rage. Rage that she would be so reckless. Pride that she could be so brave. She came so close to snuffing her life out before I could claim her.

Perhaps after another round with the dragon tail, she will have atoned.

“The one who shot Stephanos?” I ask as if I’m not aware of the facts.

“Yeah.”

“Do you know who she was?”

“Some hooker Stephanos did dirty,” Spiro says. “That’s what I heard. Johnson took a bullet and went back to his people in Chicago.”

“And what about Bruno?” I ask after Stephanos’ right-hand man.

“Bruno’s loyal,” Spiro says, and the rest of the gang nods. They’re calmer now, warming up to me. With every passing moment, Uzi lets the gun muzzle bow another inch.

“I need to speak to Stephanos,” I say

Uzi jerks his gun back up.

After a glance around the room, Spiro answers. “We haven’t seen him in ten or twelve weeks.”

“So long? Who’s paying you?”

“We’ve got jobs.”

“I know you are busy,” I say, allowing them to keep their respect. A quick perusal of the video footage showed them waiting around, eating pizza rolls Spiro bought at the dollar store and cooked in the restaurant microwave. There was some talk of moving equipment left unguarded on the docks, but when Spiro looked into it, the equipment was already gone. “I am prepared to pay you for your time. There’s a briefcase there on the front stoop. Locked, but the code is today’s date.”

Spiro jerks his head at Joe, and the big man lumbers off. Clouds of dust billow up when he opens the door. After looking left and right, he brings the briefcase inside.

“Don’t open it,” Uzi says. His voice is higher than you’d expect from a grown man. “Could be a bomb.”

“Then he’d blow himself up too, dumbass,” Spiro says. “Today’s date, you say?”

At my nod, Spiro enters the code. The case opens slowly, and the men freeze. You’d think I had handed them a bomb, not a case full of unmarked bills.

“What the fuck is this?” Spiro snarls.

“This was half the take Stephanos advanced me for the wedding. You can split it among yourselves.”

Joe scratches his chin again. “What’s the catch?”

“I require the rest of the payment. I never received it. I need to contact Stephanos, and to do that, I need your help.”

“No,” Bruiser blurts, but Spiro elbows him in the chest.

“Shut up.” Spiro unpacks a stack of bills and runs his thumb along the edges, counting. “If we connect you with Stephanos, what’s in it for us?”

“Another case of unmarked bills.”

“This is fucking bullshit,” Bruiser mutters, his beady eyes darting to the exits. “Uzi, waste him.”

Uzi’s staring at the money.

“Fuck this,” Bruiser says. “I’ll do it myself.” He raises his weapon and stares in horror at the knife protruding from his hand. He stands there, blinking at it until the pain rushes in.

“Fuck! My hand!” He waves his hand around, spattering everyone with blood.

“Shut up,” Spiro rushes to close the briefcase and protect the money. “Joe—”

Joe steps forward and cold-cocks Bruiser. Bruiser collapses to the dirty floor. With a gush of blood, the knife slides out of his hand, clattering to Joe’s feet.

Everyone freezes.

Slowly, Joe reaches down and picks up my knife. He shuffles forward and offers it carefully to me. “I never liked him,” he says about poor Bruiser, who is still groaning on the floor.

I accept my knife back with a nod, and the tension in the room goes down a notch.

Spiro hugs the briefcase. “We’ll talk to him,” he says with a nod at Bruiser. “Explain things.”

“There’s a burner phone underneath the money,” I continue as if we hadn’t been interrupted. “I’ll call you in two days.”

“And if we don’t deliver?” Spiro asks, still wary. I can feel the men’s eyes crawling over me, trying to figure out where I hide my knives. Wondering how many I have secured away and how quickly I could draw and throw them.

I shrug. “You can keep the cash. I’ll find another way. But I plan to stick around this town, and I’m generous to my friends.” I give them a big, friendly smile. For some reason, it doesn’t seem to reassure them at all. “And it might be nice to be my friends. Don’t you agree?”

CHAPTER 12

victor

“He’s a fucking maniac. I vote we take the money and blow.” This is from Kill Zone. He paces back and forth, waving his hands. “Did you see him smile? My cousin told me he smiled like that when he killed the bean counter at the wedding. Just bam. Dead.”

Uzi sits in a corner, cradling his gun like a teddy bear.

Bruiser is nowhere to be seen.

Spiro has the briefcase splayed open on a table, counting stacks. “He could’ve killed Bruiser. And he didn’t.”

“He could’ve killed us all,” mutters Joe from his guard post at the door.

I lean back in my chair, watching the blurry shapes of the men on screen. The lagging feed makes them look like puppets, moving jerkily around the room. The visual is poor, but the audio comes through crisp and clear.

“It’s all here.” Spiro sags into a seat. “Half the advance Stephanos gave him. He wasn’t lying.”

That gives them all pause. Stacks of cash speak louder than words.

I mute the feed and watch them deliberate. They are on the spectrum between fear and awe, with a little curiosity mixed in. A few of them might cut their losses, take their share of the cash, and leave town. But my bet is that a core group will remain. Their leader, Spiro, has an aging mother in the area, which would make him reluctant to move. He can contact

Stephanos. And if he carries the briefcase anywhere, I'll be able to track it.

It's just one tendril, one silken thread I've woven to make my spider's web. In time, I will have Stephanos trapped where I want him. Not today. But soon.

In the meantime, I have sweeter company to keep.

To my right, a smaller screen shows the small room and king bed where I left Lula. The doctor reported that she remained asleep all this time. Her eyes are still closed, but she's more restless, her fingers and toes twitching. I rise and leave the computer room and its monitors. I only have a few minutes to get ready.

My beautiful prisoner is about to wake.

LULA

I BLINK MY EYES OPEN, feeling like an elephant is sitting on me. A heavy blanket is on my lower half, and when I shove it off, I'm able to breathe, but my limbs are still heavy with the languor that comes from a long, uninterrupted sleep. I'm in a big, four-poster bed in a plain, dimly lit room. There's no way to tell what time it is. My prison isn't the worst hellhole I can imagine, but the lack of clocks or sunlight is driving me mad. In this stifling, windowless space, with no markers of night or day, I'm lost to the world. Adrift in a timeless space with no direction to tell me up from down.

The only constant is my body, my nakedness. And Victor. I hate how my thoughts go to him immediately and constantly. I hate even more how my body revs up at the thought of him.

I could spend a few minutes lying here imagining shooting him properly. His eyebrows are darker than his silver and gold hair, a honey color. A bullet between them would kill him instantly. But then I'd feel the tangle of emotions when I watched the light drain out of his ice-blue eyes.

Suddenly, the bed is too soft and confining for me to stay in a second longer. I stretch and metal clinks. My right wrist is handcuffed to the headboard, but other than that, I'm free.

I'm free!

I swing myself out of bed and brace against the heavy wooden post. Gritting my teeth, I pull my hand against the steel circle of the handcuff. With the right amount of joint-screaming pressure, I pop my thumb out of its socket and wrench it through. Fire blazes up my poor thumb, and I have to swallow my scream, but with my thumb out, my fingers follow easily. Shuddering, sweating, and panting with the pain, I clutch my throbbing hand to my chest and head for the door.

It's unlocked. I stop breathing and turn the knob slowly so as not to make any sound. The space beyond the bedroom is a smaller version of Victor's penthouse. There's a kitchen with a giant quartz-topped island with four black leather-topped bar stools pushed under it. The rest of the area is bare, with a thick plush rug and a single, deep black leather armchair. Doors line the walls, thick and utilitarian. Probably locked. One of them might lead back to the large room where Victor's been holding me. Even if escape lay that way, I wouldn't be able to bring myself to enter the dungeon-like space again.

The first door I open leads to a small bathroom. My bladder screams at me, but I ignore it. Next door, locked. The next, by the kitchen, opens to a dark hallway. I'm through it in a flash, racing down. It's dark, and I pat the walls with my good hand, finding door after door, each one locked.

He comes out of the shadows, his silver-gold hair lighting up the dark. "Lula."

I scream, and he grabs me, tugging me back the way I came. Maybe back to the dungeon—

I kick, and he grunts, then lifts me. I'm a wild thing, thrashing and flailing. I'll do anything to escape him. I can't go back to the dungeon; I just can't—

He drags me down to the rug, his weight falling on me. A few feet away, the open door to the hallway swings shut. I feel the final click, like a guillotine blade slicing down, severing all hope.

"No," I growl.

“Lula,” he murmurs in my ear. “You can’t have thought it’d be this easy.”

I jerk away, but he holds me fast. When I try to free my arms, the move hits my dislocated thumb, and my body seizes with the pain.

I cry out, and he rolls me to my back, pressing me into the floor with his hips heavy on mine.

“Oh, *krasiva*, what have you done to yourself?” He pins me and reaches for my hand.

I try to wrestle him one-handed, breathlessly pleading, but he immobilizes me.

“Shhhh, precious one. I’m not going to hurt you.” He shifts his weight so he’s not crushing me.

Whimpering, I let him take my hand and study it.

“Correction. This will hurt for a moment.” He searches my eyes until I nod and pops my thumb back into place. My whole body seizes, screaming, and then I slump, panting.

He bundles me in his lap, and I settle there, draped against his chest, while the sweat dries on my back, and my body gets used to the empty feeling where the pain used to be. The fight’s gone out of me... for now.

After a few minutes, my breathing matches his.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I tell him quietly. He rises effortlessly, still holding me, and carries me to the bathroom. For a moment, I’m afraid he’ll stay with me in the small space, but he sets me down, waits until I’m no longer wobbling on my feet, and, with a brisk kiss on my forehead, leaves me. I sink down onto the toilet, feeling pathetically grateful.

I spend long moments in the bathroom, finger-combing my hair and scrubbing my face with one hand, scolding myself the whole time. *He’s the enemy. He’s the worst.*

But when I warily exit the bathroom, I can’t help searching for him. And when I see him, barefoot and broad-shouldered, standing in the kitchen area, my heart flutters.

“Hello, beautiful.” His eyes crinkle as he smiles. Behind the island, tending to something on the stove, he’s the picture of domestic bliss. A boyfriend welcoming me home.

I’ve never had a boyfriend. If I had, he wouldn’t be model-pretty like Victor. A sense of satisfaction hums through me, pleasure that this beautiful creature is, for the moment, mine.

Which is stupid. I’m his prisoner. I have to remember that, and resist.

The scent of sautéed onions hits me, and my stomach cramps.

Victor signals me forward. I halt at his stupid hand gesture, but he doesn’t seem to notice as he’s too busy plating something mouthwatering and sliding it across the island to a place setting. “You must be hungry.”

An omelet. He’s made me an omelet sprinkled with finely cut chives. And it looks like something out of a cooking magazine, damn him.

I cross the space to him, feeling the pull toward him deep in my belly.

In this mundane setting, I feel my nakedness even more. Again, I’m naked while he’s clothed, and the powerful contrast makes my core throb. When I slide onto the stool, the cool leather makes goosebumps break out over my body.

“Cold?” he asks, and I nod.

He unbuttons his black shirt and comes around the island to help me into it. It’s huge on me, draping over my thighs like a shirt dress. He has to roll up the sleeves so I can eat. My heart slams happily in the cage of my ribs as he dresses me. He purses his plush lips and fiddles with the fabric, his nimble fingers tucking and straightening the black silk.

And when he returns to the stove, leaving me sitting there in the soft shirt that smells of him and still retains his body heat, I want to cry.

I stare at the shirt buttons. I get it now. This is how he’s going to break me. Not with cruelty. With kindness.

Shirtless, Victor finishes cooking his own meal. The muscles in his back and shoulders ripple with each lazy movement. “You’re not eating,” he says with a frown, and my heart leaps. Will he punish me? Drag me back to the cage?

I glance at the heavy door that leads to the hallway. If only I had made it out.

“Lula. You must eat.”

“Or what?” I ask, my stomach roiling. “You’ll hurt me?”

He drops his elbows to the white quartz on either side of his plate and leans in. “No. I won’t hurt you again unless you beg me.”

I hiss in a breath. The scent of the food is making me so weak I might fall off the stool, but every cell in me wants to fight. “Are you insane?”

“Probably.” He picks up his fork and digs into his eggs. “The official diagnosis is antisocial personality disorder.”

“I’m not going to beg you.”

He smiles at his plate.

“I’m still going to fight you,” I say, testing the words.

Okay, he signals. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I dig into my omelet.

It’s fucking delicious.

Victor finishes his food before I do. I take my time, savoring each buttery bite, hoping if I draw out this meal, I’ll be able to put off whatever happens next.

He watches me with a half smile as if he knows what I’m doing but finds it amusing.

“How long did I sleep?” I ask, less hoping he’ll tell me and more to stretch meal time.

“Long enough. I would’ve stayed with you, but I had business.”

I use my fork to cut a piece of omelet into a perfect golden square. “What sort of business?”

“Tracking down Stephanos.” He says it calmly, as if he didn’t just drop a live grenade into the conversation.

“Why?”

“He owes me. The last payment for my last job.”

“David,” I say, and he nods.

“He paid the first half promptly. But before I could collect the second half, I was incapacitated.”

Because I shot him. “That’s a shame,” I say with a straight face.

“Indeed.” He clears his plate and washes it right away. It would take me a few seconds to rush around the island to jab my fork into his kidney. But I doubt he’s distracted enough to let me. Besides, the pale, muscled expanse of his back is so pretty. And I want to keep eating.

“Stephanos has gone to ground,” Victor tells me as he cleans up the cooking area.

“I know.” I grind my teeth.

“But I found several members of his gang and spoke to them today. One way or another, they will lead me to him.”

When Victor turns from the sink, I’m gripping the fork like a weapon.

“Lula, breathe.”

“What will you do when you find him?”

“Retrieve what is owed to me. One way or another.”

“Will you kill him?”

“Do you want me to?” He looks me dead in the eye. It’s a genuine question.

“No. I can’t afford to hire you. Left my wallet in my other pants.”

His expression doesn’t change at my little joke. Which is fine. I don’t feel like laughing, either.

My appetite is gone, but I poke at my food, unwilling for the meal to be over. “How many people have you killed?”

Victor tilts his head as if he’s doing mental math. “Men and women?”

I have a horrifying thought. “Do you kill children?” There’s a metallic taste in my mouth.

“No. No one under the age of twenty-two. There are rarely contracts on children unless they are heirs.”

I feel the tiniest bit of relief. The psychopath has standards.

He’s still a monster, I scold myself. I don’t want to think about this dark world that Victor lives in, but I can’t help myself. “What you told me last night. The story of the little boy. Was any of it true?”

“There are no lies between us.” He leans over the island, and that slight movement is enough to send his winter-fresh scent wafting my way.

“Why?”

“You know why.”

I want to protest, but he’s staring at me so intently, gaze scalpel-sharp enough to dissect me, that I have to look away.

“Everything I told you was true. My mother slept with men for money. She did her best to survive. A butcher took us in and gave us food and a place to stay. In return, my mother did whatever he wanted, and I worked for him in the shop. He taught me everything I know.” He’s leaning into the island counter, gripping the edge. It looks casual, but his fingers tighten until they’re almost as white as the quartz. “One night, he hit my mother, and I killed him. I used his favorite knife to cut him into pieces. A graduation of sorts.”

I swallow. “How old were you?”

“Thirteen.”

I blink rapidly. My heart bleeds for the young, tow-headed boy. “And your mother?”

“Dead. I had to run, you see, and she had to hide. She found another man, but he hit her, and it was fatal. I killed him, too.”

“My god.”

“There is no god.” He stalks around the island to stand over me. The wound in his stomach is on display, the bullet puncture a half-healed pink. His head is bowed and shadows like in the hollows under his cheekbones. “Are you finished?”

Yes, please, let’s change the subject. I lean back to let him take my plate and invite a new danger. My skin prickles as he reaches over me. In this setting, it’s easy to imagine him as a friend or a lover. I’m not a hugger, but all that beautiful muscle, godlike in its perfection? I want to draw him close under the pretense of comfort. Lay my head on his pecs. Slide my hands up his strong back. There’s an ache deep in my gut, one that will only dissolve if I touch him. He’s so close I’d only have to move an inch...

I swallow and deliberately angle myself away from him.

I can sense him silently laughing as he carries my plate away.

“Is this some sort of plan to make me care about you?” I ask sourly. “To make me empathize with you so I feel like we’re on the same side?”

“We are on the same side.”

He’s at the sink again, his back to me, but I shake my head. “I mean some sort of psychological conditioning.”

“Stockholm syndrome?”

“Yes. Except Stockholm syndrome was developed by a cop-sympathizing psychologist to discredit a witness’s testimony. A woman’s testimony. It’s more likely she felt real empathy for her captors.”

“You are the expert.” A smile hides behind his dry tone.

“Shut up.”

He finishes the dishes and returns to me. I slide off the stool, not wanting to act too nervous but needing something physical between us. My hands fist at my side, and I will myself not to run. Not to look towards the dungeon door.

“What now?” I finally ask to keep from screaming.

“More training.” Before I can throw myself in the opposite direction, he says, “Not that sort.” He flicks his fingers, and where they were once empty, they now hold a shining blade. “I’m going to teach you how to throw a knife.”

CHAPTER 13

victor

Her dark brows knit together. “Are you serious?”

“Trade you.” I offer her the knife handle first. It’s one of my favorites, a fixed-blade combat knife, both handle and blade a rain cloud gray.

She stares at it. “Is this for real?”

“A trade.” I point to her right hand and signal her to *Come*. “The fork, Lula.”

She sets the fork on the island and reaches for the knife, every movement broadcasting that she doesn’t believe this is happening and expecting a bait and switch.

It will take time, but eventually, she will realize I am honest with her and worthy of her trust.

A sign escapes her when she palms the knife handle. Her entire stance relaxes. This woman was born to hold a weapon.

“You’re really going to teach me?”

“Yes.”

“And if I attack you?”

I shrug. “You’ll learn faster.” I wait for her to make a decision. If she rushes me, I can overpower her. If she runs, it might be difficult to catch her. Untrained, she’s more of a danger to herself than she is to me.

“What if I don’t want to learn?”

“There are other ways to pass the time.”

She clicks her tongue, and I know I have her. She wants to know what happens next. In a world filled with many dull moments and even duller people, curiosity is our greatest weakness.

Come, I gesture to her. “The training area is this way.”

“Like this?” She gestures to her bare legs. She looks fantastic in my shirt, the tails just covering her soft backside and the tops of her thighs.

“I’ll give you more to wear if you are good.”

She scoffs and tosses her hair over her shoulder.

I lead her to the door with the hallway, and her breath catches. The hall is long and dim, lined with locked doors. I can sense her calculating her chances of escape.

“I thought you’d take me back to the dungeon.”

“No more dungeon.” I underscore this with a *No* signal. “You’ve earned a reward. New living quarters.” I spread my hands. “And a live-in chef.”

Her eyes narrow. She’s gripping the knife hard enough to whiten her knuckles.

I jerk up my chin. “Toss it at me.” *Come*, my fingers say.

She looks startled. I spread my arms wider, presenting a bigger target. Her gaze lingers on the ridges and contour of my chest, and her breath comes faster. Imagining fucking or killing me?

Probably both. She’s the only person in the world who wants to please and hurt me in equal measure.

I feel the same about her.

The minute stretches on. “Let me see how you throw.”

She grips the knife tighter. She doesn’t want to lose it.

“We’re not sparring?”

“I’d rather you not risk fighting in hand-to-hand combat.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

“There are advantages to being smaller and lighter, but only if you’re faster.”

She smirks. “I’m only fast when I’m eating pastries.”

I’m about to command her again when her arm snaps back, and she whips the knife in my direction.

I catch it easily. It was a sloppy throw, angling towards the floor. With my right hand, I toss it up and down, catching it each time. With my free hand, I reach out to a panel on the wall and punch a few buttons. At the end of a hall, a ceiling panel retracts, and a large wooden target lowers. I pace closer and point to where I want her to stand. After a pause, she follows and obeys.

“Stand here. Like this.” I put her through her paces, running my hands down her legs so she shifts into the proper stance, cupping her hips and angling them. Pulling back her hair and pressing a kiss to her shoulder. She shudders but gives me a glare that makes me glad I have the knife.

Then I stand behind her, pressed to her back as I move her arm with mine to mimic the proper throwing technique. With her naked, there’s nothing between her curvy ass and my groin but the thin fabric of my slacks. The more we move together, the more unsteady her breath. She tries to hide it, but I know her. Every rise and fall of her glorious breasts. The furrow in her forehead as she tries to master the movement.

My cock is hard and throbbing, poking into her lower back. I take a moment to push against her, burying my face in her hair to inhale her scent.

She waits, tense, for me to breathe in my full.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Killing with a gun is easy but killing with a knife?” I flip the dagger so the handle is at my lips, and the blade digs into my palm. “It is much more... satisfying.”

She shakes her head slightly, making her hair fall against my shoulder. “Psycho.”

“No, that’s like this.” I mime the overhand strike Norman Bates used.

“Ha. Ha.”

I catch her hand and press the knife into it, continuing my instruction. “Now.” I move her arm until she’s loose and limber, then coach her through a throw. “All the way through. As if you’re slashing someone.” The knife smacks the target, but the tip doesn’t catch, so it clatters to the floor.

“Again.” I trace a circle with my pointer finger, then pat her ass until she heads down the hall to retrieve the weapon. The sight of her swaying away from me has my groin tightening. Her bare body is a thing of beauty, but the bruises from her last session have faded. I’ll have to do something about that later.

I make her throw again and again, driving through the motion until her right arm falters. Then I teach her a left-handed throw. Her chest is heaving, her golden skin slick from exertion.

At last, the knife thunks into the wood, right through a seam. I go to fetch it and touch the tip protruding from the other side. “It went through. Well done, Lula.”

She comes to examine it herself. She’s breathing hard but glowing, her eyes lit with a triumphant light.

“I killed it.”

“You did.” I give her the *Good girl* signal, and she doesn’t frown at my fingers like she usually does.

She works to wrench the knife out, and as she does, I slip behind her, running my palm down her belly as I kiss her shoulder. “You did well.” I let my hand delve between her thighs, cupping her heat. “You get a reward.”

It only takes a few minutes to work her up with my fingers. I know just where to rub and press and tug. As her muscles tighten, I work a finger into her backside, letting her anus clench on my fingertip. Soon, I’ll introduce her to a plug. She’ll only be allowed to cum with something filling her rear until she associates anal with pleasure.

I worm my finger in deeper. She twists in my arms but ultimately settles, accepting the intrusion along with the clitoral stimulation. In no time, she's gasping and shaking through her climax. I keep stroking her, stoking the pleasure higher, forcing her through another and another.

Finally, I take my hand away. She slumps forward, and all her weight falls into my arms, pulling me off balance. It's only for a second, but it's enough. Her feet find the ground, and she snaps up, her elbow coming toward my face. I turn at the last second and grapple with her, drawing her arm behind her, but she's determined and falls to her knees. I fall with her, but she has enough of an advantage to scramble away from me. She looks feral on all fours, hair falling wild around her snarling face. She still has the knife.

I smile and crouch and signal her to *Come*.

She lunges, knife first, and I hit her wrist hard enough to make her drop it. From there, it's easy to tug her shirt down and restrict her movements. She shucks it off and lets it drop, leaving her naked, which is fine by me.

I stalk towards her, and she turns to run, trying every locked door. Eventually, I corral her back into the living area. She races to the kitchen, probably to look for another weapon, and I lunge, using the advantage of my height and weight to bring her to the ground, face down on the rug, with her arms wrenched backward into my hold.

She yells into the rug, shaking with the force of it.

I lean down and murmur into her dark hair. "To the victor go the spoils."

That earns me another shout of rage. I ease off her, and she pushes up, attacking me again with her nails stretched toward my eyes.

This time, I catch her wrists and slam her onto her back, pinning her wrists to either side of her head. With my weight half on her, I can keep her immobilized for hours or as long as it takes for her to regain some control of herself.

Slowly, the rage bleeds out of her dark eyes.

“Good work. You almost cut me. If we spar to first blood, that would be a win.”

She bares her teeth at me. “I want more than first blood.”

“We’ll have to practice then. I’ll reward you when you win. But since you lost...” I ease off and flip her over. She lands face down over my lap. I don’t have cuffs at hand, but it’s a pleasure to restrain her and watch her bottom and thigh muscles ripple as she struggles. I slap her ass, letting my broad palm catch as much of her rear as I can. She yelps, and I continue punishing her, hard and fast, while her shoulders and hips rock, and she tries to wriggle away. I drape a leg over hers, pinning them down. I spank her ass red until her hips are surging up and down, seeking stimulation.

I’ve trained her to crave pain. I raise a knee under her, letting her rub against my leg until she’s close, then flip her to her back with a hand at her throat. “Little savage. This isn’t for you.”

I swat at her hands and use my knees to spread her legs. After a minute of wrestling, I pin her again and open my pants. I have her where I want her: her arms overhead and breasts lifted, her legs wide, and my cock nudging her folds. “I won. Now I get my reward.”



LULA

VICTOR’S huge body blankets me, pressing me to the rug. My bottom is hot and swollen from my spanking, my core pulsing with need. His cock is at my entrance, and I’m wet enough for him to slide right in. But as soon as he tells me he’s won, I start fighting again.

I wriggle and try to ram him in the gut, aiming for the tender spot on his abdomen where my bullet went in. His jaw tightens—he’s so beautiful when he’s angry—and he drapes more of his weight on me, pinning me down.

I force him to tighten his grip until he’s hurting me. This isn’t some sweet lover’s tryst. Sure, he cooked me breakfast and introduced me to his favorite pastime, but we’re not

sweethearts tangling on the floor, too overcome with lust to make it to the bedroom. He is my enemy, and I am his.

I cannot forget that. No matter how many orgasms he gives me.

His cock punches into me. My core clenches on that first blunt inch. He's so big it always takes a few minutes to adjust to him. Today, he's not giving me time.

"Let me in." He emphasizes each word with a kick of his hips. He's merciless in his invasion, and despite myself, my body softens and swallows him up. And, fates help me, it feels so damn good.

I widen my legs and arch off the floor. He lessens the amount of weight on my smaller frame. "That's it. Good girl."

"Fuck you."

"With pleasure." He rocks into me, and warmth rolls up my torso, blooming in my brain. He moves slowly, and I savor every drag of his long and thick rod. Lights spark behind my eyes.

All too soon, his thrusts turn savage. He clasps my hands and drives into me, holding me captive to his plundering. It's too much. I want more.

I'm not fighting him anymore. My knees are open wide, and I let myself wrap my legs above his taut buttocks in an attempt to keep up with his punishing rhythm. His face is frozen in an intent grimace, the pale marble of his sculpted arms and chest glistening with sweat. He shifts to his knees, putting his giant hands under my bottom and jackhammering deeper. The head of his cock battering at my womb. My orgasms blow up like a bomb. Again and again, until I lose count of the detonations.

Victor hoists me up and carries me to the armchair, where he flips me face down onto the seat cushion so he can fuck me from behind. I grip the leather until it's slippery with my sweat. With Victor wedged inside me, my knees don't quite meet the floor, but it doesn't matter. He doesn't stop slamming into me, driving me forward until I'm clawing at the seat back

for purchase. He draws my head back by my hair. Every time he tugs, I clench around him. Somehow I cum again this way, my head tipped back and mouth open, trying to drag oxygen into my lungs.

He flips me again and stands, holding me in his arms. I clutch his shoulders, and he grabs my hips, forcing me down on his cock again. Slowly, he impales me, letting gravity drag me down. At this angle, he's so deep that I feel him in the back of my throat. When he works my hips for me, sliding me up and down, I stare down at the angry red inches disappearing inside me.

My legs vibrate in one continuous, nonstop climax.

And then we're in his bedroom, and he's letting me sink into the plush mattress before propping my legs over his shoulders and powering into me.

He's still impossibly hard. I cannot believe his stamina.

Times like these, I think I should've shot him in the dick. But it'd be a crime to deprive the world of the most perfect penis in existence.

And just as I'm fantasizing about killing him again, he slides a hand up my backside and presses a finger into my ass. I come hard, feeling him everywhere, and he finally follows me over. I clench down on his cock, loving the way he surges inside me.

We lie on our sides for a moment, panting. I need a nap, and I'm going to be sore when I wake up. Victor fucks like he lives—with joyful violence.

"You like my finger in your ass?" He twists his digit deeper.

"No," I say, just as a mini-tremor runs through me.

"Liar." He probes me mercilessly. Just when I've stretched around his single finger, he adds another.

Meanwhile, his cock is growing harder inside me. As it swells, it adds pressure against the fragile wall between it and his fingers.

“Fuck me,” I moan.

“As you wish.” He removes his fingers from my ass and swings into the cradle of my hips.

“Again?”

“You can take it.”

I mutter something unintelligible. At least now we’re in bed. I watch him through half-closed eyes, letting him use my body to sate himself. I’m a tiny sailboat rocking on an endless ocean.

A warm cloth to my sex snaps me awake.

“Lula, my Lula.” He’s cleaning me, kissing me. Then he turns his head and sweeps his tongue up my cheek, licking the tears off my face. I bare my teeth at him half-heartedly, and he laughs. “You want to mark me, my vicious beauty?” He settles my hand at the wound on his gut. “You already have.”

His skin is smooth under my palm. This is the moment. I could dig my fingers in, break the still-fragile scar tissue, and draw his blood. Instead, I simply rest my hand over the wound, savoring the feel of him. I’ve never liked cuddling, but Victor is huge and powerful, and the basest part of me registers him as safe. He’d never allow anyone to hurt me. He’d reserve that right for himself.

Sleep is rising to claim me. I try to fend it off, muttering, “I should’ve aimed for the heart.” I slide my hand up to his left pectoral. He presses his own hand on top of mine, forcing me to feel his heartbeat thundering in time with mine.

“You may not have aimed for it, but you hit it all the same.”



LULA

IT’S dark in the bedroom when Victor wakes me, rolling me to my side so he can raise my thigh and slide into me.

“You’re nuts,” I mutter into the pillow. I don’t know what time it is, but it feels like the middle of the night. I half doze as

he uses my body, only waking when he grunts in satisfaction and folds me into him, kissing the top of my head. I settle in his arms, trying to decide whether the wetness between my legs is his fresh cum or my own arousal.

“Finished?”

“For now.” He kisses my forehead. “Sleep. You need it. I’ll wake you when it’s time to eat.”

“I want pancakes.” I let sleep claim me again.

At our next meal, he makes me pancakes and lets me wear his shirt the whole time. When I’m full, he pulls me into the hall where he’s set up a wooden dummy and teaches me to slash and cut with a knife. “I’d prefer you never need to fight in close combat. But better to be prepared.”

He has me throw knives at a target until my arms are tired and rewards me with a shower and an easy, slow fuck against the tiled walls. Then he uses a straight razor to shave me. Once we’re clean and dry, he props me on all fours in the bed next to a black towel with a tube of lube and a small black plug on top of it.

He strokes my bottom. “Are you going to fight me?”

“I don’t know.” I glare at him over my shoulder. “Are you gonna put that in my ass?”

“Would you prefer to do it yourself?”

“What do you think?” I let him plant a hand between my shoulder blades and push me down so my cheek is flush with the bedspread, my ass high in the air.

“Push out,” he orders and probes me with lube-coated fingers before replacing them with the plug. I blow out a breath at the alien feeling, but it’s not so bad. What’s worse is how he uses his free hand to play with my pussy, and how quickly I grow wet for him.

“Now what?”

“Now a reward.” He twists his fingers into my pussy, finds the rough wall above my entrance, and rubs it. “Do you want

me to tie you down?” But I’m already rocking into his hand, the plug adding another dark dimension to my climax.

Much later, he makes me what I think of as a late lunch—thick steaks cooked to perfection. He sits on a bar stool next to me and feeds me bite by bite. And I let him because the meat is too amazing to refuse. Melt-in-the-mouth buttery.

It’s super weird sitting on a stool with a plug in my ass. But it’s not that bad. At least I’m not bound with clamps on my nipples.

It’s the little things.

He pours me a glass of wine, a Châteauneuf-du-Pape that’s beyond compare to my cheap merlots. I lounge in the armchair, tipped onto one hip so I don’t jar the plug in my rear, savoring the smooth but complex red while he does the dishes. Just another episode of *Life with a Hitman: Domestic Edition*.

It’s been a while—at least a week or two—since I’ve had anything alcoholic to drink, so a few sips go to my head.

“You’ll be happy to know I made contact with men who can find Stephanos,” Victor tells me, speaking over his shoulder from his spot at the sink.

“You did?”

“Yes. They have not yet led me to him, but they will.”

I stare at the ripples in my wine. Having this conversation with Victor is weird. I’m used to thinking of him as an enemy united with Stephanos.

“I asked them who the mole is.”

“Did they tell you?”

“No, but I will tell you when I find out.” He dries another dish. “Your cousin is looking for you.”

“Of course he is.” I can imagine my cousin now, standing with arms braced on his desk, barking orders to his men, and only taking breaks to comfort Leah.

“He’s intensified the search. Offering a reward for any proof of life.”

“Can I get word to him?”

“What would you say?”

That shuts me up. What could I say that Victor would allow? “Wanted: tall blond hitman. Likes to torture people. If spotted...” I hesitate.

“Shoot to kill?” Victor dries his hands on a dish towel hanging neatly on the oven handle. The dish towel is a creamy white, decorated with little yellow ducks because why not?

“Maim,” I say. I don’t sound certain. Victor prowls over, holding the wine bottle. He tops me off, then sets the bottle down and scoops me up, only to sit with me in his lap. And I let him. I’m more worried about spilling the wine.

I settle into his arms like we’re a couple decompressing after a long day’s work. A half-naked couple, him only wearing soft slacks and me in nothing—no bra, no panties—but his shirt. And a butt plug.

For a while, Victor does nothing but stroke my back and watch me sip my wine.

Maybe I’m tipsy, but this is nice. The plug is still annoying, but its presence makes my pussy wet.

“Do you like it?” He tips his head towards the glass.

“It’s good.” It’s my turn to turn to him and hold the glass to give him a sip. Which might be a mistake because it leaves his hands free to roam. He trails his fingers over my hip and into the cleft of my bottom, finding the flat end of the plug. He does nothing more than tap it, but I feel the vibration deep in my core.

He just watches me, noting every twitch of my facial muscles, every catch in my breathing.

After a time, he leans in, stirring my hair with a silky whisper. “Do you like your plug?”

I won’t dignify that with a response. He doesn’t need one. His roaming hand finds my bare pussy and the dampness there.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to check.” He’s thorough, too, his fingers dancing from clit to plug and back again. My mind goes blank from the wine, from his touch.

He only stops to pour me more wine. Only a quarter of the bottle left.

“How does this end?” I ask the open air.

He’s drawn down my shirt to play with my breasts, and he brushes his lips across the top of my shoulder.

“Victor,” I call his name to catch his attention. “Will you ever let me go?”

“You know the answer to that.” His long fingers trail over my curves, dipping between them. His callouses catch on my nipples, and my stomach muscles tighten. “We belong together.”

I scoff.

“Can you imagine your life without me?” I open my mouth, and he pinches my nipple in anticipation. “No lies.”

“I’m a lawyer. I twist the truth for a living.”

“Then let this be the time and place you tell the truth. Not only to me but to yourself.” He loosens his grip on my nipple, rolling it between his fingers instead. “If I disappeared tomorrow, would you miss me?”

I imagine it. The empty rooms, the unlocked doors. I’d get my escape, but... “I’d be pissed.”

“Would you hunt me down?” He sounds amused, as if predator and prey is a game we play.

Maybe it is.

“Yes.”

“And when you caught me, would you kill me?”

I try to imagine my life before Victor. Nothing but long hours of work for La Famiglia. Nights I spent alone with my resentment and my red wine. Bad wine compared to the heady ambrosia I’m drinking now. “No.”

“So you would miss me. Or perhaps only the orgasms I give you?”

“I crave them,” I finally admit. “I crave you.”

“It’s not a weakness to need another person.”

I want to scoff again, to roll my eyes. He’s wrong. Needing someone is the greatest weakness of all. Instead, I challenge him like the lawyer I am. “Who do you need?”

“You.”

I don’t want to believe him. But he takes my wine, drinks it down in one deep swallow, and takes me back to bed to prove how much one part of his anatomy needs me. Several orgasms later, I’m back to drifting off in his arms, enveloped in his wintry scent. I’m not thinking of how I could incapacitate him and escape. I’m thinking of steaks and massages and sessions on the cross. Secrets whispered in the middle of the night.

Being the one person in the world this dangerous man needs? Fate, save me from this exquisite hell. I do not want to give it up.

CHAPTER 14

lula

Seven meals, five bottles of wine, three training sessions with the knife, and many, many fucks later, he has me tied up, standing in the middle of the room. My arms are cuffed over my head, and there's a blindfold over my face. I have a spreader bar between my legs, a plug in my ass, a gag in my mouth, and a diabolical shield over my clit that vibrates at odd intervals.

He places a plush sphere into my hand. "Squeeze." I do, and the ball squeaks like a dog toy.

"Squeeze this three times, and I'll stop." He waits for me to nod, then adds the finishing touch of plugs in my ears.

When he's done, I can't see, and I can't hear. I flex my free hand in the bindings, reaching for something. Proof of the world beyond this dark, silent place.

His hand at my hip steadies me, and I know he's chosen something particularly wicked to begin with.

A line of fire blazes across both globes of my ass.

My hand clenches, but I don't squeeze the toy.

Another stripe across my sit spots. A third below that.

I strain, but I can't hear anything. Not that it'd be a mercy to hear the implement whistling through the air or cracking on my flesh, but at least it would be something to focus on other than the throbbing stripes on my buttocks and the backs of my thighs.

Another stroke and subsequent sting. A fifth slanting over the rest. My rear is a fiery mass, each caned line pulsing in echoing waves.

I dangle, half dancing in my high heels, twisting this way and that. The flogger comes to bite my breasts, and I drop the ball.

Sweat rolls down my chest, beading between my breasts. I can smell the animal scent of me.

And I can smell the cool winter wind of Victor.

He leans into me, returning the ball to my hand. I squeeze it once to prove that I'm still with him.

His lips caress mine. Cool mint, a bite of pine. I sigh.

Then the nipple clamps come. And more flogging on my back. I lean from side to side, shifting my weight in the small increments I'm allowed by the spreader bar and the bindings on my wrists. I turn my head, but the blindfold lets in no light, no shapes, and the earplugs allow no sound.

I can only feel.

A crop on my pussy.

A paddle on my ass.

A tightening of the nipple clamps so they pinch with a sharper bite.

Victor's fingers trail over the marks he made, and I can only imagine his satisfied expression.

The shield on my clit trembles to life, buzzing in rising surges. I rock to tiptoe, fighting to close my legs and get more stimulation.

Victor strokes my inner thighs, taunting me.

I moan around the gag. The sound is worlds away.

He presses on the shield, giving me the pressure I need. All the agony in my body rushes in fiery rivulets toward the beautiful feeling in my pussy. As my core contracts, the bright red burn turns to gold.

His breath caresses my face, and I can sense him murmuring, “Beautiful. Bellissima. Good girl.”

He unplugs my ears and gives me water.

“Had enough?”

I shake my head. The smarting lines on my backside and the sting in my nipples have faded to nothing. The pain is no longer enough to balance the excruciating sweetness of my climax.

I don’t know what I have to prove. Why I always want more.

But Victor does, and he answers my unspoken questions. “You need it to hurt. You like to earn it.”

“Yes. Give it to me.”

“I will, beautiful one. I will.”

And he lays into me harder than before. He never replaced the earplugs, so I hear each swish and crack. The strokes come faster, merging from one into the other until I have no time to brace for them. So I surrender to them and welcome the pain. I want it. I need it. It burns like a cleansing fire, and I’m caught in the crucible and reborn.

A hand at my hip steadies me again. Slowly, Victor draws out the plug in my ass and pumps it back in. At first, I tense, but there’s no fighting it. My body relaxes, accepting the strange sensation. When he pulls it out all the way, I clench, seeking the dark stimulation.

I don’t have long to miss it. He sets his cock at my gaping hole and presses in. He’s slick with lube, but the stretch still burns. Any desire to be filled is replaced by panic at the blunt intrusion.

“Breathe, Lula,” he growls. I suck in oxygen, feeling dizzy, and he wedges himself deeper into my ass. His arm snakes around my midriff to press on the buzzing vibrator over my clit.

And I cum, hard and long, my muscles seizing and clamping on his cock.

He curses and mutters something long and intent in his native tongue. Slowly, he eases out of me, giving me a hint of relief before pushing back in. He's gentle, and the device on my clit doesn't block my pussy, so he's free to press his fingers inside me. I clench around them, gripping them like a lifeline as the burn in my bottom flares into something new, something disturbingly like pleasure.

"That's it. Good girl." He pushes another finger into my pussy, his wrist pressing on the vibrator, his dick stretching me impossibly wide.

His free hand comes to my throat.

"Are you going to cum for me, beautiful? With my cock in your ass?"

"Fuck."

"Yes." His dick saws in and out of me. Another few passes and his fingers catch just the right spot inside me, making me shudder through another climax. "I think you like this, Lula." He plucks away the vibrator and replaces it with his palm, roughly scrubbing my swollen bud until I'm thrashing, trying to get away.

I can't get away. I'm strung up like a piece of meat, striped red, and now subject to him fucking me in my last virgin hole. And I like it.

Fates help me, but I love it.

He shoves his fingers, wet from my pussy, into my mouth. I bite down, tasting the sour-sweet of my own cunt. He thrusts into my back channel, making me rise to tiptoes. He's not going to be gentle. Not anymore.

He removes his fingers from my mouth and pulls off a nipple clamp. I cry out, and

I don't know what's more excruciating, the bite of the clamp, the removal, or the final, awful relief.

He waits a while before removing the other one.

"Fucking sadist."

He gives a dark chuckle and power into me, fucking me hard enough that I'll feel it for days.

The blindfold falls away, and I gasp. I'd grown used to the dark. Leave it to Victor to give me what I want and completely ruin it.

He pulls out of my ass, and I hang for a moment, panting. Bereft.

Leave it to Victor to give me what I hate and make me crave it.

“Don't worry, krasiva. I am not done with you.”

He uncuffs my ankles from the spreader bar and cuts me down from the overhead bindings. I collapse into his arms. His powerful arms are strong and ready to catch me. His skin is hot and glistening with sweat, and I'm surrounded by his delicious scent.

He carries me to the bed and cleans me up before laying me out for inspection.

More water. A few more kisses.

Then, a hand at my throat, pinning me. Something silver flashes in the corner of my eye, and I startle.

He's holding a knife.

“One more thing,” he says as I track the blade's movement. Now that he's trained me to hold one, to throw one, I can spot the expert skill in his elegant fingers. The black handle, the silver tang, the honed edge, it's all a part of him.

He uses the hand that holds the knife to stroke the tendrils of my hair back from my face. “I have waited for this moment since the morning you left me.”

The morning I shot him.

He waves the blade in front of my face. I'm pinned by his hand at my throat, limp from the gauntlet of agony and ecstasy he put me through. But I'm still strong enough to fight.

I don't fight. I don't move.

I want to know what happens next.

He sets the knife at my heart. “You marked me. And now I’ll mark you.”

I hold his gaze. The thin line of frost around the rising darkness. If this is the end, I am not afraid. “Do it.”

The first cut is perfect. The sides of my flesh peel away from the sharp edge. Then the blood wells up, darker than I imagined. And it hurts. It hurts like he’s cut too deep. Like he’s carving his mark on my heart and not just the layer of flesh above.

A second slice, angling towards the first. He’s carved a V over my left breast. V for Victor. Proof of his victory over me.

His eyes are fully black now. He doesn’t stop but gives me another three strokes to form a second letter. My breath stutters in and out of me, my nerves screaming. But I don’t tell him to stop.

I crane my neck to see, but the blood streams in every direction, blotting out what he’s carved.

This is the end, yes, but it’s also the beginning.

“Lula.” He captures my lips, pressing down against me with an insistent hunger. He tips my hips back and slides into my ass again. This time, I can watch him invade me, inch by punishing inch. When he’s fully rooted, he presses on my sex, scrubbing the sodden folds until my orgasm blooms and I soften and accept another quarter inch of his cock. My ass is full of him.

My brain is full of warring sensations. I push against his hard, bare chest with arms weakened by the pain over my heart. The smooth marble of his muscles is pink, stained by my blood. I plant bloody handprints all over him—his shoulders, his pecs, his face—until our lips touch, and I taste metal and salt and *us*.

And then he’s coming, deep in my ass. Another part of me has ceded to his rule. But I don’t care because he cleans me up so carefully and rolls us to a fresh, clean section of the king bed so I can fall asleep in his arms.

I wake to him bandaging me. I still haven't seen what he carved into me, but I can feel it throbbing through my chest like it went all the way to my back. The soreness extends into my left arm.

He pauses, his hand hovering over the white bandage. A shark's smile hovers at the corner of his mouth. He's happy with his work.

He feeds me some pain pills and holds a glass of water to my lips. The pain recedes behind a gauzy curtain.

"Sleep," he orders. "It's still late."

It must be night. I savor this sliver of the outside world he's gifted me. "Late?"

"Yes." Another kiss. In the darkness, he moves beside me, warm and familiar. A partner, a trusted lover, coaxing me back to sleep. "I'll wake you in the morning."

Mornings with Victor, barefoot and shirtless in the kitchen. Eggs. Pancakes. I fall back asleep, smiling.



VICTOR

I'VE NEVER SLEPT AS WELL as I do with Lula. Even as a boy, I rested in fits and starts, listening to the cacophony of the crime-ridden neighborhood where we could afford to live. Angry voices, slamming doors, back-firing cars and shots fired, I never got used to it. I learned to sleep lightly, to startle awake, warn my mother, and protect her.

But now I rest deeply and fully, my arms full of my captive. My vicious angel.

She makes me feel things, and I'm not used to feeling things. But the small, stunted part of me recognizes that she is the only one who can awaken these emotions. I need her close. She is my soul.

After two REM cycles, I rise reluctantly. I leave Lula sleeping on her back, the bandage over my initials bright in the darkness, and head to the locked drawer in the kitchen that holds the most important of my burner phones.

I wait seven minutes before making the call.

“I’m here,” Spiro answers. Over the past few days, I’ve worked to gain his trust. Now, I’ll learn if my efforts paid off.

“Do we have an agreement?”

Spiro pauses. “What’s it worth to you?”

“Name your price.”

He does, and when I agree to it, he tells me the information I asked for. All of it.

I hang up, heavy with the news I have for Lula.

Our time of reprieve is over. Last night marked a turning point for us. I know she felt it.

Now it’s time to learn whether it was the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end.



LULA

I WAKE SLOWLY AND STRETCH, wincing as it pulls the tender skin above my left breast. Victor’s left more painkillers beside me and a glass of water. Considerate sadist.

As I have so many mornings, I pad out of the bedroom and find him at the stove, making a meal. Unlike most mornings, I almost smile when I see him clad all in black, his white-blond head in the fridge. His T-shirt shows off the taut muscles and veins of his forearms.

My mouth waters. “Morning.”

He signals me to *Come*, and when I do, he sets a bluish smoothie in front of me. I didn’t even hear the blender. I taste yogurt and berries.

He watches me drink it, his face a beautiful mask. *Okay?* Another hand signal. He uses them constantly now, especially when he’s teaching me how to attack someone with a knife.

“A little sore. Let’s go easy on training today.” I pretend to roll my shoulder but don’t move it more than an inch.

Victor plants his hands on the island, staring at the glittering quartz.

He's not usually this moody. Something's wrong.

I set the glass down. "What? What is it?"

"I know who the mole is," he rasps.

He doesn't have to explain. The mole, the person who infiltrated our family and passed on information to Stephanos. It would have to be someone trusted to get the intel Stephanos seemed to get, intel that kept him one step ahead of us at all times.

Names and faces flit through my head. "Who?" I know I'm not going to like the answer.

"Gino."

I close my eyes and accept this bullet to the heart. My stupid, selfish brother. "That fool." It makes sense. He burned through his trust so quickly. He liked spending money and expected it to come easy. And as the son of one of the top family members, he had access to anything. No one would question his loyalty.

A shadow falls over me. Victor has come around the island to be close to me, and despite my roiling stomach, the hairs on my arms raise a second before he touches me. "Lula, I'm sorry."

"No, you're not." I wrench myself away, wincing as it sets my wounds throbbing. "You're one of them." An enemy. I have to remember that. I keep retreating until I'm a few feet away. "I need to tell my cousin. I need to get out of here." It's stupid to say this to my captor.

He stands at my stool, his hands by his sides, still no expression on his face.

Then he says the unexpected. "And if I let you go? Will you continue on this path to vengeance?"

I'm still reeling from the fact that he would let me go. "What do you care?"

“You belong to me.”

“I’m not a possession—” I’ve stopped retreating. Mistake. Because he’s crossed the distance, backing me into the wall. I glare up at him as he sets his hand at my throat.

“You belong to me. And I belong to you.” He flexes his hand and releases me. “But you see nothing, consider nothing, but your revenge.”

“It’s not revenge. It’s vengeance. It’s for someone else.”

“Is it? What does your mother gain by you killing her murderer?”

My chest is rising and falling so rapidly that blood has started trickling down my breast. “She deserves to be avenged.”

Victor’s face is carved from stone, but his eyes burn like blue lasers. “But does she *require* it?”

“I require it.” My voice cracks. He’s flaying me open like the sadistic surgeon he is, and I have no more defenses. “They threw her life away. They treated it like nothing. But she wasn’t nothing. She was everything.”

“And what would she think if she saw you now, her precious daughter? Would she want your life to look like this?”

I suck in a breath. Victor could not have hurt me more if he carved my heart out and held it in front of my face, still beating.

“You spent all these years sharpening yourself to a blade and making yourself a bullet in a gun. But you are more, Lula. You can do, can have, more.”

“Shut up,” I whisper and turn my face away.

The floor creaks as he leaves.

He’s making noise on purpose because he so rarely makes a sound, leaving me with bile in my throat and burning eyes.



VICTOR

THE SCREENS in my media room are filled with motion. Spiro, Joe, and the rest moving around the deserted pizzeria. Cars zooming down streets. Workers in Cavalli's, fixing the walls, prepping them to paint.

I ignore them all and fix my eyes on one screen, the most important one. In the black frame, Lula sits on the bed, staring at the wall. She hasn't crumpled yet, but I can tell she wants to. The news about her brother bowed but didn't break her. More proof that her mother's death was ignored by those Vera loved the most.

They threw her life away. They treated it like nothing. But she wasn't nothing. She was everything.

My captive has not cried yet, but her eyes look bruised. I message the doctor to watch over her and leave my media room.

An hour later, I'm across from the dark doors of the abandoned hotel Spiro gave me the address to in a neutral part of town. Here, supposedly, Stephanos left me my money. A black duffel bag of unmarked bills. Whether the money will be accompanied by the man, I cannot say.

Instead of walking in as instructed, I climb the fire escape of a nearby building and get to the roof to scout the area. From here, I can settle into a sniper's perch and look down onto the drop zone. Not that I have a gun.

A few minutes pass. I'm early, but something tells me my client is earlier still.

The moon drifts across the sky. A rat pokes its head out of a hole and inches toward a dumpster.

A match flares in the dark for a second before being snuffed out, but it's enough. The tiny, mean eye of a cigarette remains, burning red gold.

And there he is. Broad shoulders, shaved head.

I wait in the shadows, contemplating my next steps.

CHAPTER 15

lula

Victor leaves me alone. For hours. Maybe days. I try to break down the door leading to the hallway where he's gone but have no luck. I even try to break into the dungeon. I stand on a stool and poke into the vents, but they're too small to fit more than a hand and covered in a steel grid. I leave it alone, not wanting to mess with the only source of fresh air in my cushy prison.

I have nothing to do but eat the food in the fridge, take the painkillers he left me, and imagine what I'll do to my brother if I get my hands on him.

I refuse to think of Victor. He's nothing to me. He was never more than my captor. My enemy. And if I am a bullet in a gun, a dagger with a poisoned edge, let me maim him. Let me kill him.

I sleep every so often, fitful and restless, dreaming of a hitman with silver blond hair and shadows under his eyes. At some point, I wake to the door to the long hallway open. But it's a dead end. There's nothing but more locked doors, an attack dummy, and a few knives.

I could carve my wrath into the walls and locked doors. Instead, I practice fighting, only stopping to eat or rest. Without windows or a clock, I don't know if I sleep for years or merely a nap. The bedroom is as dark as an underground bunker. A tomb. I can't think about this too much, or I'll go mad.

I sleep with a knife in my hand. After one particular spell of sleep, I wake up knowing I'm not alone. *He's* standing in the shadows, wearing a dark suit.

I snap to my feet, knife outstretched.

"Ah, you're awake," he says, as if I'm not ready to stab him. "Get dressed." He nods to the foot of the bed, where he's laid out a black dress and long, tan trench coat.

Clothes. For the first time in... as long as I've been here.

"Why?"

"I thought you might enjoy going to a party."

"What sort of party?"

"At Cavalli's. You've been there once. Remember?"

I remember the smoke, the bark of the gun. The cool air wafting up my bare legs under the trench coat.

"What's this about?" As soon as I ask, my mind flashes over the possibilities and spits out the most likely explanation. "Stephanos will be there." My voice is flat.

"He might be. He owes me, you see. And I always collect what I'm owed. He wants to meet me." He leans down and straightens the slinky black dress he's laid out for me. "It turns out you're an excellent bargaining chip."

My heart sinks to my feet. Any hope I had that Victor wasn't one of them is stolen away from me.

And then Victor continues to twist the knife. "I told him I had you. At first, he didn't believe me. But then I showed him some footage."

I close my eyes. Of course, he did. How much footage does he have of me bound, caged, naked, and whipped? My greatest enemy, seeing my greatest humiliation. I could puke.

"And now he says he'll meet with me... on the condition that I bring you to him."

I want to stab him in the eye. I could do it if I were stronger, faster. If my opponent wasn't Victor.

“So that’s it?” My chest is heaving, stretching the barely healed marks on my breast. Marks that mean nothing. “You’re just going to hand me over?”

“Of course not. You belong to me.” His eyes flicker to the bandage above my breast. He cut me like a schoolboy carves his name into a desk. But that doesn’t mean he owns me.

One day, he’ll find that out.

“Stephanos will not touch you.”

I scoff. “That’s supposed to reassure me?”

Victor comes closer, his pale eyes pinning me into place. His hand grabs my wrist and presses a point that makes my fingers spasm, and I drop the knife.

He catches it and holds it up. It all happened in a flash, too fast for me to see.

“I have much to teach you. But this time together is at its end. There’s a decision for you to make.” He tosses the knife so it flips overhead and embeds itself in the wall above the headboard, where it quivers. It’s in the dead center of the room, and I half expect the bed to split in half, bisected by this moment and the blade. When it doesn’t, I turn back to my nemesis. He looms over me, half of his face in the light and half in shadow. But when he speaks, I hear both the iced-over tones of the psychopath and echoes of the soft, hopeful murmur of a lover.

“So now, I must ask. Lula... will you trust me?”



VICTOR

JOE DRIVES us to the restaurant, and Lula sits next to me in the back seat, a black silk blindfold over her eyes. When I guided her to take her first steps outside, she raised her head to the sun. She’s thinner than when I first brought her here, but not by much. I tried to feed her well, but she’s more hardened. The circles under her eyes are darker from a lack of vitamin D, but also not enough feasting with friends and family—not enough joy.

I can't give her everything, even if I wanted to. But maybe I can give her enough.

She said yes to trusting me. But she didn't bother to keep the derision out of her tone. But she is here, next to me, sitting up straight and gorgeous in the sleek black dress I gave her. I can only hope that there's a tiny sliver of trust in her toward me. Maybe there is.

And maybe we are both lying to ourselves.

Joe pulls right up to the door, and I help her out. She wrinkles her nose, probably smelling the stale cigarettes that stain the evening air. Once inside, the smell is better, replaced with butter and garlic. Spiro had a hand in hiring new people for the kitchen, and the result is a massive improvement over what Cavalli's used to be.

The decor still has the same faded carpet and old furniture. But there's a fresh coat of paint and no sign of bullet holes. I pull Lula along to the back room, pausing in the shadowy hallway to lift the blindfold from her eyes.

She blinks once and takes in her surroundings with the wary look of a hunter in unknown territory.

Low laughter and the murmur of men's voices come from the room ahead.

"Ready?" I ask.

She shrugs and visibly hardens. I draw her close on the pretense of fiddling with the coat's collar.

"Do this for me," I whisper in her ear. "And I will give you everything you want and more." I pull away to take in her expression, but it's blank and remote. It reminds me of my own face in the mirror.

Maybe I taught her more than I should have.

"You're missing one thing." She's wearing my tan trench coat, and I reach into a pocket to pull out a silver tube of lipstick. Her lips compress to hold back a grimace, but she lets me paint it on her. A pop of red in her colorless face. Warpaint. "Now you're ready."

“You’re not going to tie me up?” She holds up her hands, presenting her wrists.

“I think you’ll behave. The stakes are too high, the reward too great.”

Her eyebrows twitch, but her forehead smooths before I can ask about her thoughts. “Let’s get this over with.”

“As you wish.” I lead her into the room where she faced Stephanos last. According to Spiro, it’s much the same with the unneeded tables and chairs pushed to the side. A few men lounge around the long table lining the opposite wall, and they fall silent as we approach.

“Lucrezia Romano, meet my new friends. Spiro, Uzi, Kill Zone.” Each man stands as I name them. There are five more newcomers, all vetted and vouched for by Spiro. He completes the introductions by saying, “And Joe’s out back. He’s coming in soon.”

Lula stands silent through this, shifting slightly from foot to foot. I keep a hand on her elbow.

“Shall we?” I sweep a hand toward the table, and the men part to make a path for us. I guide her to settle in the center of the booth lining the wall. The seat of honor, but hemmed in on either side by me and Spiro.

“NICE TO MEET YA, MS. ROMANO,” Kill Zone says after a nervous glance at me.

She nods, her jaw still rigid. She’s trying to figure out what’s happening. There’s no sign of Stephanos. Or Bruno.

She sits with her hands in her lap, the long sleeves of my coat draped past her fingertips. I didn’t offer to take the coat; she might feel safer in it, less exposed. And I like seeing her in my clothes. It’s a big change from the last time she walked in here wearing my coat. Now, no one looks at her bare body but me.

The back door opens and squeals closed. Everyone tenses, but it’s just Joe. He walks in. “Sorry, I’m late. Business.” He gives me a significant look.

Spiro pipes up. “I made sure the kitchen has their orders.”

“No trouble?” I ask, resting a hand on Lula’s rigid knee.

“Naw. They’ll be ready soon.” He picks up a wine bottle and uncorks it. “Something to drink while we wait?”

Lula doesn’t move, but I nod to her wine glass. He leans in to fill it, and the men around us relax a little. There’s still a readiness, an air of anticipation, but a few of them light cigarettes or take a sip of their drinks. Uzi relinquishes his hold on his gun and sets it on the floor, letting it lean against his chair.

One of the newcomers cocks his head at Kill Zone. “Kill Zone? That’s your name?”

“That’s what they call me.” Kill Zone shrugs. “I’m thinking of shortening it to Killz.”

“Killz?” Spiro snorts. “Isn’t that the stuff my ma had us paint the bathroom with? For mold?”

“Yeah,” says Kill Zone.

A raspy sandpaper sound echoes as Joe scratches his stubbly chin. “That shit is great.”

A server appears at the main entrance, pushing a food cart. A huge dish covered by a silver dome rests on top. Everyone’s eyes snap to it. The server is a young man with a long neck whose Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. Under the red stain of acne, his skin is blanched pale.

“I got it,” Joe says, snubbing out his cigarette and heading to take over controlling the cart. The server relinquishes it, and Joe pushes it right in front of Lula and me. “Go ahead,” I gesture to her. “The main course. I sourced it myself.”

Suppressing a frown, she reaches for it. Hesitates. With visible willpower, she lifts the silver dome.

For a few moments, she stares at the contents of the dish. Even though he knew about it beforehand, Spiro sucks in a shocked breath. Kill Zone and Uzi mutter quiet curses. One of the men, a newcomer whose name I already forgot, staggers to the corner to quietly retch.

Behind the cart, Joe is looking away.

But not Lula. Her eyes feast on the gruesome sight. Then she slowly lowers the silver dome to cover the severed head of Bruno, Stephanos' right-hand man. It's not as gory as it could have been. After I cornered and garrotted him, I let much of the blood drain away.

Lula twists to look up at me. She's flushed and breathing hard like she's run up the stairs but trying to control her emotions. I can see the question in her eyes. *Why?*

"Excuse us," I say. "We need a moment."



LULA

VICTOR USHERS me into a dark room. A flick of the lights and I see it's a bathroom. In case I have to throw up?

A quick inventory tells me I'm not queasy but numb. I brace my hands on the bathroom sink just in case. The place is cleaner than it used to be. Not what I expected, but nothing about today is.

I expected Victor to parade me in front of Stephanos, to put me on display like a trained submissive. I expected torture or humiliation.

Nothing could've prepared me for the sight of a man's head on a platter. Victor stands behind me, much like he did the first time we fucked in his bathroom. I meet his eyes in the mirror. There's no color in my face other than my red, red lips. "You could've warned me."

"Would you have believed me?"

"Hell no." I shake my head. This isn't my reality. I have no idea what's going on. "You killed Bruno." At least, I think that was Bruno. It wasn't easy to recognize the slack features, but the shaved head was huge. And who else could it be?

Victor doesn't deny it, so I can move on to my next question. "Why?"

“Because he shot at you,” Victor growls. The tops of his cheekbones flush as bright as my lips. “He almost killed you. You could’ve died.”

“I thought...” I thought a lot of things. “I thought you were going to...” I don’t know what to say, so I stop talking.

Victor turns me to face him. He’s a beautiful, brutal force of nature. A blizzard. An oncoming iceberg. I don’t understand him, but he’s always been honest about who he is. “I told you to trust me, and I’d give you everything. I had to prove it to you. This is my proof.”

I gape at him, my jaw hanging toward the floor. So I ask again, “Why?”

“You know why. You’re it for me.” His touch on my cheek is gentle, but I startle. “I don’t know what love is. I do know I would slaughter every man and woman on Earth and serve their heads to you on a platter on the chance it would make you smile.”

Mass murder. How romantic. “That’s not... don’t do that.” I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that he doesn’t want to destroy me.

He pushes closer, crowding me against the sink, and presses something into my hand. A knife. I automatically settle it into the proper grip.

“Don’t you understand?” He takes my hand and brings the knife up to his own throat. “I’d let you cut my own heart out if you wanted.”

His hand falls away, and for a moment, I keep the blade against his pretty, pale skin.

I could do it. I could kill him.

He speaks again, and I have to lessen the pressure against his throat so I don’t cut him. “I had to prove I’m worthy of you before you’d trust me. Love me.”

I have to stop myself from saying, “I don’t love you.” Because Victor has taught me not to lie. Not to him. Not to myself.

My hand flexes, and I press the knife too hard. A thin cut appears, and blood streams down. I set down the knife and cover the wound, trying to stem the flood. “Oh. Oh no...”

He captures my hand, not noticing or caring about the cut. “Lucrezia. My love. Tell me what you want from me, and I’ll make it happen. The gang out there”—he tips his head out the door—“is yours to command. Or I’ll kill them all.” He says it with such ease I flinch. He cups my cheek, blood still streaming down the hollow of his throat. It’s a shallow cut, but it’s bleeding so much. If Victor’s aware of it, he doesn’t care.

He strokes his thumb over my cheekbone. “I’d kill everyone in the world if you wanted.” He sounds so happy, it’s disturbing. “Say the word. Cut my throat right now, and I’d be happy because it’s you, Lula. It will always be you.”

My breath is rattling in and out of me. My throat was lined with poisoned knives, but they’re gone now. My chest still aches, like nothing will soothe it, but...

I push up to tiptoe, pulling his head down so I can reach his lips. He grips the lapels of the coat I’m wearing, drawing me up so his mouth can dominate mine.

We kiss until I’m surging against him; the ache in me spreads through my core to my limbs.

He takes my shoulders and pushes us slightly apart, keeping a bare millimeter between us. “Death or belonging to me. Those are your options.”

“Your death or mine?” I raise my head to murmur against his lips.

“I don’t want to live in this world alone. Without you, Lula, I might as well be dead.”

I draw back. The nick at his throat really is making a mess. I curse and find a paper towel to clean it up. He holds still and lets me, watching me with a tenderness that makes me ache.

Fates preserve us. There might be a small part of me that loves him. And that is enough.

But first things first.

I straighten and toss the bloody paper towel into the trash. Then I pick up the knife, testing its weight in my palm. “Where’s Stephanos?”

“Hiding like the rat he is. Do you want me to take you to him?”

“Yes.”

He smiles and takes my hand. The one without the knife. “Then let’s go.”

CHAPTER 16

lula

The drive leaving Cavalli's is very different from the one a mere hour before.

This time, I relax in the backseat with Victor, holding his hand. No blindfold. I returned his knife, and he gave me back my Sig Sauer. Its weight feels weird but familiar.

Two of the guys ride in the front. Joe and Spiro. Joe is driving again, keeping to back roads.

We're rolling down an alleyway when I recognize the silver siding of the building up ahead.

"Stop here a moment," I say. "Please."

Joe looks into the rearview mirror, and Victor nods. The car slows to a stop.

The back door of Three Diner opens before I step out of the car. Two of the owners greet me. The tall young woman with dark glasses and the tiny white-haired one with weathered hands. The shadow of a third woman, round and matronly, haunts the door.

"You've returned," the young woman says, with a hint of a smile. Her head angles like she's looking into the sky or hearing music playing far away. "And you're not alone."

"Yes." I don't know what I want to say to them, so I wait through an awkward pause.

"You're ready, daughter of Vera," the white-haired lady pronounces.

My throat clogs up, but I nod.

“Then go, and fate will bless you.”

I slide into the back seat, and Joe takes his foot off the brake a second later. Victor tips his head to the two women and gives them a cocky wave.

As soon as they're out of view, he leans forward to study my face. “Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes,” I say, but then I amend, “but not from them. I already have what I need.”

“Almost,” he says and holds up a silver chain, the sword charm dangling from his palm.

I'd cuss him out, but I'm too happy to see my old necklace. I lift my hair and let him put it on me. He takes his sweet time and fiddles with it so the sword settles on my sternum.

And all too soon, we're at an ancient brick warehouse a few blocks away from the docks. I recognize the area. “This is Vesuvi territory.”

“Yes. Stephanos has bolt holes like this all over the city. It's how he's survived.” He's patting his clothes, presumably checking his hidden knives. “He's inside.”

This is it. The moment I've prepared for all my life.

I press the sword into my skin for a second before shrugging out of Victor's long coat. I take a moment to check my Glock. In the front seat, Joe and Spiro are doing the same.

“Here.” Victor holds up a black vest. I shrug it on, and he makes sure it's fastened up the front.

“We disabled those cameras,” Spiro tells me, pointing to the surrounding buildings and the silver or black equipment nestled in the eaves. “But he'll have more inside.”

“Thank you.”

A heaviness settles over me, more than the weight of the vest. Reality descending. I open the car door, and the sky above is so blue, I could cry. The shadows at my feet are dark

and deep, and I can see every speck of dust floating in the air between me and the warehouse door.

When I step out of the car, Victor appears at my side. “I’m coming with you.”

“Of course.” He’s made it clear he wants to keep me close. Whether because he loves me or thinks I’m his property, it doesn’t matter.

He pulls on a black ski mask and glides ahead of me. Signaling me to wait, he presses a hand to the heavy steel door. It opens easily, without a sound. Did he come here beforehand and oil the hinges? I wouldn’t be surprised.

Victor leans in, his whisper barely stirring my hair. “He’s fond of booby traps, but there won’t be many here because he hasn’t had the time to set them. He was hiding elsewhere. Recent events flushed him out.”

Recent events. Like Victor killing Bruno and presenting his head to me on a platter. A grisly valentine.

I can’t help it. I glance at Victor with a little grin. He lifts his hone-blond brows and signals me. *Come?*

In answer, I press a thumb and forefinger together and stalk into the warehouse, gripping my Glock tight. The safety’s off, and it leads the way. The vest Victor gave me lays like a stone on my chest, but I welcome the weight. It keeps my heart from flying from my chest.

But I’m calm and centered as I move deeper into my enemy’s hiding place.

I don’t need luck or fate.

I have Victor.

Once inside, he signals me to go left. There’s a TV buzzing somewhere off to the right, but I trust him. A quick glance at the concrete floor shows faint footprints in the dust and a glint of steel wire.

Booby trap number one.

We round a huge shipping container, and I stop when he signals me to.

He points at a camera overhead. We back up and find a different way through the stacked crates and past a few big machines folded up like the carcasses of giant dead insects. Victor points out more cameras, another trip wire—booby trap number two—and a patch of disturbed dust that seems to cover a metal plate of some sort. Every step of the way, he uses the hand signals he taught me during my captivity to guide me safely forward. We sidle carefully past booby trap number three, all while an announcer on TV narrates a baseball game.

We've taken care not to kick up too much dust, but it hangs thick in the air. I breathe through my mouth, willing myself not to sneeze.

The TV noise is coming from a small room up ahead. Once an overseer's office, the grimy windows mute the yellow light, but it glows like a beacon of light and sound in the forgotten space. There's a set of footprints leading from it to the back of the warehouse, to an exit or bathroom or both. Victor and I creep around until we're in front of the door. Through it, we have a straight line of sight into the cramped room. There's a shelf with a microwave on top and a mini fridge below. Takeout containers and potato chip bags litter the floor. Just out of sight, on a sagging couch, Stephanos lounges in ratty slippers.

He's just sitting there in his sweatpants, watching TV and eating chips. Living his life long after he snuffed my mother's out.

Victor, slowly so I can see him, draws a long knife. A good throwing knife. He mimes tossing it at one of the booby traps behind us. The noise will startle Stephanos and drive him out of his nest.

Right into the line of fire.

I nod and raise my Glock. Victor slips forward, and I bite back a hiss. He's sneaking closer to get a better shot at hitting the booby trap but also to cover any other hidden exits

Stephanos might use. My instinct is to call him back and tell him to stop, but I don't.

I trust him.

He raises the knife and pauses. I reaffirm my grip on my gun.

His throw is so quick and smooth I don't see the knife. But the instant it hits the trip wire, there's a discordant twang, and a tower of boxes comes crashing down.

Stephanos is up and racing out the door toward me. His yellow-white shirt fills my vision, and I brace myself and take aim.

Crack!

The force of the shot reverberates up my arm. Acrid smoke fills my nose. I fire again and again, my ears deafened by the noise. The pulse of the gun is a steady heartbeat against my palm. In the distance, through the gray clouds, Stephanos jerks and dances.

There's a clap of noise and an explosion of heat that sends me staggering to the right. The world is muted beyond my buzzing ears.

Something else knocks into me, and I crash to the floor. The weight isn't sharp or too heavy, and I understand what it is as the dust settles. Victor. Covering me with his huge body.

He's on his feet in the next second, peeling me off the floor and backing me into a safe corner. I keep my Glock out, pointing into the dancing dust cloud at his back. Covering him like he covered me.

My back hits a corner, and a breath escapes. The warehouse area we're in is wrecked, with clouds of sawdust threatening to make me cough and debris littering the floor.

"Stephanos?" I manage to say without hacking on the heavy particulate hanging in the air.

"Hurt, but he managed to trigger the explosion." He pauses, and we both hear it: a labored wheezing a few yards away.

The hunt is not over yet.

Victor helps me step over splintered wood and creep closer to our quarry.

Stephanos is a slight form on the floor, grunting as he tries to pull his leg out from under a fallen steel beam. Trapped by the explosion he triggered.

I pause and look up at Victor, waiting for his signal. His ski mask is no longer black but gray with dust.

After a sweep, he raises his hand and touches his forefinger to his thumb, giving me the go-ahead.

I raise my hand and offer him my Glock. He understands instantly and trades my Glock for his knife.

For a moment, we stand together, holding our weapons and gazing into each other's eyes. His gaze drops to my lips like he wishes he could kiss me. My body tightens. *Okay*, I signal back.

He touches my back gently. *Go*.

I step over a fallen board and stroll to the spot where Stephanos is pinned.

He's smaller up close. Grooves line his face and sunken cheeks, surrounding his black, beady eyes. There's an unhealthy pallor to his skin, and I know that time and heart disease would've ended him sooner rather than later.

But that won't be his fate.

His eyes go wide, and he bares his teeth when he sees me. "You."

"Me." I sink down and plant a knee on his chest.

He blinks at me with sawdust-coated eyelashes. Up close and exposed like this, his ugliness is repulsive, like something crawling out from under a rock. He bats at me, but his arms are limp, weakened by the bullets he took to the chest. He struggles to breathe under my weight, his body fighting to stay alive.

I set the knife at his grime-streaked throat, ready to strike the way Victor took pains to teach me. “This is for my mother.”



VICTOR

THE BLADE FLASHES as Lula cuts just as I taught her. I force myself to wait with my weight pitched forward into my toes until the stench of death rises in the air. I pull off my ski mask, meant to dull my distinctive hair.

Lula rises slowly, her dark hair swinging like a cape behind her. I don't have to go to her. She returns to me, offering me the knife back. Her eyes are black. “You're right. It is more satisfying.”

There's blood on her jaw and cheek. I secrete away the knife and touch her face carefully, tipping it this way and that. There's a dark stain in the corner of her mouth, blending with the brighter red of her lipstick. “You have some blood...”

“Don't worry,” she murmurs. “It's not mine.”

I swipe it away and bow to claim her lips.

My dark, vengeful angel.

The sound of a slamming door breaks us apart. “What—” She raises her empty hands. I still have her Glock.

“It's all right,” I say, even as I draw us into the shadows. “Spiro made a call to your cousin.”

“Royal?” she says as her cousin appears, flushed and angry and glaring at me. His men fan out behind him, covering him.

“Lula.” His gaze sweeps the area, registering Stephanos' still form before returning to us. He opens his mouth, but before he can speak, someone else pushes forward, raising a gun with a shout.



LULA

I WATCH it in slow motion. Royal, looking angry and relieved, ready to tear me a new one. Enzo and the rest of our cousins are covering his back but turn toward the new threat.

It's my brother, crashing through the debris, his gaze fixed on Victor. "You," he snarls and swings his gun muzzle upward.

"No," I shout and step between them.

Too late.

Gino's pulling the trigger, but fate's on our side. In his carelessness, Gino blundered into one of the booby traps. He's already falling forward as the gun goes off. I flinch, but the shot goes wild. It hits a machine and ricochets. Everyone ducks.

Royal curses in Italian. "Someone take his gun."

Enzo rushes to take care of it. Gino's still flailing on the floor.

"Idiota." Royal runs a hand over his face. He looks tired as he turns to me. "Lucrezia."

"I'm okay." I step forward, tears pricking my eyes at the sight of him. "I'm in a vest. Victor..." I turn back to where Victor stands silently, the sunlight filtering in through the dust gilds his stunning features. He looks calm, maybe a little sad.

Behind me, Royal clears his throat, and I realize I've lost my train of thought. It's not often that that happens.

"Victor," I say more firmly, "found Stephanos. He helped me."

"Helped you?"

"Saved me. He saved me." From myself especially.

Royal looks back and forth between us. I can tell it's on the tip of his tongue to give the order to incapacitate or maybe even kill Victor.

So I gesture for my beautiful monster to come and wait until he's standing at my side to make things clear. "You can't

kill him,” I tell Royal and the men of my family, gripping Victor’s hand. “He’s mine.”

CHAPTER 17

lula

The Regis mansion is the heart of La Famiglia. Dark and filled with heavy, imposing furniture, it's a shocking contrast to the sterile, modern decor Victor prefers. Royal used to keep the temperature five degrees cooler than what was comfortable, but then he found his wife. Now, the air is a tad too warm but perfect for Leah and the spaghetti strap camisoles she likes to wear. And if she gets overheated while baking, sliding things in and out of the oven, well, Royal's always trying to get her naked, anyway.

There was a day when I swore that Royal would never marry for love. Some would say he didn't, but I know better. When it comes to devious, dangerous men, love looks a lot like obsession.

I lean on a sturdy mahogany leather chair, studying my cousin's dark expression and sipping my wine. I refused any food—my stomach is still unsettled—but accepted a glass of merlot. It's still not as good as the wine Victor keeps for me.

Royal and I have caught up on a lot of things in the past hour. Family, business, Gino's betrayal, Stephanos' death, and the way Victor turned his gang. We're in agreement on many things, but—

“So you're telling me I have to accept this murderer into my family?”

“Yes.” I toy with the sword charm on my necklace. My mother bought it to give to me when I turned thirteen, and I

used to feel her presence whenever I touched it. Now, the miniature blade reminds me of Victor.

Royal shakes his head, muttering in Italian.

“He’s a useful asset. But even if he wasn’t...” I shrug. “I want him.” I gave up everything for vengeance. It’s time I claimed something for myself.

“If he betrays you...”

“He won’t. Any more than you could betray Leah.”

Royal accepts this with a growl, and I hide my smile. One day, I’ll tell him my theory on how much he and Victor are alike.

“I’LL ALLOW IT,” Royal says finally. “On one condition.” He digs in his pocket and holds up a dull silver coin. On it, a long-haired man stands with his head bowed, holding a cross. Or is it a woman holding a sword?

“You’ve offered this to me before.” I didn’t take it because I’d just met David. And because Royal was still solidifying his power base, ushering the old guard out and replacing them with new, well-trained men who wouldn’t mind taking orders from a woman. From me.

“It’s time.” He presses it into my hand. For such a small thing, it’s heavy, carrying the weight of the Regis family.

“Accepted. Although, with Gino out, there’s an extra seat.” When Victor proves himself, he’d be perfect for it.

“Don’t push it.”

I turn with a smirk. “If that’s all, then I’d like to see Victor.”

“No more disappearing,” Royal says. He’s pretending my time in captivity was by choice. Like an extended vacation. It’s probably easier for him to think of it that way. It’s not as if he didn’t do the same thing to Leah.

“No.”

Royal downs his drink in one swallow and sets the glass down. He moves around the desk to flank me but doesn’t stop

me. “And I can make it official? To the Family?”

“Yes. I’m already acting as the family attorney; I might as well be in truth.” I stop and face him and let him take my face in his hands and kiss my cheeks.

“Then, consigliere, welcome home.”



“CONSIGLIERE?” Victor murmurs as we make our way to the car. Enzo is behind the wheel. Joe, Spiro, and the rest of Stephanos’ old gang are still being vetted. But eventually, they’ll be brought into the Regis regime. Another one of my acts as second in command of the Regis Family.

“Yes. He’s been wanting to make it official for a few months now. It comes with a seat at La Famiglia’s table.” Royal always took my advice before he voted. But now I have a vote of my own.

“There’s another seat free.” The one that belonged to my father and then Gino. “Royal isn’t ready to fill it, but perhaps if an outsider made himself indispensable to the Family...”

“Then I’m sure I can make myself useful.”

I sink into the car. It’s not that late, just after sunset, but I’m tired. Royal tried to get us to stay for dinner, threatening to unleash Leah on us, but I negotiated our escape by promising to come back in the morning for brunch.

Victor lets me rest, leaning forward to murmur directions to Enzo.

I must have dozed off because when I open my eyes, the car is pulling up outside the building that houses Victor’s penthouse. The one he originally took me to.

The first time, he carried me in. This time, I walk in of my own volition after Victor helps me from the car.

It feels like a lifetime since I’ve been here. Stephanos is gone. My mother’s been avenged. The truth about my brother is out, and he’ll be punished. And I may have lost a brother, but I gained a lover. Victor brings a handful of made men with him, along with his own unique skills.

Ultimately, La Famiglia has won.

And I've claimed a victory of my own.

"Where's the dungeon?" I ask Victor as we step into the elevator. I have a theory, but I want him to confirm it.

"In the basement."

I knew it.

He hovers a long finger over the button for the lower floor before he presses the one to take us to the top.

He takes me to the bathroom and positions me in front of the sink. His big hands roam over me, checking for blood, bruises, and tender spots. I took a moment in the bathroom at Royal's mansion to dust off the worst of the wood splinters and debris that coated my dress and hair from the explosion.

The worst of my wounds are carried over from my time in captivity—the letters carved above my heart. When Victor tackled me to protect me from the explosion, I crashed to the ground. The force broke the fragile skin, and the letters he carved were bleeding again.

I pull down the dress's square neckline and push my sword necklace aside so Victor can remove the dirty bandage. He growls as he fusses over the marks.

"You're the one who did this to me." I roll my eyes at his muttered curses. "It'll heal." I stop him before he covers the cuts with another bandage. "Wait. Let me see something."

I point to the letters carved into my chest. The V is the easiest letter to read. Next to it, in the same size script, is the letter R.

I studied them when Victor left me but didn't understand. The V is obvious: V for Victor. But the second letter... "R? What's your last name?"

"I have none," he says. "Not anymore. I figured I could take yours."

I drop my hand, my arm muscles suddenly too weak to hold it up. "Romano?"

“Or Regis. Your mother was a Regis, correct?”

“She was.”

“And here I am, part of the Regis family. If you and your cousin will have me.”

“He will accept you.” He will if I have any say in it.

“You saved me from him.” His touch is tender on my cheek.

“Yes.” I turn fully and rise to tiptoes to thread my arms around his broad shoulders. I pull him down until his lips brush mine and whisper, “If anyone is going to kill you, it’s going to be me.”

He straightens, lifting me off my feet as he claims my mouth. His kiss is ice and fire, and I savor the solid power of him, rubbing my swelling breasts against his chest. His dick jabs my thigh.

He swivels and sets me on the bathroom counter. I’m already spreading my legs. The dress he gave me was form-fitting but modest enough, with a hem that ends an inch above my knee. I wriggle, trying to pull it up, but it’s too tight and doesn’t budge. Until Victor helps by ripping it in half so it’s open to my navel.

“Yes,” I gasp and scoot forward to the edge of the counter. I’m not wearing underwear. He didn’t give me any earlier today, and after spending so long naked, a bra and panties would feel weird.

Victor’s already opened his pants. The head of his cock is red and angry, dripping pre-cum. He finds my sopping wet entrance and pushes in an inch. I’m squirming, trying to stretch to accommodate him when he digs his hand into my hair to hold me still.

“I will give you everything,” he promises. In one swift move, he pushes inside, spearing me as he wrenches my head back. Bombs explode in my brain. I cum right then, shaking in his grip. He watches me with his icy gaze.

“Krasiva. Mi kama.” He cups my bottom and lifts me so he can sink even deeper, filling the depths of me. My insides stretch around him, slowly accommodating his girth, but nothing can help me get used to his length. At this angle, pressed against him with gravity pulling me down, the head of his cock is knocking on my cervix.

I tear at his shirt collar, sending buttons flying as I rip the dress shirt open so I can fasten my mouth to his neck. I find the cut I made and suck on it, hard. His growl rolls through me, the delicious vibrations making me pulse around him.

“Fuck, Lula. You will be the end of me.”

That’s the idea. I sink my fingers into his hair, bare my teeth, and nip at the vein stretching from his neck to his shoulder. His winter scent swirls around me. Before I can bite him fully, he tugs my head up by my hair, and the sting in my scalp is enough to make me cum again.

Victor’s voice rings savagely in my ears as I convulse, squeezing down on his dick like the orgasm turned my inner muscles into a vice. He sets me back on the counter, pulling out. His shirt’s torn open, his hair disheveled from my fists, and there’s a red mark on his neck from my teeth. His own mouth is contorted into a snarl. He doesn’t look like we’ve been making love. He looks like he’s been in a fight.

He backs away slowly, his dick bobbing in the air. *Come*, he gestures, and I do, stalking after him, further tearing my dress so I can strip it off as I go. Naked in nothing but stilettos, I wait until he’s reached the bedroom before dropping to my knees. I crawl on all fours, my body swaying sinuously all the way to the bedroom. My breasts swing, the necklace dangling between them. I keep my head up and my gaze on Victor so I can savor the blue flame burning in his eyes. I prowl like an animal on the hunt, like an obedient pet, like a submissive safe in her Dom’s control. My humiliation and his happiness are a delicious heat that warms me through and through.

He sits on the end of the bed to wait for me, pulling off his shirt and baring his chest. Miles of pale, sculpted muscle, pretty enough to Michelangelo weep. I crawl to him, mouth

watering at the sight of him and his gorgeous dick, but I don't get to play. As I'm reaching for his cock, he wraps his hand around my neck and pulls me up to meet his mouth. His fingers dig into my throat as his lips sear mine, whispering promises of pain and pleasure. My body aches, my gaze darkening until I'm blind with need for him.

I push on his shoulders so he lies back on the bed, and I climb him. Bracing my palms on his hard pectoral muscles, I set my entrance over his erection and plunge down.

My necklace bounces as I ride him.

His hand collars my throat, controlling my movements even as I'm on top. "Mi kama. My weapon. My sharp-tongued sword. Fate forged you for me."

"A sheath for the dagger. A dagger for the sheath."

"You belong to me." He snaps his hips, driving into my depths.

"Yes." I rock over him, accepting the pain as he batters my insides. I dig my nails into his pale shoulders, willing to scratch him bloody. "And you to me. Because..." I hesitate, the words so sharp, so real, they cut. My heart aches like a bruise.

But Victor shows no mercy. "Say it."

"I love you." And it's the truth.



THANK you for reading Victor and Lucrezia's story! I have more Mafia Brides books planned.

In the meantime, read [Royal and Leah's book](#), [Revenge is Sweet](#) and grab the exclusive extra story, [A Bun in the Oven](#), [here](#).

Love and blood-soaked poniards,

Lee Savino

royal doll

**A NEW KINGDOM
STANDALONE**

MAY SAGE AS EMM DARCY

Royal Doll

2024 © May Sage

Edited by Theresa Schultz

author's note

If you've previously read any Emm Darcy title, feel free to carry on! this one shouldn't scar you for life.

If you haven't, and you have some triggers, take a little pause to read this: as Emm Darcy, May Sage writes highly steamy and often morally bankrupt stories that aren't for everyone.

This book isn't very dark at all (there are mentions of dark things, but none on the page) however, it includes subjects some will find disturbing.

Liv and Callum are completely monogamous, emotionally and romantically. But they are swingers, and in this specific book, Liv is a hotwife.

The trigger list, if you need it:

sharing, sexually.

prostitution.

somnophilia.

IF THIS DOESN'T SCARE you, keep going my fellow kinky soul!

~ MAY

CHAPTER 1

liv

He's here tonight. I'm unsurprised, but I notice all the same. The ridiculously tall, young, gorgeous guy wears another expensive suit—blue, this time—that must be tailored for him; I can't imagine any store carrying something that could embrace such large shoulders and show off that narrow waist.

Sometimes, I wonder what he does for a living. He certainly doesn't fit in here. He's several tiers over the bulk of our clientele, in all aspects; age—we cater to the midlife crisis crowd, not twenty-somethings—wealth, beauty. Maybe he's a lawyer. I'd look him up, but I don't know his name, and I doubt I ever will.

He doesn't know mine either. To him, I'm Nala, the girl behind the mask.

My stranger first came on a stormy night at the beginning of the summer. I guessed he must have walked in to get out of the rain. I was in the middle of my routine, but at the moment when I twist, head down, to look at the audience and blow them a kiss, I noticed him.

He's been here every single time I've worked since. I wonder if he comes every day, or if it's just a coincidence that he ends up being here the four nights a week when I work the pole at the club.

I know it's terribly cliché—poor girl from the wrong side of the tracks becomes a stripper—but point me to one single job paying half as well in all of Andaria for an eighteen-year-old fresh out of high school. I bussed tables the last two years,

and it did allow me to have some pocket money—not to mention occasionally eat, when my father forgot to stock the house with anything other than booze.

I finished high school two months ago, and Dad immediately announced that I had to pull my weight if I wanted to stay under his roof. I didn't want to stay under his roof, and certainly not while paying him, so I packed what he allowed me to take and left. I stayed at my friend's Patricia's for a few days, but Tricks's house is pretty cramped, between her twin and their parents, so I made sure I had a place within a couple of weeks. I'm renting a tiny flat with a couple of girls; the rent is cheap as fuck, but I still need to pay it.

Starting in September, I'll get my college scholarship, but it's rudimentary, only covering tuition and board. The books are going to be a fortune, and until then, I need cash, fast.

The seven years of studying ballet with Tricks and Jinx made me flexible, good at following rhythm, so this job made sense. Besides, we're all behind masks; no one has to know it's me. I'm extremely careful when I leave and come to this place, to make sure no one sees me.

I stretch my leg over my head, extending into a full split in the air, which never ceases to cause standing ovations, both by the clapping hands of my audience and by the tents in their pants.

Truthfully, I don't mind this job. After watching my audition, Christina, the boss, immediately gave me a rotation on the main stage, rather than the various poles set up in front of small booths. That didn't endear me to the rest of the employees—apparently, many worked here for years before even seeing the stage—but it means that I get to do it from too far away for anyone to actually touch me.

Most of the time. I get private requests, though. Many of them. Sometimes, I'm even tempted.

Our patrons can request any of the strippers to perform private lap dances, but it's up to the dancer to accept or refuse them. Most dancers automatically accept them all. I'm the opposite. I've never said yes.

The actual menu on their table lists a private dance for two hundred and a lap dance for three. But the offers can be a lot higher. Five hundred for a blowjob. Seven hundred bucks for a pussyjob—I had to ask what that was, exactly. Some guy even offered a thousand bucks to come on my feet, and god, I was ever so tempted. What do I care if someone wants to use my feet for their spank bank? I could really use a thousand bucks.

But it's a slippery slope, and one I don't intend to step on. Being an exotic dancer is one thing. I'm not signing up for prostitution. For one, it's illegal, but more importantly, I want to walk away from the club with full knowledge that I worked hard and did what it took to make my dream come true without cutting corners.

Why spreading myself open for the eyes of fifty guys while wearing a tiny silver thong is okay but having jizz on my feet isn't, I'm not quite sure, but a girl's got to draw the line somewhere. Mine is bodily fluid exchange.

Everyone's clapping, except *him*. My eyes are inexorably drawn back to his striking figure as I throw my head back in a cambré that would make Tricks's mother weep. If she knew how I used the lessons she taught me, I think the poor French lady would pass out. Or potentially murder me. Ballet teachers are intense.

It doesn't matter. It's a good day, with a lovely, appropriately drunk crowd, and I'll end up with another two grand in my pocket by the end of the night.

I blow my last kiss, just like I did the first time my stranger walked into the strip club, and leap down elegantly, curtsying to the gentlemen.

The curtain falls, and I rush to leave.

“Fucking bitch,” Sandra mutters.

I try not to let it get to me. It's not surprising she doesn't like me: she's been stripping since she was my age, and she's in her thirties now. She doesn't get nearly as many tips as I do. While I only need to dance, with the occasional split to make

them all drool, she's no longer able to get their blood going with something so prudish.

Tonight, she wears her cowboy getup, a sparkly silver catsuit that she can peel away by ripping it off her body with one tug. Underneath, I know her bra's cupless, and she has tassels dangling off her nipples. While I wear a thong, she's likely in a minuscule bundle of strings leaving nothing to the imagination. She'll also take lap dances tonight in the VIP room. And with all that, I'll likely bring home as much, just from my four dances.

I smile, biting back any retort. Sandra isn't my enemy. She's a warning of what my life could very well become.

CHAPTER 2

lii

“Ahhh. Arghhhh!”

I grunt as I let myself into the shoebox apartment.

It’s three in the morning and I’d hoped to be able to crash, but of course, that’s too much to ask on a Saturday night. Or is it Sunday morning?

“Oh, Willem!” one of my roommates shrills.

Across the narrow corridor, the second responds with a, “Harder, Pete!”

Then the thumping commences.

Needless to say, we have thin walls.

