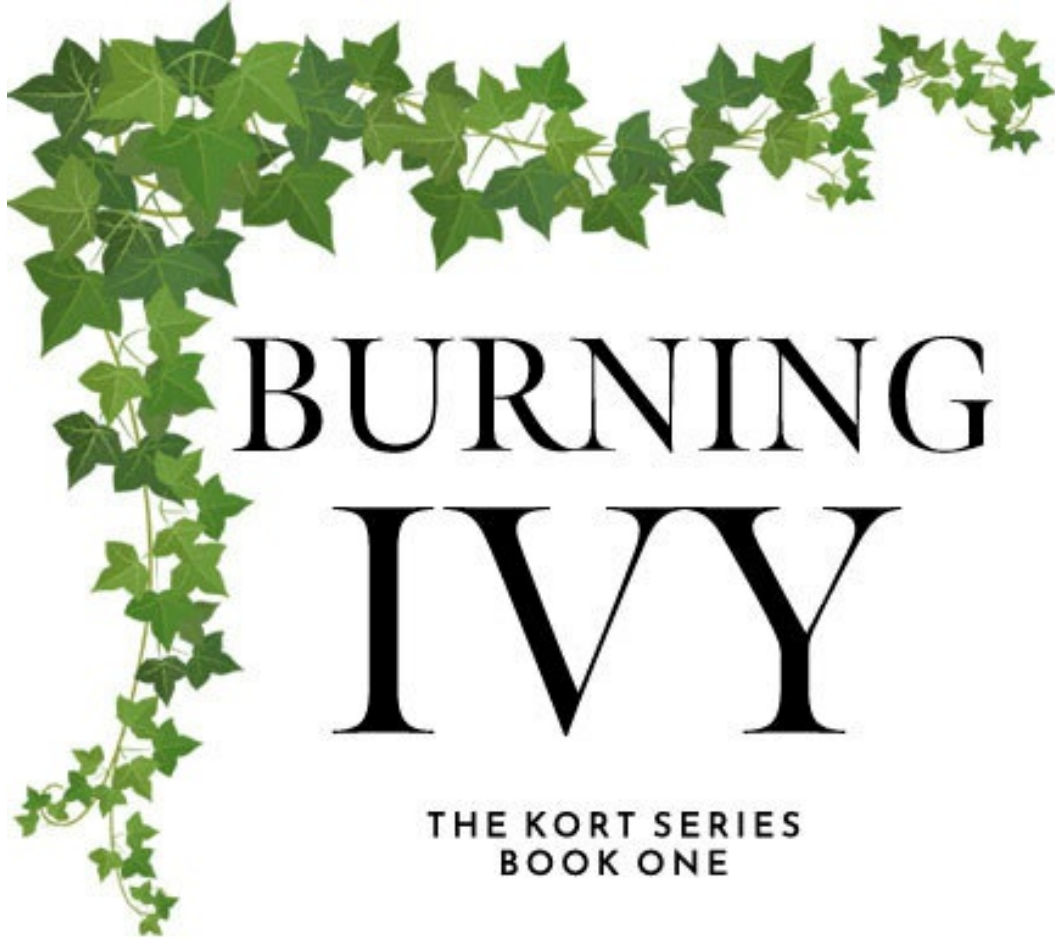


BURNING IVY

THE KORT SERIES
BOOK ONE

BRANDY HYNES



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Visit my website at www.brandyhynes.com

Cover Design by Bee at Bitter Sage Designs
www.bittersagedesigns.com

Editor: Jovana Shirley, Unforeseen Editing
www.unforeseenediting.com

Formatter: Stacey Blake, Champagne Book Design
champagnebookdesign.com

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EPILOGUE

THANK YOU FOR READING!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Burning Ivy is a **dark**, contemporary romance.

While I highly recommend going in blind for the best experience, your mental health is important. So, if you have triggers that overlap with the common themes of dark romance, be aware that this story will hit upon many. Including, but not limited to graphic murder, torture, and explicit sex scenes.

A more comprehensive list of specific triggers is on my website at www.brandyhynes.com. Should you have further questions beyond that, feel free to reach out to me there or through one of my social media platforms.

It's important to note that *Burning Ivy* is a work of fiction, meant solely for entertainment purposes for mature audiences. Please do not use this as a guide for ... well, *anything*. Refer to nonfiction works for how-tos, and simply enjoy the ride with Ivy and Wells.

A few things to note about *Burning Ivy*:

- *This is the first book in The KORT Series.
- *This is NOT a Why Choose.
- *It is MF, one male and one female.
- *The story is told in Dual POV.
- *The MMC is a morally gray, jealous/possessive, over-the-top hero.

*To all the good girls with fire in their bones, who drift into fantasies of being
a queen by day and a slut by night.
This one's for you. Burn, girl. Burn.*

*You will hear thunder and remember me,
And think: she wanted storms. The rim
Of the sky will be the colour of hard crimson,
And your heart, as it was then, will be on fire.
—Anna Akhmatova, You Will Hear Thunder*

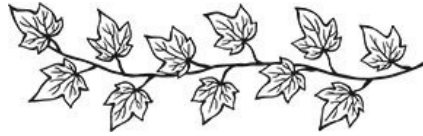
PLAYLIST

[Spotify Link](#)

There are a few songs with designated chapters.

- “Runaway Train” by Soul Asylum
- “Sex and Candy” by Marcy Playground
- “You Put A Spell On Me” by Austin Giorgio
- “Power Over Me” by Dermot Kennedy
- “I Will Follow You into the Dark” by Death Cab for Cutie
- “Iris” by Goo Goo Dolls
- “Stuck in the Middle with You” by Stealers Wheel (Chapter Ten. IYKYK)
- “Feeling Good” by Nina Simone
- “Curiosity” by Bryce Savage
- “What Have I Done” by Dermot Kennedy
- “Dangerous Hands” by Austin Giorgio
- “Three Little Birds” by Bob Marley (Chapter Nineteen)
- “Old Money” by Lana Del Rey
- “Snap” by Rosa Linn
- “Sitting in Fire” by MASN
- “Here Comes the Sun” by The Beatles (Second half of Chapter Twenty-Four)
- “Mount Everest” (Explicit) by Labrinth
- “Dancing With Your Ghost” by Sasha Alex Sloan
- “Outnumbered” by Dermot Kennedy
- “Radioactive/Pumped Up Kicks (5-Year Anniversary Mashup)” by Megan Davies (Chapter Thirty)
- “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” by James Brown
- “Skyfall” by Adele

CHAPTER ONE



IVY

Some say time is our most valuable commodity, the only thing we can never get back. For me, time is a storm in which I am forever lost.

Others view this as my downfall—the way time slips through my fingers like a breeze-blown dandelion. Wishes adrift. How the measurement of moments passing is nothing but grains of sand and shooting stars and butterfly kisses. Fleeting and intangible. Perhaps. And yet it’s terribly difficult to be shackled by that which eludes me. Those who see it as my weakness don’t understand all I hold in its place.

The stolen moments, the fantasies, the forbidden secrets.

Shadows swallowing golden rays.

All mine.

Reality is so often a pretentious bore. I far prefer the storm.

Freshly manicured acrylic nails, dressed in an elegant and glittery opal, float in front of my face. *Snap. Snap.*

“You in there, Ivy?” Celeste Carver—my best friend. And in so many ways, my polar opposite. She’s proper yet secretively wild and one of those stunning Elizabeth Taylor-curvy girls.

“Oh, I’m here, Lettie.” Her terribly *improper* childhood nickname rolls off my tongue in jest, causing her head to tilt with the quirk of her dark brow while I serve up a teasing dig. “I merely got distracted while you were checking out the waiter’s ass.”

“Touché.” She flaps her hand, accepting defeat, her gaze seeking out said waiter with a wanton pout. “It can’t be helped. I’m in a dry spell.”

That nearly sends the lemonade I’m attempting to swallow across the table. I cough a garbled laugh, the sweet and tangy beverage stinging my

throat. “You broke up with Nelson ten days ago. It’s not that dry.”

She sighs, clutching an imaginary strand of pearls and showcasing a less-than-stellar Southern accent. “Why, Ivanna Kingston, how droll. You can’t get off properly to a man named Nelson. The dry spell has been simply treacherous.”

Celeste has a way of making life lighter, which is why sitting here at the airport Chili’s, preparing for her to venture across the globe for a daredevil six-continent journey, has me off-balance. Her butchered accent is endearing though, so I chuckle at her animation.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You should.” She leans forward, a serious divot marking the space above her slender nose. “In fact, you should rip off that chastity belt and find someone to thrust some excitement into your life while I’m gone.”

Not willing to battle this argument for the five thousandth time, I choose to ignore that line of badgering and distract her. “I’m going to miss you so much. Send me pictures so I can live vicariously through you in both your death-defying adventures and your *sexcapades*.”

“I am excited.” She smiles. “It’s exactly what I need before some sort of real-life nonsense is expected of me or I finally bag the coveted role of a politician’s wife.”

We graduated college just shy of four months ago, neither of us with a clear direction. Well, Celeste’s directionless approach to life could very well be a destination in itself. She’s mastered the art of making *nothing* look fabulous and is certain to *nail* her role as first lady of something.

“It’s unbelievable the spot opened up at the last minute. Wish there had been two.” A frown creeps down her chin, one I refuse to allow her to cart on her expedition.

“Wouldn’t have mattered. I never applied, so they would have given it to someone else.”

She scoffs. “I’m sure there’s a dollar amount that would have convinced them you’d applied.”

She’s probably right. In our world, money is superior to facts, but this was so out of the blue that I couldn’t find the motivation to take it on—not with how unsettled everything at home feels.

She shakes her head. “Honestly, I don’t remember filling out the application either, and blocking things out is more your hang-up than mine.”

Her jab is as old as time, not offending me in the least.

“Hey,” I balk in mock indignation. “I do not block things out. I choose which moments are worth taking up brain space. Totally different. It frees room for my creativity.”

“Well, I can’t argue with your brilliance. Paint a masterpiece while I’m away, bestie, and we’ll open a glamorous gallery when I return.” She slides the strap of her crocodile Gucci purse onto her shoulder, a heavy breath falling with the movement. “But right now, I need to get through security, or I’ll miss my flight.”

My stomach clenches. I hate how much this feels like an ending—like everything I’ve ever counted on is about to change. *It’s a temporary trip, a few months. No need to freak out.* “Right. So, communication will be—”

“Sparse.” Guilt coasts over her features. She didn’t want to leave me, only caving after I relentlessly insisted she seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. “I promise I’ll be in touch when I can, but the travel, time difference, excursions, and the director’s belief that *the best experience arises device free*”—her eyes roll in bewilderment since she tends to view her phone as an appendage—“will make it a challenge.”

Leaning in for a hug, I smooth my hand over her back in reassurance. “It’s okay. Enjoy every jump, climb, flight, and fling. I’ll see you in three months.”

“Three months,” she parrots with a slight quaver. “But, Ivy, if anything happens with your dad—”

“Let’s not.” The words are a choked plea.

She squeezes me with a quick nod. “Okay. I’ll be on the first plane home if you need me. If you’re going nowhere—”

“You’re coming with me. I know.” My chest trembles against her at the exchange of our promise to always stick by one another, metaphorically anyway. “But go now because there’s a lump in my throat that’s about to make this very awkward.”

“You can rock anything, girlie, even awkward. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

After one last embrace, she turns and walks toward security without looking back—a gift to me—her dark brown tresses bouncing with her stride.

Swooping my own ginger mop into a messy bun, I bolt out the automatic doors, running all the way to short-term parking, attempting to distance myself from the stark realization that I’ve never felt so alone. Fleeing the airport doesn’t leave the feeling behind though. It hooks into my skin, like a

bur refusing to be uprooted.

On the drive home, the foreboding loneliness sinks its teeth deeper because I know the emptiness that awaits. My father, my favorite person in the whole world, won't be there. He's lost inside his own brain, living at Shady Pines Stroke Rehabilitation Center for severe stroke victims, which in itself is a tragic, poetic irony. One of the world's most renowned neuroscientists and neurosurgeons, who dedicated his life to freeing those with brain trauma, is now a prisoner of his own.

My speed slows as I enter the limits of Royal Oaks, my northern Ohio town. The trees stop blurring and enliven to a vibrant, tunneled canopy, welcoming me with all the charm of stepping into a Monet painting—choppy, flirtatious brushstrokes of petals and growth and light. These quaint, picturesque streets once felt warm and inviting with the scents of fresh-cut grass and Dum Dums lollipops, asphalt and sweet corn. Now, they're glazed with the chill of loss, but my heart still thumps with a longing for what was. That which can't be held.

Grains of sand.

Being Labor Day weekend, there's the added ache of barbecues and bonfires wafting in the air—a reminder of happier days tucked away. And just like that, my hour drive is over. Wallowing is a sure way to suck the time—a conquering shadow.

The guard waves me on, my silvery-blue Ferrari Roma easily recognizable. As I pass through the iron gates, a neighbor waves with a bright, plastic smile. Wealthy people, who live in grand ten-thousand-plus-square-foot mansions, are never home. Except on rare holiday weekends when socializing and entertaining are expected. There will be countless gatherings over the next three days, none of which I'll be attending. Without Celeste or my father as buffers, the idea is ludicrous. My mother will most certainly make an appearance, and while I adore her, hanging with the society ladies isn't for me.

I park the car in our six-car garage and enter through the mudroom door, passing through the butler's pantry and into our kitchen. Dropping my purse onto the island, I wash my hands and make myself a cup of coffee with the Keurig attachment on the fridge. Two tablespoons of vanilla creamer and a pumpkin-flavored coffee pod later, I'm inhaling the scent of fall.

Tiny blossoms among the thorns.

My mother rounds the corner. Her bright blue eyes catch me—our only

shared feature, which is precisely why Celeste and I completed one of those ancestry kits last month. Unlike Celeste, my appearance doesn't favor one parent over the other, but falls somewhere in the middle. While my mother is a fair-haired beauty—her bleach-blonde strands currently swept into a polished updo—my father has brown hair, speckled with gray now, and hazel eyes. None of that matters though. It seems you can have one parent who is one hundred percent Italian and one who is one hundred percent Irish and still end up eighty-five percent Irish and ten percent Italian with a sprinkling of confusing other nationalities that no one can ascertain who they originated from.

I'm currently waiting for my results. Sadly, it's the most exciting event on the horizon.

"How did everything go with Celeste?" my mother asks, her mouth slanted with both curiosity and concern.

"Good. She's really excited. I'm a little envious." My eyes flit to hers, and I know she sees the lie in my words. "A lot envious, okay? But still happy for her."

"I wasn't judging." She pulls out a high-back stool, lowering herself into it with all the air of a cultivated lady. Natasha Kingston is always the picture of elegance. "This is the time you should be taking adventures. I'd love to tell you to go find one, but unfortunately, we need to discuss something that will make that challenging."

My heart stutters, and my hands shake so that my coffee sloshes up the inside walls of my oversize mug. "Is it Dad? Is he worse?"

Her fingers reach across the countertop, skimming over mine. "No, honey. Your dad's the same, but he did something you might not like."

A pause to process precedes the scrunching of my forehead. "How could he have done something when he can't *do* anything?"

"Before the stroke," she says, releasing a heavy sigh with a slump of her shoulders before regaining her perfect, ramrod-straight posture. "Your father's lawyer brought it to my attention that your trust kicks in when you turn twenty-three."

"Oh." That has me pausing again. It's not that I didn't know about my trust or ever consider it, but before my father fell ill five months ago, he took care of everything. And after ... well, after, all I've been thinking about is him. But the real culprit of my hesitation is the frown on my mother's face. "You're not happy that I'll receive the money?"

“That’s not it at all. The money is yours. You’ve always done as asked and worked hard. You deserve it.” Unshed tears glisten in her eyes, not matching her words.

My brows wrinkle in question. “Then, what?”

She wrings her hands—a nervous gesture my mother can usually suppress, except when it comes to my father’s health or ... that’s the only time actually. “There’s a clause that requires you to be married by your twenty-third birthday in order to receive it.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.” I laugh, certain she’s confused. “My birthday is in three months.”

“I’m aware.” Her face is a chiseled stone of distress, causing my laughter to die.

I sip my coffee and wave off her worry. “I’m sure it’s some bizarre extra precaution he’s had in there since I was a toddler. What age do I get it if I’m not married?”

“You don’t.”

I slam the cup down on the counter, suddenly feeling hot. “There is no fucking way that’s true.”

Hand to her heart with a dramatic gasp. “Ivanna, *please*.”

Dear sweet Jesus. “Seriously? We’re discussing some archaic notion that I must be betrothed in order to receive my trust—an archaic notion that Dad would *never* entertain, by the way—and your concern is my unladylike language?”

Regaining her composure, she swallows, her throat working overtime at the basic function, hands toiling once again. “You have every right to be upset. I’m not happy about it either. I can’t imagine what he was thinking—probably one of his ways of protecting you or something. And if he was of sound mind, I’m sure he’d change it, but he isn’t. So, we need to figure this out.”

I take another sip of coffee to feign a tranquil demeanor, although the autumn treat is now liquid bitterness. “I’ll talk to the lawyer. There must be a loophole.”

“I already have. They’ve been combing through it for weeks. There’s none.” She lifts something off the stool beside her, sliding a small stack of paperwork toward me that I didn’t notice she had with her. My eyes scan the highlighted words—a very clear directive of everything she’s explained.

“Weeks?” I flatten my palm in an angry smack on the cool granite.

“You’ve known about this for weeks?” Heat floods my cheeks and neck. “You know what? I don’t need the money, so let’s forget about it.”

Before I can stalk away, holding tight to my blossoming rage, she lays three headshots on the counter of waxy, well-bred men and glances at me.

“All three of these gentlemen are in good society standing, have wealth of their own, and are currently single.” She stares at me, waiting, giving me time to come to terms with what absolutely cannot be happening.

Utterly baffled, I croak out the words, “You aren’t suggesting ...”

“The marriage only needs to last five years for you to receive all the funds, Ivanna. I’m sure we can strike a comfortable deal with one of these young men.”

“You’ve lost your damn mind, or I’ve lost mine.” My hand flies up to my forehead as I march out of the kitchen through the two-story great room toward the back winding staircase. “This isn’t *The Princess Diaries*, for Christ’s sake. I’m not going to interview potential husbands and *strike a deal*.”

Hot on my heels, she doesn’t let up. “Your father would want you to be taken care of and have that money.”

“My father raised me to be bold and independent.” I take the stairs two at a time—a feat my mother can’t match in her four-inch heels. My voice rises with the elevation, bouncing off the marble columns and floors and crystal chandeliers. “He would never ask me to sell myself to a man to earn my money like a one percent whore.”

Her huffing breaths finally reach me, accompanying her clacking heels into my room. “Clearly, you need to calm down. It’s a lot to take in, and with Celeste gone ... I’ll set up casual meetings with these gentlemen and—”

I point a warning finger at her—a disrespect I have never thrown at either of my parents before, but my fire is blazing now. “You will do no such thing. *Jesus*, I have to get out of here.”

Pulling a pair of yoga pants out of my drawer, I shimmy out of my skinny jeans and slip them on. She watches with a look of dread, and while I know she feels upset about all of this, I can’t seem to empathize when it’s my life falling apart.

“Where are you going?” she asks as I scurry past her back toward the stairs.

“To sell a painting, make my own money, go for a run, and pretend my world hasn’t imploded in the last five months.”

Grabbing my purse, keys, and latest painting, I jump into my car and zip the twenty minutes to The Art Garden—my favorite little gallery—my knuckles blanching on the steering wheel in spite of this being my most-loved destination. It's not the highest-rated gallery in the area, but the owner is sweet and always sells everything I bring her for unbelievable commissions. She insists I have a secret admirer or a superfan. Either way, it enables me to make a living doing something I enjoy, so she has rights to all my pieces.

It's the area that draws me in more than anything though. Four Victorian-style homes sitting on several secluded acres compose the Victoria Shops, each housing a unique local business. Beside the gallery is a coffee shop with the most delectable French pastries in town, a jewelry store next to that, and a gun shop resides in the last. Each seems to be plucked out of a fairy tale. The grounds enhance that aesthetic with the jade-green grass and hundred-year-old oaks and maples shrouding quaint reading benches, whose leaves will blaze in rich, vivid hues of goldenrod and burgundy in a few short weeks. Rows of sculpted bushes and patches of sunflowers line the brick walkways that flow between each house, leading to the back acreage—my favorite place to run. It's a picture of peace.