I drag myself into the kitchen, and heat up a Cup Noodles, before making my way to my bedroom, yawning.

I’m not hungry, but I know better than to go to bed without something in my stomach; if I do, I’ll be up in three or four hours, irritated and starving.

Alone in my bed, staring at the ceiling while I wait for my roommates to finish their fuck fest, I find my thoughts drifting back to my stranger, the one who always watches in silence.

I’ve never seen him from close enough to actually make out all his features but from a distance, he seems incredibly beautiful. Dark, tousled hair. Penetrating eyes that don’t shift from the object of their attention—namely, my legs.

I try not to feel weird or guilty as my fingers slide between my legs. After all, he’s been watching me for a month, and I’m

pretty sure at one point or another, he must have thought back to my bends and my splits in the shower, his hand around his cock. The difference is I'm not paying for the privilege of using his pretty face.

It's rather sad that I have no one else to fantasize about, but such is my life. At school, the pretty guys lost their appeal the moment they opened their mouths, and I'm too superficial to go for *nice personalities* blessed with zits. The simple reality is that I've never so much as had a crush.

I could probably just think about Henry Cavill like your average girl, but my stranger's my choice tonight.

I make myself come to the sound of my roommates' fun, finishing after them, and I manage to fall asleep almost immediately.



I WAKE TO A SUNNY AFTERNOON. I shoot a text to Tricks, knowing she's likely too busy with rehearsals to hang out with me. She joined the corps at the Royal Anderian Ballet last month. She's free most evenings, but that's when I work. Her twin, Jinx, isn't as close a friend—she's a little shy and bookish, and I'm introverted, so when we're alone, the conversation is just scintillating. Not.

Both replies come fast: no, they aren't free.

I sigh, and resolve to visit my third, and sadly, final friend: a swan with a broken wing I've fed at the park for the last couple of years.

Grabbing my ebook reader, I take an inventory of all the things I need to buy for the coming week, planning to stop for groceries on the way in, so I can pick up some spinach and peas for Aurore. I called him that before one of the park rangers informed me that he was a he.

Half an hour later, I'm crouched by the lake, chatting with Aurore as he nibbles his treats, sipping my coffee, when I hear him.

“There's a Don't Feed the Ducks sign, you know.”

I turn, because the low rumble is too suave not to wonder who it comes from, though I don't expect him to be addressing me.

There are a fair few people in the park today, given that it's so nice out, but they all fade into the background.

A few paces away, leaning back on a stone picnic table, stands my stranger.

He doesn't quite belong in broad daylight in my mind, likely because I've always seen him in the dim club, but there's no denying that it's him. And he's *definitely* talking to me.

I stand slowly, at loss for words.

"Well?" he prompts, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Should I get you arrested?"

I blink. "Arrested?"

"You're not supposed to feed it, you know."

And you're not supposed to stalk girls to their favorite swans, my mind shoots back.

But of course, he's not stalking me. It's a complete coincidence that we're meeting here. He doesn't know I'm Nala. How could he?

In all likelihood, he spotted me on his walk and decided to stop, either in defense of the swan, or because he decided I reminded him of someone.

Still, I run the statistics of my meeting him out here by chance in my head. In a city of millions, what are the odds?

"He's not a duck," I retort dumbly.

I could explain that I've actually chatted with the wildlife guide here, and was told that giving him swan-appropriate things was just fine; the sign is meant to deter people from stuffing them with bread. But that would require more words than I'm currently capable of enunciating, so he gets "Me Jane. You Tarzan. No duck."

“So I see.” His smirk broadens. “So, legalities are dependent on the exact wording to you?”

I shiver. It’s a very pointed question to ask a stranger in the park. Again, saying so would require the full use of my vocal capacities, so I settle on, “I guess.”

“Interesting.”

What’s interesting is the fact that he’s crossing the narrow path separating us, until he’s more than near, standing right next to me.

From up close, he’s not what I expected. He’s far *worse*.

Strong jaw, with a bit of stubble. Straight nose. Clear gray eyes, as intense as when I feel them on me in the dark.

I redirect my eyes to Aurore rather than bear the weight of their scrutiny, feeling my cheeks explode.

Oh my god, I fingered myself thinking of him not even half a day ago. How fucking embarrassing. And I feel like it could be plastered on my face; if he looks too hard, he’ll see it.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

I glance back. It’s a perfectly normal question, objectively, but made incongruous by circumstances. Why would he care about the name of some chick in the park? Unless he knows... but he can’t, right?

“Unless you’re actually called Nala.”

My heart stops.

Oh.

I stand, staring at the stranger as my pulse flies.

“I’m a *Lion King* fan.”

He nods. “Figured as much. That still doesn’t tell me your name.”

Somewhere at the back of my mind, an alarm bell rings. I tell myself I should be concerned. But I’m not.

I’ve heard about some of the girls getting followed, and worse, but if he wanted to harm me, he wouldn’t have chosen

to do so at four o'clock on a sunny afternoon, in a park full of families and ducks.

“What’s yours?” I counter, to highlight the awkwardness of the question.

I doubt he’d give me his real name, either. Men might enjoy watching pretty things dance in barely there clothing, but that doesn’t mean they want their indulgence to have any impact in the real world.

Usually.

If he gives me his name, I could find him, blackmail him by offering to tell his wife where he spends his nights, or whatever other methods I’ve heard of in the changing room. I wouldn’t, but I *could*.

I find myself glancing to his left hand. No ring. No hint of one recently removed either.

No wife. His girlfriend, then. Someone who looks like him can’t possibly be unattached.

“Callum Noble,” he replies without hesitation. “At your service.”

My lips part in surprise.

Before I tell him I don’t believe him, he retrieves a card wallet from the inner pocket of his jacket, and pulls one out, handing it to me.

I blink at it. If he’s lying, he’s certainly well prepared.

My eyes widen at the crest above his name on the black card. Wings to either side of a shield, with crossed blades in the background.

The emblem of the house of Noble. Every kid in the country knows it.

Holy fuck.

“What do you want?” I barely recognize my voice, trembling, weak.

Now, I have the sense to be a little afraid.

The Nobles are some of the most powerful aristocrats in this kingdom. And one of them is standing right next to me. That can't be good.

“For now, a name would do, darling.”

He doesn't want my name.

He already has it.

I'm certain of it.

“You tell me,” I challenge, lifting my chin.

He smiles, those gray eyes still cool. “I wasn't certain whether you favored Olivia or Liv.”

The fact that he's not lying to me gives me a little courage. “Liv. And what do you want *now*, Callum?”

I should say Mr. Noble, or sir, and probably curtsy, but I'm sure my breach of etiquette can be forgiven given the fact that *he's stalked me*.

I don't know what I expect of him next.

“I have a problem I believe you can fix,” he tells me.

“How?”

“By spreading those delectable legs, of course. What else could I possibly need you for, darling?”

Okay, I'm not surprised. I roll my eyes. “Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass.”

I start to walk away.

“You haven't heard about your compensation yet.”

“Still not a whore, but thanks,” I call back without turning.

I seriously hope he's not following me.

But of course he is, and his much larger strides let him catch up in no time. “That's a judgmental word. You didn't strike me as judgmental.”

I'm not, most of the time.

“Shows how well you know me.”

“Not as well as I will soon, I grant, but—”

“Look, Romeo,” I interrupt. “You’re barking up the wrong tree. Pick up any other girl at the club—or on the street. I’m sure they’ll be happy to...help with your little problem.”

I can’t help lowering my gaze to his crotch.

“That’s hardly *little*,” Callum replies. “And as it so happens, no other girl will do for this specific issue.”

“And I’m still not interested.” I shrug. “I’ve never even had sex, and I won’t start by selling it.”

He pauses, tilting his head. “Even better.”

I groan, feeling like a parrot as I repeat, “I’m not int—”

“A hundred thousand euros for one night.”

Now I stop.

And then I turn, slowly.

“You’re actually insane.”

Callum scoffs. “Not the first time I’ve heard that.”

“No. I—no. I’m not fucking you for money. Sorry.”

Anyone willing to spend that much on something others would give for free is bad news. He doesn’t want sex; he wants to tear me apart, and probably leave me dead in the morning so he doesn’t need to pay up.

Callum Noble is majorly bad news. I’m going to google him as soon as I go up; I bet I find a trail of disappearances of pretty girls he meets, and equally troubling things.

“Who said you’d be fucking me?” he asks, shocking me *again*.

What?

CHAPTER 3

lii

I told him in no uncertain terms I wasn't interested in his proposition, so I thought he'd move on, but when I'm back on the stage on Tuesday, my stranger is in the room.

Except he's no longer a stranger at all; I have his name. I know it's his real name, courtesy of google. Callum Noble, twenty-four, lawyer—I called it—only child and sole heir to the earl Albert Noble, and prince of the realm. I definitely didn't call those last bits.

And he's certainly not *my* anything.

I ignore him as I dance, pretending I haven't spent the last two days mentally tallying how I'd spend his money. One hundred thousand euros for a shag. How ludicrous. Part of me is insanely curious about the details of the deal. If not him, who was it that I was supposed to screw? Why wouldn't any other girl work? It's all awfully mysterious. But curiosity killed the cat, and I plan on having a long life, so I'm not going to indulge myself by asking Callum any questions. I'm just not.

Even if the card he handed me includes what looks like a mobile phone number. It can't possibly be his. Men like Callum Noble don't hand out their private numbers to random chicks they want to buy for a night. I bet it's a secretary's.

I finish my last routine for the night and get changed in the back. It's crazy hot in July, even at this time, so I'm only wearing shorts and a T-shirt, with a baseball cap to hide my

face. I stuff my hair in it, before making my way to the underground parking lot underneath the club.

One of the reasons I feel relatively safe at my job is the fact that the building has a basement entrance reserved for the staff. We're on the ground floor of a skyscraper, with a casino on top of us, and a hotel above that. Patrons can access the basement levels 2 and 3, but the first is exclusive to those who work here. I don't need to go out on the street at the end of my shift, so creeps can't follow me.

That's excluding wealthy, entitled, gorgeous creeps in custom suits.

I wonder how he found me? Once he got my name, working out that I go to the park at least once a week can't have been hard, but how did he get it in the first place? My guess is he bribed my boss, or hacked the employee records.

It should disturb me more than it does, and it would, if he were any other of my patrons. But I guess that coming from a freaking *Noble*, I'm not surprised. If he wants to find out who someone is, there's no reason why he can't.

Ugh. I sigh, frustrated with myself as I straddle my dingy little Vespa. It breaks down at least twice a month, but it gets me from A to B without having to walk at three in the morning.

Before I turn it on, I grab my phone, giving in.

Me: Is this your actual number?

I intend to immediately shove it back in my pocket, but a reply flashes before I put it away.

Royal Psycho: Why, hello, love. Delighted to hear from you. Yes, it is.

Why does it sound like he absolutely expected me to text him? I told him no, numerous times, in various ways.

And then I bloody texted him, like an idiot.

I stuff my phone back in my pocket and head home, resolutely ignoring the three beeps I feel through my pants.

It's one thirty this time, and I enter a blissfully silent apartment. Ellie and Meg have work in the morning on weekdays, so they save all sexcapades for the weekend.

I make a conscious effort to start the kettle and brew some herbal tea, before sinking on the sofa and retrieving my phone.

Royal Psycho: It's been some time since I indulged in middle of the night texting. Isn't it customary to receive interesting pictures at this time?

Royal Psycho: Or filthy promises. I'm not fussy.

Royal Psycho: Come on, Liv. You wouldn't have texted me if you didn't want to play.

I find myself imagining his voice as I read the words, and I flush.

Me: I was driving, if you must know. And no pictures for you. You've seen enough of me, don't you think?

Royal Psycho: Not nearly as much as I will, and soon. If a hundred grand isn't enough, name your price.

My jaw drops. Name my fucking price?

Me: I told you I wasn't a whore.

Royal Psycho: Everything is for sale.

Me: Oh yeah? How much do YOU cost?

Royal Psycho: I'd fuck anyone for a billion in cash.

I grunt in annoyance, because truth be told, I don't think anyone would refuse that deal, even billionaires.

Me: What if that's my price? A billion.

Royal Psycho: Now we're talking.

Me: You'd pay it?

Royal Psycho: No, but we can start the negotiations.

Me: Cheapskate.

Royal Psycho: Any businessman worth his salt knows not to pay more than the market value on a product. I'm quite certain you'll lower your fee.

Me: *middle finger emoji*

Royal Psycho: Now, now. That wasn't very mature of you. Two hundred and fifty thousand.

I blink.

My brain can't even comprehend the concept of two hundred and fifty thousand euros. I know the apartment I lived in with my father is worth sixty thousand. A little over four apartments?

I also know how much my tuition is for the next year at Crompton College: ten thousand a year. I couldn't afford that, but it, along with the eight grand for housing, is covered by my scholarship.

I have another acceptance burning a hole in my bedside drawer: the Royal University of Anderia, one of the best colleges in the entire freaking world. They offered me a social scholarship, covering housing, but nothing for the tuition—unsurprisingly. I have good grades, but just getting in was a miracle; the merit scholarships are only given to geniuses like Jinx, or the one-in-a-million talents like Tricks.

The tuition is fifty thousand a year for Anderian. I considered getting a loan for it, but dismissed the idea. How the hell would I ever repay it, when my choice of study takes seven years?

But if Callum is serious...I could do it. His money could pay for my entire undergrad and then I'd just have to fork out for the post-grad years. And I'd have four years to save up for it.

I bite my lip hard enough to bruise.

Me: Tell me why you picked me.

I need to understand that.

Royal Psycho: That's a complicated answer and not one I want to give via text. Meet me tomorrow?

Me: Right. So you can kidnap me, have your way with me, and get your minions to dump the body in the nearest river.

Royal Psycho: Is that why you're saying no, love? You're afraid of me.

I'd be insane not to be.

Before I reply, he sends me a new message: an address in the posh part of town.

Le Luminaris.

I've heard the name somewhere but I can't immediately place it. A quick Google search tells me that it's the place to be, the restaurant frequented by the famous, the wealthy, and the beautiful youth of Anderia. The crown prince and his siblings are frequent patrons.

Royal Psycho: Tomorrow, 6 pm. You can meet me at the doors, where a hundred paps will take pictures of us entering together. And if your body is found in any shallow rivers in the next few weeks, I'd be the prime suspect. Would that suit?

I stare at the message, trying to name the different feelings flooding my brain. Confusion, interest, bafflement, relief.

I might have played it off as a joke but part of me was genuinely worried about what he planned to do to me. If he's serious about being seen in public with me, then murder, or general harm, is likely not part of his plan.

Oh my god, I'm genuinely considering that nonsense. I *am* a cat. I really hope it's not lethal. At least, the word is, we have nine lives, and I'm only on my first one.

Me: I'm telling my best friend everything you say.

Royal Psycho: Tricks, right? If you must. She already has an NDA.

He knows Tricks?

I have about a million more questions now.

Me: I don't have anything to wear someplace like that.

He's responded almost immediately to each of my texts but now, he takes a minute.

Royal Psycho: Get something red. See you at six.

I'm about to shoot another protest, and maybe suggest my local pizza joint instead, when I get another text—from my bank.

I have an alert set up to tell me whenever I get, or spend, more than a thousand bucks.

Automatic notification: you have received 2500 euros at 1:47 am on 17th of July 2021, from Sir Callum Edward Charles Roissy-Noble.

Me: ?????

Royal Psycho: Night, love.

CHAPTER 4

liv

I'm lost.

I do not belong in the quirky shop on one of the royal lanes, and it must be blatant, either from the look on my face or my secondhand band T-shirt, because a perfectly put-together adult who looks, for some strange reason, like she could be my age, smiles at me and asks, "Can I help you?"

She's also blonde, though hers is more honey than my almost-white mess. People assume I bleach my hair. That's an expense I can't afford, so I don't; it just happens to grow super pale right out of my skull. Hers is swept in an elegant updo. Her makeup is perfect, and she looks so svelte in her pencil skirt.

I wouldn't even know how to walk in one of those.

Presumably, I can't ask her how I can become her, so I blurt, "I need a dress." With a wince, I add, "For Le Luminaris."

I've gone back and forth on it since I woke up at eleven. Do I go? The sane, logical answer is hell no, but apparently, I'm still a cat, because I want to. I want answers. I can always tell him to shove his offer where the sun doesn't shine again if I want to, but I'd still like to hear why he thought to ask me. Why no one else will do.

All right, I'm flattered. It's stupid, but who can say that they were followed and propositioned by someone of the caliber of Callum fucking Noble? No one I know, that's for sure.

Then when I decided to go, I had to start thinking about how I was going to dress.

Her eyes widen. “I see. I’ve never been, myself, but we’ll have what you need.”

She proceeds to talk my ear off about fashion as she leads me directly to a changing room that looks like it should belong to a princess. Everything is pink or gold, with rich velvet and lace. The room’s larger than my bedroom, with a deep plush loveseat.

I really can’t afford this place.

Except I have two and a half thousand euros in my account that don’t belong to me, sent exactly for this purpose, so I suppose I do. Maybe. Possibly.

“Most people make the mistake of assuming that because Le Luminaris is so exclusive and costly, it’s meant for formalwear, but from what I’ve observed—we do have many clients that frequent the restaurant, I assure you—that’s not the case.”

Maybe I should be offended, but I’m glad she’s assumed I’ve never been, because I need all the help I can get.

“Lum is...how could I say it? The pre-game of the in crowd. They dine there before heading out to a party elsewhere.”

I nod, happy I didn’t attempt to pick out something myself.

I combed through pictures taken at the notorious club, and honestly the clothing was eclectic; some people wore dresses worthy of a Cannes red carpet, but others just threw on jeans and a sparkly top.

“So, clubwear, huh?”

“Highborn clubwear,” she specifies, nose scrunching up. “You’re meeting a man or a friend?”

I snort. “Why can’t it be both? And I could be gay.”

She doesn’t roll her eyes, but I can tell it takes some effort to prevent herself from doing so. “You didn’t notice my low

neckline. Pardon the assumption.”

“It’s a guy,” I admit. “But it’s not a date, we’re just... talking about something.”

Her eyes rake probingly over my body, taking it all in. “Thirty-six, twenty-five, thirty-two, yes?” She doesn’t let me reply. “You can remove your clothing and put on a dressing gown. I’ll be back shortly.”

I only have a second to get changed and sit down on the soft sofa before she’s back, several items in hand.

“I forgot to ask about the budget,” the woman says. “These are between five hundred and three thousand, will that suit?”

I blink, and nod. “I guess, yeah.”

It’s wild to me that one single outfit could cost so much; I think the single most expensive piece of clothing I own as of today is a two-hundred-buck coat—and that was a splurge. The winters get arctic up here in the mountains, so I bought a ski jacket in the off season.

I try on the first piece of clothing, an off-white jumpsuit, softer than anything I’ve ever touched, with little studs stitched on the lapel and a wide leather belt. It’s adorable. At eight hundred bucks, it better be. But I remove it and try the next, a little black dress with a frilly, short skirt and a corseted top. That’s hot as fuck. I remove it, *fast*.

As I try on the dozen outfits, it occurs to me that my shop assistant has only shown me stuff that I could see myself wearing. It can’t be a coincidence. Everything would work at a Taylor Swift concert—a little pop rock, on the edgier side of girlie. It also fits like it’s been designed for me, so thirty-six, twenty-five, thirty-two must be my actual measurements.

The three-thousand-buck piece is entirely made of butter-soft leather. I dismiss it regretfully, my eyes darting back to the first thing.

And then I take the little black dress again. It’s far too sexy for meeting my freaking stalker, but it’s also gorgeous, and something I’d likely wear again.

And a small part of me also knows that a dress like that holds a little power over men. Callum Noble is already far too powerful; it can't hurt to leave him a little tongue-tied.

"That's the one," I finally say.

"I had a feeling." The woman smirks, raising a single brow. "Not a date, huh?"

It's my turn to roll my eyes.

The dress costs a thousand bucks, which leaves over half of what he gave me for tonight. I could just return it, but instead, I browse the accessory aisle while the shop assistant packs the dress.

I notice a long red chain, with an adorable little bow featuring a pearl at its center.

"Hey," I call. "Sorry, what's your name?"

"Annalise, miss."

"Right. Do you do shoes, Annalise?" I ask.

I could go to another store, but something tells me Annalise is my best option.

"Of course, through these doors." She waves behind the counter. "Would you like some help?"

I'm relieved she offers. "Please. I don't want high heels. And red, if you can find it?"

I tell myself it's because of the necklace. Besides, black and red just make sense. It's absolutely not because Callum instructed me to find something red. I don't take orders, least of all from that perverted Noble.

Annalise finds me a pair of mid-height heeled Mary Janes with a bow that goes so well with my necklace.

I make a face as I swipe my card, immediately getting a notification from my bank, who likely thinks I've been replaced by pod people. I shop at Primark, not fancy little boutiques.

But I confirm the transaction, and they accept it, swiping away just under two thousand euros in an instant. For some reason, I don't feel sick.

“If I may, there's a makeup store across the road that occasionally takes walk-ins. Tell him I sent you. He'll do your hair, too.”

My hair. Usually, I just let it be or tie it up. But I've been invited to Le Luminaris. And there will be photographers. And I have a wonderful little dress.

If I choose to do it, it has nothing to do with Callum.

“Right.”

CHAPTER 5

liv

He's there when I arrive, chatting with some blond guy whose hair is as pale as mine, at the entrance, beyond the bodyguard and ribbon keeping us peasants away from Le Luminaris.

I shift uncomfortably, half expecting to get shooed at the door.

“I'm with—”

The bulky, tall, bald man in uniform lifts the barrier before I can finish the sentence, waving me in. He didn't even ask for a name.

I stand still for a moment, hesitant to approach Callum while he's with company, but just then, his gray eyes dart away from his guest, finding me.

Then they don't let go.

I can only describe his look as ravenous. I've seen men stare at me like that before, but typically, I'm mostly undressed and showing them my pussy through flimsy underwear when they stare this probingly.

Callum takes his time, his gaze raking over me from the tips of my Mary Janes to the elegant side braid, missing nothing. His friend seems to be asking something, but he's not paying him a bit of attention. Finally, the blond guy turns to see what could possibly have enthralled him that way.

His eyes widen, and his jaw falls as he, too, watches me. But his expression's different than Callum's. He seems... confused?

“If you’ll excuse me,” I hear Callum say, before he crosses the distance between us, taking my elbow.

He drags me inside fast. The paparazzi, who until then ignored me, flash their cameras, taking several shots on our way up.

Only when we’re beyond the dark green gates does he let me go.

“Fucking hell, love,” he grunts. “Do you *want* me to bend you over in public?”

I snort. “I thought you wanted me to fuck *someone else*.”

Callum leads us to a bar, lifting his hand. The poor bartender immediately abandons what he was doing to scurry over. “Scotch, neat, and Cristal for the lady. Bring a bottle.”

The man obeys with a nod.

“Cristal?” I ask.

“Champagne. You’ll like it.”

“What if I detest champagne?” I argue for the sake of it.

“You got drunk on cheap cava for graduation last May. I doubt you’ll frown on the upgrade.”

How does he...

Oh. Tricks. I was with Patricia at graduation.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m gonna have a talk with my so-called best friend. How do you know her?”

“So many questions.”

“And no answers so far.”

His drink arrives first, and he downs it in one go, looking like he’s been parched and that’s the first bit of water he’s seen in days.

The champagne is next, and this time, he takes the time to lift his flute to mine for a toast. “To a mutually satisfactory evening.”

I can't exactly pinpoint why I flush. Likely because of the way those dark gray orbs pierce into me. He could be talking about the weather, I'd still be beet red.

"To getting some fucking answers," I retort, tapping his glass with mine.

A beautiful brunette informs us our private room is ready, and I tense immediately. I thought we were supposed to stay in public? But that's not what he offered; he said I'd be seen with him in public. And he's right, it's reassuring. He can't possibly murder me now, without being a prime suspect, as he said.

Then again, he's a fucking peer of the realm, and pretty high on the hierarchy, too. I think it would only take about twenty-five deaths for him to become king.

And I'm having drinks with him.

Wild.

He takes our bottle and we follow the hostess, past the bar and into a dimly lit area with half a dozen closed doors.

I wonder what's happening beyond those. Business dinners. Dates. Something else altogether.

She opens the last one and smiles pleasantly as we walk into the modern black-and-gold lounge.

"I understand you'll be trying our tasting menu tonight?"

"Yes," Callum says without my input.

I roll my eyes, unsurprised, but also unbothered. Tasting menu sounds like exactly what I would have wanted to eat in a place like this.

"The first course will arrive in a moment. Afterwards, please do press on your call button when you're ready for the next. You will have absolute privacy until you let us know we can come back in."

And I'm back to being red. I guess these rooms are definitely meant for something other than business dinners.

That explains why the seats seem so comfortable—beds, more than sofas.

She's gone after one last smile.

"I haven't agreed to fuck you," I remind him as soon as the door is shut.

Callum's washing his hands in a small basin that's far too pretty—I thought it was a plant pot or something—and I imitate him.

"Love, if it was about fucking me, I wouldn't ask. Now go sit that beautiful ass down before I change my mind and have you for dinner."

He makes his way to the sofa on the far wall, and I take my place on the other one, even more dumbfounded than before.

I'm about to ask another question for him to ignore when the door opens again, four servers armed with several small dishes coming in.

Each plate contains less than a bite-size serving of things I couldn't begin to identify. Squares. Fleshy bits. Foam. *Air*. It all looks dainty and beautiful and nothing like food.

"So," Callum says, reaching out for a dish on his right.

He takes it between two fingers, bringing it directly to his mouth.

I do the same, and lose all my ability to think for several moments.

Oh. My. God.

Is this what rich people eat? No pasta or pizza or potatoes, just heaven on a plate?

I think I come a little in my panties. I want to cry because it's already gone.

"Why you. That was your first of many queries, yes?"

It takes me a while to get over what's in my mouth, but I finally manage to nod.

"Are you sure you wanna know?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes. That's the entire reason I'm here."

Though if I'd known about the food, I would have come anyway.

How do people even make things like that? With what?

"You have a half-sister."

My jaw falls as my hand stops, halfway to the next dish.

What?

"Come again?"

"I figured you wouldn't know. Your dad and mom only stayed together for a couple of years when you were born, then you were raised by your mother until age seven, when she ODeD, right?"

I nod, rather than launching into another useless lecture about stalking.

"Well, just around when your parents separated, another woman had a kid with your dad. She's about a year and a half younger than you."

I don't know what to say. Honestly, given who my father is, the possibility of step-siblings should have occurred to me before now, but it just didn't.

I have a half-sister? Some girl around seventeen years old?

"Long story short, my friend Hawk has a thing for her. You look alike. *A lot.*"

This, I can also believe, because I've taken a lot after my father; the blonde hair, but also his mouth, his nose, his eyebrows. I think the only thing I have from my mom is the blue eyes.

"He is about to throw his life away and I want to remind him of the...*possibilities* that could open to him someday if he refuses to marry the harpy his dad's forcing on him."

"By fucking me. Because I look like my half-sister?"

It's all too stupid for words.

"Essentially."

"That's insane."

Callum shrugs. “He can’t fuck her. She hates his guts, for one, but she’s also jailbait. And a lot more complicated than you. So here’s the deal: I convince him with my words, you convince him with your pussy, and we pull him away from the edge. You walk away with a tidy sum that will make your life considerably easier either way it ends.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “That’s it, that’s your grand plan? Persuading your friend to change his mind on something major using the strength of my almighty pussy?”

He nods solemnly. “It’ll help that he’ll be your first. Pretty sure your prissy little sis is a virgin, too. He’ll think about popping her cherry next. Are you on birth control? I’d rather you weren’t.”

“Oh, if you’d rather I weren’t, I guess I’d just pop out some stranger’s kid, ruining my entire life for your convenience!” My voice is rising, but he doesn’t seem bothered.

I’m guessing the room’s soundproof, given its purpose.

“You can take a pill in the morning or whatever. But it’ll help.”

I stand, ready to leave. “I’m done with this nonsense.”

“Half a million.”

The words hang between us in the stunned silence.

“I’m going easy on you rather than dragging out the negotiations. That’s my plateau. I won’t go higher; you’re objectively not worth more. But you do this for me, and half a million euros are yours. I’ll even register your service to the kingdom, so it’s tax free.”

“Under what, party favors?” I snap, finding my voice again.

“Yes,” Callum replies without hesitating. “Sit, Liv. The theatrics don’t change the fact that you’re going to say yes. You need the cash. I need your help. It’s a fair deal.”

He sounds oh so reasonable.

And what kills me? He's right. If I stay on my high horse and walk away from this life-changing offer...there's a very high chance that sixty years from now, I'll lie on my deathbed, wondering what if. Regretting it.

Life doesn't tend to throw curveballs, or chances. Not to people like me. This is mine.

I sit.

And the asshole smirks.

"How did you find me?" I ask out of curiosity, and because it just occurred to me that it likely was no coincidence.

"Gathering dirt on your sister," he answers obligingly.

It doesn't matter how nasty it is, he always gives me the truth.

"What, so you could blackmail her into fucking your friend?" The moment I say the words, I know they're true.

"That was the initial plan, but when I learned about you, I figured it'd be much cleaner this way."

"Cleaner," I muse.

"I mean, you are a stripper. You're not above using your body to get where you need to in life. Your half-sister's a spoiled brat. She would have pouted through it all. Whereas you're going to be such a good girl, aren't you?"

I shiver. "You're something else."

He winks. "Eat your mousse, love. It's to die for."

CHAPTER 6

callum

I like when my plans come together this well, usually. I have every piece in place. Hawk is going to accept my offer. All is going swimmingly. So why won't my fists stop tightening on the damn armrest?

We're in my apartment, and no one questions when I had the brand-new pole installed in my lounge. All eyes are drawn to the gorgeous blonde stretching on it, dressed in lingerie far more revealing and a thousand times more appealing than the cheap shit she wears at her club. I picked it out myself. Red lace. Black silk. Her lips are painted bright red, too.

She's wearing a mask for now—a hand-carved Venetian affair that belongs in a museum.

The party could have been for just about anything, but as it so happens, it's my birthday weekend, so it gave me a reason to invite everyone. They would have come in any case.

"Is that new?" my sister asks, sipping wine as she watches the dancer—or rather, the pole.

"Mm," I reply noncommittally.

I don't speak to her if I can help it, and she knows it.

It's sad to say so about one's own sister, but she truly is the worst piece of shit I can imagine. I'm no saint. I can be manipulative to get what I'm after, but she takes pleasure in causing pain. I've always known that. What I didn't realize was how far she's willing to go.

Too fucking far.

I'm the only one who knows what really happened that night. If I'd told my cousin or my friends, the viper sipping cocktails would be dead and buried. I can't bring myself to throw her into the lion's den, given the fact that she is my fucking sister, but I'm not going to let her ruin Hawk's life. I'm just not.

He's the best of us—an artist, with his heart on his sleeve. He's also far too loyal, and easily swayed. She would chew him up and spit him back out, a fact my father knew when he arranged the engagement. He chose someone she could control, so that we Nobles could take over the fucking world.

I'm not against the concept per se, but I draw the line at using Hawk to do it.

This party goes on like just about any other in one of The Loft's apartments: we start to drink and dine up here, then most of the guests make their way to the Royal Club. It suits me fine. The sooner we're in closer comity, the better.

My sister usually leaves early, but tonight, everyone lingers, watching my gorgeous butterfly extend her wings on her pole. I should have realized they would.

Eventually, though, general horniness wins and my guests leave to fuck a whore, a pledge, or a lady downstairs.

I invite Hawk and my cousin Sebastian to start a game of poker before they, too, think of making an escape. Not that they would during my birthday celebration.

My gaze drifts from the table to the slender dancer still twirling on her pole. She had breaks, but she's been at it for hours. Won't she be tired? I should have hired someone else to dance with her, too. I need her to have some energy for later.

A part of my mind is asking a very different kind of question. Tomorrow is my birthday, after all. Twenty-five. Shouldn't I be the one to get a present? I've never been one to mind sharing, but why should I give her virginity to Hawk, when I could be the one to take it? Shove right into her purity, mark her as mine.

That's a surprise. I've never been one to prefer virgins. They're terrible fucks, and rate as a ten on the cringy meter. Yet I don't seem to mind the idea of taking hers. Claiming it.

That's stupid. My plan is sound. I know just what to say, and do, to get under Hawk's skin and move him like a pawn. I am my sister's brother, for better or worse.

All guests except those at my table have left, and our game's over. It's time. And still...I hesitate.

But then I clear my throat, waving toward the gorgeous trap in lingerie. "Come over here, love, won't you?"

She moves like silk and water, smooth, gracious, confident. I've read her files enough times to know she owes those movements to many years of training with one of the most severe ballet teachers in the country, but when she's dressed like that, it's easy to forget, and to think that she's just made to be fucked.

Olivia Barrett is but a means to an end, and my little head needs to get with the program.

I offer her my hand. When she takes it, I pull until she's standing right over me.

My hands move to her bare waist and I lower her to my lap. "What do you think of my lovely find?" I ask innocently.

"Remarkable," Hawk declares without hesitation.

"Yes." Sebastian's eyes caress her body, drinking it in.

I take one of her legs and lift it up, putting her foot down on the table so she's giving them both a full view of her tiny La Perla string, as my other hand pushes it to the side.

Fuck. She's *drenched*.

Does pole dancing always make her wet like this, or is it just tonight? Just for me?

I slide a finger inside her, bringing my mouth to her slender neck.

"Want a closer look?"

Neither of my friends is shocked, it's certainly not the first time I've made a similar offer, but while Sebastian doesn't hesitate to stand, Hawk stiffens.

"Daphne wouldn't like that."

It takes a physical effort for me not to react. Of course, I know my sister's demanding monogamy of him now, though she's still fucking two of her girlfriends, our butler, and half of the peerage.

"What my sister doesn't know won't hurt her," I reply.

It's time to play my trump card, the one I know will work for Hawk. I let go of Liv's leg to undo the ribbon holding her mask behind her tied-up hair, and take the pins and scrunchie holding it in place while I'm at it.

Her light blonde hair, slightly damp with sweat, falls around her sweetheart face. Silence follows, as Hawk watches everything he won't admit he wants. He saw her last week. I made sure he did, so he'd understand this as a possibility at the back of his mind.

Seb, however, never saw the girl who could very well be Grace's twin.

"How?" he gasps.

Having Sebastian here, like everything I do, is entirely strategic.

"Meet the lovely Olivia. She's eighteen—almost nineteen, in fact—and, believe it or not, a bona fide virgin." I trail a series of slow kisses along her neck, relishing her discreet shivers. "She's my entertainment for tonight, but you know I don't mind sharing."

"How does she look *exactly* like fucking Grace?" Sebastian asks.

"Accident of birth." I chuckle. "Aren't most things? Their dad was a cheat, on top of a deadbeat."

"Jesus," Hawk swears under his breath.

My slow exploration of her wet opening changes, my finger dipping inside her faster, deeper. I run my thumb along her clit, taking a sip of wine, ever so casual.

She muffles a moan, her leg dropping to the floor.

“Now, now, love, I know you can keep it up for us,” I chide gently. “Our friends don’t want to miss the show, yes?”

She lifts it back up, flushing, and clamping her mouth as shut as she can.

“Want a taste?” I ask Sebastian.

“That’s just insane,” Hawk says.

I don’t see him leaving, though.

I know he won’t. He barely needs any convincing already. Because he’s wanted this since he was sixteen and they introduced him to a fifteen-year-old bombshell he couldn’t have.

Sebastian gets to his knees without further prompting, bringing his mouth to my gorgeous stripper’s cunt.

This, too, is uncomfortable to me. I don’t think she’s done much dating in her life, hence the deplorable state of her hymen, and well, if it’s the first time she has someone go down on her, why isn’t it me?

Fuck. I need to get a grip. I’m doing this for a specific reason, and it has very little to do with getting off. I will, but that’s just a bonus. I’m here to save Hawk from the misery of a marriage to my bloody sister.

Liv’s back arches over me and she can’t help the wail coming out of her throat when Sebastian’s tongue draws slow circles around her clit. I don’t stop fingering her cunt, but one of my hands moves to her lovely tits.

My eyes remain on my friend. “Come on, Hawk. If my sister’s dry cunt is the only one you’re gonna fuck for the rest of your life, you deserve this before you tie the knot.”

He’s stiff as a post, wrestling with all things moral and right and good, no doubt. But Sebastian sucks her clit, so

Olivia moans again, and Hawk stands, a fucking tent in his pants.

I got him.

CHAPTER 7

Liv

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

First of all, I wasn't supposed to be sitting on his lap, on display for two other guys, one finger in my pussy and a tongue lapping at me like I'm fucking ice cream; he only said he wanted his friend to fuck me. There was no talk of another guy. Though what's the difference between two and three of them, really? He bought me for a night, and according to our contract, I'm his from eight in the evening till eight in the morning.

He wasn't joking when he said I'd be properly hired by the crown as an entertainer. Jesus, I wonder how many times they've done this.

But what shocks me isn't the third guy—a dark-haired hottie around Hawk's age. It's my reaction.

I should hate every second of this. I should be lying back and thinking of England as I sacrifice my dignity for a comfortable life. I shouldn't be on fire, aroused by every touch. I entirely blame Callum and his fingers, though the other guy's tongue definitely knows what it's doing. My body moves of its own volition, hips lifting to get more of the maddening torture as I pant, and bite my lip just so I don't *beg*.

Hawk, the blond guy I saw with Callum at the restaurant only four days ago, stands like a deer in headlights, his flight instinct driving him hard.

“Have you already sucked a cock, Liv?” Callum asks me.

I don't know why, but I feel my inner wall tighten. "N—" I don't trust my voice. "No."

"Don't worry, love. We'll teach you, won't we?" A low, rumbly chuckle vibrates behind my back. "Open your mouth."

I do as I'm told, and the psycho removes his finger from my pussy to bring it to my lips.

That's *gross*.

But I'm getting paid half a million fucking euros to do as I'm told for another eight hours, so I close my lips around it.

Given better access, the dark-haired man between my legs moves from my clit to my entrance, his wet tongue entering the space Callum's finger left vacant.

Oh, god.

"With three of us here, we can teach you all sorts of things. Why, we can plug all of your holes until you're airtight."

My panicked eyes seek him out; I have to twist a little but I manage to stare at him, hoping I can see that he's kidding.

Except I don't. All I see in those gray eyes is a flash of heat and amusement.

"God. She's so fucking wet," the man between my legs groans against me.

I don't even know his name.

"Come on, Hawk," Callum urges. "Her bitch of a sister chased you from your house, didn't she? I bet you've dreamed about teaching her a lesson more than once. And now you can. You know that kid always had a crush on you. She just lashed out because you didn't give in. Now, you can take your revenge. You can fuck her sister. Imagine when she finds out, huh? You wouldn't touch her, but you filled her big sister with cum."

Those words are weapons, aimed right at a part of Hawk I would never have guessed existed. He knows his friend in and out and he's aiming right where he'll hit his mark. I can tell even before the blond guy moves.

“You’re so sick,” Hawk says.

But he’s the first to open his belt, and free a hard cock from his pants.

I’ve never actually seen a cock in person, though porn has taught me plenty. His is...scary.

It’s *long*. Very long and straight, like a fucking pole. It’s not as wide as I imagined, but the idea of that ten-inch tube going anywhere near me makes me recoil in fear.

Hawk is content to remain at a distance, though, jerking the shaft up and down as he watches.

Callum lowers the cup of my bra underneath the swell of my tit to directly cup it, his finger running around the lobe of my nipple. “These are smaller than your sister’s, I think,” he muses.

I don’t attempt an answer; I know that evaluation is for Hawk more than me.

Meanwhile, the stranger between my legs adds a finger to his tongue, and fuck, I can’t help the spasms running through my entire body, making me jerk up, moan, tremble.

“So fucking *tight!*” he grunts. “I can’t wait to be inside you, beautiful.”

Inside me.

It dawns on me then. I’m not going to be fucked once. All of them are going to use me, at once. Likely for eight hours straight.

Oh god, what did I get myself into? Will I survive it? My cardiac rhythm can’t be healthy right now.

Without much in the way of a warning, my body betrays me, losing all control as I come, and come, and come over the lap of my buyer, while a man whose name I still don’t know keeps licking me, for the viewing pleasure of a third stranger.

“Good girl,” Callum praises me. “Now you’re just wet enough to take a hard cock, huh?”

Fuck.

“What do you say? Should we reward Sebastian for being so generous with his tongue?”

So that’s the name of the man whose golden eyes are staring at me from between my legs, his mouth wet with my juices.

“Or maybe Hawk should get to play? He hasn’t had a chance yet. Besides, I think out of all of us, Hawk might need a good fuck more than the rest. You see, he’s about to enter into holy matrimony, after all.”

I look at the miserable sod who strokes his cock while watching us.

This whole thing is objectively disgusting. That guy’s about to be married. I’m the stripper whore he cheats on his wife with on the eve of the big day. What an awful cliché.

But I know what my answer should be.

“Well, Hawk already has his cock out.”

I don’t know how I manage to sound sultry. I certainly don’t try. But he does have a cock, and he’s stroking it, and he looks...

Scary. Too big.

Beautiful.

“You know you want to play,” I tell him.

Where does that even come from?

“You can think of my spoiled bitch of a sister. You can *tell her* you chose me.”

I’m only echoing Callum’s statement, and it breaks whatever restraint held Hawk together up until this point.

He doesn’t even pause, jumping to his feet and aligning his cock right at my entrance, before lifting me up as he drives right in.

Can I just say, *Ouch?*

“Holy fuck. Holy fuck, Cal—no, I thought... Shit, she really was a virgin?”

I was so drenched, he managed to enter me in one go, but the lack of care still burns. I wince, biting down hard to prevent myself from screaming.

“Shit. Sorry. Liv, was it? Sorry, darling,” Hawk tells me softly, his hips retreating, and entering in slow, shallow thrusts. “I’ll make it better. It’ll all be good for you, I promise.”

Except those words aren’t really for me. Nor is the softness behind them. He’s seeing someone else entirely, just when he took me as hard as he could. It’s about a girl named Grace who wronged him—someone I’ve never met, but who looks enough like me for Callum to have spent a fortune on this.

I let him move me as he’d like; if Callum wanted an experienced lover, he would have picked someone else. He wanted a doll. I’m just that: a puppet used as a prop, a replacement.

Hawk took me like he hated me and now fucks me like he loves me, because he loves and hates that girl.

My body’s stopped screaming, the slow rhythm coaxing more pleasure out of my aching core.

My hips start to sway up to meet his thrusts, when something shifts under me. Callum’s lifting me up. Hawk instinctively grabs hold of my legs, and both of them drag me from the table to a low sofa. My back’s only just hit the velvet when Hawk pushes my ankles over my head, and changes the rhythm back to a fast, deep, hateful pounding.

To my surprise, my body still doesn’t register any pain. Just tendrils of pleasure traveling from my core through my legs, my belly, my tits.

I’ve only had a moment to adjust when another cock, this one thicker, if a little shorter, and curving up, meets my face.

I open my mouth obligingly, but Callum’s quite happy to run it along my cheeks, my nose, my forehead. His hard dick slaps my face and he grunts with satisfaction. “You should see yourself right now, gorgeous.”

His balls settle on my lips, cutting off any reply I might have thought about. I do the first thing that comes to mind; I

close my mouth around them, sucking them in.

Callum hisses, hips swaying, as the man between my legs starts to go so fast I think he could split me in two. His balls hit my ass at each of his moves, which indicates that, unbelievable as it might seem, he's managed to sheathe the entire thing in me.

I can't see it over Callum's cock, but Sebastian wraps my right hand around his shaft; I close my fingers on it, at a loss what to do with it. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to want much input; he just moves back and forth, using my hand to wank himself.

Callum brings the tip of his cock to my mouth, now.

I bite it.

It's meant to be playful, an argument when I can't use my voice to snap at him. He should have told me he planned... this. I would still be here, but I would have been more prepared.

His ridiculously handsome face splits into a grin. "Good girl," he tells me, which is ridiculous because no good girl in the world has ever handled three cocks at once. "Open wide."

I let my jaw go as slack as I can, parting my lips, to let the wide shaft in.

"Fuck. I'm going to come," the man whose hips are slapping my ass every other second grunts, growing impossibly larger, moving faster.

"Do it. Flood her," Callum encourages, his cock in my mouth, cutting off any protest I might have made. "Breed her. She's not on anything. You could have your heirs right now. You don't need an heiress for it. *You're* going to launch a fucking legacy."

So that's why he didn't want me on any contraception; to make his friend realize he could have children that easily, with anyone; to *feel* like he could.

I'm fully aware that somewhere in his mind right now, Hawk is fucking my half-sister, not me. Thinking about

impregnating her, not me.

“Do you really want your entire life to be about the next tea party and what the neighbors could think? This could be it. We have plenty of money. You’re an heir twice over. *Take what you want.*”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Heat floods me, as Hawk pushes in one last time with grunts and more *fucks*. Then he grows still.

The same can’t be said for Callum, who moves faster in my mouth, the tip of his cock hitting my palate. I retch each time.

“Tilt your head back, lovely, and breathe in when I push in. Don’t fight it.”

Easy for him to say; he’s not the one getting a bloody aubergine crammed in his mouth.

I’m concentrating so much on trying to stay alive, obeying his instruction, which only results in his cock being shoved deeper down my throat, that I don’t feel Hawk move away, or Sebastian taking his place, at least until the other guy’s ramming his cock between my sensitive legs.

It’s different. Larger. Bolder. He repositions my legs, spreading them wide, his fingers pushing my pussy open, as he barrels into me. I suck in air—at least, I try, but only end up sucking in more cock, until Callum’s seated inside me to the base.

Neither of these men is gentle as they split roast me, causing pants and moans and muffled curses that can’t escape past Callum’s cock. I let them fuck me because I have no other choice. If I tried my best to move, to fight, to push them off, I couldn’t, so what’s the point? Besides, they bought this. They bought me. And there’s no denying that part of me is enjoying it. Why else would I move my hips to meet each abrupt thrust? Fuck. I love this. I love it all. The helplessness. The sheer depravity, the fact that I’m nothing but a mindless cock socket for the time being. That I couldn’t be any more if I tried.

I come all over Sebastian's cock, walls squeezing him, and my release tears his from his groin.

He's only just painted my cunt with his cum when Callum withdraws from my throat. I cough, struggling for air.

He doesn't wait for my wheezing to stop before lifting my legs up in the air, over my head, and shoving his cock where both of his friends just were. Wet, repulsive noises accompany each of his moves as he sinks into the dripping hole, his taut cock reaching deeper than I would have thought possible, hitting a completely different angle than either of those who tore inside me.

Two cocks are presented to my hands, hard again, and I reach for them with...eagerness? No, that can't be it.

Obedience.

Callum fucks like he does everything else: with utter control. The moment my body starts to tighten, bracing for a release, he slows. He teases.

I'm moaning and whimpering and panting, desperate.

It's only when I say, "*Please*," that he takes pity on me, resuming a maddening, steady rhythm that slowly increases, deepens, and then races to the oncoming precipice.

I scream. I beg some more. I jerk both of his friends. This time, I think I pass out, coming so hard all notion of space around me disappears.

My pussy's dripping with the cum of three different men, and I'm on a cloud.

Being a doll doesn't seem like such a bad thing.

"Come on, darling," Callum's voice purrs as he scoops me up.

I'm glad he doesn't expect me to be able to move. I couldn't if I tried.

"Let's get you to a bed."

If I thought he meant to sleep, I was sorely mistaken.

CHAPTER 8

lii

In the two months it took me to make the call, my life has changed drastically.

No longer being a virgin is only the tip of the iceberg. I've moved to the dorms, as planned—except I'm not attending Crompton College. I attend the Royal University. I called the acceptance office, and apologized for my late registration, explaining that I'd been trying to sort out the financial side of things before confirming I would be one of their new freshmen mid-September.

“Understandable, and you're not late at all. The deadline is Sunday,” the kindly old lady informs me with a smile. “Did you end up sorting the finances, honey? There are grants and aid packages we could talk about—as well as an installment system. I can make you an appointment with the department...”

“I'm fine actually,” I replied, finding myself flushing as I signed away more money than I've spent in my entire life without blinking.

The college is a dream, as is the fact that I no longer have to count pennies for every little thing. It's hard to get out of the habit of checking which banana is the most financially sound. And I don't truly try to stop myself; I'll always notice the price of things. It's just that now, I sometimes decide I'm going to eat organic anyway.

The biggest change is that my future was fairly set until now. I knew exactly what classes I would take: those leading

to a secure income right out of school. IT or finance.

Now, I just don't know. I was paid *half a million euros* at eight am sharp on that Sunday morning, before Callum even dropped me off. He must have scheduled the transfer because he was still spooning me, and lazily thrusting into me from behind at the time.

My clothes are another change. I didn't want to stand out too badly at my crazy exclusive, crazy expensive new college, so I opted to pay a visit to Annalise. I wasn't sure it was the right call, given the fact that I had no intention of dropping all my money on clothes, but she asked about my budget, and didn't even wince when I admitted I didn't want most of my tops to cost more than fifty bucks.

"That's entirely reasonable for casualwear. A couple of fancier things around the one, one-fifty mark, maybe?" she suggested. "For parties and the like."

I agreed to what seemed a reasonable solution; six thousand bucks later, I have a brand-new wardrobe, top to bottom, underwear included. I only skipped footwear; I have the Mary Janes when I want to dress up, and my beat-up Converse work fine otherwise.

I feel more sure of myself. The security, the clothes, the fact that I'm attending the best university in the country, is a huge boost of confidence.

I try not to think about that night much during the day. Or the next three days, when I still felt them each time I walked, or moved.

They fucked me all night. After bringing me to a dark bedroom, my wrists were tied to the bedpost, and Sebastian, Hawk, and Callum took turns, jerking themselves over my skin, against my tits, in my hand when they weren't inside me. Then I was carried to the shower and fucked again. Back to the bed, on all fours this time. It must have been two or three when the guests excused themselves, leaving me with the birthday boy. I didn't even think to try to leave, just passed out, only to be awoken with a hard shaft pumping inside my burning pussy.

Trying not to daydream about it is one thing; I mostly manage. But at night, there's no helping the memories flooding back to me, so I wake up drenched and frustrated in the middle of the night.

I think that's why I could only bring myself to contact her at the start of October. After all, she was the one they really wanted. I was the replacement, because I was easier to buy and less complicated.

The girl across the table from me has dark hair. The differences between us stop there.

"We really do look alike," she marvels, sipping her chai latte.

"Dad and his super swimmers," I retort with a snort.

She tilts her head, her expression mostly blank. "What is he like?"

I shrug. "He's a drunk."

What else is there to say?

My half-sister nods. "Mom said as much. We went no-contact because he hit her. I'm...sorry you had to grow up with him. Is there anything we can do to help?"

I didn't really understand my instinct to get my shit together before I tried to get in touch with my little sister, but now I do.

"No," I assure her sincerely. "I'm fine."

"Really?" She's surprised, but not particularly relieved. I don't get the feeling she would have been annoyed if I had asked her for cash.

"I didn't reach out for money. I have some..." I hope she doesn't ask how. I'm just eighteen, and she likely knows our father can't keep a job for shit. I don't want to explain how I came into my newfound prosperity.

"Okay. But if you *do* need anything—well, we have money." She winces. "I sound awkward. I didn't mean..." Grace hesitates, chewing on her bottom lip the same way I do

when I'm not sure what to say. "We're sisters. I don't want you to struggle, when we have the means to help. My mother married a rich man, you see, and he's very generous."

I smile. While it's abundantly clear to me that Grace is mostly shy, and a little bit on the awkward side, I can see how some would see her as stuck-up.

"You're kind. But I'm truly fine. I *did* struggle for a while," I admit, "but I manage now. I'm going to RUA."

Don't ask me how, don't ask me how, don't ask—

"Oh wow! Me too, next year. I got early admittance. What *are* you studying?"

"I'm undeclared, so I picked up a few different courses to explore my options. I figure I can decide on a major next year, or the year after."

A new, insane luxury.

"Are we the same person?" she jokes.

It's all I can do not to laugh in her face as I imagine her dangling her ass around a pole in a G-string. Maybe not.

"And how did you find me, if I may ask? Did you see me and figure it out?"

I'm prepared for this question. "Actually, one of your friends did. Callum Noble? He told me he thought we might be related in July." All of that is entirely true. "I asked him to give me some time to tell you myself."

"Cal?" She's shocked. "Oh. I wouldn't have thought he knew what I looked like."

She chuckles, cheeks flushing.

Oh, goodie. My sister has a crush on the fucking psycho.

I absolutely don't expect the sudden rush of protectiveness, but well, she's *me*, except younger, adorable, sheltered, and *so* not ready to deal with bloody Callum Noble.

"Oh, no, sis. *Don't* go there." Rather than explaining all the reasons why she shouldn't, I say, "I liked it. It's mine."

She gasps, then leans forward with a giggle. “You did? Do tell!”

“Nope.”

The manipulative little thing pouts. “But I must live vicariously through you. Everyone thinks he’s droolworthy, but he hardly ever dates...”

“Well...” I need a second to think about what I can say to satisfy her curiosity without shocking her. “We had dinner. He’s an interesting mixture of a gentleman and a crass-as-fuck motherfucker.”

“Isn’t he just?” she says with a snort. “I mean, I don’t hang out with him much, of course, but my...stepbrother’s friends with his cousins. We’ve attended the same parties for a while. How can one be so eloquent yet so very *rude*?”

“Right?”

“But I wasn’t asking about the extent of his vocabulary, Olivia.”

“Liv,” I correct. “And that’s all you’re getting. Facts on his very large *vocabulary*.”

She practically chokes on her drink.

Grace makes me think about Jinx a little; quiet and easy to blush, but so very sweet and fun when she opens up. By the time our cups are empty, I don’t want to let her go. And she might think the same, because she offers to let me tag along with her. She’s seeing some friends at a fancy gallery opening.

The gallery, it happens, belongs to the Forts. Mr. Fort saved a princess a decade ago, and his daughters ended up engaged to princes as a result. The youngest sister, Belladonna, is one of the most beloved girls in the entire kingdom, adored by the media and public alike. As it turns out, she’s a friend of Grace’s.

If someone had told me before summer that I would be attending events in the company of the highest of the peers of the realm, I would have laughed hard enough to crack my ribs, but here I am. It’s not even that weird. Grace introduces me

proudly, and people marvel over our looks. I meet fellow students, none of whom stop to ask why there are holes in my Converse.

“Love your hair!” a gorgeous Asian chick says. “You *have* to tell me who dyes it.”

“No one. It actually grows like this, believe it or not. It’s a little lighter at the end of the summer.”

“Gosh! That explains why you don’t have roots. She’s just *so pretty*.”

“And I adore the look,” Bella announces. “A little edgy, not quite emo.”

“Give me your number!”

I get everyone’s numbers.

I don’t know why I expected all of them to be stuck-up as fuck—and maybe they are to complete outsiders, but they’re used to Grace, and I share her face.

I’m having the best of times, completely relaxed, though my social meter is about to hit empty. I’ll have to recharge over the next few days.

And then, I look up at a particularly gorgeous painting across the modern white hall, and I see him, leaning on the opposite wall, surrounded by friends in sharp suits.

And his gray eyes are set on me.

CHAPTER 9

lii

In a crowd of tall, fit, well-dressed men gorgeous enough to belong on the big screen, none should stand out, yet he does. I could say that's because I have intimate knowledge of what's under the suit, but one glance shows Sebastian's there too, and he doesn't capture my attention the way Callum does.

I make myself turn back to my half-sister, who just asked something. "Sorry?"

"I said, have you tried the gallery before?"

"Oh. Um, no, actually. I've only visited the national museum. But it's gorgeous."

"We should eat at the restaurant here one day. It's delicious." She smiles. "If you want to, of course."

"Yeah, sounds great. Tell me when?"

"Feel free to name drop me," Bella offers. "They'll squeeze in a table even if it's full. Actually, text me, too, and I'll crash your date. I freaking *love* the new chocolate cake."

"I love whenever I don't have to feed myself," I admit.

I used to cook and I'm not terrible at it, but I'm not fond of it either. Now, outside of the dinners covered by my meal plan, I've developed an unhealthy relationship with various takeout apps and the taco truck across the road from the dorm.

Grace inhales sharply. "I love to cook!"

"Good to know we weren't actually cloned after all."

The gallery launch is a private event, by invitation only—Grace brought me as her plus one since all of her friends have their own invites—and I can already tell the art isn't the star of the show: it's basically a posh party with an open bar.

Smartly dressed servers hand us glasses of bubbly, appearing to top them up before they ever get empty. I'm not even sure how many glasses I've drunk, but I'm on the tipsy side, which isn't good.

I can't help it, my eyes drift toward his corner a fair few times. He's stopped watching me now, acting like I'm not there.

I don't like it one bit.

I note that the crowd in the large gallery hall was somewhat segregated at the start—us girls under twenty-five around Belladonna, the proper adults together around the bar, and the guys; Callum's friends. While he's the one I can't help watching, the attention's mostly monopolized by another man, a little taller than him, and with an easy smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

There were also a few older people—past fifty—but they soon left.

As the evening draws on and the champagne flows, we mix and match a little; some of the guys come closer to us, a few girls venture to their side.

I stay firmly planted by Grace, and Callum remains on his wall like his back is glued to it.

But Sebastian does make his way to us.

Bella's being hugged by a gorgeous dark-haired man everyone knows—her other half, Prince Nicolai.

Sebastian kisses her cheeks first, but then, he tilts his chin towards me. "Liv. It's been a while."

I hope I don't blush too obviously. I'm surprised he remembers my name, honestly. I was just a pair of tits and a couple of holes to him. "Sebastian."

“How’s RUA treating you? I hear we’re both freshmen, but I don’t think I’ve seen you around.”

No surprise. The campus is pretty vast.

“I love it,” I say. “What do you study?”

“Political science. You?”

“A bit of this and that. I don’t know what to focus on yet.”

It makes me sound so flighty, but he nods like it’s perfectly okay. “There’s a career advisor if you need it, you know. Once you get a feel for what you like, their job is to talk you through your options and tell you how to get there.”

Bella elbows him gently. “And how would *you* know that? Weren’t you born destined for the House of Lords?”

“*Ouch.*” He rubs his side for show. “And I know that because I have a billion cousins, including some who needed to work shit out.”

“That’s pretty great. I’ll have to reach out to the office in a few months.” I smile.

“So what classes are you taking in the meantime?”

“Mostly general education stuff. English, Italian for my second language, and math, natural sciences, but I also enrolled in the dance program.”

Bella whistles. “The dance program is pretty serious at RUA, isn’t it? I have a friend in there, and she dances part time at the Royal Ballet as part of her course.”

“Oh, I’m not specializing in performing arts like an actual professional would. I only take eight hours per week.” I shrug. “I’ve been doing ballet since I was seven, so it’s mostly because I’m used to it.”

“Ballet. Nice.” Sebastian winks, the cad. “You must be flexible.”

I try not to think of the times when I proved to him how much I was, and fail miserably, as the heat rising around my face attests.

“Maybe you know Tricks,” Bella says. “Patricia. She’s a friend—”

I can’t believe it. “Seriously? She’s my best friend.”

“*No!*”

“I’ve been friends with her since grade school. In fact, I dance because her mom took pity on me when I kept showing up to watch her. She’s our teacher. I couldn’t afford the classes, but she let me join anyway.”

As soon as I say it, I regret it, expecting looks of pity or scorn from that crowd. But everyone’s just focused on the coincidence.

“Small world!” Grace marvels. “Jinx is in our class at RAA.”

I’d forgotten Jinx was still in high school. She might be the smarty pants out of her sister and her, but Tricks’s performing arts course has different requirements; she graduated this year, at the same time as with me.

Both of them got scholarships at the Royal Academy of Anderia; Jinx for her brains, Tricks for her talent.

“I’m surprised we didn’t meet before,” Grace ponders. “Tricks comes to most parties...”

I snort. “I’m not. I don’t go out much.”

Not for lack of trying on her part, but I’m not a social butterfly. I’m fine tonight, but if I’d been invited ahead of time, I likely would have found an excuse to cancel.

“Serious, huh? All work and no play makes Liv a dull girl,” Sebastian drawls, before flashing those dimples. “Well, maybe not.”

He’s blatantly flirting with me, and I don’t know what to do with it. Ignore him? Flirt back? The dynamic is weird for someone who already came inside me four or five times.

Not to mention his friend across the room.

“Well, you *must* come to my birthday next week,” one of the girls tell me. “Say you will, pretty please?”

I nod to Astrid, fully aware that it's likely one of those things I will cancel last second. The petite Asian beauty grins like agreeing alone is a present.

Why is everyone so damn nice?

"I need to pee," says Grace, which apparently launches a veritable exodus to the bathroom.

Was every girl holding it in, waiting for someone to crack first?

I can't talk. I remember the existence of my bladder at that exact moment, and follow the herd like a well-trained sheep.

One thing about me: when I need to go, I need to go. Part of the issue is that I don't really notice the need to pee until I'm desperate. I blame a decade of bi-annual performances: three hours in elaborate costumes, with very little chance to pop by the toilet. I know how to hold it. And then, I don't. One of the many reasons I don't do well in social circumstances. Why are women's loos always so freaking full?

I tap my foot relentlessly.

Fuck this.

I dip out of the endless line leading to the toilet, and skedaddle to the man's bathroom, blissfully line free. It's not my first time and it won't be the last. I'm grateful no one's peeing in the urinal; one guy's washing his hands, but he only lifts a quizzical eyebrow before moving along.

The relief is palpable when I finally get to pee.

I don't take long, then it's my turn to wash my hands. I bet the line hasn't moved one bit at the girls'. I don't even know how we, as a gender, take that damn long on the loo.

I'm just about to leave, my hand on the knob, when the door swings open.

I suck in a sharp breath at the sight.

Dark hair.

Cold gray eyes.

And that *mouth*.

“You.”

Callum Noble seems to be taking up all the air from the room. Or maybe just from my lungs.

“Yes, me.”

I open my mouth, to justify my presence here, or I don't know what, but then, his mouth is on mine, and he's pushing me backward until my back hits the closest wall, next to the urinals. His mouth is demanding, and I don't even think about the fact that we're in the damn men's bathroom, or the fact that this is Callum Noble, the man who literally bought me for him and his friends to use. All I know is that the way he kisses me should be illegal. Drugs are less addictive. I don't even react when he lifts my leg, setting my foot down at the top of the porcelain, and brings his hand between my legs, using the access my denim skirt affords him.

Only when he puts my panties aside do I think to breathe, “Wait—”

“No.” His mouth descends to my neck as two fingers curve right into my pussy.

Holy fuck.

I've touched myself since that night. Of course I have. Almost *every* night. But it's never been like this. Currents of energy travel all the way from my core through the rest of my body as his hand moves in and out of me, my breath hitching as I fold against him.

“Callum!” I manage to whine. “Any—anyone could walk in!”

His mouth finds my ear. “And it makes you so wet, doesn't it?”

I want to tell him he's insane. Deluded. *Not all of us are perverts like you!* I could say. But I am drenched, and given the fact that his fingers are still fucking me, there's no denying it. Besides, that's far too many words. The last ones were hard enough to get out.

“I can guarantee that someone is going to come here before I’m done fucking you, love.” Callum smirks against my skin. “Do you want them to watch? Or should I let them line up behind me for a turn?”

I feel my walls tighten around his fingers and I tell myself it had *nothing* to do with those filthy words. I don’t want... that. Definitely not. It’s one thing to let three guys have me to change my life, seize my chance, get half a million fucking euros, but I’m not turned on by the idea of letting some stranger fuck me in the damn toilet for the hell of it. Because I’m sane. And normal. And—

The door opens.

“Holy shit!”

I don’t recognize either of the guys walking in, but they were in Callum’s crowd.

“Damn, Noble. Warn a man, would you?”

He glances over his shoulder and smirks. “What will it be, love? Are they watching or do you want all their cocks? Either way, you’ll be the center of attention, I promise.”

As he talks, his hand casually slides along my collarbone, lowering my loose T-shirt to expose one of my tits.

“Am I picking?” he asks, that dangerous glint in his eyes.

I realize that not answering isn’t an option unless I want to spend the rest of the night with many, many cocks inside me.

And I don’t. Because that would be insane. Not to mention, unsanitary.

Not that what we’re doing right now is all that clean either.

“W—watch. They can watch.”

“Indeed, they can.”

I didn’t even see him open his pants, but telltale velvety softness slides against my entrance, and his fingers leave my pussy. I find myself swaying my hips to align the glistening hole with his hard shaft.

I should ask for a condom. But then again, I did fuck him bare less than two months ago, and I wasn't even on the pill then. I am now; and after a health test, I know I'm clean—so he is too. Or at least, he was in July.

Before I can make a conscious decision one way or another, he's pushed inside me, filling me so damn much.

The first time, there had been some discomfort through the night, but it's entirely absent today; there's only fullness and tension that make me shiver inside out. His hand grasps the back of my neck as he slides out, and sinks back inside, ever so deep, making my core tingle.

I like this. I like this *a lot*.

Not just the steady rhythm of his thrusts in and out of me as his mouth swallows my moans and his hand on my tits, or the other, tightening around my throat.

I like watching the two guys who have forgotten the reason why they came here in the first place, and are standing right behind Callum, eyes devouring us.

The door opens again, and again, and a third time. There are five onlookers, and no one is going to leave until the end of this.

One of the guys pisses right next to us, washes his hands, and keeps his cock out, grasping it firmly as he enjoys the show. Enthused, the others follow suit, touching themselves like we're nothing but a porn video.

Either way, you'll be the center of attention, I promise.

Callum had sounded...reassuring. Like he believed that I wanted that. And while I didn't ask for it...I revel in it.

“Hold her up,” Callum grunts, leaving my throat long enough to grasp the knee of the leg resting on the lavatory, and hand it to the closest guy. “Open her up for me.”

I don't doubt he could do it himself, but he wants more than an audience. Their participation is a turn-on. For him. For me.

The stranger doesn't need to be told twice. He pins my knee to my shoulder level. Another one seizes my supporting leg, lifting it too. An animalistic sound rises up from Callum's throat as he angles himself differently, reaching new depths. My entire body weight falls on him each time he rocks his hips into me, in thrusts so powerful I could black out.

I'm so close to losing it, and the asshole knows it, because he pauses just as my core starts to tighten, only resuming his onslaught when I've somehow regained control.

"You're such a good whore, Liv," he praises me.

At least I think there's praise somewhere, buried deep under the insult. Maybe it's in his reverent tone, like he can't possibly think of something better than a whore in that moment.

"Fuck, look at how she's dripping! Your pants are gonna be drenched, man," some blond guy laughs, bending to get a better view of Callum's cock going in and out of me.

"Jesus. I don't think I've ever seen any girl that wet. You're sure we can't have a piece, Cal?"

"Next time, if you're good. Tonight, my lovely whore wants to go home with my cum dripping down her leg, no one else's. Don't you, Liv?"

I want to tell him to go fuck himself, but all I manage is a long wail. His thumb found my clit, and it's not being gentle with it. Pinching. Pulling. Slapping.

My legs start to tremble, toes curling.

Once again, Callum stops moving, though his cock pulses inside me. "You're not coming until I'm ready to paint your cunt white, got it?"

I think I'm crying.

"I asked you a question."

"I—" My voice comes out so fucking high-pitched. "Which one?"

Callum snorts. “Do you only want my cum inside you, love?”

It’s not fair he’s making it sound like it’s about him, rather than about the fact that I don’t want to get used by everyone in the bathroom. More guys walked in. Some, much older than me. All are staring at us, and I don’t doubt that if he gave the okay, all would pounce.

“Yes.”

“Thought so. Sorry, gentlemen. This pretty little doll is entirely *mine*.”

The last word comes with one thrust so deep the back of my skull hits the wall.

He’s sheathed inside me to the hilt, and I feel his cock rearrange my insides. Then he withdraws all the way and does it again.

It’s completely different from the steady, fast rhythm he tends to favor. The cadence is brusque, unyielding, painful.

I’m not going to last long. I *can’t*.

“Please,” I whimper helplessly.

“Yes, love?”

“P—please let me come. *Please*.”

“You’re ready for my cum, then, huh?” I bob my head up and down, chanting my plea again and again in rhythm with his violent lunges.

Then he grabs hold of the knees still held up by the guys to our sides and puts my ankles on his shoulders, balancing my back on the wall again.

A third angle, and this one hits an impossibly sensitive bundle of nerves that has me screaming so hard it’s a miracle the police aren’t barging in.

And a good thing too. I don’t need a bigger audience.

I thought it must be a fluke, but each time he moves, Callum triggers an incomprehensible explosion of senses

inside me.

“Now,” he croaks, voice tight. “Come with me *now*, love.”

I lose it. My body collapses back against the wall as it explodes. If someone told me I’d died, I wouldn’t question it. His cock’s buried in me, heat gushing down my leg, coating my insides, so he must have come with me.

I can’t move, or talk, or think, completely useless as he straightens me up, leaning me forward on his warm chest rather than against the wall. He lowers one of my legs to the floor, then the other, but thankfully, Callum doesn’t expect me to be able to walk just yet; he’s holding me upright, one arm around my underarms, while the other caresses my hair.

His mouth is on my skull, pressed against my hair, and I hear a few sounds that seem gentle, like he’s cooing to a baby or something. I don’t mind any of that.

I don’t know how long it takes me to realize our audience is particularly appreciative, some guys clapping, others throwing their fists in the air like their favorite team just scored a goal.

“Do you loan her?” I hear someone ask.

“Hey, if you ever need a third—”

“You guys are fire, man.”

I flush, realizing that everyone here has seen my face, and seen me do...all this. It’s not like stripping behind a mask, a whole stage away from the perverts paying for it. We did this here, in front of anyone who just wanted to walk in. And they all think I’m a whore now.

No, not *think*.

They *know* I am.

CHAPTER 11

lii

I flee, practically running all the way to my house. I can't bring myself to return to Grace and her friends' side. Her posh friends who all welcomed me.

Well, they won't now.

Because they will hear about this, I have no doubt.

What the hell was I thinking?

I wasn't. Not until it was over. I was completely brainwashed, acting like the damn sex doll he constantly accuses me of being.

I hate Callum Noble.

It's abundantly clear to me that I need to stay far, far away from him. I can't explain the power he has over me; I doubt anyone else would have been able to make me do this without even considering whether I should.

If I felt weird, I'd suspect I was drugged, but other than completely humiliated, I feel fine. This was all me. Or rather, all *him*. I don't think anyone else could have made me do anything like that. What is it with that guy?

He's hotter than hell and delivers countless orgasms? a voice at the back of my mind suggests.

I tell it to mind its own business and shut the fuck up.

The fancy gallery at the heart of the upper town isn't far from the campus—a mere twenty minutes' walk through the park, twice as long going around, and my restless energy

demands I keep going, ignoring the line of cabs waiting in the street.

It's only when I'm in the middle of the park, all alone in the dark, close to midnight, that I pause. I might have been hasty.

There's something about darkness that makes you feel utterly alone and yet, watched. Followed. *Stalked*.

We're in the middle of the summer, and the burst of wind rustling the leaves should have been a relief.

It's not. I shiver, and at twenty-nine degrees Celsius, it's certainly not because of being cold.

Worrying my bottom lip with the edge of my teeth, I make my legs move forward, speeding up.

Less than five minutes and I'll be out of the engulfing darkness.

It's just the darkness. There's nothing looking at me from the shadows.

But the sudden, undeniable fear that seizes my insides isn't the kind I can reason with; it's an old instinct, written in all of our DNA from the time our ancestors were nothing but prey running from apex predators.

It's hard to tell myself I'm at the top of the food chain right now. I'm a hundred and twenty pounds, and while I'm athletic, I have never taken any sort of self-defense training. An oversight I will remedy, *stat*.

If I live the night.

I have no reason to pretend anymore; I let my fear push me from a brisk jog to a sprint for the last few meters until I reach the metal barrier and line of streetlamps indicating my return to civilization.

I didn't run for long, but I'm so out of breath I stop and bend forward, inhaling deeply.

This side, although there aren't many people in the street, I feel considerably safer.

And stupid. I also feel so stupid.

Why didn't I just grab my phone? The camera has a flash. I could have used that as a light, if my brain hadn't been short-circuited, first by cocks, then by primal fear.

I make a mental note to avoid the park at night in the future.

Straightening up, I chance one last look over my shoulder, expecting it to look less daunting now that I'm on the other side.

It doesn't. The watchful darkness still has me repressing shivers in the southern European summer.

I need to go home.

I can't quite recall how or when I do make my way back to my dorms, but the next thing I know, I wake up, groggy, achy, as though I'd been partying all night.

I'm not one to linger in bed, but I do today. Not even my bladder can convince me it's time to get to my feet.

I let myself crash again, waking much later in the day. This time, I have no choice but to run to the bathroom and pee.

My entire face flushes, remembering the last decision *that* pressing need forced me to make. The men's bathroom.

What was I thinking?

I upgraded to a private dorm room, although they're usually reserved for juniors and seniors; for three thousand per year, I can have my privacy and my own bathroom, such as it is.

It's not bad really; the room itself is spacious and the boiler doesn't run out of warm water until around seven thirty. My father's apartment was certainly worse. It is pretty depressing that I don't really have a home except for this place, but it's really not that bad.

I spend my Sunday trying to focus on work, but replaying yesterday in a loop whenever I don't catch myself. It takes me

five hours to assimilate the text I'm trying to read instead of two.

My phone taunts me, tempting me into sending him a scathing text. Somehow, it would feel like accepting defeat though. Better that I leave him alone. Pretend I'm unaffected.

But the bottom line is, yesterday, I had sex in front of over a dozen strangers. Maybe they even took pictures. I didn't see anyone do it, but the possibility is terrifying. Did they post them online? Will they?

The good news is, I'd never met any of those people other than Callum until then; the likelihood that I'd just bump into them now seems low.

I decide right there and then that I'm never allowed to spend any amount of time alone with Callum Noble ever again. The next time I see him, I'm running in the other direction—although that reduces me to the prey he accused me of being all those weeks ago.

And here I'm doing it again: thinking about him rather than my Lit assignment.

I sigh deeply, and force myself to breathe.

It's not that bad. It's *not*. Because I have a fat amount of money in my account, and nothing holding me here. If yesterday's mess has destroyed my life, I can always pack up and leave. It would be a shame, when I just got to know Grace, but we can always chat online.

And you'd waste all the money you've spent on school this year.

Ugh!

Callum Noble is the literal fucking worst.

CHAPTER 12

callum

I've always been the patient sort, happy to painstakingly set up a castle of cards and step back to watch it fall when the time comes.

But this girl is seriously trying me.

I watch her now like I watched every day for the last few weeks. There's no denying the changes; she's jumpier, suspiciously looking over her shoulder, scanning the faces around her, trying to check if she knows them. If they could have been there that day.

I like it. Frankly, her fear shoots straight to my cock.

What I don't like is the fact that she's still not fucking grabbing her damn phone. Why does she even have that thing, to tell the time? Someone should tell her there are watches for that.

She's worried, feeling backed into a corner, and she's not *calling me*. What does a man have to do to get her damn attention?

It should have been the most obvious move. She's worried about people talking about her, giving her shit; she should come to me. Tell me to leash the dogs. She knows they're in my circle.

But then again, I also expected her to talk to me after the first night, and she didn't.

Maybe she's not that into you, dumbass.

I dismiss that asinine thought as it comes. What's not to like? Besides, I've seen the way she looks at me, then pretends not to look at me, blushing, fidgeting. When she knows I'm around, her eyes inexorably return to me. She's definitely got a little crush, which is entirely mutual.

Right. Because you stalk everyone you have a crush on.

I know it's deeper than that. Fascination, maybe. Closer to obsession.

It started because I was intrigued. I wanted to understand how someone could be physically so similar to Grace Haven, yet, get my cock's attention with little to no effort. I think Grace is about as exciting as a piece of dry gluten-free toast without butter, so it was a bit of a mindfuck. I watch to try to explain it. Maybe it was the clothes, or the fact that she doesn't hold herself like there's a broomstick up her arse. And the next thing I knew, following Liv became my favorite hobby. As soon as I have a moment of free time, I hunt her down, and I watch.

It's not a habit I've developed in the past; she's my first obsession. And I'm pretty certain I'm not too much of a creep, given the fact that I don't intend to harm her. If I wanted a piece of that, I'd just cross the street, get into the cafe where she's studying, say hi, back her up into the closest empty room and fill her with my cum. She wouldn't say no. I'm not trying to prey on her. I'm just watching.

But there's no denying that it's growing entirely too frustrating. If she called me, I wouldn't have to resort to following her like a lost puppy. We could hang out. I could take her to that cafe, to another fancy restaurant—she loved the first—and other places.

I'm not going to ask her out myself. I gave her half a million; she'd feel obliged to indulge me, and I don't fucking need to get a damn pity date. *She* has to come to me, dammit.

All right, it's a matter of pride, and it pisses me the fuck off that she's seemingly content to keep me out of her life when I want...

I run my hand through my hair in frustration. What I want, exactly, is a pretty good question, but I'm fairly certain the answer isn't sitting across the street.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I'm irritated before I check the name, as I know it's not the one I want to see.

Camilla.

Of course it is.

“What?” I bark.

“That's how you greet me?” She chuckles. “Who pissed in your Cheerios, darling?”

“Whatever you want, spell it out.” I'm in no mood to deal with her brand of manipulation.

“Father wants you for dinner. What's that gonna cost me?”

I take a moment to think.

She and I have had an understanding based on mutual need for most of the last ten years. As kids, those needs included making her bounce up and down my cock, but I got over it. Women like her and Grace—well-to-do, perfectly poised socialites—are boring fucks.

We both know our agreement will come to an end, and soon, but I'm not above letting her bribe me into delaying the inevitable.

“You're gonna fuck five guys when I tell you to.”

I don't have a specific need for her at the moment, but banking future fucks is the standard way I make her pay for my help. I don't doubt that someday there will be another enamored fool drooling over her, who I might need for one reason or another. Pimping her out has proved profitable in the past.

“Five!” she whines. “Come on, Cal. You're not being fair.”

“You want dinner with your dad,” I remind her. “Not a public appearance at some charity. You know he's going to drill me about when I intend to pop the question.” Which is never. “It's five, or you find yourself another beard.”

She sighs. “Fine. Friday night, five thirty, at La Maison D’Elle.”

I hang up, eyes trailing back across the street.

La Maison’s a great place. Liv would love it. And I can show it to her.

Just as soon as she uses her fucking phone to *text me*.

I'm the first to be shocked when Friday comes and I don't cancel Astrid's birthday.

Part of me wants to hide in my room and never come out again, of course, but after a full week without a single incident—not a nasty word, or even a weird look—I have to conclude that against all odds, the madness of last weekend didn't leave any consequences.

Which makes no sense.

Not one to question my luck, I intend to make the best of it. And that means hanging out with Grace and her friends.

I might get along just fine with the people in my class, but they all seem to have gotten together based on long-established social circles, and I don't belong to any of them. I haven't really been embraced by anyone the way I was at the gallery. So after class, I head into the lanes to shop for a present—seeking Annalise's advice, as I always seem to when I'm out of my depth.

I feel a little foolish, asking the poor shopkeeper for advice, but she just leans in eagerly over the counter. “Well, what do we know about that girl?”

I have to take a moment to think. “She's short and cute. Wears bright colors—she was in a yellow dress last week. She's a student at RAU, too...” I sigh lamely. “That's about all I know.”

“Is she wealthy?” Annalise checks.

I have to think for a moment. Most students who can afford that university definitely are, but well, then there's me. I wouldn't consider myself wealthy at all, despite my current bank balance. After three more years of tuition, most of the cash will be gone. To me, wealthy means being so comfortable that financial planning for the next ten years doesn't bring any sort of panic.

"I think so?" I venture, because most of the girls at the opening seem to have been.

"Well, then, she has anything she could need. You're looking for something sentimental. Something *you* care about and want to share."

That makes a hell of a lot of sense.

Suddenly, I know what to get her. And bonus, I can buy it here. Given Annalise's effort, I would have hated to go to a competitor for the present—although I fully intended to get myself a second pair of shoes to make up for it.

"She liked my necklace. The red one," I say.

I've worn it most days since purchasing it; I tend to wear a lot of black or white, so a touch of red never hurts.

"Maybe you have something similar in yellow?"

As it so happens, she does. The long chain has butterflies instead of bows, but it's in the same vein. I thank her profusely, and as she painstakingly wraps the box in a complex fashion—almost too pretty to ruin—I pick up a second pair of shoes anyway. Black ankle boots. It's starting to rain, summer changing into autumn, and I don't like having to choose between soggy Converse or drenched feet in the Mary Janes. I also own a pair of winter boots, but those are purely practical, and butt ugly. I'll have to replace them in a few weeks.

"Any idea what I should wear to La Maison D'Elle, by the way?" I ask, wondering what I would do without the shopkeeper slash life coach.

Panic and stay in my room, canceling everything at the last second, probably.

“Oh! La Maison is *lovely*,” Annalise gushes. “The black dress you wore in August would be just fine. But if you were after something else, you can get away with smart casual, and up to semiformal. No one would blink at a cocktail dress or jeans. Do you know how the others in your party will be dressed?”

I think back to the gallery evening. “I mean, last week, every woman other than me wore a dress, I think. Wait, one of them was in a suit, with a shirt.”

“Tailored dress? Or something they’d wear at the beach?”

I get the feeling she’s dumbing down the choices for me, and I’m grateful. “Definitely tailored. Though I’m not certain their idea of beachwear and mine would align.”

She snorts. “Likely. Well, it sounds like your crowd favors semiformal. As I said, the black dress would be fine.”

Except...that’s the dress I wore with Callum. I can’t exactly say why, but I don’t want to wear it again; not for a party. It would be like bringing him with me, which is the last thing I want to do.

“Would you recommend anything in the store?”

I might as well have told her Christmas is three months early.

Three hours later, my hair and make-up have been handled by Phillip. I’m bundled in a deceptively simple powder blue cocktail dress, off shoulder, a little higher at the front than the back. I didn’t want to look like I was trying too hard, so I passed on bright reds or complex designs. But the dress rocks.

It’s also unbearably Stepford wife, so of course, I’m wearing it with ripped tights with a snake design and my new ankle boots, paired with a new long necklace. This one falls to my navel, with several charms and beads. I also got matching earrings. The accessories make it look a little less like I’m on my way to church, and more like I’m back from a rave, but quickly changed into something more suitable to trick parents into believing I was totally at a girl’s slumber party. I like the

vibe. Never mind that my parent wouldn't have noticed if I'd come back naked.

I get to the restaurant at six thirty-five, exactly five minutes late, which is the minimum to not seem completely dorky, in my humble opinion, and of course, I'm one of the first to arrive. The birthday girl isn't here yet. My sister is though, along with the Fort princess and a pretty dark-skinned girl with a daring buzz cut.

"You're so pretty," Grace laments with an adorable pout, after kissing both of my cheeks. "Why do I get a sister who's prettier than me?"

"Well, that's quite simply not true," I argue empathically. "You're shorter, and therefore, more adorable."

"But I don't have your tits."

I can't deny that, as the sweetheart neckline of her burgundy skater dress emphasizes. "You have two years to catch up on that front."

"I wish my sister was as awesome as you," her friend Lucinda says with a deep sigh. "Mine would have just told me I could only dream of ever being half as cute as her."

"That would be because your sister is evil," Bella retorts. "Mine is awesome. And if I ever dare say she's prettier than me, she'd launch into a three-point thesis about why I am absolutely wrong. Even though it's true." She smiles at me warmly, like I've passed some sort of test. "Shall we get drinks now, or wait for the birthday girl?"

As if summoned by the offer of drinks, Astrid strides in, wrapped in a shimmery gold dress worthy of the Oscars.

I'm smiling at her, until I spot something my eyes can't help but drift towards.

He's here, dressed in a dark suit, with a silky blue shirt, seated next to an incredibly gorgeous, tanned beauty with dark waves and smoldering eyes. She's everything I'm not.

Callum holds her hand across the table. They're seated with an elderly couple—a man with salt-and-pepper hair and

an elegant, older beauty who can't possibly be anyone except his woman's mother.

Oh my fucking god.

I've never considered myself someone with a temper. I don't tend to get angry. I'm a problem solver. When someone causes issues or breaks my trust, I tend to just remove them from the equation, never bothering to think about them again. My reaction to seeing Callum Noble having a lovely dinner in a trendy restaurant with a girl he's clearly serious about and her fucking *parents* not even a week after railing me in the restroom should be to cut him out of my life for good. Which happens to be handy, as I'd decided to do just that even before today.

Except I'm not surgically removing him from my mind, the way I've done with countless other scum. I am *fuming*.

I try to make myself focus on what's going on around me—my newfound sister, who's epic; her friends, who are pretty cool; the adorable birthday girl, who loves my present so much she immediately throws it over her gold outfit—but my eyes keep drifting back to the asshole.

He's all touchy-feely, kissing the brunette's knuckles, whispering sweet nothings into her ear, making her laugh. I never considered myself a violent person, but I'm clutching my knife so tight the metal digs into my flesh. I suddenly understand crimes of passion. If he were closer, I could imagine myself plunging it into his stupid hand.

Here's the thing: I don't like cheats. The very notion of a person betraying someone else's trust is disgusting to me. And up until now, I've prided myself on never having so much as flirted with a guy with a ring on his finger. Sure, some married

guys found their way to the strip club where I worked, but it was their business, and I never directly interacted with any of them. That's one of the many reasons I was never interested in lap dances. I don't want to be an accessory to infidelity.

But turns out, the guy made me the other woman, by fucking me when he's quite clearly taken.

I hate him. I hate him IhatehimIhate—

“Who are you staring at?” Grace asks, following the direction of my gaze.

Shit.

“Oh! That's Cal and Camilla. I didn't see them.”

Camilla. A ridiculously perfect, posh name to go with the perfect, posh girlfriend. I bet he's not fucking her in any public bathrooms.

It takes a mountain of effort, but I do force a smile. “Looks like it.”

“Where?” Bella cranes her neck. “Oh, yeah. Ugh. Don't they match ridiculously perfectly together?”

Astrid snorts. “Too perfectly. They look like brother and sister.”

She's right: both have dark hair, light eyes, the same-ish complexion.

I try to help it, but I can't. I clear my throat, then the question's out before I can stop it. “How long have they been together?”

“*Forever.*” Lucinda rolls her eyes. “Like, I moved from England when I was, what, twelve? And they were already an item.”

Grace nods. “Yeah, but I don't think they've ever been that serious. I mean, I've seen her date other people.”

That defuses some of my tension.

“By the looks of things, it's about to get pretty damn serious,” Bella retorts. “I mean, dinner with the parents? No

one does that unless there's a ring coming in the near future.”

So much for that. I'm right back to seething and wishing my eyes could shoot lasers into his treacherous back.

Just then, as though the sheer force of my gaze got his attention, Callum looks over his shoulder and sees me, glaring at him.

Then the asshole has the gall to smile, and wave.

Fucking *wave*.

I'm going to *murder* him.

But in the interest of having an alibi—not to mention, some self-respect—I fake my brightest smile and wave back.

Then I redirect my attention to the table of girls around me. We're meeting for dinner, then the rest of Lucinda's birthday is happening in a club.

I do my best to stay focused on the conversations around me, but my mind refuses to let go of the jerk and his damn girlfriend. Dinner is delicious, though a lot more casual than Luminaris: I recognize all the ingredients, at least. And the wine is perfect, and better yet, plentiful. The servers never stop pouring, and I don't try to stop them.

We're halfway through our mains when the happy couple leave, Callum's arm thrown around Camilla's shoulders in the most natural of embraces.

I snap.

I blame the wine, but I can't help it: I grab my phone and search for his name.

Me: Does your girlfriend know you like to buy girls to fuck in your free time?

I put my phone back in my pocket. It's not like he's going to reply, given the company he's in, but I feel better, now I've called him out on his shit.

My hand's still clasping the device when it buzzes into life, signaling a reply.

Really?

I half expect someone else has messaged me—although the only other person communicating with me at the moment is seated next to me, and definitely not texting.

But it's from Callum.

Callum: So that's what it takes to get your attention, huh?

I blink at the screen incomprehensibly. Get my—what the hell is he on about?

Me: Don't text me again.

I don't even have time to put the phone back into my pocket before the three dots are flying.

Callum: You started, love.

I'm incredibly annoyed about the fact that he's right.

Me: And now I'm ending this. Bye.

Callum: Strange that my messages are still getting through. Never heard of the block button?

Again, he's correct. I could have just blocked him. And I certainly should now. But I find it much more satisfying to just reply with a middle finger emoji, so I do that, before putting the device back in my pocket.

I can't pinpoint why exactly, but I feel considerably better. I guess I don't do well with unresolved issues. I said my piece now. He knows I think he's full of shit. And needless to say, I'm never letting him touch me again.

I can focus on my friends for the rest of the night, and only daydream of murder a time or ten.

CHAPTER 15

liv

It's past two in the morning by the time I stumble into my room, giggling for no reason and finding the floor particularly uneven.

The girls might be a year or two younger than me, but they can drink me under the table. I know better than to do shots with my sister ever again.

I'm only just conscious enough to remember to take a bottle of water from my mini fridge and put it on my bedside table. I throw my leather clutch on there too, as I have the painkillers I will no doubt need in a few hours.

All in all, it was a lovely evening. We drank, we danced, we drank some more and danced until my feet were sore, despite the block heels of my ankle boots. Some guys tried to cut in, but the girls never let them interfere for long, cutting the flirting down to a minimum. Apparently, that's something Grace's friends are known for on girls' night out.

Bella's fiancé was at the club, along with a bunch of his friends, but while they left together, they all stuck to their side booth.

I really like those girls. I hope I'll get invited again.

I drop down on my bed, back against the mattress, closing my eyes, because the world is spinning a little too fast. I can feel myself drifting off into the deepest slumber, and then there's nothing.



I HAVE NEVER FELT BETTER in my entire life. Pleasure rolls over me in waves, starting in my wet center, and traveling everything along my skin. *So, that's a wet dream.* Except I'm not truly dreaming. There's only darkness around me.

The first thing I consciously notice is the steady, high-pitched squeak of metal rasping against the wooden flooring. It pulls me away from the sumptuous delights of sleep. But then there are other things. Wet noises, grunts, the stench of sex hitting my nostrils.

And friction, right there, between my legs. The weight of a body moving over me, *inside* me.

My body's still languorous after the copious amount of alcohol I've ingested, but I will myself to blink.

I can barely see a thing, and yet there's no denying who's currently screwing me within an inch of my life.

I want to scream at him, but I'm panting too hard to manage a word.

I try to move my hands, but firm, unyielding binds keep them in place. Too bad. I would have slapped his treacherous face.

"Awake, huh? What a shame. I was having such a good time."

The intruder fucking me lifts my legs over my head and sinks in harshly, deeper, with a visceral groan.

"You know it could have been *anyone*? You left your fucking door open, love. Did you *want* to get fucked in your sleep by a perfect stranger?" Callum punctuates the last few words with punishing thrusts, making my poor single bed scream, and slam the back wall. "I think that slutty pussy of yours did. You're so drenched."

"Fuck you!" I manage to scream.

"I am fucking you, and you're taking my cock so well, aren't you? You truly are the perfect little fuck doll, even in your sleep. Especially in your sleep."

I strain against the cuffs, wanting to wrap my fingers around his throat and squeeze, but the metal just bites my wrists, so instead I flail my legs to try to kick his damn face.

The asshole laughs. He has the fucking gall to *laugh*, while grabbing my ankles, and pinning them to the mattress, spreading me wider.

“Go back to your fucking girlfriend and leave me alone!” I demand.

It’s highly depressing that although I’ve decided to never do this again, my body is completely betraying me, drenched and hot and clenching, taking everything he’s giving me, begging for more.