The kind of place where time slipping by is seen as a treasure, not a plague.

Dandelion wishes.

And that's what I'm aiming for—losing myself to the whirlwind of stolen moments so I don't have to think about the fiasco that has become my life. Unfortunately, even after Suzanna, the gallery owner, raves over my current piece, assuring me it will sell in a heartbeat, I'm still seething. So, I tromp down the front steps, prepared to pound my woes into the jogging trail, and somehow slam into a solid wall.

This particular wall is adorned in luxurious fabric, and as my fingertips revel in the silkiness, my eyes catch two sets of men's dress shoes. I'd guess Tom Fords, but Celeste is better at men's footwear—a skill she believes will give her an edge as a politician's wife. It's a baffling concept, one I choose not to question. The idea of lifting my head to face the manly wall has my stomach in knots. Peopling isn't something I'm in the mood for, nor is it a skill I'm especially natural at.

Stepping back, I steel myself to apologize and bolt when my breath catches at the two beautiful men standing before me. Both are tall, well over

six foot. One has short brown curls, kind eyes, and tawny-brown skin. He grins at me, but I can't seem to stay focused on him. Something about the other guy grips me in a way I can't quite explain, like he's mentally holding me hostage, and it has nothing to do with the way his hand is curled around my arm. Nothing to do with the electricity pricking my skin in that very spot.

His look is otherworldly, Damon-esque from *The Vampire Diaries*. Not that I think this guy is a vampire, but he's certainly not average or normal or maybe even human. A smile explodes across his face—a beam of light that bleeds of danger and safety at once. If I wasn't so pissed off with my current reality and was thinking clearer, maybe I'd run from this devil who shines with a deceptive celestial glint. Who am I kidding? I've never wanted to plummet to the depths of Hell more.

He removes his sunglasses, his shiny raven-black hair making his shimmering emerald eyes glow like something lethal. And the dark, impeccably groomed stubble lining his jaw, highlighting his golden skin and strawberry lips, is giving me some sort of sensory malfunction. An itch to decimate socially acceptable decorum and reach out and touch it.

“You okay, Little Storm?” The rasp and tenor of his voice is a gravelly lullaby.

“No. I mean ...” What do I mean? What does okay even look like? My inheritance, my freedom, my foot shoved down throats. *Jesus, this rage.*

I'm staring again, spellbound by him in some bizarro magnetic realm. *Did he call me Little Storm?* That's ... oddly fitting.

“I'm having a bit of a bad day,” I mutter.

His fingers graze down my arm, soothing, comforting, and yet emitting a thrilling jolt that I don't want to end. His Adam's apple bobs. “I'm sorry to hear that. My name is Wells. This is Ty.” He gestures to his friend, who's still smiling at me, now with a courteous nod. “And you are?”

“Ivanna Kingston. Although those without sticks up their asses call me Ivy.” *What the hell is wrong with me?* Am I incapable of dripping any sort of class at this moment? A lifetime of training snuffed out by a single gale.

His warm chuckle tickles my ears while my eyes sail over his charcoal-gray suit, tailored perfectly over his lean, muscular frame. No tie. Black button-up unfastened at the top. I have a feeling that's his casual look—dress shirt, vest, and jacket to let loose. When my attention rises, his mirthful eyes are crinkled and waiting.

“Noted. Ivy it is then. Can we help ease your day, Ivy?” That voice. It's

like ... a ripple in a pond.

“Not likely. Unless you’re willing to run off and get hitched.” A bark of my laughter follows. It’s as though I’m possessed. The uninhibited revealing of my innermost thoughts—one of my less desirable quirks—will doubtlessly be my undoing. Something my mother has been impressing upon me since I was in preschool. “I am so sorry for my lack of manners. You’ve really caught me on an off day.”

“Hitched?” His eyebrow kinks on the word, a stellar choreographed dance.

My cheeks, neck, and chest surely match the red of my hair at this point. I’m fairly certain beads of perspiration dot that ginger hairline too.

“Joke.” And now, my standard backpedaling will round. “I’m in desperate search of a guy I can nail down and marry for the next five years. That part is true. The joke was the suggestion that you’d volunteer. Not a super-funny joke, but I’m working on my comedic delivery. Not quite ready for the stand-up life. Honing my skills.” My rambling could be used as a cautionary tale for an etiquette class. *God, why can’t I shut up?* “Like I said, bad day.”

His luscious lips tip up into a pensive, lopsided smirk. If I didn’t know better, I’d believe this devilishly handsome man was considering my non-comedic nonsense as a genuine proposition. His intense gaze never travels past my face, which leaves me feeling both respected and deeply disappointed. My hammering pulse would relish those green gems slowly raking over my curves.

“Interesting,” he muses.

Interesting?

A boisterous laugh spills straight out of my belly. That’s a first for today. “Is it?” Before he can answer, I give my own. “Maybe I asked for this. I’ve always craved a more exciting life.”

“Is that so?” Wells’s choreographed eyebrow dance returns while Ty chuckles beside him, obviously caught off guard by this preposterous conversation yet capable of holding his tongue far better than I am.

I nod, speechless again, wondering what good this could possibly do other than leading me to a hot and bothered lonely night. This brief encounter already rivals my five minutes with a masked stranger at the age of eighteen, and that memory has kept me panting with a toy and my forbidden fantasies plenty of nights. It couldn’t hurt to have some fresh material.

Inhaling the crisp early evening air, I take them both in again. They're absolutely delicious. Perilous. Mesmerizing. My mother would hate them. My father would respect them. It's not that they don't have money—Armani suits, Cartier aviators, Rolex Submariner watch on Ty, Patek Philippe watch on Wells; they definitely do. But it isn't old money, and something about them tells me it's tainted. My father appreciates a self-made man. He isn't a stickler for the method, nor is he particular about the company he keeps—or kept before he was sick. Characteristics I revere.

Wells winks at me, and some dam of flurries breaks inside my chest. "I think we may be able to help each other out, Ivy."

What in the ever-loving hell is happening?

He is considering my flippant proposition. I'm not sure what to do with that. It's certainly not the most levelheaded scenario, and I can't fathom his angle. He's beautiful and wealthy, and he could clearly have anyone. Not to mention that my first impression has been downright cringeworthy, but he did say *help each other out*. Maybe he's got some odd need for a speedy marriage too?

I wonder if he'll be up for authenticating a sham marriage, a surefire way of fueling a toasty winter. Good God, I'm glad my yoga pants are black because I'm soaked through. Dripping with an eagerness to verify what's beneath that suit. This day might not be so bad after all.

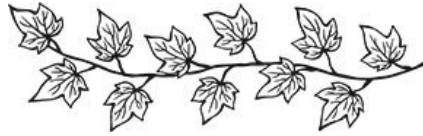
That line of thinking stems purely from hormones because it is positively absurd.

Asinine even.

Who considers binding themselves for all of eternity, or even five years, to a man—no matter how panty-wetting hot—after five minutes?

On the other hand, if I'm forced to marry to get what's mine, it might as well be an epic adventure. Like my mother said, this is the time for it.

CHAPTER TWO



WELLS

Ivanna Kingston is a vision of perfection. So goddamn gorgeous, standing before me, her fiery locks swept into a messy bun, wisps framing her sweet, freckled face, pink from embarrassment. She's a wreck, rambling and nervous. I'd like to think that's all my doing, but it seems her day may have already knocked her off-kilter. Regardless, she makes unhinged sexy as hell. My cock twitches to life. I can't get enough.

A flash of excitement crossed her big blue doe eyes a moment ago when I suggested we could help each other out, but now I see her wheels turning. I'm glad. Willingness to blindly jump with a man she just met would be both alarming and disheartening. I expect more.

"Help each other out?" She tilts her head, the free-floating ginger strands brushing against her neck and shoulder. "You're in the market for a quickie marriage too? Perhaps antiquated nuptial requirements are more common than I realized."

Her nose scrunches with a hint of snark. Fucking adorable. I could take great pleasure in reining in the brat in her.

She purses her pouty lips and twists toward Ty. "What about you, Ty? You looking for a wife too?"

Fuck that.

My eyes flick to Ty's before he settles on Ivy to answer. "No. That's all Wells." He pats my shoulder. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Ivy. I need to step away to make a call, but I hope to see you again soon."

"Nice to meet you too. Take care." She smiles so brightly at him that my molars grind before I catch myself.

He walks to my Maserati GranTurismo, and she watches him go for a

moment before turning back toward me, her teeth snagging on her lower lip, begging me to tug it free.

“So,” she says, removing her phone from the side pocket of the yoga pants hugging her small, toned frame—a runner’s body. Tiny, fit, yet still plenty of mouthwatering curves. “I’m not sure what to do now ... I’ve had the strangest day, and this is no exception. I wasn’t really ... it was a joke.”

“So you said, but you also suggested that you do have some urgent demand for a spouse,” I point out. “Is that not the case?”

She blinks a few times while weighing her response, the cerulean blue of her eyes filtering the rays of sun so that pearly drops dot them—angelic. And yet there’s something that rages behind them, something wild that she attempts to repress. After a long, peaceful beat—songbirds tittering in the grand white oaks, a serene breeze enveloping us, the world itself slowing to a crawl—she lifts her chin in newfound confidence. “I do. It’s complicated, and I’m usually not one to share my complications with a stranger, but—”

“Here.” I snatch her unlocked phone out of her hand to add my information. The illusion of transparency will build some immediate trust, and for this to work, she’ll need to trust me completely—with her life.

Her bemused eyebrows dart for the sky. She’s probably wondering why I didn’t ask her for the phone or first explain what I was doing. She’ll learn soon enough that I don’t ask.

I finish inputting what I need and return it to her. “My full name is Gavin Wells. I logged my number and my social media accounts. There isn’t much regarding socials because I’m not a fan, but if you’d like to internet stalk me, it will furnish a start. Private though, so you’ll need to request.”

Her ocean blues narrow, a stunning mix of both suspicion and intrigue. “Thanks.”

She doesn’t offer me her information in return.

Good girl. Smart.

“Looks like it’s your call, Little Storm. After you’ve slept on it, if you’re still in need of a husband, contact me. We can have dinner so we’re no longer strangers and decide if it makes sense.”

With that, I smile, wink, and join Ty in the car. Her eyes are still on me as I shut the door. Locking on to her, I refuse to be the one to break our gaze.

“A proposal in under two minutes. That was unexpected,” Ty says with his signature chuckle.

Out of the four of us who make up my small crew, he manages to bury his

demons and find amusement in life the best.

“Yes, it was.” And fucking brilliant—I wish I’d thought of it. Not that similar notions have never been a consideration in the back of my mind, but there was never clarity in how it would work. When the flustered suggestion flew out of her mouth, my mind latched on to the idea with stark resolution, racing with all the ways this would give me everything I wanted.

Her eyes are still fixed on mine, like she’s a prisoner to our connection and can’t turn away.

I know the feeling, Little Storm. No need to fight it.

After a cursory, dazed bob of her head, she resumes her run, and I turn the ignition.

It’s taken nearly five years to get to this point, to stand before her and soak her in. Usually, moments and people long awaited pale in comparison to the imagined. The buildup is so often the demise. But Ivy Kingston has shattered that theory. So worth the wait.

After seven months of searching, we finally got a promising lead. Cloaked in the shadows of a corner curio cabinet, I stare at our mark. Her body slumps, inching toward the edge of the couch and dropping with a thud a moment later. The creaking floor has all my attention. Well, that and the deafening sound of blood flow rushing in my ears. But I live for that. The roar of life, of adrenaline.

The melody of the chase.

The two bastards creeping through the Colonial Revival mansion’s parlor room don’t know it yet, but they’ve killed my target, pissing me the fuck off. My orders are to hand her over. Alive. Unharmd. Theirs were obviously shoot to kill. Who the hell do they work for?

The fuckers leisurely stroll through the house, oblivious that a team of four awaits them, right under their noses.

The taller of the two, donning a tarantula tattoo crawling up a throbbing vein in his neck, bends over the girl, tipping her blood-soaked chin up to him with the end of his gun. “This isn’t her. Poor bitch isn’t even the right one.”

“How do you know?” The other guy asks, hood pulled up over half of his greasy blond mop, dragging his black combat boot along her matted, fanned-out chestnut hair.

“Nothing like Eleanor or Daniel. I don’t fucking see it.”

The hooded one wanders aimlessly, scratching his head with the barrel of

his pistol. "This is getting old. Three years we've been looking for this cunt."

"Payday will be worth it. Highest-priced body on the market. She's out there," says the tarantula-inked jackass, poking through her things, "and we'll be the ones to deliver."

"I'm tired of collecting scraps for worthless kills." Hood makes a valid point. You'd think verifying the mark prior to execution would make sense.

"Not worthless. This one was involved in some messed-up shit. Rich bitch was an addict. Would've been dead soon, even without us. And her parents are loaded." Tarantula Tattoo pulls out a rolled-up wad of hundred-dollar bills that was stuck behind a false drawer in a roll-top desk, flaunting it to the other guy. "She won't be needing this. Let's raid the parents' room and head out."

Their conversation infuriates me more. They won't be leaving. I announce our presence by shooting the hooded asshole between the eyes. His accomplice briefly considers retaliation, whipping around with his pistol raised, but wisely thinks better of it. There's three of us with guns on him. He knows it will result in death. And while that is most certainly his fate, he's in that deceitful bubble where false hope is dictating his actions.

So much can be accomplished in that space. False hope is a productive dome of delusion.

Productive for us.

While collecting his partner's weapon, I state in a stone-cold tone, "You killed my mark," so he grasps the gravity of our situation. Wrong girl or not, he dared to take what's mine. That is unacceptable.

"We can work together, man. No need to flip the fuck out and pick us off," he protests, wisely lowering his gun to the floor and kicking it toward me as I eye it. "You looking for the O'Reilly girl?"

I nod, which he seems to take as a relieving sign. He shouldn't.

"This ain't even her," he says.

I circle him, itching to light a cigarette. It calms me after a kill. Although this guy shaking and ready to piss himself will have its own relaxing appeal. "We don't play well with others," I tell him honestly. "Who do you work for?"

He spits, panic contorting his face. "I don't know."

I shoot him in the foot. He grunts and drops to the antique hardwood floor, attempting poorly to stifle his whimpers. Time to clarify things. Killing his friend apparently didn't do the trick.

“Every lie, you lose a body part,” I explain. “So, let’s try this again. Who. Do you. Work for?”

“Fuck off, man! I don’t know!” he shrieks, and I shoot him in the thigh on the opposite leg, careful not to hit his femoral artery. Wouldn’t want him bleeding out before I get my information. His shrill, high-pitched screaming, amplified by an echo due to the twenty-foot ceiling, is already a migraine-inducing annoyance.

My cell pings with a text. Glancing at it, I exhale, frustrated, and flip my focus to Liam. “I don’t have time to interrogate this douche. Where’s Gage?”

Ty huffs a menacing chuckle. “I’ll get him. He’s been aching for some fun.”

Less than a minute later, Ty returns with Gage, whose beefy, formidable stature and bald head frightens even the most seasoned thugs.

I turn back to our whiny, spider-tatted bitch, bleeding all over the floor. “Meet my good friend, Gage. Unlike my hurried approach, he has nothing but time on his hands. Speaking of hands, he’s particularly fond of digits and appendages—fingers, toes, dicks.”

Gage cracks his knuckles and slides a machete off his belt. “Let’s get acquainted.”

As Gage ties him down and plays to find out who sent him, Liam contacts the cleaners and collects DNA from the victim for confirmation that she is indeed the wrong mark. Ty and I scour the young girl’s home for clues. She might not be who we’re searching for, but I have a feeling if she hadn’t been killed, she would’ve been the answer. I enter her bedroom on the second floor, digging through her vast walk-in closet. On the far wall, a floor-to-ceiling built-in cabinet houses sunglasses, gloves, and jewelry. Concentrating on the latter, I come across the ruby necklace that cost the poor girl her life and pocket it before sifting through her other belongings.

Back in the bedroom, above a writing desk, there’s a corked memory board brimming with photos that draws my attention. One photo specifically. Our recently deceased gal, Gemma Frost, stands in the woods beside a girl with deep crimson braids and big blue Bambi eyes—the essence of innocence and trouble in a single package. Beneath the redhead’s thin white camp T-shirt, the ruby necklace peeks through. Both girls beam at the camera. Behind them looms a sign reading Camp Hideaway. Fitting. I look through the rest of her pictures, but this seems to be the only one with the pretty

redhead. I'd guess they're about fifteen in the camp photograph, which, based on the age of the girl we're searching for, makes it three years old. Still, my scalp tingles the way it always does when I'm close to what I'm looking for. I need to find out who she is.

Ty clears his throat, handing me a grape Tootsie Pop, obviously aware I'm keyed up from either a memory or the encounter with Ivy. "So, married? That's a new angle to dating and conducting our business. Not sure which this should be classified as by the heated looks exchanged, but either way—"

"It stays between us until she's on board," I order.

He nods in understanding as I unwrap my treat and back out of the parking spot. "Saw you in her phone. Did you offer social media?"

The grape syrup fills my mouth as I shift to speed up toward home. I pop the sucker out. "Accounts Liam set up with society bullshit. They'll finally serve a purpose. She won't request though."

"Were you able to get what you needed?" he asks while working on his phone, most likely tracking for another client.

"Yep," I gloat. "Almost too easy."

He crows a skeptical snicker. "Not sure we should celebrate yet. Ivy is a smart girl. You think she'll go for it? Marry a guy she just met?"

A broad smile splits my face because I know my Little Storm better than she knows herself. "Absolutely. She'll reach out before the end of the holiday weekend."



While the remainder of Saturday evening passed quickly due to both the anticipation and the adrenaline of finally having been officially acquainted with Ivanna Kingston, Sunday dragged on. I busied myself with work, distracted by where her thoughts were landing and hopeful she'd contact me before day's end. She didn't, and although I was disappointed, the fact that she was doing her part to research me and cautiously considering the wisdom in proceeding reassured me that she would indeed be discerning. Her initial excitement and willingness still lingered as a vexing concern.

Mid-morning Monday, my patience was thinning, blatantly obvious by the empty bag of Sour Skittles devoured for breakfast and half-consumed

bottle of Macallan 18 I'd conquered over the weekend. But as initially predicted, she texted.

Little Storm: Hi, Wells. This is Ivy. We met in front of the Victoria Shops. If you're still interested in hitching our misfortunes, I'd be open to meeting.

Clever girl. I promptly returned her text.

Me: I live in Starlit Hills. Mind driving out this way? Dinner @ 6 tonight. Shooters.

Several minutes later, her response pinged through.

Little Storm: Perfect. See you there.

Now, on Labor Day evening, I sit in a quiet corner booth, awaiting her arrival. The pub is a local favorite, known for its casual atmosphere, heavy pours, and excellent appetizers. The discretion is what I appreciate most.

It's a few minutes after six, but I didn't expect her to be on time. My eyes stay glued to the door, heart ratcheting higher in my chest when what struts through is a completely different version of the gorgeous mess from Saturday afternoon. Blazing curls drape her bare, creamy shoulders. Those big doe eyes, a darker blue here in the dim pub, shine so bright that they alone could guide lost sailors home. And her attire? Downright lethal. My cock strains against my zipper at the sight. A royal-blue deep-V halter jumpsuit. Classy. Sexy. Befit for any occasion and showcases the swell of her ample tits, small waist, and slight curve of her hips. I'm willing to bet the rear view is equally devastating.

Fuck, she's stunning.

She doesn't belong in this small-town pub, clear by the slack-jawed gawking from various patrons—jaws begging to be broken. I stand, button my jacket, straighten my tie, and wait for those sapphire beauties to latch on to mine. A smile blooms on her face when she spots me, cheeks blushing with each clack of her silver heels. Confident but still nervous.

That's a good start.

"Ivy. You look positively radiant this evening."

"Thank you. It's good to see you, Wells." She beams, allowing me to steer her into the booth before I unbutton my jacket and slide in across from

her.

This is far more complex than a simple date, which by her rigid posture, I know she feels too. Whether for business purposes or not, bypassing the natural progression and diving straight into the idea of marriage is bound to be a bit awkward.

“Should we order first? Drinks and appetizers to take the edge off?” I suggest.

Her shoulders relax with a breath of relief. “That sounds wonderful. Small talk isn’t my specialty.”

“Then, you’re in good company. Mine neither.” I wink.

She blushes a deeper scarlet.

After we place our order—Macallan on the rocks for me, merlot for her, and a myriad of fried finger foods—she swallows, studying me with a quizzical softness. “As I admitted, Wells, I’m not great at small talk, so I’m going to plunge us into the deep end and get to it. You said we could help each other out. How does a marriage benefit you?”

Leading me to share information prior to volunteering her own shows she’s protecting herself. Let’s see how far I can push that.

“While I hadn’t initially considered it, this marriage will help me in obtaining an important position with a business associate.” All true.

She nods, ruminating on that while the waitress delivers our drinks. Ivy sips her wine, lowering the glass and raising her chin. “As a show of stability? You’re in finance, correct?”

A crooked grin tugs on my lips. “You’ve done your research, I see. But you can’t believe everything you read.”

She laughs. It’s bright and full, and it feels accusatory. Triumphant and poetic, like Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.” So goddamn perfect. Some things need to be experienced up close. And this, her laugh, is one of them—brand-new.

Her nose scrunches, part humor, part skepticism. “Mysterious. So, you’re not in finance?”

I chuckle, swishing the amber liquid in my glass. “Is that what you took from my comment?”

Eyes roving over my face and trailing briefly down my body, she tilts her head. “Your vagueness is intriguing and certainly entertaining. But it won’t get me down the aisle, so eventually, you’ll need to be forthright and offer up a little more.”

Interesting. Aware I'm hiding something, and yet her confidence seems to be growing with the whisper of danger. Ivanna Kingston is even more riveting than I already knew.

“While there are financial *elements* involved in what I do, there's far more that occurs behind the scenes. Some of which can't be disclosed”—I arch a brow—“*without spousal privilege.*”

Her eyes light up with my admission, her chest rising and falling with what resembles arousal.

I tamp down the urge to haul her across the table and show her how dangerous I can be and instead shine the spotlight back on her. “Before I share further, you haven't told me why this arrangement is necessary for you.”

“Right.” She pauses, savoring her merlot and regaining her composure, although her cleavage is flushed and fucking glorious. “Mine is a ludicrous inheritance issue—need to be married to get it. Archaic, misogynistic nonsense. I'll need you to sign a prenup, of course. Will that work for you?”

The waitress arrives with a tray of appetizers, setting down the baskets and granting me a moment to watch Ivy. Always fascinating. She places a napkin across her lap, loads a few of each finger food onto her plate, and doesn't hesitate to dig in, albeit with an elegant flair. It's as though she's forgotten I'm here and certainly forgotten she asked me a question minutes ago. Lost in thought, unaware she's taken a vacation from our *date*.

Wherever she's disappeared to, it offers her some semblance of freedom. While we both eat, I permit myself to observe her until she's nearly finished her plate and I've pushed my empty one aside. Her face is a vision of contentment. I almost hate to interrupt. *Almost.* There will be plenty of time for admiring later—once this is all settled and she and everything I've been working toward are officially mine.

Clearing my throat, I stretch across the table. “I'm fine with the prenup. I'll sign whatever you need.”

Her wide eyes flit up to me as she chews, swallows, and rolls her lips in. “Did I zone out there?”

“Only for a moment.” Or several, but who's counting? “The food is good here, isn't it?”

While she's mildly relieved, unease still mars her features. “I apologize. Sometimes, I ... it's not important. The food is excellent. My best friend, Celeste, would love this place. My mother would hate it.” She giggles to

herself. “Anyway, signing the prenup was the primary concern on my end. And the marriage needs to last five years.” She clamps her jaw. “Is that okay?”

“All fine,” I assure her.

Her forehead wrinkles with a vestige of surprise. “Great.” She exhales, wiping her hands with a napkin and relaxing into the booth, a smirk pulling at the corner of her rosy-painted lips. “Your turn. Give me more.”

I drain the last of my scotch before setting the glass back on the table with a clink. “I’ll be candid, Ivy. It’s important you know what you’re getting into. This life, my business, is ... dangerous.”

She quirks a brow. “Dangerous how?”

“Ty and I work with two other men. Our clients are generally running from a potentially fatal situation, missing, or wreaking terror themselves. It’s for this reason there are strict rules for how we live, and you’ll be expected to adhere to them.”

Ivy mulls all of that over while the waitress replaces our drinks. “What do you do for these clients?”

I offer her a subtle headshake. “You’ll need to commit before I provide more details. That’s for your own safety.”

This is the point when most women would bolt, and they’d be wise to do so. Ivy should unquestionably consider running. Not that I’d allow her to get away. My mind’s made up.

“Will I be safe?” she inquires with a hushed tone.

“Safe?” The question loiters over the table between us. A skulking cloud. My fingers stroke over the scruff on my jaw while I revel in the way her breathing picks up, exhilarated by the risks I’m hinting at. “Safety, like many things in life, is an illusion, but I’ll protect you.”

She nods, evidently agreeing with that unsatisfactory response, her tongue sweeping seductively over her bottom lip. “And you and me? What will we —”

“We’ll be business partners, but to the world, you’ll be mine.” My words bring a frown to her face before she can correct it.

Fantastic. Let the cravings begin.

I wonder how much of her question is centered on sex. We’ll be getting to that—plenty of it—but not tonight. Not for a while, unfortunately. She needs to be good and desperate before we travel down that path. My cock hardens, vehemently disagreeing, but there’s a bigger picture to keep in mind.

One final nugget of truth to bait her. “This isn’t a life suited for most, Ivy.”

Straightening her posture, she pulls back her shoulders and tucks in her chin. My Little Storm doesn’t like to be doubted. “I’m not like most people. Never have been. I can handle it.”

And there go her questions. She doesn’t care what the expectations are or what she’ll encounter, just that she isn’t considered to be in the *most* category—a nod to the thunderous spirit that drives me wild.

“Settled then?” I lift my glass to toast our progress. “Do we have an engagement?”

A twitch plays on her mouth, her eyes twinkling with a bit of humor. “Not so fast, *Mr. Wells*.”

My heart stammers with the way she says my name, and I worry this is headed south, but then that playful twitch blows wide open, lighting up her gorgeous face. Dazzling.

“Most of my decisions are gut driven,” she says. “This feels promising, but I still need more to go on.”

Although only the first step of many and not quite a *yes*, this feels like a win, so I don’t bother hiding my celebratory grin. “Most definitely promising, and I’m happy to deliver more. Let’s go see your new home.”

She balks. “Arrogance is clearly one of your character flaws.” Holding up her index finger, she whips out her phone, snaps an *unauthorized* picture of me, and begins texting—audacious, ensuring I know what she’s doing and wise to be sharing her whereabouts. Those actions won’t amount to much in this situation, but her good instincts are appreciated.

“Age?” she asks, glancing up at me. “I suppose we skipped that due to my aversion to small talk. I’m twenty-two, need to be married before my birthday in December.”

“Thirty-one,” I say with a chuckle, swirling the ice in my tumbler. “And our nuptials will transpire within the week.”

Her eyebrows arch as she tips her chin in jovial disbelief. “Presumptuous too. And therein lies the reason I need more particulars.”

Maybe so, but it isn’t preventing her from pressing on.

“Home address?”

I rattle it off while her finger swipes over the screen.

“I’ll be ready to go in one minute,” she adds.

What does she do with that one minute? She rises with her phone still in

hand, gathers her purse, sashays her fine ass to the bar, and requests to see the manager. After tossing a few bills on the table, I follow along and stand beside her while sipping the remainder of my scotch, utterly transfixed. The manager, a thirty-something blonde, appears, and Ivy thanks her for her time.

“My name is Ivanna Kingston, and this is Gavin Wells.” She throws her hand out, gesturing to me while the manager smirks. Ivy doesn’t seem to notice. “I’m leaving with him, and in the interest of sisterhood solidarity and safety, I was hoping I could text you our photos and basic information, so if I turn up missing or murdered, you’ll know precisely where and to whom to send the cops.”

Good girl. She gets better by the minute. Fucking brilliant.

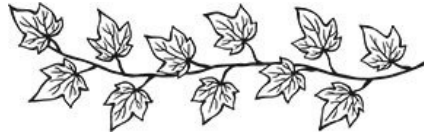
The blonde hoots. “You are one smart woman, Ivanna.” She reaches across the bar for the phone. “I’ll put my number in so you can text me the pictures and info.” They make the exchange, and once Ivy sends the texts with pictures of each of us and our information, the manager smiles at me with a wink. “Always entertaining, Wells. Good to see ya. Take care of my girl here.”

I tap the bar. “Planning on it, Abby. Thanks for everything.”

Ivy’s face drops, hand on her cocked hip, eyes flitting between Abby and me. “Could’ve mentioned you knew one another.”

“You never asked, Little Storm. But now that it’s settled, let’s get you more to go on.”

CHAPTER THREE



IVY

The sane part of me—the part that isn't drooling over the self-professed dangerous man who does some sort of undisclosed work with seedy, lost, or deranged people—is screaming that while this could be an enjoyable evening, considering marriage at this early juncture is absolutely absurd. Considering a relationship with Wells would probably be ill-advised.

But also so fucking hot.

Which is where the other part of me is parking. The part that recognizes he's always one step ahead and is challenged and ignited by it. The part that feels enraged and twisted in knots because he knew the bar manager, wondering the nature of their relationship. The part that feels more alive than ever, simply by being in his mysterious, electrifying, dominating presence. It's as though something inside me is begging to be unlocked and Wells holds the key.

None of that is quite rational though, so I'm following him to his home and panicking. It's not like we're getting married tonight. Now, that would be ridiculous.

Seven days from now, as he suggested? Still so fucking ridiculous.

Just because I alluded to being on board doesn't mean I'm bound to him. No vows were exchanged. No contracts signed. I was clear that I needed more to make this decision. It's not like he's in my head, knowing how I think, or aware of how my body seems to be reacting to him. As far as he knows, I could very well tell him this isn't going to work at the end of the night.

Maybe the bigger problem is that I don't want to.

And I think he senses that. Being in his presence is an odd mixture of

comfort and exhilaration. Like he's an old friend who understands me, familiar with all the ways to get under my skin and offer a thrill.

I haven't dated much. There's never been anyone who captivates me the way I crave. Someone who can love me, strengthen me, heighten my voice while also being commanding enough to take control and free the darker side of me—the part I keep hidden. Maybe that's asking for the impossible. Maybe I'll end up alone.

If that's the case, so be it.

I'm not one to settle. If I can't have the blaze I desire, I'd rather celebrate a life of ashes than fool myself into believing the warmth of an ember is enough.

Not that this is ashes or embers or any type of flame. It's not real. It's a means to an end for us both. But there's something about Wells, something he stirs inside me. I've only felt it once before, a very long time ago, in a surreal five-minute fairy-tale moment. But while the premise of this possible sham marriage may be anything but authentic, Wells is astoundingly real. I'm fairly certain he would know exactly how to make stealing my innocence the most euphoric, earth-shattering moment of my life, complete with equal measures of commands and praise.

My thoughts are in a continual loop, slipping between berating myself and inwardly squealing. Lost.

A shooting star.

He turns right, leading us down a quiet country road. Starlit Hills is almost an hour from my home in Royal Oaks, so I'm not familiar with the area. Before we left, Wells mentioned that he lives with Ty and two other guys. I'm assuming a bachelor pad awaits. Not sure how that will work with our arrangement.

We pass a beautiful Tudor set up on a hill and what looks to be a farmhouse on the other side. Then nothing but trees. If it was daylight, it would surely seem peaceful, but in the dark of night, it's a bit creepy. We drive a little farther before his turn signal blinks, and we veer into a driveway to the right.

There's a wrought iron fence that appears to enclose the property. A gate slowly swings open, permitting us to pass through, and shuts slowly behind me. He continues down the long drive toward what is decidedly *not* a bachelor pad. The lit-up, stone Gothic Revival home comes into view. It's stately, regal—two sharp peaks with windows to what appears to be a third

story, copper and wood accents, and arched windows and doors. The estate is sprawling and dressed in climbing vines. Charm and stature in one.

Wells appears at my door, opening it and greeting me with a modicum of pride. It's ... cute. He reaches for my hand. "Ready?"

My stomach flips as I slip my hand into his and allow him to help me out of my car. "This is absolutely majestic."

"Thank you." He winks, and that swift flip of my stomach whips into an all-out tempest. "I hope you like it. The property sits on fifty acres, but we'll have to wait for daylight to explore that."

Fifty acres. And from what I can see, they're all treed. The little girl in me wants to jump up and down. It's like an enchanted castle.

Stuffing down that girlish giddiness, I remember my manners. "I'm sure it's beautiful."

"I texted Ty, so he and Liam are expecting us. Gage is working."

Working. Doubtful he's referring to the evening shift at a bar.

My hand still in his, I let him guide me until we reach the back door near the garage—the twelve-car garage. This place is unbelievable, but that makes sense for four men in *finance*.

Trekking through the mudroom, which has a door to both the driveway and another to what I'm guessing is the garage, we empty into a dreamy kitchen—matte-black center island, topped with tan-and-gold granite; a matching matte-black hood; cherry-wood cabinets; and peaked cherry-wood beams. The floor, a buttery-tan ceramic tile, coordinates with the backsplash. Even the chandelier, black with teardrop candlelight bulbs, screams medieval inspired.

Gothic chic.

I've always loved my home, but my parents were in their forties when they had me, and their style is stuffy. Rich and showy. This is over-the-top but inviting. Wells ushers me from room to room on the main floor. All of them are similarly decorated. I mutter impressed responses to each space, but when we arrive at a two-story library, complete with a balcony on the second level, I'm *almost* speechless.

"Books," I heave, running my fingers over some of the pristine, classic spines, and he chuckles as I continue, "are my favorite destination. I mean, I love to paint. We haven't talked about that, I guess. But that's what I went to school for, and art is definitely a passion, especially as a way of processing deeper emotions, but stories are ... home. Characters, family."

His face is still, watching me with a content, pensive expression, like he knew this would be the room I loved most, and he's pleased he's right. But that's probably my imagination spinning fairy tales.

He strolls along after me. "Do you have a favorite?"

As I soak in the endless, elegant bindings lining the two-story black shelves, the question feels like too much to hold. "It's impossible to pick only one. There are, of course, beloved classics, like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Gone with the Wind*. But I also cherish newer epic stories like *Twilight* and *Hunger Games*." I glance up at him, noticing how he's hanging on every word, engrossed, and my chest tightens with a pinch of hope. "Most days," I elaborate, "it's nice to curl up with an easy rom-com, like *The Hating Game*, or a dark romance with lots of angst and twists. I'm a romantic at heart, so that's what I read most, but any story with something to fight for holds my attention."

He points me toward a shelf, plucking a well-worn copy of *The Great Gatsby* out to show me. "My favorite classic, although I also love *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. We have all the classics you mentioned, but I'm afraid the rom-coms and dark romance are lacking. That can be remedied though." He gestures toward a shelf with books stacked loosely. "There's plenty of room."

My throat dries, nervousness seizing me as I realize how hard I'm trying to swallow. His proposal to add other books—a grand gesture—unfurls something inside me. Like he's not only offering a contract, but also a home. Maybe I shouldn't read much into it, but the musty coffee-bean scent of ink and paper and his love of great literature have me a little lightheaded.

"That is incredibly thoughtful," I say, lowering myself into a leather reading chair, the cool, supple material soothing my jittery arms.

His mouth falls open to respond, but before he can, Ty and another guy—Liam, I suppose—appear in the entryway.

Ty crosses toward me, a bright smile illuminating his face. "Ivy, I was so glad to hear you'd be dropping by tonight. It's good to see you."

Standing to greet him, I notice Liam hanging back, a devilish smirk on his face, but I don't let myself dwell on that. "You too, Ty. Your home is incredible."

"Thank you. That's primarily Wells though. Especially this." He waves his hand in a circle. "A fanatic book collector. But Liam and I can take credit for much of the backyard, which is an adventure in itself. Next time, you'll

have to come during the day.”

“An adventure.” My brows knit with curiosity. “You’ve piqued my interest, so next time it is.”

“Next time, she’ll be sticking around,” Wells declares, searing me with a gaze suggesting it’s been decided as his hand glides over my lower back. “For good. Right, Ivy?”

A tingle runs up my spine from his touch, my breaths accelerating and my mind racing to grasp what he said. *No grains. Let the sand be sticky, please.* Yes. That was it. Sticking around. “It’s under consideration.”

My words act as some sort of beacon for Liam. He finally emerges from his relaxed pose on the molding of the library entry to amble toward the rest of us. That devilish grin still frolics on his face, his dirty-blond hair a mess in an I-look-this-good-rolling-out-of-your-bed seductive kind of way. His hazel eyes are crinkled at the corners, and as he nears, a whiff of nicotine wafts over me—a smell I detest. Celeste has always found it sexy, but I can’t for the life of me understand why. Being a doctor’s daughter cements certain things. Other than the lingering blanket of smoke, Liam is all sex appeal and nothing but trouble.

He stops right before me, beer in hand, his teeth snagging his lower lip as though I were his missing pretzels. “Staying, like moving in?”

“Yes,” Wells barks, tugging on my hip possessively. “She’ll be here as *my ... guest.*”

Guest? Okay. We’re not sharing our possible engagement with Liam then.

Liam stretches his arm out, squeezing Wells’s shoulder, but never averting his fixed scrutiny from me. “Since we all live here, it seems as though she’ll be *my* guest too. Right, Chief?”

Ty smacks Liam’s chest. “So, Liam, this is Ivanna Kingston. Ivy, meet Liam Graves, otherwise known as the pot stirrer.”

“Hey.” Liam laughs as though Ty nailed it and he’s not at all ashamed. “I keep things fun around here. Wells and Gage are far too serious.” His eyes bounce in mockery. “What about you, Ivy? You like to have a good time, don’t you?” He winks, and although he’s kind of a dick, I like him.

A laugh spills out of me while I take in the three of them—all lean and fit and at least six-two or six-three, Liam being the tallest by a hair over Wells. And their charisma, although each different, is as lofty as their height.

“Yeah, I’m not opposed to fun.”

His lips twist in doubt. “That outfit certainly camouflages your fun side —”

Before Liam can continue commenting on my attire or so obviously dragging his gaze up and down my body, I cut him off. “I dressed to meet Wells tonight, confident he’d be the picture of class. If I’d known I would be hanging with some frat boys”—I gesture to his black T-shirt, relaxed jeans, and the Modelo in his hand—“I would’ve worn my vintage Pearl Jam tee and cutoff jean shorts, fully prepared for keg stands.” I shrug. “Next time.”

Ty howls with a clap while Wells chuckles quietly beside me, his fingers lightly nudging my hip.

Liam nods to both of them. “I like her. She can stay.” He turns toward me. “But now, you owe me a keg stand, *High Society*.”

Ty tugs me away from Wells, wryly quipping, “How about something to drink, *seated* at a kitchen stool?” He tows me out of the library, Wells and Liam staying behind. “You did good,” he says as we halt at the island. “Liam’s a shark, and if he smells fear, he goes for the kill. He’ll keep trying to ruffle you, but you’ve already impressed him.”

An odd sense of pride fills me. These men are far more enthralling than the boys in college and more put together, but some things never change.

I drop onto a stool, brushing my fingertips across the smooth granite countertop. “He came off a bit more like a wild boar, but thanks, Ty. I bet it’s a trip living here with both of them. You seem far less ... intense.”

He tilts his head, a heaviness briefly coasting over his features. “We all have our demons, Ivy. I just appease mine with a smile.”

The weight of that hits me. “I know the feeling.”

“I’m sure you do,” he replies with a wistful roll of his lips, which seems wholly misplaced and comforting, all at once. Like he can see how much I hurt from the loss of my father—his essence anyway—without me ever showing it. Like we share a secret somehow even though we don’t.

He offers me a vast selection of drinks and snacks, ultimately pouring me a glass of the lemonade I settle on due to the hour drive I have in store. While waiting for Wells and Liam, we bond over our common hobby of people-watching.

“If we’re ever in a crowd together, I’ve got a game for us,” I say. “Match a person to a movie character as quickly as possible.”

He leans forward on the island, sipping a Kraken Black Label Rum and Coke, his brown eyes narrowed. “Are the matches judged by accuracy or

humor?”

“Hmm. We need a sliding scale—too many variables, but humor is always favorable.” On the word *favorable*, Liam swaggers in. I jerk my head in his direction and lower my voice. “Humorous but possibly kind of accurate—Brad Pitt’s character, Tyler Durden, in *Fight Club*. But an equally funny choice is Kevin Bacon’s character, Ren, in *Footloose*.”

Ty smacks the counter with a cackle. “Fucking perfect.”

Propping his weight on the counter beside my stool, Liam speaks low in my ear. “What’d I miss in here?”