“If I’d known all it would take to get your attention was parading Camilla, I would have done it much sooner.”

“I don’t give a single fuck about your girlfriend.”

Callum grinds in and out of me with that maddening smirk. “Right. This is quite obviously you, not giving a fuck.”

I know I can’t get to him, but that doesn’t stop me from wrenching the restraint as hard as I can, writhing away from him, struggling to get up, to move.

His rock-hard body’s hold on me is completely unbreakable, and my futile attempts only seem to stimulate him. His gray eyes bright with indisputable hunger, he plows in and out of me, until neither of us can manage another word. There’s nothing but the friction, the heat, the bestial need to come around his cock.

I’m not even ashamed of the fact that I’m no longer fighting when he lets go of my leg and brings his hand to the apex of my thighs, parting my pussy lips and bringing his thumb right to my clit, rubbing it in fast circles, then slapping the raw flesh.

His free hand cups my breast, as he leans in and brings his mouth to the other nipple, sucking it between his lips as his cock drives me fucking insane with need.

My pussy grips his cock so hard, and I sob as I explode around him. Callum's cock engorges and slams deeper than ever one last time before he loses it inside me.

I wish I could say I immediately start to scream at him, telling him to leave me the fuck alone, threatening to report him, but for the next minute—or the next hour—all I can do is learn to breathe again.

Callum's no better; he slumps on top of me, likely because there's no room in the small bed anywhere else, heart pumping. He would have crushed me if he wasn't supporting some of his weight on his elbows.

"I fucking hate you," I finally manage to wheeze.

The jerk chuckles again, shifting to stare right at me.

He's in my reach now, so I bring my hand to his shoulder and rake my nails along his arm, leaving angry red marks in the dim light.

That's deeply satisfying to me. Better than any slap would have been.

His girlfriend will see it. She'll see it and she'll know some girl touched him. That's as close to payback as I can give him.

Except Callum mustn't have realized that, because he only smiles wider. "Careful now, love."

His voice is thoroughly entertained.

Asshole.

"Scared your girlfriend will see my scratches on you?" I taunt, in case he didn't get the memo.

He's a man, after all.

Callum shakes his head, chuckling again. "You are so incredibly jealous. Don't worry, though. I think it's sweet."

I frown, trying to understand why he doesn't seem to care one iota.

Maybe they have an open relationship. After all, Grace said they had dated other people. But the whole scene with the parents said otherwise.

“I’m not jealous.”

Not. One. Bit.

“Aren’t you now?” Callum sits up a little, hovering over me, hands either side of my face. He lowers his mouth to my cheek, and then the other, before bringing it to my ear.

I’m going to stop him.

Anytime now.

“But if you insist on marking me, I might just do the same to you.”

“You *wouldn’t*,” I snap.

His chest rumbles with amusement, as his mouth travels down to my neck, lips sucking on my skin, softly at first, then deeper, harder.

Shit.

“Are you giving me bloody hickeys? Who even does that?”

It only occurs to me now that my hands are still firmly locked. I’m right back to trying the cuffs, but they’re just as unyielding as they were on round one.

“Callum!”

He gets to a spot between my neck and shoulder and fucking inhales me like a vampire.

I make a mental note to never tell him he can’t do something.

“Cal!”

His hand slides between my legs, although it’s disgustingly slick with various body fluids, three fingers sliding inside me.

“You’re *not* going to fuck me again!”

So much for not ordering him around.

“Aren’t I?”

“I will *scream!*” I promise.

“Is that a promise?” the asshole has the gall to breathe against my nipple, before sucking those, too.

He takes his time, while his fingers never stop exploring, teasing, curving inside me.

His mouth progresses slowly down my body, and by the time he’s made it to the inside of my thighs, I’m a fucking mess, clamping my mouth shut to stop myself from begging for relief from the onslaught.

Then I just can’t help it. “Please!”

“Please what, my lovely little doll?”

“Please let me come,” I whimper.

“Oh? And why should I? It’s not like you’ve been a very good girl for me tonight.”

I hate him, I hate him, I hate him.

But I know, without a single doubt, that if I tell him as much, his response will be more teasing, when I need to fucking come. *Now.*

“Please. I’ll do anything.”

I hate how fucking desperate I sound.

“Anything, huh?”

“Yes.” Anything he asks of me anyway, which happens to lead to more orgasms.

“Tell me how jealous you were tonight.”

But that.

Anything but that.

I tug my restraints.

“Tell me you marked me because you want to prove to Camilla, to the world, that I’m yours, my possessive little doll. Tell me you’re *mine.*”

“Fuck you!” I scream.

He chuckles, and to my utter shock...he gets to his feet. “Yeah. Thought as much.”

Callum grabs something from his pocket; because of course he’s not even undressed, having only lowered his pants to his hips. I see a flash of silver, then he’s unlocking my hands.

“Seriously, though. You have to be more careful. It *could* have been anyone. I get being drunk, but if you’re not capable of locking a door behind you at night, I’m going to have to take measures you won’t like to see to your safety.”

He’s saying a lot of words, none of which make a lick of sense for me.

“Wait; I actually left the door open behind me?”

“Yep. Not that I’m complaining. I did have a wonderful feast.”

What few brain cells I have left see fit to engage. “You’re so fucking twisted for fucking me *while I was asleep*.”

The unabashed jerk shrugs. “Twisted is all you get with me. Good night, love.”

And then, though my pussy’s pulsing, the skin on fire, and I literally begged him for sex, he’s gone.

CHAPTER 16

lii

It would be considerably easier to pretend Saturday night didn't happen if it weren't for the many, many bruises all over my skin. I look like I've been mauled by an army of mosquitoes. And also, the fact that I can barely move without feeling him inside me on Sunday.

In the changing room of the studio, I take a selfie of my neck, arm, and torso in my red ballet leotard and angrily send it to Callum.

Me: How am I supposed to explain this to my teacher??

I have a sheer, black warm-up top that I put on, and don't remove even when I'm sweating three hours later. A couple of hickeys are on display, and I do get knowing grins, but no one points it out. It's not like I'm the first to come to class with that type of mark. It's just the first time for me.

By the time I'm back in the changing room, I have my reply: a picture of Callum Noble on a horse, dressed in a tight polo shirt. I can't miss the clear three straight lines running through his tanned skin, angrier than any of my bruises.

Yeah...I'm not in a place to complain.

Callum: I told everyone my favorite doll got possessive. Feel free to do the same.

Me: *middle finger emoji

He's so freaking *infuriating*.

Callum: The guys would love to meet you by the way.

I stare at my phone for the longest time.

Me: Meet me like Hawk and Sebastian did? I bet they would.

Callum: Let's not pretend you didn't love every moment.

I flush, fully intending to pretend just that, but another message follows the first.

Callum: Dinner tonight?

Me: ...?

Callum: It's that time when people ingest sustenance.

He's fucking impossible.

Me: The last time you took me out for dinner you had a highly indecent proposition in mind.

Callum: Indecent with a side of twisted. That's me. The guys and I have a reservation at 6 at the steakhouse on South Main. Feel free to extend the invitation to whoever.

He sounds like he absolutely expects me to come, which in itself should be enough to make me want to not show up... except I'm intrigued.

He wants to have dinner, in a public restaurant, with his friends. It's... I can't decide what it is.

Weird, for sure. Inappropriate, given that he was having dinner with his girlfriend and her parents days ago—though he insinuated they had an open thing. Disturbing, in the sense that I should have shot it down right this second. Even if he and Camilla have an open thing, I have no intention of being the other girl in any trio.

But, for all that...I want to go.

Before I can question myself, I send a text to my sister, Bella, Lucinda, and Astrid. If I'm doing this, I might as well have four pretty buffers. Not that their presence stopped what happened at the art gallery.

No men's toilet for me, I tell myself. I'd better pee before I go.

After ballet, I have a study period I spend arguing with my debate group about the necessity of the monarchy in modern-day Anderia—gleefully supporting the nope side—and then I only have time to run home to drop my stuff and change. I showered after ballet, so I just remove the band top I wore all day, and replace it with a fresh one, patently refusing to pick anything nicer.

I know the steakhouse on Main; it's close to campus, so I've eaten there a couple of times, and ordered takeout more often than I can count. Even Annalise would agree that jeans and a T-shirt is perfectly acceptable there.

I make it at ten past, and my eyes immediately find him, seated at the head of a long table, an empty seat to his left.

Grace is already there; she and the other girls made it clear wild horses wouldn't stop them from having dinner with Callum and his polo pals.

One glance around the table, and I know why.

Not a single guy is anything less than a fucking ten. There's a tall and gorgeous Asian flirting with Lucinda; Sebastian, seated so close to Bella she might as well be on his lap—though she *is* engaged to a bloody prince. Another guy stands out, because he reminds me of both Sebastian and Callum: dark hair and light eyes like theirs, a similar mouth. He's certainly older than me, but I'd be hard pressed to say by how much. Twenty-five? Thirty? No clue.

The last is very well known. The heartbroken heartthrob who lost his fiancée when Bella's sister broke off their engagement—and left the country, to boot. Only Less Valmont doesn't seem the least bit heartbroken now, laughing his ass off at something Grace just said.

Callum stands as I approach, wordlessly pulling out the chair next to his, bringing it to the head of the table along with his, rather than the first seat on the long side.

“Hey,” I say awkwardly.

He presses his lips to my cheek as I approach, and throws his arm over the back of my chair once we're both seated.

I don't need a mirror to know that I'm beet red.

"Are you gonna introduce Liv, or should I?" Sebastian says, raising an eyebrow.

Callum rolls his eyes. "Everyone, Liv. Liv, you know that asshole, Caden is his brother, Less is our...second cousin twice removed?"

"From your mother's side, yes, I think so." Less Valmont nods.

"Are we doing the whole familial relation thing again?" Caden, the older guy I don't know, sighs. "It's awfully tiresome. I mean, you guys are first cousins, we are second and third..."

Callum wrinkles his nose. "Yeah, please don't enlighten my girl on how inbred we all are, man. And this is Declan Huxley—Hux for short."

That name, I do recognize. "Aren't you a professional soccer player?"

"Yes, ma'am. You're a fan?"

I snort before I can help it. "No, but my father never missed a game."

He smiles. "I can send you a ticket for him."

Yeah, I don't think so.

I haven't spoken to my father since I moved out. I have no reason to reach out, and he hasn't either. I don't expect he will at any point in my life. And the thing is, I really don't mind. I feel more kinship with Grace after two weeks than him after close to two decades.

"Pass, but thanks." I manage a smile. "We aren't close."

"How about your mom?" Hux asks.

That's the most natural question in the world, and one that always tends to follow those about my dad. "She's dead. Wasn't much to write about either."

"Ha!" Caden snorts.

Meanwhile, Hux leans across the table to *shake Callum's hand*.

“What am I missing?”

“Nothing, clearly,” Sebastian says. “No crazy mother of the bride or bossy in-laws, and hey, a terrible father so you’re a freak in the sack with daddy issues. You’re pretty much the perfect passage, baby.”

“That’s *rude!*” Bella swats his arm.

“Definitely true, though.”

“Anyway, we’re not together,” I’m quick to add.

And for some reason, the guys actually laugh their asses off—all of them, Callum included. Meanwhile, Grace’s jaw drops to the floor, and the rest of the girls are just as shocked.

“We’re not!” I insist. “You have a girlfriend.”

“I have a fake girlfriend, love,” he replies, “And a real pain in the ass who took a month and a half to text me.”

I stare at him. “A fake girlfriend.”

He shrugs. “We were in high school when our parents started to hint at looking for engagement prospects. It was handy to pretend to have someone—but Camilla and I have an agreement that ends the moment we want it to.”

“A *fake girlfriend*,” I repeat, shock giving way to irritation. “And you didn’t think to let me know?”

The asshole has the audacity to shrug again. I want to murder him, and my hands are free this time, so I wrap my fingers around his thick neck, and tighten them.

It turns out, strangling people is harder than it seems.

And now the entire table is laughing at my expense, Callum included.

“You could have texted me any time, love. I would have told you whatever you wanted to know.” He winks, before bringing his mouth to mine.

Some of the things he said and did Saturday make a hell of a lot more sense all of a sudden, and I do feel foolish.

Tell me you're mine.

At the time, I thought he was the kind of spoiled, gorgeous, entitled asshole who thought he could have his perfect princess on his arm and me—the nobody—after dark.

But maybe, just maybe, I don't know anything about what Callum Noble thinks.

And it's not entirely impossible that he might want me for more than in the dark or in public toilets. The question is how much more. I have no idea, and the scary thing? I don't think I'm really in charge here.

If he gave me nothing but the occasional nasty fuck, I'd still beg for it. And I'm here. I'm here today aren't I? After his bullshit from the weekend.

He has a hell of a lot of power over me.

Because...I like what he does to me. I like when he touches me. I like how he calls me love and Liv and even doll.

Oh, fuck. I'm in a hell of a lot of trouble, aren't I?

The food is delicious, in a casual, relaxed atmosphere, and the company, pretty nice, too.

Caden is twenty-three. I wouldn't have guessed, because of the way he dresses, and speaks and just *looks*. He finished his law degree at Harvard last year and returned here to pass the bar in Anderia, only to be swooped up by the best firm in the country. Oh, also his dad's the king's actual big brother, which makes him fourth in line for the throne: there are the three royal siblings, followed by him, as his father abdicated. Sebastian's fifth.

When I stare at them openmouthed as Caden explains he might one day rule over us all—it would only take a few *accidents* after all—Callum laughs, and assures me that as their maternal cousin, he's only twenty-third.

Less is higher.

It's wild that I'm sitting there with people like them. Hell, I even *fucked* two of them.

But like Grace and her friends did, the guys let me in, completely unbothered by the fact that I'm not part of the glittering elite.

I relax. I let Callum kiss me and touch my arm and act like it's completely normal, refusing to freak out about it. So, what, he's touchy. He was touchy with Camilla too.

After dinner, I let him take me back to my dorm room, and there I let him kiss me on my bed forever, like we have all the time in the world, devouring me slowly, hungrily. But I'm the

one who needs more, so I straddle him, and proceed to remove the annoying little buttons of his eggshell white shirt.

I want to see him this time.

When I've succeeded, I'm rewarded by the sight of hard pecs, abs, a slender, narrow waist, and that hardness poking at me in his pants.

"Like what you see?" the smug prick asks, fully aware that anyone would.

"I'm not sure. I'll need to see a little more." I hop off his lap to peel his pants down his legs, taking his boxers with them, until I'm on my knees in front of him, his pants around his ankles.

It should feel like a vulnerable position, me at his feet while his huge cock points straight at me, but I don't think I've ever felt more powerful.

My lips part to take in the tip, and I run my tongue around it, taking my time.

It's not the first time his cock is in my mouth, but this time he isn't ramming it down my throat until I beg, sob and choke over it.

This time, I'm in charge.

I might not have tons of experience at this, but I've watched porn, which gives me a place to start.

My hand moves to his balls, as I lick from the base of his cock to the tip, and back again, my hand twisting around the shaft.

He sucks in a breath, his legs tensing, and a chuckle escapes me.

This is a hell of a lot of fun.

I play. I toy with the sensitive eight-inch pole in my care, licking and sucking and blowing, and wanking, relishing all his grunts and moans. *Payback's a bitch, darling.* Deep down, I know it's only a matter of time before he snaps and takes control. Callum isn't the kind of guy who just lets people

manipulate him. So I'm not surprised when he fists a handful of my hair and tugs it back, forcing me to look straight into his gorgeous eyes.

I grin.

“You like that, huh? Being a fucking tease.”

I love it.

“Your throat or your ass?”

My pussy clenches with need, liking neither option.

“Am I coming at the back of your throat or inside your asshole, doll?”

I lick my lips. He went deep in my mouth before and I remember the feeling—it wasn't pleasant. I could have choked. But my ass? I've never had anything in there. The prospect is daunting.

And maybe, just maybe, also a little...intriguing?

“Should I make the decision, darling?”

“Ass. My ass, please.”

He lifts an eyebrow, as though I've surprised him. “Ass it is.”

Without another word, he stands and kicks his shoes off, along with his pants. Callum grabs me by the waist, throwing me over bed and roughly lowering my jeans.

It's my turn to be the mostly undressed one.

I twist to look over my shoulder, watching him take my place on the floor, parting my butt cheeks. I tense, but when he brings his face to me, it's to lick the folds of my pussy with his clever, clever tongue.

I whimper, hips grinding over him. Fingers join his lovely tongue, and I almost don't notice that one slides around my tighter hole.

It feels...nice. Lovely, in fact.

“Like that, do you? I figured you might, darling. At first glance, I just knew you'd be the kind of person who would

love a cock in each hole. And you will, won't you, love?" While his thumb rubs my clit, his index curves in my cunt, his middle finger slides in my butt. "That's it. Relax. Trust me, you can take it. You're gonna take quite a few inches in there in a minute. And you'll *like* it."

The finger slides in easily, and I can't deny the sensation's intriguing.

His index leaves my pussy to leave room for his tongue again, and the free finger now joins his index in my butthole. One finger goes in as the other goes out, and again, and again, both of them curving inside, pushing the tight walls. By the time his thumb joins the two, I'm bucking against him, back arched.

His tongue's relentless against my clit, my folds, my inner lips. It's just too much.

"Christ, I think you could take a full fist," Callum grunts against me before straightening up, fingers still stretching, teasing. "Another time. Do you have lube, love?"

With frenzy, I open my bedside table, rummaging through it to find the small bottle of lube I use with my vibrator. I hand it to him with trembling fingers.

A disgusting wet noise fills the air, and moments later, there's a cold, wet hardness pushing against my ass.

I push back, needy, greedy.

"That's it, love. Open for me. You were made to take it."

He enters me slowly, but his cock is so slick with lube once it's past the muscles, it slides in to the hilt, like I've taken a hundred hard dicks deep in my ass before.

Oh, god. I've never felt so *full*. His cock's rearranging all my guts, and I can't even breathe, let alone think.

Then he draws back.

I *scream* as he plunges back in. Holy fucking hell, this is *good*.

“That’s it, my beautiful doll,” he praises me, his hand sliding at my front as he circles my clit with his hand.

His other hand reaches for my throat and lifts my upper body up, so that I’m flush against his chest as he drives in and out of me.

“I’m not gonna last, Liv. Can you come like this? I can’t come without you.”

That admission does things to me, and like my body was waiting for it, all of my nerve ends come alive, propelling me to the edge.

“Yes! Yes. I’m gonna come,” I wail.

His movements grow frantic, unfinished half thrusts, fingers rubbing too hard, too fast. Exactly how I need them to. I tighten around his shaft, my pussy weeping along with me; I’m dripping all over him, and then I lose it, falling limply in his arms.

Callum thrusts and thrusts again, before warmth floods inside me as he grunts.

I don’t understand how it’s possible, but every single time he fucks me, it’s better. More powerful.

Callum Noble is breaking me, little by little. I don’t think there will be much left when he’s done with me. But I can’t control the fall.

CHAPTER 18

liii

The good news is, I can technically get out of bed after all that. Unfortunately, there's a six-foot-something gorgeous hunk spooning me so I don't want to.

In his sleep, Callum's all handsy, grabby, so exactly the same as when he's awake. Except he looks younger. Less bossy. More...attainable, somehow. He's still ridiculously bloody gorgeous, but for a little while I can pretend I'm not in bed with someone who's twenty-something in line for the throne of our kingdom.

"I can feel you staring."

Oh. So much for him sleeping.

"You stayed the night," I say in wonder.

He grunts against my hair. "My neck may never recover."

I chance a glance at his feet, which are hanging in the air. "My bed definitely isn't Noble-sized."

"If only the size were the only issue." Callum sits up and rolls his neck, before dragging my body to his lap.

Sometime overnight, we both shed all our clothes, and there's something incredibly intimate about sitting against him, bare, without a single layer of fabric between us. Especially while we're not actually fucking.

"Can we talk about your pillow, though? What woman only has one? And a shitty one. And don't get me started on the springs in that mattress. Is it a form of torture?"

I roll my eyes. “You’re so fragile.”

“I’ll show you fragile.”

The amused, delighted threat is clear in his rumbly voice, and I expect to be gagging on cock within seconds, but Callum is far more evil. He starts to tickle me.

I honestly don’t remember ever being tickled. If anyone had asked me whether I was sensitive, I would probably have said no.

Lies. All lies.

I’m writhing, laughing uncontrollably, attempting to get away, but it’s Callum, and he doesn’t need handcuffs to overpower me.

“Please! Oh, Callum, *please!*”

“Nah. But beg me some more. I might change my mind.”

His fingers explore every crook that drives me into frenzied hysterics. Then all of a sudden, there’s pressure at my entrance and Callum drives into me from underneath, pushing through my tense walls, all the while never stopping his assault on my underarms, my knees, my damn feet! He grinds his hard cock into me, relentless fingers teasing me until I can barely breathe.

“Stop it! Please, Cal, stop!”

“Tell me you’re mine and I might.”

Relentless, exasperating goddamned jerk!

“I’m yours,” I whimper. “I’m yours. Please, st—”

Stop. I was going to say stop. But his mouth crashes against mine, devouring my breath along with the last word. His hands leave my poor limbs to clasp the back of my neck, my waist, eagerly running his large palms over my skin, smooth and reverent.

Callum doesn’t tend to fuck me like this; taking his time, not racing to the finish line, all the while kissing me. I don’t know what to make of it. My hips move to meet his of their own volition, my back arching into it as I ride him. Suddenly,

my insides are on fire and demanding more, and I don't know how he got the signal, but Callum's also grunting, lifting his hips to reach deeper, the head of his cock hitting a bundle of nerves inside me that has me screaming into his shoulders as my teeth bite down.

My orgasm comes in soft waves, not as explosive as some of the previous ones he so ruthlessly forced upon me, but comfortable, peaceful. It feels less like brutal, visceral, bestial coupling and more like...affection. Or something close to it, anyway.

Sex with Callum Noble is an addiction I don't know how to stop. Not that it's up to me. If I did attempt to prevent it, I'd still end up full of cum. Good thing I don't seem to mind.

"I'm on the pill, by the way," I tell him.

He's never asked, which is highly irresponsible, but the way we've been fucking hasn't left much room for reason.

"You are?" he replies, with a careless indifference. "That's a shame."

I snort. "Christ, you're so ridiculous. How many bastards do you have running around?"

"That would be none. I always wrap it up unless I'm certain the woman's on contraceptives, and clean."

"You literally said it's a shame I'm on the pill, weirdo." I wrinkle my nose. "Is breeding your kink or something?"

"I'm not going to deny I do love going bare. But I wouldn't want to impregnate anyone except my gorgeous little doll." His mouth falls to my shoulder, kissing it.

"You don't want to impregnate me, either, idiot."

"Don't I?" He chuckles. "You can't deny it'd make things easier."

"What?" That makes no sense whatsoever.

"You're fighting me. You're deliberately refusing to see that I want you bound." His mouth moves from my shoulder to

my neck. “Attached.” Now he’s at my ear, whispering, “Tethered to me.”

Callum draws back to look into my eyes.

“Knocking you up would have gotten that across. But as you took precautions, I’ll have to convince you another way.”

“You’re insane.”

“I’ll have you know that the Crown has tested my mental capacities and found me fit for duty, age eighteen,” Callum replies primly.

“Someone should fire whoever came to that conclusion. You don’t know me. You don’t want...whatever you just said.” I shake my head. “I’m a novelty. Different from the girls you usually see, so that’s why you’re having—”

“If you say the word fun, I will have no choice but to resort to kidnapping,” Callum retorts.

His expressions tells me he is kidding. He seems highly entertained. Meanwhile, I’m actually losing my mind over here. Doesn’t he know how those words would affect me? How fucking devastated I’ll be when he tells me he was joking, or that he changed his mind?

“I’m considering it, anyway. A few months locked into a tower ought to persuade you.”

“Callum, I’m just trying to be realistic. We’re having fun. It’s great. But—”

“Kidnapping it is.”

He stands, taking me with him, and carries me to the bathroom.

My tiny shower looks downright claustrophobic with him in it, but he doesn’t heed any of my protests as he lathers me with soap and proceeds to clean every inch of my skin.

I admit, I don’t protest much, especially when he gets to my tits.

But then, once we’re both dressed—me in denim shorts with fishnets and a band tee, him in yesterday’s suit—and out

of doors, I realize he wasn't kidding. He's not letting go, hand firmly anchored around my waist.

"I have class!" I tell him in a whine as he all but drags me to the parking lot.

"Love, when I tell you I will do something, I will do it. My word isn't worth much if I don't. So you can get that cute ass in the passenger seat, or I can toss you on it. These are your choices."

I glance behind my shoulder, to the elegant university's main building, calculating the likelihood that I can get to it before he catches me.

The odds are not in my favor.

"What would we even do?" I'd like to think I'm not pouting. "Don't you have work?"

"I'll take a personal day, to show you the meaning of fuck around and find out."

It's not my first time in the building, but when I took the lift directly to the seventh floor that fateful summer day, I didn't realize this was *one house*.

It has a receptionist, footmen, a waiting room. I thought we might even be in a hotel.

No, Callum doesn't have a house. He has a *Hall*. Fern Hall, to be exact, an historical monument built in the eighteenth century for one of our monarch's mistresses. The town manor takes up half a block, just a few streets down from the royal palace, with a view of the park.

"Is this...your parent's place?" I look around, half expecting to see his mom and dad around the corner.

He shakes his head. "No, I bought it from the Harwicks when I got access to my trust fund at eighteen."

I blink. "You bought this. At eighteen."

I knew he came from another world. I didn't realize it was an entirely different galaxy.

He smirks. "I got lucky. The Harwicks needed an infusion of cash, and not many wanted to deal with renovating a place with so many features that couldn't be touched: the ceilings, the stained glass, some of the walls."

Somehow, though, despite the complex ornamental ceilings, columns, and yes, those stained glass windows on the first floor, this place did feel modern. Dark wood, simple decor, in deep reds.

“After renovating, I sold the west wing. Less, his brother Nic, Hux, Hawk, Caden, and Sebastian live next door. They each own a floor. The sale recouped what I spent on the property and all improvements, with a fair bit of change to spare.”

“So you meant to say you bought the entire block, not just half.”

This is *unbelievable*. “And those *seven floors* are all yours?”

“Indeed. I mostly use the penthouse, on the upper floor.”

“What do you *do* with all the space?” I wonder.

“Orgies, mostly.” He shrugs, as casual as if he was talking about the weather. “About once a month or so, I get all the eighteen- to thirty-year-old royals together in one place—with their partners, their friends, their dolls, their toys. Not many people have the space for a gathering like that in town—and why travel to a country estate when I can host?”

I’m completely out of words.

“You’ll love it, won’t you, my precious doll? You adore being the center of attention.”

I flush, looking away. “I really don’t understand you, sometimes. Like, you say I’m yours and all that, and at the same time, you seem to like nothing more than letting other people touch me.”

He snorts, leading us to the lift again. “For me to share something, it has to be mine in the first place. Be honest, love. How does it make you feel when you’re being watched? When Hawk, Sebastian, and I shared you?”

My insides clench as my core tingles. I don’t say anything, but Callum still smirks smugly. “That’s what I thought.”

The lift opens up to the floor I already know.

“There are people who are completely possessive with their affections. I’m not one of them. I love showing off what’s mine. I want the entire universe to know just how beautiful and precious it is, and be quite certain that it belongs to me,”

he explains as we walk into the familiar lounge, with that pole still set up near the window.

I wonder if people can see it from outside.

Maybe.

Probably.

Considering what he just said, I'm fairly certain he set it up so they *would* see. Maybe not in detail, at that height, but still.

"I realize that's not how the majority of the population feels. But here's the thing, love. You like to be shared, too. You know that," he adds somewhat gently. "And that's one of the many reasons I'm keeping you."

"Keeping me," I repeat with an eye roll.

"And you're staying right here until you can assure me you understand that. Make yourself comfortable."



I DON'T BELIEVE my comfort is Callum's primary concern. First, he bends me down in the billiard room, then he gets me to dance on the pole, naked, before fucking me on the floor next to it. We break for lunch, only for him to request a lap dance in the library.

"I've never actually done one of those."

"Another first I'm getting, huh?" He seems ridiculously smug about that.

I think we fuck in every single one of his many rooms—on the upper floor, anyway. I'm glad he doesn't set out to explore the entire hall.

The next day, I actually can't get out of bed, even if he'd let me—even if I'd tried. My muscles are on fire.

He orders a massage for us both, and the Swedish man with hands of iron who looks like an extra in a Viking show has me moaning on the table, first because he works his thumb right into all of my aches and knots, and then, because his sleek fingers are deep in my ass and pussy, almost as skilled as

Callum. One glance towards his table, set up next to mine, and I see his dark-haired masseur with one hand around his balls and the other, jerking his shaft.

Okay, then.

“I didn’t know you were bisexual,” I say, as I’m floating in a bubble bath after we’re both boneless and deeply satisfied.

I’m not going to lie: watching some guy jerk, then suck him was disturbingly hot.

“I’ll fuck any hole, so make that pan. Sex doesn’t necessarily mean much to me, past the release.” Gray eyes bore into mine. “Unless it does.”

It’s dinner time by the time I manage to pinpoint my issue with the whole thing.

He’s right, I don’t believe or trust that he’s actually into me, and there’s one simple reason: he approached me as a substitute.

I ponder on how to broach the subject for a while, before he says, “Spell it out.”

“What?”

“Whatever has you frowning and sighing and fidgeting. Let it out. There’s literally nothing you could see that would shock me, or piss me off, or turn me away.”

When did I become so transparent?

“Do you have a thing for my sister too?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Hell no. She’s a *baby*.”

There’s no mistaking his grimace.

“And I’m not?” I reply with a snort.

I know there are a couple of years between Grace and I, but we really do look alike.

Callum sighs. “I’ve known her for four years. I saw her grow up. And she’s still seventeen. I haven’t seen you with braces.” After a beat, he continues. “But beyond the obvious,

you're different. She's more...controlled. I prefer to be the one in control, in case that wasn't clear."

That makes sense, but I still don't really understand how someone could be into me and not her. Especially someone who approached me only because of our resemblance.

"Besides, she can't move like you do," he adds teasingly. "I doubt she's as flexible either."

"But how could you be into me if she repulses you?"

"You're right. Physically, you're very similar, and when I first saw you, I only really saw a blonde Grace," he admits. "That was before we ever met, at the club. Then I ordered a report on you, to get a sense of what I could use to convince you to fuck Hawk. I learned many things. Such as the porn you watched."

Oh god.

I might not have had sex, but I used to watch sex videos fairly frequently, each filthier than the last.

Group things.

Gangbangs.

Blowbangs.

I've always liked that sort of vibe...and he knew from the start.

"You're such a fucking stalker."

He's completely unapologetic. "Yeah, it hits differently, watching you dance in the club, while knowing what gets you off. I imagined a dozen cocks coming all over you like they do in your favorite videos." Callum grins across the table. "I was a goner from there on. The rest was just confirming what I suspected about our chemistry." He reaches out, fingers brushing one wayward strand of hair back. "Doesn't hurt that you're adorable."

"Did you..." I clear my throat. "Did you arrange for a foursome because that's what I like to watch?"

"Of course."

I lick my lip. “And the deep throat?”

“Yeah. I figured I’d leave the double penetration until you have a bit of anal training though.”

Holy fucking shit.

“It shocked the hell out of me when you told me you were a virgin,” Callum announced. “I mean, the PI file did kind of confirm that: I couldn’t see proof of any dating, or any private shows at the club...but that’s a hell of a kinky list of interests for someone who hadn’t even had sex.”

He’s not really asking me, but I find that I want to share.

“When I was little my mother would receive...clients in her flat.” I wince. “She’d tell me to go in the closet, but sometimes I’d watch under the door. I used to *hear* them. I guess that stayed with me.”

After a long moment, Callum reaches for my hand, squeezing it. “I’m sorry you lived through that.”

“You are?” I don’t know why that surprises me.

He nods deeply. “Children are meant to keep their innocence. You should have turned into a pervert at a pool party orgy at sixteen like the rest of us.”

“*Sixteen?*”

“Oh, yeah. Estelle had this tiny string bikini on and damn Caden pulled the little bow.” He chuckles. “Next thing I know, my cousin’s lifting her pussy up to his face and half the other girls want to know what makes her scream so hard so they’re sitting on our mouths.”

“Seriously?” The sheer decadence of the scene he describes is baffling.

“I don’t even know who jumped my cock—I was asphyxiating under a fat pair of buttocks. Good times. I’d had sex before, but that party determined how I fuck. How most of us fuck really.”

My introduction to that sort of thing was *nasty*, but his somehow feels worse; not the kind of things sixteen-year-olds

should naturally lean towards.

Again, it shows a stark difference between my world and his. I never went to a pool party, but if I had, it would have ended with swimming.

“We’re a mess,” I conclude.

“Yep. Would you pass the bread?”

He doesn’t fucking care one tiny bit.

And when I search my feelings, I find that I don’t either.

We are seriously fucked up, but we wouldn’t work if we weren’t.

Shit. I think his kidnapping idea is working. Maybe it’s Stockholm syndrome, because I think I finally get it.

“Okay,” I say, not actually reaching for the bread. “You like me. And I think, in your weird, seriously need a shrink kind of way, you’re serious about it.”

He smirks. “That was faster than I thought. Now tell me how *you* feel about that.”

I flush. “I like it.”

I’m fairly certain any other answer would result in another day or two in his golden prison, but that’s not why I admit it.

“I like *you*.”

“Wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” Callum’s smile broadens, showing me all his teeth. “But I really would like the breadbasket, please.”

I am freed on Thursday. Callum drops me off in time for my classes on his way to work, kissing me in front of the university.

I could get used to this.

He picks me up after work, and does the same the next day, and—following a sinfully lazy weekend in his hall—the Monday after that. I’m pretty sure that by Wednesday, I am used to it.

“I have a room, you know,” I mention, in case he forgot that fact.

I’ve only dropped by my dorm to change clothes and pick up course work over the last week.

“I don’t think my neck will *ever* forget your bed,” Callum retorts. “The only way I’ll ever sleep in your dorm is if you let me change the damn bed.”

After a week in his expensive furniture, I’m tempted to allow it, but I just say, “Or you could sleep in your bed, and I could sleep in mine, occasionally.”

Even I don’t like the thought of that.

“Don’t wanna.”

Me neither, so I let it drop.



THE NEXT DAY, I stop being invisible. Overnight, people go from completely ignoring my existence to saying hi to me in

the corridors, or stranger yet, pointing and staring.

It's not until I check my phone at lunch that I learn why.

Grace: OMG!!! Is it true you moved in with Cal??

Lucinda: Good on you, girl.

Grace: Why am I learning that from a magazine?? You're losing sister points.

Bella: What magazine? I want the gossip!

Astrid: *link*

Astrid: Spill, girlfriend.

Before composing a reply, I click on Astrid's link, and read a three-page piece detailing how I have been picked up and dropped off every day by none other than Callum Noble.

Who is the future earl's new live-in wonder, you wonder? Meet Olivia, nineteen, student at the Anderia Royal University, Mr. Noble's undergrad alma mater before he crossed the sea to—

It says very little about me, sticking to my valedictorian status and my course schedule at school, blissfully skipping the pole dancing. God bless crooks who love to pay cash. There aren't many records of my former employment. I can only imagine how problematic that would have been for Callum. He might not care about it, but I imagine he would certainly mind his image being ruined over it.

I quickly return to the group chat.

Me: I haven't moved in. We've just been hanging out.

Grace: Every day??

Me: Only for a week.

Bella: But every day?

I don't have any choice but to admit as much.

All the girls go crazy, sending many emojis.

Grace: Drinks tonight? You can tell us all about it.

Lucinda: If your sex god lets you out of his cave, that is.

I accept the drinks.

The rest of my inbox is just as insane.

Tricks: CALLUM NOBLE?? Jesus, warn a girl, would you! And WELL DONE!

Jinx: Is it true? I know the media can be stupid. Tell me it's true, pretty please. I want to live vicariously through your Cinderella story.

I laugh at both, and spontaneously decide to invite them for drinks with the other girls. They're all in the same school anyway. Jinx and Tricks can't afford the fifty-buck cocktails we'll sip at my sister's favorite club, but there's no way I'll let them pay.

I send the information to the girls, and Bella's the first to answer.

Bella: Wonderful. I love J and T.

Grace: I don't know them well. Let's change that.

The others acquiesce too, if a little reluctantly: a thumbs-up and a "no problem."

I muse at the different greetings; those four have been lovely to me, but I don't really think they like my other dance school friends, except for Bella.

Then I think back to Jinx, who's extremely awkward, to the point of weirdness, and Tricks.

Tricks...is loud.

I might love the attention, as Callum so likes to point out, but I don't like it on me all the time. Just when I dance and do other, mostly naked things. Tricks was the most popular girl in our old middle school. She was never mean or a bully, but she did always like to draw the eye, and well, it didn't make her loved by other girls; especially when she batted her pretty lashes and flirted with their boyfriend.

We got close because we were the two principal dancers in her mom's school; I ended up being favored over Jinx when we were about thirteen, because I took ballet seriously and

Jinx preferred to attend comic cons and read manga. Tricks and I ended up spending a lot of time together for years. She never did anything to hurt me, but that doesn't mean she was a saint.

I regret my impulse, but there's nothing I can do about it now that the invitation is sent.

I tell Callum I'm hanging out with the girls tonight, and to my surprise, he doesn't try to stop me or barge in. I half expected him to. He can be pushy.

Callum: I'll pick you up. Text when you're done?

Me: You could let me go home, you know.

Callum: We could do that...I remember how fun you can be when you're drunk. Go home. Leave the door open. I'll see you when you're asleep ;)

And now my panties are ruined in the middle of the day. Great.



ON MY WAY to the bar, I'm worrying about what Tricks could possibly have done to earn their scorn, when a voice makes me stop dead in my tracks.

"Hey, Olivia! Wait up."

Shit.

If I had to compose a list of the people I don't want to see again, my father would have been number one. Yet, although it's definitely not his part of town, there's no denying that my drunk of a sperm donor is crossing the street, waving at me like we're a happy, happy family.

Someone shoot me.

I'm almost at the bar, and all of a sudden, I freeze, not wanting to bring him any closer. *Shit.* Grace is there. She hasn't seen his abusive ass since she was a toddler for a reason. It's one thing for me to deal with him—I have my entire life—but I don't want to bring his attention to her.

Squashing my instinct to run, get into the bar, and tell whatever security that he's bothering me, I stay put.

"What do you want?"

"Is that how you greet your old man?" he drawls.

"Yes. What do you want—money?" I guess, knowing that there likely is no other reason why he would have approached me.

He saw the article, somehow. Maybe someone he knows, someone in the building, brought it to his attention. He's guessing I have some cash, or at least, access to it through a man, and he wants a cut.

"Now you mention it..." He scratches his chin. "Had a bad hand at poker. You understand. I wondered if you'd mind helping out your old man."

"I *would* mind," I snap, knowing it's the only way forward.

If I give in and hand him anything at all, he'll never leave me alone.

"I'm at school on a scholarship and live in the dorm, Dad. I don't have spare cash to bankroll your habits."

A lie, but one so believable he doesn't question it.

"What about that man of yours?"

"No one asks for cash from their boyfriend for their drunk of a father. Get lost, Dad. You're getting nothing from me."

"Hey now, wait a—"

"Is this man bothering you, love?"

I blink, startled. But indeed, Callum just appeared at the corner of the street. He walks towards us smoothly, bringing his arm around my shoulders.

"Yes," I say, recovering quickly. "Yes, he is."

Dad puffs his chest. "I'm her father!"

"Oh, yes. Heard all about you." Callum looks at him from top to bottom, with the haughty arrogance of a prince staring at a particularly repulsive slug. "And given that you just raised

your voice in front of my girlfriend, let me make it crystal clear that I'll have you arrested if you ever get within fifty feet of her again."

Without another word, he starts to walk toward the bar, taking me with him.

My entire body is tense, but I manage a, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it." He puts his lips on my forehead, squeezing my arm.

"How were you here so fast?"

"I missed you," Callum says simply. "I figured I'd go to the bar, too. Less, Caden and Seb are joining us. Don't worry. We'll leave you girls to your chatting. I just want to be close to you."

Finally, my body starts to loosen in his arms.

I must have been a pretty awesome person in my previous life to deserve a man like him.

I wake panting, whimpering, my insides already fighting a battle I wasn't present for.

In all honesty, I didn't drink all that much last night—it's the middle of the week, for one, and I'm not much of an alcohol fan, when I'm not trying to forget shit like the guy I've been fucking hanging out with his girlfriend and her parents. But with Callum's message in mind, I took an herbal sleeping aid.

Callum's not the only freaky person here. I liked waking up with him deep inside me. I might not have been very fond of him at the time, but that part was a trip.

This time, my hands are free, and I'm face down on my mattress. After a week of his expensive box spring, I can see what he meant about my lumpy bed. But observations about the springs digging into my skin don't take up my mind for long. Not really understanding what he's done to my body means that I'm sensitive in various areas without truly expecting it. My nipples, my clit, my pussy and ass all are aching with need.

Callum's plunging into me prone bone, his cock punching my damn g-spot like it's a boxing match. I can *tell* he's close, by his grunts and his shallower, faster thrusts, and so am I.

It feels like I'm cheating somehow, like reading the end of the book at the beginning, going straight to the happy, happy ending. I scream into my pillow as my body races towards my climax.

“Holy fuck!” I grunt, toes curling.

“Bloody hell, love, you’re gripping my cock so fucking *tight!*” Callum surges forward, groaning, and does it again. “Come for me. I need you to come right *now*, Olivia.”

I don’t need to be told twice. I feel my body giving in, plummeting into the abyss with him.

Fuck, this is amazing.

Still breathing hard, Callum drops on top of me, and buries his face in my neck. “Welcome back, sleeping beauty.” He kisses my cheek, then chuckles, as he pulls me against him, so there’s enough room for both of us on the tiny bed.

His hand immediately flies between my legs, seeking my clit.

“How do you have so much energy?” I groan, feeling his already-hardening cock against my back. “Aren’t men supposed to need a second to recover?”

“I’m twenty-four, not forty, you little minx.” He snorts. “Besides, I don’t wank.”

My eyes widen. “You don’t?”

“No. Why would I when there are so many holes to fuck?”

Damn him and his clever fingers, but my body’s already tingling with need.

“I mean, I ended up fucking my hand a fair few times that month when I was watching you dance at the club,” Callum admits. “But as a general rule, I don’t see the appeal. I’d much rather reserve all my cum for you.”

I snort. “And they say romance is dead.”

“You don’t want romance. You wanna wake up with a cock in your cunt.” He chuckles against my ear. “Damn. Caden would be so fucking jealous if I told him how much you like this.”

That doesn’t make much sense. “Caden?”

I don't really understand how Callum's cousin figures in the current situation.

"Mhmm." His mouth moves back to my neck.

"He'd want to fuck me?" That's highly surprising to me.

I've only seen his cousin that one time at the restaurant, but I absolutely didn't get that vibe from him—unlike all of his friends.

"He'd want to fuck you while you're asleep, for sure." Callum snorts. "We're alike in more ways than one, he and I. He's always had a thing for somnophilia. Technically, it's *his* kink. He mentioned it to me. I never thought to try until you were right there, vulnerable, and ripe for the taking."

"You're such a predator," I say, and it's very much the truth.

But the thing is, I am willing prey, and he knows it.

Still, at the back of my mind, I wonder whether he's capable of doing this sort of thing to a woman who wouldn't be into it.

My answer is immediate and vehement: no.

Callum only ever reaches pleasure from my own satisfaction. He needs me to come. He wants to take me like a savage but he wants me to *like* it.

Caden, on the other hand? I'm not so sure.

"Yes, my delicious little prey. I truly am."

"And your cousin..." I hesitate. "He does that sort of thing often?"

Callum takes a minute to think. "I don't think so, no. I mean, it's not that easy to find girls—or guys—open to the idea. It takes a fair bit of trust."

He's right. If I didn't trust him, I certainly wouldn't have taken valerian specifically intending on letting him do whatever he pleased with my body while I was out of it.

“But I know he’s paid some people to play out his little fantasy, a few times.”

It makes absolute sense—why resort to violence when cash can get him what he wants?—and I shouldn’t be shocked. Isn’t that the Noble way? He paid me, too. And so long as they consented to do it, it doesn’t matter whether it’s for money or because they find it hot.

“That’s a pretty sweet gig. Earning money while you sleep.”

“I’m not sure they think so the next day. Caden is probably a rough motherfucker.” I feel Callum’s chuckle against my back. “Ugh, I hate your bed. Come home with me.”

I’m the one who made a point of coming here, but now we’re on the hard, lumpy piece of furniture, and I decide I hate my bed too. “Okay.”

There are things which are just not worth arguing about. Sleeping on this torture device definitely is one of them.

“Do you have a suitcase? You should bring some things, so you don’t have to rush back to get changed or whatever.”

This, I should probably argue against. I come back to campus daily to study in any case; popping back by my room is no hardship.

But it would be awfully convenient to have a few things at his place, given how much time I’m spending there. And I’m too tired, content, and practical to shoot myself in the foot.

“Sure.”

It takes three weeks for him to say it, as he helps me unpack more clothes and some of my schoolbooks.

“You could just move in, you know.”

In all honesty, I have to commend his restraint, because I’m fairly certain the words have been on the tip of his tongue for days.

“I mean,” he adds casually, “I have the room. You can have a walk-in closet. Half of the office. Or your own office, for the sake of both of our productivity.”

“No, Cal, I can’t.” I roll my eyes. “We’ve been together for a month and known each other for two. That would be insanity. We’re not insane.”

“Aren’t we?” He shoots me a grin that highlights those cheekbones. “We’re not the definition of sane either.”

“True. But I’m not going to move in with you. What if you grow tired of me? Where would I live?”

He exhales loudly. “Does it seem to you like I’d get tired, darling?”

It doesn’t; but that doesn’t mean he won’t. The thing with Callum is, he’s a little obsessive around the edges. That’s why we ended up here. I don’t have a high enough opinion of myself to think I’ll be his sole, and last obsession. He has me now. Someday, he’ll likely move onto the next shiny thing. And there’s nothing wrong with that. People get together, have

fun and break up all the time. I just have to make sure I come out on the other side with a life. And a place to live.

I'm trying to work out how to say all of that without making it sound like I don't trust him—I do. I trust that he likes me and is enjoying my company. I just don't think it'll be forever. And who would think they'd spend forever with their boyfriend after one month? Especially given how we started.

“Look, Cal—”

“I'll drop it for now,” he announces, surprising me.

I cock an eyebrow. “Really?”

That's not like him at all to give up so easily.

“Yep. You're about to say no, along with a lot of other words that won't please me. Let's skip that. You're not ready. Consider the subject dropped.”

Well, that was easy. He mustn't have been as keen on the idea as I thought. Or at least, he understands my point. I smile and keep packing, firmly intent on not analyzing the degree of disappointment I feel because he gave up so easily.

So much for not being insane.

My phone buzzes, and I check my messages, frowning, at first, because there's a new text from an unknown number.

They pop up every other day, increasingly threatening, all of them with the same message: I'm a bad daughter, I'll get what's coming to me, I should share my wealth after all the years he spent supporting me, blah, blah, blah.

The thing with my father is, he never lifted a finger to help in any way shape or form. I had to learn to do my laundry, the shopping—using the food stamps the government sent every month, 'cause he sure as fuck wasn't giving me any money. I've had part time jobs since I was seven, babysitting or cleaning for the neighbors, just to pay for basic necessities. I packed my own lunch, signed my own school forms. The only thing he provided me with was a roof, and even that wasn't always safe, with his dodgy friends around.

My salvation was having Tricks and Jinx in the building. Their mom let me attend her ballet school for free, invited me to eat all of the homemade dinners I ever had in my childhood, and never said a word when I'd sneak into the house late at night to escape the apartment.

He ignored me my entire life, treating me like an inconvenience, because the government was going to make him pay for me any time he had a job if he didn't keep me around. Now, it's my turn to pretend he doesn't exist.

I block that number, too, and open the actual text that caused the notification: a message from Annalise.

"I have to pop into town to grab the stuff I ordered for Halloween. Do you need anything?" I check with Callum.

"Only your cute ass in a slutty costume tonight," he replies. "Do you need another drawer?"

I really do. But I have two, and three is far too much for someone who's definitely not living here. "No, thank you. Who said my costume was slutty?"

"Me. Because you're a slut."

It occurs to me that I should be at least pretending to be offended, rather than giggle as he draws me into his arms.

He's right though: I am an eager slut for him. Whatever game he has in mind, I'm happy to play along.

Over the last weeks, he's fucked me in every position I've ever heard of and some I haven't, covering every surface in his place with body fluids. Good thing he has an excellent, discreet cleaning staff.

After the way we started, I expected that he'd invite half of his friends to jump me daily but he seems quite happy to keep me to himself, too. And I can't say I mind, though I also liked having an audience.

Tonight's the first time we have plans with his friend since the steakhouse, when he introduced me to them. We're supposed to attend the Halloween parade thrown by the crown every year, followed by a party here.

Or rather, an *orgy* here.

Every floor will be open except for the penthouse.

I can't deny I've been looking forward to tonight for days—even more so after Annalise managed to find the perfect outfit for me. It was hard to explain to her what I needed: something I could wear in public at the parade, where we'll no doubt be photographed by the paparazzi always eager to write about Callum's life—which right now, extends to me—and also appropriate for after.

I fumbled my way through an explanation, saying we'd go to a nightclub afterwards. But she got the memo. She had to order the dress from abroad, but promised she'd move heaven and earth to get it to me in time.

We picked a secondary choice she kept in store just in case stars weren't aligning, but according to this text, I'm getting my dress.

Two hours later, I gasp as I try it on.

It's long, tight and sexy—something that Morticia Addams could wear—but the dress is made of various layers, many of which are removable.

The first combination, that I'm wearing at the parade, has long, sheer bell sleeves, but underneath, there's a boned top, and that top can also be unhooked into two parts, leaving only an underbust corset.

The skirt's similar: there's a leather overskirt, and a mesh one underneath. So, I can look like a sexy, classy witch, or an emo porn star, depending on the mood.

"I also found a headpiece for you," Annalise says, handing me the most adorable little fascinator, with spiderwebs instead of normal mesh and a tiny pointy hat in the middle.

"Oh, my god, it's *adorable*."

"On the house," she tells me with a smile. "You're going to put my future kids through college, anyway."

It's true: I haven't gone anywhere else since finding the little shop that I now know belongs to her. I haven't had any

reason to. She has most of what I need and when she doesn't, she knows how to get a hold of it. She's also less expensive than the big luxury stores out there, carrying only the most obvious brands. Annalise works with little, but high-quality designers.

"Are you going to the parade?" I ask.

Annalise seems to know everything going on in town—and what to wear for it—so I'm assuming her social calendar is pretty packed outside of the shop.

"Sort of. My family watches it from the castle," she replies without fuss.

"The castle?" I blink.

"Yes." She smiles. "I don't go often, but Halloween is my favorite holiday to spend there. The cook makes the most delicious little cupcakes with pumpkin icing."

Watching my expression, the shop owner chuckles. "I'm the queen's niece. Not that it matters, as I'm technically disowned by my parents, but my aunt doesn't care."

"That sucks. Why were you disowned, if you don't mind me asking?"

She shrugs. "I like simple things. Such as owning my shop. Making my own money. *Not* marrying some old guy on command for a title."

I've spent enough time in her world to know that's not unusual. "I'm so sorry."

She snorts. "Don't be. I do really well. Before I put my foot down, I was a stylist for the elder royals, and trust me, I much prefer the lanes. At least here, I get to play with wonderful dresses such as this one. I do have a wonderful lingerie set you might want to try with it, by the way."

Her store doesn't carry much lingerie—just a few iconic pieces—but she pulls it out of the back.

A cupless bra attached to what looks like a collar. Matching panties—or, rather, strings attached together.

I swallow.

She *definitely* gets the vibe of the royals, doesn't she?

It turns out, I likely didn't need to spend that much time trying to explain what I was after for Callum's orgy, after all. I wonder if she has an invite. Probably.

"Does it come in red?"

callum

She's trying to kill me, there's no other possibility.

Objectively, by this point, I'll admit that my hobby might seem a little strange. I got the girl. I got the girl in my house, in my bed, and it's only a matter of time until she admits she's never walking out of it. So you'd think I'd stop stalking her. But I just love watching her when she's by herself. I'm also fully aware that I could tell her about it; she wouldn't mind. My delicious little doll is as twisted as me. But her not actually knowing is half the fun.

I had to cut back my hours at the office because I'm following her every day, as soon as she's out of school. Good thing I don't technically need a job.

I picked law because there's a contract shoved in my face every week, and it's always useful to know what the hell they're saying, and I founded my firm because I had nothing better to do. Now I do, so I work from ten to four. Fuck anyone who has anything to say about it. I've hired a handful of grunts who can hold down the fort when I'm busy. I represent artists and authors, anyway, so the hours are flexible.

Today, I took the afternoon off to watch her go to her favorite shop in the lanes, and get her hair and makeup done, before heading back home.

And my place is her home. She knows that deep down. Why would she go there and not her dorm, otherwise? We're officially meeting at six for the parade.

The Halloween parade, like all other events in the streets of the capital, starts in the park, circling it before walking up to the avenue leading up to the palace.

Temporary bleachers have been set up at their end point, where the true spectacles will happen, and I have seats reserved every year. Most of the time, I don't bother to show, but Olivia was so excited when I mentioned it.

"I've never actually seen it properly from up close! There's always such a crowd. To have the best view, I had to watch it replay on TV."

No one really goes unless they're under twelve, but if my girl wants to see the circus outdoors, we're seeing the circus.

God, I'm so whipped.

I know I could just cross the road and join her, but instead, I watch her walk, that tight ass downright sinful in her leather mermaid skirt. Everyone turns to watch her in the street; she causes whistles, blatant second looks, and she *loves* it, slut that she is.

My cock tightens in my pants. I know she wants to be watched. Some of the guys shamelessly checking her out aren't safe, but she doesn't care. If she could get away with stripping and spreading her legs right here in the street, she would. She wants to be *prey*. That's an instinct that calls to me. I really can't get over how fucking perfect she is for me.

She reaches the square in front of the castle, where a crowd's already assembled although the parade hasn't started yet—our meeting point—and looks around.

She's fucking terrible at it. If she paid a little attention beyond the obvious, she'd see me. Just because I'm wearing a beanie and standing behind a tree shouldn't keep her from spotting me. But she doesn't. She never does. Maybe that's why I can't stop myself from following.

She's a little early, so I wait, watching her move from stand to stand: there are various vendors tonight, selling candy cane, cotton candy, hot dogs, pretzels, candied apples. I try to guess what she'll pick.

Pretzels.

They're freshly made, so worth the carbs for her. Olivia isn't the kind of girl to count calories closely, despite being a dancer, but she only eats fast food if it's extra delicious.

I'm deeply satisfied to watch her queue in front of the pretzel stand.

My watch beeps, which means it's time for me to join her, and I'm about to walk away from the line of trees, when I see a silhouette pull away from another tree.

So much for calling Olivia unobservant. Why didn't I see him?

There's no denying that he's a fellow stalker, walking like a predator, dressed not to get noticed, in sunglasses and baseball cap, although it's six and definitely not sunny enough to justify either. Sunset is in minutes.

It would be one thing if he was just a random pervert preying on whatever tits and ass they can look at, maybe planning to flash them. But that guy's aiming for the same fucking target as me. His gaze is fixed on my gorgeous girl in her black dress, with her red collar.

Oh, *hell*, no.

I'm not sure what he's planning. It doesn't matter. He's approaching her and he has no right to. She's *mine*.

I trail him, and I have to say, preying on the predator is exhilarating in a very different way. When I follow Liv, I know I won't do anything to hurt her. Best-case scenario, I'll get to fuck her while she sleeps—which I know is a major turn-on for her as much as it is for me—but most of the time I just derive pleasure from watching her, knowing she's mine.

I'm not an observer right now.

I am a hunter.

I bite into the buttery softness and moan. How fucking *delicious*.

I got two pretzels, but if Callum doesn't show up in the next three minutes, he's on his own.

I've ingested most of the salted goodness in three bites when some guy says, "Hey, you're Olivia, right?"

Ugh. Paparazzi. It's not my first time dealing with one of them. I'm about to say that, no, I don't have any comment, when the guy pulls a fucking *knife* and brings it up to my throat in one smooth move.

I drop the pretzel and gasp.

What the *fuck*?

I'm too startled to even scream for help, and then, watching the three-inch blade pressing against my skin, I know better than to do it.

He could kill me in one single move.

"What do you want?" I croak, voice tight.

"For you to stop being a fucking bitch, that's what," he snarls, his blade cutting a red line across my throat as he walks forward, forcing me to backtrack, away from the avenue and towards the trees.

Shit!

"You're going to take your fucking phone, call your father, and transfer him the money you *owe* him, understood?"

I have no clue what he thinks I owe my dad, but I don't have any other choice but to nod. My fear would have made me agree to just about anything right now.

In all honesty, I never expected this. I thought Dad was just hot air, angrily harassing me, but he ultimately has no power over me. And sure, he has gross, dangerous friends, but I didn't think he'd sic them on me.

I underestimated him.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

I focus on the problem at hand. Whats and ifs and hows don't help me stay alive.

"I'll do it. I'll send him money—I promise."

"I don't give a shit about promises. Do it *now*."

Hands trembling, I reach for my phone. I can't transfer a substantial amount remotely without extra security, but this guy doesn't know that, and I have to at least pretend to comply, so he leaves me alone.

My eyes dart to the crowd around us, all of them focused on the festivities, the stands, the balloons and music. The parade must have started.

He's in close quarters, and to an onlooker not really paying attention, it must have seemed like we were a couple embracing or something.

It takes me two tries to unlock the device. "I don't—" I swallow. "I don't have my father's number."

"Fucking bitch," he groans, looking down to his own pocket to retrieve his own phone.

It occurs to me that if there was ever a time to run, it would be now. Except, a flick of his wrist would be enough for him to stab me in a fucking artery, so I don't chance it.

He's staring down to grab his phone, when a passerby in a beanie, head down, approaching from behind me suddenly turns, grasping the hand holding the knife by the wrist, and twisting it behind his back.

I step back as he grabs the knife and wordlessly, seamlessly, shoves it into my aggressor's back.

The man screams, but the man in the gray beanie wraps his hand around his mouth, before withdrawing the knife.

I watch wordlessly, eyes wide. Callum pockets the knife and holds the limp body by the shoulders, like he's helping a drunk friend stand up. He even pats his back and says, "There, there. You just don't know when to stop, do you, friend?"

My eyes scan around us. There are a couple of people heading towards the parade, none of them watching us.

On autopilot, without checking, I grab the guy's other shoulder, and help Callum bring him to the closest bench.

Holy fucking shit. He killed him. Easily. He aimed for the heart and it was over in an instant. Like he knew just where to plunge the blade.

It should be terrifying. I should question why my boyfriend knew, without a single moment of hesitation, how to end a life.

I *shouldn't* be sick to my stomach at the idea that he might be taken away from me if anyone found out he just *killed someone*.

After we've dropped the guy on the bench, Callum brings his arms around my shoulders, and holds me tight, hands soothingly caressing my back.

I don't know how long we've been like this when I realize that this isn't smart. We should...go away. Wipe the evidence. Destroy the knife?

"He was..." I croak. "He was—"

"Shhh. He's never going to hurt you again. No one is."

"But," I insist. "He was sent by my father. *My father!*"

Callum hesitates. Then all he says is, "Hm."

I sob, soaking his shirt.

"It's me."

I lift my head, surprised to see Callum on the phone.

“I need a cleanup crew—the grove by the palace. Self-defense.” Pause. “He was after Liv.”

He’s calling someone. Does that mean it’ll be okay? Now I can think vaguely clearly, I realize he’s right. It was self-defense. The knife, my cut, maybe even some city cameras—they can prove it.

We’ll be okay. Right?

“Of course. We’ll be just fine, darling. That’s a promise.”

I didn’t even realize I asked the question out loud.

An indeterminable amount of time later—but it feels soon—there are six men in dark suits and an unmarked black van pulling up, although it’s a pedestrian area, and then the body dripping blood under his shirt is gone. So is the red smear and the puddle on the green bench, though the white concrete is a little stained.

It’s over.

It’s over.

Then why doesn’t it feel like it?

For the first time in my life, I don't see the parade, though I had the best seats. There's no party later. The upper echelons of Anderia likely hate my guts now, because Callum cancels his orgy at the last minute for my sake.

It's not until the next day that I realize what the dread coiling in my stomach is about.

Callum's clean-up crew wiped away the incident like it never existed. There's no report of death by knife on the news. No policeman comes to question either of us.

But someone did know the thug was coming after me today. Someone who would kick up a fuss, if only to get my attention. Blackmail me with the information.

He sent him. He sent that guy, no doubt telling him to hurt me if I didn't comply. And maybe after I complied too, to make sure I stayed in line the next time he texted.

"My father is a problem."

My voice is so broken. I don't think I've talked all night, and most of the morning.

Callum has stayed glued to my side. He's pulled me on his lap now, and is feeding me grapes I wouldn't eat if he weren't shoving them right into my mouth.

"I know," he replies simply.

My eyes meet his, now gray and cold, as they get sometimes. I've always found it hot—the way they can turn to ice. Now I understand it.

He knew exactly how to kill. Quickly. Efficiently. Like someone who'd done it before.

"You're going to kill him?" I ask.

He presses a fruit to my lips. I part them obediently.

"I don't have to, love. He wants cash. I'll give it to him."

My stomach drops; that's the last thing I want. Dad doesn't deserve a reward for...well, anything he's done my entire life, and certainly not yesterday.

"A substantial amount that can turn his life around, attached to a laundry list of conditions in an ironclad contract. First of all, he'll have to leave the country."

That's a start, but he wasn't there last night. He still found a way to get to me. What's to stop him from doing it again?

I make myself nod. It's not like I can ask Callum to kill *someone else* for me. He was right anyway; it was self-defense—or my defense—with my aggressor. If he went to my father with the deliberate intention to kill him, it'd be an entirely different story altogether.

I can't ask. So I don't.

"I'm sorry you had to live through that. I thought..." He sighs. "Foolish of me, but I believed that while we were just dating, you didn't need a security detail. You don't have enough money, or a rank, to make you a person of interest to the wrong crowd. I never considered this. You'll have a security detail starting tomorrow."

Some of my dread fades.

If someone had told me before yesterday that I'd want someone to follow me around, I would have rolled my eyes so hard. But right now, it sounds amazing.

"I will?"

"Of course. No one is hurting you but me," Callum promises, holding me tight against his chest.

I lower my head to his shoulder and let him.



I DON'T TRY to go out for the rest of the weekend. On Monday, I have to force myself to leave the safety of the penthouse.

I know Callum drew up the fifty-nine-page long contract over the weekend, and brought it to my father's attention. The asshole was only too quick to accept, of course.

He's going to get a million euros by the end of the business day; the likelihood that he'll come after me right now is low.

But after he blows the money, that's another story.

I make myself go to class.

By December, I don't even flinch when I hear loud noises.

I'm good. Everything is good. Manageable.

The next time Cal asks me to move in, I accept eagerly. I rarely ever leave the apartment, anyway.

"Would you like to see someone about the attack?" Callum offers. "I...my cousin and I—we've been trained to expect that sort of thing since childhood. Kidnapping, attempted murder. There are people who don't like the fact that aristocracy exists. Besides, we're filthy rich. So we're prepared. I know it came as a shock to you."

As usual, he knows exactly what I need.

I go to therapy, which helps a bit.

But nothing entirely removes my newfound anxiety until Christmas Day comes, bringing many gifts, including one I never would have expected.

The snowstorm is insane this year; we're used to it in Anderia, as the entire country's in the mountains, but it's a lot, even for us.

Callum's best friends are all snowed in on the high peaks, in their mountain resort, so we expect to be quite quiet, yet on the twenty-fifth, the footman announces a visit.

"Caden!" I grin at Callum's cousin, hugging him. "I thought you were still up in the Valmont manor?"

"The snow let up three days ago. I was there until this morning, though, if you ask anyone." He shoots me his best winning smirk, one that I would likely find entirely irresistible if I wasn't so used to it from Callum.

I tilt my head. "Why would I ask where you were?"

"Some people might," he replies lightly. "Is your man in?"

I wave towards Callum's gym. "He's sweating—in the boring way. I doubt he heard the footman's call, given how loud his music is when he works out. He should be done in ten, but I can get him..."

"Don't. It's you I wanted to talk to."

That's...odd. "Do you want a drink?" I offer. "It's a little early, but if we can't day drink on Christmas Day, when can we?"

He chuckles, following me to the lounge. "Yes, please."

He sheds his coat, leaving it at the back of one of the armchairs, before retrieving a piece of paper from his back pocket. "This is for you."

My eyes go from the rolled-up paper to his and I frown, taking it.

It's an article, from an American paper, judging by the spelling.

...found at 7:59 this morning.

...drug overdose.

...identified by the landlord...

...no proof of foul play.

...immigrant recently moved to New York...

My eyes scan through the entire paper, and return to the picture on top. A man who would still have been handsome in his late forties, if not for all his substance abuse.

My jaw falls as my eyes return to Caden.

I'm sitting. I haven't even made a conscious choice to sit, but I'm in the armchair now, and he's taken over my job behind the bar, pulling glasses.

"Champagne, wouldn't you say?" Caden offers, smile never wavering.

But they don't reach those cold, familiar eyes.

"You did this."

Without waiting for my reply, he retrieves a bottle of champagne from the fridge and opens it with a loud pop. "He'd already used up about forty percent of the cash, in two months. I imagine he'd be out by the end of next year, and coming for more." Caden shrugs. "Which I can't say I mind, but his methods have proven problematic."

He circles the bar and hands me a flute, just as Callum walks into the lounge, sweaty and glistening. "Thought I heard obnoxious self-importance."

"Cousin." Caden grimaces. "You stink."

“I know. Hug?”

“I’d rather be flogged, thanks.”

The casual banter is usual for them, but completely surreal given the bomb Caden just dropped.

He killed my father, who was apparently in New York.

Made it look like an accident.

He was in the mountains *if anyone asks*.

But no one will.

“Are you all right, love?” Callum asks.

I can’t formulate a word, so his frown is redirected toward his cousin, who shrugs. “I might have killed her dad. Merry Christmas?”

Callum shoots him a glare, before rushing to my side, protectively. “Hey. Are you okay?”

His hands run over my lap, while his voice drops down to a smooth whisper; he’s babying me, like he thinks I’ll break like I almost did at the start of November.

I guess I should have said something sooner. “Sorry, I... That’s a lot to take in, all of a sudden. I’m not even sure I’m not dreaming the whole thing.”

Exhaling to ground myself, I set the flute down and stand, crossing the distance between me and Caden. I wrap my arms around his shoulders. “Thank you. I was... I tried to ignore it, but I was so scared of what he’d do next. Thank you, thank you, *thank you*. You’re crazy. But thank you.”

“It was my distinct pleasure, darling.” He snorts. “You’re going to be a Noble. *No one* is ever going to get a second chance to hurt you.”

He achieves what therapy, time, and an entire security detail couldn’t achieve: I feel safe.

Also, clearly, I’m surrounded by murderers, but as they’re on my team, I don’t mind.

Callum is reactive. If there's someone intending to hurt him, me, or anyone he cares about, he'll dispose of them without losing a minute of sleep. But Caden has no issue with preventive measures. And as far as Dad was concerned, that's what I needed.

It's not just about me; it helps Grace, too. She's also his child, and if he had ever learned that she was well off, he would likely have also targeted her, somehow.

For the first time that night, I sleep peacefully.

And I wake with a positively wicked idea in mind.

CHAPTER 27

callum

“I’m gonna marry that girl,” I announce, just in case anyone here doubted it.

Anyone conscious that is. Olivia’s still not quite certain about it, but she also happens to be deeply asleep, like she only is after taking the sleeping pills her doctor prescribed for anxiety last month.

“I will if you don’t,” Caden retorts.

The horny motherfucker’s fucking salivating. And why wouldn’t he be? Tonight is about him. His present for murdering her dad for her.

Smug asshole.

If I’d thought that’s what she wanted, I would have had it done in November. But to be fair, the way things happened now is safer; as far as anyone looking into it is concerned, I gave him cash and sent him on his way. And no one with the surname Noble traveled to the States last month. Our hands are squeaky clean.

“Damn, that’s one lovely ass,” Caden muses, like he’s never even looked at it before.

To be fair, he’s never had a chance to watch it like this.

She usually sleeps naked, but tonight, she put on one of her naughty little lingerie numbers for us; a see-through black thong with little bows, like she’s a present to unwrap, and a bra to match. She’s passed out on her tummy, one leg folded up, so I can’t properly get a good look at her tits, but I bet we

can perfectly see her nipples through it, just like we have a full view of her slit and clit between her legs.

When she told me she wanted to offer herself as a Christmas present for Caden, to thank him for *his* present to her, I grew hard immediately. The only thing better than to fuck her asleep would be to share her asleep. The fact that she *asked* me only makes it hotter. She knows who that pussy belongs to.

“Can she take two cocks?” Caden unceremoniously starts to peel his clothes off.

“We’ll find out,” I promise, following his lead.

“That might wake her up.”

“I don’t know—she took the prescription pills. She should be out for most of the night.”

I haven’t actually fucked her in her sleep since October. She didn’t ask me to stop, but I didn’t quite feel like it, while she was vulnerable and so scared. But I know she ignores several of her alarms on the nights when she does take those sleep. Sometimes, even shaking her awake doesn’t work. Not for long. She drawls something unintelligible and crashes again.

“Fuck. How did you get so lucky?” Caden grunts, bending over her, hands palming that gorgeous ass.

I’m generous enough to leave him to it. This is about him, after all. And I have her every night. I sit by her and bring my hand to my cock.

I spoke the truth when I said I don’t really wank, but I’ll make an exception while watching her get worshipped.

Caden takes his time, sniffing her ass, before pushing the panties aside and licking the crack from top to bottom, and lower, towards her pussy. She moans absently as she always does, like she’s having a great dream.

“Fucking hell.” His cock against her leg, he sways his hips to get some friction while he keeps licking her.

Her hips rock back and forth slowly in her sleep, as she instinctively seeks pleasure. She twists on top of the cover, to lie with her back against the mattress, bare to us.

Fuck. I was right. *Everything* is on display in that lingerie. I immediately bring my hand to her tits as Caden resumes his onslaught on her clit from a new angle.

As I watch him, I wonder what his deal is. I've seen him fuck a conscious woman before. He never takes much time on foreplay, especially the giving kind. Yet now he looks like he could spend hours devouring her cunt.

"She's *drenched*," Caden marvels, sitting up to bring the head of his cock to her entrance.

It's pierced with a ball on top and a ladder underneath, which I'm told increases pleasure for both parties. I watch him enter her slowly, his eyes riveted on her sleeping form.

Other than her hips moving a little again, there's no reaction from her.

"Oh god, that pussy's pulsing around me," he grunts, sinking in, and out, and in. "But she's completely asleep."

Emboldened by her lack of reaction, he grabs hold of her legs, bringing them to his shoulders.

"That's it. Just stay limp like that for me and *take it*," he orders her, drilling her faster, harder.

My hand deliberately moves slower around my shaft, because if I'm not careful, I'm going to come while watching, when I'd rather be balls-deep inside her.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," Caden chants.

He abruptly drops her limbs and withdraws, climbing over her limp body to aim his cock at her face as he comes, painting her white.

I chuckle. "That was embarrassingly fast."

"I *dare you* to last as long," he says primly. "That damn cunt!"

“Oh, I will.” Not that I did the first time, but I’m used to her. The way her body craves this, even in sleep.

To prove it, I take his place between her legs and ram home. She’s already wet and sensitive, those walls sucking me in, but I have a point to prove, so I take my time.

Caden doesn’t just watch, unlike me; he’s licking her tits, bringing her unmoving hand to his cock and wrapping her fingers around it to wank himself with her help, opening her mouth, then sliding his tip past her lips and filling her with shallow thrusts.

Using her like a doll.

“The camera,” I remind him.

That was part of his present—from me: an old polaroid all set up, waiting to be used on the bedside table.

I think we both forgot it until now.

“Hell yes!” He’s quick to grab it, taking shots of his cock in her mouth, with her face wet with cum, mine in her cunt, her bare stomach.

“Move over, would you?”

I’m almost ready to come, and there’s one thing I meant to try today.

When he scoots a few inches back, I move her to the side, before bringing my cock to her asshole. It’s well and truly used by now, so it lets me in without any protest. I lift her leg, giving Caden full access. He’s quick to catch on, wordlessly sliding back into her pussy.

Oh, god. This is *so tight*.

We’ve worked up to this for a while. In a way, it’s a bit of a shame she’s not awake for it, but it makes sense to do it this way: the next time we’ll do it, her body will be used to it, though her mind will likely still need adjustment.

I make a point to push in when he withdraws, setting a rhythm that drives me fucking insane. The friction of a good

fuck, but multiplied by the fact that there's another cock across the slim wall between her holes.

And she fucking sleeps through it like a good girl.

We race each other, both of us refusing to give in first, railing her pussy and ass until we're both painting, swearing, sweating.

I can't take it anymore; I come, not even ashamed to be first. No; he stopped moving too, filling her at the same time as I did.

Holy shit.

We're *so* doing this again.

I roll onto my back to catch my breath.

"I think I'd die of a heart attack inside of a year if I had that in my bed every night," Caden wheezes.

I laugh.

"Wait until she wakes up."

He doesn't. He fucks her again twice, taking her ass, and then her pussy again, before falling asleep.

I stay up, though, watching the wonder in my bed. I want to know the moment she shows signs of waking, so I can fill her cunt again.

“Callum!” I yell from the lounge. “We’re gonna be late!”

“And whose fault is that?” he asks, walking in.

He’s fiddling with his cufflinks. I roll my eyes, and walk to him to help.

“Yours, for being naked in the damn shower. Slut.”

“I’m *your* slut,” he retorts, bringing his mouth to mine in a kiss that quickly turns into something more, like it usually does with us.

I grunt against his lips. “Don’t! It’s your cousin’s wedding.”

“Second cousin,” he retorts, his eager hands sliding along my legs.

I slap them away. “Hey! We like Less, remember? Besides, his mother will murder you if you’re late.”

He sighs, because he knows it’s true. “Fine. The sooner we go, the sooner I can fuck you in the bathroom.”

I roll my eyes. “We’re not doing that at a *wedding*.”

“It’s a royal wedding,” he reminds me. “It’ll be perfectly safe.”

By safe, he means, no royals kiss and tell—or watch others get plowed against dubiously hygienic surfaces and tell.

I ponder his answer. “Okay, fine, but not until after they say their vows.”

“We’ll see.” He kisses my neck, and leads me out to the car.

“What if it was *your* wedding and, I don’t know, Hawk or Caden disappeared for a quickie in the middle of it?”

“I’d certainly understand, and forgive. My bride though... not so sure.” He tilts his head as he opens the car door. “Will you?”

“Hm?”

“Will you forgive our dear friends if they leave our wedding to fuck in the bathroom, darling?”

I stay planted right there, incapable of thinking of a single thing to say. My brain short-circuited at the whole wedding thing. Preceded by the word *our*.

“Personally, I’d say it’s acceptable extenuating circumstances, though they’ll have to be back in time to give me the rings. But if you have something against it, let me know. I’ll warn the guys. I know none of them want to be on your bad side. They like to fuck you far too much.”

He’s teasing me; I know he is, because he’s wearing his best smirk. The one he uses when he’s pulling my leg.

I refuse to let him win. “If we ever get married and any of the guys disappear, I’ll castrate them.”

“If?” he challenges, leaning in over the door.

I swallow.

Six months ago, I would have had many words to say. Most of them, a clear denial that this could even be happening.

Except it is.

I know exactly what he’s *not* saying.

“You’re not proposing to me on Less’s wedding day. Ivy *will* castrate you, and I like your balls.” I slide in the seat, determined to look unruffled.

Except...*holy shit*.

“Yes, ma’am.”

He shortly slides onto his seat in the classic Jaguar.

“And there’d better be a ring when you do *ask*.”

“Like I don’t have that in my pocket.”

I gasp, and dive into his breast pocket with a squeal.

I’m *not* accepting a proposal today. But that doesn’t change the fact that I wanna see the shiny.

bonus

CADEN

“Hello, Mr. Barrett,” I say politely as I walk into the temporary rental.

He’s lived here for a month and hasn’t bothered to look for accommodations that wouldn’t drain his recent influx of cash.

“It’s a pleasure,” I lie smoothly.

The drunk, barely standing waste of space brings his bottle of scotch to his mouth. “So you’re that twat my girl’s shackled up with, huh?”

He hasn’t met Cal; their interaction was purely virtual, but if he had, he could still confuse the two of us. Firstly because he’s drunk, and secondly because we do look alike.

“No, that would be my first cousin, Callum. I suppose I would have been your nephew-in-law, under different circumstances.”

He hasn’t invited me in, but I close the door behind me.

“Different circumstances?” he repeats, butchering both words.

“Yes. See, my cousin is a simple, reasonable man. The best, truly. I want to assure you, your daughter couldn’t be in better hands.” Not that this piece of shit cares. “But you see, my cousin is, well...optimistic. He believes giving you a little money will rid him of you. I know better. I know that man came after your daughter because you told him to, and you’d happily do it again. I’d wager you actually already decided

you would when you've run through the cash you just got, right?"

"Now wait a minute..."

"Shhhh." I grin. "It won't be long now, my friend, and there is nothing you can do about it."

My victim blinks, his slow brain not getting it.

"'bout what?"

"You're dead, Mr. Barret. The toxin running in your veins would kill a horse." I tilt my head. "Someone of your constitution...well, it's surprising you've lasted this long."

He stands abruptly; a mistake. Sudden movements will only pump his blood faster, therefore spreading the poison he's just ingested with half of his drink in seconds rather than minutes.

Not that anything will save him.

"What—what did you do to me?" His hand goes to his heart. "What are you doing here!"

He tries to lunge but falls face first, then struggles to crawl up.

His body drops back down with a hollow *thud*.

"I'm here because I like watching, at the end, Mr. Barret," I explain to the corpse.

My gloved hand retrieves the bottle, and I grab the sterile syringe from its box in my pocket.

I fill it and inject him three times.

The poison will perfectly fake the effects of an overdose, but it'll help if they find the right drugs in his system. Not that anyone is going to look too far at what killed dear old Brad Barret tonight.

I go to the toilet and flush the rest of his scotch. The toxin dissipates fast, but one can never be too careful.

I'm done, and about to leave when I hear it.

It's barely a noise, not even a breath, but I know better than to let that stop me from checking.

Shit. That was careless of me. I did observe Barret all day, waited until he drank enough, and I made sure no one was coming in...but maybe there already was someone in the apartment.

Who? My investigators assured me he was alone. He'd been visited by street grunts who carry his coke a few times, but that always had been brief.

What did I miss?

It could just be a cat.

I push open the door.

Definitely not a cat.

A problem.

The emaciated girl in a tiny crop top and a skirt short enough to show her butt crack has hollow, hungry eyes. She looks young. Far too young to wear this. Far too young to be here.

"How old are you?" I hear myself asking.

It doesn't matter. She was here today, which means she's a problem.

There's only one way I deal with problems.

"What?" those light eyes falling on the body behind me.

"Your age, kid," I repeat.

She swallows, her eyes returning to mine. "I'm—I'm..." She clears her throat.

"Lying to me will not end well."

"Sixteen. I'm sixteen. I said I was eighteen so they'd let me join."

No one with eyes would believe that waif is anywhere near eighteen. "Why did you whore yourself out?"

Those eyes are suddenly full of fire, like she hates me for pointing out what she's clearly been up to. "None of your business."

I chuckle. "And here I thought you might have some survival instincts."

She returns to the corpse, swallowing a sob. "It's my ma. She's dying. Cancer. I needed—"

"A decent healthcare system, which isn't going to happen this century here," I summarize. "It's courageous of you to do this for her. But foolish. You wouldn't make enough to pay for cancer treatment on your back."

"Fuck you!"

I laugh again. She's so idiotic, it's actually fun. "No, thanks. Come back in five years and I might, though."

Except she won't be alive in five years. She shouldn't be alive in five minutes.

I'm smart—unlike her—and that means making the right decision.

The right decision is disposing of this waif.

Except I don't want to.

"Here's what's going to happen, kid. You're going to pretend tonight never happened."

I am in so much fucking trouble.

"He was a horrible man. I'm not gonna say anything."

I almost ask her what he did to her; then I decide against it. It would probably lead to me kicking his body, which would be even dumber than letting her see another day.

"You're going to tell me your name and your address. Then you will go home, throw those clothes in an open fire, go to school, get good grades. And tomorrow, your mother is going to get into the best hospital. Her treatment will be taken care of by an anonymous donor."

The pale green eyes fill with tears. Fuck. Now I'm playing Father Christmas. Someone shoot me.

"Hold this." I hand her the bottle in my gloved hand.

"Why?"

"Because I want your prints on the murder weapon, in case you ever get a little chatty."

I'm surprised to see her immediately take it. I figured she'd argue. Maybe her survival instincts aren't *that* terrible.

Mine are.

"Do you like it?" the kid asks me. "Killing people, I mean."

I retrieve the bottle. "Yes."

She nods like it's the most logical thing in the world.

"I bet it makes you feel powerful."

"I am powerful."

"Yes. Because you can get away with murder."

I laugh again. Three times in an hour. When was the last time that happened? "You're a smart kid."

"And you're really not going...to hurt me?"

I don't know if she means rape or kill. The first is out of the question; and to my surprise, so is the second.

"No. I don't think that's necessary. Do you?"

She exhales so deep, before that mouth extends in a monkey grin. "You're like my guardian angel, then."

Ah! Here I am again, cracking up. "I suppose I am, kid. I still need your name."

"I'm Rory. Aurora Grant."

The End

Caden and Aurora's story is planned in 2025, when Rory's a lot older.

For more in this twisted royal world, and the sister series, the Heritage, you can follow May's group or Patreon.

forbidden legacy

KT SAGE

CHAPTER 1

luca

I've got ninety-nine problems and half of them are caused by the man across from me. My youngest brother, trouble-maker, fire-starter, was too handsome for his own good, and too careless for mine.

"The fuck is this?" I demand, fanning the photos in my hand, before sliding them across the desk to him. The desk is wood polished to such a high-shine, it smudges as soon as you look at it, but that makes for a frictionless surface for the pictures to glide over. They spread across, haphazard, in front of the man wearing a face almost identical to my own. If only there weren't ten years between us, enough time that I practically raised him along with my other two younger brothers. If Riccardo was my age, we wouldn't be in this problem.

He'd know how to damn-well regulate.

"He insulted my girl—" he says with a shrug, leaning back in his chair, the leather creaking underneath him. His black shirt is stretched across his muscles, sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the first few buttons undone. He looks like a playboy. He is a playboy. I should have sent him into the army. My mother would never have forgiven me, even though I came of age and became the patriarch of the family the very same year, and it could have been my say.

It should have been my say.

But I was lost, soft, vulnerable after our uncles, and my father, were all murdered on the same weekend, taking out the

heads of Greco crime family and leaving me alone, at eighteen, to try to wrangle our criminal empire.

“He was a business partner,” I correct. I was working on a new venture with a shipping magnate and his son, and Riccardo took it upon himself to throw alcohol in his face and light him on fire. “Now I have to send flowers to the private hospital wing he’s in, and pay for his plastic surgery. I had to call his father and explain the accident, and tell him we’ll handle his medical expenses, and his son’s care.”

Riccardo shrugs.

“You don’t have anything to say?” My hands grip the edge of the desk, and I want to strangle him. Our father always said Ricky was all feeling and no thought, where-as I was the one who measured everything carefully, before making a decision. Even our middle brothers wouldn’t do something so damn impulsive, so stupid. The only reason the cops didn’t get called was because it was our street medic working the club, and it was our damn club. Nobody employed by the Greco family spoke.

Ever.

Loose lips had caused all the patriarchs in our family to end up with their throats slit. Now I visit the exact same punishment on anyone I catch talking.

And I always catch them.

“I didn’t realize the guy was one of yours.” Riccardo rolls his eyes, and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a cigarette, before lighting it, and blowing smoke. “And yeah, I’m sorry. It was stupid.”

“Stupid is mild,” I reply, tapping my fingers lightly. “You were supposed to take over the half of Gas Town Luca this year.”

Ricky pauses, his cigarette half-way to his mouth. I’m going to enjoy doing this. I can’t skin him, he’s family, but I can bring him to his knees.

“I was supposed to have half the town?”

“I was going to make you the Capo di tutti Capi of Gas Town.”

His lips turn down, and his fingers tremble.

“Was?”

“After this blow-up? You’re not fucking ready. Twenty-five, you could have had anything, a degree, a career in the military, you could have gone straight, but this is what you wanted, goddammit, this life is what you wanted.” I stare him down.

Each of my brothers they had choices. I gave them that.

Me? There was never any option for me. I’ve got a hastily forged GED burning a hole in the bottom of my desk, because I’d been immersed in the family business from the time I could walk, before I could talk.

And then I turned eighteen, and ten days later, I had the whole Grecco operation in my hand, only to find that I had to grip it tight with both just to ensure it didn’t turn on me and eat me, and my immediate family alive.

“I need someone I can rely on,” I growl. “And it’s not you.”

“I’ll do better.” His words are a whisper.

“Too little, too late.”

“Luke—” He gets to his feet, hands fisting at his sides, and I shake my head.

“Get the fuck out of here. You’re on door duty tonight at Capo’s and every night for the rest of the month. Dani will tell you which toilets you’re cleaning after the bar closes, too—”

His mouth drops open, and that cigarette hangs loosely from his fingers, like he’s forgotten about it. My jaw clenches.

“Don’t fuckin’ drop that. The carpet in here is older than you, and worth more, and if it’s burned, I’ll take the cost out of your goddam paycheck. And you can go help Federico at the repair shop, and learn a little about weaving while you’re at it.” His eyes burn in rage, but I know Matteo and Gio are

going to back me up on this. Matt's only a few years older than Ricky, but didn't have the benefit of being spoiled rotten as the baby of the family. He's already proven himself time and time again, and has been running his own crew for three years on his own now.

Ric should be ready. He's older than Matt was when I set him his territory, Terminal City and Gas-Town, but he's not.

“Go.”

He doesn't move, and I stare him down.

“You want me to ask the others if they want to give up a piece of the leadership to you, when you lost us a deal that was worth millions? You're going to keep tweakers out of Capo's and clean up vomit and piss, and you're going to do it with a fucking smile.”

“Yes, sir.” The words are bitter, and his mouth closing, his jaw clenched as he stares me down. He flips me the bird by way of a salute, and turns on his heels, striding out the door.

I slump back in my chair and let out a slow breath.

I'm trying to do right by my family.

But sometimes it's like they won't let me.

My eyes slide over the dark-charcoal walls of my office, the linen wallpaper catching the light along its texture. There's a painting above the door, a family portrait, the same one that used to hang in my parents' house, with a hole torn through my father's face, the killer's mark from the assassination still present.

My cousins say it's bad luck to keep it here, but it just reminds me of what he died for, what I live for. Every day, my focus is on protecting my family, everyone that falls under the Greco shadow. When I took over, when I was forced to take the reins, none of this was handed to me.

I fought for every scrap and nearly lost it all.

I was only eighteen. Just a kid, who'd never really had a childhood anyway, or a choice. The stars were aligned before I was born.

This is my place, my reason, my lifeblood.

There's a knock at the door of my office and I sigh, wanting to rub my temples, but knowing that any sign of weakness from the boss will spread like fire through the ranks.

"Come in." I hide the weariness in my voice, and Dani's face appears in the doorway.

"That bad, huh?"

"How much did you hear?"

"All of it. And I agree with you."

"That's a fucking change." I raise my eyebrow at her and she smiles. Her dark face, usually closed and enigmatic, is amused.

"He'll learn, cleaning up piss." She wrinkles her nose, trying to hide the laugh that I know is shaking her shoulders. A cousin, daughter of the black sheep of the family, my uncle Nero, who married outside of the Italian diaspora Boston to a beautiful classical singer. Dani inherited her mother's good looks, dark skin, and excellent singing voice.

But she inherited the Greco temper too, and our sharp, calculating minds. She'd be out of place in any other city, but to me, she's blood forever, family, and almost as close as a sister would be, if I'd had one.

"So, you came in to tell me how I'm not fucking up for once?"

She smiles and shakes her head, coming further into the room, shutting the door behind her.

"No. To tell you that the next shipment is ready." She cocks her head. Dani's true gift, beyond singing and making meatballs that would make God weep with the glory of them, is an analytical mind that traps data and moving parts like a spider's web. Nothing gets by her. She's better than a computer, essential for our records-keeping so that nothing, or as little as possible, is written down or digital.

It's the secret weapon behind the Greco family's power as we've moved from the Rolodexes and Filofaxes of the 80s into

the era where our whole empire could be carelessly left behind in a coffee shop, on some foot-soldier's phone.

It's why I don't let her date. Or rather, I don't approve of anyone she takes an interest in. That and she's too good for the mouth-breathers in this city.

"Is the delivery going to go smoothly this time?" I demand.

"It should," she replies, looking away. She doesn't look at me as she adds, "We've had an issue with the ship."

"Can't be helped, the dad's still pissed."

"I've pulled some strings, the best surgeon in North America. Rumor has it he's worked on half the royal family in—"

I raise my eyebrow at her.

"Well, he's done his best, the very best, but when you work with a flawed canvas." The corner of her lips turn up in a smirk.

"Fine, fine, just do what you need to do." I wave her away with a sigh and she studies me, her expression shifting from smug to hold a tinge of concern.

"You should take a little time off," her voice softens, and she walks around my desk to wrap her arms around me from behind, letting her head rest on my shoulder. I sigh, trying not to stiffen up at the contact.

"You smell like garlic," I say, trying to break the moment. She doesn't, she's too fastidious for that.

"And you smell like shitty cologne. But we put up with each other." She squeezes me, and I cover her hand with mine.

"I love you, and I miss the old you," she says quietly. Her eyes, like liquid gold, are sad. She's talking about when we were kids. But she remembers a different version of me, one that I pretended at. I was never a child, able to play at games. "You should rest, I mean it. No good in running yourself into the ground. You don't even have an heir to the throne."

“Gio,” I say instantly, naming my brother, the second eldest. He’s got an even steadier temper than I do.

“Mmm, yeah, but he’s not you,” she points out, but then smiles. “Seriously. Take a night off. Not at Capo’s. I think Ricky might ban you from coming in just to be a brat about it.”

I snort.

“That’s not the worst idea.”

“Just... don’t go to the usual haunts. I don’t trust that the new guys have learned enough yet.” She pats my arm and leaves the room. “And call my mother. It was her birthday last week, and you forgot,” she calls over her shoulders, and I curse under my breath.

Good thing Pearl is more patient than any of my other aunties. I chalk it up to her not being Italian.

But yeah, I should blow off some steam... maybe tonight, with my closest friends, or maybe even on my own. I reach for my phone to call Heather and let her know I’ll be down to visit. It’s not a half bad idea. What’s the fucking worst that could happen?

CHAPTER 2

ash

“I don’t like any of this.” Samantha’s face is scrunched up like she just ate a bag of sour gummy worms marinated in lemon juice. She’s sitting on the couch in our small living room, and she pulls her knees to her chest as I work on packing my bag for the night. I don’t answer her. I have to focus. Laptop. Cables. Extra cables in case the first cables break. Tablet as a back-up. Heels, lashes, extra stockings—

“You’re getting glitter everywhere,” she grumbles, putting her chin on her knees as she watches me.

“Sorry,” I finally answer her, reaching for where the glittery bra in question is shedding its craft herpes across our coffee table and onto the scuffed, old carpet below. I wrap it up in tissue paper, and tuck it carefully into the front of my bag, looking for the matching thong.

“Next to Herbie,” she says, and I glance at her cat, Herbert Sherman the Third (there was no first or second, but Sam has a love-affair with naming conventions of the generationally wealthy) is sleeping soundly, with my thong wrapped around one of his paws. He’s going to be glitter-claws tonight, and I move toward him, to unwind it, but he clenches his little paw down like a fist of doom.

“Herbie,” I try to coax him, but he ignores me.

“Ashley, seriously, I’m worried. These guys are going to take one look at you and decide to eat you up and spit you out,” she says, and I look at her, giving her a grim smile.

“That’s fine. If that happens, whatever, I’m there to do a job. The dancing is just the cover.”

She groans and falls back against the cushions, and Herbie finally relents when I offer him a scritch under his chin. He releases my thong, and it joins my bra. Mrs. Patti would be horrified to know I was putting my twelve years of dance lessons to use by shakin’ it at a notorious local strip club, but it’s for a good cause.

“I can sell plasma,” Sam says, her hands over her face and muffling her voice. “That’ll get us—”

“Like \$700 over the next month?” I ask her. We need more than that. It’s why I took the job. Because I’m good at what I do, but with my little teensy tiny criminal record, I’m not good enough to get a job with a 401k and a pension plan. That means I use my degree in computer science (with a focus on data security systems) when I can, where I can, and the people who usually hire me don’t bother doing background checks.

You fuck with them? You end up with a bullet between the eyes.

Not that I’d ever been threatened with that. I’ve kept my head down and out of trouble.

The problem is, that the people I usually work for don’t want to pay what a hacker with my experience and skill set is worth, but since I don’t have a lot of options in the employment department, and I need a lot of money, like now, that means I’ve had to go outside of my usual field of small-time CEO who needs me to help cook the digital books before an audit.

“It’s a good plan,” she says.

“It’s a bad plan. You’ve already donated once this month, and you can’t again for six weeks. The nurse said your veins looked...” Not great. Bad. And Sam had nearly fainted twice on the way home. I wasn’t letting her give plasma again, if I could help it, ever.

“I hate rich people,” she mutters, and looks forlornly around our little apartment. Our home, for the last few years,

we've made it our own. It's in a crappy part of town, but it's our postage stamp of privacy, and a few months ago, all of that was threatened. The pretty Christmas lights that Sam put up two years ago that we've never taken down twinkle in the window, with its metal crossbars that frame the city, cutting it up into pieces. There's no balcony, but Sam leans out when she wants to smoke a joint since I hate the smell. The couch is old, the bathroom toilet doesn't flush properly unless you threaten the lever for a good ten seconds. The carpets should've been replaced two tenants ago, but we know all our neighbors.

I mean all of them. Up and down, across and around, we know everyone. Who's on food stamps and needs a few cartons of milk a week, who's got a shitty ex we're all on the lookout for if he comes around, who's ducking the landlord, who smokes up on the fire-escape... we know them all. The building, made up of eight units, looks out for each other.

We're lucky to have that, but we're also about to lose it, if I can't get the money to buy the place out from under the developers that are eyeing it.

I only know about that because I was doing a little wee job that involved hacking into City Hall's planning division and... nevermind. It doesn't matter.

"Hey, I'll be okay," I give her my bravest smile as I tuck my deodorant into the bag, and my insurance policy, a slim personal Tazer I've never used, but I'm trusting to keep me out of trouble.

"You're going to go dance at the place where they have the most gang violence." She stares at me, and I wince.

"Look, it's a high paying, under-the-table job. I dance, I distract, I disarm their computer security system and put my key-logger in place," I say with a bright smile. "And then we get paid. A cool two mill. More money than I've seen in my life. More money than I'll ever see in my life."

"And then you need to figure out how to launder it," she points out to me. "This little scheme is a bigger than a side hustle, and it's going to attract a lot of attention."

“We’ll handle it.”

“I’m serious, Ashley, if you get caught, you could be locked up for years. I know you think with your record that you’re invincible, that you’ve been to prison—”

“Jail. And it wasn’t long, and I’m here now,” I remind her, flicking my braid over my shoulder. I’ve got my curling iron in my bag, ready for when I park my ass down where the house mother tells me I can get ready for my dance shift. It took me three months to get this gig. Three whole months of taking ‘free’ dance classes at the Cascade, until I was dubbed ‘in shape’ enough to warrant a shift.

“I still hate it.”

“You can hate it from a penthouse, with a pool, and a view,” I remind her, and she glares at me. We’re getting enough money out of this deal to buy the apartment building, all eight units, the land underneath it, for around a million. There’ll be money left over to get us out of here, into something with white marble for days, and if we’re smart, it’ll be enough cash to last us a lifetime.

We’ve come a long way from best friends sleeping in Sam’s beat up old van she bought for five hundred dollars, but still everything is hand-to-mouth. Our lives are thread bare, and the cold comes in whenever it likes. A life like this ages you, and I don’t want to die at fifty from the stress and pain of it. I want to enjoy life.

“If you get murdered, I’m going to murder the murderer,” she threatens, and I smile, walking over and pressing a kiss to her forehead. She grabs my wrist and tugs me down, hugging me tight, and I let her.

“I’m just dancing,” I promise her. “It’ll be fine. I’m just going to put in my key-logger, and I’ll be home by three AM.”

“Liar,” she accuses, and I wince. So there’d been a guy, a little while back, and I’d stayed out late, far later than I’d intended.

And Sam, reclusive shut-in that she is who won’t go out unless I’m with her, hadn’t had food in the apartment and had

gone hungry, wearing herself out with worry for me. I wasn't doing that anymore.

“Three AM,” I promise, crossing my heart and holding out my hand to her. She kisses my palm, making the promise sacred and complete, like a little magic spell binding me to my word. With that, I grab my bag, tuck my heels into the top of it, and leave the apartment, trusting Sam to lock up after me.

I make my way to the top of the building, slipping out through the sky-light after climbing a short wooden ladder. The night air and the roar of the local freeway cutting through the city, fills my ears. It's a warm spring night, the breeze blowing a little, and I'm grateful, cause the alleys around here often smell like hot piss and beer. I slip across the roof, taking a detour across a few precariously placed board-and-lumber bridges to the next building, and then the one after that. The wind tugs at my clothes, and I hate that I have the bulk of my backpack on, but I have to assume my client is watching my appearances and disappearances.

Nobody hires an off-the-grid hacker without an insurance policy.

My Docs clang quietly on the fire escape of a building four over from mine, and I emerge from the alley, dusting rust from my jeans, and needing to re-secure my hair in its messy bun. It's late, but people in this area work two, three, and sometimes four jobs, so there's not a lot of people out on the street as I start walking toward the bus-stop that'll take me to Cascade. I'm halfway there when a sleek black town car pulls up beside me, and the back window rolls down. My heart skips three beats, and I have to take a deep breath when I see a semi-familiar face in the shadow and darkness inside the car.

“Get in,” that smooth voice says, and I swallow.

“Is this a great idea? I mean. I should get there on my own steam. Seems like a weird thing for a dancer to show up being driven in a half-a-mil-”

“Get in,” he snaps, not requesting this time. I open the door and slide inside, my stomach doing a good job of trying to eat itself. The leather is smooth-rubbed and soft under me as

the seat gives from my weight. I close the door and try not to look at the man to my right, although I can feel the pressure of his gaze. “You have better attire in your bag, I’m assuming?” He asks, the light accent in the back of his throat making his words purr.

To some, he’d be considered handsome, at least from this side of him. Dark hair, the kind of cheekbones and jawline that should have its own Instagram, and a body that doesn’t quit.

I saw him for the first time a few months ago. The first time we met, it was through the darkness, the rain. He looked like he’d stepped out of the pages of GQ, but there was such a cruelty in his eyes that I could never find him handsome.

That and the scar down the left side of his face, making part of his mouth droop into an angry frown. The Viper, as I’ve been told to call him, is old enough to be my father, and he looks like he’d be more the leather-belt type of dad than the lollipops and piggy-back rides. I hope he doesn’t have kids.

“You didn’t hire me because I was a snappy dresser,” I point out to him, knowing that I can get away with a little bit of banter. There’s some safety in my profession, some. I’m a few steps above, say, a low-level drug runner, or a cook brewing up drugs for the street. I’m replaceable, but not easily.

His jaw tenses.

“Show me,” he says, and I hesitate.

“Look, dude, there is a lot of glitter and it’s going to get—”

He makes a sound in the back of his throat that I know means I’m coming up to the end of his patience, and I better listen. But only because he’s already laid down a hundred k with our ‘escrow’, an Irish mobster who rules the far end of my neighborhood and is basically incorruptible when it comes to money deals. Cash left with him always stays safe, and gets paid out when the job is done. Liam never lifts or skims. He’s as honest as he is beautiful, that one.

I pull out the bra, leaving the thong where it is. Somehow that seems too intimate and personal, and never mind that I’m

about to show a bunch of men my ass in it before the night is over. But here, trapped in the Viper's town car? I'd rather cut my own face off. It just seems like a bad idea, and my gut has never gotten me into trouble before.

He eyes it up and then looks at me, as I try to turn my face so I don't have to look at him directly.

"It'll do, but next time—"

Next time? My gaze flicks to him in panic. No. The deal is for tonight, and that's it. Two mil for inside access to the computer system of the Greco crime family. It's worth at least that, probably four times as much. The Feds would kill to get my kind of access, and I'm surprised they haven't tried, but the Greco family seems to sniff out plants when they're government-bred.

Word on the street is they're still finding pieces of the 'accountant' who was double-agenting for the Feebees.

"I need insurance that the—" The Viper gestures towards me, and I tuck my bra back inside my bag, zipping it up tight.

"Key-logger. The thing that gives you every single key-stroke and mouse-move," I reply. Under me, the car starts moving, making me tense up.

"That it stays in place," he says, "for a long enough period of time to be valuable to me. As valuable as the cost of that knock-down you're living in."

I freeze. He knows where I live. And where Sam is. I'm not a super spy, or an assassin. I'm just a kid who got kicked out of her home early and took community classes while working the midnight shift at the local diner.

He reads my fear easily, and he smirks, as much as he can with part of his mouth refusing to cooperate.

"Insurance," he says softly, "I'm sure you understand. Your friend could use some, perhaps get some therapy, help her get out of the house—" My heart rate starts to pick up, sweat rising on the back of my neck and along my collarbone under my shirt. "Just like you are my backdoor to Greco," he says, his smooth voice so quiet I can barely hear it over the

purr of the car as it takes us toward Cascade. “There are backdoors into every building in this city. I just needed to find the key to yours. Do you understand?”

My heart sinks. Someone, in our building, is a mole for the Viper. Someone who’s probably desperate for a little extra cash, and could be cajoled into giving details about me, my life, and the strange girl I live with who never leaves the apartment.

“How long?” I ask, through gritted teeth, and he tuts.

“Don’t tense your jaw,” he says, “you can’t afford the dental work yet.” I glare at him and he smirks.

“One hundred thousand per week you work there.”

What?! No.

“I’m not dancing at Cascade for nearly half a year,” I say flatly, trying to keep my voice neutral, and in serious negotiating mode instead of going shrill like it wants to. It’s a war in my body. “I’m not that good of a dancer.”

“You’ve already done three months,” he points out, and I want to cry.

“That was in a workout room, without an audience. You want me to get naked every night—” I shake my head and he cocks his head, reaching for the phone in his pocket. There’s something so threatening in that move that my mouth dries up and my throat goes tight. “Three hundred a week,” I counter. I could do six weeks. That would be fine, I think, at the same time trying to bury the sheer panic.

I’m not a stripper or a sex worker, and I have nothing against those women who do that as a profession, but the idea of being so exposed for that long. I could handle doing a dance set tonight. Ten minutes, sure, twenty in a pinch. But every night?

“And I get two days off a week,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Two hundred and fifty,” he counters, and the car comes to a stop. I glance outside. We’re not at Cascade. We’re in front

of my building. There's a man on the front steps, in dark jeans and a plain black t-shirt. He's not even ten feet away, and he's got black gloves on. My head whips back to the Viper. He smiles at me serenely. "Insurance."

I glower at him.

"You don't need to threaten me."

"Most people don't even have the will power to save for their own retirement," he comments idly. "I felt threats might be more efficient here."

"Fine. Eight weeks, but that's it, and if I think my cover is blown—that's a lot of time where I can get caught."

"You'll trust your instincts," he says, amusement sparkling in his eyes. "they've steered you well so far, have they not?" The car starts moving again. This time I'm sure we're going toward Cascade. It stops outside of a bus stand, a few stops from Cascade, and the Viper offers his hand to me. I take it against my better judgement, and the touch is like spiders crawling up my skin. I want to scream, I want to cry, but instead I give him my most professional smile.

"Thanks," I say, as if he was helping me down the stairs of his front porch. Instead, I open the door, flinging it open rudely and not giving a fuck. He threatened Sam. He bribed someone in my building. It was probably Mrs. Polcha on the bottom floor, blind and barely able to leave her apartment either, subsisting on meager social security. I'm not even mad at her. I'm angry at an evil criminal taking advantage of a poor old woman.

As the door shuts behind me, I hunch my shoulder against the evening breeze, and slouch over to the bus-stop. The car drives off, and I watch for the bus to take me to my new place of employment for the next eight damn weeks. I hope I can manage to survive it, somehow.

CHAPTER 3

luca

“What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?”

The woman across the table from me looks up, her green eyes bright. She’s a fox, this one, a sharp nose and sharper ears, and she’s not shy about it. The line makes me shoot a glare at the man who leveled at her, because what the fuck is he stuck in the 80s? He’s some business-man, a suit, but he’s got a wife and a kid waiting for him at home. I’d know. Dani has his life in a spreadsheet, and she’d have told me if there was anything to be concerned about. That’s the way it is with every client that comes into Cascade. This is our honeypot, attracting the best and worst of our city. It’s the place I get most of the blackmail material that flows through Boston, and gets my guys off the hook when it comes time for them to be hauled in front of a judge, magistrate, or otherwise.

Smartest thing I’ve ever done is turn the Cascade into a cash machine and a safety net. I’ve made friends and enemies on both sides of the law, and everyone else is in the middle, just trying to stay afloat. It’s been to my benefit to exploit them all, high and low.

“A girl like me?” Her voice is low and husky, and she leans forward, her chest pressed against the table. She shakes her tits a little, and with a sigh, I get up, throwing a hundred down for the drink she served me earlier. I don’t know the girls here personally and make sure my upper staff never let them know when I’m coming in. I want to be treated like any other customer. Except when I tip. Her gaze slides to the bill,

and then up to me for a brief moment, her mouth parting into a soft 'o' of surprise.

“Don't let him buy you a drink, he's an asshole,” I tell her, and walk away, hearing her laugh softly as the business-suit guy squawks. I can hear the wheels turning, him trying to figure out how he fucked up, why some guy ten times his better just screwed him out of a lap dance.

His kid needs him at home. I don't judge, I don't feel any kind of disgust, but I know what that kid needs, and it's not his dad spending college tuition on one of my girls.

Not that I'm gonna say no to the influx of cash... I walk toward the bar, where Heather, my head bartender, gives me a subtle nod, murmuring to one of the girls to pour me a whiskey. A glass appears at my elbow before I can lean up against the bar.

I take it and survey the room.

It's not a shithole, not like some of the places that have been burned down by rival gangs over the years. The walls are painted black, and the floors are polished concrete, with a slight shine to them. The stage is lit by a red glow, the music pulsing in time with the beat. It's not the kind of place that attracts a massive crowd, but the ones who come in and stay, have money, and have an interest in more than just the girls. I know there're all kinds of information brokering going on here, some I'm privy to, some I'm not.

Whatever it is, I'm just glad my spot is the place it happens. It's helpful, good for business, to be the center of the action.

“You're not gonna get a dance, not like that,” Heather's voice breaks into my thoughts, and I look at her, raising an eyebrow. She's got the kind of face that you can read easily, and she's got that mother-bear protective streak going on.

“Who says I'm here for a dance?” I shoot back, and she quirks a smile at me.

“You have that tension in your shoulders, the one I told you that you should go see my cousin about.”

“He’s a chiro,” I reply, voice flat, “if I wanted to get my car fixed, I’m not gonna see a tarot card reader—”

“They’re not all bad,” she laughs, edging closer to me, murmuring softly “We got a new one tonight. You might even like her. Her boots are real worn down. She could use a sugar daddy.”

I give her an annoyed look, and she doesn’t bother to hide her mirth. I took Heather in when she was fifteen and on the edge of turning tricks out on the corner, close to being snatched up by one of the body-runners that grabs the vulnerables in my district before I can nudge them to better work.

And fuck no, I did not have some skinny teen dancing for old perverts. She washed glassware in the back and slept upstairs until she was old enough to make her own decisions for herself. I’m not her dad, but I’ll be damned if I didn’t try to teach her how the world works, and how to avoid falling through the cracks.

And now, the last five years, she’s my right hand at Cascade, managing the girls and their schedules. She’s got an eye for trouble like almost nobody, and sometimes I think she might read people better than I do. Too bad she’s not interested in a place within the family. I could have, would have, happily set her up with one of my cousins and welcomed her into our circle, and the Greco name.

Heather pats me on the shoulder.

“Eyes up,” she taunts, walking away. The beat of the room shifts, a jazzy, bluesy cover of a pop song I don’t know coming on, lights on the stage turning blue.

It sets off the glitter mirrors along the edge of the stage, lights flickering around the room, before the smoke machine starts pumping. The stage goes dark, and when the lights pop again, my hand goes around the glass of whiskey in my hand.

There’s a girl on the stage, a woman, soft curves, curvier than the kind that Heather usually picks to perform for the pack of predators that frequent Cascade. Her hair is curled,

rivulets of brown waves that slide over her bare shoulders. My gaze lingers, following the curve of her back down to her hips, her legs. Her feet are in tall black boots, and they make my eyes drag up her body, as she dips and sways to the beat, an icy thrill rolling down my spine.

She's got a blue silky wrap around her hips, but underneath it I can see the glitter of a deep blue thong. She turns, grabbing onto a pole and pulling herself up.

Fuck, she's flexible. Her leg wraps around the pole, and her head is tossed back, her back arching, her chest pushing forward. My mouth waters and I force myself to swallow the mouthful of whiskey in my mouth. Her breasts nearly slip out from the hold of her bra, more glitter, falling like snow as she twists around it, a fairly basic move, but she makes it look like something more. Her face turns toward mine as she lets herself down with a slow, low bow, the hint of dusky nipples at the edge of her bra making how much I want her an urgent problem. My cock stiffens in my suit pants, and I set my whiskey down.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

Except she walks back from the edge of the stage, one leg behind the other, her thighs plush and perfect. I want to wrap my fingers around them and pull them apart, bury my mouth in her and make her scream my name.

I don't even know her name.

Her hand slides over her hip, and then she tugs on the wrap. It falls to the ground, and the glittery thong she's wearing leaves nothing to the imagination. Fuck.

"More whiskey?" Heather's in my ear, the evil bitch that she is, and when I turn to look at her, she tilts her head to the side. "What? You haven't dated anyone in forever." She reaches up a hand to brush against my cheek, and I grab her wrist, nearly grinding my fingers through her skin right down to the bone.

"Who the hell is she?" I demand, even as her eyes widen. I'm hard as fuck, and that's a problem. How long has it been

since I've felt... anything? For anyone? Work, keeping my family, my people safe? It's always overridden everything, including my basic physical needs. But now...

The beat shakes up, the song shifting, and the girl on the stage moves, her hips swaying and her arms over her head. There's a look on her face like she's not thinking, and her expression is serene, almost happy. My throat goes tight, my skin feels hot, and I get to my feet, letting go of Heather's wrist.

I barely hear the sound of Heather pouring me more whiskey, the clink of the glass beside me, because I'm staring at her.

The fingers from one hand glide down her other arm, teasing touches that fill me with fury because it should be me touching her like that. She'll never touch herself again, I'll be the only one, I'll make her come, I'll make her scream, I'll—

I swallow down my jealousy and the whiskey in my glass. Turning away, my jaw clenched.

“Thanks,” I snap at Heather, and make a rude gesture before walking toward the door. There's no way in hell I'm stepping foot back in here for a month, and I'm telling Heather to fire that dancer. She's not a fit for our club, she's not—

A scream echoes out across the room, cutting through the music, and the sound stops short a few seconds later. I turn, as the lights come up, and my eyes narrow. The world tunnels in front of me, vision dialing in on the sight at the edge of the stage. The girl, that dancer, she's being pulled down by some cheap suit, her eyes wide in panic.

My body moves, the room a red blur, my fist hauling back and—

CRACK!

I get him across the jaw first, and he hangs in mid-air, stunned, letting go over her thigh. As he starts to fall, I grab him with my other arm, hauling him up against the stage, shoving him back-first against the edge of it.

I punch him again. And again, the rage swelling inside of me, fueled by something I can't even name.

“Get your fucking hands off of her,” I snarl, as he spits out a mouthful of blood and a tooth, groaning.

“She’s a stripper,” he gasps, and I slam my fist into his face, his nose breaking with a satisfying crunch.

That’s when arms come around me from three different directions, the whisper of suits telling me they’re Cascade bodyguards, too slow to make a damn difference, too on the hind foot to save the girl from being molested.

They’re all fired after this.

They’re all lucky to not be dead after this.

The growl that rips out of my throat as they try to pull me back, and I shake them off, Heather’s panicked explanations in the background, none of it matters. All I can do is look up at the girl on the stage as she stands there, her thong torn, as she holds it at her side, eyes wide, tears wetting her lashes.

Then she turns and bolts off the stage, nearly tripping on her ridiculously tall, ridiculously impractical boots.

CHAPTER 4

ash

I can't catch my breath. I can't stop shaking. My hands won't stop shaking, and I'm so cold, the adrenaline is turning my skin to ice. I can't think, I can't breathe, all I can do is run. I get backstage, reaching down as my boot nearly turns my ankle. I grab the zipper, hiccuping a sob, yanking it down, and then the other.

"Oh honey, oh god honey, did he—"

"Did who—"

"Mr. Greco, he— shit." A girl swears, and I feel her hand on my elbow. I flinch away. My skin is still crawling. That guy grabbed me, said things I could barely hear, but the look on his face was pure disgusting evil. And then he tried to get his hands up between my thighs... I close my eyes, feeling like I'm going to vomit.

"Let me help you," someone else says, and there's a huddle of girls around me as I blink away tears in the shadowy dark of backstage. I'm pulled toward the changing area, the sound of the stage and the bar beyond it fading away as curtains and doors close behind me.

"You're okay, sweetheart," someone soothes, and I'm pushed down into a chair. "That's just the adrenaline," another voice says, and someone pulls a robe around my shoulders, cinching it tightly.

"Get her water."

A bottle is pressed into my hand.

“Drink,” a firm voice orders, and I do. A cool trickle of water runs down my chin and throat, and I take a long swallow.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice raw and cracked, and there’s a chorus of voices, talking all at once.

“He won’t be allowed back in, I can guarantee you that, and Heather’ll make sure he doesn’t get into a single club in the area. We don’t let customers touch the girls.”

“Luca went crazy,” someone whispers, and the name makes my stomach lurch. “He punched the guy so hard, and the guards didn’t even stop him. He was beating that shitbag to a pulp.” Someone’s safety pinning my underwear together at my side, a small act of mercy I’m immensely grateful for.

“Who’s Luca?” A girl near me, with red hair, asks. She’s newer too.

“A regular,” Heather’s voice cuts through, “doesn’t put up with shit. I’ll give him a bottle of our best as a thank you. Girls? Cut it out. She needs air. Go get ready, show goes on once the blood is mopped off the floor.” Heather steps out from behind the other girls, coming toward me, and she kneels down in front of me. “Are you hurt? Any cuts?” She inspects my skin for blood, even as I pull my legs together tight.

God.

My first night here on stage, and I’ve fucked this up so badly, creating a scene like that.

“I-I-” Get it together, Ash. “I got too close to the edge, he grabbed me, I—” I shake my head. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” she assures me. “We have security, and our customers are usually well behaved. I’ve never seen him go after someone like that. I’m sorry.” She brushes a tear off of my cheek. She frowns when she sees something in my expression she doesn’t like.

“Let me take you to my office, let you calm down. There’s a couch there, you can lay down if you like?” She offers me a hand up, and a shiver rolls through me. I’ve lost my job. I know it. I’ll lose the money, the building, I’ll lose—

“You’re still working here,” she says, reading my expression. “Don’t worry, I’m not kicking you out. Rookie mistake, yeah, but that’s why you’re on rookie probation. It’s my call whether to can you or not, and I know you didn’t mean to play with fire. You weren’t begging for more tips, it was just a fuck-up.”

I follow her as she turns, grabbing my bag before I go, pulling it close to my chest as we leave the room through a back door, entering a stairwell.

“Upstairs,” she says, and starts walking, I follow her up two flights, into another small hall, and then she opens a black-painted door. Beyond it, there’s wall-to-wall windows along one side, a view of the club below, the stage, the bar, the tables. There’s a leather couch, a coffee table, a mini fridge, and a computer, sitting on a desk with a big comfy looking chair behind it.

“Have a seat, relax, there’s water and snacks in the fridge. Have something with protein,” she says with a pat of her hand on my shoulders. “I gotta go wrangle the chickens back into sanity so they can do their dances without freaking out.”

I give her a confused look.

“We almost never have a girl grabbed here,” she says with a tired smile. “Most people know better because—” She shrugs. “Well. I’ll come check on you in twenty. Put your feet up.”

I nod, and she closes the door behind her.

I sit down on the couch, and lean forward, pressing my head between my knees, trying to take a deep breath. I’m not gonna be sick, I tell myself.

A soft hum fills the air, a light coming on, and I open my eyes, glancing up over at the desk. Just as the bottom drops out of my stomach. Her computer. Heather’s computer. My mouth goes dry. My fingers fumble for my duffle bag, shaking hands, making it hard to get the zipper open.

The key-logger. I’ve been unintentionally dropped into the perfect situation to get it loaded onto the computer I’m hoping

holds all the keys to the Greco crime kingdom. My fingernails scratch at the deodorant's powdery product, pulling it out of the hollow core of the packaging. Underneath is the key-logger: small, compact, matte black. Not likely to catch an eye for anyone not looking for it. I dust some deodorant off of it, smearing the residue on my bare leg.

My heart thudding uncomfortably in my throat, I mince toward the desk and computer, keeping my eye on the door, and listening hard for the sound of footsteps. At the same time, I glance around the room, looking for any hint of a camera.

But no, they'd never be that stupid. Putting surveillance in a room where criminal activity is conducted, right? They couldn't be.

I'm trembling so hard that I almost struggle to get the USB for the keyboard unplugged, thanking every god that exists it's not connected by Bluetooth. I slip the key-logger, a small rectangle that's not even an inch long, onto the end of the USB cable. I reattach the keyboard to the computer and breathe out.

My heartbeat is the loudest thing in the room as I straighten up, and look at the door, and the windows, and then the computer.

It feels almost anti-climatic, and a few minutes later when the door swings open, I'm back on the couch, shaking from the night's events, and from having successfully executed the first part of my plan. As Heather comes in with a fat packet of cash in an envelope for me, a thank you from the big boss as she says it's not hard for me to burst into grateful tears.

The key-logger works both ways, the Viper had said. When he logs in to see what's been recorded, the key-logger will ping, and send a message back. He'll know I kept up my part of the deal. And now I just have to stick it out for the next few weeks, and then? Home free. I should almost thank that asshole who grabbed me. He saved me a lot of work and problems tonight, but some small part of me can't get the vision out of my head of the guy who came running to my rescue.

His dark eyes, narrowed in righteous fury, are going to haunt me for a long damn time.

CHAPTER 5

luca

I'm sitting at the kitchen counter in the penthouse, staring down at the phone in front of me, tapping on the marble surface, the clink of my pinky ring against it the only sound in the room. Dani walks by, glancing at the phone, and then at me, as if to ask if I'm okay.

I don't know. I've never done this before.

I've never wanted to do this before.

Dani walks into the kitchen, grabbing an apple and a knife, and then pauses, and looks back at me, a sly expression crossing her face.

"You should take her flowers," she says, "she likes tulips." I freeze and lift my chin to look at her.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Your stripper girl," she says, leaning forward on the kitchen island. Dani comes and goes as she pleases in my home, even though she's got a place of her own. She's also not afraid of me, which is both frustrating and annoying, and a little endearing. She's like an annoying house-cat, although if I ever told her that to her face, she'd probably be pleased. "Heather told me allllll about that. How's the hand? You have goons for that. You can't be parading around with split knuckles." She's not really scolding me, just reminding me of my place in things.

I'm the lynchpin, the king, and she's right. I shouldn't be getting my hands dirty.

But the look on her face... the sheer panic, it wrenched something inside of me, woke something up that I thought had been dead a long damn time.

I fucking hate it.

“And,” she continues, slicing the top off the apple and cutting it into neat slices, “you should get her some tulips. She’s a little bit romantic.”

“How the fuck do you know what she is?” I ask, “how do you know anything about her?”

“Heather runs backgrounds on every girl in the club. She’s living in some shithole a few blocks from Cascade, barely meets code. But she grows flowers on the roof, and she always gives money to the guy who lives in the dumpster out back. Her name’s Ashley Morrow.” Dani takes a bite of apple and smirks at me as I get up from the table, my body taking me before I can even think about it. “And Heather says you’re not allowed back at Cascade until—”

My front door slamming cuts her off, and I hit the call button for the elevator. I need to get the hell out of here.

Ashley, huh? I roll the name around in my head, and my jaw clenches. It’s a good name. Morrow. Not Italian. English, probably means something about the future, or tomorrow. Something like that. The elevator slides open, and I step in, stabbing the button for the garage.

The doors close behind me.

Ashley.

That’s a problem, and she’s going to be one soon. Because I can’t stop thinking about her. Three nights I’ve gone to sleep, the look on her face when that man grabbed her, invading my dreams. I’m distracted, something that someone in my position can never be. And I know just how to make it go away.

Ashley Morrow. Lives in a shithole apartment a few blocks away from Cascade. Down on her luck, as Heather had put it? Then she’ll need something, something I can give her.

I’m about to do something I never do.

I'm about to fuck in my own backyard.

It's a bad idea. But I don't care, not right now.

I walk through the underground parking garage, and into the side door. A man steps forward, a gun at his hip, and a look of concern on his face. When he sees it's me, he calms down, going right to my favorite car, the Aventador, but I shake my head. He raises his eyebrows and follows my gaze to the Bentley. The Phantom is built more for comfort, at least more than the Lambo. And I want Ashley Morrow to be comfortable when I go down on her in the back until she's screaming and breathless.

I want her to come.

And I want her to like it.

It's an unfamiliar sensation, caring about the pleasure of a woman. I'm not some virgin boy who doesn't know the ins and outs of women's bodies, of what they like. It's just not a priority for me. I have no interest in being with a woman unless she's willing to accept a certain set of terms from me. I set the rules, I set the contact times, how often, and I always, always, tell her when she's allowed to come.

I'm driving toward Cascade before I know it, my hands gripping the wheel firmly, my phone on the seat next to me, having already informed Heather to have Ashley at the backdoor of the club and ready to join me in my car.

She'd sounded confused, and a little annoyed.

"I'm not running a dating service, Luca," she'd huffed.

"You'll do this," I'd told her, "or you'll lose everything you've worked for, you got that?" She went silent in shock. But then I've never flexed my position over her before, not in all the years we've worked together. "Fuck you, Greco," she muttered, and hung up. But I knew she'd do it.

I never ask for anything for myself. I never take, always giving to my family, to everyone connected to the Greco name.

Now I want. I want her. Ashley Morrow.

She'll come with me, and I'll make her mine.

I drive past Cascade, the street crowded, and the valet parkers already having trouble keeping up with the demands. The back entrance, where the girls come and go, is quiet. No cars.

Good.

I pull into the alley and park the car. There's a back-entrance, and it's not locked. I'm about to text Heather again when the door opens, and a girl walks out. Not her.

I narrow my eyes, and the girl glances around, then back at me, her shoulders hunched.

"Looking for someone?" she asks, and her voice is low, a rasp, a little smoky.

"Heather sent you? Who the fuck are you?" I get out of my car, an unholy rage pulsing in my chest, making it hard to think. Is Heather playing with me? Sending me some blonde thing with big tits bursting out of her hoodie, thinking that would placate me?

"B-Beth," she says, and when I get up close, she's pale under her makeup, afraid of me, like she's worried I'm going to rough her up. I make a disgusted noise in the back of my throat, and push past her, ignoring the fact I've just left my car in the middle of the alley. Nobody around here is going to dare put a finger on it.

The hall inside is dark and shadowed, and I take the stairs up to the change room, not bothering to knock before I step inside. At first, no one notices I'm there, their eyes blinded and dazzled by their change-table lights, and the rest of the room thrown into darkness.

I see her before anyone else sees me. She's half-dressed, her top off, and I get a good look at her bare back, the dimples above the line of her jeans, her brown hair falling down her back. And in the mirror— my breath catches. Her face, light, no fear there, relaxed confidence as she chats with her seat-mate, another brunette but this one with a short, slicked-back bob. I barely notice her.

Because Ashley's half-nude, her breasts full and exposed, fully on display in the mirror as I watch her. My hand grips the doorknob behind me, squeezing it tightly. I could turn around, right now, and go.

Or, I could keep going, and fuck up everything.

But the image is seared into my brain, the sight of her, and I want to match it, meet it with the feel of her skin still under my hands. I fucking want her. I'm rock-hard in my suit pants, heat creeping up my stomach, a tightness inside of me that is desperate to feel hers.

Fuck.

I clear my throat, and she turns, her green eyes meeting mine.

It's like a punch in the gut. She's even prettier in the real world, no music, no smoke, no lights, nothing between us. The rest of the girls, the room, fades away, and it's just us.

Her eyes widen, and her arm goes up, across her chest, covering her soft nipples, budding in the cool of the room.

"What the hell," a voice demands, "Luca, you can't be in here, are you crazy?"

I can't speak. I can barely breathe.

Ashley Morrow, you are mine.

I turn, Heather's enraged face glaring up at mine, and she grabs me by the arm, like I'm a child, dragging me out of the room before I can say anything.



HEATHER AGREED. One dance. One private dance, in the upstairs lounge, and then I had to go. I might be the head of the Greco family, but Heather was furious at me for endangering the careful boundary between me and the staff and dancers of Cascade.

She's right, and if I was thinking straight, I'd agree with her. But Ashley was the only thing in the world for me right now, and it took her walking into the darkened room upstairs

to break the spell. There's a small stage in the upstairs lounge, a red leather couch in front of it, and it's just me, and Ashley Morrow now.

I let out a slow breath from between clenched teeth.

She's not dressed up. Her hair is in a messy bun, and her outfit is simple. White denim cut-offs that are a little too big for her, a pink bra, and the hint of a matching thong under her shorts.

I shift on the couch, the leather creaking quietly under me, hidden by the music thudding through the speakers, blotting out everything beyond this room. She comes to the middle of the stage, the lights blinding her to me, and as she strikes an opening pose, coming into stillness, the curve of her back so arched and perfect, I want to rip her down off that stage and take her on this couch.

But I'm not a damn animal. I won't force her.

If she wants to go, then she can, and she won't ever see me again.

As long as she dances for me first.

She moves, her feet stepping forward and backwards, and as she starts to move, the music swelling around her, and the look of concentration on her face, I can't help the growl that escapes me.

Mine.

All of her, mine.

The thought echoes in my head, and I know there's no turning back from it. She moves smoothly, her hips swaying, my hands clenching on air like I want to grip her close to me. She comes to the edge of the stage as the music winds down, and a low groan vibrates up my chest as she walks toward me. Her shorts hit the floor, a teasing move of her hand reaching up to unfasten her bra as it slips down her arms. Her breasts fall, heavy and beautiful, nipples tight in the cold air-conditioning of the room.

Private dances are always like this. This is the one place that the girls are supposed to get close enough to touch, and as long as the men don't actually touch them, everything is alright. But as she bends in front of me, her face a mask of professionalism, it's not close enough.

My cock is straining against the zipper of my pants, and I can feel the heat of her breath as she leans closer, the swell of her breasts brushing against my chest. Her thighs spread and she straddles my hips, coming in close for the lap portion of her job, but as the backs of her legs connect with the fronts of mine, I can't help myself.

My hands wrap around her hips, commanding, a wild look entering her eyes as they flicker with uncertainty.

And I pull her down into my lap, grinding up against her, the feel of her wet cunt, slick and ready under her panties, a hot pulse throbbing through my cock, begging to bury myself inside her.

"You're coming for me tonight," I whisper against her ear, and a shiver runs through her. Her eyes slide shut, and I know what I want. I could just pull her thong aside, snap it with my fingers, and thrust up right into her, before she could even say no.

I could do it right fucking now.

CHAPTER 6

ash

My heart is racing. His hands, rough, the knuckles bruised and battered, are like steel bands around my hips. They're strong enough to crush me. I don't doubt that for a second.

But he's not moving.

I've never had a customer, never had a guy touch me like this before, and it's—

It's wrong.

This is wrong, and I should be trying to get away. But I can't move. My thighs are pressed into his, and I can feel him, his cock rock-hard and thick, and he's pressing it up between my thighs, grinding into the wetness of my panties. He's so close to where I need him. The feel of his body is electric, and a rush of wetness coats me as I tremble, caught in his grasp.

His words ring in my ears, and a jolt goes through me.

Nobody has ever, ever spoken to me like that. My eyes shut tight, and I shudder in his grip, as he holds onto me tighter, the strength in his hands incredible, as if he could break me and put me back together with his bare hands. I should be signalling for security, making the hand-movements that tell them I'm in trouble, they'd see it over the security camera and come rushing in immediately.

Instead, I can't do anything but press down on him, and let out a ragged breath.

"Say yes," he orders, his voice harsh, his grip on me almost painful. "Tell me you want me to make you come so

hard you can't even breathe." His voice rasps over me, sending a rush of heat clenching deep inside my cunt, a pulse of need that makes my thighs clench around his hips.

"Yes," I whisper, and a sound rumbles through his chest, something dark and pleased, and his mouth comes down on mine. His lips are hot, the kiss demanding, and the shock of his tongue slipping between my lips makes me cry out and open my mouth to him. He kisses me hard, his hand coming up to tangle in my hair, his other hand sliding down, pushing between us, and a whimper escapes me.

He tears my thong. I feel the fabric ripping away, and the sound, the feel of it, it should bother me, it should make me scream. Instead, it's the hottest thing that's ever happened to me, and I feel my pussy soaked, the ache inside me desperate for more.

His fingers push inside me, and a strangled sound leaves his mouth as he groans.

"Fuck, so tight, so fucking wet."

"I—" What? What can I even say? I've never had a man talk to me like that before, but the way his voice, a little awed, a little surprised, a lot possessive, it's got my breath catching in my throat. He's got me in his arms, and the couch underneath us is a red blur as I blink, the lights of the room swirling around us. His fingers slip inside me, spreading me wide, the feel of it making me gasp. My hips arch up, my thighs around his body, as he presses me down.

I've never been so full, never been stretched like this, and a sob of pleasure-pain leaves my lips as he grinds the heel of his hand against my clit.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, his other hand in my hair, cupping the back of my neck. In the distant part of my mind, I wonder why security isn't busting down the door at the sight of one of the girls being mauled like this, finger-fucked so hard that the breath is sobbing out of her lungs, but all I can do is cling to him as he teases me with long strokes of his fingers inside me.

“You’re going to come on my fingers,” he says, “and then you’re coming for me again when I get you home. Understood?” He leans in, his breath hot against my cheek, the smell of whiskey and spice enveloping me. It’s leather, subtle cologne, surrounding me, and when I try to hide my face in his shoulders, his fingers wrapped in my hair forces my head back so I have to look at him. “And you’re going to let me watch you. You’ll never, ever hide how good I make you feel. You understand?”

He doesn’t wait for my answer, because I don’t think I could give him one right now. His thumb drags over my clit, and his fingers curl inside me, hitting a spot I’ve never been able to reach myself, and it’s all I can do to not scream.

My body is a live wire, electricity flowing through me as I shake, the orgasm taking me by surprise, and then his lips are on mine, his kiss stealing the scream from my throat, swallowing down my moans. I can feel my body squeezing his fingers, my pussy tight and aching, and he doesn’t let up, he doesn’t stop, and all I can do is dig my fingers into his shoulders and hold on to him.

My breath catches, my eyes squeezing shut, and when he finally slows, dragging the last shivers and twitches from me, a soft whine escapes my lips.

He pulls his fingers free, and his tongue follows them, licking up between my thighs as he pushes down my body. My back arches in slow surprise, my eyes dragging over the ceiling above us, the black lights illuminating the room.

And then his mouth is on me, and I forget where we are, who I am, and how any of this started. All I know is the feel of his lips, his tongue, his teeth, and the pleasure of him between my legs. I’m writhing, I’m crying out, and I barely hear the knock at the door, or the sound of voices beyond it, as my fingers twist in his hair.

He drags his tongue along my slit, his mouth closing around my clit, sucking softly, and another wave of heat rolls through me. A soft cry leaves my throat, and the door is thrown open.

I look up and see Heather, her eyes widening, her mouth falling open, and then her gaze goes to the man licking me out, who hasn't stopped. He looks up at her, his expression smug, and when his mouth comes back down on me, his fingers teasing against my entrance again, Heather makes a noise of shock and frustration, slamming the door. She doesn't stop us, or him, like I thought she would, and I can't question it as he slips his fingers up inside of me again, the drag of them easier and faster now that he's made me come once already.

My eyes close, the world swimming around me, the pleasure of him overwhelming. He forces it out of me, up inside me. I can't escape it, because it's all around me at once. He holds me as his prisoner, his fingers inside me, his tongue stroking over my clit, his other hand gripping me tightly, like he never plans to let me go.

The idea is so hot, that the second orgasm takes me by surprise. It's so quick, a hard, fast punch of pleasure, that makes my whole body go tight. The sound of his fingers moving inside me, the way he's groaning into me, his tongue stroking over my clit, like I taste so good to him, I can't bear it. My body clenches and then releases, and I hear a high, sharp cry, the sound of it echoing in my ears.

It's my voice.

My own scream, the pleasure so intense that it's the only thing I can hear, the only thing that makes sense, and as the world slowly comes back into focus, I realize I'm still in underneath him. His mouth is against my shoulder, and he's murmuring words against my skin, his breath hot, and his hands possessive.

He's got his arm wrapped around me, holding me so close that I can barely breathe, and as the last of the orgasm fades, leaving me limp, a rush of adrenaline and fear hits me.

Why didn't Heather stop him? This is so clearly against the rules, that she'd be checking in on me to see if I was consenting, and if I was, to kick me out on the curb in an instant.

And the fact she wasn't...

As the man over me rolls his hips into mine, the hard press of his cock against my body, his suit pants still firmly on, a thrill of unease rolls through me.

What did I just get myself into? He has to be someone too important for Heather to fuck with...

“You’re so fucking wet,” he murmurs, his mouth against the swell of my breast.

Someone, not just a VIP, but someone...

My mouth goes dry as he kisses up the curve of my breast, and then to my neck.

Luca Greco, owner of Cascade, and head of the whole Greco crime family.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 7

luca

I want to fuck her so badly, but not on this cheap leather couch. It's bad enough I've taken her like this, but I couldn't stop myself. There's something in her expression, the way she moves, that I had to have her. But now I've made her come, several times, marked her as mine. I can withdraw, and plan my next sortie on her body and mind.

Ashley Morrow, whoever you are, you're mine.

"You're so fucking wet," I murmur, my mouth against the swell of her breast, and I kiss up the curve, feeling her softness. So soft, so perfect. "You're mine," I say, as her breath catches.

"Who are you, I—"

"Hush," I command, and I feel her shiver.

"But the rules," she says, "this is— you can't—"

"I can," I tell her, "because you're mine. Say it."

She looks up at me, and I can see the struggle on her face, the battle inside her. She wants to submit to me, and she doesn't want to admit it. I can see it on her face.

I wait, patiently.

"I'm yours," she whispers, her cheeks flushing, and a soft moan leaves my lips, the words making me so hard I could burst.

"Again," I demand, and she swallows, her throat bobbing. But she doesn't get a chance. The door bursts open, and

Heather is standing there, her hand on her hip, a furious expression on her face.

“What the fuck are you doing, Luca? You can’t—”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want,” I snarl, “and you know that.” She gives me a look that could set light to stone, and for a moment, my more sensible nature grips me, when what I want is for Ashley to be gripping her cunt around my cock. I could murder Heather, and I might do that.

“If you don’t get out of here,” Heather hisses, “you’ll be banned for life, and don’t think for a second I wouldn’t do it.”

I glare at her. She can, technically, ban me from coming onto the working floor of the club during work hours. That’s a right I give everyone in my organization for the public-facing establishments, but only because of the immense trust that I place in my people, and they in me. And right now, I know I had better listen to her. I’m acting like fucking Ricky.

That’s not who I am, and it’s not the man that’s been ruling this city and keeping things under control for over a decade.

I look down at Ashley, and I see a glint of fear in her eyes, the same look she had on the stage when that mouth-breather grabbed her, the same look she had in her eyes as I dragged her upstairs.

It makes something in my chest lurch, and a cold chill run through me.

No.

I’m not him.

“Get dressed,” I snap at her, and she does, fumbling with her clothes. I storm out of the room, Heather, trying to grab me as I go, but I shake her off. “We’ll speak later,” I grit the words out. I need to clear my fucking head, because what the hell just happened?

I need to get out of here.



“ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING, GODDAMMIT?”

I'm sitting at the table, staring down at the spreadsheet, and all the numbers are just blurring together. I can't focus, and Dani is furious, pacing the room.

"Yes," I mutter, and she makes a disgusted sound, and kicks the leg of the chair I'm sitting on. Across from me, Matteo is giving me a look, like he doesn't know what's wrong with me. It's been nearly a week, since I held her in my arms and made her mine, and I cannot think of anything else.

True to my promise to myself, I've stayed away, because I am not this weak, and I'm not going to let this obsession, this thing, this madness, take over my life.

Not like he has.

Dani kicks the chair leg again, and I sigh, pushing it out.

"Alright, tell me what you want, what you need—"

"You to listen for once," she says, crossing her arms as she glances at Matt and Gio. They're nearly identical, so close in appearance as to be twins. Being the middle brothers, they fight a lot less than me and Ricky do, almost like they are twins, but instead of sharing a womb, they share an office. And Dani, when they can pry her away from her computer.

"You've been ignoring me all damn week, Luca, and it's driving me crazy. It's driving us," she gestures wildly to my brothers, and then back to herself, "crazy. Our territory is being eaten up, and it's not the usual outsiders thinking they can take a bite of Boston."

I rub a hand over my face, and then glance back at the table.

"The De Luca's have been expanding," Matt says, leaning forward on his elbows. "They've been running up against our people in the southside, and we can't let them have it."

"No, we can't," I say, agreeing. The southside is our bread and butter, the place we've been running business and protecting for years. The De Luca's have been encroaching on the edges, and they've taken a few girls, some guns, but so far, nothing big. "What's causing them to press in?" I frown at the

spreadsheets on the table, hard-copies that are smudged and crumpled, but safer to keep it physical than digital.

“No idea,” Dani says, and Matt nods in agreement.

“I’m being squeezed too. Lost three of my best guys last week,” Gio adds, his voice shadowed with concern. “I think the Carusos are looking to make a power grab, and they’re willing to put my guys in the ground to do it, even if it calls attention from the local fuzz.”

I stare down at the papers, and my hands tighten on the edge of the table. Carusos. De Lucas. The Grecos have always ruled strong for years, eating up their territory. They shouldn’t be strong enough to come at us.

Unless someone is giving them something to help them get stronger. That’s insane though. Who would partner with either of them?

“How’s Ricky doing?” I ask Dani, for a change of subject. Her expression lightens somewhat and she sighs.

“Better. I mean, he’s settling in well, isn’t talking back, I think he’s finally learning.”

Matt barks out a laugh, Gio shortly after him, and both Dani and me look at them. They shrug, in near unison.

“I don’t think he’ll ever learn, doesn’t matter how many puddles of vomit he needs to clean up,” Gio says, and I glance at Matt, closest to Ricky, the brother who knows him best.

“You’d be surprised,” Matt says, leaning back in his chair. “He’s actually doing good. I thought he’d try to get out of this, or at least complain the whole time, but he’s been keeping his mouth shut, and the old guy is teaching him. But yeah, he still needs some time to come to his senses, on his own terms.”

“Well, the shipping magnate’s son isn’t healing very quickly, but he’s healing at least,” Dani says, sounding somewhat mollified.

“What’s his name, again?” I ask.

“Gabe,” Dani says. “And he’s not just any shipping magnate’s son. He’s the heir to the whole organization in his

own right, from what I hear he started out working the ships as crew, no hand-outs or a free ride of it. My whisper network tells me that the Carusos were looking to marry his daughter off to him, until Ricky set him on fire. They're not going to be happy about it, and it might have tipped them into making their move." This is all unpleasant news to me, and I take a deep breath. At least it's doing something for me, keeping my thoughts off of Miss Morrow and...

Ashley Morrow.

The beautiful way she moved under me, the way her lips parted as she cried out. She never whispered my name, but next time she will—

There will be no next time.

"I'll talk to Ricky, see what he knows about this marital arrangement. Maybe there's something more to this." I can't believe my words, as I say them. "In the meantime, I want you two," I point to Dani and Matt, "to get the street-level guys to pull back. If the De Lucas are encroaching, and the Carusos are going for the whole territory, the best way to avoid them getting anywhere is to make them walk into a trap. I don't want to lose anymore of our people. Got it?"

All three of them nod, and Gio stands up.

"I've got a meeting with a new guy," he says, "we'll talk later. I'll get some of my people to see what's going on with the Carusos, see if anyone is whispering about a marriage. Maybe that shipping magnate was planning on stabbing us in the back." That thought makes me furious, the grip of anger tight in my chest, and when the three of them leave the room, I stand at the windows of my penthouse, looking down at the city below.

"Boss?"

I turn, and one of the men is standing behind me, looking uncertain. He's dressed in black, with an earpiece, and his suit jacket is buttoned to hide the gun in the holster at his side.

"What?" I say, not even trying to temper my voice.

“You have a guest,” he says, and steps aside, letting someone through. My whole body goes tight.

It’s Ashley Morrow, and she’s standing in the living room of my apartment, wearing a dress. It’s pale blue, the skirt flaring out, and it hugs her hips and bust tightly. I’m frozen, my body betraying me as she steps closer, and smiles, nervously. What the hell is she doing here? How did she get up here?

I look at my guard.

“Heather sent her,” he says, as if that answers everything. The fuck?

Why the fuck did Ashley Morrow just walk right into my home, my territory, when I’d done everything I could to drive her from my mind for days, and days, and days?

CHAPTER 8

ash

“The mission has changed.”

“But I never said I—”

“Do not mistake yourself for someone who has any autonomy here,” the Viper says, his tone low, dark, and threatening. He doesn’t even have to make a move for me, sitting across from me in the limousine. He already has me, trapped in a vice. He knows my soft spots, all of them, Sam included, every single person who lives in our building. I’m a hacker and a coder, not a super-spy, and I haven’t covered my tracks as well as I could’ve.

The moment Luca Greco put his hands on me, it was all over. The Viper got wind of it, somehow, and days later demanded to know what I was going to do with this new intimate connection I had with the head of the Greco family.

“He isn’t interested in me,” I protest, “I— didn’t even want it. He hasn’t been back.”

“You think he stays away for your benefit or his? Are you stupid? Or were you so blinded at being touched by a man of his status, Ash,” he says, and his voice is mocking, using my nick-name in a way that almost hurts. “Right? It must’ve been so overwhelming for you. But now you must see sense. Seduce him. The key-logger is paltry, a mere token. Having you in his bed? I will own him.” His hand closes, into a tight fist, like he wants to wrap it around Luca Greco’s throat.

That meeting with the Viper had been days ago. Days prior to that, I’d... been with, in some way, Luca Greco. He’d

stormed out of Cascade, and then Heather had sent me home, with another thick envelope of cash, and a look that said I should never come back, but without her explicitly firing me, what could she do? I was back the next day, trying to keep an eye on my key-logger but not able to organize any kind of reason to be up in her office. The Viper didn't seem to care about that anymore.

He was now singularly obsessed with the idea of me wrapping Luca Greco around my fingers and pulling at his heart strings. Which is why I cobbled together the prettiest dress I would allow myself to buy with some of the cash in those envelopes, and used more of it to bribe one of the guards at the club, who bribed someone else, who bribed someone else, to get me an idea of where to go looking for one criminal overlord.

I guess I should be proud of myself, but all I can do is not be sick as I take the elevator up, a hand-written note carefully copied from Heather's handwriting, and the guard at the penthouse lets me in, and I'm standing in front of him.

He's so angry. The guard disappears, apparently trusting either me, Heather, or Luca to handle business.

Luca Greco.

He's silhouetted by the city behind him, a black shape, a predator, and he looks every bit the part. He's wearing a white shirt, no jacket, a tie slung around his neck, his collar open, the look of a man who had been interrupted while deep in thought, and he isn't sure if he should kill me...

My throat tightens and I want to take a step back, my whole body tingling in fear. That look in his eyes.

Or devour me.

My thighs clench at the thought, the memory of his hands on my body, the way he held me so tightly, so close. It had felt safe, somehow, and even now, standing in front of him, a small part of me, the most reckless, impulsive, stupid part of me, wishes he'd grab me again, and take me.

I don't want this.

I'm not ready for this.

"I've been waiting for you," he says, and my cheeks burn at the double-entendre. Waiting? All this time? He'd been so hard when he held me down and finger-fucked me to gasping and writhing. I want to look away, and I feel every inch of my dress, far less revealing than stripping for him, and yet, right now, I feel even more naked than I did on that private stage.

It's the way he's looking at me. Like he wants to strip the dress off of me, and consume me, like a fire, burning me right where i stand.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and his voice has a strange quality to it, almost gentle. The question is unexpected, and I shake my head, the motion involuntary. How do I even begin? I'm supposed to seduce him. Out there in the city behind him, the Viper lays in wait, anxious for a phonecall from me declaring victory.

But I'm not a spy. I'm a hacker, and I'm not very good at this, this sort of seduction... business. Especially when I'm standing in the middle of this rich, opulent penthouse who's value could, several times over, buy the building I live in. It's hard to be distracted and not distracted at the same time, because he is so close, and my body remembers.

It yearns. My cheeks flood with fresh heat, and so does my pussy, and I try to clamp down on it as best I can, invisibly. I don't want him to know how just being in his presence has me on the edge of something I can't even put a name to.

"What do you need?" he asks, and there's a note of command to his tone.

"Heather wanted me to give you this," I say, my voice shaking, and I hold out the envelope. "I— it's just a message, nothing—"

"Do you have your phone?" He demands, and I swallow, before nodding. "Give it to me," he demands, and with shaking hands I pull it out of my purse. "The purse." He takes both from me, his fingers, rough and textured, grazing mine.

Our eyes meet.

My breath catches in the back of my throat. Those fingers have done terrible, beautiful things to me, made me feel things that I've never thought a man could evoke in me. And the way he's looking at me right now, he's thinking about how he had me laid out under him, arching in his hands, and I can see his jaw flexing, his teeth grinding together, the tension in his body so obvious.

A jolt of arousal goes straight to my clit, and a hot rush of wetness dampens the fabric between my legs. My hand lifts to my mouth, fingers trembling, to keep the soft noise that wants to escape me, in.

"These will be returned to you when we're done here," he murmurs, and my lips part, in shock that he would be so bold as to assume— A smirk flickers across his face. "If you want to leave, leave," he adds, jerking his chin toward the door that's behind me. The challenge is clear, and I'm frozen.

I could run.

I could call the Viper, and tell him the job is off, because this is impossible. How the hell am I supposed to do this? But then he'll hurt Sam...

Instead of running, my head nods, and I can see a spark of something dark and hungry in his eyes.

"Go wait for me in the bedroom," he snaps, his tone abrupt, and a rush of relief hits me, as he turns, stalking across the penthouse to the table with my things. The bedroom, the bedroom— god what am I doing? I look around the open-plan condo, the way the kitchen spills into a sunken living room, the city glittering through the windows at me.

This is madness.

"It's to your left," he says, not even turning to look at me. He's beautiful from behind, too, the way his shoulders fill out his shirt, and his slacks tight around his—

Enough.

I walk into the bedroom through double doors, and it's dark and warm, the lights dimmed, windows unadorned by curtains along one side to reveal another, different view of the

city below. The bed is huge, a California King against, the linens a pale blue, a few shades darker than my dress. The furniture is all dark wood, a chest of drawers, a nightstand, a tall, narrow bookshelf full of old paperbacks. The bed is neatly made, the sheets tucked under the mattress, the pillows in place, the covers thrown back like he'd been in here, getting ready for a nap or to relax, maybe.

I swallow, and look down, not knowing what to do. Do I sit on the bed? Do I lounge on it, looking edible? How does anyone seduce a man, especially one like him, powerful, and strong, and dangerous.

My breath is coming faster, and I try to calm down, to steady myself. Instead I try to look around the room, focus on what's here, catalog it in my mind for later. Every bit of it, every single detail, I'm going to have to relay to the Viper.

It's part of the deal.

This is just a job.

I hear a soft laugh behind me, and I turn. Luca is leaning against the door, his arms crossed, and he's staring at me, a look of amusement on his face.

"Why are you here?" He asks, and I struggle to make my tongue work. "Heather didn't write that note, and the last person she'd send to me is you." His eyes flash with irritation. "So why are you here?" He stalks toward me, his hands at his sides, and I swallow, backing up. The backs of my thighs hit the edge of the bed, and he looms over me, so tall and broad.

"I," I stammer, and his hand lifts, and the tip of his finger touches my collarbone, the pressure feather-light, and a shiver runs through me, "I—"

"Are you a spy, Miss Morrow?" he asks, his tone deceptively light.

"N-no," I whisper, and the lie tastes sour on my lips. He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. He pushes me down, and I tumble backwards with a yelp. His hand wraps around the backs of my knees, and he drags me closer, spreading my thighs open for him. The skirt of my dress bunches up around

my hips, leaving me exposed, instantly, the cold air rushing against the damp of my panties. It chills me and heats me up at the same time, and a soft sound leaves me, half-mortified, half-excited, and he laughs again, his finger tracing a line up my inner thigh.

“Why are you here?” he asks, again, a look of determined patience on his face.

“Heather, she— Heather doesn’t know I’m here,” I confess, and his hand stops moving, and he looks down at me. I can feel my heart, thudding against my rib cage, and his expression darkens. I’m really not cut out for this. And now I’m going to die. I’m cracking like a creme brulee.

“I see,” he says, and the hand on my thigh tightens, gripping me painfully. “Then what were you going to do? When I called her and found out that you’re a fucking filthy little liar?”

“I—” My mind goes blank, and he leans over me, his hand going to my throat. It wraps around me delicately, deliberately, like he knows exactly how much force to use.

“Answer me, before I lose my patience,” he snarls, and a shiver runs through me. I can’t help the moan that leaves my lips, and the dark, angry look on his face deepens. “Are you fucking serious?” he says, his voice dropping to a hiss, and his hand slides between my thighs. “You’re a goddamn spy, aren’t you? And now you’re so wet for me, like you can’t fucking wait for me to fuck you, spread you open on my cock—” His hand pushes down, and then up, and I gasp, my hands clenching on the blanket underneath me, the rough drag of his fingers making my back arch up off the bed. “You want me to fuck you, right here, right now, and you’re soaking my fucking hand, Ash, are you a fucking spy, or what?”

“Yes!” I cry out, “yes, yes, yes,” I can’t stop the word, and his mouth crashes down on mine, the kiss harsh, demanding, taking, and his fingers move, stroking up and down my slit, the wet noise of them the only thing I can hear beyond the pounding of my heart in my ears. He pulls my thong down, and I kick off my shoes, his fingers pulling the flimsy fabric

down my thighs, until I can get them off, and they drop to the ground.

“I should torment you, drag this out, show you what it means to betray me, and what happens to everyone who does —” He pauses, looking down at me, my thighs locked around his shoulders, the most intimate part of me laid bare for him, his gaze, his touch, his mouth. He leans forward, and kisses me, the brush of his lips against my folds a tease. I’m writhing on the bed, my eyes squeezed shut, and the first stroke of his tongue has a cry leaving my lips.

“I should fuck you, and not let you come, until you’re crying and begging me, until you’ve broken and confessed everything,” he continues, and then his tongue strokes against me, a slow, teasing lick, and my hips jerk against him. “I should fucking kill you, and send a message to whomever it is you’re working for.”

He licks me again, taking his time with me, until my fingers clench in the tidy, perfectly made sheets, scrunching them up in my hands.

And I have to wonder... why he isn’t doing just that. Why hasn’t Luca Greco killed me already?

CHAPTER 9

luca

I'm a fool, and this woman has somehow wrapped me around her little finger, just like her employer must have thought she would. I have the proof that she's a spy, she admitted to it herself, and yet, instead of killing her, instead of letting her go to run to the man who's pulling her strings, or torturing her for more information, I'm licking her pussy, and loving the way she's moaning and arching under my mouth.

"Please," she whispers, and the sound sends a jolt straight through me, right to my rock-hard cock. I should be furious, and a part of me is, but there's also something else. This is a challenge, and I know, even if she doesn't, that I'm not a man who turns away from a challenge.

And she's a challenge, the most interesting and attractive one I've had in a very long time. She's got her hands twisted in the blankets, her back arched up, and I slide two fingers inside her, pushing them in to the last knuckle, and feeling her tight cunt squeeze them. She gasps, and I lick her clit, sucking on it, the taste of her making my mouth water.

I could fuck her, I could fuck her until she couldn't move, until her thighs were quivering, her mouth open and gasping. And right now, that seems like the best thing to do, although I know it's a mistake. I need to find out who the fuck has sent this woman, and why.

I pull back, and her eyes, those pale blue, grey, indecisive, beautiful eyes, fly open. Her lips are parted, the flush of pleasure rising to her cheeks, her hair mussed and tangled.

She's half-way to an orgasm, more than, and shocked that I'm stopping. But she has no idea the kind of control I have.

"You stay here," I say to her, my voice dark. "Do not move. Not an inch." I get to my feet, feeling my cock chafe against the inside of my boxers, irritation at having been denied the hot, sweet taste of her cunt. Her eyes follow me, wide and uncertain, and she nods, swallowing nervously.

"Stay," I remind her, and I walk out, closing the doors behind me. I'm going to fix this, and then I am going to fuck her senseless as punishment for daring to interrupt the carefully ordered life I've built.



THE MAN STANDING in the lobby, looking anxious, is a good ten years younger than me, but still old enough to know what he's doing. He's tall, dark, with an earpiece in and a black suit.

"Sir," he says, nodding respectfully, and his gaze is direct and unwavering.

"I'm going to ask you a question," I say, and he nods again. "If you don't want to answer, just say you won't, and leave. No repercussions, and your debt will be forgiven, alright?"

"Okay, sir," he says. Conor Flynn

"Who the fuck hired Miss Morrow, and why did they do it?" I stare at him, and he swallows.

"H-Heather?" He asks, confused, and that's when I know that he's not hiding anything. He really thought Heather had sent her.

"Not Heather," I growl, and he frowns, the confusion deepening. Fuck. He knows nothing. And now I need to go along the chain, figure out if Heather has any idea, who sent this tiny viper into my nest. "Go home. You did nothing wrong, but if I find out you're lying to me, I'll end you."

He's gone in a second, the elevator doors opening and shutting, and then he's disappeared from my sight. Back inside the condo, Ashley waits in my bedroom, unmonitored and

unshackled, my entire home accessible to her. I wonder if she'll take the opportunity. Not that she'll find anything. Dani took the paperwork with her when she left our earlier meeting, and I don't have a single computer on the premises. I've learned lessons about being raided by the cops, or infiltrated by enemies.

No computers. No evidence. Just me, and my brain.

I head back to the bedroom, and push the doors open.

Ashley is still where I left her, although she's moved, her legs bent, her arms covering her face, like she's trying to hide from the world.

"Did you move?" I ask, and her arms lower, and she looks at me, her cheeks flushing, and she shakes her head, a clear lie. A thrill of excitement and rage shoots through me, and I'm on her in an instant, grabbing her wrists and forcing her down. "Don't lie to me, little spy, it'll only make things worse," I snarl. "Who sent you to me, and why?"

"I— can't tell you," she whispers, and her lips part, a gasp leaving her lips as I push my knee between her thighs, the hard press of my leg against her pussy.

"What happens if you do?" I ask, and my breath catches in the back of my throat as her eyes widen, the grey-blue almost disappearing with the flare of her pupils, and the pink flush to her skin spreads.

"Someone I love will be killed," she murmurs, and there's something like resignation in her tone. She doesn't want to be here. The knowledge hits me, and a pang of regret follows it, chased by irritation and jealousy. Who the hell could she be in love with? She lays, helpless under me, the soft pink of her pussy glistening in the dim lights of the room. I should bury myself inside of her, fuck her until I get the real truth out of her, because she's only telling it to me in bits and pieces.

"Who?" I ask, and I lean down, pressing my mouth to her ear. "Tell me, and maybe I'll let you go, let you walk out of here." It's a lie, a dirty fucking lie, and I can't believe I'm saying it. I know myself too well. I want her now, I want her

for my own. I've never asked for anything to be truly mine, not since my father and uncles were slaughtered.

This woman, she's mine. She's mine and I'm keeping her.

"A girl," Ashley murmurs, "a friend, and he'll kill her if he finds out."

"I could have you killed, little spy, and then who would suffer?"

"She would, and everyone in my building," she says, her eyes wet with tears, her face flushed with arousal, with shame, and with fear. "He knows where we are. Please, please don't do that. Kill me if you want, but save Sam. Not her."

"Why?" I ask, and her lips part. "Why should I give you anything you ask for? I don't put up with disloyalty. And from the moment you set foot on my property, you were disloyal."

"I don't belong to you," she snaps, and the flash of fire, the quick retort, makes my cock twitch and harden. "You don't own me, and I'm not yours. I'm nobody's. But if you kill her, if he hurts her, I will make you regret it, somehow, someday. I will. I'll hack your computers, I'll ruin everything—"

I laugh, and shake my head.

"You think I'm ever letting you go?" I ask quietly. "I'll keep you here, locked up, for as long as I want."

There's a real flash of panic in her eyes, and I want to chase it away, soothe it down, because there's no way I'm going to let her go. Even if it means killing her lover, which, in the back of my mind, I know that's not going to happen.

"Then fuck me, or kill me, but do something, I'm tired of talking," she snarls, and my hand closes around her throat, gripping her neck, my thumb stroking her cheek.

"You have a filthy fucking mouth, don't you, little spy? You'll talk yourself right into trouble, and now you can't find your way out of it again."

A shadow passes behind her eyes, and she gasps for air, as I hold her to the bed. My free hand strokes down her chest, the

thin straps of her dress no armor against my twisting them to snapping.

“Please,” she whimpers, and a groan leaves my lips. “Fuck me, hurt me, but just fucking touch me, please,” she begs, and it’s like music to my ears.

“Oh, you can beg,” I whisper, and my hand cups her breast, her nipple stiff against the pad of my thumb. “So you can learn, can’t you? Needy little thing.”

“Yes, I can, please, touch me,” she says, her voice breaking as I stroke my fingers over the sensitive bud of her nipple.

“I’ll touch you, I promise, until you’re begging me not to,” I say, leaning forward, and taking the stiff peak into my mouth. Her back arches, and her hips grind down against my thigh. “You’ll come so hard you won’t remember your own name, little spy,” I murmur, and then my mouth is back on her, sucking on her, pulling the peak with my teeth.

“Please, please, oh, god, please,” she’s begging, and it’s so fucking sweet. “Luca, Luca, please—”

“Say my name, again,” I whisper, and I look up at her, and she stares down at me, her cheeks pink, and her lips swollen from where she’s bitten them.

“Luca, Luca, Luca, please, please,” she chants, and a smile pulls at the corner of my lips. I release her throat, and her hand flies up to her neck, rubbing where I’ve held her, the fingerprints already purpling on her pale skin. It’s beautiful, a collar I’ve marked on her, showing the whole world that she’s mine. If I ever let her set foot outside, everyone will know who she belongs to.

“What a good girl you are, aren’t you? So sweet, so eager,” I murmur, and she squirms under me, her eyes going dark, the color draining from her face. Her eyes flutter shut, as I twist one of her nipples, a cry of pain edged with pleasure escaping her.

“Are you a good girl, Ashley? Or are you a filthy slut, who needs to be fucked and filled, until she can’t walk anymore?”

“Good girl,” she says, her breath hitching in the back of her throat. “I promise—”

“Liar,” I breathe out, pinching her nipple as she arches up, trying to ease the pressure, but also trying to chase the feeling of it. She wants more of it.

“I’m not lying, I’m not,” she protests, her eyes opening. They’re so bright, so pale, such a contrast to her dark hair and pink lips, and the flush in her cheeks.

“You know what I thought, first time I saw you on my stage?” I ask, and her lips part, but no sound escapes.

“I thought,” I say, sliding my hand down her body, pushing her dress up, over her thighs, her hips, her waist, and she wriggles out of it, letting me strip her bare, her breasts rising and falling as she pants, waiting for me to touch her. “That you were a virgin, and a slut, a pretty little toy that was just asking to be played with.”

“No,” she breathes, shaking her head, and my fingers slip under the fabric of her panties, the ones that are soaked through with her arousal. I can feel it, sticky and wet, and my cock aches with the need to have her, right here and now.

“You can’t lie to me,” I say, and my fingers slip down, parting her folds. She cries out, a soft sound, a mewl of want and need and desperation. “You were made for this, weren’t you, Ash?” I say, and she gasps, her mouth falling open. “Made for sex, for my bed, for me.”

“Please,” she whispers, and I can’t wait anymore. My hand slides away, and hers comes to her pussy, her fingers slipping between her legs.

“Don’t you dare fucking touch yourself,” I snarl, and she whimpers, her other hand lifting to cover her mouth, and she squeezes her thighs together, and it’s such a delicious sight, the need written on her face, her fingers pressed against her pussy, her thighs trembling with the effort. “Open,” I snap, and she obeys, her thighs parting for me. “Don’t fucking touch, not unless I say so, understood?”

“Y-yes,” she murmurs, and then I’m stripping off my clothes, pulling at them, throwing my tie to the side, and undoing the buttons of my shirt. She trembles on the bed, her hands wrapped around her thighs, like she isn’t sure what else to do with them, keeping them busy so she doesn’t touch herself.

My cock is throbbing, and the first touch of my hand, as I wrap my fingers around the thick, hot length of it, nearly makes me groan. I’ve been waiting so long to fuck her, to spread her wide, and the ache inside of me is like a monster. I reach down and grab her hands, pulling on them, dragging her down the bed until her feet hit the floor, her knees bent, thighs open for me, and between them, her cunt is ready for me to bury my face into it, or tuck two fingers up inside of it, fuck her with them until she’s hoarse.

But that’s not how I want to take her right now. I want her to know who she belongs to, who owns her.

“Get on your knees,” I demand, and she drops, kneeling on the hardwood floor, her arms lifted. I can see the tremble in her fingers, and a dark thrill shoots through me.

I am going to give her a night she never, ever, fucking forgets. By the time I’m done, she won’t be able to think of herself as anything other than mine.

CHAPTER 10

ash

Kneeling on the floor, my thighs spread, my body aching, and my mind is spinning, trying to grasp the fact that Luca is naked in behind me. He moved around me, watching me as he undressed, his body all muscle and sinew and power, a strength to him that is like nothing I've seen. Not even the Viper has anything on Luca Greco.

The Viper is a bully. He's a man who thinks he can control others, and does it with a sneer, with a threat, and he gets off on it. He doesn't really have any power. But Luca does, and the knowledge of that is thrilling.

I want him to use that power on me.

"Hands," he snaps, and my breath catches in the back of my throat, as he pulls my hands together, wrapping a thin, black rope around them. He pulls tight, and it bites into my skin, making my breath catch in the back of my throat.

"Too much?" he asks, and there's a note of concern in his tone, which feels... not real. Out of place, but it surrounds me in a gentle warmth that in this moment is exactly what I need. His fingers stroke the side of my face, gently. "Little spy," he says, his tone a purr, and I swallow.

"No," I whisper, and he smiles, a cruel expression, and tugs on the ropes. It burns, but not painfully, and a whimper leaves me. He ties them to one of the legs of the bed, the hard wooden floor under it and me making my knees ache.

Luca circles me, and a shudder runs through me, every inch of me aware of the fact that he's standing behind me,

watching me, examining me, waiting. For what?

The answer is immediate, as he wraps a hand in my hair, pulling it out of the neat, careful updo I'd worked on for what felt like ages.

"You're going to be my pretty little pet, aren't you?" he says, and my throat goes dry, the tug of pain as he yanks my head back, arching my back, sending a shock through me.

"Yes," I say, the word slipping from my lips without a thought.

"Do you think you're worthy of the title?" he asks, and a gasp leaves me, as he slides his hand down, his palm pressing against the flat plane of my belly, and then lower, cupping my pussy. My eyes fly open, and he's staring at me, his green eyes dark and glittering.

"Please," I gasp, and a smirk flickers across his face. "Please, please," I whisper, and the first thrust of his fingers inside of me make my hips jerk. My hands strain against the ropes, and the ache in my knees is forgotten. There's only the hot, slick glide of his fingers, and his gaze, fixed on my face.

"So desperate," he murmurs, and his thumb presses against my clit. "So wet. Does being a filthy little spy turn you on, or is it just me? Do you get wet when you're thinking about other men, Ashley? Do you let them touch you, when I'm not around?"

"N-no," I say, and he kneels beside me, his face next to mine, his teeth grazing the shell of my ear, his lips closing around my earlobe. I tighten on his fingers, trying to get more from him, my body betraying me. I've never been touched like this, handled roughly, anything, and it's got me on the edge, my toes digging into the wood floorboards.

"Don't lie," he breathes, and he twists his wrist, the thrusts of his fingers becoming deeper, more insistent, his thumb on my clit.

"Only you," I moan, "only you."

"Who am I?"

“Luca Greco,” I cry, and he bites down on my shoulder, his fingers crooking inside of me. A wave of pleasure rushes through me, and my thighs shake, my mouth falling open as I pant.

“And who are you?” he asks, his voice a growl. His fingers twist inside me, driving me to arch. He’s still got his hand in my hair, holding me still. I can barely move.

“Ashley Morrow, Ash, Miss Morrow, oh god, please, I can’t, please, I need to—” My words break off as a ragged cry leaves my lips. “Please, please,” I beg, and the words leave me again, his fingers pulling back, and then driving in again, a brutal, quick pace that has me writhing and twisting. “Please, oh god, please, Luca, please, fuck, fuck, oh fuck—”

He is relentless, and I can feel a hot blush spreading up my neck and over my cheeks, as he fingers me, his hand holding me still, not letting me get away from the intensity of his touch.

“You can come,” he whispers, his fingers pushing deeper inside me, a third one pressing against my folds, slick with my own wetness. “Come for me, little spy, come on my fingers, like a good little slut, you’re going to be so good for me, aren’t you? So, so good,” he whispers, and his thumb brushes over my clit, his mouth on my ear, and I gasp, and a cry escapes me.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, “my good girl, aren’t you? You can come now,” he says, and I don’t want to disappoint him, even though a small part of me whispers that this is all wrong.

It’s wrong, and it’s perfect.

And I want to come for him, I need to.

“Luca,” I whisper, and his fingers curl inside of me, and his thumb strokes over my clit, and another orgasm rushes through me, stronger and harder than the first.

“Such a sweet little thing,” he says, and my head is spinning, the words leaving my lips as the room tilts around me.

“I’m gonna pass out,” I whisper, and he lets go of me, the hand in my hair falling away, his fingers slipping out of me. I sink forward, the ropes going tight, and my cheek hits the floor.

I’m not even embarrassed.

A low, dark laugh fills the air, and the ropes go slack, and I’m being pulled into strong, solid arms, the world around me shifting.

“Let’s put you in bed,” he says, his voice warm, and soothing. I can’t focus on anything, not with the aftershocks still shaking through me, not with the way the whole room is spinning.

“Mmkay,” I mumble, and a soft laugh, full of affection, echoes through the air.

“Good girl,” Luca whispers, and he lays me down on the bed, climbing in behind me. The sheets rasp, they’re so smooth against my skin, it feels like I’m tumbling into the early shadows of sleep. His hand skates up my bare hip, and I shiver until his warm form presses against me from behind. His body curves to meet mine, pulling me against him. His cock, rock-hard, is pressed into the small of my back and my eyes slide open.

He must want something. Me, sex, something. He’s the one who stopped me from leaving the club, he’s the one who brought me back to his place, the one who’s kept me tied up and under him since.

I should be scared, and part of me is, but the rest is too exhausted to care. Instead I part my thighs, arching my back, shifting back against him, until his breath catches and he groans low in his chest.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for,” he murmurs, the heat in his voice waking me up, bringing me from that half-way place of almost-sleep. My wrists, still slightly sore from where he bound me and made me tug against the footboard of his bed, beg to differ.

I know exactly what I'm asking for. And I can't let a few good orgasms, and this mysteriously sweet dangerous man lull me into complacency. I need him in me for more than one reason.

I'm a spy, and I have a job to do.

"Fuck me," I whisper, and his fingers wrap around my hip, the pressure bruising and possessive, and he shifts, the thick, hot length of him sliding between my thighs. He nudges against my entrance, and a gasp escapes my lips. "Please, Luca, please," I beg, and a groan leaves him.

"Good girl," he whispers, and his cock thrusts inside me, deep and hard. I gasp, my head thrown back, and his teeth sink into the side of my throat, and his fingers press into my hip, holding me still.

"Fuck," I breathe, and his hand wraps around my thigh, lifting my leg, hooking it over his hip.

"That's it," he murmurs, "let me in," he continues, and the words feel like a command, one that I can't disobey.

"Yes, sir," I whisper, and he laughs, low and dark, the sound sending a jolt straight to my core.

"I knew you were a good girl," he growls, and I can feel his breath on the back of my neck, his hand stroking down my chest, his fingers closing over my nipple, pinching the stiff peak. "I can't wait to hear you beg me to let you come."

His cock slides out of me, and I whimper, feeling the emptiness, the ache in my cunt for him. He's so thick and long, and so fucking good, I can't believe I'm letting him do this to me.

"What's the matter?" he asks, his mouth pressed to my ear, the hot, hard press of his cock sliding against my pussy. "Did you want more? Do you want me to fill you up, make you mine?"

"Please, please," I whimper, and the hand around my hip slides up, his thumb finding the bud of my clit, pressing down, making me arch up and away from the overwhelming

sensation. “Please, please,” I cry out, and the head of his cock slides inside me, filling me.

“You want me to fuck you? Fill your pretty little pussy with my come?” he whispers, and I moan, a low sound in the back of my throat, a yes.

“Good,” he breathes, and he pushes deep inside me, filling me, stretching me, making me arch, the sensation of him so big and overwhelming, it’s like I’m being split apart.

“Fuck,” I cry out, and his fingers dig into my thigh, keeping me in place.

“That’s right, just let me in, baby,” he murmurs, and the soft endearment, the sweetness of the word, it makes me melt, and a low moan leaves me.

“Fuck, fuck, please,” I whisper, and he pulls out, the tip of his cock just inside my entrance, and his fingers stroke my clit.

“Please, what, little spy?” My eyes open wide at the use of the nickname, because it feels like it’s tarnishing this moment between us, but I can’t protest.

He’s right. I’m all wrong. I’m a snake in his bed. My pussy clenches down on nothing, and he laughs, breathless and aroused, before thrusting back into me, bottoming out in me.

“F-fuck,” I gasp, and his teeth scrape against my neck, and he thrusts in and out, a steady, relentless pace that has my toes curling.

“Do you like being mine, Ash?” he asks, his thumb on my clit, the slide of him inside me, so fucking good. “Do you like being owned, being fucked?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I whimper, and the hand on my hip reaches up, wrapping around my neck, pulling me back against him.

“Beg me, beg me to fuck you, beg me to make you come,” he whispers, and my eyes squeeze shut, the pleasure rising and building inside of me, making me feel like I’m about to burst, or shatter, or maybe just disappear.

“Luca, pl—” I want to say please, oh, god, fuck me, fill me up, let me come, but I can’t. I’m wordless, pure light in his hands, the tension in me spinning tighter and tighter, and then there’s no warning, nothing to hold me back. I cry out, my thighs shaking, the hand on my throat tightening, and the other pressing against my clit, and his mouth is on my shoulder, biting down, the pleasure and the pain making me arch.

Luca groans, and he pushes into me, as deep as he can, and a hot rush fills me, a distant realization that there’s nothing between us, he’s deep in me, and there is absolutely no going back now.

CHAPTER 11

luca

I'm staring at her. Her pale face is flushed, her mouth is red and swollen, and she's curled up on her side, her arms tucked close to her chest. She's asleep, the lines of her face softening, the dark lashes brushing her cheeks. There is something deeply wrong with whomever is pulling her strings, and I need to know more.

This woman is no hardened criminal, and she is no assassin. But she is something. A thief? Someone with hacking skills, a digital criminal? It's hard to imagine her as a hacker, someone sitting at a computer screen, coding until her eyes hurt. She moves so naturally on the stage. I tap out a text to Dani, and she gets back to me within seconds, my phone buzzing on the kitchen counter.

We need to talk. That's all the message is. Vague, and unspecific, and that fills me with irritation. Instead I call down to one of my guards downstairs, and tell him to ensure that Ashley doesn't go in, or out, of the apartment, but that all her needs are seen to when she wakes up. The housekeeper will see to it that comfortable clothing is laid out for her.

For now, I have to find out exactly who has a hold over her.

And I think Dani knows.



“YOU KNOW that I'm ten times smarter than you, and would be happy to take over the job if you didn't feel you were up to it anymore, right?” Dani asks me as I sit down on the bench next

to her. The harbor in front of us is steel-grey, the water lapping at the stone near where we sit, the only thing separates us from the sea are concrete barriers.

“Not interested,” I say, and she smirks, her eyes fixed on the water. She was smart, picking Fan Pier Park to meet, away from our own territory, everyone we know, although with a good view of the Waterfront that one day will fall under the Greco jurisdiction, if all goes well.

“Why did you bring her home, Luca? If you wanted information on her, you could’ve sent me to do it.” She sounds doubtful, as if she knows there must be some other reason but doesn’t want to put it into words.

When was the last time I went chasing after a woman? I’m not Ricardo. Even Gio and Matt get more action than I do. I’ve been the stalwart hold-out. No woman has caught my eye, or captured my attention for more than a single hour since our family suffered our devastating loss.

“Because,” I say, and my mind is whirring, the truth, the truth, how much of it can I share? How much does she know, and how much is it safe for me to say? I don’t know, and it makes the muscles in the back of my neck tense up.

“I want you to look into a few things,” I say. “See what you can find out about her.”

“She’s got a record, for one,” Dani turns to look at me, the breeze tugging at her hair, twisted into thick braids on either side of her neck. It’s a childish look, but on her, is elegant. I wonder when I’m going to lose her to a man, to motherhood. The thought is irritating to me, and I push it away. Dani’s always put our family first, before her interests, just like me.

“She’s got a record,” I repeat, and she nods. “But that’s not all, is it?”

“No,” Dani says. “It’s not. She’s working for someone. They put her in Cascade, slipped her right past Heather. It was laughably easy, considering how Heather holds open auditions and free classes for any girl who wants to dance.”

“What better way to get fresh blood in if not to train them ourselves?” I point out and Dani makes a face. “You don’t agree.”

“I do agree, but it left us vulnerable. A girl got in, was placed in the exact right spot to infiltrate our computing systems.”

“Well thank fuck we keep nothing useful on them,” I remind her. “That’s why I’ve kept to our physical-only rule.” I look out at the water, the cold wind ruffling my hair, and a shiver runs through me.

“She didn’t get anything on those computers,” Dani says, and there’s a note of triumph in her voice. “But I still don’t know who pushed her in our direction.”

“Is there anything we can use?”

“No, but—”

“What is it?”

“Her apartment, the building. It’s got a lot of girls. It’s an older building, and they’re packed in like sardines. I’m wondering if...”

“Some answers might be there?” I ask and then nod, the silent go-ahead. “Find out what you can. And tell me everything. Until then—”

“You’ll keep her distracted, and if she’s truly with you now as some kind of plant, whoever sent her will feel like he’s succeeded,” Dani replies with a smile. “And that’ll keep him complacent.”

“So complacent he fucks up,” I mutter and get to my feet.

“We can only hope.”



BACK AT MY CONDO, I head up in the elevator, a bag in my hand. The housekeeper is waiting for me in the lobby, her coat buttoned up, a scarf covering her hair, the keys in her hand.

“Miss Morrow woke, and then took a shower, sir,” she tells me, her face calm, and her voice even. “And is in the kitchen,

having lunch.”

“Thank you,” I say, and she nods, before disappearing through the front doors. Satisfaction curls in my gut and I walk toward the elevator, my every move tracked by one of the guards by it. He lets me onto the elevator, the private one that goes right to my top-level penthouse, and silence surrounds me as the car moves upwards.

Keeping Ashley Morrow distracted is going to be a challenge I enjoy. There’s intelligence in her eyes, but I can’t just keep her pinned to my bed until we find out why she was placed as a mole in my world.

And I have no interest in using... traditional methods of extracting that information from her.

She’s in the kitchen, her hair wet, and tied into a loose knot, strands escaping around her face. She’s wearing the clothes the housekeeper left out, a soft t-shirt, and a pair of stretchy jeans. She’s bra-less, I can see from the way the shirt catches on her nipples, and a pulse of heat sounds in my groin.

“Hungry?” she asks, gesturing to the plate in front of her, where half a sandwich too tidily made to have been prepared by anything other than my housekeeper, remains. There’s a hint of a smile on her lips. Like she isn’t aware she’s a prisoner in my home. She’s a good actress, my little spy, but I’m going to put the pressure on her.

“Starving,” I reply, injected some heat into my voice, and the flush on her cheeks is delightful. “Did you have a good sleep?”

“The best,” she says, her eyes dropping from mine, and she looks at her lap, her hands in her lap. “I... did you want to have sex again?”

“Is that an invitation?” I ask, and her cheeks flush deeper.

“N-no,” she says, stuttering, and then looks up at me, her eyes wide. But it is, although I don’t think it’s the most natural of invitations. I have other plans for her today, anyway.

“Not that you aren’t beautiful, standing here in my kitchen,” I say, my voice hot with possession because it’s

doing something to me to see her in my home, wearing clothes that my money bought. “I have other plans for today.”

She looks almost relieved, and disappointed at the same time.

“Such as?”

“First, we’re going to go out.” I watch her with barely veiled hunger. I would prefer to throw her across the island in my kitchen and show her how good it feels to have me go down on her in the middle of the day.

But we have more important things to attend to. Getting to know her more deeply is first. Dani might be doing the legwork out there, but I know I can prod some real information out of Ashley now that I have her in my possession.

“You can’t—” she starts, and then bites her lip, her eyes wide.

“I can’t what, Ash? I already know you have a record—” she inhales at this revelation, meeting my gaze even though she’s scared. I can see it in the way her fingers tighten on the counter. “And it doesn’t take much to make things difficult for you. Putting a key-logger on one of my computer systems? Just because I operate outside of the bounds of the law doesn’t mean I don’t have people in law enforcement who’d be only too happy to make an arrest to my benefit.”

“That—”

I walk toward her, slowly, and wrap a hand in her hair, pulling her head back. She’s forced to look up at me, and her eyes widen. She swallows, her throat bobbing, her tongue darting out to lick her lips. She falls silent, but I’m not going to leave her in suspense for too long. Already her nerves are jumping, her pulse beating visibly under the thin skin of her throat.

“You will tell me who sent you to spy on me,” my voice is gentle, and her eyes grow wet along the lash-line. I’m pushing too hard. Slowly, I’m going to draw it out of her. “But not now.”

“Then—” she tries to speak, and I shush her.

“Right now, you’re going to finish your lunch,” I say, “and then I’m going to take you out so you can get dressed in something nice. While you’re with me, you’ll want for nothing.” Her eyes flicker with something I don’t recognize, is it fear? Or anticipation? A mix of both? But she doesn’t look like she’s particularly thrilled at the idea of being a kept woman.

Extra reasons why I suspect she’s not exactly the normal girl who comes to work at Cascade, and more reason for me to suspect that she was placed there for more than one reason.

“Where are we going?” Her shoulders are tense. I gesture toward the windows, indicating the outside.

“The Combat Zone isn’t exactly a bastion of shopping,” she says, like she’d know. From what Heather tells me, Ashley comes to work in clothing that’s neatly patched and probably third-hand. But that doesn’t mean she’s not aware of where there is actually good shopping in town.

“Newbury. I’ve got a call to make, but be ready to go in five minutes.” I head toward the doors of my private office.

“Bossy,” she mumbles, but when I glance back at her, she’s got a distant, small smile on her face and a faint blush on her cheeks.

She likes it.

And that’s going to be the key to unlocking all of her secrets.

CHAPTER 12

ash

He takes me to Newbury Street, in a black town car staffed by a driver in the front that I'm pretty sure is packing, if the slight bulge under his black suit jacket is any hint. Luca doesn't wear a suit to take me out, and looks oddly soft in a dark-navy long-sleeve Henley, tucked into jeans

"Why aren't you wearing a suit?" I ask, and the question sounds ridiculous, and I'm not even sure why I ask it.

"I didn't have anything to prove, and it would stand out too much," he replies casually as he helps me out of the car, his hand warm on mine. The fresh air of the day wakes up my senses, the sunlight pouring over me, as I glance around the street. Sam would die to be someplace like this, if she could set foot outside of the home. Throat tight with feeling, I push thoughts of her away. She's safe in our building, with enough cash to pay anyone to run errands for her. Last time she'd checked in with me, she promised me she was okay. I'm staying away because I have to. The Viper, I'm sure, is watching me.

I pretend to look around at the shops, scanning the faces of people far and near, looking for him. He wants me close to Luca, as much as possible, so there's no way he's not having me watched, or watching me himself.

"Chanel first?" Luca asks, and just the name of the French fashion boutique has my stomach dropping, the expensive taste of the shop not something I could afford, even if I had saved for ages. What do their purses cost, like north of eight

thousand dollars? IT seems like such a waste to me, but there's no way I can ask him to take me to a Goodwill.

"Maybe," I reply, and his arm slides around my waist.

"Or maybe not," he murmurs, his breath hot on the shell of my ear, and a shiver runs through me. "Tell me where you want to go. Anywhere."

"Someplace where nobody is going to look at me funny," I reply. I'll stick out at a haute couture boutique, with snooty sales associates who'd rather look down their noses at me. "I don't want a Pretty Woman moment. Making a scene isn't my thing."

He pulls away, but his hand stays wrapped around my wrist, a firm, warm shackle I'm not going to lose anytime soon.

"Come," he says, "I know where to take you."

Luca leads me toward an innocuous looking boutique, a place called TulipToo. As we enter, a woman in a soft black dress, her hair tied into a perfect ponytail, a white ribbon wrapped around it, greets us, her face lighting up.

"Luca!" she cries out, and he leans in, kissing her on either cheek, and they embrace. I try not to look as surprised as I feel, because this is clearly someone he knows, and it's clear they're... close. My chest feels uncomfortably tight. "How's Dani," She asks, "oh, how's Ricky?" She turns to me and smiles. "Look at you, can it be?" Her eyes sparkle with mirth, but Luca holds up a hand, stopping her from talking more.

"We're just here for clothes, Angelique, not conversation." His voice is light, but there's a thread of steel running through it. He wants no further comments from this woman.