“Nothing much.” I grin. “Do you dance?”

Liam winks, beaming like he’s won something, but his eyes shift between Ty’s howling and my barely contained laughter. He straightens, deciding not to answer.

Astute.

Wells saunters in, surveying the room with a cocked brow, which makes Ty and me lose it more.

“We’ll save that one for later,” Ty says with a snicker, referring to Wells.

I nod. “Better be good with all the extra time you’ll have.”

His kind eyes twinkle with amusement. “Challenge accepted.”

Wells sidles up beside me, fingers grazing down my arm, leaving goose bumps in their wake, before threading with mine. “Let me show you your room.”

While his touch is thrilling, relief floods my veins that there’s a separate room for me. Of course, the part of me that has lost all sagacity is pouting in disillusionment. A pang stings my gut, like I’m almost wishing for a one-room, one-bed, green-card marriage. It’s as though every moment of wise decision-making and overthinking that has driven my life choices is disintegrating at the foot of Gavin Wells.

Tonight, I’ve had fun, felt connected and seen—all the markings of a fantastic first date. But marriage? He’s showing me to my room, in his house, where I will live as his wife with a separate bedroom and three other male roommates. This is the dumbest idea I’ve ever considered. But if not this, then what? One of those pretentious, waxy society bores my mother picked? *Ughhh*. Even if one of them could be a decent pick for this completely fucked-up situation, I can’t bear the thought of her *striking a deal*, like I’m an arm candy offering.

This is maddening. I should forgo my inheritance. That’s the smart thing

to do. Walk away. I have my art, my education, my connections. Starting fresh wouldn't be so bad, and it's not as though my mother will kick me out and disown me. Plus, I've never really cared about the money. Although it's easy to say that, having always had it. I might not be spoiled, but being broke still probably wouldn't suit me, not that it suits anyone.

"Ivy?" Wells's voice cuts through my thoughts, and I realize I haven't absorbed anything he's shown me.

We're standing in the middle of a beautiful bedroom with classic decor—cream walls, plush cream-and-black bedding with purple accents in the pillows, drapes, and coffered ceiling. Tasteful and elegant.

My eyes flit around the room before landing on his. "Yeah?"

He chuckles. "I was showing you that you'll have an en suite bathroom, but you seem to be thinking about something else."

"Sorry ... I struggle with staying present ... a lot." My heart is hammering in my chest, making it difficult to catch my breath. "It can be frustrating for other people—"

"I'm not frustrated." His fingers squeeze mine. He's still holding my hand.

"No?" I ask, mesmerized by our tethering. It's been two days since we met. Right? Or three? Doesn't matter. It's strange, new, and familiar at once.

"No. Where did you go this time?"

This time. Because I drifted away at the restaurant too. Most of the time, it doesn't embarrass me. I don't usually worry about impressing people or care if they're irritated by my zoning out—it's not as though I purposely lose myself or lose time—but nothing about this, about him, is usual.

"Just thinking about being here ... or not," I answer.

"Ahh." He moves us a few steps into the wall so I can lean back comfortably. "It's a lot to think about. And at the restaurant? Where'd you go when you zoned out there?"

"I'm not sure," I lie.

Sharing that isn't happening because at the restaurant, I was imagining how different this would have been if he'd simply seen me, felt an attraction, and asked me out. How maybe we'd be swept up in one another, have a passionate love affair, and marry the old-fashioned way. Maybe the way we're handling it is somewhat old-fashioned—marriage as a business deal. Regardless, that little jaunt into the beauty of what could've been if this inheritance issue hadn't stolen it lent a muted echo of peace. Peace that isn't

mine to hold.

Dandelion dreams.

“You don’t want to tell me.” There’s a sternness to his tone, proclaiming he doesn’t appreciate me withholding something. “I asked because you seemed free at the restaurant, but this time, you were anxious.” He braces his shoulder against the wall, close enough now for me to feel his breath cascading over my cheek and neck even though he towers over me with my heels on.

Can he hear my battering pulse? See the chilled bumps?

He tips my chin up so I’m staring into his dizzying emerald eyes. “Are you having second thoughts? Don’t lie to me this time.”

Being the inexperienced dater that I am, the intimacy in this moment—his command to tell him the truth, the raspy timbre he used to deliver it, his proximity to me, and his knuckle under my chin—is overwhelming.

Overwhelming yet invigorating. And even as I feel it all slipping away, I know this feeling will be a lingering tingle.

A butterfly’s kiss.

I suck in a slow, composing breath, deciding I want to tell him the truth. To show him he can trust me. “Yes. I’m having second thoughts. I’m someone who keeps my word, so while I’m not saying no, I can’t ...”

His thumb sweeps across my jaw before falling away, an empty ache left in its absence. “Cold feet are natural when people have spent months or even years planning for their union. I think I can let yours slide.”

He smells like sugar and scotch. Deliciously sinful.

Intoxicating.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

His eyes rove over my face, stalling for a beat on my lips before meeting my gaze again. “How will you handle your inheritance dilemma otherwise?”

“I don’t know. My father’s sick. I wish I knew what he’d want me to do. I can’t imagine any of this being his wish for me. My mother chose three men for me to consider. That doesn’t appeal to me, but at least I’d have three months.”

“Three months.” His jaw tics.

Does he feel the same twinge of jealousy I felt at the bar?

“Although,” he argues, “five years is five years, no matter when you start it.”

“Valid point. This just feels ... fast. And I’m not even sure if I need the

money. My head is spinning. If I decide not to do this, what will you do? Do you have someone else you can marry for the position you want?" My voice cracks on the last sentence—a crack surely revealing I'm a scared little girl harboring a heart-pounding infatuation with a flawless, powerful man. *Please tell me there's no one else.*

"You're the one I need, Ivy."

Holy mother of Moses.

I'm tattooing that sentence—along with his scent and touch and rasp—on my soul. It makes zero sense and is most likely suave flattery because it can't possibly be true. We just met. But I don't care. I want him to utter that string of words again and again.

My eyes close as I murmur a breathy, "Okay."

"Go home, Ivanna."

"What?" The word croaks out like a croupy cough.

His fingers twiddle a strand of my hair, tucking it behind my ear with a tender brush of my cheek. "Go home. Think about it. Be sure. If you decide you can make this arrangement work, call me. I am on a bit of a time crunch, so I need to know in a day or two, but do what's best for you."



My mother is perched at the kitchen island, laptop open, when I walk through the door. We both smile apologetically in greeting.

"What's that?" I point to the open web page for a spa. "Going to Switzerland?"

She waves her hand at me. "No. Not now anyway. Sharon invited me. Her husband had some unexpected business come up, and they were planning to retreat for a week at Grand Resort Bad Ragaz before a twelve-week trip through Italy, France, and Greece. She's devastated that he's deserted her and begged me to go, but I told her now isn't a good time. Not with needing to plan a wedding."

I pour myself some apple cider from the fridge and twist back around, arms folded across my chest. "I'm not going to marry one of those men you picked. I won't do it."

"Ivanna, you can't be serious." She sighs, stroking her forehead. "I gave you the weekend to relax and come to your senses. This is a temporary

inconvenience to enjoy a life of luxury.”

An inconvenience? “I don’t need a life of luxury.”

She laughs, and I see red. “Honey, look at your clothes, your custom jewelry, your Louis Vuitton handbag.”

“All presents from you,” I say through gritted teeth. I do like them, but that’s beside the point.

“Perhaps. But you’ve enjoyed them, come to expect them. It isn’t a criticism. You’re right. I raised you this way, wanted you to have beautiful things, big opportunities.” She softens her tone. “Forget the handbag. What about owning a gallery?”

I snatch a cinnamon streusel muffin from the counter basket, picking at the top and knowing how right she is. I’m not certain I want to open a gallery, but I don’t want to *not* be able to do it. The ability to choose is what’s important.

“I don’t mind making my own way even if it’s hard, but I do know Dad would be heartbroken if he saw me struggling. So, I’ve found another way.”

She perks up. “Did you speak with a different lawyer? How? It was a holiday weekend.”

“No.” I shake my head, resolution settling in my bones. “I found someone to marry. Someone I chose.”

Her eyebrows shoot up playfully. “Oh. Who? The handsome *friend* you texted me about earlier?”

I sip the liquid autumn spice, hoping a campfire kumbaya moment follows. “His name is Gavin Wells. He’s thirty-one, wealthy, and he works in finance.” God, I hope career questions don’t follow. Didn’t prepare for that.

She shuts her laptop, stilling for a moment in thought. “How do you know him?”

“I met him at The Art Garden.”

A look I can’t pin down drifts over her. *Concern? Intrigue?* “He’s an art connoisseur?”

Sure, let’s go with that. A gun connoisseur is more likely since I don’t think they were at the Victoria Shops for art, jewelry, or pastries, but why split hairs?

“Among other things.”

Her head slants to the side, mouth tight, and I know I’m losing her. “When did you meet this man?”

Clenched jaw. Breath held. “Three days ago.”

“Three days ago?” She gasps. Audibly. Clutching her chest. “And you’re going to *marry* him?”

I scoff, outrage smacking into me like a tsunami. *How out of touch can she be?* “You were offering my hand to men I’d never met. What’s the difference, *Mother?*”

“The difference, *Ivanna*, is that they are all from respectable families in our community. What do you know about this Mr. Wells?”

“Enough,” I snap.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Shouldn’t you have rebelled as a teenager or indulged a wild streak in the college years? Really. Now? You’re almost twenty-three.”

“This isn’t rebellion. This is me being who *my father* taught me to be. I’m doing this *my way*. Who knows why he added that clause? He was always protective and cautious, but this ... it’s not like him. But since I can’t question his reasoning, all I can do is double down on what he taught me. He’d encourage me to do this in a way that empowers me, and this is it.”

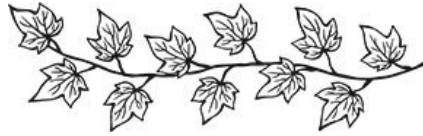
She jumps up with a huff, pacing. “I disagree.”

“You should go on that trip, Mom. I’ll visit Dad while you’re gone. You deserve to get away and relax, and this will be a no-frills courthouse affair. No need to stick around for it.”

Tears glisten in her eyes, a few spilling over that she nimbly catches. She rounds the island, cupping my face, defeat and torment written all over hers. “This isn’t what I wanted for you. I love you, sweet girl, and fought for other ways. I wish I could elaborate, but please know I’m trusting that your father knew what was best for you. He always has. Both of us have always known what an extraordinary woman you’d become. You’ll conquer this obstacle with as much strength as you’ve thrown at everything else and come out on top. I have no doubt.”

She hugs me, kisses my hair, and strides toward the back staircase, turning to address me once more. “The lawyers have a prenup drawn up already. Make sure he signs it first and be safe.”

CHAPTER FOUR



WELLS

Ushering Ivy out to her car and sending her on her way took far more strength than it should have. Especially since she hesitated in the driveway, first with an awestruck gape at the house, much like when we had arrived, but soon, that morphed into a lingering ogle on my eyes and lips, accompanied by shallow breaths, as though leaving wasn't something she ever wanted to do.

Which nearly broke me.

She fucks with my head, her vanilla-raspberry scent waking up my cock when that is the last thing I can afford to be focusing on right now.

I down the last of my Macallan, Ty promptly passing me another one from our back patio bar.

He pulls up a wrought iron chair beside me at the white stone table, sipping his Kraken and Coke. "Seems like it went well."

The stars are so bright out here when we keep the string lights on the lowest setting, like they are now, even better when they're off. Peaceful.

I nod, searching the diamond-dotted sky, visible through the slats of the pergola, wishing some of that peace could wash over me now. "It did."

He chuckles. It isn't his typical mirthful bellow. It's patronizing. "So, that's why you chomped on that raspberry Tootsie Pop like you had something personally against it when you came back inside?"

I cracked that bastard wide open. No licks. My brows arch in feigned confusion.

He kicks up his feet with another all-knowing chuckle. "Anger? Sexual tension?"

"Both," I bark, the raspberry sweetness still coating my tongue with

longing. “Such a fucking mess.”

“Is it?” He swishes the dwindling liquid in his glass. “We’re close and, if all goes right, in a better position than we expected to be a few months ago. Hell, far better than four or five years ago.”

“I know.” The scotch burns my throat with a twinge of comfort, but I’m not sure a bottle will suffice tonight. Everything is falling into place with a weight I didn’t fully anticipate.

“Then, what?” His tone holds more anxiety now. *For me? Ivy? Achieving our goal?* “You don’t think she’ll commit?”

“She’ll commit,” I assure him. “It’s not that. I—”

Liam swings open the French doors, making an entrance, as always. “So, *Chief*, let’s discuss our little high-society hottie.”

A growl erupts from the depths of my chest, causing Ty to laugh and tip his head with a that’s-what-I-thought expression.

Liam hauls a chair near us, straddling it and studying me. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but don’t we have a code of conduct—protocol if you will?” He pulls a Marlboro Red from his pack, letting it stick to his lower lip without lighting it. “And isn’t one of those protocols to never get involved with a client?”

Christ, I knew he’d be a jackass about this.

I lean back in my chair, calmly drinking my scotch with a serene, unfazed air. “She’s not a client, and we all agreed this was the direction things needed to go.”

“Right.” He takes a long hit of the cigarette he lit, shoving his Zippo into the pocket of his jeans, and blows his smoke out into the yard. “It’s worse. She’s the job. Her father is our fucking client. And, furthermore”—he throws out his arms—“we agreed she needed to be brought into our inner circle. But everything tonight suggests you’re going to be *coming* into *her* inner circle.”

Ty laughs, which garners a scowl from me. “Sorry.” He shrugs. “That was funny.”

Children.

I dismiss that and turn my attention back to Liam. “I’m still focused on our mission. This is the best way to entice her into our circle.”

“As a fucktoy?” He howls, and my blood boils as he draws in another long nicotine hit. “Jesus, *Chief*, I gotta say, when you add an amendment, you go for it.”

Heat rises up my arms and chest, but I remain composed, relaxed. “Not a

fucktoy. I'm going to marry her, doubling our reward."

His eyes light up—he clearly likes the sound of that. That is Liam's love language—acquiring more, taking what belongs to someone else—a trait he comes by honestly, but will most definitely be his demise. He swings his leg around the chair, moseys to the patio fridge, pops the top off a beer, and leans against the stone wall of the house. "So, that's your angle. And hers?"

"Inheritance," I explain simply. A development I hadn't yet shared with him, but the reason our door swung wide open.

He bobs his head in thought. "So, there's no romantic or sexual expectations from either party?"

Motherfucker.

Ty swigs his drink, shaking his head while his forehead wrinkles with annoyance. "Fuck, man."

Handling this with Liam will take a bit of finesse, but it's a walk in the park compared to what I anticipate from Gage, so there's no sense in letting him rile me. I knew it was coming.

While my patience is dwindling, my tone is still placid. "I didn't say that. For a marriage to appear authentic, certain lines will need to be crossed. Essentially becoming the job."

Extinguishing his cigarette in the bar ashtray, he roars a pissed-off laugh and props himself against the house again. "Jesus Christ, talk about pulling rank and finding a self-serving way of completing a job."

I slam my glass onto the table and stand, the force pushing my chair back with a screech on the flagstone patio. "Shut your suck, Graves. I've been carrying your ass for nine fucking years. If I say this is how we're handling it, then all I need out of you is quiet compliance."

He salutes me with his middle finger. *Asshole.* "Yes, sir. Completely on board, Chief, but—"

Ty groans, his head falling back against his shoulders. "Don't be a dick, man."

Liam ignores him, pinning me with his arrogant gaze again. "You may have seen her first, but we're all invested. It doesn't mean she's yours."

That's true. It doesn't. She isn't mine because I saw her first. She's mine because she was made for me and because everything changed the second I laid eyes on her, which he knows damn well. But Liam is my family, and strictly forbidding his interest will only spur him on, so I'll indulge him. "It doesn't?"

“No,” he says with an edge, followed by his signature twinkle. “And I’m far less temperamental than you. Ivy seems like the kind of girl who wants a man who can shed a little light in her world.”

The fucker doesn’t get her at all. Ivy is brighter than every star in the inky sky. A field of fireflies blinking nostalgia. A goddamn bonfire illuminating the stale night air. I’m skilled at hiding emotions, but at this moment, with my pulse thudding between my eyes and my fingers flexing with an itch to fist, it’s a struggle.

“Ivy is the light.”

Ty claps his hands with a victorious whoop. “The man can say more in four words than you can say all damn day, Liam. Let it go so we can move forward. He’s staked his claim.”

“That’s fucked up,” Liam balks, plucking the cigarette tucked behind his ear, lighting it with his Zippo, and taking a hasty drag. “I refuse to accept that. We’ve changed the rules, so my hat is getting thrown in the ring whether you want it to or not.” He smirks, plainly goading me, as he flicks the glowing cherry into the ashtray. “But I’m not greedy. If she’s open to it, we can share her.”

My glare is surely burning a hole through his skull while I consider killing him, slow and torturous, but Ty interjects my sentiments in a more civilized way. “Now, *that’s* fucked up, man. What’s gotten into you?”

Liam snickers with another puff. “I’m trying to think through this. We both want her. And we can’t let pussy come between us, so why not? She’d be spoiled by the two of us, and then no one loses.”

“Except Ivy!” Ty spits out. “She’s a traditional girl. Marriage. Babies. PTA and cocktail parties. *Jesus*, as if she doesn’t have enough shit to face right now. She won’t be towing her two lovers along to events. What the hell?”

Liam is like the fraudulent mother who was willing to let Solomon cut the baby in half so she didn’t have to see someone else with the infant. Fucking narcissistic fool. It confirms what I already knew to be true. Ivy is mine. Always has been. Always will be.

With swarming visions of flattening him for his flagrant disregard of her value, I grit out my objection. “I. Don’t. Share.”

He shrugs, his lips peeling south in a slight frown. “Fine. Your loss. I’m fairly certain I can charm my way into her—”

A snarl bellows out of me as I lunge at him, my forearm securing him to

the house at his throat. “Do not finish that fucking sentence. Throw your hat in the ring, Liam. It won’t concern me in the least. But you do *not* touch her unless *she* asks *you* to marry her.” No fucking way that’s happening. “Understood?”

His face is tinged red, breathing strained, but the son of a bitch still narrows challenging eyes. “Don’t want me to deter her with my—”

I smash my arm tighter against his bobbing Adam’s apple, cutting off his air supply. “Your blood on my hands would be unfortunate, but I would not lose any sleep. No. Fucking. Touching.” Letting up slightly on my hold, I shoot a glare toward Ty. “You jumping into this boxing match too?”

“Nope.” Ty raises surrendering hands. “You and Liam are family, *as is Ivy*. She’s like a sister. You assholes can cockfight and risk losing her completely, but I’m keeping her forever.” He walks toward the entrance to the great room, obviously over this, pausing once he opens the French doors. “If you don’t settle this shit, you’ll get her killed. And trust me when I say, I won’t repeat my mistakes. I’ll protect *this sister* from *anyone* necessary.”

And that’s why Ty knew my plan before anyone else. That’s why I’ll trust him with Ivy. This job has become as personal to him as it has for me, just in a different way.

Liam’s eyes come back to mine once Ty disappears, his features softening, voice husky from the pressure on his vocal cords. “You know I would too, right? *With my life*. But we have a job to finish.”

Dropping my arm and stepping back, I scan him as he flattens his crumpled shirt and stubs out his wasted cigarette. My fingers weave into my hair with an exasperated grunt. “I know you would. And, yes, we do.”

“So, if she doesn’t come willingly?” he asks.

My gaze locks on to his with all the earnestness the answer requires. “We force her.”



I roll out of bed at the crack of dawn, having barely slept. Shouldering the stress of all of this is getting to me, and the journey is far from over. Even my morning workout routine doesn’t seem to be clearing my head. After a five-hundred-yard swim, one hundred push-ups, one hundred sit-ups, twenty pull-ups, and a two-mile run, I’m still as fucked up as I’ve been for days.

Reading over Liam's reports on our offshore accounts, I chug my fourth cup of black coffee, attempt to settle myself with some classical music, and check my phone for texts from Ivy for the twentieth time. Nothing.

C'mon, Little Storm. Talk to me.

It's not even noon, and I'm breaking out a bag of Sour Skittles, drowning my stress in sugarcoated sourness, while I continue working through my daily tasks. Popping a handful of only the strawberry in my mouth, I send a quick text.

Me: The decoy is ready. You?

The three dots dance immediately, followed by a response.

Private: Did everything asked on my end.
Up to you now.

That was less pissy than our last communication, so I'll take it.

Me: Appreciate it. She's in good hands.

I flip my phone over, burying my face in my hands and cataloging every imaginable scenario and a contingency plan for each, which leads me to check in with Gage, who's been too quiet. Deciding I'm not in the mood for conversation, I send a text to him as well.

Me: Status?

Another handful of Skittles to take the edge off, and I'm thinking it's going to take a lunchtime scotch to survive this waiting game.

Jesus, what if she freezes me out for an entire day, like last time?

Not wanting to be a piece of shit who drinks his meals when overwhelmed, I saunter out of my office to the kitchen to find something solid to ingest when Gage's response pings through.

Big Guy: Target Neutralized. Back tonight.

That's one issue down. Everything is moving along fine. If I could keep my thoughts off the spunky gingersnap for ten minutes, sanity might be mine again. Settling on an omelet for lunch, I pull out the eggs, cheese, and a slew of vegetables to throw inside. But, as if she knew I had a full three minutes

not fretting over her, my phone rings. *Little Storm* flashes across the screen. I abandon the uncooked ingredients of my meal, hurry back to my office for privacy, and answer.

“Hello, Little Storm. Good to hear from you.”

She giggles faintly before her sweet, raspy warble filters through the speaker. “Hi, Wells. I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time.”

“Not possible,” I promise as I lower into my leather desk chair. “How was your night?”

“Good.” She shudders an ambivalent sigh. “A little weird actually.”

My pulse picks up as wretched images of what could unsettle her flash through my mind—an occupational hazard. “Weird how? Everything okay?”

“Yes. Fine. Thank you for asking. It’s my mom. She ... her response was a little weird.”

Her mom’s response? My pulse continues thumping, apprehension mingling with hope. “Response?”

“Oh, right. I should back up. I’m in ...” Her tone grows tentative, shy. “I mean, if this whole marriage situation still works for you.”

If she only knew.

“Yes, Ivy, it works. You’ve made my day. But your mother? She was unhappy?”

“Kind of. It’s not important. She seemed ... *off*, and now, she’s headed out of town, but this whole situation is a lot to take for everyone, so no worries.”

Leaving that alone is probably best, so I won’t tarry there. “It is a lot. Are you packed? When can I come get you?”

“I am mostly packed, but I can drive out there myself. No need to come,” she declares. “I’d like to stop and see my dad on the way.”

I sift through the Skittles, selecting a few yellows. “Not bringing much? I can’t imagine you fitting everything in the Ferrari.”

She chuckles under her breath, a snicker holding both doubt and challenge. “It’ll be tight, but I can manage.”

That’s not how things work with us, Little Storm. “I’m coming to get you. I’ll be there at two, help you pack up there, unload here, and take you to see your father tomorrow.”

A scoff hisses through the speaker, a peek at the thunder booming beneath her trill. “That’s really not necessary.”

“Ivanna,” I warn.

“Yes, *Gavin*?” she snarks, and my cock jerks, aching to tame the brat.
“I’ll be there at two.” It’s not a question or a suggestion.
Several beats of weighty silence before a resigned, “Okay.”
“See ya soon, Little Storm.”



Birds chirping and a light breeze are the only signs of life in the neighborhood as I stand in Ivy’s bricked circular driveway. There’s got to be several people working from home and certainly some who don’t need to work at all. No one enjoys the outdoors anymore.

Since she insisted she could manage on her own, I’ve allowed her to demonstrate that feat for the last fifteen minutes but to no avail. The midday sun is beating down on us, a September scorcher, and she is growing visibly more irritated—pink skin, beads of sweat on her neck and hairline, clenched jaw. After she shoots me a stern glower, I suspect her indignation is directed at me, but that is wholly misplaced. I’m the savior here.

“Hmm,” I muse, sucking on a cherry Tootsie Pop as I perch against my Mercedes G-Wagon. We could’ve thrown everything in there from the start, but where’s the fun in that? “Trouble?”

She drops the box she’s holding with a thud, puffs the flyaway wisp of hair from her gorgeous face, plants her hands on her hips, and clamps those striking ocean blues on me. “You. You’re enjoying this.”

“Yes,” I admit with a smile. I aim to tell her the truth as often as possible, and this is beautiful. The view and the victory.

A throaty grunt follows, filling me with excitement that my Little Storm might rage right here in the driveway for me. But she surprises me. I like that about her. There’s always something unexpected.

She straightens, composing herself with a slow breath. “Fine. I can admit when I’m wrong. Of course, had you not come, I would’ve simply adjusted what I deemed necessary to bring, therefore proving the accuracy of my original statement. But since you’re here, you might as well make yourself useful.”

Without a word, I wrap up my treat, stick it into my jeans pocket, and move toward the discarded box, but at the last second, I shift, pressing her against her Ferrari. Her breath hitches as I cage her there, lips parting when I

dip my chin, eyes roving over my face as I lean in to whisper in her ear, “I’d like to hear you ask me nicely.”

Her chest heaves against mine, soft, hidden, and sexy as fuck beneath her forest-green V-neck tee. “What?” she asks, sounding a bit dazed.

My lips tickle, dusting over the shell of her ear, my breath bouncing back over my cheek as my balls draw up in anticipation. *Christ*, she smells delectable. “Ask me nicely, Little Storm. For what you *want*.”

“Oh,” she croons, breathy and light, lifting her chin to brush her mouth against my jaw. “Please, *Mr. Wells*, could you get off your fucking ass, wipe the cocky smirk off your face, and load my damn luggage?”

Pulling back a smidgen, I study her triumphant features, thick eyelashes batting, so proud of herself.

Jesus, she’s going to be fun.

As much as I’d like to dive deeper into this erotically charged battle right here in her driveway, I think it’s best to let her savor this win, knowing her panties are most definitely wet. I reach down, sweep the rogue strand of hair behind her ear, and trail my fingertips down her neck. She shivers under my touch, and my lips split into my own victorious grin.

“That’s a start, Ives. We can build on that.”

She bites her lip, eyes closing for a beat before her hands curl on my hips, shoving me backward. Not that she has enough force to do so, but I don’t mind playing.

“Great,” she says. “You can start by building a pyramid out of my boxes.”

Shouldering past me, she struts to my SUV, attempting to open the back door. It’s locked, of course, so I wait a hot minute before unlocking it. Her glare on me eventually erupts into a musical, full-bodied laugh. *Infectious*.

“Seriously?” she whines as she stomps her foot, although it’s more for comedic effect at this point. “Open the damn door so we can get out of here.” There’s the faintest hint of something deeper that floats across her face as she flicks her gaze back toward her house.

I click the button on the key fob in my pocket, scoop up the box near my feet, and step around her to slide it in the back seat. She returns a moment later with another, and I open the rear cargo door for her to deposit it, before grabbing her arm. “You’re anxious to get out of here. Something happen?”

Swallowing, she seems to be deliberating on whether or not she should divulge whatever she’s thinking. We can’t have that.

“It doesn’t feel like I’m leaving home, I guess.” She shrugs, her loose ponytail swishing with the gesture. “It’s like I’m leaving a life that doesn’t belong to me anymore.”

I can relate to that far more than I could explain here in her driveway. “That makes sense. You said your dad was sick. Is that why?”

She nods, her eyes clouding over. “Yes. He was ... my rock. And now, he’s not himself—stroke. A bad one. Plus, my best friend, Celeste, and my mom are gone now for the rest of fall. In a blink, everything ... fell away. No one is truly gone, and yet, they’re no longer mine.” Tilting her face up, she purses her lips as though embarrassed to catch herself drifting. “Sorry. Promise not to be a downer.”

I cradle her chin in my palm. “Don’t do that. Don’t apologize.”

“Okay,” she breathes before adding, “Thanks,” with a contrived grin.

We finish loading her belongings in silence, but once they’re packed up, she glances back at me. “I guess that’s it. Good thing you came to help.” Her teeth notch her lower lip with a giggle, so damn alluring. “But so you know, you don’t have to take me to see my father tomorrow. That I really can handle on my own.”

“Why don’t we go now?” I suggest, swirling the keys around my index finger and itching to finish my sucker. Although, it isn’t a suggestion. We’re going. “You said it’s on the way, right?”

“Yeah.” She slides her hands into the pockets of her hazelnut shorts. “I’ve already monopolized so much of your time. You don’t want to sit in a parking lot and wait for me while I visit with him.”

“You’re right,” I agree. “I don’t. I’m coming in.”

“What?” Her eyebrows pinch tight over her dainty, freckled nose. “You won’t want to do that either. He’s often confused, sometimes irritable. He can’t speak or—”

“Ivanna, it’s your father. I’d like to be there.”

Accepting the finality in my words, she blows out a breath, her voice strained with emotion. “Fine. I’d like that too. He’s at Shady Pines Stroke Rehabilitation Center.” With that, she scurries to her car and jumps inside, not starting the ignition until I’m behind the wheel of my own vehicle.

I follow behind her on the way to Shady Pines so I can see her father and tell him his little girl is mine now.

CHAPTER FIVE



IVY

He called me Ives. I love that almost as much as Little Storm, both so unbelievably fitting. It's uncanny how he seems to know me better than he should, better than most. Maybe that's a skill for his job—keen observation.

I'm already somewhat attached, which is bizarre in itself, and although I would generally trust my gut to know if that's wise or not, I've never been so mixed up—like Wells feels safe, but being with him, this life I'm embarking on, is perilous.

That may be on point actually. He told me his work was dangerous, that he couldn't even answer questions about it until I committed to him for my own safety. That should have been enough to make me run, but instead, I find myself eager to be a person he can trust. Eager to please the man who knows what he wants. And eager to be what and who he wants most.

But I won't be one of those girls. Never have been. I won't let him simply call all the shots. If he wants control, my compliance, he'll have to earn it. Fight for it.

Wanting to meet my father is a sharp sword to cast in that fight. My dad isn't himself, and I can't be sure he'll understand what's happening, but Wells caring enough to introduce himself goes a long way. There is no one in this world whose opinion, guidance, and mere existence mean more to me than my father's.

When I pull into the Shady Pines Stroke Rehabilitation Center, a pang of guilt strikes me. I have to remind myself this is what he wanted. He was too proud for his own good, insisting that he never become a burden who held my mother and me back from life.

It isn't right. If it were up to me, I'd have him home, taking care of him,

keeping him company. His living will is so specific; I'm not even permitted to visit more than once a week, for fear I'd sacrifice my future to spend it here. I would be here daily, but it wouldn't be a sacrifice. It would be an honor.

He has stipulations on my mother as well. The man is—or was—a ridiculous control freak with a contingency plan for every imaginable scenario, but also the most selfless person in existence. A stubborn mule with a sacrificial heart—the very qualities that enabled him to be the world-renowned neurosurgeon who took the lost-cause cases. Thankfully, most of the staff worked alongside him at some point, so he's among those who care about him even when I'm not here.

Wells appears at my window before I even have the ignition off. Delicious as always, but different than he was at my house, where he had the sleeves of his white button-up rolled to his elbows, showing off his tan, corded forearms. So unbelievably sexy. Now, he's donning a navy blazer and looking every bit the dapper businessman despite the mouthwatering, thigh-hugging dark-wash jeans. Nothing looks casual on him. Stefano Ricci brown leather dress shoes and belt. The man knows how to impress.

He holds my door as I step out, always the gentleman. My heart flutters with apprehension. Introducing him to my father will mean something to me, which seems more threatening than anything else. I stop cold after a few steps and spin to face him, the lingering scent of that cherry lollipop he sucked on at my house wafting over me. Who knew a well-dressed man salivating over candy could be so seductive?

“Are you sure you're up for this?” I ask.

“This is clearly important to you, Ivanna. It's important to me as well.”

That stills me. “Why?”

Maybe I'm colder than I realized because although I'm incredibly attracted to the gorgeous man before me and even a bit attached, I can't say anything with him feels *important* as of yet. I'm invested in my willingness to make this work for each of us in the formal business capacity and hopeful that, perhaps, it could lead to something more, emotionally and—*for the love of all things holy*—sexually. But after only a few days, I'm not at the point where meeting his family would be important.

His eyes soften, skating over my face, but he doesn't speak right away. It's as though he's deliberating, searching for the right words. “If you were mine, I'd want to know who was taking you.”

That sentence plays over and over in my mind—a riddle to solve. *If you were mine.* Those words sting, but I'm not sure why since I just admitted to myself that my attachment was still modest. I guess I always thought if I introduced my father to a man, it would be because I was already his. And while *being given away* and *taking you* share the same essence, they have wholly different vibes. That's probably me overthinking the semantics though.

Wells gathers my flyaway hairs. I took it down and brushed it while I was driving, but the breeze is making a mess of it. At my silence, he lifts my chin. "Let's go in. It'll be fine."

I nod and swallow, but stay quiet until we're through the doors, checking in. Reception waves us back, and before we reach my father's room, one of his nurses, Theresa, spots me. She's a sweet older woman who used to work for my father. I've known her most of my life.

"Hey, baby girl. He's having a good day today. I'm glad you're here."

"Hi, Theresa. That's fantastic." I allow her to scoop me into a hug before stepping back to gesture to Wells. "This is my friend, Wells."

She and Wells exchange greetings, and she slips me a not-so-sly wink of approval. "Go on in, sugar."

Inhaling a deep breath, I center myself because even good days are somewhat disheartening. After months of this, I'm still never quite prepared. Wells trails behind me as I saunter into the room. My father is sitting in his chair with his back to the door, a medical documentary on the corner television. I wonder if he was able to communicate that he wanted that or if they knew he'd like it.

His hazel eyes go wide when he sees me—a glimmer of recognition I don't always receive.

I lean in, wrapping him in my arms and willing myself not to break down on him when his spirits are higher than normal. "Hi, Dad. I've missed you so much this week." I pull back to examine his face, his coloring a bit better than usual too. *Hope.* "You're looking handsome today."

He blinks a tear away, and my heart breaks and inflates at once. He's rarely this present.

Grains of sand.

It suddenly dawns on me that Wells is still standing patiently against the entrance wall.

"C'mon in," I tell him before turning back to my father. "I have someone

I want you to meet, Dad. This is Gavin Wells ... my ... fiancé.”

Wells steps forward and takes my father’s hand in his. “It’s a pleasure, sir. You’ve raised an amazing young woman.”

My father’s eyes flit between Wells and me. Back and forth several times, crinkling slightly at the corners. I wish I knew what that meant. Finally, his gaze plants firmly on Wells, and he hums. The quiet, gurgling noise grows louder until it’s nearly a grunt.

“That noise. He never makes noises. Not like that.” I squat before him, taking his hands in mine as Wells steps aside. “Dad? Are you trying to say something? Can you do it again?”

What did that mean?

His eyes anchor on me, tears filling them.

Happy tears? Christ, I hate this.

My own begin to cascade down my cheeks as I glance up at Wells. “He’s trying to tell us something.”

Wells smooths his palm over my head, my father following the movement before returning to me with a hard swallow. His inquisitive eyes flick back up to Wells again, who speaks in a soothing tone directly to my dad. “I’ll take care of her, Dr. Kingston.”

Another subtle hum follows.

I skim my fingers over my father’s forehead, sweeping some strands of his salt-and-pepper hair to the side. “This is what you wanted, right? For me to get married?”

His chin drops slightly, but I can’t tell if it’s a purposeful nod of approval or an involuntary movement. When his hazels settle on me again, they hold some sort of resolution within them. An expression I am familiar with—his acceptance. So, I guess that’s my answer.

“It’s okay. I’m okay, Dad.” I offer him a reassuring squeeze of his hand. “Wells, can you get Theresa?”

Wells steps out while I stay behind with my father, whose face is tinged with exhaustion now. He’s silent and distant. If he’s upset about the marriage, he’d be trying to tell me something while we’re alone. Right? It’s as though he wanted to tell Wells something, which caught me off guard, but makes sense. It’s probably killing him to be incapable of having a heart-to-heart with the man I introduced as my fiancé.

Theresa ambles into the room with Wells. She takes one look at my father and lets out a small gasp. “Oh my, baby girl. You wore him out fast today,

didn't you? Too much excitement."

Scanning her, my father, and Wells, I search for the answers that none of them can offer me. "I'm not sure what happened. He was making noises."

"Is that so?" She pats my father's shoulder. "Told ya it was a good day, but that explains his exhaustion. Probably best to call it a day."

"Okay," I sigh, disappointed the visit ended so quickly. "Hey, I know he wants me to come once a week, but my mom—"

"I spoke to your mom this morning and know all about her schedule." She walks to my father's bed, fluffing the pillows to prepare them for him. "But rules are rules. Once a week. You go off and live your life the way he wants. That's the best thing you can do for that man. Lord knows all he ever talked about was giving you a beautiful life."

I groan, wishing his dreams for me were enough, but irritated with the stupid rules, so Wells steps forward, addressing her. "I'll be bringing her by every Wednesday at two. Is that a good time for Dr. Kingston?"

Presumptuous much? Must've missed us discussing that.

"Perfect," she says with a girlish grin, obviously swept up by his charm. "I'll be sure he's ready. You kids get going now."

Wells chuckles. "Thank you, Theresa. Nice meeting you." He steps out into the hall while I give my father and her one last hug.

She squeezes me tight. "That's a handsome friend you got there. Enjoy these days, Ivanna. I'm taking good care of your dad."

"I know you are, Theresa. Thank you."



I've barricaded myself in my room at Wells's house—*my* home now, I suppose—ever since he left me here with my suitcases and boxes. It might be rude to be hiding, but I need a little time to process everything that's happened. My father's reaction was strange, much like my mother's was, and yet my gut tells me that look he flashed me was him assuring me, so I'm going to embrace this odd turn of events. I trust him.

There's a knock on my door, startling me from my dazed unpacking and hectic thoughts.

"Come in."

The door swings open, Ty looming in its place, flaunting a buoyant smile.

“Hey, Freckles.”

Freckles. These guys like their nicknames, don’t they?

“Hungry?” he asks. “We’re ordering pizza.”

Sliding the last of my tops onto a hanger, I head toward the walk-in closet. “Yeah, I could eat.” I hook it inside and emerge a bit lighter. “I’m happy to buy tonight.”

He furrows his brow. “Not a chance. It’s move-in day. Our treat.”

“That’s very kind,” I say, dropping into the oversize lilac chair, soothed by the velvet texture. “But unfortunately, I can’t come out there until you’ve proven you accepted your challenge.”

“Right.” He lowers his voice, like a kid keeping a secret. *Cute.* “Wells as a movie character? James Bond is the first who comes to mind.”

“Pierce Brosnan. *GoldenEye*?” I confirm.

“Exactly.” He bobs his head, clearly pleased we’re on the same page.

“Aww. That’s a sweet dose of hero worship and fitting, but too easy. I expected more.”

He laughs, his temple falling against the arm he has perched on the door molding. “You got a better one?”

Of course I do. “Clooney. *Ocean’s Eleven.* Danny Ocean, the brilliant, suit-clad leader of con artists, swindling millions from the unlikable and suspicious casino owner.”

His eyes narrow with a mix of humor and respect. “You’re too clever for your own good, Freckles. You win.” He jerks his head out to the hallway. “C’mon.”

We make our way out back to a charming stone patio, and Ty points to a golf cart. “Hop in, and I’ll show you the grounds before the sun sets.”

“That’s right. This was the *next time* promise.” I jump in the golf cart, and Ty takes off.

We pass a sparkling turquoise two-lane lap pool that dips into an oval lounge area, complete with a tranquil waterfall. Off to the side, there’s a quaint campfire area, and beyond that, a man-made pond is surrounded by vast shade trees and vibrant jade-green grass. They’ve thought of everything.

“This is all incredible,” I commend him, captivated by the tranquility. “There’s a small pond behind my house. I’ve always loved the way the moonlight dances on the water. Do you guys entertain a lot?”

“Not really.” He grins, boyish and lopsided, like he’s holding something close to the vest. “We use the pool every day until the weather doesn’t

permit, so we'll be draining it any day now. Wells loves the pond too—usually drinks a morning cup of coffee out here. And we build a lot of fires. But what's coming up is my favorite.”

He drives on, flying over some uneven terrain with a teasing glint as we jounce. My lively response ricochets around us, the thick wall of trees whispering of that enchanted-forest energy I was hoping for.

“Whoa. What the hell is this?” I shriek when a massive obstacle course comes into view beyond another set of trees. It reminds me of one of those warrior mud runs—walls to climb, sandpits to crawl through, bars to swing from, ropes to scale, and tires to flip. Who has this in their backyard?