"Of course, darling, of course," she says, and clasps her hands together. "What'll it be! Oh, you'd look lovely in a ripped jean, I know exactly what you need. Let's leave this grump here," she says, taking me by the hands and drawing me deeper into her boutique. "Luca, darling, you'll behave?"

"When am I not a paragon of manners," he asks from the storefront, and a low laugh escapes her. I glance back at him,

and he's not looking at me, instead, his eyes are steady on the doorway, a tension in how he holds himself.

Like he's ready to spring into battle. He's... guarding me. That has to be it. A flutter of nerves in my stomach has me turning back to Angelique.

"Oh, darling, you are too much, you always have been," she calls, pulling me between racks of clothes packed with jeans, all colors, and designs. "Wide-legged. I'm so glad they're back again. Very comfortable, as long as you're in the right shoe. How tall are you?" She eyes me up, before she starts pulling several pairs of jeans off of a rack near her. "I'll start you a room. I'm lucky you came at a slow moment, Luca would have kicked everyone out, I'm sure."

She bustles off, and I stand, awkwardly in the middle of the space, surrounded by clothing.

"Luca?" I call out, and his voice comes from the other side of the rack.

"Don't worry," he says, "I've got everything covered."

I'm not reassured.

An hour later, my head is spinning from all the clothes, and Luca's sitting in the waiting room, on his phone, a magazine in his hand. I can't imagine how much this is going to cost. It's not lost on me that each piece of the clothing I've been asked to try on is conspicuously missing a price tag.

"Try the jeans and the blue sequin shirt," Angelique says, practically pushing me into the fitting room when I emerge. "I'm going to get Luca a drink."

I slip inside the fitting room, and pull the curtain closed. Looking at myself in the mirror, my hair is starting to fluff up with the effort of trying things on, and my cheeks are two pink patches of color. And my heart, it feels heavy and sick. I wish I could check the price of these wide-legged jeans, made out of a pale, comfortably thick denim. The sequin shirt, the cut of it perfect, shows a hint of my cleavage, but nothing too outrageous, and fits perfectly, the hem falling to the top of the

jeans, and the sleeves ending in a cap sleeve, just the right length.

Nothing off the rack has ever fit me this well. There's a knot in my throat. I have a sneaking suspicion that the jeans alone would pay my half of our rent. For the month.

"Are you decent?" Angelique's voice floats over the curtain, and I step back from the mirror.

"Uh, yeah," I say, and she pushes it open.

"Oh, sweetheart," she breathes, "you look stunning."

I stare at myself in the mirror.

"I can't," I say, and a look of understanding comes across her face. She taps a finger against her bottom lip.

"Here, my dear," she murmurs, and comes into the fitting room, pulling the curtain closed. She warms her hands by rubbing them together and then presses them against my cheeks. "Shhh, shhh, now, it is no easy thing to be the chosen of a Greco, but he is a good one. Oh, but you are crying—"

I am, tears starting to form, clinging to my lashes and dripping down my face. Angelique, unnecessarily kind to someone she barely knows, pulls a delicately embroidered handkerchief out of her pocket and dabs at my cheeks.

"You are so beautiful, darling, and I understand that your circumstances may be difficult, but don't let that take away from your happiness." She tucks the handkerchief into my hands, her fingers lifting up to pull gently at my hair, arranging it, and then she steps back, looking me over. "Look at you, transformed, a glowing woman, worthy of love when you stepped in to my little shop, but showing the world the evidence of that affection now." I glance at myself in the mirror, my breath hitching.

I am radiant, my eyes sparkling, the blush high in my cheeks, my lips pink and full, and I have never looked more beautiful. The clothing fits me perfectly.

"He will not hurt you," Angelique says, mistaking my upset. Of course, Luca wouldn't, he's not like that, I feel like I

know that in my heart.

“I know,” I whisper, and she touches my shoulder.

“Then what is the matter?”

How do I tell her that it’s me who is hurting him? Secretly spying on him in deeper ways than he knows or suspects?

I press my lips together.

“This is just all so expensive,” I whisper, “and I don’t come from money or anything, in my area, it could buy groceries for a month.” Angelique nods sagely.

“You know, there is no harm in a few well-placed words into the ear of a man who would kill himself in order to please you,” she comments, keeping her voice hushed. “All you need to do is tell him what you want. What you, in your heart of hearts, truly want. Do not let fear guide your hand, or your actions.”

I swallow, hard, and blink back the last tears.

“Okay,” I whisper, and she smiles, a wide, brilliant expression that lights up her face.

“Good. Now, come, let’s show your man how beautiful you look.”

My man.

A shiver runs through me, and I’m not sure what it means.

Or why, when I walk out of the fitting room and Luca looks up from his phone, his eyes raking over me, the slow, hungry smile spreading across his face, a flush of pleasure fills me, and I want nothing more than to please him.



WE END up buying the jeans and the shirt. And a couple other things, because apparently Luca enjoys spending his money on me. Or rather, giving me no choice but to spend his money on me. Angelique’s words float after me from shop to shop, and even though the bags of purchases mysteriously disappear at the end of each store visit, my guilt does not.

It doesn't matter that I've left Sam with envelopes full of cash from my short-lived time at Cascade and the work I've done for the Viper. I should be working harder, to protect everyone in the building. But instead, I'm on a shopping spree.

Luca pulls my hand into his, wrapping his long fingers around my palm, his touch warm and grounding. I glance up at him.

"What about that dress?" He asks, pointing to a window near us. In it, a dark blue floor-length dress of gauzy, floaty fabric haunts the window, sparkling under a spotlight that seems to make it glow from within.

"I wouldn't have anywhere to wear it," I reply with a laugh, because the idea of me, traipsing around my small apartment with Sam in that is ridiculous. Luca squeezes my hand, and it feels possessive, and the butterflies in my stomach turn into something more insistent.

"That's a lie," he says, and I freeze. I glance up at him, feeling caught out, even though it's not a lie. When this bubble pops, I go back to my old life, eking out an existence on the fringe of things, but hopefully in a more stable living situation.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I'd take you to parties and galas. I'd show you off," he murmurs, and then tugs on my hand. "Let's go in." I shake my head. He's fooling himself. Men like him don't pick girls like me.

"I really don't think—"

"What if I promise you, this dress, and anything else, you can wear it for me?" His voice is low, a dark rumble, and a thrill runs through me, and his hand wraps around my waist. "Only for me. In my home, in my living room, where only I can see you and you don't need to bear the weight or scrutiny of anyone at all?"

He looks at me like he sees right through me, all of my small and large fears laid bare, the fact that all my life I haven't anyone to really see the real me, and I've hidden behind layers. Good at coding. A good friend, a good

neighbor. Never letting anyone too close, except Sam, and she was safe, because she didn't even leave the apartment ever. And when danger came to find her? I was determined to fight it.

"Please don't," I whisper, and he leans in, brushing his lips against my ear.

"Please, let me," he repeats, and his breath is warm on the shell of my ear. His fingers flex, pressing against my side, and the heat of his body next to mine is too much, it makes my heart beat faster and a low ache throb in my core. "Let me treat you like you have always deserved to be treated. From one criminal to another," he taunts, and his words have me blushing. I guess we aren't so different.

The only big difference?

He's good at what he does.

I'm an abject failure.

"Fine," I whisper, and the smile that spreads across his face has a thrill running through me. He pulls the door open, and the shopgirl smiles at him, and a wave of jealousy goes through me. Not of her, or her attentions on him, but how easy he seems to glide through life. We leave not even twenty minutes later, the dress in a bag, that is whisked out of my sight before we step out of the store again.

"Ice-cream?" He offers, and I laugh because the day is becoming overcast.

"It's a little cold," I point out, and then pause, "also, where are all the bags going?"

"Back to the apartment," he says with a casual shrug. I pause, for a moment, and glance around us. That implies there's someone out here with us, following us, to collect the bags as we leave each store. He says nothing, but just waits for me to decide if I want to ask my questions.

I don't.

Of course he has someone following us, probably several someones. He's the king-pin of a major crime family. I'd be

stupid, in his shoes, to go out on a casual date, and not have careful watchers, and some runners, to do my errands and keep me safe.

Somehow the fact he's done all of this without even telling me makes me feel a rush of warmth, even as the sky overhead grumbles with thunder, and two seconds later the rain begins to fall.

He looks up, laughs, and pulls me close, under an overhang.

"Maybe a raincheck on the ice-cream," he murmurs, and when he leans down to kiss me, I let myself relax into it, his lips closing over mine.

And over his shoulder, far down the street, movement catches my eye.

The Viper.

Standing, by a lamp-post, in the sudden downpour, his eyes locked on Luca and me.

CHAPTER 13

luca

Ash is quiet on the way back to my penthouse, sitting still in the back of the town-car. She's surrounded by bags from our shopping trip, since they'd been handily brought to the car after we left each store, and yet...

Any other woman, a real sugar baby, a kept woman, would be pawing through the bags and tissue paper, giggling madly. A woman more urbane than that might be able to keep the smirk off of her face, but barely. All would be on their phones, taking selfies,

Instead, she looks like she's about to throw up.

I've done something wrong.

"What's the matter?" I ask, and she flinches.

"Nothing, just the storm," she replies, and I glance out the window. Fat drops are streaking down the glass, although I know that isn't it. She's practically got her knees tucked up under her chin on the seat, the posture of a child, not the head-strong grown woman I'm coming to know her to be.

"I don't believe you," I say, and her mouth presses into a thin line, before she swallows, her throat moving.

"It's just the storm," she insists, her green eyes flickering and I sit back. Head-strong in-fuckin'-deed. But she has no idea how much more stubborn I am. I didn't get where I am by taking the first answer offered. I tap out a few rapid instructions on my phone, and the car, headed toward home, takes a right turn at the next light instead of a left, but Ashley wouldn't know the change.

“If that’s what you say,” I murmur, and she shoots me an angry, hot look, before staring out the window again. This time, she really does pull her feet up onto the expensive leather seats as if they’re nothing, and tucks her knees under her chin. I say nothing. Let her do as she pleases, as what makes her comfortable. I will have answers, but not now. She doesn’t trust me to hear her, or for whatever reason, I’ve offended her, and I have no idea how.

It’s frustrating, and I have to remind myself that this is all new to her. If it’s a game, it’s a game she didn’t grow up knowing.

She’s a pawn.

But, I think, my eyes sweeping over her, she’s a beautiful pawn.

When the car finally arrives at our destination, she’s silent. When I open the door and let her out, she stands on the sidewalk, a strange, lost look on her face.

“You know where you are?”

Her lower lip trembles.

“How did you find this?” She asks softly, and I glance up at her apartment building. I give her a look and she huffs out a sigh, her shoulders rounding. “I don’t want to go in, I just want to see it.” She chews on her bottom lip, then glances nervously around us. “You shouldn’t have brought me here without telling me.”

“I’m not an idiot,” I reply, and the tone in my voice is sharp enough to make her wince. “You’d have fought me the whole way if you knew I was taking you home.” I look up at the building. It’s not much to miss. The old cement facade is cracked and crazed, in need of a good repair. I can see why it’s on the demo list to be flattened, making way for a bevvvy of townhomes, or microscopic condos.

“Can we go? I don’t want someone seeing me here—” she turns away from the building, reaching for the car door, but I put a hand on her arm. She’s jumpy. Something’s scared her, or someone.

“Is someone bothering you?” I ask. Her eyes go wide.

“N-no,” she stammers. She’s a bad liar. I don’t know why she ever thought she’d be good at infiltrating my business, but maybe she was hoping on not dealing with anyone at my level. First mistake. I have good layers of intelligent people throughout my operation, but that doesn’t mean I don’t personally check in on things. Even if my lower-level staff don’t know it’s the big boss they’re dealing with, they’ve met almost all met me at some point or another.

But she’d have no way of knowing that. Just like I don’t know what’s going on with her, and why she’s so rattled being in the one place she has to be missing.

I take her by the shoulders and turn so that she’s looking at me, and I’m facing her building.

“Who would be looking for you, Ash?” I ask, and her mouth opens. Her tongue darts out, and the pink tip runs over her lower lip, making me think about how it would feel wrapped around my cock, how much I want her again. Now’s not the time for that. Stay fuckin’ focused, Greco. “Who set you on my trail?”

She looks up at me, those eyes of her reminding me of a mysterious forest, the kind of place I’d get lost in, and for a moment, I am lost. My hands grip her shoulders tight, until she lets out a shaky breath.

“If you care about me, you won’t ask,” she says quietly, “and you’ll figure it out on your own because you’re a big crime lord, and can probably do that. Don’t you have like, people for that?” I pop an eyebrow, and she hazards a brief, cautious smile.

“Then answer me something else, little spy, if you won’t be honest with me on who hired you.” She hesitates but I give her a slight shake, just a small one, to let her know I’m serious. I could pry any information out of her that I wanted to, if I wanted to. She has no idea what resources are at my disposal. “Why did you accept the job to break into my business, to spy on me?”

She shrugs and shakes her head.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

My eyes narrow.

“Bullshit, everyone has a choice—”

She scoffs and squirms out of my grip.

“Men like you would think that,” she says, walking away from me and up the few steps to the first landing of her apartment building’s entry-way. She’s framed by the doors, the peeling paint, the faded sign in one of the windows displaying contact information for the property management company itself. It’s a sad place, although there’s a kid’s trike on the steps, and with some windows open I can hear the sounds of people talking, cooking happening, signs of life. More so than in my sterile pent-house.

More so than in my life since the patriarchs were all murdered...

“You think you can just have anything, buy anything, and get anything you want,” she snaps at me, and her anger is so pure, so real, and so honest, that it gives me pause. But even though her glare is leveled at me, she’s not mad at me, not me directly. It’s just the idea of who I am. Powerful? Is it my power she’s angry with? The way I can ordain who lives and dies, arrange the world around me to my liking at anytime? Or is it the way I have money, and use it freely, buying things like ice-cream on a rainy day, a dress for a woman I’ve just met?

“So?” I ask, spreading my arms out, palms open, the epitome of all the things she hates. If we’re going to have it out, then let it be here, and now. I don’t give a fuck.

I know my future has Ashley Morrow firmly imprinted in it. Fate, or God, or the universe. All of it seems to have spoken to me, and it’s in my gut. I can hear her name in my sleep.

There is no reality where I let her go free, because that will be the end of me.

If she wants a show-down, I’ll give her one, and then I will take her home and show her exactly how she was made for

me, to be pleased by me, to please me. We are meant for each other.

“So?” She repeats, her brows furrowing, and then her mouth twists. “You think you’re such a big man. What did you tell yourself? That you’d just sweep me off my feet and buy me some clothes, and that would fix everything?” Her voice is rising, but her eyes are empty, like she knows she’s full of crap, but she’s hurt, and has nobody to take it out on but me. If I need and stand to be the bulwark of her rage, I’ll do it.

I’d do fucking anything for Ashley Morrow.

“It doesn’t have to be hard, Ash,” I say, my voice gentle. She scoffs, and her shoulders sag. Above us, there’s movements in the windows, faces pressing against the glass, and then vanishing.

“You don’t even know why I’m angry,” she points out. I try not to smile, because that’d just be insulting.

“Money has never come easy to you. You’ve struggled all along, and I’ve waved my hands and made the problems go away, but not the real ones.” I take a step toward her, wondering if she’ll bolt, but she holds her ground. “Your life’s not going the way you hoped. And now, here you are, and what does that say about you, and your life? Who the hell is Luca Greco, and why does he deserve a woman like you?”

Now I’ve hit it, or at least, something that breaks the anger inside of her. Those beautiful green eyes of hers well up with tears and she shuts them tight, to hide herself away from me. She shakes her head.

“I don’t think I deserve you after what I’ve done,” she whispers, and I’m against her in a moment, pulling her into me. My arms are tight around her, and I hold her as close as I can, her face pressed against my chest.

“Whatever you agreed to do to hurt me, it doesn’t matter,” I promise her, and her body trembles, the weight of her against me, a comforting, familiar feeling now. “You didn’t know me, or my people. I was faceless, another monster in the dark. You were just trying to—”

“Save my home,” she says, her voice cracking. “They’re selling our home.” She looks up at the building, the fear in her eyes so very real, like she doesn’t have a place with me now and forever. Because maybe to her, nothing is forever. Maybe she’s never had that, the promise of once-and-always.

She doesn’t know the Greco men. That once we promise our hearts, we’re done, there is no other option for us.

“What if I told you,” I say, brushing her hair away from her face. It’s getting wet from the rain, her bangs plastered to her forehead, the rest hanging limp around her shoulders. “That I’d make all your problems disappear? Your home would be safe, and you wouldn’t need to worry about anything, ever again. You’d want for nothing. Not a single thing.”

“And in exchange, what?” She asks, her eyes glittering, and I smile, because the smart, fierce woman that I know and love is coming back to the surface, pushing her fears and her anxieties aside. She was clever enough to insert herself into my business, unobtrusive, invisible. She was so very clever, beautiful, resilient, and now I am going to see she’s rewarded.

“Ash?” A voice unfamiliar to me has me stiffening, and I shove her behind me, one hand going to the gun at my waist. The door to the town-car opens, my driver emerging, in similar preparedness.

A small, dark-haired girl with wide, scared eyes is staring at Ashley, standing in the doorway of the apartment building, the rain falling in earnest now around us.

“Sam,” Ashley gasps, and moves to push past me, and I don’t stop her, even though my instincts are screaming at me to. But she’s not a captive anymore, she’s a woman in need, and my woman. I’m not going to be the one to stop her from giving comfort to the friend she’s clearly been missing.

“I was so scared,” the small, pale girl whispers, and her arms wrap tightly around Ashley, and a shiver runs through her.

“You’re okay,” Ash whispers, and glances at me, a pleading in her eyes. I nod to my driver, and pull out my phone. Whatever Ashley needs, whatever this building needs? I’m going to make sure they have it. Whatever it takes.

CHAPTER 14

ash

Luca is deeply a man of his word, and if he says something's going to be okay, I believe him even if trusting goes against my best instincts and most hard-earned experiences. But I when I look at Sam now, and there's a sparkle in her eye, a glow in her cheeks, that I haven't seen since before the attack.

And it's all because Luca, in the space of less than a week, has found her a new place to live, in a small apartment in his building, several floors below ours, but close by. That's just an insurance policy, he murmurs to me, as I coax Sam (and Herbie in a brand new carrying case that he yowls his displeasure about) out of our old building, and into the new one.

This isn't to say that he's ignored our old neighbors either. He's promised me he'll find a solution to it, although I don't know what he could do other than outright making an offer of purchase on the building, which seems insane. It must be valued in the millions for the land alone. I could never... ever... ask that of him. Not even for blind Mrs. Polcha, who ratted me out but I still care about. Or Mr. Gomez, the elderly man whose kids have moved him into the city, but he has a long-distance relationship with his wife in the countryside, and she's not able to visit.

I blink away tears at the thought of it as I make my way from the bedroom I'm sharing with Luca, to the open living room where Sam's sitting, upstairs for a visit with me while Luca is out on business.

"He's very sweet," Sam says, and I roll my eyes.

“Luca? Sweet? You don’t even know the half of it,” I tell her. It’s been a whirlwind week, and she’s only seen Luca when he’s come down to greet her when picking me up personally at her door, or when he helped her move into her new place.

“Well I guess I’ll have to get to know him better,” she says quietly, with a mischievous smile on her face, “he have any brothers?” I throw a pillow at her and she shrieks in joy, batting it away, and for a moment it’s like we’re kids again.

“I’m just teasing,” she says, and there’s a wistful tone in her voice, “it’s good you have him.” A glance around the room from her tells me she’s thinking about this place, how immense it is, the money of it all, and she wonders how the hell she got here, along for the ride with me.

I’d never have left her behind.

“Are you okay?” I ask, and her head jerks.

“Yes! Of course, Ash, this is just weird. It’s... too much, you know? And you’re like, the boss’ girlfriend, or whatever, and I know he’s bad news, but the good kind of bad news, and what else—”

There’s the clacking of low heels on the marble floor out in the foyer, and Sam goes dead quiet, craning her neck to see. I stiffen, sitting up, when in comes someone I haven’t met before. She’s beautiful, dark skin glowing with a warm peachy blush on her cheeks, her curling, coily hair pulled back into a neat bun. She’s dressed like an upscale business professional, and has the walk of a powerful litigator, on her way to win her client some cases.

I feel scrubby in comparison.

“I’m sorry,” I say with a start, knowing for one that nobody would ever get in here without Luca’s say-so, but also feeling at odd-ends just sitting in his living room. And from the way she looks at me, and her gaze slides over to where Sam is, this newcomer definitely thinks I’m an interloper.

My mouth goes dry.

“Is Luca around?” she asks, her voice deep and warm.

“He’s out,” I reply, and then swallow. The expression on her face? Tells me she already knew that. So why did she come, and why is she asking? “Can I, uh, help you with something? I’m Ash, by the way, and that’s Sam.”

“I’m Dani, his cousin. I’d love a coffee,” she says, turning to Sam. “Can you make us some?” Sam’s mouth guppy-fishes, and she looks at me for help as the new woman sits down, a briefcase landing on the couch cushion beside her.

“I’ll make it,” I say instantly, getting up to preserve Sam’s dignity. She doesn’t even know how to work the simple coffee machine in her apartment, let alone the fancy one up here that Luca practically purrs over in the morning.

Dani, Luca’s cousin.

Of course he has family.

She doesn’t say anything as I busy myself making three coffees. The silence is awkward, and I wonder if she’s going to try and tell me to leave, that her cousin is too good for me, or any of those things. Instead as I turn, tray in my hands with coffees, and some cookies too, because I wasn’t born in a barn.

“I need to talk to you about Luca’s will.”

My steps falter.

“What?”

“His will. His estate. Things that could happen in the future.” She crosses her legs and folds her hands on top of her knee, the perfect image of a cool, calm, respectable woman. “I’m not talking about his business interests, I’m talking about his personal life.”

“I—” my throat feels tight, and I have to set the tray down, because my hands are trembling. I glance at Sam, who doesn’t seem to understand this either. I set the tray down on the coffee table, a smooth white marble oval that sinks right into the thick rug beneath it.

“Thank you,” Dani murmurs, and she looks at me with sparkling eyes. “He did talk to you, about how things are organized, did he not?” She asks, even though she has to know

I have no idea what she's talking about. Her lips part in another smile that reminds me of a viper ready to strike. "Well let's get started then."



THE APARTMENT IS dark hours later when Luca gets home, and I'm still on the couch, surrounded in paperwork, a single candle burning on the coffee table. Sam, and Dani, have long ago left, the only other evidence of them being here beside the mountain of paperwork I'm drowning in, are the coffees by the kitchen sink.

The door in the foyer opens, and I know it's him by the sound of his footsteps. I pull the purloined knitted blanket I'd found tucked in a side table, around me tighter.

"Why are you in the dark?" Luca's voice is amused, but as he turns on the light and comes around the couch to see me, his smile dies on his lips at the look on my face. We say nothing, and he takes in the papers around me. "My Nonna knitted that," he adds quietly, coming to sit next to me, shifting paperwork out of the way. For a moment, I want to stiffen and pull away.

Dani's information download into my brain of everything to do with Luca's business, the far reaches of it, how many people depended on him, that him getting distracted by me and what troubles I was bringing?

I feel hollow.

I've brought danger to him. To him and his business, and I'm putting everyone in his orbit at risk.

But I don't move, because that's not how he's acting toward me. Dani hasn't called him, but as he picks up one sheaf of paper, he lets out a soft sigh.

"My cousin was here."

"It was a pleasure making her acquaintance," I growl, and he gives me a startled smile.

"Calm down, murder-kitten," he teases, and then wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me into him. I resist for a

second, and then melt into him, his warmth, the gentleness in his touch. Dani explained all the ways I could hurt him. My existence, apparently, is a curse on the Greco family name.

I never meant to do any of those things. It's not so much that I'm not good enough for him, as far as Dani's concerned, it's that any woman is not what he needs right now. It's not personal. It's just business.

"Dani is... a gift, in my life, the stable anchor holding everything together. My friend. A good one, and she knows me well," Luca explains. "What was all this?"

"Her reminding me that you don't need extra complications. Like buying property that can't be used for business— Luca, why didn't you tell me you were putting an offer in on my old building?" I'm not even angry about it, I just wish he'd told me. I turn to him, looking up at him, his arm still wrapped around me. His face is so serious, a shadow falling over his face.

"Because I knew you'd argue with me," he replies. "And because you're mine, Ash. I'm not letting you go, no matter what. Anything that troubles you? I'll deal with it."

"I'm bringing in baggage, the guy following me—"

"Whom you won't even tell me the name of," he reminds me but I make an annoyed noise in the back of my throat and he holds up his hand in contrition. "Alright, finish, my apologies."

"He's a big problem, he had enough cash to offer me to solve our housing problem, for everyone in my building, just to spy on you."

"And that's a bad thing for me? You exposed an enemy of mine. I know he exists because of you." He leans down to kiss me, and the press of his warm lips on mine, the scent of his rich cologne on his skin, it threatens to chase away all of my problems.

But they'll be waiting.

"Luca—"

“Everything you’ve said can be solved,” he murmurs, “especially if you let me do this.” He lays me down on the couch, in the blanket his Nonna knitted him, which feels like a certain kind of blasphemy or maybe a blessing, I’m not sure, and kisses me.

His body, hard and hot, is heavy over mine, and I whimper against his lips. I have no idea how he can have this effect on me, how I can crave him so much. Dani came in and ruined my life, and here he is, saving it again.

The worst part is that I can’t blame her for wanting to protect her cousin, and I can’t stop him from making me feel good.

His lips on my throat, his hands pushing up the t-shirt I’m wearing.

I don’t know what will happen.

I don’t know how I’m supposed to do this, or why I’m worth protecting, or all the other questions I have, but he seems to believe that I’m worthy of his time, his—

Oh god, his cock. It’s hard in his suit pants as he rocks his hips into mine, lifting my arms up above my head, pinning them together in one of his big hands.

“You’re a beautiful woman, *mia adora*,” he murmurs, kissing his way down my chest. He’s not a man to take his time, or tease me with little kisses or touches. No, it’s straight to the main event with him, his mouth closing over the hard, swollen tip of my breast, and his teeth graze it, a sharpness that makes me jerk and moan. “I can’t help but take what’s mine.”

He moves to the other nipple, doing the same thing, his free hand reaching down between us. I feel him fumble with the fly of my jeans, and the brush of his knuckles against my belly has my hips jerking, trying to rub against him, wanting more.

“Please,” I whisper, and he hums, nipping my nipple, tugging it and making me cry out.

“Tell me, is there a man alive who would give you more than me?”

His voice is a low, possessive growl, and I can only shake my head, and arch my hips.

“Is there a man alive who wouldn’t want to?” He asks, and that question stuns me silent, as his hand palms over the seam of my jeans, his thumb pressing against me roughly, splitting me open inside my pants so the fabric of my panties rubs into my pussy, making me gasp.

“There isn’t,” he continues, his voice low, as he presses a kiss against my cheek. His breath is hot against my skin. “So I’m going to take you, and please you, and show you the world. Because you deserve it, and you’ve been missing out on what you’re worth.”

“I—”

“Tell me, my little spy,” his hand releases my wrists and his fingers find their way between my thighs, “have you been wet for me, all day?”

“Yes,” I whisper, and his teeth nip my earlobe.

“Good, then it’s been as hard for you as it’s been for me. Let’s not wait a second longer, shall we?” He asks, and then sits up, his fingers curling around the waistband of my jeans. He pulls them, and my underwear, down my hips. I lift them up, and he slides them off, tossing them to the floor. His hand presses against my belly, pushing me back down against the couch.

“Luca—”

“Shhh,” he whispers, and then his hands are spreading my thighs. I look down, at the way his fingers curl against my pale skin, his dark hair, his face in shadow, the glint of his eyes and the curve of his smile as he looks down at me. “Look at this perfect pussy, Ash, look how pretty it is,” he says, and his finger strokes down my folds. I shudder, and gasp, and his smile grows wider.

“You’re going to ruin me,” I say softly, and his eyes flick up to meet mine.

“That’s the idea,” he murmurs, and his fingertip circles around my clit, making it harden and throb, sending sparks of pleasure through me. “To ruin you for any other man. To have you addicted to my touch.”

I can’t reply, and my breath catches in my throat as he leans in.

“Luca,” I manage, but his hands push my thighs wider, and then his lips and tongue are on my clit, and I forget everything else. My fingers curl into the blanket under me, and his tongue strokes down my folds, teasing around the opening of my pussy. I squirm, and he pushes me down, his palm flat against my lower belly, keeping me pinned down.

I’ve never felt anything so good in my entire life, and when his tongue flicks against the little, tight, rise of my clit, a moan escapes me, and my hips jerk. His chuckle has the vibrations sending more pleasure through me, and I try and close my thighs.

“Never hide from me,” he murmurs, his hands on my knees, pushing my legs apart, keeping me spread wide. “Not ever, you belong to me, remember?”

I’m panting, the pressure building in me, the tension.

“Please,” I whimper, and he glances up at me, his dark eyes glinting.

“Say it,” he orders, and I can only shake my head. He licks at my clit again, a slow, teasing flick that makes me gasp, and then another. I can’t take much more. I can feel it building.

“Say. It.” He repeats, and I bite my lip.

“I’m yours,” I whimper, and he growls against me, the rumble of it vibrating through me.

“And mine alone,” he murmurs, and sucks my clit into his mouth. That’s the last straw, the pressure inside me snapping, and I come, hard. His mouth is still on me, and I’m bucking against him, his hands holding my thighs, and he doesn’t let up. He doesn’t stop.

Even when I'm crying his name, begging him, his mouth is still on my pussy, and his fingers are pushing into me, thrusting, the sound of how wet I am filling the air.

He's merciless, and when a second orgasm builds, threatening to overtake me, he doesn't stop.

"I can't!" I cry out, and he chuckles, the vibrations pushing me over the edge. "Luca, please, I can't! Not again!" But I can, and I do. When the third orgasm rips through me, I'm not sure what to do with myself, except cling to him and the couch, the blanket, and pray.

"I love it when you beg me," he purrs, and then stands up, leaving me shaking and gasping, lying on the couch, and walks out of the room. My vision is swimming, but when he returns, I can tell he's naked.

And he's stroking his cock, looking down at me, and smiling.

"Please," I whimper, not sure what I'm asking for, or why. He kneels next to me, his hand still moving over his cock, the thick, swollen head glistening with precum. He reaches down and touches my lips, and I open my mouth, letting him slide his thumb in, the taste of him on my tongue.

"So greedy," he murmurs, and takes his hand away. "Open your mouth wider," he orders, and I obey, because how could I not. He guides his cock between my lips, and I take him into my mouth, sucking and licking at the head of him, and then he lets out a soft grunt, and pushes deeper, until I gag.

My hand presses against his belly, but he's already pulling back, and then thrusting forward again. I have to relax my throat, and swallow him down.

"Fuck," he grunts, and then he's fucking my mouth, his fingers curled around my jaw. "Swallow it all," he growls, and his cock jerks in my mouth, and then cum is flooding my tongue, hot and salty.

I have no choice but to swallow, and he's right there, watching.

“So beautiful,” he groans, and then his cock slides from between my lips, and he leans down, and kisses me. “I’ll never have enough of you,” he whispers, and I kiss him back.

Maybe, just maybe, we can have a happy ending.

Together.

And that thought should scare me, and yet, as he carries me to bed, and makes me come once more with his fingers and his tongue, I can’t help but want it. When he slides inside me, his cock hard and ready to take me, claim me, I want to be his.

More than anything.

But I know, even as he starts falls asleep, his body curved around mine, the steady sound of his breathing in my ear...

That I can’t have it. I don’t deserve it.

His voice in the darkness in the next moment gives me a hope at salvation though.

“*Mia adora*, won’t you tell me?” He asks, stroking my hair, holding me close. “Tell me who it is that set you on me?”

I close my eyes. Maybe I can have this. Maybe I can... if I just tell him...

My words are throaty, raw, when I finally speak, gathering all of my courage to love and be loved, to be worthy of his love,

“He calls himself the Viper...”

CHAPTER 15

luca

My fists slam onto the desk top, and I snarl under my breath as Dani walks into my office, shaking her head, no.

Two weeks ago everything felt like it was slotting into my life perfectly, I just needed the truth from Ashley, and I could eliminate the ghost that was hiding in her shadow. All that changed the moment she said those two words: the Viper. My whole vision went white. I couldn't interrupt her rest, even as I lay in bed, practically vibrating with rage and pain. A name I haven't heard in years. That fucking bastard.

The one who'd orchestrated the beheading of the Greco family. He thought he'd had us, by killing off our patriarchs, my father, his brothers. My eyes closed as I lay next to her, and I waited for dawn, to send my lieutenants, all the people I can trust, to the ends of the earth to hunt him down and bring him to me.

And then I would rip him apart, personally, intimately.

For a man like him? I have all the time in the world.

The fact that his name came out of the mouth of the woman I'm falling for, is nothing short of a fuckin' nightmare. How dare he cause me the most amount of pain, and then deliver me salvation? I'd kill him longer just for the sin of involving himself in something that was bringing me joy, for even thinking he could corrupt her.

And for the last two weeks, it's been one dead end after another. The Viper is a phantom, a shadow, and if there's a clue anywhere, it's not where we can find it.

And all the while, Ashley has been beside herself with worry, and guilt, knowing that she brought all this hell to my feet and not knowing what to do with it. She knows I've been working overtime trying to find her former employer, but she doesn't know why beyond my duty to destroy anything threatening her.

I need to tell her at some point, soon. It just... hasn't been the right time.

Never one to run from a fire, Dani slips into the seat on the other side of my desk, crossing her legs and her arms.

"How long are we going to chase this ghost, Luca?" She asks quietly, a steady seriousness in her eyes.

"As long as it takes." I try not to grit my teeth at her because she should know better than to ask. Why doesn't she want revenge as badly as I do?

"But you know the Viper isn't going to just come out and play with us," she points out. I grit my teeth, and shake my head. "I know this isn't about the business. This is personal, and it's hurting the family. You have a lot to live for. More things to focus on."

"He threatened her," I growl, and Dani sighs. "He showed up, while I was out with her, with no fucking fear of me at all, and looked at her."

"A man looked at your—" She pauses, and curls her lip, like she doesn't want to say it, "Girlfriend."

Fiancee if I have any fucking say about it. I'm seeing my mom tonight, she's flown in from St. Barths just for that reason, to hand over the family stone to me so I can make things official. But I don't want to tell Dani that yet. It's none of her business.

"It's more than that," I hiss, and she narrows her eyes.

"She told you that she saw him," she says slowly, "but has he made any other contact with her?"

"He murdered our fathers!" I roar, getting to my feet, slamming my hands down on the desk again so hard that it

moves forward an inch from the force. Dani sits there, looking unimpressed.

“Are you done having a temper tantrum?” She asks, and then glances at the door. “If not, I can go. Let you scream at the empty air some more, if you’d like. Maybe punch the wall. Throw some shit.” Her lower lip is trembling, and I inhale. Dani has never shown an inch of emotion when it came to our fathers being killed. Not even at—

“Do you not want revenge?” I ask, dropping my tone and my volume to something a little more comfortable. Dani gives me a tight smile.

“Let’s just say before my father died, I would have loved it if someone would have cared about my welfare as much as you do Ashley’s.” Her eyes are shadowed and I take another breath. What she’s not saying could fill a room. How the fuck did I not know about that? I was older than her, how did I not see— She clears her throat. “Revenge is reserved for people you’re sad you lost. Like your dad. It’s in the past. But you need to be smart. This is a vendetta. We’re not going to get anywhere with the Viper if we’re not careful. He’s not just some two-bit thug.”

I nod, and sit down. She’s right. Of course she is. She’s been right about everything since I took the reins of the business, and before.

“He’s a snake,” I mutter under my breath.

“People say the same thing about us,” she says with a delicate yawn, stretching her arms out over her head. “Now, let’s put all of this on hold, and go to dinner. We have a special guest coming, after all.”

“Mom’s here?” I jerk to my feet.

“At the restaurant already,” Dani says, “and waiting. Patiently.” She smiles at me, and gets up, walking out before I can ask her more. “And yes, I had Ashley brought over for the reunion.” My cheeks flush. Sometimes Dani treats me like I’m Ricky, an idiot with no manners. I would have told Ash to meet me there if I had known it would be so soon, after all.



THE RESTAURANT IS one of the nicest in the city, and the staff know my family well. The private room in the back, with the heavy wood paneling, the leather seating, and the view of the water. Mom is already seated, a glass of wine at her elbow, a smile on her face as we enter. Ricky's at her side, rubbing a smudge of lipstick off of her cheek, Matt and Gio looking amused at her greeting the youngest of the family.

But now that I've arrived, my mother's face lights up, and she waves to me, standing.

"Luca," she cries, and her arms wrap tightly around me. My heart warms at the feeling, and I hug her back, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "You're eating well," she says into my ear, running her fingers through my hair, as if to make sure it's all still there. I try not to roll my eyes, as she pulls away from me and turns to Ashley. "You must be Ash," she says, taking Ashley's hands, and then kissing her cheek. "A delight to meet you."

"Likewise," Ash says, her face pink. My mother looks her up and down, and clearly approves. Ash's hair falls down her back in loose waves, small pearls at her ears, elegant without being flashy. My mother doesn't even raise an eyebrow at the demure dark charcoal dress Ash is wearing, the way it hugs her curves but doesn't have too deep of a neckline. At least, not one that makes me want to punch every man in the room just in case they think about looking at her.

"She's perfect," Mom tells me, and then winks, leading Ash to the table, and sitting her down in the seat next to her. Dani and I share a look, and I have to bite back a chuckle.

"Don't you think you should ask what Ashley wants to do?" Ricky asks, his voice a low rumble, and Mom turns to him, raising an eyebrow.

"Since when have I ever asked anyone what they want? I'm the guest of honor, and I'm sure Ash is quite pleased to honor me, aren't you dear."

Ashley doesn't even miss a beat, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Whatever pleases you, Mrs. Greco," she says, the picture-perfect model of a future daughter-in-law.

"I've got this seat," Gio says, giving me a smug look as he slips in beside Ashley on her other side, causing her to laugh. I sit across the table from my beloved, and my mother, trying not to ask why I didn't have all my brothers murdered when I took over the family business.

"You've all gotten so big," Mom sighs, leaning back in her chair, and reaching out, her fingers brushing against each of our faces in turn, Ricky, and then Gio, and then Matt who's given up and grabbed a seat beside Ricky. "And I am ever so proud of you all." Dani sits next to me, and my mother smiles at her, warmth in her eyes. "And the most beautiful flower the Greco's have ever turned out. Look how stunning you are." Dani ducks her head and it feels good to see the love shared.

Ash is taking all of this in, quiet in her own way, as platters of steaming pasta are brought in, and a large salad heaping with cheese and olives. I grab a plate and start loading it up, watching as the waiters bring in a fresh loaf of warm bread, and garlic butter.

"Now, Ashley, you must tell me all about your family," Mom says, patting Ashley on the hand. "And try the shrimp, delicious—" She piles some high on Ashley's plate, angel-hair pasta already coiled on it and ready to receive the large pink shellfish.

"That'd be hard, they're dead," Ricky says— and for a moment silence breaks over the room, and I stiffen, my head jerking up. Ash's gaze, trained on her plate, lifts slowly until she meets mine. Her throat is tight and she smiles, even as Mom launches into a rapid-fire Italian lecture at Ricky, who looks completely unbothered by the whole thing.

"You've always been a tactless oaf," Gio growls, and Ricky just shrugs, helping himself to salad.

"I thought everyone knew."

Ashley gives me a tense, small smile.

“When I was much younger, a long time ago,” she says, “I was raised by my aunt for awhile, and now, well,” she shrugs. “My best friend, Samantha, is pretty much my family now.”

“And your aunt, did you have any other relatives?” Mom asks, her face kind and curious, but not intrusive. “You must have some blood relatives somewhere, perhaps cousins?”

“No,” Ashley says, shaking her head. “It’s just me and Sam now. She took me in when things were rough in my teens, it was just the two of us against the world.” She clears her throat. “But, it’s been great to meet such a big loving family, I don’t know how you all put up with each other,” she says, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she teases. “Especially Ricky.” My mother’s eyes are on me, and I can tell she’s got some thoughts to share with me later. Maybe when I’m asking her for the ring.

He opens his mouth, half-way through chewing, and Matt slaps him on the back of his head.

“Christ, Ricky,” Matt huffs. “This is why you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“No, that’s cause I’ve been doing shit work. Ma, did the patron saint tell you that he had me cleaning out bathrooms—”

“I get my reports, Ricardo,” she says sharply, “and although I love you most out of all your brothers,” she says with a wicked little grin, causing the other three of us to groan. She’s always joked that Ricardo was her favorite, but in truth we know she loves all of us equally. “Although that may be true, I approve of how your brother handled you. And did you learn a lesson from it?”

“If Mrs. Greco had her way,” Dani whispers to Ashley, in a barely-disguised whisper, “all the bad boys in Boston would be writing letters of apology whenever they offed somebody or took over a new piece of territory.”

“Manners go a long way,” Mom says primly. “Ashley, do you want more shrimp?” As if to make a point. I take a sip of wine and sit back with a sigh. “And how are things with your

shipping magnate?” She asks, and Dani glances at me before answering,

“Son is recovering well, we might salvage the deal. It’s still uncertain.”

“Make it certain,” Mom’s eyes go steely as she speaks, and Dani stiffens, and then Mom lifts her glass. “To my family,” she says, and we chorus our agreement, Ashley’s eyes shining with amusement and wonder as her voice chimes in.



“WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY ANYTHING?” I have Ash in my bed, laying on her stomach, the sheet pulled up to the small of her back. The lights from the city seem to glow off of her pale skin, the silken waves of her hair spilling over her shoulders. I want to push them out of the way and lay kisses down her back.

“It’s just another sad story in a string of them. You’re a crime boss, Luca, you can’t tell me that you had an easy upbringing or that your world isn’t layered with tragedy,” her voice is muffled as her face is turned away from me, and I can imagine the way it looks, her eyes sparkling with reflection of the city below. “I did what I had to do in order to survive, and that landed me with a record. Maybe if my aunt hadn’t been such a bitch—” She rolls her shoulders and then turns her head to look at me, pillowing her cheek on her arm. She’s so beautiful. All I want to do is wrap her up and protect her. Getting her best friend-slash-adopted-family moved into my building was part of it. I’ve also got a lock on the property she used to live in. One of my shell companies is buying it and will be managing and maintaining it, ensuring everyone she used to call a neighbor would have safe harbor housing for as long as they liked.

I trace my thumb along the line of her cheekbone, her heart-shaped face relaxing as her eyes slide shut.

“What makes you say all that,” I ask, and she chuckles, one eye popping open in amusement.

“You’re not even thirty-five and you run an entire criminal syndicate. Hello, you clearly either murdered your way to the top or someone important to you died and you inherited the role.” She curls closer to me, the blanket shifting off of her hips. I try not to look at her greedily, eating her up. “Grief and pain put us on the path to meet, so how can I be mad at it? And I don’t even have to explain to your mom why I’ve got a criminal record.” She exhales as she kisses me, tilting her head up to meet mine. The softness of her lips, the warmth, makes me melt.

“You have nothing to explain to anyone,” I murmur, and she smiles against my lips.

“That’s what Dani’s for, isn’t it? She’s your fixer. She’s good at it too.”

“Let’s not talk about anyone else right now, but you and me, got it?” I try to chase the annoyance from my voice, and lay her out. “Arms above your head, *mia adora*.” She shivers under me as I move over her body, but she obediently slides her arms up, her fingers grabbing the headboard. “If you let go, I’ll tie you up.”

The moan that rises from her chest has heat sliding through my body like a bolt of lightning. Her breasts, soft and flatly-rounded against her chest, are already tempting me, her nipples hardening in the cool air of the bedroom.

I am going to chase out every shadow from her eyes tonight, and show her that in the darkness the only thing she needs?

Is me.

CHAPTER 16

ash

“If you even let go of the headboard, I’ll tie you up, spread those thighs of yours, and finger-fuck you until you’re begging me to stop,” Luca’s words light me up right to my core, and I can’t help the way my back arches, and I shiver underneath him, goosebumps rising along my skin. He’s kissing his way down my chest, teasing at the curve of my breast with his tongue, nipping and tugging at the hard tip of my nipple. His other hand wraps around my breast, doing his best to contain it, his rough finger-tips teasing me.

I bite my lower lip to keep some focus, to keep grounded, because already I know I’m slick with want for him. His tongue circles my nipple, before leaving it to chill in the cold air. A shiver rolls through me. The lower he goes, the more of his warmth I lose, but the hotter I get.

“Luca,” I moan, and his fingers gently twist at the hard bud of my other nipple, and I lift my hips up in protest. “Don’t you dare!”

“Keep those hands right where they are,” he purrs, and kisses down my belly. “You’re mine to play with tonight, remember?”

How can I forget? I look at the ceiling above us, the cove recessed ceiling, as his mouth finds a sensitive spot along my ribs and a giggle erupts from between my lips that melts into a moan as his hands curve over my hips.

He’s the only thing that’s ever made me feel like this, like a woman, a desirable, sexy woman, and not just someone who

is lucky to be breathing and surviving. Maybe I was never looking for love, but I'm glad that it found me anyway, because his arms are the only place I ever want to be.

"I'm yours," I moan, and I can feel him smiling against my belly as his mouth drifts down. "And I'll never let go of the headboard."

"I'm going to hold you to that," he promises, and then his mouth is on my pussy, kissing and licking over me. I can't help but rock my hips up, trying to rub against him. His broad shoulders are forcing my legs apart, my thighs squeezing down on them. He isn't doing more than teasing me, flicks up and down where I split apart, not even diving in. He's just taking his time, and it's making the tension inside me wind tighter.

"Luca, please," I whimper, and then he licks up the center of my pussy, and then his tongue flicks my clit once, his fingers splitting me wide to expose me to him. I'm already so wet, and he hums against my flesh.

"You're always so ready for me, and I love it. I want to spend every night showing you how much I love it, mia adora," he says, and I close my eyes tight. I'm already trembling with the need to come, and he's just teasing me, the bastard.

His tongue swirls around my clit, and then he sucks me into his mouth.

"Please!" It doesn't take long for me to get to begging, and I don't care how shameless that makes me, my hands holding fast to the bars of the headboard, their smooth metal under my fingers. He growls against me, and sucks me harder.

My back arches off the bed, and he doesn't stop, sucking and licking and teasing me, and it's too much, too intense. My eyes squeeze shut, and his fingers thrust into me, and that's it, I'm coming, my toes curling, a scream rising in the back of my throat, my fingers digging into the bars of the headboard.

"Good girl," he says, and the praise lights me up, my breath catching even as my body relaxes, back hitting the bed

as I sag onto it. He keeps his fingers inside of me as he moves up my body, catching me in an earthy kiss, the faint salty taste of me on his lips making my face flush.

He uses his fingers to guide his cock inside me, and he groans, his eyes fluttering shut, the high planes of his face thrown into relief from the city lights. I try not to think about what he's told me about his family, how I could have been the cause of this, and just... enjoy the moment.

I've never met someone who is so willing to take all my baggage and make it their own, and it scares me and makes me love him even more.

I wrap my legs around his waist, and he pushes deeper, my body tight and wet, clenching down on him. His mouth drops, and his eyes meet mine.

"Mine," he says, and then his hands are under me, on my ass, and he pulls back, his cock sliding out of me, before pushing back in, and he does it again. He's setting a rhythm, and all I can do is cling to the headboard, my knuckles going white, his mouth on mine, and his body, his cock, the way he's claiming me, and making me his, everything, everything is his, and I couldn't ask for anything more.

"Luca," I moan, and he kisses my throat, his teeth scraping my skin.

"Come for me, I'm right behind you," he whispers, and his pace quickens, his breath ragged. "*Mia adora—*" His voice is harsh, but those words will always be sweet, and as I shudder under him, the blinding lights of an orgasm streaking across my vision, I never want him to let me go.



IT'S A STRANGE FEELING, waking up in someone else's house, their bed and feeling like it's yours even though it's not official. In the week since his mother returned to Boston, Luca and I have been inseparable. I've had an eye-opening education into his world, riding quietly beside him in one of the town cars, or beside him in one of his sports cars, his hand curved possessively around my thigh. Sometimes, and my face

burns to think about it, at a stoplight, he'll slip his hand up under my skirt and finger-fuck me slowly until I'm squirming on the seat.

There's no better feeling, or rush, then getting out of the car and going into a meeting or a restaurant, and knowing that he knows exactly how wet he's made me, how much I ache for him, and we're going to do something about it later.

Last night was one of those nights, a dinner out with some 'business associates', his claim obvious to everyone in the room as he kept an arm around me for most of the night.

What they didn't know was under the table, as I toyed with my dessert? His thumb was stroking over my clit, back and forth, as he spoke business with a straight face to a man who'd simply introduced himself as Gary when he first sat down.

Gary, it turned out, was a fine wine dealer from England, and was having trouble getting his product into the States. Gary, also, seemed to be totally oblivious to me nearly coming in my seat while he and Luca hashed out a simple transportation agreement.

I roll over in bed, sitting up and feeling completely luxurious. The day outside is gorgeous, and Luca told me I could take Sam out for lunch if she felt like it.

She's still not very good at getting out of the house, but it helps that we've got Greco bodyguards shadowing us wherever we go, one of which is Ricardo, having finished his punishment stint he's trying to get into his older brother's good graces by spending time watching my back.

My stomach rumbles, even though it's only been an hour since I woke, I'm ready for breakfast. I've put on a little bit of weight since proto-moving in with Luca, the regular access to proper nutrition and high-calorie meals around the clock being too much to resist. It doesn't hurt that his housekeeper makes amazing breakfasts and lunches, and dinner, too, if I'm around.

I'm not going to complain. Not when Luca's gone off to work for a bit. I get up, pulling on some yoga pants and a

loose sweatshirt of Luca's that smells deliciously like him. Out in the living room, the elevator pings softly, and I perk up.

Maybe he's home early for a late breakfast, or an early lunch?

"Luca?" I call out, and silence is the only answer. Silence, and then... footsteps, several sets.

My heart rate speeds up.

There's someone in the apartment. I edge toward the double doors that let out into the living room. Whoever is in the condo, they haven't made a move toward the living room yet, or they'd be visible in the giant open-plan space.

"Ashley?" A familiar voice rings out, and I let out a sigh of a relief.

"Dani?" I ask, poking my head out the doors, and then smile. She's standing in the entry-way, two guys I don't recognize at her back, but they're dressed like the usual bodyguards are.

Something sounds off in the back of my mind...

Dani smiles at me, her expression grim with displeasure. She lifts up a small paper bag.

"Let's go to the bathroom," she says, and my stomach drops.



EVEN THOUGH SHE'S another woman, Dani clearly has no issue man-handling me into the guest bathroom, and considering she's backed up by two beef-a-ronis with guns, I don't have a lot of choices.

She tosses the paper bag at me, and I catch it, half expecting it to explode in my hands. But nothing happens, and she stares at me, a flat expression on her face, her hands crossed over her chest.

"Open it," she demands. My mouth goes dry. I look down, and peel it open with shaking hands. Inside is a... pregnancy test? I stare at it, and then glance up at her.

“What the hell?” I sputter, and her smile is grim.

“Do I need to explain this, or are you smart enough to know how it works?” She cocks her head to the side, seemingly unimpressed with me. Except... there’s no reason for her to be like this to me. What the hell have I ever done to her?

“Why are you being so cruel?” I whisper.

“Because Luca’s got his head stuck so far up his ass he can’t see straight with regards to you,” she says. “And you are going to fix that by giving him a swift reality check. I just got Ricky sorted out from a bad situation, and I don’t have time to fix another one of the Greco brothers.” She jerks her head toward me. “Go ahead.” Behind her, one of the men snicker lightly. My cheeks flush.

“Can’t I have a bit of privacy?” I ask.

“And risk you diluting the sample and screwing up the test? Nah,” Dani says with disinterest. “You were happy enough to get naked in front of a room of strangers. Just think of it as another show.”

A lump forms in my throat, and my cheeks are hot, and red, and my eyes are stinging with unshed tears. I feel like I’m five years old, and have been sent to the principal’s office for something I didn’t do.

“Can I at least have a cup?” I ask, my voice shaking.

“I’ll give you thirty seconds,” she says, glancing at her watch. “If you’re not done by then, I’ll do the honors for you.” That makes me snort, and she glares at me. “If I have to hold you down to get a sample from you, I will,” she growls out, and there’s no laughter in her voice.

“I’m done,” I tell her. “I’m not going to do this.”

“Fine,” she replies, and gestures to the toilet. “We’ll just tie you up until you do.”

Looking at her, I don’t doubt she’s about to make good on that promise. My mind races.

“Why do you think I’m pregnant?” I ask, starting to unbox the pregnancy test, and she shrugs, not replying.

“Do I look like your period tracker? More like, why’d you show up in his world offering him everything he’d ever wanted on a platter? I don’t have time for this. You may never admit it, but I know what you are. The Viper didn’t just plant you in his life for a stupid key-logger. There was always something bigger at play. Why the hell would he have backed off and left you alone once you were safely ensconced in the Greco ivory tower?” She shakes her head. “Just shut the fuck up and get on with it. I’ll even close my eyes. But the boys have to watch.”

I want to scream. This is insane. My period isn’t...

Late.

Except...

It is.

My face, my whole head, feels like it’s been dunked in cold water. My period is late, but I didn’t notice because my body hasn’t been under the usual stress, and the lack of junk food has probably helped, and there’s been a steady supply of high-calorie foods that are actually good for me.

And the fact I’ve been having a lot of sex, with a man who knows his way around a female body, and isn’t careful about how often or enthusiastically he fucks me.

“What’s going on, Ash? Having second thoughts? No matter what, this doesn’t end well for you. If it’s negative, you’re taking a swift exit from his life,” she says, “and if it’s positive, we’ll be taking a little detour first to a street doc I know. Now pee on the damn stick.”

I swallow, and the lump in my throat feels like a boulder. My vision is swimming.

“I thought you said you were closing your eyes,” I say, and she lets out a huff, her eyes falling closed. I glare at the men behind her. They roll their eyes, but look away, closing their eyes as well. God. This is just... beyond.

I can't be pregnant.

I'm not.

My hands are shaking.

I finish up, and the box tells me to wait for ten minutes. I clear my throat, hitching my pajama pants back up.

“Good,” Dani says, opening her eyes, the two goons doing the same, all of them looking at me with intention.

“I'm just gonna go get... changed,” I mutter, and brush past her as she eagerly surges into the bathroom, with more joy on her face at seeing my pee-stick than she has any right to.

The men let me pass by, but not without giving me appraising looks. Assholes. I go to the bedroom, and hurriedly pair out a pair of jeans, shucking my clothes and getting into a warm hoodie. I jam my feet into socks, and a pair of runners, trying to remember the distinct things about the apartment that are important.

Where is the escape route?

“You can come back out,” Dani's voice carries through the condo. “The results are in.”

Fuck.

I can't stay here. I can't wait and find out what the verdict is. I feel like Dani's detour is going to have me marching off the balcony—

The balcony. There's a ladder up to the roof there, normally locked, but not if...

The small red rectangle on the wall by the bedroom doors I didn't notice the first time I was in here, but in a high-rise it makes sense. Not even criminal overlords are exempt from simple safety measures.

“Ashley?” Dani's voice is closer, and I don't even think twice. I yank the small tab on the wall down, and race toward the balcony doors. I'm half-way to them when the fire alarm starts to blare through the whole building, the emergency

lights flashing and flaring in the room. Dani's yell from the hallway is buried under the noise, and I yank open the balcony door, sliding it shut behind me. My feet clang on the ladder, my breath hot in my throat as I heave my body upwards, up onto the flat roof. It's graveled, tiny rocks spitting up under my feet as I run to the other side, unencumbered by silly things like the walls and doors Dani and her goon-thugs will have to contend with downstairs. There's a ceiling hatch, and my fingers snatch at it, lifting it up, praying that she hasn't figured it out and isn't waiting for me just inside. But there's nothing, just an empty chute, and a landing below. My heart is screaming in my ears as I nearly tumble down it ten feet, and then my shoes hit the solid landing.

Run.

Run.

Run.

My thoughts race ahead of me as I take the stairs two and three at a time, bolting down them, the sharp turns dizzying, my whole body feeling like it wants to collapse at any moment.

Run, Ashley.

Run.

RUN.

CHAPTER 17

luca

When the alarms start, my watch beeps with them, letting me know there's a fire at my apartment building. I know, immediately, something's wrong.

When Dani calls thirty seconds later, I pick up on the first ring.

"Luca," she blurts out, "I'm sorry," are the first words out of her mouth, and immediately my heart stops, it drops, and my stomach rolls.

"What the fuck did you do?" I snarl, and she doesn't back down, like she knows I'll tear her a new asshole if she shows any weakness.

"I did what had to be done, or... I thought—" she says, her voice strong, but she growls, at herself maybe. "I think I fucked up. But it had to be done."

"What?"

"There's a fire alarm at your apartment. The sprinklers are going. It's a false alarm, but the whole building has been evacuated." She pauses. "We have the whole condo wired with security cameras, Luca." What she's not saying is freaking me the fuck out. I stalk out of my office, just as Ricky is running toward me.

"What do you need?" He asks immediately, face serious as hell, and I shake my head.

"Stay with me," I snap at him, and turn back to my phone and to Dani. "Tell me what the fuck you did," I demand, and

she's silent, "Dani, I swear to fucking god, if you don't tell me—"

"She's gone, Luca," Dani says, and the whole world stops.

"Who?" I ask, even though I already know. But I want her to say it. My heart feels like it's cracking.

"Ashley," Dani replies, and then I hear something that sounds a lot like a door slamming.

"All the stairwells are clear, the lobby, she's not anywhere," the voice is muffled in the background. I gesture to Ricky, and he takes off, toward the stairs, as Dani keeps talking.

"I thought we had the situation under control," she says.

"What the fuck does that mean," I snarl, walking after Ricky. I hear him on his phone, calling my brothers. I love Dani, she's my cousin, but sometimes she oversteps. And sometimes, I need my brothers to support me. Now is going to be one of those times, I can tell.

"She's been here for weeks with you, and we haven't found a thing, except her laptop, which was pretty much wiped, and a bunch of empty notebooks and random stuff. The Viper hasn't so much as raised his snake-head since she moved in with you—"

"You're not making any sense, Dani," I reply, "tell me what happened, because I'm about three seconds from finding you and choking you. You chased her off?"

"I made her take a test," Dani says, and now's when she falters, like she doesn't know what to do with the information except tell me. "This isn't how you should find out."

She doesn't even need to say the words. She doesn't need to tell me what test.

I'm not fucking stupid.

I've just been fucking blind. My throat goes tight.

"Fuck," I whisper, and Ricky looks back at me, and shakes his head, holding his hand up for me to pause. He's on his

phone, his mouth set in a grim line, and his eyes are wide and shocked. My hand is numb around the phone. “Find her,” I grate the words out, “and if she’s hurt—”

I don’t finish the threat. I just hang up. Ricky’s eyes are bright as I stride across the floor to him, and he holds the door to the stairs open for me.

“Matty and Gio are waiting,” he says, “Matt’s at Cascade, Gio’s got guys all over her old neighborhood, we’ll find her.” He sees it on my face. “Dani overstepped huh?” He shakes his head. “I get it, I’d want to know if I was gonna be an uncle that bad, I guess...” He’s being charitable, underestimating her, not that Dani’s anyone to worry about....

But she puts the family first always, even above and beyond my own happiness.

How many times have I bitchslapped my brothers for not doing the same? And here’s me, having fucked it all up in exactly the same way.

And now... Ashley, and our baby, is going to pay the price. If she’s out there, exposed, thinking she has to hide from Dani or any of the Greco family?

She’s ripe for the Viper snatching her up.

I do the only thing that makes sense as I race down to the car, Ricky hitting the elevator call button over and over again.

I call my mother.



SHE’S NOT AT CASCADE, and nobody from the lowest crew member to my trusted lieutenants have seen her around the neighborhood.

Gio’s men have a few reports of her being seen downtown, near a subway entrance, but none of them are close enough to have seen her clearly, and the CCTV footage he gets from the station shows her heading in the opposite direction to where he’s searching. I grind my teeth, waiting on Newbury Street where my mother told me to meet her.

She arrives, in a green slick pea-coat made of some shiny material that sheds water.

Before I have a chance to open my mouth, she hushes me.

“I will handle Dani,” she says, “and you will mend fences with her once she apologizes properly. There’s a way we do things, and that’s not how it is.” She takes my hand, her small fingers curling around mine. “But that can wait. For now, let’s focus on the task at hand.”

“What, finding Ashley before the Viper snatches her up?” My mother pats me on the hand.

“She’ll be here,” she murmurs, and looks down the street. “Ah, Crecha. There it is. Come.” I follow her, feeling anxious and lost, powerless which is the last thing a man in my position ever likes to feel. I’m not in it a lot. “Normally I would have preferred the ring and wedding to come first, but it wasn’t that way with you either so,” she shrugs and I give her a bewildered look.

“This is not the time to find out that I was born a bastard,” I growl.

“You were not,” she says, and taps me lightly on the face. “But it was a close thing. Come. Inside.” We step up to what looks like a maternity store, and my stomach drops.

“She’s not going to be here, Ma—”

She opens the door anyway, and inside I’m forced to eat my words, because standing by the maternity racks is an anxious looking Ash, fingering the sleeve of some frilly looking dress. She turns as I inhale, the sound of it alerting her that it’s me.

“Luca,” she says, and my heart breaks and is fixed all in the same moment. I cross the room and pull her into my arms.

“Why did you run?” I ask her. “God I am sorry Dani was being such a bitch—”

“Luca, language,” my mother’s sharp words have me shooting her a glare.

“She was.”

“She was looking out for you, that’s a difference. Now, Ashley, dear, what do you think about this? You’d look good in a nice mint green.” I roll my eyes and go back to embracing Ashley. She’s trembling.

“You set off the fire alarm?” I murmur into her hair.

“I thought she was going to shoot me,” she grumbled, and when I look down at her, her eyes are wet with tears. I am going to absolutely pound Dani. If my mother lets me. And if not, I’m not talking to her for six months. She can go through Gio. “And, Luca, the test—”

“We’ll get another one,” I promise, “and then you’ll come home, and we’ll figure out where we go from here.”

“What do you think about looking at strollers?” My mom calls to us, as she heads toward the back of the store. “Too soon?”

“I already know where I’m going. Home. My old place,” Ashley says, pulling back from me, and wiping her eyes. “She’s right. I’m a trap, it all makes sense now. That much money, to plant a key-logger, he wanted me at the club for weeks, months, I think he wanted to dangle me in front of you, but I don’t know why, to make us...”

She looks disgusted.

“To make you want me? I have no idea. I honestly—” Her lower lip trembles and she looks destroyed.

“What a happy family reunion.” The voice cuts through the moment, and a chill runs down my spine. Ashley’s face pales, her cheeks turning white. I’ve heard that voice before, but the accent isn’t quite right. I turn, following Ashley’s line of sight, my whole body going cold.

A handsome face. A scar. I know that face, that voice. From so, so long ago...

“He remembers,” the man says quietly. It’s the Viper, I know, the man who killed my father, my uncles, terrified Ashley.

The man I’m about to plant a bullet in.

He takes a step toward us, his arm, curled against him, finally visible. There's a gun in his hand, aimed at Ashley. She goes very still, not even breathing.

"I should have finished you off when you were younger, and stupider, but there's something poetic, hmm, fun, about this. Was it love, Luca? Did you fall in love?" His eyes flicker with mirth. "Your father knew a little something about separating lovers."

I know that voice. He'd been a lieutenant. Critical to the Greco family, but not related. But I don't know what he's talking about, separating lovers. My heart is hammering in my chest, a roaring in my ears. I reach for my gun, but he's already got a step on me, his gun coming up another inch.

"Don't do anything foolish, son."

"If you think I know what the fuck you're talking about, I don't."

"Why would you? I killed them all before they could confess their sins," he spits, his hand twitching on the gun in a way I do not like. "And now, you'll pay for i—"

A quiet sound of a silenced bullet stops him. He hovers, his eyes going slack, his mouth opening in an 'o', as the front of his shirt darkens and turns red. He sways, sags, and falls to his knees before crumpling in front of the two of us. Ashley inhales, and I glance at her. There's a spatter of blood on her face. Behind the counter, a woman cries quietly, as my mother makes her way between the aisles of clothes.

"We'll have to buy it all," she says with a sigh. "Who knows what you'll need, really, and the rest, well, I can gift it to my other future daughters-in-law." She's got a gun in her hand, silencer on the end of it. I stare at her, wide eyes. "What? You think I was going to let that idiot of a man ruin my life again by stealing my daughter-in-law and grandbaby?" Her face twisted into a sneer. "He was a grunt, an idiot, your father was too nice to him, and he fell in love with a girl from one of the other clans, and decided to double cross us. So, what could be done? Business is business. He took it too personally, and decided murder was the answer to being told

not to go back to his little fuck bunny.” She looks down at the body at her feet, poking him with one of her toes. “Don’t worry about it, I’ll go talk to the cashier.”

She walks away, and Ashley clings to me.

“Your mom is insane and amazing,” she whispers to me. And as my mother goes, pulling out her checkbook, apparently intending on buying the entire store, I get Gio on the phone.

There’s a body that needs to be taken care of. And the fact Ash isn’t all that disturbed to have a man’s blood on her face... I need to talk to her about that. If she really wants this, this life. It’s not glamorous most of the time.

“Did... she mean that, when she said daughter-in-law?” Ash adds, turning her back on the dead body of the Viper behind her, looking up at me. It’s like she has blood freckles. Christ. I reach for my handkerchief.

It’s going to be a long fucking day. But I have the best woman I could ever ask for at my side.

CHAPTER 18

ash

Luca's baby is not going to be a bastard, even if his auntie is a bit of a bitch (who hasn't really apologized but I haven't really talked to Dani one-on-one about it, and I'll deal with her later... after the honeymoon. Much much after.), and he's got three uncles who are trouble-makers, and a murderer for a grandma. We get married a few weeks later, in a quiet celebration on the balcony of our pent-house, Sam walking me down the 'aisle', the sun setting behind us as we kiss. It's the perfect end to scariest time of my life, and the beginning of the best.

"Little spy, *mia adora*," Luca says, holding his hand out to me as we're announced to his family and friends inside as husband and wife. "Welcome to the family."

I'm never letting go.

Ever.

And neither will he.

Not even later that night, when he asks me to hang onto the headboard tight for him again.

"Don't you dare let go."

I'm not planning on it.

"Don't stop," I moan, and he kisses the side of my neck, his hand sliding between our bodies, his cock still buried in me. His finger finds my clit, and his thrusts are slow, steady. He's driving me crazy.

“Not until you come,” he promises, and I arch my back, moaning louder. He’s drawing it out of me, stringing me along, teasing me until I feel like I’m going to shatter from it. Every time I get close to the edge, he draws me back, pulling me down again, making me gasp. I’m writhing, desperate, and pleading with him, but he isn’t so easily swayed to let me have what I want.

“I won’t stop until you come, but I’m not promising to let you come whenever you want,” he taunts me, his words falling like hot stones into my thoughts, shattering me. Just the idea of him holding me back from my orgasm has my body shaking, pleasure right beyond my reach. His fingers squeeze my clit lightly between two knuckles, and that pressure is all I need to break.

The gasp curls out of me, from the deepest part of my chest, as the pleasure washes over me in waves. “Good girl.”

He’s going to drive me mad, and I love it. His cock is rock-hard inside of me, and I look down to where we’re joined, the rippling muscles of his abdomen working hard as he thrusts up inside me.

“*Mia adora*,” he growls the nick-name, “do you think when you’re round and thick, I’ll be able to fuck you like this? Or maybe—” He pulls out of me and I gasp at the loss of his heat, and girth inside me. Before I can protest, he’s flipped me over, my ass in the air.

His cock sinks back into me and I cry out, clutching at the headboard.

“Fuck me,” I beg, “don’t stop, please, oh, god,” and then his hand is under me, on my belly, holding me so I can’t escape him. His hips snap sharply, the wet noise of our bodies meeting, his balls slapping against my pussy, my clit, making me blush. I can’t help myself, and he can’t help himself either.

His fingers find my clit again, rubbing hard, and I can’t, I can’t—

“Don’t you dare come,” he threatens me, going still inside of me, cutting off my pleasure and leaving my cunt tightening

on him desperately.

“Please,” I beg, “I can’t, please, oh—” His fingers circle my clit slowly, but it’s not enough to tip me over the edge.

“The first time I saw, you, I wanted to take you on that stage, let everyone know who owned you,” he says, his voice rough in my ear. His hips snap, and I’m rocking forward, crying out, his cock sinking deeper inside me, stretching me out.

“Luca,” I cry, and his teeth close on my shoulder, and then his fingers are speeding up.

“You were mine,” he says, and thrusts again.

“I was yours,” I agree, and I feel his smile, his hand sliding up to cup my breast, his thumb and forefinger rolling my nipple.

“You danced for me, came on my fingers, you were so beautiful, and now you’re all mine, forever,” he says, biting the side of my neck. It borders on pain, a move of ownership.

“Always,” I breathe, and he kisses the spot.

“Come for me, *mia adora*, you’re all mine, and I’ll take care of you, and our baby,” he whispers, and my eyes slide shut. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you.”

“Oh god,” I whimper, and he rubs my clit, the friction sending sparks through my body. I’m already so wet, so turned on.

“You’re my good girl,” he says, and I can’t hold on any more. My body tightens around his, my thighs pressing down, my back arching. He groans, his cock twitching inside me, his fingers not slowing. He fucks me through the orgasm, until I’m shivering and gasping under him, begging for him to stop, because I can’t handle the over-stimulation.

“Fuck,” he grunts, his thrusts erratic, and he pulls out, the sudden emptiness making me cry out. He comes over my lower back, and ass, his hand working his cock, until he’s satisfied, his come covering my skin, the warmth making me shiver. He kisses my shoulder, and then the back of my neck.

He leaves, the mattress dipping as he shifts off of it, and I hear the tap running in the bathroom. He returns, and I moan as the warmth of a damp hand-towel is draped over my back, wiping down my skin. He slowly cleans me off, washing me to freshness, every inch of me, as I drift there on the sheets, my eyes half-closed.

It feels like a dream, but every bit of it is real.

Luca pulls me to him, tucking my back to his front. He's warm, and solid, his cock still hard and pressed against the cleft of my ass.

"Go to sleep, *mia adora*," he murmurs into my ear. "Dream of me."

"Is there anyone else to dream of?" I ask, words clumsy and tired.

"There had better not be," he growls into my neck, his tongue sliding over the bite mark from earlier. I'll wear it in the morning, and be reminded that I'm his by more than the ring on my finger.

"I'm yours," I whisper, and he lets out a pleased sound, his hand cupping my breast. He nuzzles into my hair.

"Sleep," he commands.

And I do.

But not before I hear him murmur, "you're safe now. With me, you're always safe."

"I love you," I whisper, and his lips are on my skin.

"I love you too, little spy," he replies, his voice low. "I'm never going to let you go."

And I believe him.

CHAPTER 19

luca

Ashley, pregnant with our child, is a vision, and I have a hard time keeping my hands off her, or my cock out of her.

It's been months since we got married, and she's getting bigger and bigger by the day, and the sight of her round belly, and her breasts, makes me want to fuck her all the time. I have to behave myself though, somewhat.

I don't want to hurt the baby, or make Ash feels like she needs to give me anything to keep me happy. Right now is all about her. I've even given Ricky more responsibilities, taking a step back and letting Dani and Gio sort out who does what. Sort of an unofficial paternity leave.

"Is there a reason that you've been sleeping out on the couch?" Ash asks me one morning, coming out of the bedroom in nothing but a robe that has me hard in my sweatpants. Fuck. She's making it difficult for me to leave her the hell alone.

"Just gotta let you be," I say, gesturing toward her. "God knows the first few weeks of your pregnancy were rough enough, I don't want to hurt... you, or..."

"You won't hurt the baby," she tells me, when she catches me eyeing her with barely disguised lust, "and honestly, it's getting hard to walk, and my back aches. The only time I feel any relief is when you're inside me," she whispers, and my groin tightens. She comes next to me and sits on the couch, stretching her arms up above her. "Sex is good for relaxing tense muscles, and I'm... I'm tense." Her eyes flutter shut.

“Are you sure?”

“Fuck me,” she replies, letting her head slide back against the couch cushions, and that’s all the encouragement I need. I’m kneeling between her legs a moment later, her robe untied and hanging open.

Her tits are bigger, her nipples dark, her whole body glowing. She looks amazing, and I can’t help but stare at her, even as I slide my fingers over her thighs, teasing her. She’s already wet, her pussy lips swollen and slick, and when I part them, she’s a flushed, rosy color, and so soft.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I groan, and she squirms, opening her eyes, her mouth curving into a smile.

“Shut up and fuck me,” she tells me, and I grin.

“If you insist,” I murmur, and push her legs back. Her knees are by her ears, and I press her legs together, my cock sliding against her slick folds. “How long have you been aching?” I ask her, as I slide against her, the heat of her cunt making my eyes roll back in my head.

“Too long,” she moans, and her fingers dig into the couch. “Luca, please, I can’t wait,” she begs, and I’m not about to deny her. I slip into her, her cunt tight and hot and slick, and she cries out, her legs tensing.

“God,” I groan, “you’re perfect,” and I can’t help myself, fucking her, her thighs squeezing against the sides of my cock, her pussy lips pressing in on my cock as I thrust into her.

It’s tight, and wet, and the way she’s crying out, begging, moaning, it’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen or heard. She’s got her hand between her legs, fingers rubbing her clit, and it’s so fucking hot I could come just from watching her. But I hold off. I want to get her there first. None of our games where I tease her, I just want to see the release reflected on her face, watch her body relax, and fuck into her as she goes loose and warm around me.

“Come for me, *mia adora*,” I demand, and her eyes open, hazy with pleasure.

“Say it again,” she demands, and I do, leaning over her, my hands on her knees, pushing them back.

“*Mia adora, mi amore,*” I murmur, “come for me, Ashley,” and she does, her eyes shutting, her back arching, and her hand stilling. Her lips part, the look of complete bliss taking me far away from my own body until I am a soul focused on her, her needs, her pleasure. I have never loved and could never love anyone as I love her.

“Fuck, Ashley,” I groan, and come inside of her, her body pulling at me, sucking the come from me until my knees feel weak, and I’m trembling. I release her, her legs flopping down, her breath coming fast and hard, and her eyes are glassy.

I slip out of her and she lets out a little sigh, and I can’t help but smile.

“Better?” I ask her, and she nods, her eyes closing.

“Much,” she murmurs. Her eyes open in start. I’ve got two fingers pushing my cum back inside her, finger fucking her slowly. Her face flushes, and her eyes widen, but she doesn’t ask me to stop.

“Good,” I say, and push my cum deeper into her. “After you can take a nap, and then I’ll have breakfast ready for you. But first... you’ll come for me, I don’t care how fucking tired you are. Spread those thighs, my filthy little spy.”

She does.

And I’m right there, between her legs, ready to eat my fill of her sweet, soaked, pussy.

When we’re both sated, she’s limp, and her eyes are closing. I stand up and carry her to the bed, putting her down and pulling the covers up over her. I tuck them in and kiss her forehead.

“Rest, *mia adora,*” I tell her.

She doesn’t even reply, she’s asleep. I head to the bathroom to clean up and make breakfast, knowing that in a few hours she’ll wake up, ravenous, and I’ll be there to feed her, and whatever else she needs.

I'll always be here.
No matter what.
Because I love her.
Forever.



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LOVE AND DARKNESS,

KT Strange

dirty villain standalone version

LEXI ARCHER

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On the run for my life.

Trying to start over.

I hadn't meant to kill my husband, but I couldn't handle the abuse.

As if that's not bad enough, it turns out the bastard was involved with the mob, and now his mob is after me.

I might have no choice but to turn to a rival mob for safety, but will I be safe there? Body and soul and mind? And what about my heart?

ONE

I step through the front door, the weight of the day clinging to my shoulders like an unwelcome shadow. The click of the lock echoes in the empty hallway, and the scent of vanilla and lavender—Derrick’s favorite scents—wafts through the air. Exhaustion courses through my veins, a relentless reminder of the demanding hours spent unraveling financial puzzles at the accounting firm. Working as a forensic accountant is rewarding, but the hours can be long.

The clock on the wall ticks away, a constant reminder that time is not on my side. He’ll be home soon—my husband. The mere thought of Derrick’s arrival quickens my pulse, urging me to move faster.

In the kitchen, I glance at the clock once more, my heart racing against its ticking hands. Maybe against my better judgment, I’m going to make a new recipe, cabbage roll skillet. Angela, a coworker, gave me. She actually gave it to me years ago, and I saw her briefly in the hallway today, jogging my memory. At one point, we used to be close, hanging out after work, but so much has changed after Derrick and I married.

So much.

Mostly me.

It doesn’t take me long at all to sprawl out the ingredients across the countertop, a chaotic mosaic awaiting transformation. I roll up my sleeves, the cool air of the kitchen a fleeting reprieve from the tension building within me.

With practiced efficiency, I chop vegetables, the rhythmic sound of the knife against the cutting board a soothing cadence. My mind races, calculating not just the dynamics of our night but also the delicate balance of tonight's dinner and his potentially volatile mood.

The sizzle of oil in the pan sends a jolt of urgency through me. I steal glances at the clock, the minutes slipping away like sand through my fingers. The aroma of spices fills the air, an attempt to mask the palpable tension that lingers.

As the final touches come together—lit candles, an already open beer can for him, our plates and silverware ready and waiting—I hear the distant hum of a car engine. Panic sets in, an unwelcome companion. I wipe my hands on a kitchen towel, my eyes flicking toward the clock once more. The seconds tick by, each one amplifying the apprehension that tightens my chest.

The door swings open, and I turn to face him, a forced smile masking the dread beneath. “Welcome home,” I say, my voice a carefully crafted melody, concealing the dissonance within.

Tonight, like every night, I navigate the delicate dance of preparing dinner and catering to my husband's every whim, hoping it will be enough to appease the storm that always follows his entrance.

His entrance sends a shiver down my spine, and I can sense the storm clouds gathering in the set of his jaw. I greet him with another tentative smile, but it goes unnoticed as he brushes past me without a word.

Dinner, carefully prepared in haste, sits on the table like an offering. I watch anxiously as he takes a seat, the tension thickening the air. He chugs down his beer, and I should go and get him another. I'm still standing, after all, but since this is a new meal, I'm eager and hopeful, desperate to see Derrick's reaction.

My husband spears a piece of food with his fork, lifts it to his mouth, and I hold my breath. The room falls silent as he chews, his expression darkening with each passing second.

The taste of dread lingers on my tongue as he abruptly spits the morsel back onto his plate. The metallic clatter of the fork against porcelain is the only sound in the room.

His eyes, cold and accusatory, lock onto mine. “What is this?” he snarls, the question laced with contempt.

Panic claws at my throat, but I swallow it down, mustering a shaky composure. “I tried something new,” I stammer, my voice barely above a whisper. “I thought you might like it. You like cabbage and...”

A harsh laugh escapes him, more a bark than genuine amusement. “Like it? This is garbage.”

Without another word, he pushes the plate away so hard that its contents spill across the table. Stifling a sigh, he stands abruptly, the screech of the chair against the floor amplifying the tension in the room.

“Clean this mess up,” he orders, his tone brooking no argument.

I nod, my eyes trained on the floor rather than the retreating figure as he storms upstairs. The distant sound of water running for the shower follows, a tumultuous symphony to accompany the knot tightening in my stomach. The dining room and the adjoining kitchen, once a haven of hurried activity, now feel stiflingly silent.

After a few quick blinks, I begin the thankless task of clearing the remnants of the failed dinner, my hands moving mechanically. The echo of his dissatisfaction resonates in my ears, a haunting refrain. Tonight, like countless others, I’ll navigate the treacherous aftermath, praying for a reprieve from the storm that rages within these walls.

But why? Why does this have to be my life?

The realization hits me like a thunderclap—a sudden, deafening certainty that this can’t go on. I can’t endure the relentless cycle of fear, anger, and disappointment any longer. My hands tremble as I reach a breaking point, the decision firming like steel in my soul.

It's not as if I haven't thought about this before even if I've been too scared to actually take that next step. I've already squirreled away money, a lifeline carefully woven in secret. Tonight, the threads of escape pull tight, urging me to break free from the suffocating chains that bind me to this life. The bedroom door creaks open, and I slip inside, my heart pounding in my ears.

The bag, packed with essentials and the remnants of a life I once cherished, waits patiently by the closet. I glance at the bed, where he's immersed in the shower, the watery cascade a dull roar against my thoughts. This is it. The last straw.

A newfound resolve steadies my hands as I zip up the bag. I've rehearsed this moment countless times in my mind, the escape plan etched into my consciousness. The weight of the bag feels both daunting and empowering, a physical manifestation of my determination to sever ties.

I cast a fleeting look around the room, taking in the familiar surroundings with a mix of nostalgia and detachment. This chapter of my life is ending, and a fresh one awaits beyond the threshold.

His muffled voice echoes from the bathroom, a reminder of the tumultuous years spent tiptoeing around his unpredictable moods. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the final act.

Leaving the room, I tread softly down the hallway, each step a testament to my newfound strength. The front door beckons, a portal to liberation.

The air in our home hangs heavy with tension, a thick fog of discontent that refuses to dissipate. Suspicion has become a familiar companion, lurking in the shadows of every glance and word exchanged. Tonight, however, feels different. The gnawing unease transforms into a relentless urge to uncover the truth.

His laptop, innocently perched on the kitchen table, becomes the focal point of my investigation. I've never invaded his privacy like this before, but desperation propels

me forward. Maybe I'm paranoid and wrong, and I'll find out something to exonerate him, a reason to stay.

Should I stay for any reason, though?

Probably not.

Still, with trembling hands, I open the lid, a clandestine explorer venturing into uncharted territory.

The screen illuminates, revealing a labyrinth of folders and files. As I navigate through the digital landscape, my heart pounds with trepidation. What am I searching for? The answer eludes me, yet an instinctual pull leads me deeper into the maze.

Then, a folder stands out, inconspicuous among the others, but its very existence sends a chill down my spine. The label is cryptic, a coded language that only insiders understand. I've had to deal with similar hidden accounts on confiscated laptops and hard drives in my line of work, and my husband has never been the imaginative sort. It doesn't take me long to crack the encryption, and my pulse quickens as I open it, revealing a trove of documents, images, and messages that shatter the facade of our seemingly normal life.

The realization dawns on me like a slow-burning revelation, an unraveling truth that casts a sinister hue over my once-beloved illusions. The laptop screen flickers as I delve deeper into the enigmatic folder, each click echoing like the tick of an impending time bomb. My breath catches as I unearth a document that bears the unmistakable mark of the Scarlet Vipers.

Photographs, grainy and incriminating, capture my husband in clandestine meetings with shadowy figures. The room seems to shrink around me as I absorb the undeniable evidence. The man I vowed to spend my life with, the one I thought was battling office politics and mundane challenges, is entangled in a sinister world of crime and deceit.

His involvement in the mafia is laid bare in stark black and white. Photos capture him in clandestine meetings, his face a portrait of secrecy. Financial transactions, coded messages,

and a web of connections trace his dark journey into a world I never fathomed.

The room blurs as the implications crash over me like a tidal wave. The lies, the threats, the constant undercurrent of danger, all orchestrated by the man I thought I knew. The revelation bruises my soul, leaving me breathless and disoriented.

The truth, once elusive, now stares me down with a cruel clarity. My husband is not the person I married. He is a puppet master in a world of shadows, a revelation that both terrifies and liberates. The air, once stifling, now feels charged with a newfound awareness.

My hands tremble, the weight of the truth settling in the pit of my stomach like a heavy stone. Financial transactions, coded messages, and a network of connections reveal a dark web of secrets I never fathomed. The Scarlet Vipers, a name that once held no significance, now permeates every corner of my reality.

The room, once a sanctuary, transforms into a chamber of betrayal. The ticking of the clock mocks my obliviousness, and the world outside the window takes on a surreal quality. The husband I knew, or thought I knew, is an actor in a play of shadows, performing a role I was never meant to witness.

A bitter taste of disillusionment taints my every breath. The lies, the threats, the erratic behavior—all woven together in a sinister tapestry that now unravels before my disbelieving eyes. The Scarlet Vipers, with their venomous influence, have infiltrated the sanctity of my marriage, poisoning it beyond repair.

A muffled gasp escapes my lips, but the sound is drowned in the deafening silence that envelops me. The truth, once elusive, now stands stark and unforgiving. I am no longer the naive wife blissfully ignorant of her husband's secrets. Instead, I am thrust into a reality where the Scarlet Serpents' coils tighten around me, squeezing the last remnants of my shattered illusions. In this moment of revelation, I am left standing on the precipice of a dangerous truth, my world

forever altered by the chilling knowledge that my husband is not who he pretended to be.

The room, once a haven, feels like a cage closing in around me. The truth, however damning, grants me a clarity that demands a decision. I'm at a crossroads, and each path seems fraught with peril.

My eyes linger on the incriminating evidence displayed on the laptop screen, a stark reminder of the dangerous game I've inadvertently become a part of. The Scarlet Vipers, with their insidious presence, are not a force to be underestimated. The knowledge of my husband's involvement in their dark machinations is a double-edged sword, cutting through the illusions but leaving me exposed to the dangers lurking in the shadows.

Fleeing is an option, a desperate bid for freedom from the clutches of a life unraveling at its seams. Yet, the gnawing fear tightens its grip on my heart. He has the resources, the connections, to track me down. The realization dawns like a chilling breeze, carrying with it the harsh truth that escape may only be a temporary reprieve.

I weigh the options, the stakes escalating with each passing moment. To stay is to dance on the precipice of danger, a dangerous game of survival within the confines of a marriage turned sinister. To run is to risk the pursuit. I have to believe that the Scarlet Vipers' network potentially reaches across continents.

The seconds tick away, each heartbeat echoing the urgency of a decision. Can I dare to continue my plan, knowing that danger shadows my every move? The laptop, now a silent witness to my internal turmoil, seems to pulse with the gravity of the choices before me.

With a deep breath, I confront the reality that escaping may be the only option left. The danger within these walls is suffocating, and the shadows cast by the Scarlet Vipers loom ominously. As I gather my essentials, a quiet determination settles within me. The plan to flee takes shape, and with it, the hope for a life beyond the reach of the dangerous game I never

asked to play. The path ahead is uncertain, but in the face of danger, I find a flicker of resilience that propels me toward the unknown.

As I close the laptop, a decision solidifies within me. The secrets have been exposed, and with them, the fragile illusion of normalcy shatters. The journey ahead is uncertain, but armed with the truth, I step into the unknown, my path irrevocably altered by the dark secret I can no longer ignore.

two

The sound of running water ceases, signaling the end of Derrick's shower. I hurry upstairs, ever the dutiful wife, even now, servant more than wife, nearly a slave, and I hold out a fluffy towel.

As the bathroom door creaks open, I find myself enveloped in a moment of tense reflection. The rhythmic patter of droplets falling from his body echoes the steady beat of my racing heart.

He barely holds out his hand, and I have to enter the bathroom to give it to him. Derrick merely stands there, though, fire in his eyes. He's furious about dinner, so I towel him off and then stand back, glancing around the room, each object, once mundane, now a silent witness to the turbulent history we've shared. The mirror reflects a version of me I scarcely recognize—a woman burdened by the weight of secrets, scarred by the relentless dance with danger. The damp air hangs heavy with the residue of steam and unspoken truths.

As Derrick emerges from the bathroom, a shiver courses through me. The scars, both visible and hidden, bear testament to the constant threats and the insidious abuse that have become the fabric of my existence. The walls, if they could speak, would echo with the silent screams of the battles fought within.

I catch a glimpse of him in the mirror, the water droplets I missed clinging to his skin like deceptive pearls. The facade he presents to the world, the one I once bought into, now feels like a mirage. His eyes, cold and indifferent, meet mine in the

reflection, and I am reminded of the danger that lurks beneath the surface.

The silence hangs between us, a taut thread straining against the weight of the unsaid. I clench my fists, the resolve to break free simmering beneath the surface. The scars may run deep, but the spirit within refuses to be extinguished.

Derrick, oblivious to the tempest within, carries on as if nothing has transpired. The illusion of normalcy, a fragile facade, shatters with each step he takes. The bathroom door closes behind him, leaving me alone with the echoes of my contemplation.

The decision looms before me, fueled by a blend of fear and determination. As I prepare to confront the unknown, I draw strength from the resilience forged through enduring the constant threats and abuse. The path ahead is fraught with uncertainty, but with every step, I inch closer to reclaiming the fragments of myself lost in the tumultuous journey with a man who once vowed to protect, but only brought chaos.

The certainty of impending danger causes my heartbeat to skyrocket, and I can't help but feel as if a shadow has been cast over any glimmer of escape. The realization settles like a heavy stone in the pit of my stomach. Fleeing is not just an act of desperation. It's a perilous gambit against a force I may not outrun.

A gnawing fear takes root as I trail behind my husband to our bedroom. Derrick, with his connections to the Scarlet Vipers and the abyss of the criminal underworld, possesses the means to hunt me down. The knowledge of his involvement in the mafia transforms the act of escape into a perilous journey through a labyrinth of shadows.

The walls of our home, once confining, now offer a precarious shield against the unknown dangers that lurk beyond. The clock ticks, each passing second a reminder that time is slipping away. Fleeing may be my only chance at liberation, yet the haunting certainty that he will pursue me lingers like a specter.

The weight of the decision bears down on me, and I grapple with the realization that escape may not guarantee safety. If I run, I become a fugitive in a game where the stakes are not just my freedom but my very existence. The danger, once confined within the walls of our shared life, now extends its reach into the uncharted territory of a world that has become hostile and unfamiliar.

A surge of vulnerability washes over me, a realization that the escape plan is not a guaranteed reprieve but a plunge into an abyss of uncertainty. The scars of past abuses and threats converge with the impending danger, creating a volatile cocktail of fear and determination.

As I stand on the precipice of escape, the decision looms like a looming storm. Fleeing may lead to freedom, but the haunting specter of retribution shadows my every step. In this moment of precarious contemplation, I must summon the courage to confront the unknown and accept the risks that come with untangling myself from a life that has become synonymous with danger.

Caught in the suffocating crossfire of danger and uncertainty, deep down, I know I'm trapped in a paradoxical existence where neither escape nor enduring seems tenable. Leaving, with the ominous threat of pursuit, looms like a daunting precipice, while staying condemns me to the relentless cycle of abuse and fear.

The walls of our home, once a sanctuary, now feel like the confining bars of a cage. Each room echoes with the weight of unspoken truths and the residue of torment endured. The decision not to leave becomes a silent surrender, a choice to endure a life defined by peril and deception.

Yet, the prospect of staying is equally unbearable. The air in the room thickens with the tangible tension of impending danger. The scars, both seen and unseen, testify to the toll of enduring the unrelenting storm within these walls. The promise of normalcy has been shattered, replaced by a sinister reality where every step is fraught with peril.

I find myself at a crossroads, torn between the urgency to escape and the paralyzing fear of what lies beyond. The choice, a daunting balancing act between two unenviable fates, is agonizing. I am neither free nor bound, existing in the limbo of a life that has spiraled out of control.

The realization settles like an unshakable truth. I can't leave, but I can't stay. The dichotomy is a relentless echo, drowning out reason and drowning me in the overwhelming uncertainty of the present moment. In the stillness of the room, I grapple with the weight of this paradox, a prisoner to circumstances that have rendered both escape and endurance equally harrowing.