“This is where we train.” He points to an area that's shrouded in trees. “There's a shooting range and knife throwing targets over there.”

“Jesus,” I gasp. “What are you training for?”

“Anything. The unexpected,” he quips. “You were running the day we met, right? You can't tell me this doesn't look more fun.”

“I love to run, the peacefulness of it.” My head shakes in doubt. “I'm not sure I could hack it out here though.”

“We'll have to work on that then. We do have several different mile runs mapped out that I can show you. But it's late, and the guys are waiting to eat, so it'll have to wait.” He makes a U-turn, taking us back to the house.

There's a lot to learn about these guys, and I have a feeling I haven't even scratched the surface.

Wells and Liam are waiting on the patio when we return. No pizza in sight. The sun is low in the sky, casting a dusty-mango-colored glow—a photographer's golden hour. And these men certainly provide portrait-perfect subjects. Ty and I plop down at the table with them, just as some guy bursts through the French doors.

Gage maybe?

“What's with the flashy-as-fuck car in the drive?”

That would be mine he's referring to, but I can see his monster of a vehicle parked in the side driveway from here.

“As opposed to that inconspicuous matte-black six-wheeled Jeep Apocalypse?” I chirp, which causes Ty to clap with a chuckle while Liam and Wells both sport sexy smirks, but also inquiring eyes. “What?” I shrug. “I know cars.”

“Who the hell—”

“Ivanna Kingston,” I say, rising to cut off his rudeness with my hand out

in greeting. “I’m ... Wells’s fiancée.” Second time I’ve said I was engaged today, and it’s still an out-of-body experience. “You must be Gage.”

He shoulders past me, ignoring my cordial gesture, his booming tenor filling the outdoor space with a rattle. “The fuck is she talking about, Wells?”

So, after nailing it with the first two friends, I suppose it would’ve been too easy to win over the third in the first meeting. But this is a strong reaction. I’ve barely spoken. Maybe he’s on roids. He’s huge, bronze, bald, tatted, and angry. Like he ate Vin Diesel and assumed his identity. I think Ty will appreciate that.

Wells’s face grows serious, his eyes screaming with a warning of sorts. He stands, stepping into his friend, his voice so icy that it chills me. “As Ivy said, *Gage*, we’re engaged. Congratulations is the appropriate response.”

“That’s right.” Liam lights a cigarette, pulling a deep drag while the silent, heated testosterone party carries on in full force. His eyes illuminate with mischief right alongside that glowing cherry. “When is the big day?”

I shoot a glance toward Ty, who offers me a subtle let-it-play-out shake of his head. But Wells never takes his eyes off Gage, so I answer Liam’s antagonizing question. “We haven’t set a date yet.”

Maybe I’m overstepping here, mentioning the impending marriage at all, but Wells met my father and set a weekly appointment for us to return without consulting me, so it would seem fiancée liberties are up for grabs.

“So, no plans were discussed?” Liam twists toward Ty with that question, eyebrows bouncing with clear menace. Ty chuckles, nodding as Liam says, “Vegas here we come.”

That could be fun. I’m not a huge Vegas fan. Plus, it’s the only city I’ve ever been to, so going back isn’t thrilling. But I won’t comment either way because by the looks of things, this marriage puts Wells in a tight spot for some reason.

He glances at me, eyes roving over my face with an unexpected compassion. “No. New Orleans,” he states.

I’ve never been.

An excited smile breaks across my face, so I swiftly roll my lips in, but not before Wells catches it and winks.

Gage mumbles, “New Orleans,” under his breath, momentarily pacified by the suggestion. “La Lune Noire?”

“Yes.” Wells nods.

The black moon.

I have no idea what that means, but I don't care. Getting out of town while also commencing this marital obligation is exactly what I need. And these guys, while intense, seem like they know how to have a good time. A bright spot in an otherwise overburdened day.

Wells sits back down, as if there wasn't some crazy, anxiety-provoking altercation seconds ago, sips his scotch, and turns his leer on Liam. "Where the hell is the pizza?"

"How the fuck would I know?" Liam barks.

"Because you were the one I told to order it, jackass," Wells snaps.

So, the hostility hasn't quite passed after all.

"I respectfully disagree, Chief. You had me handling financials while we discussed eating pizza tonight, but—"

"I'll take care of it." Wells whips out his phone.

Ty laughs, Gage fixes himself a Knob Creek Bourbon on the rocks at the patio bar, and Liam snuffs out his cigarette, eyes trained on me.

"It seems as though our girl here knows cars, gentlemen. Shall we?"

All four guys escort me over to the massive garage, where I'm rendered completely speechless for a full minute by, essentially, a warehouse full of unbelievable vehicles.

But then I find my words. "Holy! Fuck!" The whole structure quakes with the thunder of their laughter while I begin my rant. "A '67 Shelby Cobra. Real or replica?"

"Real." Wells beams, proud, like he was yesterday when he brought me to see the house.

"Jesus, and a 1970 Plymouth Road Runner. My father loves this car. A 1956 Porsche 356 Speedster. A Ferrari GTO 250—1963 or '64?"

"Impressive, Freckles." Ty chuckles. "It's a '64."

"My father is a car enthusiast, which is why I own the *flashy-as-fuck* Ferrari Roma in your driveway." I throw a mocking scowl at Gage, who doesn't seem so sure of me yet, so I go back to ignoring him. "But this is insane. A Bugatti Chiron? What in the actual fuck?"

These vehicles are worth millions and millions. I mean, the McLaren, the Aston Martin, the GranTurismo, and Audi R8 are all cars my friends or their parents own. My father has an Aston Martin V12 Vantage. But a Bugatti Chiron is a three-million-dollar car.

Wells strolls up behind me, his lips brushing against my ear, the other guys and the awe-inspiring car collection melting away. *Does he know he has*

that effect on me? “Pizza will be here in ten. I need a minute with Gage and Ty, but feel free to look around and meet us inside for dinner.”

“Okay,” I whisper, trying to slow my rocketing heart rate and focus again on the slew of vehicles around me.

After a few minutes of silence, Liam’s voice slices through my thoughts. “We have some bikes too.” He walks toward the back, uncovering four motorcycles.

“I’m not as good with bikes. But I know that’s a Ducati.”

He nods, pointing to each motorcycle. “Ducati Panigale V4; Kawasaki Ninja H2R, fastest in the world; Aprilia RSV4; and a BMW S 1000 RR.”

“Who the hell are you guys?” The question flies out of my mouth before I can catch it, and I realize there’s a bit of unsteadiness to my tone.

By the look on Liam’s face, that may be working to my advantage. The arrogance he normally possesses falls away, a gentleness in its place. “We’re erasers.”

“Erasers? What’s that?”

“If someone needs to disappear—have their identity erased—we make it happen.” He drops onto a bench against the wall, arms spread over the back, ankle resting on the other knee in a relaxed stance. “On the flip side, if someone is *missing*, we find them.”

“So, you erase people and find people who’ve been erased?” I repeat, trying to wrap my mind around what he’s telling me, all that it would entail.

“Yep,” he replies plainly, watching my face with a seriousness I wouldn’t have expected in him.

“Are you good guys? I mean, that sounds like a juvenile question, but I don’t know how else to ask it.”

He chuckles, egotistical smirk reinstated. “It’s a matter of perspective. Our clients see us as the good guys. But we’re ... gray.”

“Gray, like morally gray.” It’s not a question, so he doesn’t answer, and I decide it’s best to ask as many questions as I can, judgment-free. “Makes sense. I imagine the reasons people need to disappear fall in various shades of gray. I’ll avoid digging further into that at the moment. So, erasing people? Creating new identification, no contact with people from your former life? Standard witness protection program stuff shown in books and movies?”

He shrugs with a slight tilt of his head. “We’re better.”

Always so damn cocky.

An unexpected laugh spills out of me. “How so?”

“Witness protection only cares about people who can offer them information. Their protection is limited, especially once they’ve gotten the testimony they want. Plus, the number of leaks is fucking embarrassing. We work alone. We’re not cheap, but worth every penny.” He raises his spread arms off the bench, offering the cars as evidence.

Point well made.

“And you also look for people? How do you go about finding someone?” I’m so riveted that I don’t hear Wells until he’s right beside me, but he doesn’t stop our conversation.

Liam acknowledges him with a tip of his chin before focusing on me again. “Most erasers aren’t as thorough as us. They tend to leave loose ends that enable us to find the person. If there aren’t loose ends, we manipulate the pulse points.”

“Pulse points? What are those?”

He stands, probably eager to end this so he can eat, but I’m far hungrier for answers. Thankfully, he continues his explanation. “People they can’t resist calling. Investments they weren’t willing to lose. Something that is too difficult to completely leave behind. It’s different for everyone. Most teams don’t manage their erased clients for very long, like we do. We’re always keeping tabs, ensuring they aren’t fucking it up. But lack of diligence is generally our gain when we’re looking for someone.”

I glance up at Wells, who nods for me to keep going. “So, how do you manipulate the pulse points? Monitor phones and other forms of contact, I’m sure. Is that it?”

“It’s normally enough,” Liam says. “But sometimes, we need to make a big splash. Get their attention so they show themselves or even come after us. Every mouse in hiding has a piece of cheese they can’t resist.” He winks. “At the moment, mine is covered in pepperoni.”

He swaggers into the house with the easy confidence he seems to carry everywhere while I try to sort through everything I learned.

Wells grazes his palm down my arm, bumps appearing instantly on my skin from both his touch and the heaviness blanketing me. “Was that too much?” he asks.

I swallow, peering up at him, my fingers aching to dust the dark hairs on his forehead away. “Too much?”

He sweeps his thumb across my cheekbone. “You’re a bit pale, Little Storm. Something on your mind?”

Yes. A million other questions—many of which I’m not prepared to hear the answers for. But maybe I could start with a couple that need to be settled before I can move on.

“Liam said you were expensive. Do you only do this for people who can pay top dollar?” I’m not sure why that matters to me, but it does.

There’s a splash of surprise in his emerald eyes with my question. I wonder what he expected me to ask.

“We have ways of funding those who need to escape and can’t afford us. We’ve helped a lot of abuse victims that way. It’s the area of our operation that Ty oversees.”

A puff of air falls from my lungs. “I love that.”

He squares his shoulders to me, hands in his pockets. “That wasn’t the question you wanted to ask though, Ives. Ask me.”

How does this man read me so well?

I suck in a breath of courage, my gaze glued to his. “Do you hurt people?”

No hesitation. “Not good people.” And no apology.

He believes in what he does, and my gut tells me there’s good reason for that.

Although he essentially admitted to hurting *bad* people, which could be subjective, but if I’m honest with myself, I sensed the gangsters-in-suits, Mafia vibe on that very first day. And it excited me.

“That’s enough for now,” I mutter. “I’ll be okay.”

“You’re part of our family now, Little Storm.” His voice is satiny, delivering those words, but I can’t help wondering if it’s part invitation, part threat.

The other night at the restaurant when I asked him about his work, he explained very little, ending the discussion by stating that some details couldn’t be disclosed *without spousal privilege*.

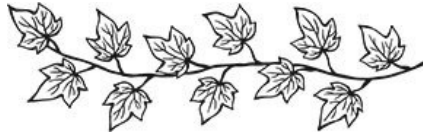
I guess there’s no going back now. “I’m happy to be here.”

Mostly true. Somewhat shaken.

His hand slides over my lower back, guiding me inside. “Good girl, Ivy. Let’s eat.”

While his rasp, assurance, and touch all breed a burgeoning of home in my heart, it dawns on me, now that I’m in the know, this doesn’t read like a five-year arrangement. I might not have sold myself as arm candy, but I think these men own me all the same.

CHAPTER SIX



WELLS

Ivy has been here for a couple of days, and we've all settled into a rhythm. We'll be traveling to New Orleans tomorrow, so plans are on track. With so many loose ends to tie, I've had less time with my leading lady than I'd like, but it's probably for the best.

I've had years to learn her, admire her, obsess over her. Crave her smell and her taste. Long for her touch.

She's even better—utter perfection. A goddamn masterpiece.

But she needs time to crave me the same way so that when she's officially mine, she'll believe she chose this regardless of how skewed that truth is.

The waves of pulsing electricity constantly crackling between us suggest it won't take long, but closing that energized space too rapidly would be a mistake. It can't happen until she's prepared to fight.

She's the storm. I need her to clear the path for us.

Not every aspect of Ivy's arrival has been as smooth as I'd prefer, but I can't say that's unexpected. Gage steers clear of her like she's a plague. That's going to take some time.

His life disintegrated at the hands of the one person he trusted to be his future. She buried his trust in humanity, especially women, right along with his gentle-hearted corpse.

He has plans to rectify that, but I've put those on hold until our business with Ivy is completed. So, unfortunately, my girl glimmers like nothing more than a deceitful, shiny obstacle to Gage. But if anyone can take him on without crumbling, it's my Little Storm. Even if she doesn't know it yet.

At the moment, I'm sneaking around in the kitchen, marinating steaks for

tonight's dinner and quietly eavesdropping on Ivy and Liam conversing in the great room. The couch is angled in a catercorner position, allowing me to see Ivy's face without her noticing I'm here. As of yet anyway.

"Hey." Liam taps her thigh. "Your eyes are open, but no one's home. It's creeping me out."

"Sorry," she says, curled up near him on the couch, a half cushion away. Too damn close for my liking. "I have a whole other world up here that sucks me in when I least expect it. And often against my will. It's like trying to hold on to grains of sand."

Holding grains of sand.

He glances at her before turning back to his laptop. "I bet that's inconvenient."

"It's a matter of perspective." She nudges his bicep with a playful poke. "Like being pegged a good guy or a hero. Maybe my mind is full of gray matter."

"You're spacey but quick," he says.

Maybe that was an inside joke between them. That thought turns my stomach. I'd give anything to Liam, except her. Not even her laughs and jokes.

He shakes his head. "Must've made school challenging. ADHD?"

"Now, you sound like my teachers did when I was growing up. My father wanted me to concentrate on the ways to *adjust the world* to fit *my needs* rather than a label requiring *me* to adjust to the world, so I'm not sure. Some of that fits. I'm definitely not neurotypical, but it doesn't matter. I've learned to use it to my advantage instead of being held back by it."

She's so strong, so determined. My molars grind at the realization that I'm not the one she's sharing this with, but before I can get too hung up, she's on to something else. "How come I never see staff, but none of you clean or do yard maintenance?"

Liam hammers away at the keyboard as if she hadn't shared something deeply personal ten seconds ago. "Wells is skeptical of everyone. He has a staff of ten that comes on Mondays to do laundry, cleaning, yard upkeep. There's even a cook who preps meals for us. But he won't let anyone stay here or be on property daily. He locks anything important up on Monday morning and keeps them under surveillance."

She laughs, fingers twirling a ginger strand. "He's intense, huh?"

"That's an understatement." His eyes come off his screen and set on her.

Flirty fucking smirk, no doubt. “Do you like that? Overbearing? Controlling?”

“Powerful. Dominant. Sexy. Yeah, that works.”

Jesus, she’s perfect. Doesn’t miss a beat and calls me *sexy* to Liam’s face. A goddamn dream.

“Down, girl,” Liam snipes with a chuckle. He’s going to fuck with her now.

Don’t let him get the upper hand, Little Storm.

He sets his laptop aside and twists his entire body toward her. “So, you’re sitting pretty then, aren’t you? Got the man. Got the house.”

“I’m not complaining.” She smiles, big and bright and full of life. “I mean, of course, Wells is a package deal, so it’s not simply a man and his house. There’s his crew”—she thrusts a hand out, motioning to him—“and the weird occupation. Although the career I find”—she licks her lips—“seductive. I can’t say the same for ...” She stares at him for a beat, sweet smile still in place while letting the kill shot penetrate a bit deeper. “I’m afraid I’ve said too much. Where *are* my manners?”

Brilliant.

Liam cackles. “That was beautiful, Ivy. Seamless. And since I know we’re only playing here, I won’t even hold that lie against you. You high-society girls never marry the man you’re *actually* attracted to. It’s bred into you—sad really.”

“Oh, is *that* why you’re not taken? You’re the side piece? The pool boy? The help?”

She’s ruthless. I’m so fucking turned on right now, my cock is throbbing.

His arm stretches out behind her on the back of the couch. Not touching, but dangerously close.

He leans, blocking her face from me. “Is that your fantasy? Doing the pool boy right under your husband’s nose? And here I thought, you came for the house and our sweet *rides*.”

“I admit, the *cars* and the house are turn-ons,” she says. “There’s nothing sexier than a two-story library, especially once my book boyfriends reside in it. They’re ... *talented*.”

Book boyfriends? I’ll have to double back to that one later.

“Too bad.” He tsks. “This place is temporary.”

Fuck.

Her spine snaps woodenly straight, cool and collected bulldozed by rigid

agitation. “Temporary? Who buys a multimillion-dollar home in *Ohio* as a pit stop?”

He shrugs, reaching for his laptop. “We’re here for a job. When it’s done, we’ll move on.”

“Wells never mentioned that.” She scoffs. “Shouldn’t he have *asked me* if I was willing to move?”

“I guess all that sexy, dominant power comes with secrets, darling.” His fingers rollick lightning fast over the keys. “That’s why the *pool boy* ends up being enticing.”

Such a jackass.

“How long until it’s completed?” Her usual raspy warble is marked with heavy gravel.

He’s gotten to her. Of course, I’ll be the one cleaning up his mess.

“Almost done.” His taunt is indisputably delivered with his signature goading twinkle, whether I can witness it or not.

“Almost done?” She springs off the couch, so I shuffle into the mudroom, out of sight, but still capable of listening. “Wells needs me to help with a business issue. Will that still be the case when you’re done with the job here?”

“No,” he says flatly.

Motherfucker.

“Oh.” She sounds out of breath. She must be pacing or hyperventilating. Hopefully, it’s not the latter. “So, that’ll be it? Jesus, this is a mistake. What the hell did I do?”

I walk back into the kitchen just in time to see Liam reach for her arm. “It isn’t a mistake.” He sighs, clearly regretful that he got her so riled. “Wells might not *need* you for business afterward, but you’ll need him for your inheritance, and he’ll be there. He’s a man of his word. You have nothing to worry about concerning that, Ivy.”

That seems like a decent cue, so I amble through the back of the great room toward my office, feigning oblivion. Ivy catches sight of me, and her deep blue doe eyes morph into orbs of fire while Liam snickers under his breath. I do the only logical thing—pick up my speed.

A trained killer seeking refuge from a petite five-foot-three ... vixen. Proud moment.

She storms through my office door before I can even reach my desk, the temperature immediately skyrocketing twenty degrees. How the hell did she

manage that?

“Liam said this house is ... temporary!” She spits out that last word like it’s revolting, which causes a chuckle to bubble inside my chest. Her aghast slack jaw suggests that is not the appropriate response, but she promptly self corrects. “He told me you’re moving on after you complete a job that has you positioned here. A job that won’t take much longer.”

I move toward her, tucking a stray hair behind her ear and grazing my knuckles down her bare neck and shoulder. Chilled and heated at once—she’s a work of art. And here, for this morsel of time, I’m her composer, reveling in the way my touch undoes her, strumming her complex chords. “Is there a question within your rambling, Little Storm?”

Flustered, cheeks blushed, and her delicate freckled nose beaded with tiny pearls of sweat, she nonchalantly tightens her thighs—*fuck me*, she must be wet. And her nipples are pebbled through her sky-blue cotton tank.

Goddammit. I can’t focus like this. My cock is already fighting his way up.

She stares at me, breaths heavy. Lost. It takes a few *long* beats, but she finds her way back, unaware of my shared haze. “Yes,” she mutters. “We had a deal. Five years.”

Bending down, I let my lips ghost across her jaw. If I can control myself, this is a winning strategy. “Still not a question.”

For the briefest of seconds, she arches her neck in an offering, but the moment bursts as she regroups, crossing her arms with a grunt. *Onto me.* “Are you going to use me for whatever it is you need and get rid of me? Because I deserve to know that.”

“I have no intention of *ever* getting rid of you, Ivanna. That’s what you should be concerning yourself with.” Truest words I’ve said to her yet. *You’re mine now, Little Storm.*

She pins her lips, barely breathing, eyes cast downward. “So, the house?”
Is that really what she’s focused on?

I back away from her, dropping into my chair and shielding my growing bulge with the desk while she awaits my answer. “If you like it here, we’ll stay.”

Reaching into my bottom drawer, I rip open a bag of Sour Skittles and dive in.