"I deserve surf and turf," he commands once he's dressed, the entitlement in his tone a cruel reminder of the power dynamics that have held me captive for too long. "You fucked up dinner, and I bring home the bacon. Go out, buy me steak and lobster. Hurry up about it too. I want a blow job before the game starts."

The demands, relentless and demeaning, reverberate through the air as Derrick's voice cuts through the room. The request for surf and turf, a cruel reminder of the stark contrast between the opulence he expects and the turmoil within, becomes the catalyst for a long-suppressed rebellion.

The simmering frustration, fueled by years of enduring his abuse, erupts into a surge of defiance. I feel a spark within, an ember of self-preservation that refuses to be extinguished. In the face of his demeaning demands, something within me snaps. The weight of the past injustices, the constant threats, and the revelation of his involvement with the Scarlet Vipers converge into a breaking point. The demand, once routine, transforms into an unbearable imposition.

With a newfound strength, I meet his gaze, the defiance burning bright in my eyes. "No," I say, the word carrying a weight of rebellion. "I won't do it."

Derrick's eyes narrow, his temper flaring at the audacity of my refusal. The room crackles with tension as I stand my ground.

“I won’t be your servant anymore,” I spit out, the words ringing out like a declaration of independence. The shackles of subservience, forged through years of fear, begin to splinter.

In the face of his stunned silence, I turn away, the weight of defiance guiding me toward a sense of agency I thought long lost. The decision to take matters into my own hands is a quiet rebellion, but in this moment of breaking, I reclaim a fragment of control over a life that has been dictated by someone else’s whims for far too long.

Derrick grabs my hair and the back of my neck, forcing me down to the ground. I struggle against him as he undoes his zipper, and when he jams his cock into my mouth, I’m biting him before I can even think about whether or not I should.

The sound of his shrill girlish cry echoes in my ear as he kicks me down, but I’m scrambling up to my feet as he hunches over, and I spy a box I’ve never noticed before in his closet. It’s black and decently sized.

I rush past him, but Derrick trips me, yanking on my ankle. I kick or try to and am shocked when he releases me so much that I end up kicking again, connecting with his forehead. Derrick howls, and I’m on my feet again. My fingers close on the box. It’s heavy, and I swing it as I turn around, connecting with Derrick’s stomach.

He yowls and tries to yank the box from me, but I won’t let go of it even as he forces me backward, into his closet. His clothes cover me, and I scream and kick, trying to lift the box so I can kick him higher.

And I do. I land a kick on his hardened cock, and he releases the box. As he staggers back, I’m so shocked by the lack of tug-of-war that I drop the box. It falls open.

And something falls out.

A gun.

Our gazes meet, and we both stare at it. Immediately, we both grapple for it, but when Derrick rips it away, I grab the box and whip it at his head. He ducks and fires.

Only the gun doesn’t fire.

He mutters a curse, and I start to grab his shoes and throw them at him as hard as I can. When I run out of shoes, I scramble to pick them back up again from the floor, and then I grab the box.

Derrick's trying to go back for the box too, but I reach it first, and I slam it against the back of his head. It's heavy and growing heavier with each slam, but I keep hitting him, keep hitting him, keep hitting him...

Blood sprays from a head wound, and Derrick slumps to the ground.

My hands shake as I drop the box to the ground. Bullets fall out. Either the gun hadn't been loaded or he had the safety on or something. I don't know. I'm not a gun person, and I hadn't known Derrick to be one either.

I hadn't thought my husband would be a mobster.

I hadn't thought I would be a killer either, yet here we are.

three

My bloody hands terrify me. I don't know what to do.

The metallic tang of blood lingers in the air, a visceral reminder of the irreversible act I've committed. The weight of my actions settles heavily on my conscience, and the sight of my hands, stained crimson, sends a shiver down my spine. In this surreal moment, I find myself at a crossroads, caught between the horror of what I've done and the urgency to navigate the aftermath.

The room, once a canvas of tension, now bears witness to the aftermath of my desperate act. My hands, still trembling, betray the conflict within, the evidence of a choice made in the crucible of fear and survival. The vivid red against my skin is both a badge of liberation and a haunting reminder of the darkness that has enveloped my life.

The reality of the situation crashes over me, the gravity of my actions sinking in. What do I do now? The question reverberates in my mind like a relentless echo. Panic sets in as I grapple with the consequences, the fear of discovery looming like a storm on the horizon.

The room, bathed in an eerie stillness, becomes a prison of uncertainty. My gaze shifts from my bloodied hands to the surroundings, seeking an answer that eludes me. The walls seem to close in, suffocating me with the weight of the secret I now bear.

The internal conflict rages on – a desperate need to escape the clutches of my past and the paralyzing fear of the unknown

future. As the seconds tick away, I am left standing amidst the aftermath, my bloody hands a visual testament to the desperate measures I've taken.

In this disorienting moment, I am faced with a choice—confront the truth or continue to spiral into the abyss of uncertainty. The decision hangs in the air, a heavy burden that demands resolution, and I stand alone in the silence, grappling with the terrifying reality of the path I've chosen.

The room feels like a vacuum, the air heavy with the weight of what I've done. The realization of ending Derrick's life in self-defense crashes over me like a relentless wave, leaving me gasping for breath in the aftermath of the struggle.

I glance at the lifeless form on the floor, my mind grappling with the stark reality of the act committed. The lines between perpetrator and victim blur in the pool of silence that now engulfs the room. Self-defense, the justification echoing in my thoughts, brings little solace as I confront the knowledge that he was not just my abusive husband but a mobster entangled in a dangerous world.

The gravity of his ties to the Scarlet Vipers settles in, casting a pall over the desperate act that led to his demise. The mob, an entity notorious for vengeance and retribution, will not take kindly to his death. Fear, once the unseen force that governed my actions, now takes on a tangible form as I consider the inevitable repercussions.

The room, once a battleground of survival, now becomes a stage for the internal struggle that unfolds within me. The walls seem to close in, bearing witness to the secrets I now carry. The echo of his threats, the shadow of the mafia world he inhabited, seeps into my thoughts, raising the specter of danger beyond the confines of our home.

In the hushed aftermath, I find myself standing at the crossroads of self-preservation and the ominous inevitability of facing the wrath of the mob. The rationalization of self-defense offers little comfort as the stark truth of the dangerous game I've become a part of emerges.

I glance around, my hands still trembling, the remnants of desperation etched into my being. The decision ahead looms like a shadow, demanding a plan for what comes next. With every passing moment, I grapple not just with the aftermath of a life taken but the treacherous journey that awaits in the wake of his connections to the Scarlet Vipers.

Guilt and fear intertwine, weaving a suffocating tapestry that wraps around my every thought. The weight of taking a life, even in self-defense, clings to my conscience like an unrelenting specter. The room, once a haven of torment, now echoes with the haunting aftermath of my desperate act.

Guilt courses through my veins, an insidious poison that seeps into the cracks of my resolve. The lines between right and wrong blur in the wake of the frenzied struggle. Did I have a choice? Was there another way? The questions echo in my mind, but the answers remain elusive, drowned out by the chorus of remorse that reverberates within.

Fear, however, takes a more immediate hold. The realization that Derrick's ties to the Scarlet Vipers extend beyond his life casts a looming shadow over my every thought. The mob, with its ruthless reputation, becomes a specter that haunts my every step. What have I done? The dread of retribution, not just for his death but for the potential threat I now pose to their secrets, tightens like a noose around my neck.

The room becomes a battleground of conflicting emotions, the silence deafening in its indictment. I glance around, my surroundings now a testament to the chaos within. The walls seem to close in, trapping me in a labyrinth of guilt and fear, with no clear path forward.

Every creak of the floorboards, every distant sound, becomes a harbinger of impending danger. The consequences of my actions loom large, and the urgency to escape this gilded prison intensifies. But where do I run? How do I navigate the treacherous path ahead?

The guilt and fear, like twin demons, cast a pall over my ability to think clearly. In this moment of turmoil, I am left

standing on the precipice of an uncertain future, grappling with the haunting echoes of guilt and the palpable fear of the unknown consequences that await me beyond these walls.

The stark realization settles over me like a heavy shroud. To stay alive, I must disappear. The room, once a witness to the chaos of my desperate act, becomes the staging ground for a decision that carries the weight of survival.

Guilt and fear, potent adversaries, continue to claw at the edges of my consciousness. The knowledge that the Scarlet Vipers, Derrick's mafia connections, will undoubtedly seek retribution for his death propels me into a stark reality – staying in this place is a gamble with my life.

The urgency to disappear intensifies, a silent imperative that drowns out the tumult within. The walls, once confining, now seem to whisper the necessity of escape. I cast a wary glance around the room, the remnants of my former life now standing as witnesses to the irreversible choice I've made.

My hands, still bearing the stains of blood, tremble with a mix of anxiety and determination. The decision to vanish is not just a response to the immediate danger. It's a commitment to sever ties with a past that has become synonymous with fear and abuse.

The path forward is uncertain, obscured by the shadows of the life I'm leaving behind. The thought of disappearing, while daunting, carries a glimmer of hope – a chance to reclaim agency over my destiny, to evade the impending threat, and to carve out a life beyond the reach of the Scarlet Vipers.

In this moment of resolute clarity, I steel myself against the fear and guilt that threaten to immobilize me. Disappearing becomes a necessity, a silent pact with survival that propels me into the unknown. The decision, though laden with uncertainty, is a lifeline extended from the chaos of my past, offering the promise of a future unburdened by the specter of the mafia's vengeance.

The room, tainted by the weight of my actions, now bears witness to a dilemma that eclipses the urgency of escape—what to do with the body? The reality of Derrick's lifeless

form casts a morbid shadow over the room, a stark reminder that my desperate act is far from concluded.

The decision on how to handle the body becomes a crucial juncture in my plan to disappear. Swift action is imperative to evade immediate suspicion and buy precious time to distance myself from the impending danger.

Hiding the body, though fraught with risks, seems like a necessary course of action. The mafia, if they discover Derrick's demise too soon, could intensify their pursuit, leaving me with little chance to vanish undetected. The challenge, however, lies in finding a location secure enough to conceal the remains temporarily.

A cold pragmatism settles in as I consider the options. Perhaps a remote location, away from prying eyes, where the body won't be immediately discovered. The urgency to act is palpable, and the clock ticks as I grapple with the gruesome task at hand.

Carefully, I wrap the body in a large, inconspicuous cloth, minimizing the chances of leaving behind evidence. The process is methodical, driven by a grim determination to execute each step with precision.

As I navigate the challenge of transporting the body, my mind races with thoughts of a secluded spot, a place where the remains can rest undisturbed until I'm far enough away to evade the vengeful reach of the Scarlet Vipers.

The decision, though fraught with moral ambiguity, becomes a calculated move in the dangerous game I've been thrust into. With the body concealed, I steal a last glance at the room, the remnants of my former life fading into the shadows as I embark on a grim journey toward an uncertain future.

The weight of Derrick's lifeless body is a haunting burden as I navigate the stairs, each step an agonizing reminder of the choices that led to this macabre task. The living room, once a space of shared misery, becomes the temporary repository for the secret I carry.

With meticulous care, I conceal the body in a corner, shrouded in darkness. The urgency to escape propels me forward, the minutes ticking away as I return to the bedroom, my hands still stained with the evidence of my desperate act.

The bloodstain on the carpet becomes a damning testament to the violence that unfolded. The task of cleaning, though gruesome, is a necessary step in obscuring the trail that could lead the Scarlet Vipers to my doorstep.

I rummage through the room for cleaning supplies, my hands trembling with a mix of anxiety and determination. The urgency of time bears down on me as I scrub away the crimson stain, each motion calculated to erase any trace of the grim struggle that transpired.

The room, once a battleground, now transforms into a canvas of deception. The echoes of my actions linger, but the cleaned carpet stands as a silent witness to my commitment to disappearing, to navigating the treacherous path ahead undetected.

As the last vestiges of the bloodstain vanish, I steal a moment to catch my breath. The room, now devoid of visible evidence, carries the weight of a secret that could mean the difference between life and death. The clock continues its relentless march, and with the bedroom cleaned, I cast one final glance around, a silent farewell to the life I leave behind.

The challenge ahead remains daunting, but with the body concealed and the evidence expunged, I take a step closer to the precipice of escape. The decision to disappear, though fraught with peril, is now in motion, and the journey toward an uncertain future beckons with each passing second.

Under the shroud of darkness, the weight of the task ahead becomes palpable. Every footstep is measured, every movement deliberate as I gather the remnants of the night's grim events. The gun, its cold metal an unsettling reminder of the desperate struggle, finds its place alongside the spent bullet and the box harboring its deadly contents.

With methodical precision, I return to the living room, where Derrick's lifeless form lies concealed. The body, now an

unwilling accomplice to the web of secrets, is carefully transported to the waiting trunk of the car. The night air, pregnant with secrecy, cloaks my actions as I navigate this macabre task with an eerie calm.

The trunk, a temporary repository for the grim cargo, swallows the burden with a muted thud. As I close it, the weight of the decisions made in the darkened hours settles heavily on my shoulders. The journey ahead, a clandestine mission to dispose of the evidence, unfolds with each cautious step.

The car, a vessel of both escape and uncertainty, becomes my conduit to the shadows. The road stretches before me, an uncharted path leading to a destination known only to the desperate soul seeking refuge from the dangerous world left behind.

As I drive through the night, the tension in the air is thick, the silence of the car echoing with the gravity of the task at hand. The cityscape transforms into a labyrinth of shadows, concealing the grim cargo that rides with me in the trunk.

My destination is a construction site near the gulf. The secluded spot chosen for its ability to hide the truth looms ahead in the darkness. The act of disposal is a grim dance with the unknown, the echoes of guilt and fear accompanying every movement.

With heavy ropes, I tie bundles of bricks to Derrick's body, enough that even once his body bloats with gas during the decomposing process he won't rise to the surface. My hands shake the first few times, but as I continue on, sobbing the entire time, my fingers slowly working surer and surer.

As I carry out the dark task, the weight of the gun, the bullet, the box, and the lifeless body becomes more than a physical essence. It is a burden borne in silence, a secret that binds me to a future forged in the crucible of desperation. The night, witness to my clandestine actions, holds its breath as I navigate the treacherous dance between escape and the ominous shadows that now define my existence.

four

It's a struggle, a Herculean effort, but I manage to roll the brick-laden body into the water. There's hardly a splash, only a few ripples, and it's done, Derrick's body concealed from view hopefully forever.

After the grim task is complete, I find myself standing alone in the quiet aftermath. The echoes of my actions linger, the night bearing witness to a secret that now lies buried in the shadows. As I drive away from the secluded spot, the road ahead stretches into the unknown, a metaphor for the uncertain journey I've embarked upon.

In the solitude of the night, I'm left to contemplate the stark contrast between who I used to be and the person I've become under Derrick's oppressive shadow. Memories of a life once filled with joy and passions flicker in my mind like distant stars. Friends, hobbies—painting, running, reading, cooking—were all stolen from me by the cruel hand of an abusive marriage.

Derrick's transformation from the sweet, kind gentleman I fell in love with during our courtship to the malicious figure he became after our wedding reception is a chilling revelation. The stark dichotomy between the two personas is a haunting reminder of the insidious nature of the abuse that unfolded within the confines of our shared life.

As I navigate the night, the weight of the past presses on me. The tendrils of nostalgia intertwine with the grim reality of the present. The joy I once knew, the friendships that

adorned my life like precious gems, were systematically dismantled by Derrick's cruelty.

The road stretches ahead, an uncertain path leading me away from the remnants of a life that became synonymous with fear. The stolen passions, the fragments of happiness buried beneath layers of abuse, beckon like distant beacons in the rearview mirror.

In the quiet reflection of the night, I grapple with the duality of the person I used to be and the survivor I've become. The decision to disappear, though laden with uncertainty, carries the promise of reclaiming the fragments of my former self, stolen away by the darkness that now recedes in the rearview mirror.

As I drive, I debate whether I should make the house look like a crime scene to try to cover up the killing. The consideration rages in my mind as the wheels of the car cut through the night. Creating a crime scene, a macabre tableau to obscure the truth, becomes a desperate consideration in the face of the dangerous game I'm entangled in.

The road ahead stretches like an uncharted path, and with each passing moment, the weight of the decision intensifies. Making the house appear as a crime scene could potentially buy me time, divert attention, and sow confusion among those who might come looking for answers.

The darkened house looms in the distance, a repository of secrets and memories that now stand at the crossroads of my fate. The decision becomes a calculated gamble, a move in the deadly chess game I find myself playing with the Scarlet Vipers.

A surge of adrenaline accompanies the realization that every action holds consequences. Creating a crime scene may obscure the immediate truth, but it also leaves a trail of deception that could unravel under scrutiny.

As I approach the house, the internal debate rages on. The echoes of Derrick's abuse, the threat of the mafia's retribution, and the urgency to vanish all coalesce into the decision that now hangs in the balance.

In the dim glow of the streetlights, I make my choice. The decision to create a crime scene becomes a calculated risk, a desperate move to cloak the truth in the shadows. With a deep breath, I prepare to navigate the labyrinth of deception that awaits within the walls of the house, the stakes escalating with each step into the unknown.

The house, once a place of torment, slowly transforms into a stage for a carefully orchestrated illusion. With methodical precision, I set about creating a crime scene, a dark theater where the lines between reality and deception blur.

The room where the desperate struggle took place becomes the focal point. I scatter items strategically, mimicking the chaos of a violent encounter. The faint echo of footsteps, muffled voices, and the imagined clatter of a desperate struggle fill the air as I choreograph the grim tableau.

The bloodstain on the carpet up in the bedroom, now scrubbed clean, serves as a canvas for my dark artistry. I replicate the semblance of violence with a practiced hand, each detail calculated to deceive. The room becomes a testament to a crime that never truly occurred, an intricate web of lies spun with the hope of diverting attention.

Careful not to leave any evidence that the crime scene is planted, I navigate the house with a meticulous eye. The illusion must be seamless, a mirage that withstands scrutiny. Every step is taken with a blend of desperation and determination, aware that the consequences of discovery are dire.

As I complete the fabrication, a haunting quiet settles over the house. The deceptive calm mirrors the tumult within, the weight of the choices made tonight pressing down on me. The decision to create a crime scene is a gamble, a calculated move in the perilous game I now find myself playing.

With a final glance at the illusion I've woven, I steal away from the house. The night, a silent witness to the deception, unfolds with the promise of obscurity. The road ahead is uncertain, but for now, the carefully crafted crime scene stands

as a shield against the looming threat, buying me precious time to disappear into the shadows.

The wheels of the car eat up the miles, carrying me away from the house, the crime scene, and the life that once held me captive. The road, stretching before me like an uncertain path, becomes the conduit to freedom, and with each passing mile, the weight of the past begins to loosen its grip.

As I drive into the night, the city lights gradually fade into the rearview mirror, leaving behind the echoes of a life defined by fear and desperation. The decision to go on the run, to leave behind the remnants of an existence entangled with the Scarlet Vipers and the specter of Derrick's abuse, is a leap into the unknown.

The car becomes a vessel of escape, hurtling through the darkness toward a destination undefined. The night air, cool and liberating, carries with it the promise of a future unburdened by the shadows of the past.

In the silence of the car, the internal tumult begins to settle. The cityscape gives way to open roads and distant horizons, symbolic of the blank canvas upon which I can now rewrite the narrative of my life.

As I leave the familiar behind, a mixture of fear and exhilaration courses through me. The decision to go on the run is a choice for survival, a desperate bid to outrun the consequences of my actions and the looming threat of the Scarlet Vipers.

The road becomes a metaphor for the journey toward reclaiming agency over my own destiny. The darkness, once oppressive, now feels like a cloak of anonymity, offering a chance to disappear into the vast expanse of the unknown.

With every passing mile, the ties that bound me to the past unravel. The decision to leave my old life behind is a declaration of independence, a bold step toward a future where the scars of abuse and the specter of the mafia's vengeance no longer dictate my existence.

As the road stretches ahead, I embrace the uncertainty, knowing that the journey to redefine myself and elude the dangers lurking in the shadows is just beginning. The night becomes a canvas upon which I paint the strokes of a new beginning, and with every passing moment, the promise of liberation becomes more tangible.

The decision to cover my tracks becomes a meticulous dance, an intricate ballet of deception and caution. Every step is calculated, every move made with the awareness that the shadows of the past are relentless pursuers. With a sense of urgency and determination, I set out to erase the traces of the life I'm leaving behind.

First, I change my appearance, adopting a new identity like shedding old skin. Hair color altered, clothing replaced, and the once familiar features obscured by a carefully chosen disguise. The reflection in the mirror becomes a stranger, a canvas upon which I paint the anonymity needed for the journey ahead.

Next, I sever digital ties, leaving behind a digital ghost in my wake. Social media accounts vanish, online footprints erased, and any traces of my former self meticulously deleted. In the age of surveillance, every keystroke becomes a potential breadcrumb, and I navigate the virtual landscape with a surgeon's precision.

At least I don't need to withdraw cash since I already have what I squirreled away. The digital currency trail must remain cold, and I become a phantom in the financial records, my transactions leaving no discernible path.

The car, once a vessel of escape, is traded for another—a nondescript vehicle that blends seamlessly into the sea of traffic. License plates are switched, a subtle but crucial detail in eluding detection. The road, now a companion in this clandestine journey, stretches before me with the promise of anonymity.

five

Derrick and I lived in Windsor Grove, a suburban community characterized by quiet streets and a facade of normalcy that concealed the darkness within our home. I need to get as far away as possible. I've been sleeping in my new car as I've been trying to leave everything involved with my old life in the dust, and after another short nap that has me waking up with a sore neck, I try to find a new destination to start anew.

After doing a lot of research, I settle on the notion of escaping Havenfield, a city located approximately three hundred miles away. The geographical distance is intentional, providing a sufficient buffer to minimize the risk of unwanted encounters and associations tied to my past life in Windsor Grove.

Havenfield... a refuge from prying eyes. A place where the past can be shed and discarded, left for dead, and the opportunity to start anew can take root. The city lights become a backdrop to the silent transformation as I navigate the unfamiliar terrain, the promise of a fresh beginning beckoning.

The decision to cover my tracks is a commitment to liberation, a strategy to evade the relentless pursuit of those who might seek retribution. The road ahead is uncertain, but with every careful move, I inch closer to the elusive goal of starting anew, leaving the echoes of the old life behind like footprints erased by the passage of time.

Havenfield has a robust job market and affordable living conditions, a place where I can secure employment without drawing unnecessary attention and rebuild a semblance of a

normal life. The choice is made not only for its practicality but also for its distance from the web of connections associated with Derrick and the Scarlet Vipers.

Navigating through the city's outskirts, I scope out neighborhoods that strike a balance between safety and inconspicuousness. A rented apartment in a modest complex becomes the starting point for this new chapter, providing a base to rebuild and redefine.

The city's cultural diversity offers an additional layer of camouflage. Here, different faces and backgrounds are woven into the fabric of everyday life. It's a city where people come and go, and blending into the tapestry becomes an art form.

The decision to choose this new destination is a calculated move to create a fresh start. As I settle into the rhythm of this unfamiliar city, the hope is to carve out a life free from the shackles of the past. The road ahead, though uncertain, is paved with the potential for rebirth, and I approach it with a mix of caution and optimism.

It doesn't take me long at all to secure myself an apartment, and I almost feel as if I can breathe again. My next task will be to find a job, but maybe this will work.

Maybe I'll be safe.

Maybe one day, I can be happy again.



THE NEW APARTMENT in Havenfield is both a refuge and a symbol of the fresh start I've been yearning for. Cooking whatever I want again... Not having steak four nights a week... eating seafood again since Derrick hated anything remotely fishy...

I even find myself smiling again as I go about buying new furniture or going grocery shopping.

I'm starting to feel like myself again.

There is one issue, though. The landlord didn't ask for any identification paperwork, not with my willingness to hand him cash for four months in advance, but a new job will require an

SSN. I suppose I can worry about that once I receive a job offer.

First, though, I need to line up job interviews.

Before I picked Havenfield, I ensured there were job openings in my field, so it doesn't take me long to apply to several. The biggest issue is that I can't use my former employer as a reference.

A twinge of guilt plagues me. After all, I just upped and vanished. I'll never see Angela again. I never did take one bite of her recipe. I had to have been reported as missing by now, Derrick too, unless the Scarlet Vipers have a connection with the police to keep it under wraps from the public. I ditched my old phone in the gulf along with Derrick and his body.

I still have the box, though, and the gun and bullets. Bullets in the gun this time. The gun is always in my purse wherever I go.

There was nothing else in the box, and it's black so you can't see any of the blood on it. Maybe I should've gotten rid of the murder weapon.

Death weapon? It had been self-defense...

My stomach twists into knots. So far, things haven't been too terrible, but I don't feel safe yet.

Maybe I never will.



MY FIRST JOB interview is with Harmony Dynamics, a tech company. It'll be different from my old position, but I need a job. I need roots here.

I need to start over fresh so maybe a new career would be smart.

The job interview, a crucial step in rebuilding my life, offers a glimmer of hope amidst the uncertainty. However, as I arrive at the office, an unsettling sight greets me. A car I've noticed a few times before, a black nondescript, faded black sedan, loiters outside. The only way I recognize it is from the peeling paint and dents that suggest years of wear and tear. It's

an older model that blends into the sea of vehicles on the highway, but I swear I've seen it before.

Anxiety tightens its grip as I try to dismiss the paranoia that creeps in.

You're just nervous about the job interview, Olivia. Get a grip.

I exhale and hurry inside Harmony Dynamics. There's no reason for me to be afraid.

But I am.



I COMPLETE the job interview with a lingering sense of unease, and honestly, I have no idea if “Emma Lawson” will be offered the job. I'm too uptight and nervous, and I'm sure the interviewers picked up on that. Adding that I told them they couldn't talk to my previous employer even though I tried to assure them that it was because I didn't want to risk losing my position there without having another one lined up first, and I doubt they'll want me.

Head down, I exit the office, and immediately, the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I don't want to look over, but I do. Sure enough, the ominous car remains parked there, a persistent presence in my peripheral vision. Fear takes root, and the chilling thought that the Scarlet Vipers may have tracked me down sends shivers down my spine.

With a quickened pace, I hurry to my car and navigate the streets of Havenfield, hyper-aware of my surroundings. The anxiety builds with each turn, the sketchy car seemingly shadowing my every move. Doubt and fear intertwine as I contemplate the possibility that my escape may not be as clandestine as I hoped.

The apartment, once a symbol of sanctuary, now feels like a potential trap. I grapple with the decision to confront the looming threat or to adopt a cloak of invisibility, minimizing any potential confrontation with the mysterious car.

Bypassing the turn for my apartment complex, I keep on driving, trying to lose the tailing car.

As night descends, the paranoia intensifies. The fear of being discovered by the Scarlet Vipers propels me into a state of heightened vigilance. The decision to leave Windsor Grove was meant to be a clean break, but the specter of my past now looms, threatening to shatter the fragile peace I hoped to find in Havenfield.

It takes me almost two hours before I finally manage to lose the car. Nerves have me driving around a bit longer before I feel safe enough to return to my Havenfield apartment.

Dread settles in the pit of my stomach as I unlock my door, hoping to find solace within its walls. The earlier unease from the sketchy car intensifies when I step through the door and into the harsh reality of a ransacked living space.

My heart pounds in my chest as I survey the disarray. Drawers are pulled out, contents strewn across the floor, and personal belongings have been scattered like debris. The once orderly haven has been violated, the sanctity of my refuge shattered.

A sinking feeling takes hold. The intrusion is not just a random act. It's a deliberate violation. Panic threatens to engulf me. The Scarlet Vipers have caught up to me. This is clearly a message, a warning that their reach extends even into the haven I sought to create, and fear gnaws at the edges of my consciousness.

I tread cautiously through the chaos, each step a reminder of the fragility of my newfound anonymity. The decision to lose the mysterious car, a calculated move to evade potential danger, now seems to have led the danger straight to my doorstep.

With a mix of frustration and trepidation, I assess the damage, the violated space reflecting the precariousness of my situation. The road ahead, once paved with the promise of a fresh start, now feels laden with uncertainty. As I grapple with the aftermath of the ransacking, the shadows of the past

threaten to consume the fragile peace I so desperately sought in Havenfield.

Back in Windsor Grove, even before I learned Derrick was a mobster, I read articles about the Scarlet Vipers and their rival mafia group, the Obsidian Shadows.

Sometimes, you need to fight fire with fire.

I can't go to the police. I fucked that up for myself. Maybe if I would've told them the truth about Derrick and what happened... Who knows? Maybe I would've ended up in prison, but I might've been safer there.

But if the Scarlet Vipers are after me, then I'm not safe here in Havenfield.

I'm not going to be safe anywhere.

I have blood on my hands, and they won't hesitate to spill mine.

Or maybe they want something from me.

Either way, I can't stay here.

Returning to Windsor Grove might be a death sentence unless I go there to try to level the playing field.

If I can convince the Obsidian Shadows to protect me...

What can I offer them?

Myself.

For whatever that's worth to them.

I'm a forensic accountant with a keen eye for uncovering financial irregularities. My expertise in navigating complex financial transactions made me an asset in untangling the web of criminal activities, and it just might be a skill the Obsidian Shadows might find useful.

Yes, it's potentially insane, but I've come too far. Whatever the Obsidian Shadows require of me, I will give it to them.

In a desperate bid for survival, I cast aside my reservations and head back to Windsor Grove. It takes me days, and my eyes are dry from constantly watching behind me for that sketchy car or any others that might be following me.

I don't drive near my old house. Of course not. I still have no idea what the word on the street is about Derrick and my disappearance. Instead, the library, with its hushed atmosphere and diverse crowd, becomes my chosen haven for covert research. I hope the public setting will deter any prying eyes from the Scarlet Vipers, allowing me to delve into the shadows without attracting unwanted attention.

Before I secure a laptop to borrow, I head to the bathroom to try to compose myself. Before, as Olivia Delany, Derrick's wife, I had a cascade of chestnut waves.

Now, as Emma Lawson, my hair is a sleek, dark bob. The weariness etched into my features from years of enduring Derrick's abuse is replaced by a determined gaze, reflecting the resilience that comes with the pursuit of a new beginning.

When at home, Derrick demanded that I wore revealing clothes, but when I was at work or going grocery store shopping alone, I had to wear nothing that would make a guy's head turn. Now, I still need nondescript attire to blend into the shadows, mirroring the anonymity I seek—comfortable, unassuming, and devoid of any distinctive features

As I turn my face from side to side, I can't deny that Emma Lawson's countenance carries a blend of caution and

determination. The shadows of the past are hidden beneath a veneer of newfound strength, a necessary facade to navigate the uncertain terrain that lies ahead.

With Derrick, my makeup hadn't been heavy, more of a natural look, but now, I contour heavily to change my face shape, especially my nose. All in all, even though I'm back in my hometown, I'm confident that no one will recognize me.

My voice, though. I'll have to speak differently. Throatier. Deeper. Yes, that'll work.

I leave the bathroom and secure from the librarian a laptop. I sit in a quiet back corner of the library, positioned so no one can approach me unawares.

With cautious steps, I utilize encrypted channels to access hidden forums and networks known only to those entrenched in the criminal underworld. The dim glow of my laptop screen becomes a portal to the clandestine, a gateway into the digital shadows where alliances are forged and secrets exchanged.

Through a carefully crafted digital trail, I reach out to an intermediary associated with the Obsidian Shadows. Cryptic messages and coded phrases serve as the language of this clandestine communication, each keystroke a step further into the murky territory of organized crime.

The library has transformed into a clandestine meeting ground where I navigate the intricate web of secrecy. I am acutely aware of the potential dangers that lurk in the shadows, my gaze flickering between the screen and the surroundings, ensuring my actions remain concealed.

The dim glow of the laptop screen illuminates a world veiled in secrecy as I craft my cryptic messages and coded phrases, navigating the clandestine channels that lead to the Obsidian Shadows.

“Seeking the Shadows where rivalries intertwine. Inquire within the realm of hidden echoes. Let the whispers guide you.”

“Cipher key echoes: Shadows dance at midnight. Confirm the resonance to unveil the obscured path.”

“In the shadow of danger, Scarlet hues threaten. A desperate heart seeks the cloak of Obsidian. Extend a hand, unseen ally.”

“Silhouettes entwined, obscured by the digital veil. Decrypt the echoes to reveal the one who walks in shadow’s embrace.”

“At the crossing of forgotten alleys, where shadows cast no judgment, await the envoys of Obsidian. A meeting shrouded in the echoes of secrecy.”

Each message is a delicate dance of words, carefully chosen to convey intent without explicit revelation. The language is layered with cryptic symbols and hidden meanings, a digital ballet where every keystroke echoes with the weight of trust and potential betrayal. In the silence of the library, the encrypted messages form a bridge between the known and the clandestine, a fragile connection that could either lead to salvation or plunge me deeper into the shadows of uncertainty.



THE NIGHT SHROUDS Havenfield in a cloak of darkness as I navigate the labyrinthine streets, guided by the cryptic directions that lead to the meeting place with someone from the Obsidian Shadows. The streets are familiar yet filled with lurking dangers. The air is charged with anticipation, a mixture of fear and determination echoing in each step I take. The Obsidian Shadows, their presence shrouded in mystery, just might become my allies in this dangerous game. The decision to approach them is a gamble, a risky move that could either offer protection or plunge me deeper into the perilous world of organized crime.

The chosen meeting spot, a forgotten alley obscured by the city’s indifference, becomes the nexus between my desperation and the potential salvation offered by this clandestine alliance. The echoes of my footsteps resonate in the quietude of the night, each one a heartbeat in the dance of shadows.

As I arrive at the designated location, I scan the surroundings with heightened senses, acutely aware of the risk

that accompanies this rendezvous. The dim glow of a lone streetlamp casts elongated shadows, creating an otherworldly ambiance that mirrors the uncertainty of the meeting.

A figure emerges from the darkness, the features obscured by the play of shadows. The air thickens with tension as the clandestine envoy of the Obsidian Shadows steps forward, a silent acknowledgment of the delicate dance we are about to engage in.

The figure emerges from the shadows, their features carefully concealed by a combination of darkness and strategic positioning. A hood obscures their face, casting a veil over any distinguishing characteristics. The dim glow of the lone streetlamp plays tricks with the shadows, offering only fleeting glimpses of the person beneath the shroud.

Their silhouette is nondescript, blending seamlessly into the night. The attire is dark and unassuming, chosen to avoid drawing undue attention. The figure's movements are deliberate, betraying a sense of practiced caution and a familiarity with the clandestine nature of the meeting.

When the figure says nothing, I whisper, "I tread carefully through the shadows, seeking the alliance of the Obsidian Shadows. Are you the envoy who holds the key to that world?"

"Cipher key echoes," the figure says in a low, modulated voice. "Speak your plea, seeker in the shadows. The Obsidian awaits the resonance of your desperation."

"In the shadow of danger, the Scarlet Vipers threaten," I admit nervously, doing my best not to wring my hands. "My heart seeks the cloak of Obsidian. Extend a hand, unseen ally. I plea for your help."

There's silence.

Finally, the figure nods. "Silhouettes entwined, obscured by the digital veil. Your plea echoes in the alley of forgotten whispers. Decrypt the echoes to reveal the one who walks in shadow's embrace."

Conflicted, I glance around, wary, alarmed, hating that our words are still coded, that we can't speak plainly, and even more so, I'm afraid the Obsidian Shadows won't help me.

What then?

"I walk with a past that haunts, seeking refuge in the darkness. Will the Obsidian Shadows offer sanctuary, or do I plunge deeper into an abyss of unforeseen consequences?"

The figure steps backward, into the shadows. The Obsidian listens, the shadows hold secrets. Await our call, seeker. The dance of alliances is delicate. Choose your steps wisely."

And now, I'm alone, left with a sense of both hope and trepidation, as the complexities of the criminal underworld become increasingly entangled in the shadows of the night.

In the aftermath of the clandestine meeting with the figure from the Obsidian Shadows, I find myself suspended in the tension between uncertainty and newfound hope. The alley, once a stage for secretive negotiations, falls back into a cloak of silence, leaving me to grapple with the weight of the alliance forged in the shadows.

I head just to the outskirts of Havenfield. I don't dare stay within the city proper, but if I want the protection of the Obsidian Shadows, I can't leave entirely.

Days pass, each one marked by a heightened awareness of the looming threat from the Scarlet Vipers and the potential salvation offered by the Obsidian Shadows. The digital echoes become my guide as I await the call that could determine the trajectory of my desperate journey.

I didn't give them the number from my burner phone, but I'm sure they'll be able to reach me if they try hard enough.

Maybe I'm paranoid, but I move constantly, never staying in the same place twice. The feeling that eyes are on me at all times never leaves, and I hardly eat. Derrick insisted that I work out lifting weights in our home gym every night. A gym membership when other guys might see me was out of the question. During my hour-long lunch break at work, I would

eat a salad and then run on a treadmill for forty-five minutes. I had to be in shape for him.

Since his death, I've lost some weight. Some muscle mass, probably, and from my lack of appetite.

Finally, almost a week to the minute, my burner phone buzzes. The soft glow of my phone pierces through the dimness of my new car, casting an ethereal light on the uncertainty that permeates the space. With cautious anticipation, I pick up the device.

“Emma Lawson,” the unknown caller says, its voice distorted, low, and enigmatic. “Or should I say Olivia Delaney? Or Olivia Morgan?”

I wince. Morgan is my maiden name. Just how much does the Obsidan Shadows know?

“Seeker in the shadows,” the caller continues, “the Obsidian Shadows beckon. Another rendezvous awaits, a dance in the realm of whispers. Navigate the echoes to the forty-third tree. Midnight.”

The voice, deliberately obscured, holds an air of authority, its cadence hinting at a world where secrets are currency. The message is succinct, a mere fragment in the cryptic language of the underworld, leaving me to decipher the nuances hidden beneath the surface.

As the call concludes, the digital realm becomes my guide once again. I decrypt the echoes, unveiling the covert meeting spot—43rd Willow Street.

The hours stretch like an eternity as I prepare for the rendezvous, a mix of trepidation and determination guiding each step.

The night, with its shadows and unspoken negotiations, unfolds as I navigate the city's labyrinthine streets. The distant chime of midnight becomes a melody, marking the convergence of fate and alliance at the designated location.

The night air carries a sense of tension as I arrive at 43rd Willow Street, the glow of the neon sign above the entrance spelling out, “Golden Tap.” The rhythmic thump of bass and

muted chatter spill out from the bar, blending with the city's ambient sounds.

The Golden Tap presents an unassuming facade that belies the enigmatic world concealed within. The brick exterior, weathered by time and city life, bears the scars of urban existence. A neon sign, bathed in a soft golden glow, marks the entrance, its letters flickering like secrets waiting to be unraveled. The entrance is flanked by discreet windows, their curtains drawn, offering only glimpses of the muted activity within.

The bouncer coughs, and I turn to him.

"Emma Lawson," I murmur, wondering if I should've said my true name.

I hadn't thought about it, but if I can ever go by Olivia again, I will go by Olivia Morgan. Derrick Delaney isn't the only one who died. So did Olivia Delaney.

The bouncer's scrutiny yields a moment of suspense before he gestures for me to follow.

The door swings open, and I step into the lively hum of the bar. The Golden Tap unfolds into a tapestry of dimly lit intrigue. The air is tinged with the warm embrace of aged wood, an ambiance that speaks of countless conversations held in clandestine corners. The bar stretches along one side, adorned with brass accents that catch the glimmer of low-hanging lights. A mosaic of aged photographs and ephemera decorates the walls, each piece telling a story that adds to the mystique.

The main area is punctuated by intimate clusters of tables and booths, the seating arranged to foster discreet conversations. The hum of subdued chatter intermingles with the gentle clink of glasses, creating a melody that resonates through the clandestine corners of the establishment. The air carries the faint aroma of aged spirits, adding to the allure of a place where secrets are shared over drinks.

Navigating through the patrons, the bouncer leads me toward the back of the establishment, where a door marked

with an inconspicuous emblem awaits. The thump of music gradually fades as we enter a dimly lit corridor, the ambiance shifting from the boisterous energy of the bar to the clandestine quietude of the back room.

As the door closes behind me, I find myself in a space detached from the lively pulse of the Golden Tap. The room is dimly lit, revealing an arrangement of shadowed figures, their features concealed in the play of shadows. The air becomes charged with the unspoken negotiations that define this world, and I stand at the threshold, ready to unravel the secrets concealed within the heart of the Golden Tap.

In the back room, where shadows reign supreme, a sense of exclusivity prevails. The lighting is intentionally muted, casting the figures within into a dance of shadows and silhouettes. The air in this secluded space is charged with the unspoken negotiations that define the complex web of alliances and betrayals within the world of organized crime. The Golden Tap, with its unpretentious exterior and rich interior tapestry, stands as a haven for those seeking refuge in the shadows.

What awaits me, though? That remains to be determined.

SEVEN

Seven people come in—four men and three women. Their appearances remain shrouded, their features dancing in the dim light like elusive specters. The air becomes charged with an unspoken tension as the ensemble gathers around me.

One man steps forward, his presence commanding. Dressed in a tailored suit that speaks of authority, his demeanor exudes a sense of quiet power. His voice, low and resonant, cuts through the murmurs of the room as he extends a hand and addresses me.

“Emma Lawson, seeker in the shadows. You find yourself at the nexus of a delicate dance. Trust is earned here. We offer protection, but loyalty is the currency. Are you prepared to walk this path?”

I meet his gaze, the gravity of his words echoing in the quiet room. The figures surrounding us remain cloaked in anonymity, their presence a reminder of the intricate web of alliances and betrayals within the opposing mafia factions.

I open my mouth, but he holds up a hand.

“What happened? Why have you sought our protection?”

I hesitate. I don't think I can lie at this point, and given that someone mentioned my maiden name, I figure they already know the truth. Lies hold no currency in this realm of shadows. The man's gaze remains unwavering, demanding an unfiltered account of the events that have led me to seek the protection of the Obsidian Shadows.

“Derrick, my husband, was a Scarlet Viper. I... I only discovered his affiliation recently. He... He was always abusive, and... I... I killed him. It was self-defense, I swear! Ever since... I tried to move on, to move past this, but the Scarlet Vipers... They’ve been trailing me. They ransacked my apartment even though I moved over three hundred miles away. I don’t think I can escape them, and... They’ll kill me if you won’t...”

The room lingers in a tense silence as he absorbs my revelation. His expression remains inscrutable, a mask that conceals his thoughts. The shadows seem to draw closer, weaving a tapestry of secrets that bind us in this clandestine exchange.

“Do you prefer the name Emma Lawson?” he asks.

I drop my gaze. “Here... I’m Olivia Morgan,” I mumble.

After a measured pause, he says, “I am Leonardo Rossi.”

My eyes widen. He’s their leader. It makes sense with him being the only one to talk to me. He’s a formidable figure with piercing eyes that seem to hold the weight of countless secrets. Not many of the Obsidian Shadows are known to the public aside from him, so I have no idea who the others behind him are.

“Deception is a currency best spent elsewhere, Olivia Morgan. The truth, no matter how brutal, holds weight in our world. You seek protection, and the Obsidian Shadows may offer it, but our loyalty is not to be taken lightly. We will deliberate on your request.”

As Leonardo speaks, the figures in the shadows remain statuesque, their silence amplifying the gravity of the moment. The delicate dance continues, and I find myself suspended between the consequences of truth and the uncertain sanctuary offered by the Obsidian Shadows.

He glances over his shoulder at the others before facing me again. “What can you offer the Obsidian Shadows in return for our sanctuary? Loyalty is a two-way street, and alliances forged in shadows demand reciprocity.”

The gravity of Leonardo's words hangs in the air, prompting me to carefully consider the terms of this precarious agreement.

I take a breath, acutely aware that every word spoken in this dimly lit room could shape the trajectory of my newfound alliance. The negotiation dance unfolds, the terms of our pact veiled in the unspoken agreements that linger in the shadows.

"In exchange for your protection," I say slowly, choosing my words carefully, "I offer my loyalty. My skills in accounting and knowledge of financial networks will be at your disposal. I seek sanctuary from the Scarlet Vipers and, in return, I am willing to contribute to the Obsidian Shadows in whatever capacity you deem fit."

The negotiation is a delicate balance, a dance between vulnerability and strategic positioning. Leonardo Rossi's gaze remains piercing, and I'm certain he's evaluating the sincerity behind my words. The figures in the shadows remain silent sentinels, observers in this clandestine exchange.

"Your offer is noted. Anonymity and safety can be afforded, but loyalty is paramount. Betrayal within our ranks carries severe consequences. Do you pledge your loyalty to the Obsidian Shadows, Olivia Morgan?"

Caught between the threat of the Scarlet Vipers and the enigmatic allure of the Obsidian Shadows, I face a choice—to embrace the alliance and plunge deeper into the world of organized crime or to risk the consequences of standing alone in the shadows. The journey ahead, fraught with peril and uncertainty, becomes a test of my resolve and the lengths to which I'm willing to go for the elusive promise of freedom.

Refusing to blink, I meet his gaze. "I pledge my loyalty. I seek refuge, not conflict. I understand the risks and am willing to abide by the terms of our alliance."

A moment of contemplative silence follows, the negotiation hanging in the balance like a delicate equilibrium. The figures in the shadows remain inscrutable, their roles as silent witnesses to the forging of an alliance between a seeker in the shadows and a mafia shrouded in obsidian.

A subtle shift in the air signals the acknowledgment of a new alliance. Leonardo gestures to the shadows, prompting figures to step forward and reveal their roles within the Obsidian Shadows.

“Olivia, welcome to the realm of shadows. Allow me to introduce those who stand beside you in this clandestine dance.” He motions toward a figure clad in shadows. “Izzy Moretti, a skilled operative. Her expertise in espionage and covert operations makes her an invaluable asset.”

I nod to her. She watches me with a shrewd gaze. Izzy possesses a striking blend of grace and lethality. Her attire reflects practicality, adorned with subtle, dark accents. Her eyes, observant and focused, reveal a depth of experience earned in the covert world.

A towering presence steps forward.

“Vinnie DeLuca, our enforcer,” Leonardo says. “His loyalty is unwavering, ensuring the safety of those under the Obsidian’s protection.”

Vinnie, a towering figure, exudes an intimidating presence. His muscular build and unyielding demeanor suggest an enforcer whose loyalty is as formidable as his physical prowess.

A figure emerges from the shadows with an air of calculated intellect.

“Dante Bianchi, our strategist. His mind navigates the intricate webs of information and strategy that define our world.”

Dante stands with an aura of intellectual acuity, his sharp mind reflected in his piercing gaze. Dressed in attire that blends sophistication with practicality, he emanates a sense of calculated stratagem.

“Cara Vasquez, our Scarlet Vipers turncoat.”

My eyes widen that he would share this knowledge with me.

Cara winks at me and holds up a hand, causing her sleeve to fall back and reveal scars. The resilience in her eyes hints at a determination to forge a different path.

“Rafe Mendez, our enforcer.”

Another enforcer? Rafe’s demeanor exudes a sense of brooding intensity. As I watch, he opens his trench coat, and I gasp. Rafe winks at me. He’s an enforcer for the Scarlet Vipers, but he’s on our side?

“Finally, Sofia Bianchi, our information broker.”

Her attire reflects practicality and discretion, and her eyes hold a depth that hints at the wealth of information she possesses.

“Olivia, meet those who share the shadows with you. Each brings unique skills and perspectives.” Leonardo smiles, the grin a bit grim and harsh. “Everyone, Olivia Morgan has pledged her loyalty to our cause. She brings with her skills that will be of use. Let it be known that her safety is our concern.”

Waving seems a bit awkward, so I just nod to everyone. Leonardo clearly is in charge here. No one else has said a single word.

“Vinnie, ensure our newest ally is provided for,” Leonardo says, his tone commanding. “Find her a secure room and supply everything she needs.”

Vinnie nods in acknowledgment, his imposing figure stepping forward to carry out the directive. His actions reflect both efficiency and a commitment to the safety of those under the Obsidian Shadows’ protection.

Leonardo turns to Dante. “Dante, gather everything from her car and bring it to the room. We need to secure her belongings, and I trust your discretion in this matter.”

Dante, the strategist, acknowledges the task with a subtle nod. His calculated demeanor suggests an ability to navigate the complexities of such endeavors, ensuring that the transition remains discreet and secure.

“There’s not much,” I start to say, but everyone seems to be ignoring me so I fall silent.

Leonardo turns. “Rafe, move her car off the street. Keep it concealed from prying eyes. We cannot afford any unwanted attention.”

Rafe, with his brooding intensity, steps forward to carry out the task. His affiliation with the Scarlet Vipers is now a tool turned against them, as he aligns himself with the Obsidian Shadows to ensure the safety of our clandestine alliance.

As the directives are issued, the room ripples with purposeful movement. Vinnie, Dante, and Rafe disperse into the shadows, their roles defined by the commands of Leo Rossi. The dance of alliances continues, and I find myself at the center of orchestrated movements that could determine the course of my newfound existence within the Obsidian Shadows.

Vinnie leads the way through the labyrinthine corridors of the Golden Tap, his imposing figure moving with a purpose that commands attention. The ambient hum of the bar becomes a distant echo as we step into the muted shadows of the establishment.

Emma, right?” he asks in a low, gravelly voice.

“That’s...” I sigh. “I tried to start over in Havenfield, but they followed me there. Emma was who I wanted to be.”

“Do you still?”

“I want to be myself, but after what I did, is that possible?”

“You’re under the Obsidian’s protection now. Olivia or Emma doesn’t matter. Leo’s not one to take chances, especially with a new face. You play by our rules, and we got your back. Mess with you, they mess with us.”

His words carry a heavy weight, a solemn assurance that echoes with the gravity of the world we now inhabit. Vinnie’s loyalty is palpable, a promise etched in the lines of his unwavering gaze.

He leans in close to me, his voice a low murmur. “I’ve taken hits for the Obsidian. Killed for ‘em. It’s what we do—protect our own. You’re one of us now. No one gets to you without going through me first.”

The shadows seem to close in as Vinnie’s words hang in the air. The commitment to protect is clear, and I become acutely aware of the fine line between safety and the unforgiving dangers that lurk within the world of the Obsidian Shadows. As we navigate the path to my secure room, Vinnie’s presence serves as both a shield and a reminder of the alliances that bind us in this complex dance of shadows.

The corridor stretches ahead in dimly lit solitude as Vinnie leads the way, a silent sentinel in the world of shadows. The echoes of our footsteps resonate through the quiet corridor, a clandestine rhythm that accompanies our journey to the secure room provided by the Obsidian Shadows.

We reach the designated door, and Vinnie stands beside it, a sentinel maintaining vigilance over my newfound sanctuary. The room, concealed from prying eyes, becomes a haven within the shadows—a space where the complexities of the criminal underworld momentarily fade.

He gestures to the door. “This is your place now. Obsidian’s got eyes on the outside, and I’ll be keeping watch here. If you need anything, you know where to find me. We take care of our own.”

His voice carries an unspoken promise, a reassurance that the confines of this room are shielded by the unseen forces of the Obsidian Shadows.

As I enter, the door closes behind me, and the shadows envelop the space, casting a cloak of secrecy over my transient sanctuary.

The room, though humble, bears the mark of careful consideration—a haven within the labyrinthine world of alliances and dangers. At this moment, sheltered by the Obsidian Shadows and guarded by the watchful presence of Vinnie DeLuca, I find myself at the crossroads of a new

existence—one shaped by loyalty, shadows, and the relentless pursuit of survival.

eight

Now alone in the dimly lit room, the weight of my new reality settles in. The air carries a mixture of tension and the promise of sanctuary, the confines of the secure space a temporary respite from the unpredictable currents of the criminal underworld.

I take a moment to assess the room—a utilitarian arrangement that lacks the comforts of familiarity. The shadows cast intricate patterns on the walls, a silent reminder of the complexities that surround me. As I navigate the space, my thoughts turn to the daunting task ahead—navigating the dangerous world I find myself in.

A laptop sits on a small desk, a tool that will become my conduit to the world beyond these walls. As I power it on, the glow of the screen illuminates my face with a pale blue hue. I delve into encrypted channels, seeking information about the Obsidian Shadows, the Scarlet Vipers, and the delicate balance that defines their dynamic.

The door creaks open, and Dante enters, carrying with him the box. He places it on the table with a measured precision. “This is from your car. Is there anything you need in here?”

I open it. There shouldn’t be any secrets here.

All that’s inside are the gun and bullets.

“My husband’s gun,” I mumble.

Dante’s gaze falls on the corner. The bloody corner.

His gaze shifts to me, but instead of asking about the blood, he holds up the gun. “Do you know how to use this?”

I meet his gaze, uncertainty flickering in my eyes. The world of guns and violence is foreign to me, an uncharted territory in the realm of self-preservation.

“No.”

Dante’s response is pragmatic, devoid of judgment. His focus shifts, assessing the situation with a strategic mindset that mirrors the calculated nature of the world we inhabit.

“We’ll fix that,” he said, “but first, are you hungry?”

The question catches me off guard, a reminder of the mundane aspects of life that persist even in the shadows.

Even here, where I’m supposed to be safe, I still don’t have an appetite.

I shake my head, my appetite overridden by the gravity of my circumstances. “Not really.”

Dante’s lips quirk in a brief acknowledgment. Without further words, he gestures for me to follow. The corridor leads to an unexpected destination—a shooting range attached to the bar, a covert space where the echoes of gunfire are drowned by the symphony of the shadows.

As we step into the range, the air becomes charged with the acrid scent of gunpowder. Dante, an experienced guide in this realm, begins the process of acquainting me with the tool that may become a lifeline in the unpredictable world of the Obsidian Shadows. In the dimly lit shooting range, surrounded by the echoes of gunfire, I find myself immersed in a crash course—a reluctant initiation into the language of survival in the shadows.

The shooting range is cloaked in the echoes of muffled gunfire, an ambiance that underscores the gravity of the lesson at hand. Dante, the strategist of the Obsidian Shadows, takes on the role of mentor in this unexpected initiation into the world of firearms.

As I stand there, uncertain and vulnerable, holding the strange pistol Dante gave me to borrow for now instead of using my dead husband's gun, Dante approaches with a silent assurance. His arms encircle me, a subtle yet reassuring gesture that weaves a thread of unexpected comfort amidst the cold steel of the gun and the shadows that envelop us.

I suppress the urge to shy away from his touch and find myself glancing around for Derrick. We stopped attending Christmas parties at his work after a male coworker shook my hand after Derrick introduced us. We never attended any for my job. Derrick was always the possessive type.

But he's not here. He's dead.

Not that I'm safe. If anything, I might be in even more danger now.

"Your stance is crucial," Dante says, his voice low, a measured cadence. "Plant your feet, balance your weight. It's about control, not force."

His words resonate through the range, a steady guide as he positions my body, adjusting the nuances of my stance. The scent of gunpowder hangs in the air, a reminder that in this world, survival often hinges on mastering the tools of self-defense.

Dante's arms, a paradox of strength and gentleness, guide me through the motions. The weight of the gun in my hands becomes a tangible reality, an extension of the newfound knowledge that pulses through my veins. He teaches with a patience that transcends the urgency of our circumstances, each instruction a lifeline in the perilous dance of shadows.

As Dante's arms envelop me, the world of violence and survival converges with an unexpected intimacy. The echoes of gunfire become a rhythmic backdrop to the dance, the boundaries between mentor and mentee blurred in the dimly lit space. In this clandestine initiation, Dante, the strategist of the Obsidian Shadows, imparts not only the art of wielding a gun but also the essence of control, balance, and the silent language of survival in the shadows.

The practice session continues in the dimly lit shooting range, and the echoes of gunfire punctuate the air, a relentless reminder of the dangerous world I now find myself navigating. Dante's guidance remains steady, his instructions a lifeline in this crash course on self-defense.

Yet, amidst the practical lessons, a subtle shift occurs. Dante's touches, initially meant to correct my stance, take on a nuanced quality. His hands linger, deliberate in their movements, and I can't shake the feeling that they transcend the necessities of the lesson. Confusion intertwines with the acrid scent of gunpowder, and a disconcerting mix of emotions courses through me—confusion, worry, anxiety, and fright. I'm not scared of Dante. He's done nothing to make me afraid.

Maybe it's just because of Derrick and everything with him, but I'm not ready for anything romantic.

Nervousness and fear coil in the pit of my stomach, overshadowing the practicalities of the gun lesson. Every touch, every gesture, becomes a question mark in the uncharted territory of my interactions with Dante.

As I navigate the complexities of this unforeseen dynamic, a knot of uncertainty tightens within me. The shadows, once a source of protection, now cast doubt on the boundaries within this clandestine world. In the midst of survival lessons, I grapple not only with the physicality of a gun but with the enigma of Dante's touch—a layer of complexity in a world already teetering on the edge of peril.

The journey back to the room is shrouded in silence, the echoes of gunfire fading into the distance as Dante leads the way. The shadows, once a haven, now seem to close in with an unspoken weight—a weight that lingers in the air as we traverse the corridors of the Golden Tap.

"You're a decent shot, Olivia," Dante says, his voice a low murmur, "but in this world, decent isn't enough. You need to practice every day. It's the only way to stay sharp."

His words hang in the air, carrying with them the implication that survival in this world demands a relentless commitment to the skills he's imparted. The weight of the gun,

both physical and metaphorical, becomes a palpable presence, a reminder that the shadows hold not only protection but the constant threat of danger.

Every day... How did my life come to this?

The room, once a sanctuary, now feels like a cocoon of uncertainty. Dante's gaze, a blend of pragmatism and concern, searches mine for a response. I grapple with the realization that the very skills he's encouraging me to hone may one day be the thin line between life and death.

"It's the reality we live in, Olivia," he says, his tone but gentle yet firm. "In this world, preparation is the key to survival. I'll check on you tomorrow. Make sure you've practiced."

"I... I guess you're right," I say.

"The world isn't kind. You know that better than most. You've... You've done what you needed to do. No one here judges you. We're all behind you."

"Because I killed one of your enemies," I mumble.

I suppress a shudder and cross my arms, wanting to rub them because of the sudden chill that's come over me.

I don't know any of them. Sure, they've taken me in, but they're the mafia. I can't forget that. I'm under their protection, but only so long as I'm useful.

The look on Dante's face suggests he might've had to kill before. I'm not sure what this says about me, but I feel better.

The door closes behind him, leaving me alone in the room with the weight of the gun and the echoes of the lesson. The implications of what lies ahead settle like a heavy shroud. In this clandestine dance of shadows, the echoes of gunfire serve as a constant reminder—a haunting refrain that survival often demands sacrifices and preparations that pierce the veil of normalcy.

I sit on the edge of the bed. I'm spent, but I don't lie down.

A soft knock echoes through the room, and the door creaks open. Rafe stands on the threshold, a figure in shadows,

holding a tray bearing a familiar aroma—lasagna and garlic bread, my favorite. The scent wafts through the room, momentarily eclipsing the weight of the shadows that linger.

“I thought you might be hungry. Leo said you haven’t eaten much.”

As I accept the meal, gratitude mingles with a flicker of curiosity. The precision with which they cater to my preferences raises questions, igniting a spark of suspicion within the shadows.

Have they been watching me all along? Did they monitor Derrick’s every move, and by extension, mine?

The meal, a comforting reminder of normalcy, becomes a paradox—the taste of familiarity mingling with the uncertainty of the world I’ve entered. I wonder if every act of care is merely a facet of their surveillance, a covert dance that began long before I took matters into my own hands.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“It’s superb,” I assure him.

I scarf down the food, barely remembering my manners. As I hand him the empty plate, I offer a grateful smile, yet the shadows of doubt persist. In this world where alliances are forged with concealed intentions, I find myself navigating a labyrinth of uncertainties. The lasagna, once a symbol of comfort, becomes a metaphor for the layers of deception and vigilance that define this clandestine existence within the Obsidian Shadows.

Rest becomes an elusive companion in the confines of the room, shadows dancing on the walls as I toss and turn through the night. The weight of the gun, the echoes of gunfire, and the layers of secrecy intertwine, forming a tapestry of unrest that clings to the edges of my consciousness.

When dawn breaks, painting the room in muted hues, Leonardo Rossi appears, a silent presence, an embodiment of authority within the Obsidian Shadows.

“Olivia, it’s time we discuss your role within the Obsidian Shadows.”

His words, a prelude to a clandestine conversation, cut through the lingering echoes of the night. I sit upright, the sheets tangled in disarray. He’s a mafia leader, so I don’t bother to fumble with the sheets, not wanting to appear childish before him.

“We’ve been monitoring financial movements within the Scarlet Vipers. Your expertise will be invaluable in deciphering their transactions, identifying vulnerabilities, and navigating the financial networks that underpin organized crime.”

As he speaks, the shadows seem to recede, replaced by a roadmap of opportunity within the obscured alleys of white-collar crime. The world of numbers, once my profession, now becomes a tool—a silent weapon wielded within the intricate dance of alliances and rivalries.

“Your role is crucial, Olivia. The Obsidian Shadows thrive in the shadows, and your skills will be the unseen hand that tips the balance in our favor.”

As Leonardo unfolds the intricate tapestry of my new role, I find myself at the nexus of a clandestine alliance—one where numbers, shadows, and survival intertwine in the complex dance orchestrated by the Obsidian Shadows.

“I’ll get straight to work.”

“Good. Breakfast will be brought in shortly, unless you wish to eat with us?”

“Ah, I’ll eat in here,” I murmur.

He eyes me. “You don’t have to work through your meals here.”

“I have to prove my worth,” I protest.

“Commendable, but I hope you will come to realize that I am not Derrick.”

I eye him.

Leonardo lifts his chin. “You can ask. I see the question in your eyes.”

Still, I hesitate.

“Ask or not. It’s up to you,” he grumbles.

Great. I’ve annoyed him, probably offended him. He’s clearly not used to people not jumping to his every demand.

But I had to do that with Derrick, and I don’t want to do that again.

But I need his protection...

“How well did you know Derrick?” I finally ask, my voice a quiet whisper.

“As well as any Scarlet Viper.”

I have no idea how to interpret that, but Leonardo nods to me and leaves the room.

The weight of his instructions lingers—a roadmap of financial intrigue within the underworld of the Obsidian Shadows and their Scarlet Vipers rivals. The room, now a nexus of shadows and secrets, becomes a silent witness to the unfolding complexities of my new role.

With the laptop as my conduit, I delve into the financial movements of the Scarlet Vipers. The screen illuminates the clandestine dance of funds, transactions cloaked in secrecy, and a labyrinth of financial networks underpinning their criminal empire. Each keystroke becomes a step into the shadows, an exploration of the vulnerabilities that could be exploited in the ongoing battle between rival mafias. Leo's a businessman, a kingpin in both the business world and the criminal underworld, but the amount of money the Scarlet Vipers have at their disposal is staggering.

Yet, curiosity and caution intermingle within me. As I navigate the Scarlet Vipers' financial web, an unexpected impulse tugs at my resolve—an urge to peer into the obscured ledgers of the Obsidian Shadows. The dichotomy of loyalty and scrutiny becomes apparent as I breach the sanctity of their financial secrets, the numbers revealing a mirror image of clandestine dealings. I need to know who I'm in bed with now.

The screen displays a convergence of illegal enterprises, a tangle of financial threads that connect both mafias in a dance of shadows. Loyalty to the Obsidian Shadows wrestles with the unsettling revelation that survival in this realm demands careful navigation of alliances, secrets, and the ever-present question of ethical compromise.

The room, once a sanctuary, now becomes a crucible of doubt. The glow of the laptop screen casts an eerie light on the contours of uncertainty that dance within the shadows. As I navigate the financial intricacies of both the Obsidian Shadows and their Scarlet Vipers rivals, a haunting question surfaces—have I truly entered a realm of safety, or am I ensnared in yet another layer of danger?

The echoes of gunfire and the weight of the gun from yesterday, the mentorship of Dante, and the guidance of Leonardo, all become facets of a multifaceted reality. Loyalty,

once a lifeline, now stands juxtaposed against the revelation that survival requires a dance along the precipice of ethical compromise.

The financial transactions on the screen, once symbols of power, now serve as a metaphor for the obscured pathways that define my existence. In this clandestine dance, every move comes with a shadowy undercurrent—a lingering doubt that whispers in the quiet corners of the room.

As the laptop closes, a lingering unease permeates the air. The world beyond the room remains shrouded in uncertainty, and the boundaries between safety and danger blur in the intricate dance of the Obsidian Shadows. In this clandestine realm, I grapple with the realization that discerning truth from deception may be the greatest challenge in a world where shadows both shield and obscure the perilous path that lies ahead.

Not thirty minutes later, Vinnie's arrival punctuates the lingering shadows within the room, a reminder of the delicate balance between protection and restriction. The scent of uncertainty hangs in the air as he offers food, a gesture that straddles the line between care and containment.

“Breakfast is ready. Are you hungry?”

The aroma of pancakes and bacon, once a comforting prospect, now intertwines with the unsettling realization that the boundaries of the room may extend beyond its physical confines.

“Actually, Vinnie, I was thinking of going out for a bit,” I say slowly. “Get some fresh air, you know?”

The request, innocent in its essence, carries with it the weight of a desire to break free from the confined spaces and shadows that envelop me.

But I have a feeling he won't go for it, or else he'll ask Leonardo for permission, and he won't grant it. I scowl.

Sure enough, Vinnie hesitates. “I don't know if that's a good idea, Olivia. We're keeping you safe here.”

A subtle tension lingers in the air, a tug-of-war between the need for safety and the innate longing for freedom.

“Safe or not, Vinnie, I can’t stay cooped up forever. Am I a prisoner here?”

The question, edged with a touch of defiance, hangs in the room—a reflection of the internal struggle against the confinement that safety demands. In the dance of shadows, the boundaries of protection and restriction blur, leaving me to navigate a complex labyrinth where every choice carries implications that ripple through the clandestine existence within the Obsidian Shadows.

When Vinnie doesn’t answer, I lift my chin. I wouldn’t dare talk like this to Derrick, but I’m desperate to try to put him and my past life behind me, and maybe that’s why I find the courage to ask, “Vinnie, are you an enforcer or something? The muscle, I mean?”

The question hangs between us, a bridge connecting the unspoken assumptions and the need for transparency. The room, once a bastion of secrets, becomes a temporary stage for this silent exchange.

“Enforcer more means that I make sure everyone stays in line among other things.”

His admission, though vague, carries with it an undertone of acknowledgment—a subtle unraveling of the mysteries that define his role within the Obsidian Shadows.

“You can come along and make sure I stay in line.” I almost smile at him. “Take me out. I need some fresh air, Vinnie. I can’t be locked up like this. I’ve already been living in my car, driving across the country back and forth... I need to get out.”

I yearn for freedom. It’s the simple truth.

After a long pause, Vinnie gives a reluctant nod. My grin turns genuine at the fact that he’s become an unenthusiastic ally in my quest for a temporary reprieve from the shadows that confine me.

The door creaks open, and a sliver of daylight spills into the room, momentarily dispelling the shadows that have become both sanctuary and confinement. Vinnie leads the way, and soon, we step out into the outside world. Vinnie and I venture to a nearby breakfast place called Sunrise Bistro, a small act of rebellion against the orchestrated confines of the Obsidian Shadows.

Because whether or not I like to admit it, I've been trapped since I learned about Derrick being a Scarlet Viper, since I killed him, since I ran away, since I sought out the help of the Obsidian Shadows against the Scarlet Vipers...

As we settle into a booth, the aroma of coffee and the sounds of clinking dishes surround us, creating an illusion of normalcy within the clandestine dance of our lives. We order the special and coffees, and I try to see if I can maybe learn something more about the mysterious man sitting across from me.

If my life has been reduced to being a drone for the Obsidian Shadows, I might as well learn about them.

I lean forward. "So, Vinnie, tell me something about yourself. What do you enjoy doing when you're not... enforcer-ing?"

I guess you could say my question is a yearning to feel, if only for a moment, like friends sharing a meal rather than members of a clandestine mafia.

Vinnie takes a long pull of his coffee. "I guess I like fishing. It's quiet, you know? Peaceful."

"I've never gone fishing," I say. "Never been on a boat. I have painted fishing boats, though, if that counts."

He grunts. "Counts for what? If painting makes you happy, why shouldn't you?"

"I'm not very good."

"Does it make you happy?"

"Yes, but—"

“No buts. The only way to become a better painter is to keep on painting. Even the greats sucked at first.”

“I don’t think—”

“I’m not sure that the arts require you to think. More feel.” He eyes me. “We might’ve been watching Derrick and other Scarlet Vipers. From what I can tell, Derrick didn’t make you feel much.”

“He didn’t let me feel much,” I whisper.

With Derrick, everything was all about him. The house, the groceries, the clothes, the sex... everything was about what he wanted. He picked the position each time, and I hardly ever came when we fucked. When we dated, sure, I would’ve said we made love, but after we married, it was like a switch went off, and I was just a means for him to get off.

I try to shove all thoughts of my dick of a husband from my mind and focus on the bacon. My poached eggs are perfectly running, and I dip my toast in it. Just the way I like it. Derrick only ever liked his eggs scrambled. I’m never scrambling another egg in my life.

As the breakfast conversation unfolds, we become two individuals seeking solace in the simplicity of shared moments. Who knows? Maybe Vinnie needs a quiet rebellion against the intricacies of the shadows that define his life too. In this transient reprieve, the breakfast place becomes a space where, for a fleeting moment, the distinctions between friends and mafia members blur, offering a glimpse of normalcy within the clandestine dance of the Obsidian Shadows.

Vinnie pays, something I hadn’t even thought of. He just nods to me, probably taking in my parted lips and wide eyes. I have cash, yes, but I don’t want to keep using it, and now that I’m an Obsidian Shadow, I won’t be paid, right? I won’t have an outside job? I won’t be held under lock and key.

We leave and start to walk back toward the bar. The day is bright, but Windsor Grove seems a bit sleepy yet. There’s not a lot of cars about.

Except there, on the corner...

Yes. I recognize those dents.

A car door slams. The driver, dressed inconspicuously, a dark baseball hat covering his face in shadows, starts to head toward us.

The illusion of normalcy crumbles with a sudden and chilling realization, a haunting awareness that the shadows I thought I'd escaped still cling to me. The echoes of footsteps become a disconcerting rhythm, an ominous reminder that the dance of the Scarlet Vipers is relentless.

“We need to go. Now,” I hiss to Vinnie.

The shadows that pursued me have not dissipated. Instead, they have morphed into something more menacing, an unseen threat that echoes the sins of my late husband's organization.

Vinnie glances around. “What's happening?”

“They found me.” My voice is strained. “The Scarlet Vipers.”

The weight of the revelation hangs heavy between us, a reminder that the dance with the shadows is far from over. In this city of obscured alliances and concealed dangers, the pursuit becomes a relentless force—an echo from the past that threatens to shatter the fragile semblance of normalcy I so desperately sought.

Every shadow becomes a potential harbinger of danger. The streets, once a mundane backdrop, transform into a maze where safety is elusive, and the pursuit is relentless. Is there just the one Scarlet Viper after us? Other cars? Others on foot?

Have I doomed Vinnie and I both all in the name of freedom?

ten

As Vinnie and I navigate the labyrinth of the city, a sinister game of cat and mouse unfolds. The echoes of pursuit reverberate through the narrow alleyways, casting a pall of tension over the clandestine dance that has become my life.

Vinnie glances over his shoulder again. “We need to lose them, Olivia.”

His words, a solemn acknowledgment of the danger that shadows our every step, become the backdrop to our desperate flight. The city, once a refuge, transforms into a maze where danger lurks around every corner.

In the harsh light of day, shadows take on a different form, casting their subtle presence amidst the glaring sunlight. While not as pronounced as in the cloak of night, shadows persist, creating a nuanced interplay of light and darkness.

Tall structures cast elongated shadows across the streets, sidewalks, and alleys, providing patches of shade that can be both a refuge and a potential hiding spot. Pedestrians and vehicles moving through the city create fleeting shadows as they traverse the sunlit streets. In the bustling urban environment, these shadows become transient, reflecting the constant ebb and flow of city life.

Overhanging awnings and canopies from shops and buildings create sheltered areas, offering a break from the direct sunlight. These spots can be strategic for evading detection or seeking a momentary respite.

The leaves of trees and other foliage create dappled shadows on the pavement, adding a natural element to the urban landscape. Parks and green spaces become a contrasting canvas of sunlight and shade.

Street furniture, lamp posts, and various urban objects cast shadows, contributing to the intricate patterns that decorate the cityscape. These elements can provide cover or obstacles in the ongoing pursuit.

While the shadows in the daytime lack the ominous depth associated with the night, they become a dynamic part of the environment. Even the seemingly mundane shadows take on significance, serving as both allies and potential betrayers in the relentless dance of survival within the city's labyrinth.

As we weave through the shadows, the neon glow of the city offers no solace. Each turn, each alley becomes a potential trap, and the echoes of footsteps intensify—a relentless pursuit that refuses to be shaken off.

“Should we go back to the Golden Tap?” I ask.

“Trust me,” he snaps, grabbing my hand and yanking me down a side street.

He's panicking, which only increases my own anxiety.

“We can't let them catch us. I need to disappear, Vinnie.”

The admission hangs in the air, a solemn acknowledgment that the fragile illusion of freedom is slipping away. In the game of cat and mouse, the rules are dictated by the shadows, and staying one step ahead becomes a test of survival.

As the chase intensifies, every shadow becomes a potential refuge, every alley a potential escape route. The city, once a canvas of possibilities, now becomes a battleground—a place where the dance with danger is an inescapable reality. In the relentless pursuit, Vinnie and I become fugitives, entangled in a game where the stakes are defined by the shadows that stretch across the cityscape.

The guy... I can't tell if he's creeping closer to us or if he's merely tailing us to see where we're going, but what's the point? Why follow us? It's clearly a deliberate act, but why?

The not knowing his motives is terrifying.

The journey through the city's maze under Vinnie's guidance eventually leads us to another Obsidian Shadows hideout—an enclave within the urban landscape where the dance with shadows takes on a new tempo. As we enter the concealed refuge, a sense of momentary relief settles over us, the walls of the hideout providing a shield against the relentless pursuit.

Several men and women are inside. Vinnie snaps his fingers, and several men, all goon-like in appearance, step forward.

“Scarlet Vipers on our tail,” he says and nods toward me. “Olivia needs protection. Several go out and handle it.”

His words cut through the air, a call to action that sets the stage for the shadowy figures within the hideout to mobilize. The atmosphere shifts, becoming charged with a palpable urgency as several goon-like figures rise from their positions, a manifestation of the Obsidian Shadows' clandestine strength.

The goons leave. Their shadows elongate as they step out into the daylight, the mission clear—confront the threat and protect their own. The door shuts behind them, and this hideout becomes a focal point in the ongoing game of cat and mouse. Shadows deepen in the corners of the room as strategies are discussed, alliances solidify, and the echoes of the urban pursuit become a distant drumbeat—each pulse a reminder that survival within this clandestine world requires a delicate dance with shadows and allies alike.

In the sheltered confines of the Obsidian Shadows hideout, Vinnie assumes a role beyond the enforcer—a guardian seeking to anchor me amidst the storm of uncertainty. His attempt to keep me calm becomes a lifeline, a momentary reprieve from the relentless pursuit that has become the backdrop of my life.

“Olivia, we've got this under control,” he assures me, his voice gentle yet resolute. “They won't get to you here.”

I wish I could believe him.

“Tell me about your paintings. What do you like to capture?”

I narrow my eyes. Derrick never cared for my artwork. He thought it pathetic and terrible, and I’m sure Vinnie’s only asking to keep my mind preoccupied.

Yet, when I meet his gaze, I see genuine interest in his eyes.

I smile faintly. “Landscapes mostly. Places where the shadows play with the light. It’s comforting in a way. I haven’t painted in a long time, though.”

“Why not?”

“Derrick.” I blow out a breath.

“He didn’t want you to paint?”

“No. I was to work, but I couldn’t go after promotions. I couldn’t risk making more than him. I had to cook for him, and I’ve always loved to cook, but I could only make meals that he liked. It became boring over the years. I used to like to go out for long runs.” I smile wide. “I never stopped that. I would set the alarm hours earlier than I needed to so I could go out for a long run before he woke up. I would be in the shower when his alarm would go off.”

“Running, huh? A treadmill’s not quite the same, but it’ll have to do for now. We can’t risk you out in the open.”

I hate running on a treadmill, but his solution is pragmatic. The shadows demand sacrifices. For all I know, when word gets back to Leonardo about what happened because I left the bar, he might revoke their protection. I’ve risked the lives of his men because I was foolish.

The goons come back.

The tallest one approaches Vinnie. “All clear, Vinnie. The Scarlet Vipers are gone for now.”

A fleeting sense of relief washes over the Obsidian Shadows hideout at the news. The shadows that loomed in the periphery of our temporary sanctuary retreat, allowing a momentary respite in the ongoing game of cat and mouse.

Wait. Did he say Vipers? So there had been more than one. My stomach twists into knots.

Vinnie, accompanied by two goons, takes on the role of my escort. The journey back to the bar unfolds in a hushed procession.

As we enter the bar, a subdued atmosphere pervades. Vinnie, his protective instinct palpable, guides me directly to my room, a gesture both reassuring and tinged with an unspoken acknowledgment of vulnerability.

“I’m sorry, Olivia. I should’ve been more careful.”

“It’s not your fault, Vinnie. If anything, all of this is my fault. I appreciate everything you’re doing to keep me safe.”

The gratitude is sincere, yet an undercurrent of self-blame lingers. The dance with shadows leaves no room for naivety. Vinnie, despite his protective role, carries the weight of responsibility, and I, in turn, grapple with the awareness that safety within the Obsidian Shadows demands a constant negotiation with the shadows that stretch across our lives.

As Vinnie departs, the room becomes a haven for introspection, a sanctuary where the shadows of the present trigger a cascade of memories, each one a fragment of a past riddled with traumas. The veil of time lifts, revealing a history intertwined with my late husband and the scars that trace the contours of my journey come into sharp relief.

The echoes of a seemingly idyllic courtship reverberate. In the early days, Derrick was a charming suitor, a gentleman who lured me into a whirlwind romance. He would bring me to Moon Park, a sun-dappled park, for picnics and long walks. Then, he had been charming and charismatic, sweeping me off my feet with grand gestures and sweet words. His promises of love and a blissful future overshadowed any hints of shadows lurking beneath the surface. The laughter and stolen kisses formed the initial strokes of a painting that would eventually be stained with darkness. The memories, tinged with bittersweet nostalgia, mask the portents of the darkness that would soon unfold.

The scene shifts to the wedding day, the celebration that marked the beginning of a descent into a twisted reality. The joyful facade crumbled, unveiling the first cracks in the facade of marital bliss. Derrick's transformation from a charming lover to a controlling figure emerged like a shadow creeping over the canvas of my life. The grandeur of the wedding venue contrasted sharply with the growing tension. Derrick's possessiveness, initially mistaken for affection, became more pronounced. The celebrations masked a subtle shift in his demeanor that foreshadowed the storm brewing within the confines of our vows. The smiles captured in photographs belied the cracks forming in the foundation of our marriage.

The progression of memories becomes a descent into chaos. Threats, abuse, and the constant cloud of fear marred the once-hopeful narrative. The once-warm home became a battlefield of emotional and physical abuse.

The trauma intensified as Derrick's true nature, a connection to the Scarlet Vipers, shattered the illusions I clung to. The revelation, a catalyst for the violence that ensued, left indelible marks on my psyche.

The room, once a silent witness, becomes the stage for the darkest memory—a snapshot of the moment when survival eclipsed everything else. The decision to end Derrick's life, a desperate act of self-defense, unfolded in my mind in chilling clarity. The shadows of that moment cast their tendrils over the present, merging the past and present into an inseparable tapestry of pain.

As the flashbacks fade, the room returns to the present, a space heavy with the weight of history. The scars, both visible and hidden, become a testament to the resilience forged in the crucible of trauma. In the silence that follows, the shadows linger, a reminder that the journey within the Obsidian Shadows is not only an external dance but an internal reckoning with the ghosts of the past.

eleven

The door to my room creaks open, revealing the unexpected trio of Izzy, Cara, and Sofia just as I'm about to try to dig around on the dark web to see why my husband might've become a Scarlet Viper in the first place. Their collective presence is a reminder that even within the confined space of the hideout, the dance with shadows persists.

Operative Izzy seems to bring a vibrant energy to the Obsidian Shadows. Her fiery red hair, tied in a loose braid, adds a touch of rebellion to her presence. Izzy's hazel eyes sparkle with mischief, and her freckles contribute to a youthful and spirited demeanor. Despite her seemingly carefree appearance, Izzy's movements suggest a keen awareness of her surroundings—a dynamic force within the Obsidian Shadows, blending a sense of spontaneity with a sharp instinct for survival.

She sits next to my laptop on the desk. “Hey, Olivia! Whatcha up to?”

Cara, the Obsidian Shadow who pretends to be a Scarlet Viper, studies my screen intently, her sleek, ebony hair falling forward, reminding me of my old hairstyle. Her eyes, a mesmerizing shade of green, betray little emotion.

“Digging into the darker corners of the web, I see.” Cara draws back. “Curiosity can be a double-edged sword, you know.”

Sofia, the information broker, wrinkles her nose. Honestly, she's beautiful. Long, flowing locks of chestnut hair fall about

her shoulders, framing a face adorned with delicate features. Sofia's hazel eyes reflect a blend of strength and compassion, and her stature, while seemingly delicate, hides an inner fortitude that resonates with the shadows she navigates.

"Leo doesn't like secrets," she says softly. "It might be wise to keep him in the loop."

Their words, a subtle admonition, hang in the air. The realization dawns that my actions, even in the pursuit of understanding, carry consequences within the intricate web of alliances and loyalties.

"I haven't found anything," I protest. "I just... I just need answers. It's nothing about any of you or the Obsidian Shadows. I'll do anything and everything Leonardo asks. I... I just wanted to know why Derrick got involved with the Scarlet Vipers."

Izzy leans back. "You should maybe just do whatever Leo asks and nothing more. Leo's got his reasons, and sometimes, we're better off not knowing everything. Trust me, it's for your own safety."

Cara pats my arm. "Leo values loyalty. If you want to navigate this world, you might want to focus on keeping him on your side."

Sofia nods, her eyes filled with sympathy. "We all have our reasons for being here, Olivia. Some questions are better left unanswered."

Their collective counsel, a blend of caution and wisdom, prompts a moment of reflection. The shadows, both within the room and beyond, seem to close in—a reminder that in the clandestine dance of the Obsidian Shadows, understanding when to tread lightly and when to reveal the shadows of one's past is a delicate art.

Izzy turns playfully. "Olivia, Leo appreciates loyalty in *all* its forms."

Cara's smile is a bit sly. "Sometimes, it's about more than just sharing information. It's about... forging connections."

“In this world, trust is earned in various ways. Leo values commitment above anything else,” Sofia says.

Their words, layered with a suggestion that transcends the professional, prompt a flush of embarrassment. The realization that they might be hinting at a more intimate form of loyalty brings an unexpected warmth to my cheeks.

Besides, Derrick required my commitment too, and I gave it to him because I felt trapped in a marriage where I had no power at all.

And now, I’m stuck in that same situation all over again.

They’re all looking at me, staring I should say, and I blush.

“I... I understand the importance of loyalty, but...”

Izzy grins. “No need to be shy, Olivia. Just pay him back however he requires.”

I nod dutifully. I’ve done that with Derrick. How many times had I basically serviced him?

Embarrassed but determined, I gather the courage to seek out Leo’s room within the labyrinthine confines of the Obsidian Shadows hideout.

I slowly stand. “Um, could you guys tell me how to find... Leonardo’s room?”

Izzy grins. “Ah, Olivia, it’s Leo. Just Leo. No need for formality.”

Cara nods and points toward my door. “Head down the hallway, take the second right, and his room is the third door on the left. You can’t miss it.”

Their guidance, though delivered with a hint of playfulness from Izzy and a practical tone from Cara, eases the tension. I leave my room, the others following me, although they head in the opposite direction.

As I embark on the journey to Leo’s room, the shadows seem to whisper secrets, and the corridors unfold like a tapestry of concealed alliances. Navigating through the dimly lit hallways, I follow Cara’s directions, the subtle echoes of

my footsteps a backdrop to the clandestine dance taking place within the Obsidian Shadows. The anticipation of facing Leo, not just as a leader but as a figure with whom loyalties might take on intimate nuances, adds a new layer to the shadows that surround me.

With a hesitant breath, I raise my hand and knock on Leo's door—a gateway to a world where shadows and secrets intertwine.

After a moment, Leo's voice, authoritative yet composed, pierces through the silence. "Enter."

The command is clear, and the door creaks open as I step into Leo's realm. The room, bathed in the subdued glow of low lighting, becomes a stage for a meeting that transcends the professional—a meeting where alliances and intimacies intersect within the intricate dance of the Obsidian Shadows.

Leo's room unfolds as a realm of mystery and authority, befitting his position within the Obsidian Shadows. The sheer size of the space commands attention, its expansiveness suggesting a domain where decisions are made, alliances are forged, and shadows hold whispered conversations.

One corner of the room is dedicated to a sprawling office space. A massive, polished mahogany desk takes center stage, adorned with an array of documents and a strategically placed laptop. The walls, adorned with maps, surveillance screens, and enigmatic symbols, tell a silent tale of the clandestine operations Leo oversees. A leather-clad chair behind the desk exudes an air of authority, awaiting its occupant.

Opposite the office, a more casual meeting area unfolds—a space where discussions transcend the formality of the desk. Plush chairs, arranged in a semi-circle, suggest a setting for confidential conversations and strategic planning. The low hum of electronic devices emanates from a sophisticated communication center, emphasizing the connectivity that defines Leo's reach within the shadows.

The room is punctuated by two doors, each leading to realms that hint at different facets of Leo's life. One door, slightly ajar, reveals a glimpse of what might be a bedroom—

an intimate sanctuary where the leader of the Obsidian Shadows retreats from the complexities of the underworld. The other door, closed and unyielding, conceals its secrets, leaving room for speculation about the hidden chambers within.

The ambient lighting, a delicate interplay of shadows and strategically placed lamps, casts an enigmatic glow over the room. The air is laced with a faint scent—perhaps a blend of aged leather, lingering cigar smoke, and the faintest hint of a cologne that speaks of power and sophistication.

As I stand in the center of Leo’s expansive domain, the room becomes a reflection of the enigmatic figure who commands it. It’s a space where shadows whisper, alliances are solidified, and the dance within the Obsidian Shadows unfolds in the vastness of Leo’s strategic sanctum.

Leo stands from one of those plush chairs, and his raised eyebrows convey a subtle inquiry—a silent prompt for the purpose that led me to his domain. The air thickens with the unspoken weight of alliances and secrets.

“Why are you here, Olivia?”

In response, I turn and close the door behind me, the soft click resonating in the silence. Facing Leo, I meet his piercing gaze, recognizing that this moment holds the potential to shape the intricate dance of shadows within the Obsidian Shadows.

“I wanted to thank you,” I murmur.

A part of me is terrified as I start to reach for the hem of my shirt. Derrick had been my first serious relationship. I never slept with anyone else before.

But I am grateful to Leo and all of the Obsidian Shadows, and if this is how Leo wishes to be shown gratitude, then I will do what I must.

Toward the end, I would just lie there and let Derrick do whatever he wanted to me and my body. My eyes were closed most of the time.

This time, though, I try to have some of my own agency as I watch Leo’s face closely as I drop my shirt to the floor near

my feet. My hands shake as I reach behind me, take off my bra, and let that drop too. His room is a little on the cold side, and my nipples are already hard.

“Olivia...” Leo’s voice is hoarse.

I reach for the button of my jeans and slide them down my legs, stepping out of them. Underneath, I am wearing a pair of lacy black panties that Derrick had bought me for Valentine’s Day but I never let him see.

My heart is pounding as I stand there, fully exposed and vulnerable. He doesn’t move, but his watchful gaze tells me he sees every bit of me. His eyes linger on my body for several moments before they finally meet mine again.

The intensity in his gaze strips away all my fears and doubts. For the first time since meeting Leo, I feel free—free to be exactly who I am without judgment or fear of what comes next.

At this moment, despite all the darkness surrounding us both, we share something precious—a connection rooted in gratitude and gratitude alone.

I hold my breath as I walk over to stand directly in front of him.

He leans back, and his eyes travel up and down my body hungrily, setting off a swirl of emotions inside me—desire, fear, anticipation.

I feel strangely exposed but also strangely safe in Leo’s presence. I swear that all of my vulnerability and strength are on display.

We stand there for what feels like an eternity before he finally speaks again.

“Is this how you wish to show my gratitude?”

I nod.

The atmosphere in the room changes suddenly as Leo steps closer to me. He stands directly in front of me and reaches for my hands, taking them both into his own larger ones. His skin is warm against mine and I feel an electric current run through

me at his touch. His dark eyes meet mine, and he draws closer until our faces are only inches apart. My heart pounds in my chest as I look up into his face.

Dark, penetrating eyes seem to hold a wealth of secrets, and his sharp features convey both wisdom and a hint of weariness. His salt-and-pepper hair adds an air of distinction, and the subtle scars etched on his face speak of battles fought and won.

“Let me show you how grateful I am,” I whisper.

twelve

Slowly, I kneel in front of him and unzip his pants. I gasp as my eyes take in the sight of his already hard cock. He's so much longer and larger and thicker than Derrick had been.

Without further hesitation, I take him into my mouth eagerly, wanting to please him and bring him pleasure.

I caress the length of his shaft with my tongue as I suck gently on the tip. His breathing is becoming ragged as he clutches at my hair, barely able to contain himself.

I move my hands up his body, feeling the strength that lies beneath his skin—the strength that has kept him alive despite all the violence he's faced throughout his life—and I am suddenly awed by this man standing before me.

He groans in pleasure as I increase the intensity of my movements on him, and soon he is gripping tightly onto either side of my head as he thrusts into my mouth.

His hands tangle in my hair, pulling me closer to him, the lengths of our bodies pressed together. He lets out a deep moan of appreciation as I swirl my tongue around the tip of his shaft and explore every inch of it with growing intensity.

I can feel his pleasure rising, and I am filled with an overwhelming sense of power as I bring him closer to the edge. I want him to come in my mouth. I want to swallow his cum. What better way can I show him how much I appreciate him? And maybe this will ensure he doesn't become mad over my leaving with Vinnie earlier.

I suck harder and harder, grabbing his ass, trying to take even more of him into my mouth.

Without warning, he pulls back, his cock no longer in my mouth.

Afraid I did something wrong or that I offended him, I start to stand, my heart beating wildly.

Before either of us can say anything, he yanks on my arm and drags me to his bedroom. The bed is covered in soft blankets and pillows, making it look inviting despite its simplicity. I shiver as Leo throws me onto the bed so hard that I bounce.

His face is dark and serious, his eyes filled with a fiery passion as he rips off his clothes and climbs onto the bed. I watch, mesmerized, as he takes out a condom and slips it on.

Leo draws me into his arms. "Pleasure me how you see fit," he commands me, his voice raspy.

I nod, but I hesitate. I've never had to make the first move before, not like this.

Maybe he's taking pity on me because he moves his hands down my body, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples with his thumbs until they are hard and aching. I gasp at the pleasure that runs through me as he continues to tantalize them.

He leans forward and captures my mouth in a passionate kiss, taking control of it in a way that only makes me want more. His tongue tangles with mine as we explore each other's mouths in an intimate dance of pleasure.

"Do as you want to show me how grateful you are," he says, drawing back.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach as I put a hand on his chest. He has more scars on his body than just his face, and I slowly push him down before I straddle him.

My hands slowly explore every inch of his muscular body. His skin is hot beneath my fingertips, and I can feel the tension radiating off of him.

I press my lips against his in a deep kiss before exploring further down his body with my mouth. His breathing quickens as I run my tongue along his chest and stomach. My fingers trace circles around each muscled arm and thigh before finally reaching what lay between them—his hardness pressing against me relentlessly.