She tracks my candy foraging, blinking her dark, fanning lashes a few times. “Just like that? I ask to stay, and we do?”

“Yes.” I nod, popping in a handful of the lemon. “Just like that, Ives.”

“Okay.” And the storm retreats as briskly as it brewed. A force melting into a puddle of innocence before my eyes. She falls into the chair across from me. “What’s with the candy?”

I slide the bag to the edge of the desk nearest her as a peace offering. “It calms me.”

She carefully sifts through, emerging with a palm full of only the reds and yellows—*my* favorites. “More than the scotch?”

“Different,” I say, marveling at how the room is suddenly cooler, the air more comfortable.

She’s like a witch, changing the weather with her moods. The embodiment of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.”

She eats one piece at a time, examining each for God knows what before gently placing it on her tongue and sucking it into her mouth. Tantalizing and adorable at once. “I guess it could be worse. At least you don’t smoke.”

Snatching the candy bag back, I dig for the reds. “I used to. The candy replaced it.”

She hums in thought. “What made you quit?”

“Someone strongly encouraged me to do so.”

Her eyes dart to mine, glacial now. “Someone important to you?”

“Very.” Truth.

And the truth flips a switch.

Her face and neck flush crimson, rage lurking beneath her creamy skin. Those icy-blue eyes shoot jealous daggers. It’s the damn Arctic in here now. I could tell her it’s not what she’s thinking, but I’d hate to be *presumptuous*. She labeled me as such at the pub. Better, and a bit more entertaining, to let her stew in spite of the frigid air.

“Anyway,” she barks, “moving on. Did you sign the prenup?” A growl follows—a quiet yet unmistakable *growl*.

Christ, she’s fascinating—a one-woman amusement park. But I will not finish that thought because it’s too ... *Liam*.

Instead, I swallow the strawberry-candy juice and pull out the papers we need, placing them in front of her. “I did. My lawyers added two clauses which require your signature though.”

She studies the first highlighted passage, awestruck gaze searching me. “If you don’t hold up your end of the agreement, I receive *ten million dollars*? Why would you add that?”

Because I need you to trust me. Quickly. “Insurance.”

“For whom? Me? *You* want to insure *me*?”

“Yes. There’s insurance for me already with you needing to stay for five years in order to receive your inheritance.” Not that she’ll be going anywhere after that, but if all goes right, she won’t want to by then.

“And if I stay after the five years?” she inquires.

Interesting. Perceptive or hopeful?

A broad smile climbs over my cheeks. “Then, you’ll have your money and all of mine, so it won’t matter.” Win-win.

“And vice versa,” she snarks, but she’s got it all wrong. Her money isn’t what’s valuable.

“I need *you*, Little Storm. Not your money.”

She nods, stumped and silent, so I flip the page and point to another section of the document. “There’s also the *other* matter my lawyers added.”

She reads over the section. “I have to adhere to all safety protocols put forth by you?” Her brows knit into a tense wrinkle. “What does that mean?”

Not expecting this to land well, I roll up my sleeves in prep for the heat. “You’ll be under my protection at all times. Guarded.”

“Okay, like a tail?” She tilts her head in thought, surveying a red Skittle and plopping it onto her tongue. “My father was paranoid too and often had security detail keep tabs on me, so I’m used to that. No worries.”

It wasn’t nearly enough for my peace of mind.

“This is a step up from that. I don’t trust many people, so one of the four of us will be with you at all times.”

Her chin jolts up, squinted eyes trained on me. “So”—she clenches her fists with a huff—“you’re saying I can *never* be alone now? For the next five years?”

The sugar-high isn’t going to cut it for this discussion. I reach into my other bottom desk drawer and grab the bottle of Macallan and a glass, pouring myself three fingers’ worth—no rocks, but desperate times, desperate measures. And this elaboration will amount to that. “You can have as much alone time as necessary within the house.”

A howl of laughter gushes out of her, bordering on maniacal. “And in the yard?”

Sounds like you know the answer to that, Little Storm. “No. It’s fifty acres. Too many blind spots.”

“Who the hell have you pissed off that would hunt me on your property?”

She reaches across the desk, chugging my scotch and promptly choking it down with a cough.

This conversation is rapidly going south. And I'm not sure how many more shifts in climate I can handle before my head explodes.

"That is an extensive list and not necessary for this conversation." My tone grows stern. "I said *no*. End of discussion."

She rises with a whoosh, her jaw locking before she presses her hands onto my desk, the force blanching her fingers. "What the fuck did you just say? End of discussion?"

She spins, fisting her hair as Ty scurries past my office door where he was undoubtedly listening.

Run for the hills, brother.

"Ty!" she hollers.

He pops his head in, forehead scrunched in surrender. "Yeah, Freckles?"

"Please reason with this ... *Neanderthal* and inform him I don't need fucking bodyguards."

Ty meanders into the room, light as always. "Now, that's offensive. I'm a friend, tons of fun to hang with, not a bodyguard, and Wells is—"

"A classy escort," Liam interjects, strolling in behind him. "He might even strip if you get on your knees and beg him. Right, Chief?"

"*Jesus Christ*," I hiss.

Liam smirks. "Oh, my bad, Ivy. He'd much prefer for *you* to strip before getting—"

"Can we stay on topic for one goddamn second?" I swipe my hand back and forth over my hair, blood boiling.

Gage tromps in next. So, the three of them were out there eavesdropping and giggling like little girls. Different than when I do it. As the one who carries the whole fucking world of everyone in this room, it's a necessary evil.

Gage's gaze sails through the room before docking on Ivy in suspicion. He puffs up his chest and sears me with his amber eyes. "Adam's downfall was Eve. David's was Bathsheba. Samson's was Delilah. Sensing a pattern? Guinevere brought down King Arthur's whole fucking kingdom. If that isn't some foreshadowing shit right there, I don't know what the hell is. This is too messy!"

For Christ's sake, I don't have time for this nonsense.

Ivy throws her arms out with a gasp. "I'm sorry." *Fantastic. As if she*

wasn't enraged enough. “Is that rant about me? Or against women in general? Misogynistic much? We’re only good for one thing, *Gage*, or do you fuck men?” She shakes her head. “Nah. I bet you can’t land them either. Looks like your hand gets plenty of use.”

Ty and Liam laugh, but Gage cracks his neck, muscles twitching in his jaw as he glares at her, and I have to grip my desk to keep from lunging over it and tearing him apart.

His nostrils flare. “*Fucking* pussy has never been an issue, but it is like sleeping with the enemy.”

She claps her hands, the crack harmonizing with her hysterics like a resounding gong in the room. “You know, there’s a movie with that title. The *enemy* is a pathetic, psychotic coward who’s a poor excuse for a man. Sound familiar?” Her rage turns on me with an eerie calmness. “Tell me this asshole isn’t one of my bodyguards.” With that, she collapses into the chair, plainly worn out by the afternoon.

“This is nice,” Liam chirps. “People underestimate the importance of quality time these days. So, what are we doing tonight, fam? Bowling? Movie?”

Ivy twists in her seat to face Ty. “Dom Toretto. *The Fast and the Furious.*”

I’m not sure what that’s about, but Ty bends in half, howling. “Shit, you’re hilarious, Freckles.”

Gage coughs into his fist. “Wrapped around her pint-size finger. Notice the death point on her manicured—”

“Enough!” I slam my fist against the desk like a gavel. “It’s like herding fucking cats. Ivanna, you will be with one of us at all times. Test me, and that goes for inside the house too.”

She jumps out of the chair, pings me with a fuming glower, and stalks from my office while I finish with the guys.

“Liam, get your smart-ass back to work. That is where we need *quality* time. And, Gage, do not let me hear one more goddamn comment that could be even mildly offensive to Ivy. You will apologize, and in the future you won’t so much as sneeze in her presence without excusing yourself and begging for her forgiveness. Understood?”

Resentment radiates off him, mostly due to old wounds, which I suspect he realizes. He simmers down, casting an apologetic nod. “Understood, Wells.”

He jerks his head to Liam, and the two leave the room, so I settle into my chair for a respite while Ty drops into the one across from me.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he says, to which I cock my eyebrow, wondering if he was in the same room as me. He smiles. “She knows we won’t be letting her out of our sight, and as far as I can tell, she’s pissed but not planning to flee. Gage had to get that out of his system. It’s done. And if we didn’t already know, it’s clear she’s got the fight in her to survive what’s coming.”

“She’s a lot to rein in,” I muse.

I shouldn’t relish her fire so much, the way she pushes back at me, but I do. That spark of lightning. Every strike is a show of trust whether she realizes it or not. Trust in herself and, to a degree, trust in me. I need her compliant, not cowering. She certainly doesn’t disappoint.

But, Christ, she fucks with my head. My whole office smells like vanilla raspberry and erotic fantasies.

Ty chuckles, eyes creasing as though he’s in on a secret. “I think you’ll manage that just fine.”

“Maybe so, but not now. Go smooth things over with her. The last thing I need is her pushing boundaries. And get her to sign these damn papers.”

His lips curl into a smirk as he grabs the prenup. “Sure thing, Chief.”



My private jet is fueled and loaded with everyone but Gage and me. He stands beside me, holding his Black Rifle Coffee sipper and a pumpkin muffin. A muffin from the batch Ivy whipped up at the crack of dawn, claiming baking eases her anxiety. He already ate two at home.

I never got a private moment with him last night, and it’s important that I know where his head is at. “Do we need to discuss expectations for this trip?”

He scowls. “I confirmed my understanding yesterday.”

Nodding, I pat him on the back with a subtle smile. “Good muffins?”

He shoots me a sidelong glare before slipping his sunglasses on and trudging forward. “Yep. I bet Adam thought it was a tasty fucking apple in the garden too.” Backhanding my chest on his way toward the stairs, he laughs. “I’m good, I swear.”

If he says he is, that’s enough for me and one issue I can cross off my growing list. I scale the stairs, my own coffee in hand, and scan for Ivy. The

guys wisely left the seat across from her empty, so she's alone, reading.

Once seated, I call her name a couple of times, but she's so engrossed in her book that nothing else exists. While I find that endearing, the term *book boyfriend* that she threw at Liam yesterday keeps assaulting me. I lean forward, skimming my hand over her linen pants. She's a vision of both class and comfort—olives and beiges. Half of her blazing locks are swirled into a braid on top of her head, leaving the back flowing, while wisps frame her face. Her silver necklace makes her peach skin shimmer above her scoop-neck tank.

She seems more like a doe than a storm in this light. Too pure for the world I'm about to thrust her into. And while I'm fairly confident she'll thrive because we're very good at what we do and we have anticipated the endless routes, she may very well hate me when all is said and done. It's the one destination I can't see clearly because at the end of this, her feelings about me won't be a choice I can manipulate any longer. But whether she likes it or not, she'll be tethered to me.

Mine.

I'll have to let that be enough.

The touch of my hand on her leg forces her eyes up to me, innocent and sapphire today.

She pulls out her AirPods. "Hey." She giggles. "Were you trying to get my attention?"

"You were immersed in your book."

"Yeah." She sighs. "It's a villain romance, and I had the noise-canceling on the AirPods. The racket a plane makes can be imposing."

"Villain romance?" Are her book boyfriends villains? That could work.

She wiggles her head, a whimsical grin coasting up her cheeks. "He's bad news, but she can't resist. Good in print, not in practice."

"Right," I reply, choosing not to read too deeply into that as I pull a small box from the pocket in my suit jacket and pass it to her.

She flashes me a questioning look, followed by a hard swallow. *Nervous.*

I reach over and tap the top of it. "Open it."

Her breath catches as she does, eyes flitting between me and the ring—a rare square stormy-blue diamond, bold in both size and clarity, surrounded by smaller white diamonds that continue down the band. "Wow." Voice raw and real. "I didn't think ... when did you? It's stunning. So elegant. I wasn't expecting ..."

As much as her sharp tongue arouses me, I find it being tied *charming*. “It’s important the engagement and the marriage come across as authentic. A ring was necessary.”

“Of course.” She straightens in her seat, composing herself as I’m sure her mother has schooled her. “You have impeccable taste. It’s exactly as I would have chosen for myself, so consider the authenticity nailed.” She begins lifting it from the box but hesitates. “May I?”

“Please. It won’t do us any good in the box.” I jump right to the remainder of our business while she slides the ring onto her finger, gaping at it, her lips rolling in with a hint of excitement as sparkles of light gleam from it, prancing around the plane’s cabin.

“We’ll be staying at La Lune Noire,” I continue.

She glances up, trying her best to focus on me instead of her finger.

“It’s owned and operated by a friend of mine and his brothers. Their hotel has everything we need for the wedding and the prep—restaurants, pools, stores, bars, and a salon and spa. There’s even a casino. We won’t be leaving the property.”

Her shoulders slump, face stony, ring momentarily forgotten. “I’ve never been to New Orleans. I was excited to explore the city.”

Not a chance. Too dangerous. “We aren’t going there to sightsee, Ivanna.”

She huffs, her eyes filling with more defeat than anger. Unshed tears brimming.

Fuck.

Surprisingly, she doesn’t say anything, but instead stews silently while chewing on the inside of her lip.

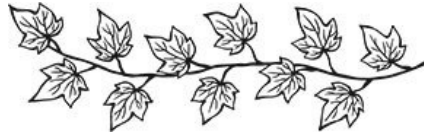
No fire. Only disappointment. Sadness.

I brush my hand over hers, certain to press my palm into the ring as a reminder of both our nice moment and what she’s willingly agreed to. “Fine. If all goes well, I’ll consider a brief outing on the last day. We’re returning Wednesday morning, so we can be back in time to see your father.”

She perks up, a bright, *winning* smile breaking over her face, all the way up to her tiny, *devious* ears. The smattering of freckles on her cheeks and nose shine like a warning of menace rather than the markings of innocence.

The Little Storm played me.

CHAPTER SEVEN



WELLS

La Lune Noire is known as the most upscale establishment in New Orleans—not upscale in the way of stuffy pomp-and-circumstance refinement. Upscale as in exclusive.

Think speakeasies and secret society clubs.

Password admittance for a hefty price.

Law enforcement in their pockets.

They own the town because everyone wants at least a peek, and after one visit, they compile a file so thick on you that if you dare take them down, you'll go down with them.

That's rarely an issue though. Governors, senators, police chiefs all covet this as their cherished escape. The siren song is addictive. Pleasure lurking in every shadow. A place where purse strings are loose because the morals are looser.

Of course, the primary hotel and casino are open to anyone, as are two of the restaurants. It serves as the front of house, distracting the naive tourists and uptight townies from hunting for proof of phantom legends.

Axel Noire is an old friend, essentially from a former life. Both of us have become far different men from when we were boys. Life has a way of sharpening a man.

He, his four brothers, and his little sister live in the North Tower penthouse—the only residence located in that building—running their twenty-four/seven operation. Here, they reign as kings of the world because nothing can touch them. For that reason and others, I trust them nearly as much as my own guys.

My crew will be staying in the South Tower penthouse, which provides

plenty of room for us to spread out. Secluded from the general public, the tower is reserved for those who require the utmost concealment. Five bedrooms, all with private en suites, a formal living space, dining room, kitchen, and office—perfect for our needs.

Ivy is accustomed to the best. Her parents spared no expense in offering her luxurious experiences, but La Lune Noire is unlike anything. Brimming with both sophistication and sin, the atmosphere is delightfully seductive. And although she hasn't said much, her twinkling blue eyes tell me the alluring appeal is casting its magical spell on her as well.

Safety and discretion are paramount to everything concerning Ivy, which is why La Lune Noire was an obvious choice for our wedding. The fact that my guys love it here doesn't hurt either.

The penthouse butler shows us to the suite, apprising Ivy of the countless services, before addressing me. "Axel would like to see you in his quarters once you've all settled, sir."

I turn to Ivy. "How much time to freshen up and dress for dinner?"

"Fifteen minutes?" It's a question, making it clear she's overestimating her abilities.

Glancing at my watch, I note that the night is still young, so there's no need to rush. "Thank you, Bernard. Please tell him to expect us within the hour."

Ivy scurries off to freshen up, emerging thirty minutes later in a silky emerald cocktail dress. While the length is modest, hanging a couple of inches above the knees, there is a slit on the side, a teasing glimpse. The material hugs her sumptuously, accentuating the slender curve of her hips, and the top is equally as magnificent—cap sleeves meeting in a thin band across her collarbone, creating a triangular cleavage window.

Ivanna Kingston takes a proper dress and corrupts it into becoming the eighth deadly sin.

She struts into the kitchen, her narrow hips swaying with an alluring sashay. After pouring herself a glass of the bottled lemonade from the stocked fridge, she sips it while ogling me from the corner of her eye. I like that she watches me. It'll take the sting out of discovering I've been watching her for years.

I move toward her, lifting my arm to the cabinet beside her head, caging her there. "That dress is exquisite. Tasteful. Elegant." Threading my fingers into her hair, I slide my cheek against hers, speaking low into her ear. "But

you in it is *unholy*.”

She hums—a seductive little moan. “Unholy? Can’t say I’ve ever been called that.”

“One of your many firsts with me,” I promise, and she draws in her chin, her ocean eyes scanning mine for the deeper meaning there.

You’ll never be the same, Little Storm.

While I have her undivided attention, I lay out my order for the night. “You’re to be by my side the entire evening. Understood?”

Her hands glide over my lapels, their final destination the nape of my neck, fingers playing with my hair. Her voice sings out in such a sultry rasp that my cock jerks in salutation on the first syllable. “Another demand from my number one ... guard dog. I might need to wander just so I can watch you bare your teeth.”

This plan of mine to keep her at arm’s length until she’s breathless and begging, convinced she chose this, is crumbling. I need to fuck the brat out of her more than I need air.

I swallow my urge to throw her down right here on the kitchen floor, binding her wrists, her long, toned legs wrapped around my waist while I fuck her tight cunt until she screams and quakes, and instead, I fix my unwavering glare on her. “Cute. This is not the place to push boundaries, Ivanna. It isn’t safe. By my side.”

She steps back, bracing her hands on the counter behind her. “Yes, sir.”

Fuck me.

Her eyes trail down to the unmistakable growing bulge in my pants before slowly returning to mine with a she-devil smile. “Maybe next time, you should bring a leash.” She tilts her head and bats those thick black lashes in a bashful ruse. “We can see who belongs on it more.”

Jesus Christ.

She’ll be the death of me.

My fingers curl around her jaw, and I jerk her chin up to me. Her back arches, my rock-hard cock nudging her stomach in the process. “You are playing a very dangerous game, Little Storm. Don’t think for a moment I don’t know that you on my leash is *exactly* what you want.”

Our eyes are locked, hers plainly lost in the image we’ve painted and unable to hide the rush of excitement.

Fuck. Now, all I can think about is buying her a collar to match her ring.

A throat clears behind us. It’s Ty. I sensed him a moment ago, as I’m

trained to do, but I don't acknowledge him because the Little Storm and I are still in a standoff. That alluring cleavage window is flushed and heaving, begging me not to move. This is why we don't get involved with our clients and certainly not with those who are our mission. Lines get blurred. Fuck, the whole job clouds with a film of haze, making it challenging to keep everyone safe. It's nearly impossible to see through the fog when your focus becomes narrowed to one.

I won't let my little obsession compromise everything we've been working for.

Done playing, I point to the door, reminding myself that the hope of exploring the city will be enough to keep her in line. "Go."

We move toward our meeting in the North Tower. Axel's request to see me right away is regarding a business matter we have to discuss, so I instructed Ivy to bring a book.

Their residence is a step up from the South Tower accommodations—two extra bedrooms, a weight room, movie room, sauna, and a few offices.

Axel greets us, and soon, his brothers fill in the living space. "These are my brothers, Ivy. Ryker, Maddox, Cash, and Jax. Our little sister, Rena, will be around later."

Each of them slips their hand into Ivy's upon introduction, all of them displaying various levels of eccentricity—the latter three heavy on expression in the way of visible sinister tattoos, piercings, and a general array of illicit roguery. Their nefarious air is enough to chill the most stoic, but Ivy never falters.

Cash lingers far too long for my liking—precisely the reason I want her occupied with a book. Ty, Liam, and Gage all stiffen beside me at the sight, protective armor in place. That's why they're her guards.

Liam snickers, patting Cash on the shoulder. "Cash, brother, that is not a battle you want to wage. Been there."

Cash laughs, sauntering away with Liam and Gage. "All's fair in war and sex, man. Noire rules."

"Not with her," Liam hisses. "Off-limits."