I take him into my hands first, marveling at the smoothness of his skin and the strength that lurks beneath it.

Now or never.

I try to slide his cock inside me, but I have to use my hand to guide him into position. Slowly, I work my way up and down on him, gradually building up intensity. With every movement, I can feel a new sensation inside of me, a warmth that spreads throughout my body like wildfire.

Shit. Derrick only let me on top the one time, and it hadn't been very good for him. He came way too fast, and I tried to keep riding him because I hadn't come close to orgasming. I guess I made him feel bad because he hadn't lasted long enough for me to get much pleasure. Am I going to fuck this up too with Leo?

As we move together, I become lost in the sensation of our skin against each other and the way our bodies move in perfect harmony.

Leo's hands roam all over my body, caressing me in places that make me quiver with pleasure. His eyes never leave mine as we keep up an intense rhythm that seems to go beyond physical pleasure and into something more spiritual—something precious—a connection rooted in gratitude and gratitude alone.

Leo's large hands roam all over my body, finally landing on my hips. He guides me up and down him harder and faster, thrusting upward, and he's slamming into me or I'm slamming down, and it feels so good, so damn good...

The pleasure is so intense that soon I'm on the brink of an explosive orgasm. But just when I think it's about to happen, Leo stops and flips me over onto my stomach. He grabs my

hips firmly with both hands as he pushes himself deeper into me from behind.

My breath comes in quick gasps as he moves faster and faster inside me, sending shockwaves through my body with every stroke. His hands grip tighter around my hips, anchoring me against him as he moves relentlessly within me.

Derrick took me from behind a lot, but I honestly can't compare this to anything Derrick ever did, especially when Leo reaches beneath me. Is he... I think he's trying to find my clit.

With Derrick being such a selfish lover, I had to take care of myself in the bathroom afterward. I know precisely what I need to get off, and I shift slightly to help Leo find my clit. His touch is a bit harsher and harder than I normally need, but I've never had clit stimulation before with a cock pounding into me before, and it's too much... too fucking much...

"Come now, Olivia," he instructs.

I nod. He's hitting that spot with such precise precision, and he keeps doing it as the pleasure builds up inside me until I'm screaming.

"D... Damn. Leo!"

All the walls I built around myself to protect my heart from getting hurt again seem to be crumbling down, and I'm overcome with emotion. My eyes are squeezed tight so I don't cry.

"That's it, good girl. Come now. Now!"

And then it happens. Finally, with one final thrust, I come undone as my orgasm shatters through me like a volcano. I can feel it in every nerve and cell of my body. The most intense orgasm of my life sweeps through my body, and I cry out in pleasure as wave after wave of bliss rushes over me. It's like nothing I've ever felt before, and I'm sure if Leo wasn't holding onto me, I would have flown away from the sheer force of it all.

I collapse against him in a satisfied heap, still trembling from the intensity of it all.

Leo pushes on my shoulders so I look down at him.

He tsks with his tongue. “You didn’t come with your eyes open,” he says.

“Ah...”

“You’re just going to have to come again, but this time, keep your eyes open. I want you to look into my eyes as you come.”

Shocked, all I can do is nod.

He takes my face in his hands and looks into my eyes.

“You can do it,” he says softly, but confidently.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I nod again, determined to try for him. I’m scared that if I fail, he won’t want me anymore, that his offer of protection will be rescinded.

Leo smiles gently before pushing himself back inside me. This time, instead of focusing solely on the physical pleasure, I take the time to look into Leo’s eyes as we move together. His gaze never leaves mine as our bodies heat up together in a passionate embrace—each stroke sending electric sparks through my veins like nothing else ever has before.

I start to feel myself reaching the edge again, and fear takes over.

Just as I’m about to look away, Leo caresses my cheek and whispers, “Don’t you dare look away from me. You can do this.”

His words give me the courage to stay focused on him.

As if he knows exactly what I need, his eyes become even more intense and his thrusts become faster and harder until finally, with one last deep push of pleasure, my orgasm rips through me like a wildfire.

Suddenly, I’m overcome with another powerful orgasm that takes over my body and leaves me trembling with pleasure once more.

This time, when it washes over me like a wave, my eyes stay open so that I can focus on Leo's gaze as I come undone in his arms. He watches me surrender to pleasure in his arms.

"Good girl," he says, cupping my face before kissing me again.

A thrill of pleasure shoots through me. Derrick never once said anything good about my having sex with him. I mean, he got off, so it was good enough, but to hear praise?

I duck my head and turn away from Leo.

He snaps off his condom and heads out of the room. A moment later, I hear water running, and Leo tosses me a towel.

To clean myself off with.

Derrick never would've done that.

I wince as I wipe myself. I really need to stop comparing the two of them. It's not as if Leo and I are lovers now.

Although if he wants me to show I'm grateful again, I would. Without a doubt. I've never felt like I did when I was in his arms.

Maybe there's something to casual sex. I never would've thought that before, mostly because Derrick was basically all I ever knew, but he's my past, dead and buried.

Well, dead and at the bottom of the gulf. Swimming with fishes.

"You were very grateful, weren't you?" Leo asks with a smirk

I blush. "Still am," I murmur.

I rush out of the bedroom, put my clothes back on as quickly as I can, realize I still have the towel, leave it on the floor rather than the table, and dart out of his room and return to mine.

Did I really just do that?

Yes, yes, I did.

Do I have any regrets?

No, no, I don't.

thirteen

The bed, a haven amid the shadows, becomes a refuge where I collapse under the weight of both physical and emotional exhaustion. The darkness outside the window deepens, casting a veil over the events that unfolded within Leo's realm.

It's only the tantalizing aroma of food that rouses me from the depths of sleep. The scent, rich with the comforting notes of spaghetti and meatballs, wafts through the room, a fragrant invitation to partake in a shared moment of respite.

On the table near the bed, I find a plate of the hearty meal accompanied by a note.

HEY, Olivia,

Thought you might be hungry. Feel free to join us whenever you're ready,

Rafe

THE UNEXPECTED KINDNESS and the prospect of shared company stir a flicker of warmth within me. The shadows, momentarily held at bay, seem to retreat as the possibility of camaraderie and shared meals offers a respite from the complexities of the Obsidian Shadows.

Will Leo be there? After my... show of gratitude... I don't know how it'll be between us in front of the others. And there's also the issue about what happened earlier with Vinnie and me. I doubt Leo knows about that yet, but when he finds out, he's not going to be happy.

Still, I decide to join the others for dinner. The camaraderie and shared meals offer a brief respite from the shadows that encircle the Obsidian Shadows, but the unease about the events with Vinnie hangs in the periphery.

As I step into the communal area, the warmth of shared company contrasts with the cool uncertainty that shrouds my recent interactions. The laughter and conversation of the others create a semblance of normalcy, yet the absence of Leo is palpable.

I linger by the doorway, looking around. A large, sturdy wooden table serves as the focal point, surrounded by an assortment of mismatched chairs. The worn leather upholstery hints at the passage of time and the countless conversations held within these walls. The arrangement encourages a sense of camaraderie, as shadows of allies and allies-to-be gather around, forming an unspoken pact within the obscurity of the room.

The lighting, strategically dimmed, casts a soft glow over the room. Hanging lanterns and discreet sconces contribute to the ambiance, creating pockets of warmth and shadow that dance in tandem with the ebb and flow of conversation. The interplay of light and darkness emphasizes the discreet nature of the Obsidian Shadows' activities.

Subtle hints of individuality punctuate the room. A few potted plants add a touch of life amidst the shadows, and an eclectic array of artifacts—perhaps souvenirs from various endeavors—speaks of the diverse backgrounds of those who navigate this clandestine world. The shelves showcase a collection of leather-bound books, both practical and decorative, providing a nod to knowledge and secrecy.

A side table, adorned with an assortment of communal necessities—condiments, utensils, and a variety of condiments—stands as a testament to the shared experiences of those who call this place home. It is a reminder that even within the dance of shadows, the mundane aspects of daily life persist, weaving a thread of normalcy through the tapestry of secrecy.

As I take my place at the communal table, the room becomes a microcosm of the intricate dance within the Obsidian Shadows—a space where alliances are forged, secrets are exchanged, and the camaraderie of shared meals offers a fleeting escape from the complexities of our clandestine existence.

Izzy grins. “Hey, Olivia! Come join us! We’ve got enough food to feed a small army.”

Her playful greeting echoes with a sense of camaraderie, inviting me into the fold with a warmth that transcends the shadows. The ease in Izzy’s expression hints at the bonds forged within this clandestine realm.

“Olivia, good to see you,” Cara says. “Grab a seat. Rafe’s spaghetti is top-notch tonight.”

Sofia smiles warmly. “Welcome, Olivia. It’s always nice to have another person at the table. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

“Olivia! Glad you could make it,” Rafe calls from the kitchen. “The spaghetti’s ready whenever you are.”

Rafe’s voice, infused with a note of friendliness, carries the assurance that within the Obsidian Shadows, the communal table is a place where alliances are fortified, and the simple act of sharing a meal becomes a gesture of solidarity.

As we gather around the communal table, the aroma of Rafe’s spaghetti wafts through the air, creating an atmosphere of shared comfort and familiarity. The others engage in animated conversations, their laughter and inside jokes weaving a tapestry of camaraderie. Yet, for me, the experience is both surreal and isolating.

Izzy chuckles. “You remember that time in Milan, right, Cara? Leo’s poker face was gold!”

Cara smirks. “Oh, absolutely. The man can make a deal with a smile. It’s an art.”

Their banter, peppered with shared memories and nods of understanding, reinforces the sense of family within the Obsidian Shadows. However, as I sit among them, I’m acutely

aware of my outsider status, a newcomer in a world that feels both strange and dangerous.

Sofia looks at me. “Olivia, you’re quiet tonight. Everything okay?”

How can their concern be genuine? They’re in a mob, and where are the others? There have to be so many more of them. Do some have families? Or do they all live here or in other hideouts throughout the city?

Sofia eyes me, and I manage a small nod, a feeble attempt to reassure them while grappling with the enormity of my newfound reality.

As the laughter and banter continue, I’m caught in the crosscurrents of emotions—bewilderment, fear, and a lingering disbelief that I’ve become entangled in the clandestine world of the Obsidian Shadows. The shared camaraderie, once comforting, now accentuates the stark contrast between their tight-knit family and my position as an outsider navigating treacherous terrain.

In the midst of this family of shadows, I sit in quiet contemplation, grappling with the complexities of my newfound reality and the realization that the dance within the Obsidian Shadows demands not only loyalty but a willingness to navigate the intricate dynamics of a family forged in the crucible of darkness.

Rafe brings over two plates, one for him and one for me, leaving the others to tease him as they get theirs.

As I take a tentative bite, the flavors unfold in a symphony of rich tomato sauce, perfectly seasoned meatballs, and al dente pasta.

The spaghetti, skillfully cooked, is a canvas for Rafe’s homemade tomato sauce—robust, savory, and infused with a medley of herbs that dance on the taste buds. Each bite into the meatballs reveals a well-seasoned interior, a testament to Rafe’s culinary prowess.

The accompanying garlic bread, golden and crispy on the outside, yields to a soft and buttery interior. The aroma of

garlic and herbs wafts through the air, complementing the hearty flavors of the main dish.

The meal, crafted with care, is not merely sustenance but a shared experience that transcends the confines of the clandestine world. The flavors evoke a sense of home, offering a brief respite from the shadows that envelop us. Despite the weight of my circumstances, the simple act of savoring a well-prepared meal becomes a source of solace amid the complexities of the Obsidian Shadows.

As I partake in the communal feast, the flavors become a thread connecting me to the shared moments of those around the table—a reminder that even within the shadows, the ritual of breaking bread together holds the power to forge bonds and offer a fleeting escape from the dance of darkness.

After I eat and thank Rafe for the meal, I return to my room. The shadows seem to deepen, echoing the mysteries and secrets that surround Derrick's involvement in the Scarlet Vipers. The soft glow of a desk lamp casts a focused beam of light onto scattered documents and a laptop—a makeshift investigation station where I seek to unravel the enigma of my late husband's clandestine affiliations.

The laptop screen illuminates my intent gaze as I sift through online resources, news articles, and obscure forums dedicated to the criminal underworld. The clattering of the keyboard echoes in the quiet room, a symphony of determination mingling with the silence of secrets.

As I delve into the digital realm, memories of my life with Derrick flicker like distant shadows. The man I once thought I knew, who had turned from a sweet and caring partner into a menacing figure, now stands at the intersection of my past and the dangerous world of the Scarlet Vipers.

The online labyrinth reveals fragmented information, cryptic threads, and speculations about the Scarlet Vipers' operations. Each piece of data becomes a puzzle piece in a larger mosaic, offering glimpses into the machinations of the criminal organization that claimed my husband.

Hours pass in a blur as I follow the digital trail, uncovering connections between the Scarlet Vipers and other criminal entities. The realization that Derrick willingly immersed himself in this web of deception and danger sends shivers down my spine. Questions multiply, and the shadows of doubt deepen. Was his involvement driven by greed, coercion, or something darker?

As I dig deeper into the digital labyrinth, the quest for answers becomes a journey fraught with uncertainty. The echoes of the keyboard strokes reverberate in the room, a rhythmic pursuit of truth within the shadows that threaten to engulf me.

I try to learn more and more until my head starts to droop. I go to bed, and when I wake, I realize I'm not alone. I shriek.

Cara winces and holds up a hand. "I didn't mean to scare you. Sorry."

"Why are you here?"

She crosses over from the door to sit on the edge of my bed. "I wanted to warn you."

"About what?"

"Leo found out."

I flinch.

"Yeah, he's not happy."

"It was my fault," I mumble.

Cara wrinkles her nose. "Things between Leo and Vinnie have been... complicated lately. Before you."

"Oh. What happened?"

She just shakes her head.

Right. I'm an outsider, even though she's the one who is a double agent.

I eye her. "Why did you turn against the Scarlet Vipers?"

Cara sighs. "I know. It's not easy to trust someone whose loyalty has shifted once because it can shift again, right?"

But..." She stares me down. "I think we're a lot alike. You're here to escape, right?"

I nod.

"My own past is brutal," she murmurs.

"I'm sorry. If you ever want to talk about it..."

"Maybe one day, but not right now." She stands.

"How should I go about..."

"Smoothing things over with Leo?" Her lips curl into a smile. "Did you see Leo?"

"Before he found out," I mumble.

"He'll blame all of this on Vinnie."

"That's not fair," I protest.

"Trust me," she says, her tone containing a clear note of worry. "The Scarlet Vipers are evil, but the Obsidian Shadows..."

I gulp. "Darkness and darkness," I mumble.

"We're all villains here," she says. "Some because we have to be. Some because we choose it. You're the former or at least you will be."

"Leo chose it, didn't he?"

"He's a mob boss. You don't reach that kind of power by being nice. If he's nice, it's because he wants something from you."

I gulp. "If I couldn't help him with my forensic accountant skills, would he have never let me in?"

"I don't try to wrap my head around what Leo does or why," she says. "I don't even worry about why I do things. Just keep your head down. That's my advice, and right now, until the whole dead husband thing dies down, you might want to keep yourself inside this building at all times."

She leaves, and I groan.

I'm a prisoner all over again.

fourteen

The delicate dance within the Obsidian Shadows has taken an ominous turn as tensions escalate between Leo and Vinnie, their strained interactions casting shadows over the familial atmosphere. The underlying currents of discord, fueled by the events involving me, become a palpable undercurrent within the clandestine world we inhabit.

I've been avoiding both of them, but the communal area, once a haven of shared laughter and camaraderie, has become tinged with an uneasy silence. Conversations stall upon my entrance, and the exchanged glances between Leo and Vinnie reveal the fissures that threaten to fracture the delicate balance within the Obsidian Shadows.

Leo's authoritative presence, usually a beacon of control, now harbors a subtle edge of frustration. Vinnie, a stalwart in his loyalty, wears a mask of simmering tension. The atmosphere becomes charged with unspoken words, as if the shadows themselves bear witness to the conflict that brews beneath the surface.

The other members of the Obsidian Shadows, sensing the strain, navigate the room with caution. The familial atmosphere that once bound us now feels frayed, caught in the crossfire of a conflict that threatens to reshape alliances within the shadows.

I head to Leo's room but am too scared to knock. I don't even know if Leo is inside, not until I hear voices.

“Vinnie, we need to address this. The tension between us is affecting the entire dynamic of the Obsidian Shadows.”

“Leo, I’m just doing what I believe is right. She’s one of us now, and I won’t let anything happen to her.”

I think I hear a sigh.

“She may be under our protection, but your actions jeopardize the delicate balance we’ve maintained for years. You’re letting personal feelings cloud your judgment.”

“This isn’t just about feelings, Leo. I won’t turn my back on her, no matter what you say.”

Fingers tap against something.

“This isn’t a matter of turning our backs. It’s about preserving the Obsidian Shadows.” Leo’s voice is stern and unyielding. “We operate in the shadows for a reason, and bringing personal matters into our affairs compromises everything we’ve built.”

“I can’t just stand by and watch her get caught up in this mess. She killed her husband to protect herself! That’s loyalty, Leo.”

“Loyalty to her is commendable, but we can’t let personal emotions cloud our judgment. The Obsidian Shadows come first, and jeopardizing that puts all of us at risk.”

The weight of responsibility presses heavily on me. The realization that my mere presence has disrupted the cohesion of the Obsidian Shadows weighs on my conscience. I become an unwitting catalyst in a conflict that unfolds in the shadows, where loyalty and hierarchy clash with the intricacies of personal dynamics.

As tensions reach a boiling point within the Obsidian Shadows, the dance of shadows becomes a precarious endeavor, and the delicate alliances that once defined our clandestine world now teeter on the precipice of uncertainty. The shadows, ever-watchful, bear witness to the fragility of loyalties in the face of unforeseen challenges.

I can't handle this any longer. The door creaks open, and I step into Leo's room. The weight of their internal struggles spills into the room, and the shadows seem to tighten around us as I navigate the delicate balance of my newfound safety within the Obsidian Shadows.

Leo narrows his eyes and stands from behind his desk. "Olivia, this is a private discussion."

Vinnie glances at me and then back at Leo but says nothing.

Leo leans forward, a vein pulsing on his forehead. "You took her to the bistro, Vinnie. Do you have any idea how reckless that was?"

"I pressed," I start to say.

Vinnie throws up his hands, defiant. "She needed to get out. She needed to feel normal for a moment. What's the harm in that?"

"The harm is that we operate in the shadows," Leo says, his voice rising. "Bringing her into the public eye puts all of us at risk. You need to be smarter about this, Vinnie."

As the tension thickens, I find myself caught between the conflicting perspectives of Leo and Vinnie. The realization dawns that my safety, and perhaps the stability of the Obsidian Shadows, is at risk. Leo's fury, a storm brewing beneath a calm exterior, contrasts with Vinnie's steadfast determination to protect me at any cost.

Leo turns his attention to me, his frustration evident. "You need to understand, Olivia. We can't afford to make mistakes. We operate in the shadows for a reason."

Vinnie looks at me pleadingly. "Leo's right, Olivia. I just wanted to help, but maybe I went about it the wrong way."

The room becomes a battleground of conflicting loyalties, where my safety becomes a pawn in the internal struggles of the Obsidian Shadows. The shadows, ever-present witnesses to our clandestine affairs, seem to deepen as the delicate dance between loyalty and secrecy threatens to unravel.

“Leo, I’m sorry.”

My apology hangs in the charged air, but Leo’s response is a stern wave, dismissing any attempt to diffuse the escalating tension. His gaze fixes on Vinnie, and the shadows seem to amplify the weight of his authority.

“Vinnie, you’re a fucking enforcer,” Leo growls. “Your fucking role is to ensure everyone, including yourself, follows the rules. Bringing her into the public eye jeopardizes everything we’ve built. We can’t afford recklessness.”

The intensity in Leo’s voice reverberates through the room, and the shadows themselves seem to retreat in the face of his authority. Vinnie, usually resolute, appears chastened, a stark contrast to his usual demeanor.

Vinnie nods, subdued. “I get it, Leo. I messed up. I won’t let it happen again.”

The room becomes a silent battleground, shadows swirling around the strained dynamics that threaten to reshape alliances within our clandestine world.

As Leo’s authority looms over the room, I’m left grappling with the realization that my presence has inadvertently disrupted the delicate balance within the Obsidian Shadows. The shadows, unforgiving and unyielding, bear witness to the internal struggles that unfold, leaving us on the precipice of consequences that could redefine our clandestine existence.

Without another word, I slip out of Leo’s room, leaving the unresolved tension between him and Vinnie behind.

Izzy approaches me in the dimly lit corridor. Her presence is a momentary reprieve from the shadows that seem to cling to the edges of the Obsidian Shadows’ world.

She places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Hey, Olivia. Tough conversation in there, huh?”

I nod, wishing I felt relief instead of apprehension. “Yeah, it’s complicated. I just hope things settle down.”

She leans against the wall, a hint of sympathy in her eyes. “Leo and Vinnie have their differences, but they’ll figure it

out. Meanwhile, there's something you should know about Sofia."

Izzy goes on to explain Sofia's unique role within the Obsidian Shadows. Sofia, it seems, isn't just an information broker. She's a neutral one, adept at navigating the precarious balance between rival factions. Her ability to remain neutral allows her to gather intelligence without aligning herself too closely with any particular side.

"Sofia told me something interesting," she whispers, "something even Cara hasn't heard yet. The Scarlet Vipers are furious with you, but the word on the street is that they want you alive, not dead."

The revelation sends a shiver down my spine. The fact that the Scarlet Vipers have taken notice of me, coupled with their desire for my continued existence, adds a layer of complexity to the shadows encircling my life. I find myself entangled in a web of intrigue, where rival factions and their motives remain veiled in secrecy.

"Alive, not dead?" I whisper back. "Why would they want that?"

She shrugs. "Who knows with these underworld types? Maybe you've got something they want, but for now, it seems like staying alive is your best bet."

The corridor, bathed in the dim glow of overhead lights, becomes a clandestine space where secrets and uncertainties linger. Izzy's information, though cryptic, adds another layer to the enigma that is my newfound existence within the Obsidian Shadows. As I navigate the shadows of this clandestine world, the realization that my survival hinges on a delicate dance between rival factions only deepens the complexities of my precarious situation.

Izzy eyes me. "I know we're shadows and all of that, dark and twisty, but I'm actually a hugger. Can I hug you?"

"I could use a hug," I admit.

We hug, and then she draws back, looking me up and down. "Have you showered? Changed your clothes?"

“Ah...”

“There should’ve been clothes in your room.”

She grabs my hand and drags me to my room. I hadn’t even checked, but there are clothes in the dresser, and she then takes me down the hall to a massive bathroom that has a shower.

“Shut the door, and no one will come in. It’ll lock,” she explains. “Some of us have bathrooms attached to our rooms, but not all of us.”

I nod. Low woman on the pole. Got it.

I shower and change my clothes, but I don’t feel like a new person. A shadow has come over me since that fateful night when I learned the truth about my husband and then killed him.

Back in my room, the glow of the laptop screen casts an eerie light in the dimness as I delve into the digital realm, searching for traces of the life I left behind. The revelations unfold like shadows dancing in the darkness, each discovery deepening the mystery that surrounds Derrick and me.

My heart quickens as I scour news articles, police reports, and online forums, only to find a void—a deliberate absence of any mention of Derrick and me. It’s as if our existence has been erased from the public consciousness, swallowed by the shadows of a meticulously executed cover-up. The realization sends a chill down my spine.

The property records reveal an unsettling detail—our house, the once-witness to a tumultuous marriage, now belongs to a certain Ned Rickerson. Suspicion lingers in the shadows of my mind. Could this be a mere coincidence, or does the hand of the Scarlet Vipers reach even into the mundane transactions of real estate?

The enigma deepens as I ponder whether Derrick might have hidden something of significance within the walls of our former home. The shadows of doubt cast a veil over his actions, and the possibility that our past holds secrets I have yet to uncover looms like a specter in the room.

My thoughts turn to the yard, once a backdrop to my life, now a potential repository of hidden truths. Did Derrick leave a cryptic message, a concealed item, or a clue amidst the familiar contours of our property? The shadows that cling to the corners of my memory hint at the possibility of untold secrets waiting to be unraveled.

The laptop screen becomes a portal into the unknown, and as I navigate the virtual landscape, the dance of shadows intertwines with the mysteries of my past. The absence of information in the public sphere becomes a cipher, inviting me to decipher the secrets concealed within the shadows of my vanished life.



WEEKS GO BY. Maybe a month or two. I don't even know. I feel trapped here, and I turn to Izzy, Cara, Sophia... and Vinnie, Dante, and Rafe. I do whatever Leo asks of me, and each night that he requires me to do something accounting-related for him, I visit him. Sometimes, we fuck. Other times, I just blow him. A few times, he just holds me. One of those times, I fell asleep in his arms. He was gone when I woke.

Soon enough, though, the illusion of safety, carefully woven within the confines of the Obsidian Shadows, begins to unravel as whispers of betrayal and impending danger slither through the clandestine corridors of the mafia ranks. The shadows that once offered protection now seem to constrict, harboring the imminent threat of enemies closing in.

Within the Obsidian Shadows, the echoes of a betrayal resonate like a discordant melody. Whispers circulate, carrying the weight of treachery, and the once-cohesive unit finds itself fractured by suspicions and mistrust. The shadows, loyal witnesses to clandestine affairs, seem to recoil as the fragile alliances that once defined our world begin to crumble.

As I navigate the treacherous landscape, the shadows take on a more menacing quality, casting doubt on the very foundation of trust within the mafia ranks. The repercussions of the betrayal manifest like ripples, distorting the once-stable surface of our clandestine existence.

The safety I sought within the Obsidian Shadows becomes elusive, replaced by the palpable threat of enemies closing in. The shadows that once concealed our movements now seem to betray us, allowing adversaries to slip through the gaps and encroach upon the sanctuary we believed to be impenetrable.

fifteen

The air becomes charged with an undercurrent of malevolence, and the shadows themselves seem to harbor a sinister presence. The enemies, once relegated to the periphery, now emerge from the obscurity of the underworld, their intentions shrouded in the darkness that envelopes us.

I've just about convinced myself that I'm going insane, but the air in the dimly lit meeting room hangs heavy with tension as the members of the Obsidian Shadows gather, their faces masked by the shadows that dance along the walls. Leo, the leader, sits at the head of the table, his eyes scanning the room, assessing the loyalty of each member.

As discussions continue within the Obsidian Shadows, I never say anything. Leo speaks the most, and the others sometimes offer opinions. Leo relies on Sofia and Cara heavily. Cara, our double agent, has been spending more and more time behind enemy lines lately.

Without warning, Leo's gaze narrows as he stares down each of us. These past few weeks, I've met a great deal more of the Obsidian Shadows, and I'm not worthy of having a place at the table, standing instead against the wall with some of the others.

His gaze locks onto Sofia's. After a long moment, he growls, "Something's not right. Speak, Sofia. What are you hiding?"

"Leo, I assure you—"

“Enough,” he interrupts, a cold glint in his eyes that sends a shiver down my spine.

If looks could kill...

Cara’s right. He’s a villain.

“The shadows don’t lie, Sofia. You’ve been playing a dangerous game.”

The room falls silent as Sofia’s composed exterior crumbles.

“I did what I had to do. The Obsidian Shadows are weak, and our enemies grow stronger. I chose the winning side.”

Leo snaps his fingers. Vinnie and Dante seize Sofia and shuffle her out the door.

There’s shouting and yelling, outrage over the betrayal, but I don’t know what precisely has happened.

Cara’s not at this meeting, so I shift over to Izzy.

“What’s going to happen to Sofia now?” I ask her.

“You don’t want to know,” she murmurs.

“Leo won’t have her killed, will he?”

Izzy stiffens.

“He’ll kill her himself?”

“He needs to know what she knows,” she mumbles.

“First,” I say, shuddering. “He needs to know what she knows first and then he’ll...”

The dance of shadows transforms into a perilous game where alliances crumble, loyalties are tested, and the looming threat of adversaries draws ever nearer. The sanctuary I sought within the Obsidian Shadows becomes a battleground, and the shadows, once protectors, now bear witness to the impending clash that threatens to consume us all.

The atmosphere within the Obsidian Shadows is charged with tension as I navigate the shadows toward Leo.

His gaze, a blend of authority and contemplation, meets mine.

“Leo, we can’t just—”

Before I can finish my sentence, Leo raises a hand, signaling for silence. His eyes, seasoned by the shadows and the weight of leadership, hold a silent understanding that transcends words. “I will always protect mine, Olivia.”

Leo’s grip on my chin is both gentle and firm, a subtle assertion of control that leaves me wondering about the complex dynamics at play. In the intimate touch, I sense a mixture of protectiveness and the acknowledgment that, at this moment, I stand within the sphere of his influence.

The air between us seems to thicken, shadows swirling around us as if bearing witness to an unspoken understanding. The question lingers—do I, in Leo’s eyes, fall under the category of those he deems his own?

As Leo’s touch lingers, I grapple with the ambiguity of our connection. Is this a gesture of protection, a reminder that I’m under his wing, or a calculated move within the shadows, concealing motives that remain elusive? The uncertainty hangs in the air, leaving me torn between trust and wariness.

What does this mean? Am I one of his? Or just another piece on the chessboard of this clandestine world?

The encounter with Leo leaves me standing at the intersection of loyalty and ambiguity, the shadows concealing the true nature of our connection. As the Obsidian Shadows navigate the aftermath of betrayal, the enigmatic dynamics between Leo and me cast a shadow over the complexities of loyalty within the clandestine world we inhabit.

His expression becomes unreadable. “In this world, betrayal demands a price. You know that. Derrick betrayed you, and how did you repay him?”

I gulp. He’s not wrong.

Maybe I’m a villain too.



CAUGHT in the intricate web of the mafia's clandestine world, I find my relationships strained amidst the fallout of betrayal. The complexities of trust, loyalty, and the allure of something more weave a tapestry of uncertainty, forcing me to navigate a perilous path where the shadows conceal both deception and unexpected connections.

Maybe I'm paranoid, but I'm starting to think that some of the members are looking at me sideways, as if I, too, am to blame somehow. Or maybe I'm still just trying to reconcile my role in the mob.

There's no denying that the revelation of Sofia's betrayal has cast a shadow over the unity of the Obsidian Shadows. Tensions rise, and the once-solid alliances within the mafia begin to fray. The enigmatic dynamics among the members make it challenging to discern friend from foe, leaving me to question the authenticity of every interaction.

But even as some of my relationships within the mafia start to become strained, some trend in the other direction.

There's a knock on my door. Vinnie's here, and he places a bag on the table, and as I open it, I find an array of art supplies—canvases, paints, brushes—carefully chosen to rekindle a flame that had been extinguished in the darkness.

“Thought you might need something to bring a little light into this place.”

His voice is a gentle melody that resonates within the confined space, and the subtle warmth in his eyes suggests a kindness that transcends the shadows. The gesture sparks a connection, a shared understanding that art becomes a refuge amidst the chaos.

As the days unfold, Vinnie becomes a steady presence in my life within the Obsidian Shadows. We share moments surrounded by canvases and colors, the air thick with the scent of paint. In the silence between brushstrokes, a silent camaraderie blossoms, forging a connection that speaks to a shared solace found in the creative process.

Vinnie's kindness extends beyond the realm of art. His actions speak louder than words as he anticipates needs before they are voiced, weaving a tapestry of consideration that wraps around the frayed edges of my existence within the shadows. His presence becomes a sanctuary, a respite from the complexities that surround us.

In the confined space of our shared artistic refuge, Vinnie's closeness becomes both a comfort and a source of unspoken tension. He stands near, the subtle brush of his arm against mine, the proximity suggesting a connection that extends beyond friendship. In the dance of shadows, I wonder if there's a desire lingering in the air, a question of whether our connection could transcend the boundaries dictated by the clandestine world.

Amidst the strokes of paint and the whispers of shared laughter, Vinnie reveals moments of vulnerability. His eyes, usually guarded by the shadows, unveil glimpses of a soul that bears scars similar to mine. The shared pain creates a bridge, a connection built on the understanding that amidst the shadows, moments of vulnerability can be a beacon of shared humanity.

As we navigate the delicate dance of friendship, Vinnie's actions and gestures leave an unspoken question lingering in the shadows. In the quiet moments when our eyes meet, I wonder if there's a desire for something more—a question that hangs in the air, shrouded by the uncertainty of a clandestine world.

In the intimate space carved out by art and shared moments, the connection between Vinnie and me deepens, threading through the shadows that define our existence within the Obsidian Shadows. The unspoken tensions and shared vulnerabilities become brushstrokes on the canvas of our evolving relationship, leaving the possibility of something more lingering in the air like an unanswered question in the shadows.

He's not the only one I've been growing closer to, though. One night, Dante learns about how I used to enjoy going for long runs.

“You like running, huh? Well, we’ve got a treadmill around here. I’ll make it your new best friend.”

“I hate treadmills,” I murmur. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Just wait. I’ll be there with you.” He grins at me.

After we finish eating, Dante leads me to the hidden enclave where the treadmill resides, a silent machine waiting in the shadows. Despite his best efforts to make it appealing, the mechanical whirr and monotonous rhythm fail to capture the essence of the open road that fuels my passion for running.

“Come on, give it a try. You might grow to like it,” he encourages.

“And I might start to like eggplant.”

“You don’t like eggplant?”

“No. I hate scrambled eggs too.”

“Picky,” he teases. “Let’s try something different. Maybe lifting is more your style.”

He brings me over to the weightlifting room. Hidden among the shadows, the room holds an array of equipment, each piece resonating with the potential for transformation.

“I used to work out all the time,” I tell him. “Run, lift weights...”

“Why?”

“Derrick wanted me to look a certain way.”

“So you didn’t do it for you?”

“The long runs were for me...” I grimace. “Or maybe it was just a way to get out of the house, away from him... I don’t know. Isn’t that pathetic?”

“You need to learn what you want to do, what you like. Maybe pilates—”

“We’re here.” I run my fingers along some hand weights. “Might as well see what I remember.”

Dante becomes an unexpected guide in the realm of weightlifting, his expertise evident as he imparts knowledge

on proper form and technique. The clinking of weights and the rhythmic breathing create a cadence that resonates with newfound determination. In the shadows of the weightlifting room, I discover a different kind of solace, one that goes beyond the pursuit of physical fitness.

“Here, let me show you the right way to do this.”

“I basically just watched videos and tried to teach myself,” I tell him.

“No fitness coach, huh?”

“And have another man touch his wife? Derrick would’ve killed him.” I grunt. “Or me.”

Dante smirks at me.

As he adjusts my posture, his touch lingers on my skin, sending a subtle ripple of flustered warmth through me. This is precisely why Derrick didn’t want this to happen to me... and I am very glad that it is.

Fuck you, Derrick.

In the intimate space of the weightlifting room, Dante’s hands guide mine through the correct motions. The unexpected touch evokes a sense of vulnerability and yet, beneath the surface, a pleasing warmth takes root. The shadows bear witness to a subtle shift in the dynamics—an unspoken connection that transcends the realm of fitness.

As Dante becomes a mentor in the pursuit of physical well-being, the weightlifting room transforms into a sanctuary of empowerment. The shadows, once harboring echoes of past expectations, give way to a new narrative—a narrative where fitness is not a means of conforming but a journey of self-discovery.

In the shadows of the Obsidian Shadows’ weightlifting room, Dante becomes an unexpected ally in my quest for physical well-being. The unspoken moments, marked by guidance and touch, unravel the layers of past expectations, allowing a new narrative of transformation to take shape. The gym, once a symbol of obligation, now emerges as a realm where shadows and strength converge, and where Dante’s

presence becomes an integral part of a journey toward self-discovery.



YES, amidst the aftermath of betrayal, Vinnie and Dante have emerged as beacons of support, their presence offering solace in the tumultuous world of the mafia. The shared experiences and the unspoken understanding between us foster a connection that transcends the shadows. As our friendship deepens, the possibility of something more hovers in the periphery, an uncharted territory fraught with both allure and peril.

The shadows that once served as a shield now become a veil shrouding the intentions of those around me. Navigating the delicate balance between deceit and loyalty becomes a daily struggle. Each whispered conversation, every exchanged glance, holds the potential for hidden agendas, forcing me to tread carefully in a world where trust is a scarce commodity.

The strained relationships within the Obsidian Shadows compel me to question the allegiances of those I once deemed trustworthy. Loyalties blur, and the line between friend and foe becomes increasingly elusive. In this treacherous landscape, discerning who can be truly trusted becomes an ongoing challenge, and the shadows cast doubts on even the most steadfast connections.

As I grow closer to Vinnie and Dante, the allure of deeper connections becomes both comforting and disconcerting. The ambiguous nature of our relationships adds a layer of complexity, leaving me to grapple with the question of whether these newfound bonds are genuine or if they conceal motives lurking within the shadows.

The mafia's intricate dance of deceit and loyalty propels me into a realm where alliances are fragile, and trust is a currency traded cautiously. In the shadowy corners of this clandestine world, I must navigate the complexities of relationships, questioning who holds true and who harbors secrets that could tip the delicate balance of loyalty within the Obsidian Shadows.

sixteen

Leo calls me to his office, and little do I know that I'm about to learn more about the true nature of the mafia world. The lines between right and wrong blur as I confront the harsh realities.

In the dimly lit expanse of Leo's office, the air hangs heavy with the weight of untold secrets. As I step into the room, Leo's piercing gaze meets mine, the shadows playing across his face like a dance of veiled truths.

"Sit down, Olivia. We need to talk."

His voice, authoritative and laden with the weight of experience, commands my attention. As I settle into the chair, Leo begins to unravel the layers of the mafia world, a world where morality becomes a fragile construct, and the lines between right and wrong blur into shades of gray.

I settle into the chair, the leather cool against my skin, as Leo's intense gaze fixes upon me. The air in the room becomes charged with an unspoken weight.

"You've stepped into a world where black and white don't exist. In our world, it's all shades of gray. Morality is a luxury we can't always afford."

The weight of Leo's words settles upon me, each syllable a revelation that peels back the layers of illusion.

"Loyalty is currency, and betrayal is the deadliest sin," he continues. "We operate in the shadows because that's where the truth hides, the truth about survival."

“I know about surviving,” I murmur. “Derrick... Even if he hadn’t been a Scarlet Viper, I... I think we still would’ve fought that night. I... I would’ve... I wanted to leave him. I would’ve. I only came back because... I was afraid he would find me. I knew I had to confront him, that it would be me or him...”

“You were very brave.”

I snort and blink back tears. “Brave? I stayed in a loveless, abusive... You don’t know what he did to me, how I felt... I had friends before, friends I abandoned. I picked him over them, and I picked wrong. I didn’t have much of a life, and it was because I stayed.”

“You saved up money, didn’t you? You wanted to leave.”

“I wanted to, but I didn’t actually, now, did I?”

“You killed him, and you got rid of the evidence. You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

“I came running to you for protection like a bitch with her tail between her legs.”

“Knowing you need help and asking for it isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s a different kind of strength.”

I swallow hard.

“You’re here now, Olivia, whether you like it or not, and to survive, you’ll have to navigate these shadows without the comfort of moral certainties.”

Leo’s words paint a stark picture of the ruthless underbelly of the mafia—the power struggles, the alliances forged in shadows, and the compromises that define survival in this clandestine realm. The stories he shares, a tapestry of deception and calculated moves, strip away the veneer of illusions, leaving the harsh realities of the mafia world laid bare.

After a moment, he sighs. “You’re not the only one with secrets, Olivia. I’ve been digging, trying to understand the web we’re entangled in. Sofia... Let’s just say she started to talk, and I learned something crucial.”

He leans forward, his gaze unwavering. I don't dare blink, terrified of what I'm about to hear.

“Derrick was on a mission, a task assigned by the Scarlet Vipers. I don't know the specifics, but it was significant, something that goes beyond the usual dealings of our world.”

A chill runs down my spine as Leo's words unravel a thread of mystery.

“They want you alive. Somehow, you're tied to Derrick's mission. Whatever he was tasked with, it holds the key to why the Scarlet Vipers are watching, waiting.”

In the dim light of Leo's office, the gravity of the revelation settles over me. Derrick's mission, a puzzle piece in the larger machinations of the Scarlet Vipers, becomes the elusive truth that binds my fate to the shadows.

“I just don't see how... I don't know anything,” I protest. “There's nothing I have, nothing I know...”

He leans back. “We need to figure out what Derrick was involved in, Olivia. It's the only way we'll truly understand why they want you alive.”

As Leo acknowledges the complexity of the situation, I find myself standing at the crossroads of revelation and uncertainty, the shadows concealing the secrets that could unravel the enigma of Derrick's mission and the Scarlet Vipers' vested interest in my survival.

Ignoring my dead husband for now, I find the courage to ask, “Did you have Sofia killed for her betrayal?”

The question hangs in the air, heavy with implications, as I lock eyes with Leo, searching for answers in the depths of shadows.

Leo meets my gaze without hesitation or guilt. “No, Olivia. I handled it myself. There are some matters that demand a personal touch.”

The revelation leaves an indelible mark on the atmosphere, a testament to the ruthless pragmatism that governs the underworld we inhabit.

“Did you... Did you have to torture the answers out of her?” I croak.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” he says smoothly.

“How can I not—”

“You’re here. You’re safe. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“You would kill for power, for your mob.”

He snorts. “That shouldn’t surprise you.”

He’s right. It doesn’t.

“You knew the Obsidian Shadows were a mob when you came asking for our protection. You had some idea that I’m a villain. That’s what I am. I haven’t hid that from you, and I won’t. You don’t know the extent of my past, what I’ve done, what I’m willing to do if I must, but do know this. You’re under my protection now. The Obsidian Shadows will keep you safe.”

Leo’s vow, uttered with a solemnity that echoes in the confines of his office, becomes a shield against the lurking dangers of the shadows.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. You’re one of us now, and we take care of our own.”

In the delicate dance of shadows, Leo’s words become a pledge, a bond forged in the crucible of loyalty and survival, promising protection in a world where trust is a scarce currency.

As Leo delves into the intricacies of loyalty and betrayal, I find myself entangled in the moral ambiguity of the choices that lie ahead. The distinction between good and bad blurs, and the shadows cast by Leo’s revelations stretch into the very core of my understanding. The lines I once believed were immutable become threads unraveling in the face of a complex and unforgiving reality.

The world I now inhabit demands a recalibration of my moral compass. The shadows that once concealed secrets now cast a spotlight on the choices that lie ahead, and the reality of

the mafia world becomes an unspoken contract, demanding a willingness to tread the blurred lines of morality.

But at this moment, as Leo draws me into his arms and starts to kiss me fiercely, all the shadows and secrets fade away. I know now that, whatever lies ahead, I am safe with him. His embrace is a promise of protection—a vow of loyalty and love between us both that will not be broken.

His hands slide up my back before delicately exploring my curves as I melt against him. His eagerness only serves to heighten my desire for him, and I can feel myself start to tremble in anticipation as he pulls me onto his lap. His erection throbs against me through his pants, and I know this time there will be no holding back. We're both ready for this.

He wraps one arm around my waist while the other trails down between us before finding its way inside my pants, down my underwear, and inside me. This time, however, instead of focusing solely on pleasure, we savor each moment, our eyes locked in an unspoken understanding that transcends words. The intensity builds as Leo moves inside me faster and faster until finally with a loud sigh, I come against his fingers.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Give yourself over to me.”

His hands come up to cradle my face and our eyes lock together in a moment that transcends time and space.

I am lost in the depths of his gaze, the electricity between us rising until it is almost unbearable.

His kiss is invasive and brutal, as if he longs to claim me, and I give myself fully to him.

Leo breaks off the kiss and looks into my eyes with an intensity I have never seen before.

“You are safe here,” he whispers reassuringly. “With me.”

My heart swells with emotion at his words, and I can feel myself starting to relax in his arms. My fear starts to dissolve away, replaced by a warmth that envelops my entire being like never before.

He wiggles his hand between us and frees his cock from his pants. Taking the invitation for what it is, I ride him right then and there, our bodies moving together as one. His face is a mixture of pleasure and pain as I grip onto him tightly, holding onto the moment for dear life.

His thrusts become faster and more passionate. I can feel my orgasm building within me until it explodes into a million tiny sparks that fill my body with an overdose of pleasure. Leo's face is a mask of desire as he grasps my hips tightly and moves inside me faster and faster until finally, he shudders in rapture beneath me. I can actually feel the intensity of his pleasure course through me like an electric current.

Normally, after we fuck, Leo doesn't cuddle me. He'll fetch me a towel. Then, I'll clean up and leave.

This time, Leo extends a protective embrace, drawing me into the shelter of his arms. The room, bathed in shadows, becomes a haven in which the complexities of the underworld momentarily fade away.

As he holds me close, a silent acknowledgment passes between us. Despite his assurances, we both know the danger is far from over. The echoes of a clandestine world linger, and the shadows, though momentarily pushed back, continue to weave an intricate tapestry of uncertainty.

In the warmth of Leo's embrace, a paradox unfolds. The safety provided by the Obsidian Shadows becomes a fragile sanctuary in a world where peril is an ever-present companion. The reassurance of his arms offers a respite, but the awareness that the shadows hold secrets yet unrevealed casts a subtle tension over the intimate moment.

The embrace becomes a silent acknowledgment, a recognition that, even within the arms of protection, the intricacies of the mafia world demand perpetual vigilance. In the dance of shadows, Leo's hold serves as both a sanctuary and a reminder that the danger, like the shadows themselves, is a persistent force that lingers, waiting to resurface.

seventeen

After a few lingering kisses, I pull away. A part of me wants to stay with Leo, but I'm certain he's sleeping with some of the others, or at least I wouldn't put it past him. I mean, they basically told me to go sleep with him. Why would they do that unless it was expected?

And I have no claim on him. If anything, I owe him everything.

And I'm also thinking about Vinnie and Dante. Even Rafe, who I've had many fun times with in the kitchen making food for everyone. Cooking with someone else is actually a fun, wonderful experience, with plenty of opportunities for stolen glances and brushing up against each other.

Would Leo care if I kissed any of the others? If I slept with them? I've never looked at another guy after Derrick and I became a couple, but now, in some ways, I feel like my wings are spreading... even if my wings have also been clipped.

Since returning here after the Sunrise Bistro incident, I haven't left the confines of this hideout. Yes, I'm safe, but I'm not free, and it's slowly killing me even as I try to find moments of joy here and there.

I fix my clothes and return to my room, only to grab clothes so I can go and shower. The hot water releases some of my tension, and I melt into my bed that night, sleep, for once, coming nice and easy.

Just like I come with Leo.



AS THE MORNING light filters through the curtains, the remnants of the night's revelations linger, casting a nuanced hue over the shadows that dance in the corners.

Soon after, a summons from Leo leads me back to the heart of the mafia enclave. In the dimly lit room that serves as Leo's makeshift office, he entrusts me with a task that delves into the clandestine underbelly of their operations.

"We need to move some funds to offshore accounts. Keep it away from prying eyes." His voice, low and authoritative, cuts through the air as he hands me a dossier containing the details of the financial maneuver.

The dossier reveals a web of offshore accounts, each a discreet repository for the mafia's financial holdings. The instructions are clear—navigate the shadows of the financial world to relocate funds beyond the reach of governmental scrutiny.

"I'll get right on this," I assure him.

"Thank you." He nods.

I take my leave and get to work right away in my room on my laptop. Every few minutes, I glance up to look at the black box. It's all I have from my old life, that and the gun and bullets. The Scarlet Vipers don't want that back, right? It has to be something more than that.

Shaking my head, I get back to it, but as I delve into the intricacies of the financial transfer, a disconcerting realization takes root. A significant sum is missing, a conspicuous absence that casts a shadow over the meticulously orchestrated plan.

Panic builds in my chest, and I grab my laptop and hurry to Leo's room. I knock.

"Enter."

I burst inside. "Leo, there's a discrepancy with your money. A substantial amount is unaccounted for."

Leo meets my gaze with an inscrutable expression, his eyes betraying a knowledge that lingers beneath the surface.

“I used that money,” he utters calmly.

The confession sends a ripple through the room, and the shadows seem to deepen as the weight of his words settles in.

It’s his money, of course, and I have no right to question him.

But I do.

“You used it for what?”

Not the most eloquent question, but I’m reeling. My adrenaline has my blood pumping, and I can’t settle.

“Firearms. We needed more firepower.”

The revelation, delivered with a calculated calm, casts a shadow over the room, and my eyes widen with a mixture of surprise and concern. The amount of money he used to purchase firearms... He has enough now for a small war.

“Enough to make sure we’re ready for whatever comes our way,” he adds, clearly reading my face as I put two and two together.

In the shadows of Leo’s revelation, the missing funds become a currency of preparation, a strategic investment in the arsenal needed to navigate the unpredictable landscape of the mafia world. As the shadows deepen, the understanding dawns that survival demands more than just financial maneuvering. It requires the readiness to confront the unseen threats that lurk within the labyrinth of shadows.

Leo’s expression remains inscrutable as he meets my gaze, the shadows deepening around the revelation of his intentions. “We’re navigating a dangerous terrain, Olivia. Sometimes, you need more than just words to protect what’s yours.”

“I’ll do whatever you need,” I assure him. “I’ll finish moving the money securely.”

“Thank you.”



ONCE I FINISH MY TASK, I start to do more digging. The dim glow of my laptop screen casts a muted ambiance in the room as I plunge deeper into the shadows, intent on unraveling the mysteries that bind the Scarlet Vipers and the government in a clandestine dance. Cryptic messages and encrypted files become my guide through the labyrinth of corruption, revealing a connection that threatens the very pillars of justice.

As I sift through the digital debris, a chilling truth surfaces. I've stumbled upon a web of compromised figures within the government, willingly entangled in the Scarlet Vipers' machinations. These revelations paint a grim portrait of political pawns manipulated by the criminal underworld.

The evidence is damning, pointing to hushed agreements and covert transactions that exchange the integrity of justice for a sinister alliance. The Scarlet Vipers, shielded by political influence, operate beyond the reach of the law, their actions threatening not just the stability of the criminal underworld but the very foundations of the nation.

In the shadows, I find encrypted communications detailing the collusion between high-ranking government officials and the Scarlet Vipers. The revelation sends shivers down my spine as the gravity of the conspiracy becomes clear—it's not just about crime, but a calculated assault on the principles of justice, a breach that jeopardizes national security.

Caught in the crossfire of this revelation, I grapple with a dilemma. The key to exposing this sinister alliance also marks me as a target. The shadows that once offered a refuge now conceal a danger that transcends the confines of the mafia world. As I navigate this treacherous terrain, the blurred lines between criminality and governance challenge me to confront the ominous specter of collusion, where shadows cast by corruption loom large over the fragile foundations of truth and justice.

The weight of the revelation about the Scarlet Vipers and government corruption presses against my chest, but for now, I choose to guard this dangerous secret. The shadows of the conspiracy deepen, and I navigate them with a cautious silence.



AS THE NIGHT DESCENDS, Rafe and I find ourselves in the shared space of the sanctuary's makeshift kitchen. The dim glow of overhead lights casts a warm ambiance, creating an illusion of normalcy amidst the clandestine world we inhabit. The clinking of utensils against pots and pans becomes a rhythmic symphony as we set out to prepare dinner.

Amidst the simmering aroma of spices and the sizzle of ingredients in the pan, a playful dance of flirtation emerges between Rafe and me. Our banter weaves seamlessly into the fabric of the night, a temporary respite from the shadows that encircle us. Laughter punctuates the air, momentarily drowning out the echoes of a dangerous truth.

I grin. "So, Rafe, any secret family recipes you're hiding from the rest of us?"

He smirks. "Well, if I told you, they wouldn't be secret anymore, now would they?"

We share a laugh, the sound echoing in the confined space as we continue our culinary dance. The aroma of spices and ingredients mingles with the banter, creating an atmosphere that teeters between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

"I heard a rumor that you're the master of the perfect risotto," I say playfully.

He adopts a faux serious expression. "Ah, the secrets of the risotto are sacred, my friend, but, for you, maybe I'll consider sharing."

My heart skips a beat. Friend? Is that all he sees me as?

The knife slices through vegetables, and the sizzle of ingredients in the pan punctuates our conversation. As we navigate the dance of meal preparation, the banter becomes a thread weaving through the tapestry of the night.

I cast a sideways glance at him. He might only see me as a friend, and maybe that's for the best, but maybe I can get the wheels churning for him.

"So, Rafe, what's your idea of the perfect dinner date?"

To my surprise, he pauses as if in deep contemplation. I expected a teasing remark, but maybe he's being serious.

“Well, good company, a bottle of wine, and a dish that's a feast for the senses. How about you?”

“I'd say good company, too, but add a dash of mystery and a sprinkle of danger,” I joke.

The kitchen air is charged with an unexpected tension, a magnetic pull that transcends the ordinary banter. Rafe and I lock eyes, the unspoken understanding hanging in the air like a delicate balance.

As we continue the dance of meal preparation, a shared energy lingers, igniting a subtle spark between us. The proximity feels electric, and in a moment of unguarded spontaneity, our movements sync in a dance that brings us dangerously close. Rafe's gaze shifts from my eyes to my lips, and I'm ready to close my eyes, to let him kiss me.

The awareness of my involvement with Leo flickers briefly in my mind, a distant reminder of the complex dynamics within the Obsidian Shadows. Yet, at this moment, a surge of wild liberation courses through me. The absence of Derrick's oppressive presence has unleashed a sense of freedom, an untamed spirit longing to break free.

The scent of spices and the simmering sounds of the kitchen fade into the background as the air crackles with an unspoken tension. In that suspended moment, I feel both wild and free, a contradiction to the constraints of my recent past.

But Rafe merely bumps our noses before drawing back and returning to work.

The almost kiss becomes a manifestation of newfound liberation, a rebellious whisper against the shadows that once bound me. Still, even though we didn't kiss, the dance of flirtation continues, now underscored by a shared understanding that the kitchen, with its secrets and shadows, holds more than culinary mysteries. The almost kiss becomes a symbol of an untamed spirit that refuses to be confined, even within the intricate tapestry of mafia alliances.

Rafe and I prepared a savory and aromatic dish of chicken piccata served with a side of lemon-infused risotto. The tantalizing aroma of the herbs and spices filled the air, creating an inviting atmosphere as the culinary symphony unfolded in the sanctuary's kitchen. The flavors, a delicate balance of zesty lemon, rich chicken, and creamy risotto, became a testament to the shared culinary prowess and banter that defined the evening.

We call the others over to eat, and the shared meal is a temporary respite, a moment where laughter and conversation weave through the communal space. As the remnants of dinner are cleared away, a weighty secret presses on my chest, and I decide to confide in Cara.

“Can we talk?” I ask her.

“Go ahead, Olivia.”

“Ah... in private.”

She nods, and we find a secluded corner, away from prying eyes and curious ears, where the shadows offer a semblance of privacy.

“What’s going on?” she asks softly.

I hesitate. After everything with Sofia, it’s hard to know who to trust. After all, Leo trusted someone who was supposed to be neutral, and Cara’s a former Scarlet Viper who still pretends to be on their side.

But I need to tell someone, and I don’t want to bring everything to Leo when he’s already preparing for war.

“Cara, there’s something I need to share with you,” I say, my tone a bit desperate. “It’s about what I discovered, the connection between the Scarlet Vipers and the government.”

She nods solemnly. “Go on, Olivia. I’m listening.”

In hushed tones, I reveal the unsettling truths I’ve unearthed, the threads of corruption that bind the criminal underworld to the highest echelons of power. Cara’s expression shifts from curiosity to concern as the gravity of the information settles between us.

“I need your help, Cara,” I say earnestly. “I can’t navigate this alone. Can you look into it for me? See if there’s any way we can expose this without putting everyone in more danger?”

Cara’s eyes reflect a steely determination, a silent promise to delve into the shadows and extract whatever truths lie within. She nods, signaling her commitment to unraveling the sinister tapestry I’ve stumbled upon.

“I’ll dig deeper, Olivia. We need to know what we’re up against. Trust me, we’ll find a way to expose them without jeopardizing the safety of our allies.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s what I do.” She pats my hand and then lowers her head. “I know you’ve been having a hard time here. I get that. You can’t leave. If the Scarlet Vipers find you... If they can’t get their hands on you, they just might try to use you killing your husband against you. We have some cops on our side, but there are some who are on theirs.”

“I’m... managing.”

“I’ve been where you are. Similarly enough anyway.”

I lift my eyebrows

“I got drawn into the Scarlet Vipers because of my husband.”

Her voice carries a weight of vulnerability, and I listen intently, sensing the painful history that she’s about to unravel.

“He... He forced it on me, really. I had no choice. He was abusive, Olivia, long before I found out, and I had to do what he asked of me, but one night... it got so bad that I thought it might be the end for me. He... He almost killed me. That’s when they approached me—the Obsidian Shadows. They offered protection, a way out. I turned turncoat to survive.”

The revelation lands with a profound impact, and the weight of Cara’s confession resonates within the dimly lit space. In the shadows, we share a bond forged by the common thread of survival, of navigating treacherous paths to escape the clutches of those who sought to destroy us.

“Cara, I had no idea,” I say softly. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

Her smile is tight and grim. “We all have our demons, Olivia. It’s what brought us here, to this world of shadows, but now, we have a chance to expose the truth and bring justice to those who exploit the vulnerable.”

The unspoken understanding between us deepens, as the shadows that shroud our pasts become bridges that connect rather than divide. Together, we carry the weight of our histories, determined to confront the Scarlet Vipers and the corrupt forces that entangle us in this intricate dance of shadows and secrets.

She gets up to go, but I pat her hand.

“Cara... Are the Obsidian Shadows better?”

“Better, yes,” she says softly, “but that doesn’t mean they’re... we’re... good. It’s a dark world out there, and we say we’re a light in the shadows, that we’re doing good, and that’s true to some extent, but...”

I nod, my stomach tightening. I already knew this.

I can’t leave if I want to.

Honestly, I don’t want to leave. There’s no life for me outside anymore. All I can do is try to make my life here as good as it can be.

Which means if I get another chance for a kiss, I’m going to take it.

Each day might be my last, and I’m not going to miss out on any more chances for moments of stolen happiness.

eighteen

The glow of my laptop screen illuminates the dim room as I navigate the intricacies of the dark web. A connection request materializes, a digital thread reaching out from the shadows. Intrigued and cautious, I accept the connection, uncertain of what secrets or dangers may lie ahead.

“Greetings, seeker of shadows,” the encrypted message reads. “I’ve heard whispers of your quest. Are you prepared to delve deeper?”

Intrigued and cautious, I consider how to respond, my fingers dancing over the keyboard to respond.

My message is also encrypted. “Who are you, and what information do you possess?”

“Names are transient in this realm. Call me Cipher. I possess fragments of the Scarlet Vipers’ secrets, threads that lead to the heart of their darkness.”

A shiver of anticipation runs down my spine. No one offers information without wanting something in return. Not only that but how can I trust this information?

“What do you want in return for this information?”

“A symbiotic alliance. Your skills and my knowledge. Together, we can unveil the truths that the shadows conceal.”

“Allow me a moment to consider this.”

I sit back. Can this enigmatic Cipher become both an ally and a potential adversary in the quest to uncover the dark

truths that bind the Scarlet Vipers and the government?

Eager to glean any information that might help unravel the mysteries surrounding the Scarlet Vipers and the government, I decide to confide in Leo. In the confines of his office, where shadows dance across the walls like silent observers, I share the development.

“Leo, someone reached out to me on the dark web.” I hand him my laptop so he can see the exchange for himself. “They claim to have information about the Scarlet Vipers and their government ties.”

Leo’s eyes narrow. “Proceed with caution, Olivia,” he advises. “The shadows of the digital realm can be just as treacherous as those in our physical world. But if there’s information to be gained, learn what you can.”

With a wary nod, I head back to my room, prepared to delve into this uneasy alliance, forming a digital connection with someone whose identity remains shrouded. Our exchanges become a dance of coded messages and encrypted communication, each revelation pulling me deeper into the intricate web of secrets that surround the Scarlet Vipers and their collusion with the government.

As the digital shadows envelop me, Leo’s caution echoes in the back of my mind, a reminder that alliances in the dark web are fragile, and trust is a rare commodity. Yet, in this digital dance of shadows, I tread carefully, driven by the hope that the information gained may serve as a key to unraveling the web of corruption that entangles us all.

“I accept your offer, Cipher. Unveil the threads that lead to the heart of the Scarlet Vipers’ darkness.”

“Wise choice, seeker of shadows. Our alliance begins. Your skills and my knowledge shall dance in the digital labyrinth, unraveling the secrets that elude the light.”

As the encrypted messages flash across the screen, the uneasy alliance is sealed in the language of the shadows. A digital pact is formed, and with Leo’s caution echoing in the background, I prepare to navigate the intricate dance of coded

conversations, prepared to delve into the depths of the digital underworld in search of truths that may bring light to the shadows surrounding the Scarlet Vipers and their government ties.

But the next message has me snorting. This Cipher is nothing more than a sham.

“All in good time, seeker of shadows. All in good time.”

I check and double-check the connection. Cipher can't determine where I am, nor where the signal is coming from. Cipher has no way to access our servers or our information, so for now, this means nothing. Will it come to something? Who knows.



EVERY NIGHT BEFORE BED, I always check and see if the police, news outlets, or social media accounts say anything about me or Derrick. Nothing ever comes back. I guess you could say that I'm hoping for a flicker of recognition that I existed in a world now left behind

Until tonight.

Angela, my coworker from a life I've left behind, the one whose recipe Derrick hated and that I never did try, emerges as a beacon of recognition. In the digital whispers of social media, I discover that she's organizing a remembrance party for me. The realization elicits a surge of conflicting emotions—gratitude for the acknowledgment of my existence and a pang of nostalgia for the connections severed by the shadows.

“They remember,” I murmur to myself.

The dichotomy of being remembered while existing in the shadows tugs at my heart. In this clandestine existence, where my very identity is cloaked in secrecy, Angela's gesture becomes a poignant reminder of the life I once lived.

When morning comes, I'm smiling for once.

Dante notices and sidles up to me. “What has you so happy?”

“An old coworker is having a remembrance party for me. It’s stupid for me to care, but... I do. I can’t go, of course, but—”

“I can go.”

I startle.

“I’ll go in your stead.”

His words carry a sincerity that resonates in the quiet room. It’s a lifeline thrown across the chasm between the life I’ve left behind and the shadows that envelop me.

“Thank you, Dante,” I say softly. “I appreciate the offer.”

“Of course.”

Impulsively, I lay my head on his shoulder.

He pats my cheek. “You’re okay, Olivia.”

I almost believe him.



THAT NIGHT, I go to see Leo. Like most nights, words aren’t needed as he takes me into his arms, kissing me, brushing back my short bob.

But for whatever reason, the weight of the concealed world presses down on me, and an insidious anxiety takes root. Maybe it’s because I know that others are gathering right now in remembrance of me. Coworkers and friends I abandoned for Derrick’s sake are coming together to mourn me. They can’t possibly understand why the police won’t look for me.

It feels like walls closing in, constricting the very air I breathe. Panic threatens to engulf me, a dark wave rising from the depths of the shadows. My breath quickens, and a feeling of suffocation tightens its grip, an invisible vice around my chest.

Leo draws back. He must sense something’s wrong.

“Leo, I... I need...”

The words catch in my throat, trapped by the tendrils of anxiety that coil within me. Leo’s eyes, perceptive and

understanding, meet mine, and without a word, he beckons me to a seat. The sanctuary of his office becomes a haven, a momentary respite from the shadows that threaten to consume me.

“Breathe, Olivia,” he instructs calmly. “In and out. You’re safe here.”

His words become a lifeline, guiding me through the storm of panic. In the quiet refuge of his office, the walls loosen their grip, and the air becomes less suffocating.

Slowly, the panic subsides.

Leo rubs my back. “Did the party bring this on?”

Of course Dante told him about it. Or maybe he uncovered the details himself.

“Ah, maybe,” I murmur.

“What else?” He smooths back my hair.

I stare at one of his scars. Who gave it to him? Why? Does that person still live? Or are they maimed too?

His scars give him a dangerous air, and there can be dangerous glints in his eyes, but Leo won’t harm me.

Not unless I do something against him or his.

Until then, I’m his.

“Talk to me,” he says gently.

“Some of it...” I swallow hard. “Some of it might be that I haven’t been able to leave this building.”

He slowly nods. “Come with me.”

Guiding me gently, Leo leads the way to the bar section of the Golden Tap. The ambient murmur of voices, the clinking of glasses, and the warm glow of the bar’s lights offer a stark contrast to the confined silence of the sanctuary. Surrounded by the hum of life, I find a momentary reprieve from the weight of the shadows.

“Thank you, Leo,” I say softly.

In the company of the patrons, I breathe in the semblance of normalcy, the facade of a life left behind. Leo's silent support becomes a reassurance in the night, a reminder that even within the shadows, moments of respite can be found.

Amidst the muted symphony of conversations and clinking glasses at the Golden Tap's bar, I find myself drawn into the ebb and flow of life beyond the Obsidian Shadows. The once-familiar cadence of laughter and camaraderie becomes a soothing backdrop, momentarily eclipsing the shadows that cling to my existence.

Engaging with the patrons, I allow myself to be immersed in the semblance of normalcy, shedding the weight of secrecy for a brief moment. Conversations unfold like echoes from a forgotten time, and the laughter, genuine and unburdened, intertwines with the soft music playing in the background.

A stranger smiles at me. "You're new around here, aren't you?"

I smile back. For once, the weight of my hidden identity feels lighter, and the mask I wear becomes more bearable.

"You could say that."

The exchange, though brief, is a testament to the transformative power of these stolen moments. In the company of strangers, I rediscover fragments of my old self, the self that once reveled in the simple joys of conversation and shared laughter.

As the night unfolds, the Golden Tap's patrons become unwitting accomplices in a charade of normalcy. The facade is delicate, yet in their company, I find a fleeting reprieve from the shadows that relentlessly pursue. For a brief interlude, I am not merely a denizen of the clandestine, but a participant in the dance of life, savoring the echoes of the person I used to be.

nineteen

The gentle murmur of the Golden Tap's bar retreats as Leo guides me back through the corridors to the seclusion of my room. The familiar comfort of the hidden sanctuary awaits, a cocoon of shadows that envelops me as I say a soft goodnight to Leo and then get ready for bed.

Maybe things will look better in the morning.

I'm ready to climb into bed when a soft knock resonates through the room. The unexpected sound halts my descent into the covers, and I glance toward the door. Who could that be?

I walk over to the door and open it to reveal Dante's silhouette in the muted glow of the corridor lights.

"Hey, Olivia. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

I smile. "Not at all. Come on in."

Dante's presence offers a welcomed diversion, a break from the solitude that often accompanies the shadows. He settles into a chair, but I remain standing.

"How was the party? I really do appreciate your going for me."

He leans back. "It was somber, you know? Angela did a great job organizing it. People shared stories about you. It was... emotional."

"I'm sure," I murmur. "Did anyone notice you?"

Dante's smile is a bit wry. "I told people I was the guy who lost you to Derrick. The number of people who said they

wished I never let you go...”

“I’m sure they all had opinions about Derrick,” I mumble.

“No one else mentioned him. They were there for you and only you.”

The look in his eyes... It’s almost too much for me to bear, and I glance away.

Dante stands and crosses the room over to me.

“I’m here for you and only you too,” he murmurs, cupping my face.

The kiss is sweet and tender, not at all like how I would expect Dante to kiss, but then he grabs my ass, thrusting his pelvis against me as he growls against my lips, almost animalistic.

Breathless, he draws back. “Too much?”

“No,” I whisper.

I suck and then bite his lower lip.

“Not enough,” I counter.

Dante grins and picks me up. I let out a shriek as he takes long strides to bring me over to the bed.

I reach for the oversized T-shirt I sleep in, but Dante handles undressing me before nearly ripping off his clothes.

He lays me down on the bed, and I can feel the heat radiating from his body. He kisses me deeply, exploring my mouth with his tongue as if he wants to memorize every inch of it.

His hands move all over my body, caressing every curve and sending waves of pleasure through me. His touch is gentle yet demanding, making sure to leave no part of my body untouched. I can hear him murmuring sweet words in between kisses, telling me how beautiful I am and how much he loves me.

I moan in pleasure as Dante plants a trail of kisses down my chest, his tongue exploring every inch of me from top to

bottom.

He proceeds to lick my folds, his tongue darting in and out of me in a dizzying flurry that has me gasping for breath. His lips suck on my clit, sending delicious jolts of pleasure to every nerve ending in my body. I'm trembling, ecstatic with pleasure as Dante brings me closer and closer to orgasm.

Derrick never gave me oral despite the countless blow jobs I gave him. Dante, though, eats me out like he's ravenous, like he can't get enough of my juices.

His movements are slow and steady as he savors every drop of my essence, sending shivers down my spine with each flick of his tongue. He knows just the right spot and how to press it for maximum pleasure. I'm so lost in the moment that all I can do is ride the waves of pleasure that keep coming until I finally reach an explosive climax.

Just when I think I can't take anymore, Dante slides two fingers inside me and starts pumping them gently while swirling his tongue around my clit. I scream out in pleasure as an intense orgasm rocks my body, and it seems like the world is spinning around me.

But does Dante stop? No. He continues on, taking his time, slowly tasting, teasing, tantalizing until I'm so aroused that I can't help but cry out for him to take me.

I can feel Dante smile against my skin, and he slides himself inside me with a single thrust. The pleasure is overwhelming, and I arch against him, letting out low moans as he moves faster and faster within me. Our movements become frantic as we both reach our climaxes at the same time, holding each other tightly as the waves of pleasure wash over us both, before finally settling into a peaceful blissful exhaustion.

When the world finally comes back into focus, Dante is lying next to me with a satisfied smirk on his face. He looks deep into my eyes with an intensity that is almost too much for me to bear.

"That was incredible," I whisper breathlessly.

Dante laughs softly before leaning down to give me a gentle kiss on the forehead.

“You deserve all the pleasure in this world,” he murmurs before settling down beside me and wrapping his arms around me.

Maybe it’s not smart for this to happen, but I curl against Dante’s bare chest and fall asleep, feeling content and more in charge of my body than ever before.

If only I was in control of my life, though...



WHEN I WAKE, Dante’s gone. That’s probably for the best even if I miss the warmth of his embrace.

He’s not around when I go to eat breakfast with the others, and I return to my room. Dawn pierces through the veiled windows of my room, and a new day unfolds, shrouded in the mystery and uncertainty that accompanies life within the Obsidian Shadows. With a sense of purpose, I navigate the digital channels under Cipher’s guiding hand, seeking the elusive threads that may unravel the truth hidden within the shadows.

“Cipher, anything new on the radar?”

“Seeker of shadows, I’ve been digging into the network. There are whispers—cryptic conversations and unusual activities. Something’s not right.”

“What do you mean, Cipher? Be specific.”

Not that I expect him to give me a straight answer. If Cipher even is a him.

“Unusual access patterns, encrypted messages within the inner circles. It points to a potential breach or someone operating from within.”

My heart pounds. “A traitor?”

“It’s a possibility. I’m tracing the threads, trying to pinpoint the source. This is delicate, seeker of shadows. Proceed with caution.”

“Understood.”

The exchange unfolds in the dim glow of the digital realm, each keystroke a clandestine dance between the shadows and the unseen.

With a sense of urgency, I navigate the encrypted channels, my fingers dancing across the keys as I unravel the threads that may expose the shadowy figure within. The messages, an intricate tapestry of encrypted words, become the conduits through which the looming threat is unveiled, a whisper that echoes in the silent spaces between each typed character.

I can't find anything, but maybe I'm not looking in the right places. Of course, there is the possibility that none of this is real. Cipher hasn't asked anything of me, after all.

With the newfound intel clenched in my virtual grasp, I seek an audience with Leo, the linchpin of the Obsidian Shadows. In his office, where shadows dance in tandem with the gravity of unspoken truths, I present the ominous revelation.

“Leo, there might be a traitor among us. Cipher uncovered some unsettling information.”

His gaze, sharp and perceptive, meets mine, and a weighty silence lingers in the room. Leo, a figure of authority and enigma, absorbs the gravity of the revelation.

“I'll take care of it.”

The intricate dance of loyalty and betrayal within the Obsidian Shadows takes center stage, and Leo, a master orchestrator, vows to navigate the treacherous currents threatening the sanctuary we've forged in the shadows. Do I trust him?

I do.

I don't have a choice in the matter.

But Cipher...

“I don't know if the intel from Cipher is accurate or not,” I hedge.

Leo's lips curl slightly. "I do recognize that, yes."

"It might just be a plot to get you to not trust those who are loyal to you," I babble.

"Why are you so nervous?" His eyes pierce through me.

"I'm not..."

"You are. Did you not sleep well last night?"

I gulp. "Ah..."

"With Dante?"

I flinch. "Leo, I can explain—"

He holds up a hand. "You are a grown woman. You can do what you wish with whomever you wish."

I nod slowly. He doesn't care that I slept with someone else? I guess I really don't mean much to him then. Just another female in his mob who comes and fucks him. I don't mind sleeping with him at all, but I don't like the idea of him sleeping with Cara, Izzy, or any of the others.

Which is ridiculous because I slept with Dante the first chance I had.

Who am I to be jealous? Jealousy poisoned Derrick against me so that I lost everyone else in my life, males and females.

"You don't want to do this, Olivia," Leo warns.

"Do what?"

He leans against his desk. "Olivia, there's something you need to understand. I've done things, things that go beyond the shadows we tread. I've made choices, and I'll make them again if the need arises."

His words, a reflection of a past shrouded in darkness, echo through the room, punctuating the silence with the weight of unspoken truths. The air thickens with a sense of foreboding, as if the shadows themselves are bearing witness to the complexities of Leo's existence.

"What are you trying to say?" I ask quietly.

He meets my gaze. “This world, Olivia, it demands a certain ruthlessness. I’ve walked a path stained by choices that some might call unforgivable. I need you to understand that I’m not a savior, and I’m not seeking redemption.”

A palpable tension lingers in the room, the unspoken acknowledgment of a reality that blurs the lines between right and wrong. Leo, a guardian of shadows, warns me not to tether my emotions too tightly to him, a cautionary tale that unravels amidst the murkiness of the clandestine world.

“I can’t promise you a clean slate or absolution,” he says, his tone surprisingly soft. “The shadows have a way of staining everything they touch. Don’t get too emotionally invested in me, Olivia. There are aspects of my world that I can’t shield you from.”

The room, cloaked in shadows, becomes a canvas for the complexities of our entwined destinies. Leo’s caution, delivered with a stoic demeanor, reverberates through the silent chambers, leaving an indelible mark on the fragile threads that bind us within the intricate tapestry of shadows.

twenty

Amidst the shadows that linger in Leo's office, I find the courage to challenge the tacit expectation veiled within his gaze. His eyes, seeking a purity that may no longer exist, meet mine, and I speak words that lay bare the echoes of my own shadows.

"Leo, I'm not innocent," I say, my voice steady. "I've killed before. I've walked through the darkness, and I've become a part of it."

The confession hangs in the air, a counterpoint to the unspoken desire he may harbor to see me as something untouched by the shadows. The weight of my admission lingers, a testament to the complexities of the lives we lead within the Obsidian Shadows.

I stare him down. "I'm not the innocent soul you might want me to be. There are stains on my hands, just like there are on yours."

The acknowledgment, a shared truth that transcends the spoken words, becomes a bridge between us. The illusions of purity crumble in the face of the harsh reality we navigate, and I stand unapologetically before him, a silhouette shaped by the shadows I've embraced.

"Olivia..." he says softly, my name almost a sigh on his lips.

"I won't pretend to be something I'm not," I say firmly. "We're both products of this world, Leo. Let's not deceive ourselves with illusions of innocence."

In Leo's eyes, I see a recognition, a shared acknowledgment that the lines between light and darkness are blurred, and within the shadows, redemption is a fleeting concept, replaced by the indelible marks of our shared journey through the clandestine realms.

In the dimly lit sanctuary of Leo's office, where shadows weave tales of secrets and vulnerabilities, a charged silence envelops us. The unspoken tension, a palpable force, becomes the canvas for an unrestrained moment that transcends the boundaries of innocence.

With a boldness that defies the shadows clinging to our pasts, I bridge the distance between us. My hands, guided by an unspoken urgency, reach for Leo's face. The touch, a testament to the shared complexities of our existence, traces the contours of a connection that transcends the clandestine world we inhabit.

As our lips meet in a fervent union, the kiss becomes an assertion—a declaration of the shadows we carry and the desires that linger in the silent spaces between us. The taste of shared vulnerability mingles with the echoes of past sins, weaving a narrative that defies the illusions of purity.

In that stolen moment, beneath the shroud of shadows, I affirm the truth that I am not innocent, and neither is he. The kiss, a defiant whisper in the language of shadows, becomes a tangible bridge between our entangled destinies, a symbol of the shared journey we navigate within the Obsidian Shadows.

The intensity of the moment overwhelms me, and with a hunger that defies the boundaries of innocence, I give in to the wild idea that springs to mind.

With my heart beating wildly in my chest, I let go of all reservations and strip off my clothes until I'm standing naked before him. My skin glows in the half-light of his office, my body alive with an unrestrained energy that defies innocence. His gaze lingers over my body with desire as he takes in every inch of me with his eyes. He's seen me naked before, yes, but I'm not quite done yet.

The air around us crackles with anticipation as I turn around and slide across his desk, my ass in the air, taunting him to take me from behind like an animal. His hands are on my hips in an instant, pushing my body against the edge of the desk. One hand leaves my body, and I hear a zipper being under before his hands press against my hips once more. He pulls me closer to him and guides himself inside of me in one smooth thrust.

I moan loudly as pleasure surges through my body with each movement of his hips, our connection transcending physical boundaries as we become lost in a world of shared desire and mutual understanding. He alternates between thrusting hard and fast, then slow and steady, driving me wild with pleasure until I'm screaming out his name.

I feel Leo's breath hot against my ear as he whispers, his voice low and filled with a raw hunger, "That's it, baby. Let me hear you scream my name. Let me feel your pleasure ripple through your entire body."

His words ignite a fire within me, intensifying the sensations coursing through my veins. The crisp scent of leather from his desk permeates the air as our bodies collide with an unrestrained rhythm, creating a symphony of desire. The sound of our skin meeting in passionate harmony resonates throughout the room, echoing off the walls.

Leo's hands, strong and commanding, roam over my naked flesh, exploring every curve and crevice as if they are rediscovering a familiar yet endlessly arousing landscape. He grips me tighter, his fingers digging into my hips, leaving deliciously sinful imprints that I know will linger long after this encounter.

As the heat between us escalates, I can't help but arch my back and push my body against his.

"Can you handle this?" he asks, thrusting harder than ever. "Can you handle me?"

"I... I..."

"Answer me!"

“Yes!”

“Good girl. Take my cock. Take all of me.”

His dirty talk ignites a firestorm within me, creating a new hunger within me that demands to be sated. I reach behind me, gripping his ass, needing everything he has to offer.

It's not a surprise that my orgasm builds up quickly this time. All too quickly, I'm on the brink of exploding. As if sensing my imminent release, Leo takes hold of my hips with a force that speaks volumes about his own need for release. With one final plunge inside me, he lets go completely and fills me with a sensation so intense it brings tears to my eyes.

We fall into each other in exhausted bliss afterward, two shadows entwined in an embrace forged by acceptance and desire.

Derrick and I never had anything like that. Nothing at all, and Derrick had rutted me as if we were animals all the time. This, though, with Leo, was different. It's so different with him.

IT'S NOT until Leo steps back and he removes his cock from being buried deep inside me that I realize this time is the first time we had sex without a condom. I can already feel his hot cum ooze out of me as I straighten.

Should I say anything about that?

I awkwardly turn around to face Leo. He's staring down at his cock. It glistens with our combined juices.

His gaze slowly lifts to meet mine.

“I never came inside a woman without protection before,” he says. “Are you clean?”

I blow out a breath. “I never slept with anyone besides Derrick... and Dante the one time.”

Leo lifts his eyebrows.

I wince and rub my arms. I'm so cold, standing here in front of him naked without the heat of his body against mine.

“Olivia...”

“For his birthday one year, Derrick begged for a threesome. I didn’t want to, but he didn’t really give me much of a choice. He basically ignored me the whole time and just wanted me to watch as he fucked another woman in our bed. It’s... We got into a fight after she left, and he said that I ruined his birthday. He left and didn’t come back until three oh nine that night. I know because I stayed up the entire time, wondering where he was. I pretended to be asleep, but he came into our bed, and despite his not trying to wake me and my not acting awake, he...”

“He fucked you when he thought you were sleeping.”

“He tried to, but he couldn’t finish. It made me wonder if he had been with... another woman while he was out. It was the only threesome we had, and he didn’t start to go out like that every night. Just that one time... I went and made sure I didn’t have an STD afterward, paranoid he might’ve gotten something, but no. I was clean. I am clean.”

“Are you on the pill?”

I shake my head. “There was no need for me to be on it except for birth control. My periods aren’t too bad, thank God, and Derrick didn’t want me to be on it anyhow because he thought it would make me gain weight.”

Leo’s scowl is vicious. There’s no other word for it. If Derrick was still alive, I don’t have to wonder if Leo would’ve killed him.

I know he would’ve.

But Leo doesn’t have to worry about that. I took care of Derrick myself.

If I hadn’t, Leo and I never would’ve met.

“I’m due for my period tomorrow,” I say. “Chances are very slim that I’ll become pregnant.”

“If you want birth control...”

I hesitate. “Please don’t be mad at me,” I whisper.

Leo lifts his eyebrows.

“I... I’m infertile. I would’ve gone on the pill secretly if... I paid out of pocket for the doctor to determine if I was fertile or not. Once I realized... Once Derrick started to become abusive and cruel, I knew I couldn’t dare have a child with him. I didn’t want to bring a baby into the world... If I was fertile, I planned on secretly taking the pill, but I’m infertile. I didn’t have to worry, so there’s no need for me to be on the pill. I... I never told anyone this before.”

Leo just stares at me, his expression unreadable.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. “You didn’t want to know all of that. I dumped my baggage at your feet, and that’s not fair—”

“What’s not fair,” he says, his words rumbling from his chest, “is that you feel the need to apologize and hide. Your past is horrific. There’s no denying that. My own past... Let’s just say my past is checkered. There’s nothing you can say that will cause me to look at you differently, but if you were to learn everything I’ve done...”

“My opinion of you wouldn’t change.”

He grunts. “You’re naïve, Olivia.”

“Maybe so, but I like to think that I am growing and changing.”

“You are,” he agrees. “Since you’ve come here, you’ve been changing, yes.”

“For the better.”

He wrinkles his nose and glances away. “My darkness... my shadows are poisoning you.”

“I’ve known darkness for a long time. Maybe the shadows are where I’m meant to be.”

I wish Leo would wrap his strong arms around me, but he doesn’t. He does help me dress, though, and I leave his room feeling a bit at a loss.

Vulnerable. That’s what I am, and I don’t like it. I also feel like I’m not doing enough for the Obsidian Shadows, and yet,

I don't know much about them and what they want.

Or what the Scarlet Vipers want.

Or why the two mobs are heading toward war.

Maybe I'm better off not knowing.

twenty-one

Desperate to find a way to prove myself, in the silent sanctum of encrypted conversations, I engage once again with Cipher, the digital oracle guiding me through the labyrinth of shadows. With each keystroke, the clandestine dance unfolds, revealing fragments of a truth hidden within the intricate web of secrets.

“Cipher, there’s something I need to know. Tell me about the Scarlet Vipers and their connection with the government.”

“Seeker of shadows, the Scarlet Vipers, a serpent in the shadows, have infiltrated the corridors of power. Their goal is a symbiotic dance with the government—power and influence exchanged like currency in the hidden marketplace. They manipulate the strings that bind the political landscape, and in return, the government turns a blind eye to their illicit dealings.”

Collusion and corruption... The Scarlet Vipers, like silent puppeteers, pull strings that extend into the heart of governance, their motives obscured by the shadows they command.

“What are they after? What do they gain from this unholy alliance?”

“Power, control, and the ability to shape the narrative. The Scarlet Vipers thrive in the chaos they sow. By aligning with the government, they secure a stronghold over the mechanisms that dictate the fate of nations. It’s a dangerous dance, and the Obsidian Shadows may find themselves entangled in its web.

The implications of Cipher's words hang heavy in the digital air. The Scarlet Vipers, architects of chaos, entwined with the very fabric of government, become a formidable force—one that casts a looming shadow over the fragile sanctuary of the Obsidian Shadows.

As I absorb the revelations, the threads of conspiracy weave a tapestry of uncertainty. In the shadows, where truths and deceptions converge, the journey through the clandestine world takes an unpredictable turn.

Cipher last said there was a traitor in our midst. I don't know if Leo has uncovered anything on that, but what if Cipher is the one who is feeding me false information? I have no idea who Cipher is, but I'm starting to get a sick pit in my stomach that Cipher might know so much more about me.

“Cipher, I appreciate the intel, but I can't help but wonder—how do you know so much? What's your connection to all of this?”

Knowledge, like shadows, exists in the spaces between. I navigate the currents of information, unseen yet omnipresent. My origins are veiled, my purpose obscured. I am the silent watcher, the keeper of secrets whispered in the language of encryption.”

The response, a cryptic symphony of digital whispers, leaves my curiosity unsatisfied, as Cipher reveals nothing about the enigmatic force that guides my journey through the shadows. The notion of a silent watcher, an entity woven into the very fabric of clandestine exchanges, adds another layer of mystery to the intricate dance between rival factions.

“But who are you, Cipher? What's your endgame in all of this?”

I know he or she won't answer this. Cipher is getting under my skin.

“The shadows have no endgame, only echoes that reverberate through the corridors of secrecy. I exist in the interstice, a conduit for those who navigate the unseen. Ask not who I am, but what I unveil.”

Cipher's identity is a lingering enigma, a digital riddle that deepens the shadows surrounding our exchanges. In the realm where knowledge and secrecy intertwine, the enigmatic presence remains a silent companion, guiding me through the hidden landscapes of a world shaped by shadows and revelations.

I hesitate for a long moment before typing in code, "Cipher, I need to understand why the Scarlet Vipers are at odds with the Obsidian Shadows. What sparked this conflict?"

"Conflicts in the shadows are woven from threads of transgressions. The Obsidian Shadows, like all shadows, bear the weight of crimes that stain their hands—deals brokered, alliances forged, and secrets veiled. The enmity between rival shadows is the dance of sinners, each faction seeking dominion over the penance they impose."

The response, veering away from a direct answer, paints the conflict in hues of moral ambiguity. Cipher's words echo the complexity of the clandestine world, where alliances are forged in shades of compromise and betrayal. In the dance of shadows, the Obsidian Shadows find themselves entangled in a narrative shaped by the sins they carry.

"But what specifically triggered the hostility?" I type, persistent in my desire to illuminate the shadows that threaten me day and night. "What event set the Obsidian Shadows against the Scarlet Vipers?"

"Specifics dissolve in the fluidity of shadows. The animosity between rival factions is a symphony of grievances, grievances whispered in the language of illicit deeds. Seek not a singular trigger but a cacophony of sins that echo through the clandestine corridors."

The elusive nature of Cipher's response leaves me more frustrated and clueless than ever before. The shadows, it seems, hold secrets that resist easy unraveling, and the enigmatic dance between the Obsidian Shadows and the Scarlet Vipers remains shrouded in the ambiguity of unspoken conflicts.

What's worse is that I know I could ask Leo, but he won't tell me. I'm not in his inner circle even if he will bring me to his bed.

Sure, I can ask Rafe, Dante, or Vinnie, but what if Leo told them not to tell me? Leo has made good on his promise to protect me, and I'm grateful for that, but my life has been reduced to living here, in their secret compound attached to a bar. I can't go outside.

That's not on Leo. That's on Derrick and his ties to the Scarlet Vipers. I can't lose sight of everything Leo's done for me just because I'm frustrated by my circumstances.

Just as I start to think about how Cipher hasn't asked anything of me, another message comes through.

“Seeker of shadows, the dance of shadows requires a willing participant. To traverse the unseen realms, you must embrace the tasks laid before you. I entrust you with a quest—a journey into the digital tapestry that conceals truths and deceptions. Retrieve the classified files hidden within the encrypted servers of the Scarlet Vipers. Uncover the threads that bind them to the government. In the shadows, knowledge is power, and power is a weapon wielded by the vigilant.”

I swallow hard. Can I do this? It's information that I desperately need, and if Cipher is asking for this, then Cipher can't be on the side of the Scarlet Vipers. But if the Cipher is an Obsidian Shadow, then he or she wouldn't have to do all of this subterfuge, right? Maybe Cipher is neutral.

My stomach twists. The last “neutral” entity hadn't been very neutral...

Leo handled her. Leo either tortured her or at least had her tortured and he killed her. He's dangerous. Who knows what else he has done? His past is dark, twisted...

Sure, one could argue that in Sofia's case, Leo did what he thought was necessary, maybe even what was necessary, but still...

“I understand, Cipher. I'll delve into the digital labyrinth and retrieve the classified files. Knowledge will be our

weapon, and the shadows our shield.”

As I embrace the quest laid before me, the alliance with Cipher takes a tangible form. The digital landscape becomes my canvas, and the encrypted servers, the hidden repositories of truth, await exploration. In the dance of shadows, where secrets are unveiled and mysteries unravel, I prepare to navigate the intricate tapestry of information that holds the key to the enigma between the Obsidian Shadows and the Scarlet Vipers.

But even though I agreed to what Cipher asked, I head over to Leo’s room. He’s in his office, and his stare penetrates through me. I swear he can see my soul.

“Leo, Cipher has tasked me with retrieving classified files from the Scarlet Vipers’ encrypted servers. It seems like an opportunity to gain valuable information.”

His nostrils flare. “Cipher, huh?” I’m surprised by how guarded his tone is. “Be cautious, Olivia. The shadows have their own agendas and not everything is as it seems.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighs and shakes his head. “I have my doubts about Cipher’s intentions. The Obsidian Shadows are a family, and we protect our own. There might be an attempt to sow discord, to turn you against us unwittingly. I don’t believe there’s a mole or traitor among us, like Cipher wants you to believe.”

I blink a few times as realization dawns. “You think Cipher is trying to manipulate me?”

Leo’s as serious as I’ve ever seen him, and I’ve seen him plenty serious. “I’m not saying to reject the quest outright. Play along, but feed Cipher false hope. Let them believe they’re pulling strings, but don’t compromise the safety of the Obsidian Shadows. We’re family, Olivia, and family protects each other.”

The revelation from Leo casts a shadow of doubt on the digital alliance forged with Cipher. As I navigate the delicate balance between loyalty and the pursuit of information, I am tasked with a new role—to dance on the edges of deception,

feeding false hope to the shadows within the shadows. The enigma deepens, and the journey through the clandestine world takes an unexpected turn as I tread the fine line between trust and the alluring whispers of digital secrets.

“I understand,” I say slowly, “but, Leo, understanding what the Scarlet Vipers are up to could be crucial for us. Knowledge is power, and we need every advantage we can get.”

His hesitation is apparent. “Olivia, some paths are better left unexplored. There are shadows within shadows, and not all secrets lead to salvation.”

“What happened, Leo? Why are you so cautious about this?”

He glances away, but I swear he mumbles, “Kira.”

“Kira?” I parrot.

His glare is fierce, and I freeze.

“Focus on the mission Cipher laid out for you, but remember to only give him false hope.”

I nod and hurry out of his office. His mention of “Kira” hangs in the air like an unresolved melody, leaving me with a sense of unease and unanswered questions. The shadows of Leo’s past, veiled by his reluctance to share, add a layer of complexity to our interactions. As I contemplate the enigma of Kira and the caution in Leo’s voice, the dance between loyalty and the pursuit of truth becomes an intricate choreography, with each step leading me deeper into the shadows that conceal both danger and revelation.

Whoever Kira was, she clearly meant something to Leo.

Or means something still.

Why does that bother me so much?



I RETURN to my room and check my laptop. Already, Cipher is messaging me.

“Seeker of shadows, the dance of shadows awaits. Have you gleaned the secrets concealed within the encrypted servers?”

He’s far too eager. Maybe Leo’s right. He’s been at this for so much longer than I have. I have to trust Leo’s judgment.

“I’m still in the process, Cipher. These things take time. Patience is key in the world of shadows.”

“Time is a bomb.”

I shiver. Bombs... firearms... war.

I’m trapped, and I don’t see any way out.



DINNERTIME HAS me heading out of my room to be with the other Obsidian Shadows. I still feel like an outcast at times, even though they’ve mostly welcomed me with open arms.

Some with arms more open than others...

I sit next to Dante. “Where’s Cara tonight?”

“She’s off playing the loyal Scarlet Viper. Duty calls.”

I shake my head in wonder. “How does she do it? How can she be loyal to them after everything?”

“Cara’s got her reasons, Olivia. She’s a survivor. Knows how to play the game.”

The admiration in Dante’s tone catches me off guard, stirring an unexpected emotion within me. Jealousy, a feeling I hadn’t anticipated, flickers like a shadow in the corners of my consciousness. The revelation that Dante admires Cara’s ability to navigate the treacherous world of the Scarlet Vipers creates a subtle undercurrent in the atmosphere, a dance of emotions I never thought I’d experience within the confines of the Obsidian Shadows. As the shadows deepen, so too do the complexities of my relationships within this clandestine world, and the unexpected surge of jealousy becomes a new thread in the intricate tapestry of alliances and emotions.

The unexpected surge of jealousy lingering in the air leaves me feeling out of sorts. Seeking a distraction, I turn my

attention away from Dante and direct my focus toward Vinnie.

“Vinnie, do you have any hidden talents?” I ask with a grin. “I feel like there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

He grins back at me. “Well, you might be surprised, Olivia. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

As the banter unfolds, the flirtatious exchange with Vinnie becomes a temporary respite from the complexities of the shadowy world I’ve become entwined with. The dance of emotions continues, a delicate balance between the shadows of jealousy and the allure of newfound connections, each step in the intricate choreography revealing another layer of the clandestine journey I’ve embarked upon.

In the intimate aftermath of dinner, the shadows cast by jealousy linger, and I find myself seeking solace in the enigmatic allure of Vinnie’s presence. Deciding to explore the unknown, I pull Vinnie aside with a sly smile, my curiosity piqued.

“Vinnie, those tricks of yours—care to show me?”

He smirks. “Do you want a private performance?”

I grin and bite my bottom lip. “Why not? Lead the way.”

twenty-two

In Vinnie's room, the atmosphere is charged with a blend of secrecy and anticipation. The subdued lighting casts shadows across the walls, creating an intimate ambiance that feels both thrilling and clandestine.

He closes the door behind us. "So, Olivia, what kind of tricks are you interested in?"

"Surprise me," I say, my tone a bit more playful than seductive.

Vinnie grins, and with a swift motion, he produces a deck of cards from his pocket. I'm surprised that he's showing me an actual trick, but I'm delighted as his fingers move deftly, shuffling the cards with precision. As he begins to perform an array of card tricks, the tension from earlier dissipates, replaced by the intrigue of the illusions unfolding before me.

"Magic is all about misdirection, making you see one thing while something else is happening."

As Vinnie continues the mesmerizing display of sleight of hand, the shadows seem to dance in tandem with his movements. The room becomes a sanctuary, shielded from the complexities of the outside world, and for a fleeting moment, I find solace in the shared experience.

My smile is genuine. I love seeing this side of him. "You're quite the magician, Vinnie."

His grin widens, his eyes sparkling. "Just a few tricks I picked up along the way. Everyone's got their secrets, right?"

He's right about that, but for him to have such an innocent secret is refreshing compared to the darkness that suffocates me nearly at every turn.

The playful banter and the shared moment of lightheartedness create a connection that transcends the confines of the clandestine world we inhabit. As the illusions unfold and the shadows retreat, I am reminded that even in the midst of shadows, there are moments of unexpected brightness—a delicate interlude in the intricate dance of alliances and emotions within the Obsidian Shadows.

The atmosphere in Vinnie's room takes an unexpected turn as the playful magic tricks transition into a more heated exchange. With a sly grin, Vinnie pulls a card from behind my ear, a playful gesture that adds an element of intimacy to the moment. The air becomes charged with a subtle tension, and the dance between us shifts into a new rhythm.

“Looks like the magic's not just in the cards.”

His fingers linger, trailing along a delicate path as he retrieves another card, this time from my cleavage. I honestly have no idea how he did that, and I don't care. The room becomes a sanctuary of shared secrets and unspoken desires, the shadows playing witness to a connection that transcends the boundaries of the clandestine world.

“Vinnie...” I murmur, caught off guard.

“Sometimes, the best tricks are the ones you don't see coming,” he whispers.

As the temperature rises, the dance of shadows and desires intertwines, creating a moment suspended in the delicate balance between secrecy and revelation. In the confined space of Vinnie's room, the complexities of the Obsidian Shadows fade into the background, and for a brief interlude, the shadows become a canvas for a different kind of dance—one that explores the uncharted territories of connection and desire.

The charged atmosphere between Vinnie and me becomes palpable, the air heavy with a mixture of anticipation and desire. The playfulness of the magic tricks has transformed

into an unspoken understanding, a magnetic pull drawing us closer.

“Magic isn’t the only thing that can surprise you.”

With a subtle yet deliberate movement, Vinnie closes the distance between us. His touch, once light and playful, now carries an undercurrent of intensity. The shadows cast by the dim lighting in the room seem to amplify the intimacy of the moment.

As our eyes lock, the unspoken tension reaches its peak. Vinnie’s hand traces a delicate path along my jawline, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. The room becomes a sanctuary where the complexities of our lives fade into the background, and for a fleeting moment, there is only the dance—our dance—within the shadows.

In that charged space, where secrets and desires converge, the boundaries blur, and the dance becomes an exploration of uncharted territories. The shadows, once witnesses to the clandestine world, now envelop us in a cocoon of shared vulnerability and connection.

The intricate tapestry of the Obsidian Shadows momentarily takes a backseat as Vinnie and I navigate the unspoken language between us. The shadows dance in harmony with the uncharted rhythm, and for that brief interlude, the world outside ceases to exist, leaving us suspended in the delicate balance of desire and uncertainty.

In the midst of the charged atmosphere, as Vinnie begins to guide me toward his bed, an unexpected wave of emotion crashes over me. Tears well up in my eyes, catching both Vinnie and me off guard. The weight of my past, the scars left by an abusive husband, and the complexities of my present collide in a moment of vulnerability.

“Vinnie, I... I can’t,” I mumble, my voice shaky.

The realization hits me like a tidal wave. Despite my sleeping with Leo and Dante, the emotional toll of my past lingers, manifesting in this unexpected flood of tears. The

shadows that once seemed like a sanctuary now echo with the haunting whispers of past traumas.

“Olivia, what’s wrong?” he asks softly, rubbing my arms.

I’m choked up. “I thought I could, but... I just can’t. I... I want to, but...”

Vinnie, ever perceptive, recognizes the pain behind my tears. The weight of my past and the fear of repeating patterns that led to my escape from an abusive marriage have all become all too real. The vulnerability I feel at this moment exposes the raw wounds that still linger beneath the surface.

“It’s okay, Olivia. We don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

As Vinnie’s understanding words envelop me, the shadows in the room seem to soften, offering a moment of solace. In the midst of desire and intimacy, the ghosts of my past demand acknowledgment, reminding me that healing is a process, and the shadows can be both a refuge and a mirror to the complexities within.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur.

Vinnie rubs my back. “You don’t need to apologize, and you don’t need to sleep with all of us.”

I flinch. “I...”

“I heard from Izzy and Cara that they basically put you up to sleeping with Leo.”

“That’s not... They mentioned it, yes, but... I... I wanted to.”

“It’s not a requirement for you to sleep with any of us.”

“I never felt pressured, and... you’ve been so sweet and kind. I just...” I rub my face. “I think it’s just... Derrick was an asshole. He didn’t want me to look at other guys, and he didn’t want other guys to look at me.”

“You have more worth than just spreading your legs.”

“Do I?” I whisper. “I feel like I haven’t done enough to help—”

“You don’t have to do anything. You were forced into this.”

“Yes, but I want to help...”

“Trust me. You don’t want to be a real Obsidian Shadow.”

I stiffen. “So I’m not—”

“I know you help with the finances, and that’s great, but you don’t want to do more. Trust me.”

“You all are protecting me—”

“We aren’t all good and kind. We’re known as shadows. If you stay in the shadows, it’s because you want to be hidden, and that’s not because we want to pop out and shout, ‘Surprise!’”

“I get that, but...”

“I don’t think you do. You’ve been through a lot, and if you need to cry, you have my shoulder to cry on, but stay out of the shadows.”

Vinnie’s sweetness persists as he continues to rub my back, his understanding demeanor a comforting presence in the wake of my emotional outburst. His wanting me to stay out of the shadows, though... We both know I can’t, and an unspoken tension lingers in the air. I feel compelled to understand the intricacies of the world I’ve become entangled in.

“Vinnie, I can’t stay out of the shadows. I need to know, to understand.”

Vinnie’s expression tightens slightly, his concern evident.

“You want me to stay out of the shadows... Is that because of Kira?”

He draws back. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Leo said it, but then he pretended he hadn’t.”

Vinnie looks away. “Kira... she was like family to us. A year ago, she handled all the money for us, but the Scarlet Vipers... they got their fangs on her.”

A somber note hangs in the air as Vinnie recounts Kira's tragic fate. The shadows become a silent witness to the grief that lingers, a stark reminder of the high stakes and dangers that exist within the clandestine world of the Obsidian Shadows.

"I don't want to end up like Kira," I whisper.

"And I don't want to lose anyone else."

As Vinnie and I navigate the shadows, we are bound by the unspoken understanding that, in this world, the line between safety and peril is as delicate as a shadow's dance.

We stand in the dark, each of us trying to come to terms with what we will risk, the weight of our decision hanging heavy between us. I want to speak up, but all that escapes my lips is a soft exhale.

Vinnie wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. You're safe here with me."

With that, I finally give in to my need for closeness and lean forward to brush a gentle kiss against his forehead. As I move to kiss his lips, I feel the intensity of our connection and am finally able to give in to the desire that has been building between us all night. His lips are warm and soft against mine as we embrace our newfound intimacy.

Finally, I'm able to give in and give him my body, needing to feel close to him after my emotional outburst and drawn in by his gentle touch as he traces his fingers along my skin. I surrender myself entirely as Vinnie slows our kiss, breathing out a content sigh against my lips before gently pulling away from our embrace.

Gathering me close, Vinnie takes my hand and leads me away from the shadows into his bedroom where we can let go of our fears and worries, just for a moment, as he holds me tight.

The room is bathed in a warm, orange glow as the sun rises outside. I feel safe and comforted in his arms, and as we lay down together on the bed, Vinnie begins to caress me with his

hands and lips, slowly exploring my body as I softly moan in pleasure. His touch is light but deliberate and I can already feel myself melting into him as we explore each other further.

Desire envelops us both as Vinnie slides inside me, and we make love slowly, tenderly, allowing our fear to dissipate in the face of our newfound connection. Vinnie takes his time as he caresses and kisses my body, delicately exploring every inch of me with an intensity that feels like pure desire. His lips are gentle yet passionate as he trails them along my skin, sending sparks up my spine before moving down to capture my mouth with his own in a soul-shaking kiss.

As we move together, I feel myself melt further into him until I'm no longer just Vinnie and I—we become one being connected by a deep understanding of each other's need for safety and closeness even in this world of shadows.

Every movement between us is charged with emotion—a full expression of the bond that has started to form between us tonight—and for the first time since discovering this new world, I'm able to relax with the realization and acceptance and the knowledge that I am not alone.

We take comfort in the intense pleasure we experience together, feeding off each other's energy.

The warmth of his skin and the softness of his lips make me feel safe and loved, in spite of all the darkness that surrounds us. Our movements become more passionate as Vinnie takes charge, exploring my curves with ever-increasing urgency before finally entering me. His thrusts are gentle at first but gradually build in intensity as we both reach a fever pitch.

The sensation is overwhelming and pulls me further into the moment, making me forget all about the shadows and the dangers they conceal. I let out a soft sigh of pleasure as Vinnie wraps his arms around me, holding me tight and allowing us to stay connected even after our climax passes. Our passion culminates in a blissful climax that leaves us both exhausted but deeply content.

Finally free from the shadows and embraced by Vinnie's warmth, I find solace in this moment and in his arms.

The shadows will come for me. I know that, but if I can have stolen moments like this with Vinnie or Leo or Dante and maybe one night with Rafe, then I will be happy.

Even if I'll one day die in the shadows.

twenty-three

The cold light of morning reveals a series of unsettling messages from Cipher, the once mysterious ally whose intentions now take a dark turn. The words on the screen grow increasingly harsh, the tone shifting from cryptic to outright threatening. The ominous shadows in the room seem to mirror the foreboding nature of the messages.

“Seeker of Shadows, your hesitation is infuriating. Time is running out. Act now or face the consequences.”

“Seeker of shadows, your dalliance with hesitation paints you as weak. The shadows will consume you if you don’t embrace their powers.”

“Olivia Delaney or Olivia Morgan or Emma Lawson, whichever name you prefer, you tread on dangerous ground. The obsidian Shadows cannot protect you forever. Make a choice, or suffer the consequences.”

The once enigmatic ally, known as Cipher, now reveals a darker side. The use of my real name instead of the cryptic title “Seeker of Shadows” sends a chill down my spine. The messages, once veiled in mystery, now carry a sense of menace, casting shadows on the fragile balance I thought I achieved within the Obsidian Shadows.

“Olivia, your indecision is a strain on the fabric of shadows. Embrace the darkness, or be consumed by it.”

“Seeker of shadows, your weakness endangers us all. Act now, or your existence will be erased.”

The once-promised alliance unravels in the harsh glow of the screen, leaving behind a lingering sense of betrayal. The shadows in the room seem to morph into ominous shapes, mirroring the uncertainty that now clouds my path. The dance within the shadows takes a perilous turn, leaving me to confront the realization that not all who lurk in the darkness can be trusted.

As the shadows deepen, the threads of trust that once bound me to the Obsidian Shadows begin to unravel. The revelation of hidden agendas, the ominous messages from Cipher, and the specter of betrayal cast doubt on the reliability of those I have come to depend on in this dark world. The once solid ground beneath my feet now feels precarious, and the dance within the shadows takes on a more treacherous rhythm.

“Can anyone truly be trusted in this world of shadows?” I whisper to myself, the words haunting in the silence of my isolating room.

The lines between ally and adversary blur, leaving me to navigate a landscape where deceit and loyalty entwine like dark tendrils. As I grapple with the shattered fragments of trust, the shadows seem to whisper secrets that elude my understanding. In the absence of certainty, I am left to question the very foundation of my alliances, wondering if any flicker of sincerity can withstand the encroaching darkness.

The walls of uncertainty tighten around me, and the shadows that once provided refuge now seem to close in, amplifying the desperation that courses through my veins. The grip of enemies, whether overt or concealed, tightens like a vice, leaving me with a sense of suffocation in this perilous world.

“How did it come to this?” I ask in a frustrated whisper.

As I grapple with the tightening noose of adversaries and hidden threats, a palpable sense of urgency takes hold. Every step feels like a precarious dance on the edge of disaster, and the shadows, once a sanctuary, now bear witness to the relentless struggle to find a way out.

The desperate search for an escape route becomes a relentless pursuit, and the shadows themselves seem to conspire against me, casting elongated and distorted forms that mirror the distorted reality I find myself trapped within. In this labyrinth of deception and danger, the only way forward is obscured, and the walls that close in become both a physical and metaphorical barrier to freedom.

A knock at the door has me jumping. My heart races, and I rub the back of my neck.

Quickly, I close my laptop. Cipher can continue to berate me through coded messages. I'm not giving in to him.

"Come in," I call.

Rafe opens the door. "Hey, are you up for making breakfast together?"

I glance up at Rafe, my trusted companion in this shadowy realm. His genuine concern reflects in his eyes as he clearly senses the unrest that stirs beneath the surface. The conflicting currents of fear, uncertainty, and an unexpected longing cast a complex tapestry over my emotions.

"I don't know if I'm up for that today, Rafe."

He crosses over to sit beside me. "I don't know what's going on, but you don't have to carry the weight alone. We're here for you." He cups my chin. "I'm here for you."

In the midst of the perilous world I inhabit, conflicting emotions and desires entwine like serpentine shadows, each pulling me in a different direction. The dance within the dangerous labyrinth becomes a struggle to reconcile the tumultuous feelings that swirl within me.

I lean against him, and as Rafe's comforting presence envelops me, a spark of warmth kindles within. His words, a balm to the chaos within, awaken a yearning for connection in this world where trust is a fragile commodity. The conflicting desires for safety and connection swirl in the shadows, leaving me to grapple with the vulnerability that surfaces in the wake of Rafe's kindness.

I go to kiss Rafe on the cheek, but he turns his head, and our lips press together.

Something sparks within me. The shadows threaten to overwhelm me, but in Rafe, I've found light, and my hand falls to his lap. Sure enough, I can feel his hard cock through his pants.

"This is the breakfast meat I want," I whisper.

Rafe's eyes darken, and a thrill goes through me.

He meets my gaze, and for a moment, we do nothing, the air heavy with anticipation. His hands come to my hips, and I shiver as his fingertips trace the curves of my body. With one swift movement, he pulls me closer, and I gasp as our bodies press together. He reaches around me and unsnaps the closures of my dress, letting it pool on the floor at our feet.

Rafe stands, so I do too, and he takes in all of me before he steps forward again. His gaze lingers on my breasts before traveling down to where his hand is now tracing circles along my inner thighs. His fingers dip lower, sending shockwaves through me that only grow as he pushes them inside me, and an electric current surges between us.

My breathing quickens as I feel him exploring every inch of me and when I can take no more, I strip off his clothes too. He looks incredible without his clothes on, all muscled and tanned, but what really draws my attention is the silver hoop piercing his cock.

My breath catches in my throat as a rush of adrenaline courses through me. I feel like I've just taken a risk, like I've done something wrong but delicious at the same time.

I take Rafe by the hand, and he pulls me over to my bed with him. We don't bother to speak. We just look into each other's eyes for what feels like forever before we start exploring one another's bodies with eager hands and passionate kisses. Every touch is electric, and every kiss sizzles against our skin, leaving us both longing for more as we become lost in each other.

The electricity between us is palpable. Rafe's pierced cock enhances our experience as I take him in deeper than ever before. His moans mingle with mine, and I find myself lost in the pleasure as we move together. I've never been with anyone whose cock was pierced before, and I find it so damn enjoyable. With every thrust the hoop moves against me, increasing my pleasure tenfold.

It's like a whole other level of sensation that I'm tasting for the first time, and I can't get enough. Every movement of his piercing against me sends shockwaves through my entire body, setting off a chain reaction of pleasure that culminates in an explosion within me that leaves me breathless and trembling in Rafe's arms.

Every time Rafe moves a little bit more, the metal hoop slides across my inner walls in a way that drives me crazy. His thrusts become harder and faster, and soon we're both moaning in pleasure as he brings us both to an amazing climax.

We lay there panting afterward, arms entwined around each other until the shadows come for me again and I must go. Rafe pulls me close one last time and kisses me before climbing out of bed. I stay there, watching as he goes and fetches my dress.

As he helps me fasten the closures of my dress, Rafe looks up at me and smiles softly, his eyes twinkling with warmth and understanding. "Whatever you need, it's fine. Me, someone else... We don't mind sharing."

I sputter, trying to figure out what to say in response.

He chuckles.

"Rafe..."

"You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?" he asks.

I nod, shyly.

"Then go for it. Whoever you need, whether it's me or Vinnie or Dante or Leo, take us to bed. Hell, Cara would go for you too."

“Cara?” I squeal.

“Never thought about a woman lover, huh?”

I shake my head. “No. I... No. Cara’s lovely, yes, but...”

“You aren’t interested in girls.”

I blink back sudden tears.

“What’s wrong?” Rafe asks, his tone turning from teasing to gentle in an instant.

“Derrick... He asked for a threesome but made me watch him fuck the other woman. It... I didn’t even want to do the threesome, and I had been so nervous and worked up about what he might have me do to her, with her... The whole thing was so fucked up, and I... Leo was the first guy I slept with ever aside from Derrick, and now, all of a sudden, my body count is five...” My laughter sounds a bit insane. “My other body count is one...”

Rafe draws me into his arms. His cock is wet from our juices, and I can feel it stirring already again.

“I don’t mind sharing you,” he whispers. “Whoever you need to try to be made whole again, go for it.”

I wipe away my tears and then take his swollen cock in my hand, stroking him to full hardness again.

“I’ll go for it,” I murmur, and I bend down to suck his cock.

The feel of his piercing against my tongue is like electricity, a spark that travels through my entire body. The taste of salty pre-cum, mixed with the exotic sensation of his hoop piercing on my tongue is erotic and intense.

The taste of him is so different than the others I’ve been with, sweet and salty, a delicious mix that drives me to pleasure him further. I savor it as I explore every inch of him. I take the hoop in my mouth, running my tongue over it. His soft moans turn to guttural cries as he comes closer and closer to climax, and I revel in the power that I have over him.

I swirl my tongue around the hoop of his piercing while licking up and down his shaft, taking pleasure in the way this new experience brings me closer to understanding myself. My own body begins to tingle in response, arousal coursing through me in waves with every second that passes.

I take both hands and massage his shaft before focusing on his tip again, using my tongue to swirl around it as I suck harder. His cock hardens even more beneath my ministrations, and soon he's gripping the sheets tightly above us as wave after wave of pleasure rocks through him.

The sensation of the hoop moving against me as I'm pleasing him sends shivers down my spine, further increasing the intensity of our experience together. His cries become more desperate and incoherent with each thrust of his hips.

His moans grow louder and more desperate, and with each lick, I make sure to pay special attention to the pierced spot. His cock grows harder in my mouth, and I can feel his hips beginning to buck against me as he reaches the edge.

Rafe's hands grip my hair tightly as he guides me into a rhythm that brings us both pleasure. His thrusts become harder and faster, and his body tightens beneath me as I suck faster and deeper, pushing him ever closer to climax until he finally releases with a long moan that sends shivers down my spine. A strangled cry of pleasure echoes as I drink in every drop of his essence.

I pull away from him slowly, letting out a contented sigh as I look up into his eyes which are brimming with lust and satisfaction.

"You went for it," he says, his voice breathless. "Now, I'm going to go for it."

twenty-four

Rafe takes my dress back off again, and then he flips me over so I'm laying flat on my back and takes his time trailing kisses down my body, from my lips to the curves of my breasts. His hands gently caress every inch of me as he moves lower and lower, teasing and exploring. He licks a path from one side of my belly button to the other before finally arriving at the apex between my legs.

His tongue glides over me with skillful precision as he laps up every drop of pleasure that is dripping from me. His fingers slide in and out in time with his movements, making sure to hit all the right spots as he sends wave after wave of pleasure coursing through me. His teeth lightly graze against my flesh, causing a spark to ignite deep inside me as I scream out in delight.

My orgasm builds within me until it finally explodes in a flurry of sensations that are so intense I can barely handle them all at once.

He moves lower, his tongue circling my clit before settling in to lick and nibble at its sensitive surface. His fingers spread me wider, allowing him better access. He laps at the entrance of my core, swirling his tongue around it to draw out every bit of pleasure I have to offer.

I moan softly as he teases me with his tongue, licking and sucking until heat pools in my belly and I'm gasping for breath. His tongue flicks against my most sensitive spots faster and faster, pushing me closer and closer to bliss with each

passing second. His hands cup my ass as he devours me hungrily, lapping up every drop of nectar I have to offer.

My cries become louder as I reach the edge of another orgasm. I grip the sheets tightly above me as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. He holds onto me until the last waves have subsided before finally pulling away from me, a satisfied smile on his face, but that glint in his eyes...

He's not done with me yet.

Sure enough, his hands wander around my body, gently massaging away any tension in the process as his tongue flicks against my clitoris ever so sweetly. I moan loudly as waves of pleasure travel through me, the sensations intensifying with each second that passes.

I dig my fingernails into his back as I arch up into him, desperate for more of this feeling. My breathing becomes ragged and intense, a new sensation overtaking me that sends me spiraling toward the edge of orgasm. As Rafe's lips circle around my clit, I scream out his name in ecstasy before coming undone beneath him.

He pulls away from me slowly and looks up at me with a satisfied smirk on his face. "I think the others are going to have to fend for themselves for breakfast."

"Is that right?" I ask with a breathy laugh.

"Yes," he growls, drawing me into his arms again.

I nuzzle against him. In his arms, I feel safe, and that's not a feeling I'm ready to give up just yet.



AFTER RAFE and I spend a lazy hour in each other's arms in my bed, he finally gets up and leaves. He has work to do, and so do I whether I like it or not.

Once I'm washed up and dressed again, I log back into my laptop. Now that Rafe's gone, leaving a lingering sense of solace in his wake, I find myself alone, facing the harsh glow of the computer screen. The digital realm becomes a mirror

reflecting the gravity of the choices before me, each keystroke a potential step toward a life-altering crossroads.

“No turning back now,” I whisper to myself.

The weight of the decision hangs heavy in the air, a palpable tension that electrifies the shadows around me. The cursor blinks like an ominous countdown, urging me to choose a path that will shape the trajectory of my fate. In this pivotal moment, the binary code of ones and zeros seems to carry the weight of profound consequences.

As I hover on the brink of an irreversible choice, the shadows seem to whisper secrets, their cryptic messages echoing the uncertainty of the journey ahead. It’s a moment of profound realization that the digital realm is not just a conduit for information but a portal to destiny, and I must summon the courage to navigate the uncharted territories that await.

In the dim glow of the computer screen, I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of the decision bearing down on me. The cursor hovers over two diverging paths, each leading into the unknown. After a moment’s hesitation, I make the life-altering choice to ally myself with Cipher, the enigmatic figure in the digital shadows.

“Cipher, let’s see where this path takes us.”

With a decisive click, I seal my fate and plunge into the digital alliance, aware that the consequences of this choice will ripple through the intricate tapestry of my existence. The shadows deepen, the echoes of the decision reverberate, and I brace myself for the unpredictable journey that lies ahead in this perilous dance between secrecy and revelation.

As I tread deeper into the treacherous labyrinth of my existence, layers of deceit and hidden agendas unravel like a macabre tapestry. The shadows, once protective, now seem to writhe with the revelation of a malevolent conspiracy against me. Each discovery peels back another layer, exposing the intricate web of deception that has ensnared me.

Cryptic messages, clandestine connections, and encrypted files unveil the true extent of the conspiracy, weaving a

narrative of betrayal and danger. The shadows, once a sanctuary, now cast sinister silhouettes that dance with the ominous truths I uncover. The knowledge, both a weapon and a burden, thrusts me into a realm where trust becomes a rare commodity, and discerning friend from foe becomes a perilous task.

The scheme unfolds like a dark tapestry, revealing a clandestine alliance between the Scarlet Vipers and elements within the government. The threads of corruption and deceit intertwine, forming a sinister pattern that threatens not only my life but the delicate balance between the criminal underworld and the corridors of power.

As I manage to break through and enter the database of the Scarlet Vipers, one name surfaces. Project Cerberus.

The level of encryption that I have to break through in order to access the files takes me hours, but Project Cerberus is far more ominous than the name implies. It hints at a collaboration between the Scarlet Vipers and high-ranking government officials, forging a union that goes beyond mere criminal enterprises. The goal remains elusive, veiled in the shadows, but the implications point to a dangerous synergy that could disrupt the delicate equilibrium of power.

As I dig deeper, evidence of corruption within the government becomes apparent. Compromised officials, covert dealings, and a web of deceit suggest that the Scarlet Vipers might be pawns in a larger game, manipulated by those who lurk in the shadows of authority.

The more I read, the more I wonder and worry about Kira. Her tragic end, orchestrated by the Scarlet Vipers themselves, hints at the ruthless nature of those pulling the strings. If they learn that I've uncovered their plans...

In the face of this intricate conspiracy, I find myself entangled in a web of intrigue, questioning the boundaries between criminal enterprises and the corridors of power. The shadows that once concealed my actions now reveal a grander, more perilous stage where allegiances blur, and the true puppeteers remain shrouded in darkness.

“How deep does this darkness go?” I whisper.

As the tendrils of the scheme tighten around me, I steel myself for the inevitable clash between light and shadow, uncertain of who I can truly trust in this intricate dance of deception and danger.

Desperation tightens its grip, and I plunge deeper into the digital abyss, determined to unearth the secrets that bind my late husband, Derrick, to the Scarlet Vipers and the enigmatic Project Cerberus. Every keystroke echoes with a sense of urgency, and every decrypted file becomes a potential key to unraveling the twisted machinations that ensnared Derrick in a web of criminal conspiracy.

The digital trail leads me to encrypted files, each one a puzzle piece in the larger mystery. Day has turned into night. I neglect to stop for lunch or dinner, too buried deep.

Soon enough, my late-night investigations reveal that Derrick was not merely a passive member of the Scarlet Vipers but a crucial player in Project Cerberus. The nature of his involvement remains elusive, concealed within layers of coded language and clandestine exchanges.

Slowly, I piece together that the Scarlet Vipers, my late husband's clandestine associates, were orchestrating a mission of significant importance. What this mission entails and how it intertwines with the government's covert interests remains veiled, leaving me haunted by the fear that Derrick's death might be a mere prelude to a more profound, far-reaching plan.

With each revelation, the shadowy contours of Project Cerberus start to take shape. It appears to be a collaboration that extends beyond the criminal underworld, with implications reaching into the highest echelons of power. The more I learn, the more I understand that Derrick was not just a victim but a pawn in a game where the stakes involve the delicate balance between organized crime and government influence.

As I tread the dangerous path of unraveling Derrick's connection to Project Cerberus, the shadows grow denser, and the line between truth and deception becomes increasingly

blurred. Desperation fuels my quest for answers, propelling me further into the heart of a conspiracy that threatens not only my existence but the very fabric of the criminal and political realms.

twenty-five

The dim glow of my laptop screen casts an eerie illumination in the room as I delve into the encrypted files, each line of code a potential key to unlock the secrets hidden within. The digital shadows dance on the walls, mirroring the turmoil that churns within me. Derrick's involvement with the Scarlet Vipers was far more sinister than I could have fathomed.

I scroll through the virtual labyrinth, my fingers tapping furiously on the keyboard, tracing the electronic trails that lead to revelations that shatter the remnants of my already fractured understanding. The documents, meticulously hidden within the recesses of the dark web, hint at a sinister plot—Project Cerberus, an ominous operation with Derrick as its unwitting executioner.

As the pixels arrange themselves to form a coherent narrative, my breath catches in my throat. Derrick wasn't just a pawn in the mob's machinations. He was a weapon crafted to carry out an assassination. The realization grips my heart in a vise, squeezing the last vestiges of naivety from my soul.

The files offer cryptic clues about the intended victim, a nameless silhouette concealed in the shadows of the Scarlet Vipers' malevolent design. The more I uncover, the more the weight of the revelation bears down on me, the gravity of Derrick's role as an assassin shaking the foundations of my already fragile reality.

I sit back, bathed in the sickly glow of the monitor, haunted by the question that now echoes through the caverns of my mind. Who was Derrick meant to kill, and what dark

forces orchestrated this deadly symphony? The shadows in the room seem to writhe with malevolent intent, mocking my feeble attempts to grasp the enormity of the conspiracy that ensnares me.

In this moment of revelation, the room feels suffocating, the air thick with the scent of impending doom. Derrick's hands, once the instruments of my torment, now appear stained with even more sinister blood—a blood that mingles with unknown victims, forming an unholy pact within the shadows of Project Cerberus. As I navigate the digital labyrinth, the boundaries between reality and the sinister game played by the Scarlet Vipers blur, and the true extent of the conspiracy against me unfurls like a malevolent tapestry, leaving me teetering on the precipice of a reality I can scarcely comprehend.

As I slip into the shadows, erasing any digital trace of my intrusion, a sense of foreboding lingers. The secrets I've unearthed cast me deeper into the web of deception, where every move is a delicate dance on the precipice of danger. My journey through the dark underbelly of the mafia world has become an intricate game, and I must tread carefully to navigate the labyrinth of lies that threatens to consume me whole.

The soft click of the laptop closing echoes in the room, and I sit back, bathed in the dim ambient light. The weight of the uncovered conspiracy hangs heavy in the air, and my heart pounds with the gravity of the information I now possess. The room, once a sanctuary for clandestine investigations, now feels like a prison of secrets.

I glance around, as if expecting the shadows themselves to betray me. The knowledge I've gained is a double-edged sword, cutting through the veils of ignorance but also exposing me to the dangers that lurk in the obsidian depths of the Scarlet Vipers' schemes. I haven't shared this revelation with Cipher, choosing to keep the volatile information close to my chest.

The laptop, now a silent witness to the secrets it harbors, rests on the table—a relic of the clandestine battles fought in

the realm of code and encryption. The room remains cloaked in shadows, concealing the turmoil that rages within me. With a heavy sigh, I rise, ready to face the enigma that unfolds beyond the virtual confines, where every step forward could plunge me into the abyss or bring me closer to the truth that has eluded me for far too long.

My gaze falls on the box from my husband. I pick it up and hold my dead husband's gun. I've gone to the shooting range several times after the first outing, but this gun still feels alien to me.

The weight of the gun in my hands is a chilling reminder of the violent turn my life has taken. It's a relic from a time when my world was shattered, and the fractures have yet to fully heal. The metal feels cold and unforgiving, much like the choices I've been forced to make.

I run my fingers along its contours, tracing the lines that conceal its deadly purpose. The memories of the shooting range visits linger, each shot fired echoing in the recesses of my mind. The gun is a paradox—a tool of both liberation and destruction, a symbol of the fine line I walk in this treacherous world.

As I hold it, I can almost hear the distant echoes of Derrick's threats and the haunting memories of the night I took matters into my own hands. The gun represents a turning point, a catalyst for the irreversible path I've chosen. It's a conduit for my fears, my anger, and the raw, unyielding determination that fuels my survival.

Sure, I didn't kill him with the gun, but if he had kept the gun loaded, he very well might've succeeded in killing me.

And then he would have moved on to whomever else it was that the Scarlet Vipers wanted him to assassinate.

I contemplate the box, wondering if it holds more than just a firearm. Could there be secrets within, hidden compartments or coded messages that unravel the enigma of Derrick's involvement with the Scarlet Vipers? The possible unknown contents of the box add another layer to the mysteries I must confront.

With a deep breath, I place the gun back into the box, its ominous presence temporarily set aside. The shadows in the room seem to lengthen, mirroring the complexities that surround me. As I prepare to face the challenges ahead, the enigmatic box becomes a silent witness to the turbulent journey I'm destined to undertake.

When I place the box on the countertop, though, I realize the box is tilted. Something is off. I take the box into my lap again, removing the gun and bullets. My hands tremble as I discover the false bottom in the box, revealing a clandestine layer of secrets that Derrick kept hidden even from me. The coded message inscribed within sends shivers down my spine, a chilling revelation that transcends the boundaries of disbelief.

Carefully, I study the cryptic symbols, my mind racing to decipher the hidden message. It's a puzzle that unfolds slowly, each symbol and character revealing a piece of the ominous truth. As the pieces fall into place, the name of the assassination target emerges, etched with ominous clarity.

It's none other than the President of the United States.

The weight of the revelation bears down on me, and the room seems to constrict around me. The implications of Derrick's involvement in such a sinister plot send shockwaves through my already fractured reality. Questions swarm my mind. Why was he chosen for such a nefarious task? What dark forces orchestrated this plan, and how deep does the conspiracy go?

I'm thrust into a world of political intrigue and danger far beyond the scope of my previous understanding. The false bottom becomes a portal to a realm where shadows dance with the secrets of power, and I'm a reluctant witness to a plot that could change the course of history.

In the midst of this revelation, a new layer of fear takes root. The scarlet threads of the Scarlet Vipers weave a dark tapestry, entwined with the highest echelons of government. As I grapple with the weight of this knowledge, the false bottom becomes a symbol of the layers of deceit that have

enveloped my life—a life now entangled in a web of treachery that stretches beyond the confines of the box and into the heart of a dangerous conspiracy.

Confronting the false bottom and the sinister revelation within, I'm forced to grapple with the specter of my late husband's dark past—the sins that now cast a long shadow over my present and future. The coded message pointing to Derrick's involvement in a plot to assassinate the President of the United States is a damning legacy that demands a reckoning.

The room, once a haven of secrets, now echoes with the weight of truth. The gun in my hands, once belonging to a man I thought I knew, symbolizes the duality of the life we shared—an intricate dance between the ordinary and the clandestine. The consequences of my actions, the blood on my hands from his demise, now intertwine with the sins he carried, creating a tapestry of guilt and revelation.

As the gravity of the situation sinks in, I'm faced with an inevitable reckoning. The choices ahead are fraught with peril, and the shadows of the conspiracy loom large. The knowledge of Derrick's role in a plot against the highest office in the land transforms the ordinary house into a battleground of secrets, a place where the sins of the past demand resolution.

Questions echo through the chambers of my mind. Was Derrick a willing participant, or was he a pawn in a larger game? Does it matter either way? No, it doesn't.

The coded message becomes a haunting reminder that the answers lie hidden beneath layers of deception, waiting to be unveiled. In the face of this revelation, the reckoning becomes not only with my own actions but with the formidable forces that seek to manipulate destinies and shape the course of nations.

As I navigate the treacherous path ahead, the false bottom serves as a metaphor for the intricate layers of truth and deceit, a reminder that the past is not easily buried. The sins that haunt me, and the consequences that loom, form the crucible in which my resilience and determination will be tested. The

reckoning is imminent, and I must confront the shadows that threaten to consume me.

Alone in the dimly lit room, shadows dance on the walls, mirroring the tumult within my weary soul. The weight of the revelations, the sins of my late husband, and the ever-growing conspiracy have carved deep furrows of despair and hopelessness in the recesses of my mind.

The false bottom, the coded message, and the revelation that Derrick was entangled in a plot to assassinate the president form an indomitable storm of darkness. In the solitude of my room, I confront the enormity of the truth, and the silence amplifies the echoes of my despair.

I sit on the edge of the bed, surrounded by the remnants of a life shattered by deceit and violence. The room, once a sanctuary, now feels like a prison—a place where the walls bear witness to the unraveling of secrets and the unraveling of a fragile sense of normalcy I once clung to.

The despair is a heavy cloak, wrapping around me as I grapple with the implications of Derrick's actions. Was he coerced, manipulated, or willingly involved in the sinister plot? The unanswered questions gnaw at the edges of my consciousness, creating a void that despair threatens to fill.

The hopelessness seeps into the cracks of my resolve, casting a pall over any glimmer of optimism. The reckoning ahead, both with the consequences of my actions and the insidious forces at play, looms large. In this moment of solitude, I confront the reality that my life has become a tapestry woven with threads of darkness.

As I sit in the quiet room, the flickering shadows tell a story of anguish and uncertainty. Yet, amid the despair, a spark of resilience stirs within—a flicker of determination that refuses to be extinguished. In the silence, I find the strength to face the challenges ahead, to navigate the treacherous path, and to confront the shadows that threaten to consume me.

The weight of my actions hangs heavy in the air, a palpable force pressing down on my shoulders as I grapple with the consequences of the choices I've made. Each step into

the shadowy realm of secrets and danger has etched its mark on my soul, and now, the burden threatens to crush my spirit.

The realization of having taken a life, even in self-defense, is a burden that refuses to be easily shrugged off. The gravity of that moment, when I confronted my husband and the darkness within him, now looms over me like a specter, haunting my every waking thought. The echoes of his threats, the shadows of his malevolence, and the blood on my hands intertwine into a heavy tapestry of guilt and remorse.

Simultaneously, the dangers that surround me—conspiracies, rival mafias, and the ever-looming specter of the Scarlet Vipers—form a relentless force, threatening to snuff out any flicker of hope that remains within. The world I find myself in, fraught with treachery and deceit, is a crucible that tests the limits of my resilience.

The crushing weight manifests in moments of vulnerability as I question the validity of my choices and the path I've chosen to walk. In the quiet moments, the walls seem to close in, and the shadows play tricks on my sanity, pushing me to the brink of despair.

Yet, within this crucible, a quiet determination smolders. It's a fragile ember that refuses to be extinguished, a small flame that whispers of the strength needed to endure. In the face of overwhelming odds, I must find a way to carry the weight, navigate the dangers, and emerge from the crucible with my spirit intact. The journey ahead is uncertain, and the road is fraught with peril, but I must find the resilience to face the shadows that threaten to consume me.

twenty-six

A knock sounds. “Come in,” I call.

Vinnie enters the room, his presence a welcome distraction from the heavy atmosphere that seems to linger. His eyes fall upon Derrick’s gun, laid out on the table like a silent reminder of the past.

“Do you want to go out shooting?” he suggests.

I hesitate, the weight of recent events making the prospect unappealing.

“I don’t think I can,” I murmur, my voice carrying the fatigue of someone burdened by the aftermath of choices made.

The gun, once a symbol of fear and control in Derrick’s hands, now sits as an inanimate artifact, but its presence is enough to stir the ghosts of memory. I came so close to dying, close enough that I aligned myself with the mob, and I’m safe to some extent, but the future potentially harbors ghosts and danger.

Vinnie’s expression softens, and he moves closer, a silent understanding passing between us. “No pressure. We can take it easy today,” he offers, his tone gentle and reassuring.

I nod appreciatively, grateful for his empathy. The weight of the gun, both literal and symbolic, remains, but in Vinnie’s company, there’s a flicker of solace, a reminder that amidst the shadows, moments of respite can still be found.

Seated together on the couch in the quietude of the room, I venture into a topic beyond the confines of our shared predicament. “Do you have any family?” I ask, curious to glimpse into the personal facets of Vinnie’s life.

His gaze shifts momentarily, a distant look in his eyes. “Not really,” he admits, the weight of his words carrying a touch of solitude. “The Obsidian Shadows are the closest thing to family I’ve got.”

It’s a reminder of the unconventional bonds forged within the clandestine world we inhabit, where loyalty to the shadows often supplants more conventional ties. As Vinnie shares this glimpse into his past, I find a quiet understanding settling between us, an unspoken acknowledgment of the shared camaraderie within the confines of the mafia’s covert realm.

I lean in, curiosity mingling with trepidation. “How did you end up with the Obsidian Shadows?” I ask, a tentative probe into the shadowy origins of my enigmatic companion.

Vinnie’s gaze tightens, a shadow flickering across his eyes. “You don’t want to know,” he replies, a somber tone underscoring his words.

There’s a weight to his response, a suggestion of a past steeped in shadows and perhaps darker deeds.

“Sometimes, you have to fight evil with evil,” he adds, his words hanging in the air like an ominous echo.

It’s a stark realization, a reminder of the moral ambiguities that pervade the world we navigate—a world where the boundaries between right and wrong blur into shades of gray. The revelation sends a shiver down my spine, a silent acknowledgment of the unsettling truths veiled within the enigma of the Obsidian Shadows.

Driven by a desire to unravel the layers that shroud Vinnie’s past, I gaze into his eyes, a plea for connection lingering in my own. “Tell me more,” I implore, my voice a whisper threading through the charged air of the room.

Vinnie hesitates, his guarded demeanor momentarily faltering. It’s as if he’s contemplating whether to peel back the

layers of his enigma, to reveal the person beneath the clandestine operative.

He points to the gun. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with this piece.”

I nod, a little unnerved that he won’t open up to me about his past.

“It belonged to my late husband. I’ve been trying to understand him better, unravel the mysteries.”

He pauses. “Are you sure you want to go down that rabbit hole?”

“I need to know. About him, about you, about all of this.”

Vinnie sighs. “All right, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He places a heavy hand on my shoulder.

I hesitate. I don’t know if he’ll answer or not, but...

“So, tell me about your past. How did you end up in the Obsidian Shadows?”

A contemplative silence lingers before he finally opens up, revealing a fragment of his past. “I used to be in the military,” Vinnie discloses, his voice carrying the weight of experiences etched into the recesses of his memory.

It’s a revelation that adds another layer to the enigma of the man before me, hinting at a life shaped by disciplines, battles, and a journey that led him into the clandestine folds of the Obsidian Shadows.

He gazes into the distance. “It was a different life. I enlisted straight out of high school, seeking purpose or maybe just a way out.”

“What was it like?”

He turns reflective. “It’s hard to describe. You form bonds with the people you serve with, bonds that go beyond friendship. It’s a crucible that shapes you, tests you in ways you never imagined.”

I listen intently. “What kind of experiences did you have?”

Military life is so very different from everything I've ever known.

He gives a ghost of a smile. "There were moments of camaraderie amid chaos, moments that felt like we were invincible. And then there were the darker times, the sacrifices, the losses. War changes you."

"Did you ever regret it?" I ask softly.

Vinnie pauses. "Sometimes, but it made me who I am today. After I left the military, I found myself lost, searching for something that could replace the adrenaline, the purpose. That's when the Obsidian Shadows found me."

"And now?"

He gazes at me. "Now, I'm a shadow, navigating the shadows. Like I said earlier, sometimes you have to fight evil with evil. That's the world we live in."

I frown. "Do you ever miss it, the life before?"

He gives a single slow nod. "Every day, but it's a part of me, something I can't change."

I find myself drawn into Vinnie's world, a world that existed before the shadows claimed him. The complexities of his past become intertwined with the enigma of the present, and for a fleeting moment, the barriers between us begin to soften.

As he's been speaking, I see glimpses of vulnerability flicker in his eyes, offering a rare insight into the man behind the shadowy facade.

He continues to talk. His voice, a low, gravelly cadence, narrates experiences that traverse the spectrum of human emotion. There are tales of unyielding bonds forged in the crucible of combat, moments of laughter and camaraderie amid the chaos of war, and the quiet introspection that follows in the aftermath. Each narrative carries the weight of sacrifice, duty, and the indomitable spirit that defines those who have treaded on the precipice of danger.

In these shared recollections, I find a Vinnie that extends beyond the confines of the secretive operative, a man who once navigated the complex tapestry of military life—a life that inevitably shaped the person he has become. As the stories unfold, a connection forms, bridging the gap between the shadows that cloak his present and the echoes of his past.

He grabs my hand and squeezes. “Olivia, we’re gonna do everything in our power to keep you safe. You’re one of us now.”

I nod slowly. “I appreciate that, Vinnie, I really do, but what if... what if what I’ve uncovered is bigger than all of us? What if the danger goes beyond the Scarlet Vipers?”

Vinnie’s face turns grave. “We face dangers every day. Leo’s been around long enough to know how to handle things. Trust him.”

I can’t help being skeptical, given what I’ve uncovered. “I want to, Vinnie, but there’s something dark, something sinister. Derrick was involved in something bigger, something that goes beyond the streets and the shadows.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll face it together. You’re not alone in this, Olivia.”

“I hope you’re right, Vinnie. I really do,” I whisper.

In the hushed exchange, uncertainty looms, casting shadows over the fragile reassurances. The mysteries surrounding Derrick’s past and the ominous secrets buried within the criminal underworld begin to paint a foreboding picture. As I grapple with the weight of newfound revelations, the promise of safety seems tenuous at best.

With Vinnie by my side, I find a renewed strength within myself. His presence becomes a source of solace in the midst of the storm that swirls around me. He’s a steady anchor in the unpredictable currents of my new reality. His unwavering support and the camaraderie within the Obsidian Shadows offer a semblance of normalcy, a stark contrast to the chaos and uncertainty that has defined my recent past.

As we navigate the dangerous territories of both loyalty and betrayal, Vinnie's friendship becomes a beacon of light, a reminder that even in the darkest shadows, connections can be forged. Together, we face the challenges that arise, drawing strength from the bonds that tie us to the clandestine world we've become entangled in. In Vinnie, I discover not only a protector but also a friend who shares the burden of the secrets we carry. And with his silent assurance, I find the courage to confront the impending reckoning that looms on the horizon.

Armed with newfound determination, I brace myself for the challenges that lie ahead. The revelation of Derrick's intended target, the President of the United States, casts a long shadow over my already tumultuous journey. The weight of this revelation bears down on me, but within the depths of despair, I unearth a resolve to confront the consequences of my actions.

In the heart of the Obsidian Shadows, I find an unlikely sanctuary. Vinnie's quiet strength and the support of my newfound allies become pillars of support, enabling me to face the storm gathering around me. The world of shadows and secrets is a treacherous landscape, but with each passing day, I grow more adept at navigating its intricate web.

As I prepare to delve deeper into the mysteries that surround the Scarlet Vipers and the government conspiracy, I carry with me the lessons learned from the enigmatic figures within the Obsidian Shadows. The delicate dance between trust and deception continues, and I tread carefully, fueled by the determination to uncover the truth and secure my place in this shadowy realm.

The road ahead is fraught with peril, yet my resolve remains unbroken. The echoes of the past reverberate through the present, and with Vinnie by my side and the Obsidian Shadows as my refuge, I steel myself for the challenges that await. In the face of uncertainty, I embrace the strength within, ready to unravel the secrets that bind me to a fate intertwined with shadows and deception.

twenty-seven

After Vinnie leaves my room, I head to the kitchen to make myself a meal. The aroma of spices and sizzling ingredients quickly fills the air as I set out to prepare a meal. The soft glow of the overhead lights casts a warm ambiance, creating a comforting atmosphere. As I get to work, Rafe joins me, his presence injecting a playful energy into the culinary endeavor.

Rafe's playful banter echoes through the kitchen, creating an atmosphere of easy camaraderie. As we work side by side, his wit punctuates the air, adding a layer of levity to the otherwise serious undertones of my existence.

He grins. "Do you always cook like a secret agent, or is this just a special occasion?"

I chuckle, appreciating the attempt to inject humor into our shared task. "Well, Rafe, if secret agents were known for their cooking skills, I might have a second career lined up."

He winks at me. "Maybe you'll have your own cooking show someday. 'Undercover Chef,' anyone?"

We share a laugh, the banter serving as a temporary escape from the complexities that define my life.

"I think I'll stick to my current line of work for now, but who knows what the future holds?"

"Fair enough. Just promise me one thing—no secret ingredients or hidden agendas in tonight's dish."

I grin. "Cross my heart, Rafe. This meal will be as straightforward as it gets."

Rafe's teasing banter and flirtatious gestures add a lighthearted touch to the task at hand. With each exchange, a subtle dance of connection weaves between us, momentarily diverting my thoughts from the shadows that loom over my life. The kitchen becomes a space of shared laughter and easy camaraderie, a reprieve from the complexities that often define my days.

Together, we navigate the culinary landscape, our interactions evolving into a seamless collaboration. Amidst the clinking of utensils and the rhythmic sounds of food being prepared, a sense of normalcy emerges—a fleeting but cherished moment of respite from the clandestine world I inhabit.

Rafe and I decide to prepare a comforting and hearty meal—homemade spaghetti bolognese. The kitchen is filled with the savory aroma of simmering tomatoes, garlic, and ground meat as we collaborate on the sauce. The clinking of pots and pans, coupled with our banter, transforms the space into a haven of domesticity, a stark contrast to the covert world I navigate.

As we stir the sauce, Rafe playfully comments on the meticulousness of my chopping skills, turning a routine kitchen task into a lighthearted exchange.

“I have to say, Olivia, those knife skills are top-notch. Did you ever consider joining a culinary academy?”

I smile. “Well, it's a hidden talent. Maybe I should add ‘master of disguise and expert chef’ to my resume.”

Our banter continues, weaving seamlessly into the rhythm of our culinary collaboration. The pasta cooks to al dente perfection, and soon we sit down to share a meal—a momentary escape from the shadows that envelop our lives.

As the meal takes shape under our combined efforts, the kitchen transforms into a haven where the boundaries between allies blur. In this shared space, the weight of my burdens momentarily lightens, and the simple act of preparing a meal becomes a welcome diversion from the intricate web of shadows that entangles me.

The spaghetti bolognese turns out to be a delightful blend of flavors, with the rich and savory sauce clinging to the perfectly cooked pasta. The dish is a comforting embrace, offering a momentary reprieve from the tension and uncertainty that define my current reality.

As we savor each bite, the warmth of the meal mirrors the newfound camaraderie between Rafe and me. The flavors meld together, creating a symphony that temporarily drowns out the echoes of danger and betrayal lurking in the shadows.

In that shared meal, there's a sense of normalcy—a reminder that even in the midst of chaos, there are moments of simplicity and connection that anchor us to the present. The taste is a bittersweet reminder that, despite the dangers that loom, life continues, and we find solace in the small joys that offer respite from the darkness.

The easy banter and shared laughter during our meal with Rafe provide a temporary respite from the turmoil that surrounds me. As we enjoy the delicious spaghetti bolognese, there's a subtle shift in the air—a moment of connection that transcends the uncertainties of our current circumstances.

The taste of the meal lingers on my palate, a reminder of the simple pleasures that can be found even in the midst of chaos. Rafe's company, marked by playful teasing and genuine moments, offers a sense of comfort that eases the weight on my shoulders.

As we part ways after the meal, a few tender kisses exchanged, I find myself feeling a little more at ease. In the midst of danger and intrigue, these stolen moments of connection become precious, a source of strength in the face of uncertainty. The echoes of our shared laughter linger, a promise that, despite the challenges ahead, there are pockets of solace to be found in the company of those who understand the shadows we navigate.

Instead of heading to my room, I approach Leo in his office and tell him everything I uncovered.

Leo leans back in his chair, his dark eyes fixed on me with an intensity that reveals the weight of the information I've just

shared. The soft hum of the air conditioning seems to accentuate the silence that lingers between us.

“Are you sure about this?” Leo finally breaks the quiet, his deep voice resonating in the confined space of his office.

I nod, my gaze unwavering. “I found a coded message in Derrick’s belongings. It pointed to the president as his target. It’s a message from the Scarlet Vipers.”

Leo drums his fingers on the polished mahogany desk, contemplating the implications. “The president,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. “This changes everything.”

I swallow hard, feeling the gravity of the situation settling over us. “What do we do now?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Leo leans forward, his eyes locking onto mine. “We need to stop them. The vice president is corrupt,” he states with a certainty that cuts through the tension.

The room feels charged with the magnitude of the situation, and Leo’s revelation sends shivers down my spine. The realization that the shadows extend beyond the criminal underworld into the very fabric of the nation is a chilling revelation. It seems the conspiracy I’ve stumbled upon reaches far beyond the immediate dangers posed by the Scarlet Vipers and the Obsidian Shadows.

In this murky world of deceit and intrigue, Leo’s admission adds another layer to the complex web of alliances and betrayals. As we delve deeper into the shadows, the boundaries between right and wrong blur, leaving me to navigate a treacherous path where allegiances are tested and the consequences of every choice resonate far beyond the confines of the criminal underworld.

“The vice president’s corruption is the linchpin. If we expose him, we unravel the Scarlet Vipers’ influence.”

I take a deep breath, realizing that this revelation thrusts us into a dangerous game where the stakes are not only our lives but the fate of the nation.

“How do we expose him without becoming targets ourselves?” I ask.

He stands. “Let’s go and see what Cipher has to say.”

Leo follows me down the hall to my room. I log on. During my silence, Cipher’s threats have escalated.

Leo’s eyes narrow as he reads the threatening messages from Cipher, his jaw tensing. The air in the room feels charged with tension as we confront the mounting danger. Leo’s silence is a testament to the gravity of the situation.

After a moment, he looks up, his gaze unwavering. “We need to handle this carefully. Cipher might be trying to provoke a reaction, to sow discord among us.”

I nod, the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders. “What do we do? How do we protect ourselves?”

Leo leans back, fingers steepled in thought. “We can’t afford to show weakness, but we also can’t underestimate the danger. Cipher has information, and he’s using it strategically.”

I take a deep breath, my mind racing. “Should we involve the others and let them know about Cipher’s threats?”

Leo’s expression darkens. “Not yet. We handle this internally. Keep it contained. The last thing we need is panic.”

In the dim light of my room, Leo and I exchange determined glances. This war, fought in the shadows, has become ours, and Cipher’s cryptic threats echo like distant thunder, signaling a storm on the horizon—one that could either cleanse or destroy everything in its path.

“Tell Cipher you can’t break into their servers no matter what you do,” Leo instructs.

I nod and quickly do as he commands.

Before Cipher responds, Leo yanks me away from the computer. I have no idea why until the loud crack of a gunshot reverberates through the room as Leo takes swift and decisive action. My eyes widen in shock as the screen shatters into fractured pixels. Fragments of my digital pursuit scatter across the room, extinguishing the glow of the monitor.

Leo stands there, his expression unreadable, the lingering scent of gunpowder hanging in the air. The gravity of his choice weighs heavily on both of us.

“Why did you—” I start to ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“We can’t afford any traces leading back to us,” Leo interrupts, his tone firm. “The less they know about what you uncovered, the safer we are. Cipher’s threats needed to be neutralized.”

A tense silence envelops the room, broken only by the fading echoes of the gunshot. Leo’s eyes meet mine, and there’s an unspoken understanding—a shared acknowledgment of the harsh realities we face in this perilous world.

As the digital remnants of my investigation vanish into the void, a heavy realization settles within me. The shadows we navigate are darker and more treacherous than I ever imagined, and the stakes have never been higher. In this clandestine dance of power and danger, I’ve become entangled, forced to confront the consequences of seeking the truth.

Leo’s gaze holds mine, his words lingering in the air. “We’ll weather this storm, but remember, not everything is as it seems, and trust is a luxury we can’t always afford.”

“But what do we do now?” I whisper.

Leo sets his jaw. “Leave it to me,” he utters, his tone raw and cold.

I shiver. I’m glad he’s on my side, but I still don’t know if I’ve aligned myself with evil...

twenty-eight

The next day, Leo has a meeting with Cara and me. The three of us sit in his office, the air heavy with tension and the weight of our shared secrets. I glance between Leo and Cara, uncertainty etched across my face. It's a pivotal moment where truths are laid bare, and the consequences remain uncertain.

Leo leans forward, steepling his fingers as he addresses Cara. "Olivia has uncovered critical information about Derrick's assignment. He was tasked with assassinating the president."

Cara's gaze doesn't waver. She seems almost unflinching in the face of this revelation. It's a subtle acknowledgment that there's more to her than meets the eye.

"I was aware of Derrick's assignment," she admits, her voice measured. "The Scarlet Vipers have their claws embedded deep within the government. The vice president is their pawn. He'll do whatever they want."

My eyes widen. The Scarlet Vipers' tendrils reach into the highest echelons of power, orchestrating a sinister dance with the fate of nations as the stakes. It's a revelation that eclipses the personal vendetta I once held against them.

Cara continues, her gaze fixed on Leo. "The Obsidian Shadows have been walking a delicate tightrope, navigating between these corrupt elements. Our actions have been a counterbalance, preventing the Scarlet Vipers from tipping the scales entirely in their favor. After Derrick died, they were left

scrambling. They thought you uncovered their plan and took out Derrick to thwart them.”

I stiffen. “So they don’t know that I killed him?”

Cara looks at me sympathetically. “They’ve since learned that, yes.”

“Do they know...” I glance at Leo and then away.

“They highly suspect that you’ve been an Obsidian Shadow for a lot longer than you actually were,” Cara says softly.

I swallow hard. “What does that mean?”

“It means you truly can’t leave this facility,” Leo muses.

“I understand, but...”

“If you do,” Cara says softly, “they’ve already made it clear to me that they will use the knowledge of you killing your husband against you.”

“To manipulate me to do what?” I ask.

No one answers me, and maybe that’s for the best.

As they delve into discussions about countermeasures and alliances, I can’t shake the realization that the shadows I’m navigating have depths far beyond the personal vendetta that initially set me on this path. The fate of nations now hangs in the balance, and I find myself entwined in a perilous game where the lines between right and wrong blur into shades of gray.

“Cara, how did you get started as a double agent?” I ask, my mind churning with the thought that maybe I should do the same. After all, my short-lived alliance with Cipher already has me working undercover.

“It started with my husband,” she says, her voice measured, her eyes reflecting the weight of the secrets she carries. “He was deeply entangled with the Scarlet Vipers, and the abuse I endured reached a breaking point. I reached out to the Obsidian Shadows, seeking a way out. Leo offered me a

chance to escape that life, but I had to make a sacrifice for the greater good.”

Leo’s expression tightens, his jaw clenched as if anticipating the path her narrative is taking. He interrupts, his voice a low growl. “Olivia won’t be following your footsteps. We won’t risk her in that capacity. She’s already entangled in this mess more than she should be.”

His protectiveness is evident, a lion guarding his territory. The unspoken message lingers in the air—my journey is distinct, and the secrets of the past won’t be a burden I bear.

The conversation shifts back to strategic discussions, leaving the untold chapters of Cara’s history lingering in the shadows. As the meeting progresses, I’m left with the realization that the intricate tapestry of alliances and betrayals extends far beyond my personal vendetta. In this dangerous game, every move is calculated, and the players are bound by a complex set of rules that I’m only beginning to comprehend.

In Leo’s dimly lit office, the air thick with tension, I take a deep breath before broaching the daring proposal.

“Leo, Cara, I understand the risks, but if we can infiltrate their plans, we could gain a significant advantage. I’m willing to take on Derrick’s quest, pose as a willing ally, and gather every detail of their operation. This way, we can thwart them at every step.”

Leo’s steely gaze bores into mine, his expression revealing a mix of concern and disapproval. “Olivia, you’re not a trained operative. The Scarlet Vipers are ruthless, and any misstep could be fatal. We won’t gamble with your life like that.”

Cara, perched on the edge of a chair, adds, “He’s right. The Scarlet Vipers are a dangerous adversary. We can find another way, a safer way to counter their plans without putting you directly in harm’s way.”

I persist, my voice edged with determination, “I’ve learned much about their organization, and I believe I can convince them of my allegiance. It’s a risk, but the rewards could be significant. We need every advantage we can get.”

Leo leans back in his chair, fingers steepled as he contemplates my proposition. After a moment, his eyes narrow, a palpable tension in the air. “Absolutely not. We won’t put you in such a perilous position. The risks far outweigh any potential gains. We’ll find another way to counter their plans without throwing you directly into the lion’s den.”

We all fall silent. I understand Leo’s points. He’s right. I’m not trained, and his mention of the word “operative” only makes me think of war that much more. The Scarlet Vipers want to have the future president under their control but to what end?

All in all, I suppose that doesn’t matter so much as ensuring that doesn’t come to pass. At least the current president isn’t corrupt...

Cara slowly nods. “Olivia’s idea has merit. What if I suggest to the Scarlet Vipers that I take on Derrick’s mission? I’ve been undercover for years, and they might find it plausible that I’d want to prove my loyalty by completing a high-profile task.”

Leo’s gaze shifts between us. I can’t read his expression at all, and my stomach twists. This is highly dangerous, and if he agrees, Cara could be thrust into a very dangerous position, and all because I suggested this idea.

“It’s a risk even for you,” Leo finally says, “but we’ve been backed into a corner. If we play our cards right, we might gain valuable intel without putting Olivia directly on the front line.”

We outline a plan, refining the details of Cara’s proposal to the Scarlet Vipers. The tension in the room remains palpable, the weight of our decisions pressing down on us like an unrelenting force.

Cara will approach her contacts within the Scarlet Vipers and express her desire to take on Derrick’s mission. She’ll emphasize her dedication to the organization and her willingness to go to great lengths to prove her loyalty.

We craft a convincing cover story for Cara, detailing the reasons why she's stepping up for this particular mission. It involves personal vendettas and a desire to gain favor within the organization.

Leo will provide additional support from behind the scenes, pulling strings within the Obsidian Shadows to validate Cara's story if necessary. This could involve creating fabricated evidence to reinforce her motives.

As we finalize the plan, there's an unspoken acknowledgment that this risky strategy could either provide us with invaluable intelligence or lead to catastrophic consequences. The stakes are higher than ever, and we brace ourselves for the intricate dance we're about to perform in the dangerous world of shadows and deception.

"What if I monitor and support Cara from a virtual standpoint?" I ask, desperate to find some way to ensure she's safe, given how dangerous this mission is and I was the one who suggested it in the first place.

Leo slowly nods. "So long as we can do it without comprising her as a double agent..."

"I can set up a secure and encrypted channel to stay in constant communication with Cara. I'll be able to monitor your interactions with the Scarlet Vipers, decipher any coded messages, and provide immediate support."

I grin. I should be able to collect any valuable information that the Scarlet Vipers might inadvertently share with Cara. This could include details about their plans, motives, or even potential weaknesses that the Obsidian Shadows can exploit.

As the plan takes shape, it's clear that the synergy between Cara's physical presence and my virtual support will need to create a dynamic duo poised to navigate the treacherous waters of deception and danger. The success of our mission hinges on this delicate balance, and the countdown to Cara's pivotal meeting with the Scarlet Vipers begins.

"You'll need to maintain consistency in your behavior and interactions with them," Leo presses. "Any sudden changes or

deviations from her established persona could raise suspicions.”

Cara chuckles. “I know. I’ve been doing this for more than a minute.” She glances at me. “Leo, you know the things I’ve done to prove my loyalty to them so they trust me.”

“You need to only reveal what is necessary,” he continues. “Avoid divulging critical details that could compromise our plans.”

She nods, but I can tell she’s getting a bit upset that Leo is handling her with kid gloves. He’s just worried about her.

“I know the drill,” she says.

“We’ll need to refresh your emergency extraction plan should it come to it,” he says, rubbing his chin.

Her laugh is bitter, and I know why. If she’s uncovered, she’ll be killed immediately. There won’t be time for her to be extracted.

The dangerous dance with the Scarlet Vipers is about to take an even more treacherous turn.



ONCE EVERYTHING IS SECURED for me to be able to watch and see everything Cara does through a new laptop Leo gives me, Leo gives the go-ahead for Cara to leave and talk to the Scarlet Vipers.

He, naturally, stays with me, wanting to follow this. My couch feels cramped as he sits almost on top of me to have a view of the screen.

“How do you do this?” I murmur.

“Do what?”

“Handle all of this?”

A muscle in his jaw twitches. “I do what needs to be done,” he says.

“How did you get started...” I trail off.

He’s not going to answer me.

And he doesn't.

It doesn't take long for Cara to arrive at a nondescript building. She heads inside, nodding to a few people whom I assume are Scarlet Vipers, and eventually, she enters a room that's guarded.

How she's able to do all of this and not be nervous I don't know. My appreciation of her is sky-high.

The room is dimly lit. Two men and one woman are inside, all seated at a round table, and they all fall silent as she closes the door behind her.

"That one there, the leader with the scar across his face, that's Markus Grimaldi. Ruthless and cunning. The woman to his right is Elena 'Spectra' Moreno, a skilled infiltrator. And the man on the left, with the cold eyes, that's Vaughn 'Venom' Rossi. He's their strategist.

I listen intently, my eyes darting between the figures in the shadows and Leo's knowing gaze. The weight of each name adds a layer of complexity to the unfolding conversation. These are not mere names. They are the architects of a dangerous world that Cara navigates on my behalf.

The air is thick with tension as Cara meets the piercing gazes of the group's enigmatic leaders.

"Gentlemen, it's time we discuss the future," she says, projecting confidence. "We've been in a holding pattern for too long, and inaction is not a luxury we can afford."

Markus leans back, scrutinizing her. "What's prompted this sudden urgency, Cara? We've been patient."

"Patience is a virtue, but so is adaptability. Our circumstances are evolving, and the window of opportunity might not stay open for much longer."

Spectra crosses her arms, her expression more than a little skeptical. "Explain yourself. What's changed?"

"Derrick's absence has left a void, and his mission cannot remain in limbo indefinitely," she says, her resolve steel. "We

owe it to him to see it through, and to the Scarlet Vipers to ensure success.”

The room falls silent as Cara’s words linger in the air. The Scarlet Vipers exchange glances, weighing her proposal against the risks it presents.

Markus crosses his arms. “This mission is of utmost importance. It requires precision and expertise. Are you certain you’re up to the task?”

Cara doesn’t seem fazed. “I’ve been preparing for this moment. I understand the gravity of the assignment, and I won’t falter.

The Scarlet Vipers deliberate among themselves, their murmured discussions hidden in the shadows.

“Time is a luxury we might not have,” Cara murmurs. “The longer we wait, the higher the risk of exposure. We need to strike while the iron is hot.”

Venom scowls. “What guarantees do we have that you can handle Derrick’s assignment? It’s a critical mission.”

“I’ve been gathering intel, honing my skills,” Cara says, projecting confidence. “I’m more than capable. Besides, I owe it to Derrick.”

I glance at Leo. She owes Derrick? Why did she say that? And the Scarlet Vipers don’t question this.

Markus rubs his chin, considering. “You’ve always been loyal, Cara, but this mission is crucial. We can’t afford mistakes.”

“I understand the gravity of the task. Let me prove myself. You won’t be disappointed.”

The delicate negotiation continues, each message carefully crafted to elicit the desired response while maintaining the facade of allegiance.

“How soon can you move forward?” Spectra asks.

“Give me the details of the assignment. I’ll make sure it’s executed flawlessly.”

Markus waves his hands dismissively. “We’ll consider this. For now, go and attend to your duties.”

Cara nods and leaves the room.

Leo turns off my laptop. “Now, we wait and see.”

His voice echoes in my room, and I shiver. There’s darkness all around, and I don’t know if I’ll ever see the light again.

twenty-nine

The Scarlet Vipers send Cara away, saying they'll let her now. I turn to Leo, desperate for answers about the Scarlet Vipers and what their ultimate goal is... but I also want to know about the Obsidian Shadows and what our goals are too.

In the aftermath of Cara's departure, I turn to Leo, a storm of questions swirling within me.

The obsidian-eyed man gazes back at me, his countenance a testament to the weight of secrets carried by both the Obsidian Shadows and their enigmatic rivals, the Scarlet Vipers.

"Leo, what do the Scarlet Vipers want? Why would they task Derrick with assassinating the president?"

He sighs heavily. "The Scarlet Vipers... their motives are complex. Power, control, influence. They seek to manipulate the very fabric of authority. As for Derrick's mission, that was just a pawn move. An assassination, a chess piece in a much larger game."

His words leave me unsettled, as if I'm standing on the precipice of a conspiracy that stretches far beyond my understanding.

"And what is their game?" I press.

Leo leans back in his chair, his gaze focused somewhere beyond the room, lost in the intricate web of the criminal underworld. "The Scarlet Vipers, they're a dark force, intertwined with power, politics, and crime. Their ultimate

goal... it's hard to pin down. Chaos, control, perhaps both. Their tendrils stretch far and wide, and their influence is profound. As for us, the Obsidian Shadows, we navigate the shadows to maintain balance, survival, and occasionally, justice.”

His words paint a complex picture of two opposing forces, each harboring its own set of motives and machinations. I grapple with the weight of the revelations, realizing that my fate is bound to the precarious dance between these clandestine factions.

But my curiosity isn't confined to the machinations of our adversaries. I also want insights into the Obsidian Shadows.

“And us? What are the goals of the Obsidian Shadows? What game are we playing?”

He smirks. “The Obsidian Shadows have always been about survival, Olivia. In a world where shadows consume the truth, we navigate the darkness to ensure our existence. Power, respect, control—these are our goals, but survival remains the cornerstone.”

The revelation settles on my shoulders, the realization that survival in this clandestine world is both a delicate dance and a ruthless battle. The Scarlet Vipers and the Obsidian Shadows are locked in a deadly embrace, each maneuvering to secure their own existence in the shadows' realm.

The truth lies veiled beneath Leo's stoic exterior, a cloak of secrecy shrouding the depths of his involvement with the Obsidian Shadows. As I peer into the enigma of his obsidian gaze, a palpable tension simmers beneath the surface. Leo guards his secrets with the same intensity that defines his role in this clandestine world.

“There's more to your world, Leo, and I can sense it. What aren't you telling me?”

His tone becomes guarded. “Olivia, some truths are better left unsaid. This world we inhabit... it thrives on the unspoken, on the shadows that conceal more than they reveal.”

His cryptic response only deepens the mystery, leaving me to grapple with the notion that perhaps delving too deep into the secrets of the Obsidian Shadows carries consequences I may not be ready to confront. The shadows hold their secrets close, and Leo, their elusive guardian, remains an enigma in the obsidian tapestry of our clandestine existence.

Leo's arms envelop me in a protective cocoon as I search for clarity in the depth of his gaze. The dim light in his office casts a play of shadows on the walls, mirroring the ambiguity of our conversation. The scent of leather and faint echoes of distant conversations create a surreal backdrop to our intimate exchange.

He bends down, his lips claiming mine, and I want to give into him, to let him whisk me away to pleasure.

But I can't.

Not when I know this is because he wants to distract me.

And not when Cara is out there, playing a game made far more dangerous because of my suggestion.

So I draw back, putting a hand on his chest. "Leo... have you and Cara ever been... involved?"

He gives me a subtle smirk. "Our ties run deep but not in the way you might think."

"So you never slept with her?"

"We share a history, Olivia, bonds forged in the crucible of our pasts, but it's not a tale of romance, if that's what you're wondering."

I feel the weight of his words, laden with unspoken truths that linger in the air. His fingers trace comforting patterns on my back, a silent reassurance that extends beyond mere words. As I peer into his eyes, searching for the answers I crave, Leo's demeanor remains enigmatic, his secrets guarded by the fortress of his stoic expression.

"Leo, I don't want any more secrets. Not now."

He leans back, still holding me. "There are facets of this world, Olivia, that are best left shrouded. For your safety and

ours.”

The admission hangs in the air, an unspoken pact between us. I can sense the walls he’s erected, the invisible barriers that separate the truth from the shadows. The lines between ally and adversary blur, leaving me to navigate the labyrinth of loyalty and deception. In Leo’s embrace, I find solace, yet the ever-present uncertainty lingers like a silent specter, a constant companion in the clandestine dance of the Obsidian Shadows.

But more than that, I can also sense his growing erection in his pants.

I feel the heat rising between us, the tension thickening in the air. Leo’s desire is palpable, radiating from his body like electricity. His gaze smolders with a mix of longing and frustration, mirroring my own internal struggle.

He starts to kiss me with more urgency, his lips hungry and demanding against mine. I can taste the need in his mouth, the desperation to consume me completely.

I pull away just as he’s about to deepen the kiss, leaving him breathless and bewildered.

A mischievous smile plays on my lips as I trace my fingers along his jawline, relishing the way his breath hitches at my touch. I lean in closer, my voice a seductive whisper that resonates deep within him.

“Not so fast, Leo,” I purr, pressing my body against his while maintaining a tantalizing distance between our lower halves. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

I refuse to let him have his way just yet. I want to tease and torment him, to make him ache for me until he’s begging for release. With a mischievous smile, I push him away gently, my fingers tracing a tantalizing path down his chest.

“I never anticipated our paths crossing like this,” he murmurs, his voice husky with a mixture of arousal and restraint, “but there’s something about you, Olivia, something that draws me in despite the risks.”

I have no idea what he means by that, and my confusion allows Leo the opportunity to yank me onto his lap. He runs

his hands up and down my back, his hands under my shirt, and he unhooks my bra.

I lean back to give him space as he brings his hands around to my front, pinching and rolling my nipples. I'm so aroused right now that I almost want to give in to him.

My breath catches in my throat as Leo's touch sends shivers coursing through my body. The sensation of his skilled fingers teasing my hardened peaks, caressing them with a mix of gentleness and urgency, intensifies the desire swirling within me. I bite my lip, fighting against the overwhelming urge to surrender to his touch.

Leo's mouth crashes against mine again, his kiss filled with a raw hunger that ignites every nerve ending in my body. His tongue explores the cavern of my mouth, tangling with mine in a passionate dance. The taste of him is intoxicating, a heady blend of desire and temptation.

My mind swirls with a whirlwind of conflicting desires as Leo's hands explore the contours of my body. The tantalizing dance between pleasure and restraint pushes me to the edge of reason, my body pulsating with an urgent need that matches his own. But even in the midst of this intoxicating whirlpool of sensations, a voice of reason whispers in my ear, reminding me of the dangers that lie within the obsidian shadows.

Leo's touch sends shivers down my spine, igniting a fire within me that burns hotter with each passing second. I close my eyes, surrendering to the sensations coursing through my body. When I open them, I scramble onto his lap, grinding against his clothed erection, feeling him grow harder and harder.

But as much as I want to succumb to the waves of pleasure crashing over me, as much as I want to succumb to the intoxicating desire coursing through my veins, a nagging voice of reason echoes in the depths of my mind. This isn't the time, nor the place, for such uninhibited indulgence. The shadows of secrecy still loom, and the stakes are higher than ever.

I summon all my willpower and push myself off Leo's lap. The ache between my legs is almost unbearable, but I know

deep down that now is not the right time.

Leo's eyes widen with surprise, his chest heaving as he struggles to regain his composure. His lips are swollen from our heated kisses, and his desire burns brightly in his gaze. But there's also a flicker of understanding, a recognition that this moment is not meant to be indulged in fully.

I stand before him, my body trembling with a mix of desire and frustration. "Leo," I say, my voice husky and laced with regret, "as much as I want you right now, there are too many uncertainties surrounding us. We cannot afford to let our desires cloud our judgment."

"I know what I'm doing," he growls.

"Do you?" I challenge. "Don't worry. I'm sure you can run off and find one of the other Obsidian Shadows to help you with..." I gesture toward his erection.

He narrows his eyes. "Is that what this is about? Are you jealous? What about you running off with some of my men?"

"Maybe they're more honest than you are."

"I doubt that. You don't know any of us."

His words turn the blood in my veins to ice. He's not wrong.

I back away from him, rubbing my arms. The darkness is so cold, and there aren't any comforts in the shadows. I wish we were in his office so I could leave him, but we're in my room.

A room that has become a prison.

Without another word, I leave Leo in my room. I can't be around him right now. If he wants to watch over Cara, he can. If he wants to shove his cock inside someone else, he can.

As for me, I'm getting sick of the shadows.

thirty

My footsteps echo in the dimly lit corridors. I almost wish I could go to the Golden Tap for a drink because fuck, do I need one, but I can't and don't risk it.

The hallway is cloaked in shadows, and each step echoes the rhythmic beating of my heart, a testament to the mounting tension that propels me forward. I need answers, a clarity that has remained elusive in the mysterious world I've been thrust into.

Dante's room is a few doors down, and I hesitate for a moment before knocking. The sound reverberates through the silence, a signal of my quest for understanding in this labyrinth of secrets. The door creaks open, revealing Dante's silhouette against the ambient glow of a lamp.

He grins at me before looking me up and down. "Olivia, what brings you here?"

I'm sure he's hoping I'm here for one particular reason, but he's going to have to deal with disappointment.

"I need to talk."

"Of course."

"About Leo and the Obsidian Shadows," I blurt out.

He raises his eyebrows and studies me for a moment, his expression unreadable. Without a word, he gestures for me to enter. The room is dimly lit, adorned with a few pieces of old but well-cared-for furniture and an air of quiet contemplation.

I take a seat on his couch, and Dante sits on the coffee table in front of me, his piercing gaze fixated on my face.

“Dante, I feel like there’s so much I don’t know. About Leo, about all of this.”

Dante leans back. “You’re not the first to feel that way. The shadows have layers, Olivia.”

“But what’s Leo’s role? What are we really doing?”

Dante’s eyes flicker with a mixture of emotions, a silent acknowledgment of the complexities that linger in the shadows. “Leo, he’s the architect of balance. The Obsidian Shadows are more than a simple criminal enterprise. We navigate the thin line between order and chaos.”

I lean forward, hanging onto his words as if they hold the key to unraveling the mysteries that shroud the Obsidian Shadows.

“And you? What’s your role?”

He smirks. “I’m a dancer in this clandestine ballet, Olivia. Every move calculated, every step a dance with the shadows.”

As Dante’s enigmatic answers swirl in the air, I realize that the world I’ve stepped into is a tapestry of intricate threads, each revealing a fraction of the truth. In the dance of shadows, I find myself caught between the allure of mystery and the desperate need for clarity.

I groan. “Can I have a straight answer for once?”

Dante’s smirk fades as he observes the frustration etched across my face. He leans forward, his expression more serious now. “Olivia, straight answers are a rare commodity in our world,” he says, his tone surprisingly soft. “The truth often wears masks, and what you see is only a glimpse of the whole picture.”

I let out a sigh, grappling with the reality that ambiguity is the currency of this clandestine realm. Dante’s eyes hold a glimmer of empathy, recognizing the internal struggle that courses through me.

“I just need to know that I can trust the people I’m with, Dante,” I murmur, resigned.

He nods. “Trust is earned in increments, Olivia. Everyone here has their secrets, their reasons. Even Leo.”

The weight of Dante’s words settles in the room, a shared acknowledgment of the intricacies that define our existence in the shadows. As I contemplate the elusive nature of truth, I realize that navigating this world demands a delicate dance—one that requires discernment and an acceptance of the enigma that veils the Obsidian Shadows.

“I don’t have any secrets,” I argue.

Dante’s eyes hold a knowing glint as he leans back, his posture relaxed yet perceptive. “No secrets, Olivia? Everyone carries shadows, some just cast longer trails than others.”

His words linger in the air, a subtle challenge to the idea that one can traverse this clandestine realm unburdened by concealed truths. As the weight of his gaze intensifies, I find myself contemplating the notion that perhaps, in this intricate dance of alliances and subterfuge, honesty might be the rarest currency of all.

“Ask me any question,” I dare him. “Ask me anything at all, and I’ll answer it honestly.”

He smirks, a hint of mischief playing on his lips. His voice takes on a velvety tone, a soft echo in the room. “All right then, Olivia. Tell me, what are you truly seeking in the heart of these shadows? Safety? Redemption? Or something more elusive?”

His question pierces through the air, a probing inquiry that lays bare the complex layers of motivation that propel me through this perilous journey. As the weight of his gaze lingers, I feel the walls of secrecy closing in, demanding a response that transcends the surface of my carefully crafted persona.

I smirk. “You always did have a knack for cutting to the chase, Dante. But fair enough, let’s dance in the shadows of honesty for a moment. What do I seek? It’s not just safety. It’s

a refuge from the nightmare that was my life. Redemption? Maybe, if that means breaking free from the chains of a past that suffocated me.”

“Nothing else?” He lifts his chin.

Damn. If I want any answers, I’m going to have to dig deep and tell all of my truths.

“There is something else, something more,” I murmur, my smirk fading. “It’s a quest for purpose, a desperate need to matter in a world that seems to have forgotten me. I lost everything when I killed my husband.”

Dante shifts back, his hands falling to either side of him on the coffee table. His eyes are locked onto mine, and I doubt I could look away.

“A quest for purpose in the heart of shadows. A perilous journey indeed, but, Olivia, you’ve already stepped into a world where shadows dance and secrets weave their own tales. Are you ready for the revelations that await you?”

I meet his gaze with determination. “I didn’t come this far to turn back now. Lay your cards on the table, Dante. What’s the Obsidian Shadows’ true game?”

He smirks again, his eyes flickering with a mixture of amusement and something deeper. “We play the game of power, Olivia. In the shadows, we maneuver, manipulate, and carve out our own destinies. Survival isn’t just about safety. It’s about thriving in the darkness. Can you handle that, or will you be consumed by the shadows you seek?”

His words linger, hanging in the air like a challenge, inviting me to delve deeper into the intricate dance of power and purpose that defines this clandestine world.

I slowly nod confidently. “I’m not here to be a pawn, Dante. I want to be a player, to navigate these shadows and come out on top. Tell me, what’s my first move in this game of yours?”

His smile is as devastating as his gaze is intense. “Your first move? Earn the trust of those around you, but never forget that trust is a fragile illusion in our world. Question

everything, and when the time comes, be ready to make choices that others can't. The shadows reveal both secrets and dangers. It's your discernment that will determine your fate."

I lean closer to him. "Then let the game begin. I'm ready for whatever the shadows have to offer."

As the conversation unfolds, I sense the weight of his words settling around me, each one a stepping stone in a perilous journey through a world where trust is a rare commodity and choices echo in the darkness.

Dante leans even closer. We're so close we could kiss, but romance is the last thing on our minds.

"You need to understand, Olivia," he says, his voice lower still, "Leo is the puppeteer pulling the strings in this twisted performance. He orchestrates the moves, and we all dance to his tune, but be cautious, for Leo doesn't reveal all the cards in his hand."

I raise my eyebrows. "What's he hiding?"

Dante grimaces. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? We're all in the dark about Leo's true intentions. If you want to survive in this game, you'll have to find out for yourself. Just remember, not everything is as it seems."

The revelation leaves me with a sense of unease, the realization that Leo, the enigmatic leader of the Obsidian Shadows, holds secrets even within the inner circle. As I navigate the intricate web of alliances and deceptions, it becomes clear that my journey is far from over, and the shadows conceal more than I ever imagined.

"What about Kira? Did she know Leo's true plan?"

Dante draws back, and I hate that he's instantly guarded at the sound of her name.

"Kira was a crucial part of this organization," he says slowly, "and she and Leo... they were very close. Olivia, in this world, some things are better left untouched."

"I just... I feel like I need to understand more, especially if I'm going to survive."

He pauses and then sighs. “Leo’s world is intricate and dangerous. I can’t promise you’ll find all the answers, but I can offer guidance. Just be cautious. Some truths might be darker than you anticipate.”

As Dante’s words linger in the air, I’m left grappling with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. The enigma surrounding Leo and Kira deepens, and I find myself drawn further into a world where trust is a rare commodity.

“I see more than you think,” he adds. “I know you’re searching for something... or someone.”

I don’t blink.

“You’ve been with some of the others,” he says.

I gulp.

“All of us, we’re bound by something stronger than judgment.”

“What are we bound by, Dante?” I ask, feeling more vulnerable than ever before.

He gives me a gentle smile. “A shared journey through darkness. We all carry our secrets and burdens. You’re not alone in this.”

Dante’s words resonate, creating a fragile bridge between understanding and the unknown. In the labyrinth of alliances and uncertainties, his offer of support becomes a beacon, a glimmer of solace in the obsidian shadows that envelop me.

“All I want to do is help you,” he says. “So you’ve been with Leo and some of the others. I’m not judging you, I swear, and if I can help you in any fashion...”

“Help me, Dante,” I whisper before kissing him with everything in me.

Dante’s lips meet mine with a hunger that matches my own, a hungry flame that ignites in the darkness of our shared desires. His hands find their way to my waist, pulling me closer as if he wants to merge our bodies into one. And in this moment, I let go of all inhibitions, surrendering myself to the intoxicating whirlpool of pleasure that he offers.

His touch is electrifying, sending shivers down my spine and igniting fireworks deep within me. Each caress feels like a revelation, a sensual dance that resonates through every fiber of my being. His fingers trail along the contours of my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Every stroke, every whisper of his breath against my skin sends me soaring to heights unknown.

I can feel the weight of his desire pressing against me, the evidence of his need straining against his pants. It fuels the fire within me, urging me to take what we both crave so desperately.

I break away, breathless, my lips swollen and tingling from the intensity of our connection. Dante's eyes are blue pools of desire, reflecting the same yearning that burns within me. He takes a step back, allowing me to catch my breath, but his gaze never wavers from mine.

"What do you desire?" he asks softly, his voice a velvet caress that sends shivers down my spine.

"I desire freedom," I reply without hesitation. "Freedom from the constraints that bind me, from the darkness that engulfs us all. I want to uncover the truth, to find answers to the questions that haunt me."

"I'll help."

"I know you will, but for now, I want a different kind of freedom."

I take him by the hand and lead him over to his bedroom. There, Dante strips us both and proceeds to take his time as he has his way with me.

His most delicious and erotic way with me.

thirty-one

The absence of Cara during breakfast the next morning leaves an unspoken tension in the air. Dante, Vinnie, and Rafe continue with their casual banter, sharing jokes and playful jabs, but I can't shake the unease that festers within me. Izzy, too, seems preoccupied, her gaze occasionally drifting to the empty chair where Cara usually sits.

As the minutes tick by, the air thickens with uncertainty. The routine camaraderie of our makeshift family is disrupted by the silent void left in Cara's absence. I wonder about the dangerous path she might be navigating in her undercover mission against the Scarlet Vipers. The shadows of suspicion linger, unspoken yet palpable. The others don't know what she's been up to, so they aren't going to be concerned about her absence, but I'm so scared for her that I can barely eat.

Before anyone can ask if I'm all right and I'll have to try to lie my way out of it, I leave the room.

A knot tightens in my stomach as I navigate the labyrinthine passages of the Obsidian Shadows' hideout. The muted lighting casts long shadows, accentuating the air of mystery that shrouds this secretive place. The usual camaraderie among the members is conspicuously absent, replaced by an unsettling stillness.

I reach the door to Leo's office, and a sense of trepidation creeps over me. The door creaks open.

Leo beams at me, rising behind his desk. Cara's there with him, and she's crying but also smiling.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Cara stands from her chair and pats my shoulder before kissing my cheek. I gape at her as she leaves and shuts the door.

Leo comes around his desk and sweeps me into his arms.

“What... I don’t understand.”

“It’s done,” Leo says firmly.

I lift my eyebrows. “What’s done?”

“All of it. You are safe now. You’ll always be safe now.”

“Leo, I don’t understand.”

“I handled everything.”

“But how?”

“I took off the head of the serpent.”

“You...”

“Their mob boss is gone, and the man who is stepping up to take his place, let’s just say that he understand what is in his best interests, and that is to keep me happy.”

“The plot...”

“Won’t be finished. No one is going to be assassinated.” He cups my face. “Damn it, Olivia.”

“Damn me?” I whisper. “What did I do?”

“You swept into my life. Into all of our lives. So innocent. So naïve. So willing to fight alongside us.”

I gulp. “Leo...”

“I never thought I would love anyone. Not after... But I do. Fuck it. I do. I love you, and I don’t care if you need the others. Vinnie, Dante, Rafe... if you need them, so be it, but I need you, Olivia.”

My head is swimming. “It’s really over?”

He nods. “I doubt you want to see the body,” he says dryly.

“Ah, no. No need for that.”

“Bodies, I should say,” he muses with a wry grin.

“I don’t want to see any bodies.” I can’t help licking my lip. “Well, maybe just one.”

“Whose?”

“Yours.”

He lifts his eyebrows.

My mind is reeling. He took care of my revenge for me. Leo’s provided much more than a safe haven for me. Sure, he’s a villain. He has skeletons in his past, but so do I.

My heart is full. Maybe it shouldn’t be. Maybe I shouldn’t want to be with someone like Leo or the others, but after the brand of darkness that had been Derrick, I know now that there are different kinds of villains.

And the villains who will burn the world down for you? Those are the kind of villains you welcome into your life, into your arm, into your bed.

“I do love you,” I murmur. “I love you and the others, and that scares me. I didn’t think I would ever find love after Derrick. I didn’t know what love was when I was with him. Whatever that was, it hadn’t been love. I’m scared about the future still, mostly because I afraid to love.”

“You don’t have to be afraid, and you don’t have to limit it. If anyone deserves love, you do, but right now, let me show you how much I love you.”

And he does. He does, my delicious, dirty-talking villain. Holy hell, does he show me how much he loves me.

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My Rise

My Empire

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The ABCs of Lust: Loving the Bully.

Allure

Bewitch

Captivate

Desire

Enchant

about the author

Lexi Archer knows what it was like to be bullied. While her love live didn't feature a redeemable bad boy, that doesn't mean her stories can't feature that... although there might be more than one bad boy.

When it comes to love, Lexi is convinced that anything is possible.

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