"As off-limits as Rena." Gage adds the lethal shot with his arms crossed over his puffed chest, jaw pulsing. "She's marrying Wells."

Cash twists back, eyes dropping to the stormy rock on Ivy's finger. "Ahh. Missed that." He sighs, and my fists clench while he eye-fucks her for another beat. "Understood."

Ryker rolls his icy-blue eyes. “Sorry about that. Axel and I were hoping to have a few minutes with you and Ty, but ...” His gaze shifts between Ivy, who stands beside me, soaking everything in with a quiet simper, and his brothers before landing on me in question.

Before I can answer, Ivy holds up her AirPods. “I have a playlist and a story waiting for me, so no worries. Thank you so much for the lovely accommodations. I’m sure it will make for a beautiful wedding day.”

Axel smiles at her. “Absolutely. You’re an impressive girl to get this guy down the aisle.” He’s well aware of Ivy being an assignment, although not privy to all the details. But his effort to offer her a traditional congratulations is appreciated. “You can make yourself comfortable over there. We’ll use the dining table.”

Generally, we would conduct this discussion in his office, but this way, I can still see Ivy. He must sense my unease.

She makes her way to a plush leather chair by a fireplace, pops in her earbuds, and opens her book. And just like that, she’s in another world.

Ryker studies her as he settles into his chair at the long mahogany table. “Should we be concerned with sharing delicate information?”

“No.” Ty chuckles. “She’s content. She won’t be paying us any attention.”

“She’s trustworthy as well,” I add. “But Ty is correct. We no longer exist to her.”

Axel pours us each a glass of Glenfiddich 30 Year Old, his brow cocked while eyeing me. “You’re attached.”

I don’t feel the need to entertain that statement.

He smirks at my silence. “Fine. We’ll move on.”

Ryker takes that as his cue. “What’s the update on Mercy? Location? Adjustment?”

Mercy is Ryker’s childhood friend, who found herself and her infant son in an abusive, life-threatening situation. We erased them both last Christmas.

“You know we can’t provide details such as location,” I say, sipping my whiskey.

This is another area our work can become messy when personal relationships are involved. Special treatment is expected, and we won’t risk it.

Ty’s dealt a lot with Mercy, so he interjects a smidgen of hope. “All things considered, she’s doing well. She’s a survivor. And Jett is thriving.”

“And have you found the bastard?” Ryker asks, referring to Dalton Montgomery, son of Governor Monroe Montgomery.

“Yes,” I confirm. “We have tabs on Dalton and Mercy at all times.”

Ryker growls, fisting his hands. “But he’s still breathing.”

“That’s what Mercy wants,” Ty says, subtly reminding him that *she* is the client. “As much as we agree the asshole needs extinguished, it’s important that she have control over some decisions. She doesn’t—”

“I don’t give a fuck what she wants,” Ryker barks, downing the entirety of his glass.

Axel places his hand on the back of Ryker’s neck in a warning to calm down. “Our thought is that if he’s taken care of, she can return. We’ll handle her anger.”

I sigh. “It isn’t that simple.”

We don’t contract kill. That’s a whole different racket. Our kills are only done when the completion of the mission requires it or if the client’s safety demands it.

Ryker kicks his chair back and paces. “You’ve killed for lesser offenses. We all have. Drag him back here, or tell me where he is, and I’ll take care of him. He beat her within an inch of her goddamn life!”

He’s not wrong. We have killed for lesser crimes. But that tends to add an extra layer of mess, and with the number of erased clients we’re still monitoring, messy is the last thing we need.

Ty has a knack for pacifying others, his tone satiny and controlled, unfazed by Ryker’s anger. “Mercy is adamant that we find another way to take him down. It’s the father of her child, and while she despises him, she can’t bear the thought of having to tell her son she had anything to do with his father’s death.”

Axel scoffs, swigging his drink with a grimace. “I have to agree with Ryker on this. It’s bullshit. Jett will be better off.”

I swish the amber liquid around my glass, toying with how I want to handle this. “I’m not opposed to killing him even if she doesn’t agree with it. But we don’t yet know if he’s paid anyone else to take her out. He knows you’re after him, so it’s doubtful he’s working alone. But he’s been smart with his communication so far. We’ve discussed paying him a visit, giving him incentive to give anyone else up, and killing him, but the Montgomery name has a far reach. His father is well connected, as you know, and oddly, other than his involvement here—which we don’t want to use—he’s squeaky

clean.” I hesitate, lifting my glass. “But there is another girl.”

“Hailey Holden,” Axel offers before Ryker adds, “His last victim.”

“Yes,” I confirm. “Missing for nearly three years, after filing a domestic suit against him.”

“Mercy would prefer us to use our resources to find her,” Ty explains. “So far, no leads.”

Axel gestures for Ryker to sit while he turns back to us. “What exactly does that solve?”

“Maybe nothing,” I say honestly. “The girl could be dead, and finding a body is unlikely. But we have a compromise.”

Ryker exhales. “We’re listening.”

“Give us until February first. If we haven’t uncovered all we need to ensure her safe return, we’ll take him out or haul him back to you for the honor of doing so.” That is the best I’m willing to offer at the present time. Ivy is our critical focus now. I added the delivery because the Noire brothers are untouchable here, but outside these walls, they don’t hold the same anonymity pass we do.

“Why February first?” Axel glances at Ivy with that question.

“Yes. Highest priority right now, and Mercy is safe.” I won’t apologize for taking care of my own affairs first. “On the other side of this, we will make Montgomery our top concern.”

Axel rises. “Fair enough. We appreciate all you’ve done for her.” He nudges Ryker, who unclenches his jaw as we all stand.

“He’s right. We do,” Ryker concedes. “Being separated from Mercy has been more hellish than expected. I don’t know what *she* means to you”—he jerks his head toward Ivy—“but maybe you can imagine the agony of not being there for her worst moments.”

Ty and I trade a knowing look. We’ve had Ivy in our daily sights for nearly five years. Even from afar, she’s been a constant. Regardless of our mission, a certain level of comfort and attachment accompanies that for us all. The loss alone would be devastating. Add in the trauma Mercy has endured, and Ryker’s reaction is well controlled.

My shoulders relax with a commiserating sigh. “I’m sure this has been excruciating. The fact that you haven’t set him and every person he’s ever spoken to on fire is impressive. Can’t say I’d be capable of the same.”

Ty and Axel both chuckle at that.

“He wanted to,” Axel remarks, swiping a few ash-brown strands from his

forehead. “And if I hadn’t repeatedly insisted it would push Mercy away completely, all of New Orleans would be ablaze, consequences be damned.”

“I assure you, Ryker,” Ty adds, “we’d have the same response.”

Ready to wrap things up and move on to the lighter part of the evening, I button my jacket and edge myself in the direction of Ivy. “The James Bond 60th Anniversary Macallan in the suite was very much appreciated.”

Axel chuckles, squeezing my shoulder. “Thought you’d like that. Consider it a wedding present.”

Ty buttons his suit jacket as well, motioning to Liam so he knows we’re leaving, before turning back to Axel to share thanks for the other personalized gifts in our suite—a favorite alcohol for each of the guys. “The Ron Bacardi Vintage, Pappy Van Winkle, and Clase Azul were nice additions since the three of us are merely guests. We’re all excited for the weekend.”

Once Liam and Gage join us, we exchange a few more words of appreciation and some humorous side notes before I palm Ivy’s head. She glances up at me, plucking out her earbuds and hiding them and her book inside her purse. I clutch her hand in mine, leading her to the door, where everyone has gathered.

Her eyes scan over the group. Maybe it’s intimidating, standing amongst nine men—all of whom have done things she can’t fathom—but she doesn’t let on if that’s the case. “It was a pleasure meeting all of you,” she says.

“You too, Ivy.” Axel lifts her hand, kissing the back of it while eyeing me to see if I mind. He can taunt as well as Liam if given an inch. When I don’t convey the reaction he anticipated, he grins and lets her go. “Everything is set for your dinner tonight at L’ange Noire. And my sister, Rena, is hoping you’ll allow her to be part of the wedding prep tomorrow. She could use some girl time.”

“I’d love that.” She smiles, genuinely pleased with the idea. “I am in desperate need of some girl time myself.” Giggling, she peers at Ty, Liam, Gage, and me, as though we’ve been exhausting her.

Right back at ya, Little Storm.



Dinner last night at L’ange Noire was a welcome break. The five of us relaxed for both the meal and a couple of hours of casino time with the

expected banter, but no bickering. It was exactly what I needed. Tomorrow, Ivy and I will be officially wed, which will secure one huge hurdle and lead us toward the final steps. The relief, knowing the end is in sight, along with the peaceful rhythm the five of us have achieved, has me feeling much lighter.

Walking out to the suite's dining room, I notice Ty and Liam are trained on their computer screens. And more importantly, Ivy is missing. "Where's the Little Storm?"

Ty glances up. "Tanning poolside." My jaw clenches as I prepare to chastise, but he continues, "Gage is with her. We wouldn't have let her go unattended."

Gage playing bodyguard by the pool brings a chuckle out of me. "Fine. Before I forget, Ty, you'll be with her and Rena all afternoon and tomorrow, prior to the ceremony. I've informed the stylist she can pick whatever dress, jewelry, and other accessories she likes. She and Rena are booked at the spa tomorrow, so that should cover most of it. But find out if there's anything else she wants."

Ty and Liam both smirk at me.

"So detailed," Liam taunts.

"What?" I spout, rebuffing their misguided assumptions. "It's the least we can do since we're upending her whole future. Women care about their wedding day regardless of why it came about. She won't even have her parents or best friend here. And," I add for good measure, "the happier she is, the better she'll cooperate."

"That's a very well-thought-out argument," Ty quips.

"Want me to take some of the load off of Ty, help Ivy try on dresses or get ... *waxed*?" Liam asks, which Ty finds far funnier than I appreciate.

I ignore them both, shrugging my blazer on. "Let's go. We'll have a pre-wedding-day lunch before she needs to be at the dress shop."

Liam snickers, plucking his cigarettes and Zippo from the table and stuffing them in his gray dress slacks. "You sound almost giddy, Chief. Looking forward to finally fucking that bride of yours, huh?"

"Do you have to be such a goddamn motherfucker all the time?" I bark, stuffing a cherry lollipop in my mouth instead of slamming his face into the wall. This might be business, and he may be family, but him even thinking about what's mine like that ends today.

He smooths out his coordinating gray T-shirt with a grin. "Plenty of

people find *that* to be my most appealing quality.”

Deciding it's best to let that lie so as not to be riled before seeing the Little Storm, I lead us out the door. We make our way to the pool, and the sight of Ivy halts my steps. Lying on a daybed, she's stretched out like a feline, every subtle curve on display beneath the *tiny* royal-blue bikini. I might need to burn that. The triangles leave little to the imagination. Her fiery tresses are bunched into a messy bun on top of her head with a few wisps fluttering about her face and neck. She stares through her white-framed Jackie O-style glasses at a book, AirPods in, foot bopping, probably to the beat.

Fucking gorgeous.

“Jesus Christ,” Liam spits out at the same time Ty breathes, “Goddamn. Great side boob.”

I'm going to end up killing the both of them. “The fuck? Thought she was like a sister, Tytan?”

“More like a stepsister,” he drawls, never taking his eyes off her. “Which means admiring is completely acceptable.”

“No, it's not,” I hiss. “She's. Off. Limits. Even in your thoughts. Got it?”

“Thought she was a business deal, Chief, a means to an end?” Liam jabs, squaring his shoulders to me while Ty chuckles.

“Still true, but still mine.” I eye them both. “Don't push it.”

Gage saunters over, stopping before us, arms crossed and usual scowl in place, taking the three of us in. “Enough fucking drooling. Half a decade of work, drowned in a pussy. Pathetic.” He ignores the heated warning daggers I shoot at him and holds his unforgiving gaze on me. “That girl over there is trouble for you, for all of us. We should've stuck with the original plan. We still can.”

Fuck that.

Ty scoffs. “We're not throwing her to the wolves alone, man.”

Liam hangs a cigarette from his lips, shielding his Zippo flame from the balmy breeze. “Aww. Is the little girl getting under your skin, Big Guy?”

He grunts. “She's a damn ballbreaker.”

Ty furrows his brow. “After the trouble you've given her, what'd you expect? A book club meeting?”

Liam sucks in a deep drag. “Ivy didn't let you read with her, brother?”

“Oh, no,” Gage balks. “After two hours, bored as hell, I yanked her earbud out and asked what she was reading—an attempt to show interest and

prove I'm not always a dick. She licked her lips *slowly* and told me she was reading some book about a big, tatted muscleman who has sex with the girl he's guarding *in public*. When my mouth fell open, speechless, she hummed, forehead pinched in thought, and added that the girl slits his throat."

The three of us erupt into laughter. She can certainly strike unexpectedly—I'll give her that.

Gage huffs, clearly annoyed by us finding humor in her game. "I ripped the book from her, pissed off, and read the synopsis on the back to find out it's about some fucked-up stepsibling romance. Who the hell reads that shit?"

Liam smacks Ty on the back, who's howling, which garners a peeved groan from me. None of which slows Gage down.

"When I called her on it, she blinked up at me through her long, curled lashes and said, 'My bad. Must've been fantasizing.' " Those last two lines are delivered in his best high-pitched girlie voice—not at all like Ivy's, but funny nonetheless.

He stares at me. "I'm telling you, Wells, trouble."

"It's under control." I pat his bicep before eagerly erasing the remaining steps leading to Ivy and perching on the daybed next to her sexy legs, tinged a soft rosy gold from the sun.

She shifts her chin toward me, and a slow smile slides over her cheeks as she plucks out one earbud. "Hi." Her voice is rough and sultry, causing my cock to twitch.

My fingers pull at the loose strings on her bikini top. I'm sure she was avoiding tan lines, but this will be the last time she sunbathes like this at a public pool. Unacceptable. Slowly, I draw them up over her collarbone, grazing the skin along the way and watching chilled bumps flare in my wake as I tie them behind her neck. "I'm taking you to eat now. Get your things."

She lowers her glasses to the tip of her button nose, her big blue eyes twinkling at me above the rims. "So damn bossy. I'm at a good part in my book. Thanks for asking."

Leaning in, I let my lips latch on to her earlobe, knowing my breath and the wet contact will keep those bumps alive. "Yes, Ivanna, I am. And in one day, you're going to realize what an understatement bossy is. Scared you can't handle being married to me?"

Her breath catches, but she doesn't falter for a second. "Bring it. Whatever you throw at me, Wells, I'll shove it right back at ya. And you'll hate yourself for how much you love it."

Intuitively accurate.

With that, she rises from the daybed, sliding a plain white shirtdress over her head, gathering her belongings, and pulling out her messy bun so those strands of fire drape her shoulders and cascade to her lower back. “Ready, dear,” she sings, meeting me toe to toe.

Gage isn’t wrong. This girl holds more power over me than I’d like, which needs to be fixed, but *fuck* if that sass of hers doesn’t undo me.

My arm snakes around her waist in a forceful sweep until she’s smashed against me, melting into my chest, her heart racing. Tangling my fingers into her hair, I force her neck up, my mouth nearly brushing hers so I can taste her lemon-scented breath. “Look at that. You talk like a brat, but you jumped right up to do as I ordered. Good girl, Ivy. You’ll do just fine.”

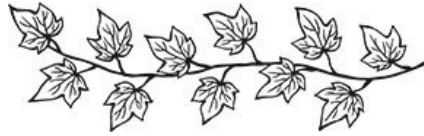
She clamps her lips and muffles a whimper.

Jesus, I want to claim her. Show her who owns her. Watch her drop to her knees, beg for my cock, and wrap those smart, pouty lips around it.

My little obsession.

This may be precarious, but it’s going to be far more fun than I ever imagined.

CHAPTER EIGHT



IVY

I can't stop staring at my ring. It's not like I'm a stranger to exquisite jewelry. I've had custom-made pieces since I was young and always admired them. I did foolishly lose a one-of-a-kind necklace once. That didn't go over well, to say the least. It was the only time my parents were truly angry with me. Probably because a rare jewel is priceless and a testament to our worth—that seems like the kind of fluffy society lie my mother feeds herself in spite of her heart of gold.

But this ring feels different.

The blue diamond is a deep cerulean blue, sparkling and stunning amid the white diamonds. Like a storm cloud.

It feels ... personal.

A constant reminder that Wells calls me Little Storm.

A name my whole body responds to.

It's not uncommon for emotional connections to be intensified during dramatic situations. Maybe that's what I'm experiencing. Or maybe, even though I haven't been kidnapped, it's a form of Stockholm syndrome.

Because all I can think about is how I want to be his Little Storm more than I've ever wanted anything.

His.

And I'm certain that's what he's thinking, but more in the way of ownership than emotional attachment. I see the way he looks at me, his emerald eyes ablaze with desire. Like I'm something to conquer. I've never been looked at like that. I'm not sure he likes me much. It's obvious I irritate him, but he definitely wants me.

To fuck me. Tame me. Own me.

It shouldn't be enough. It shouldn't be what I crave—to be lorded over. But as much as I push back because I like to screw with him and because my father raised me to be a fighter, what I want more than anything is to be claimed.

This whole situation has me seriously questioning myself.

But I've never shied away from being who I am, never given in to shame, and I won't start now. I want Wells, and I'm not going to hide it.

He'll be my husband in a little more than twenty-four hours. I might as well reap every benefit he has to offer.

And his body is irrefutably one of those benefits.

Yesterday morning, before we left to come to New Orleans, I woke at four a.m., unable to fall back asleep. Baking is my go-to when I'm anxious, so I scoured the pantry and found a can of pumpkin, immediately excited to whip up a batch of muffins.

But the better find was that at five thirty, the guys worked out. I'm guessing it's a daily routine and my new incentive for rising prior to the sun.

So. Much. Sweat.

Swimming. Running. All the ups—push, pull, sit. And that's merely what I could see—the obstacle course was out of view.

Every one of those men is magnificent. Strong and chiseled—next-level athletes.

But Wells ...

Dear God, I didn't know what sexy was before. I mean, he kills it in a suit, and my upbringing gave me that as a measure of a man—the suit, the fit, the money and power.

But as devastating as Gavin Wells is in his three-piece attire or even his jeans and blazer and three-thousand-dollar belt, shirtless and wet ruined me forever.

I sat on the patio, drinking my coffee, eating my muffin, and drooling like I'd had my wisdom teeth out. Lost to a colorful world of possibilities pole-dancing through my imagination.

A butterfly's kiss.

If they had noticed, it would've been mortifying, but they were too in the zone. Moving fluidly as one being, like the eloquent cascade of a gushing waterfall. Hypnotic and captivating.

The distance was too great to see details, but Wells has tattoos. They all do. Art inked across his upper shoulder blades, crawling toward his sculpted

biceps and chest, and a sleek one down his spine. The black images against his deep golden skin were striking. Scrumptious.

Now, all I can think about when I see him is how I want to undress him. But my mind immediately shuffles that into him forcing me to strip and do whatever he commands.

I'm a fucking mess.

After lunch, Ty escorts me down to a dress shop on the main floor of our tower. It's filled with dresses for every occasion, although nothing is popping out. This will be fun regardless. Fake or not, I might as well enjoy it. We're also meeting Rena here, which I'm thrilled about. There were approximately two hundred moments from the last week that required girl talk, and Celeste hasn't responded to a single text. It's a little disheartening, but I'm trying not to dwell.

The stylist greets us with a bright smile. "Welcome, Ivanna. I'm Amy. Right this way." She leads us to a wall at the back of the store, stepping into a corner, swinging a mirror open like a door, and pushing. A hidden entrance. We walk into a much larger dress shop, full of glamorous gowns.

She hands me a glass of champagne and laughs when Ty declines his. "Have a look around. Rena is on her way, and then we'll get started."

In the center of the room, there are plush, velvety couches beneath an elegant glass chandelier. Ty takes a seat while I roam. La Lune Noire has mastered the exclusivity vibe, like being a guest lets you in on a secret that few are privileged to share.

I noticed it yesterday—how all the coveted areas require a staff member to key you in or the use of the code we were given at check-in. Even at the restaurant, L'ange Noire, meaning the dark angel—*fitting*—the maître d' ushered us to what appeared to be an employee door and knocked three times. A small window slid open, and suddenly, we were entering into a lower level with jazz music and synchronized dancers, as though we had been transported back to a 1920s speakeasy.

And the charming spell was cast.

I felt special. Invited. Included.

It's a brilliant business model, one that most certainly attracts those with the deepest pockets and the greatest sins.

This dress shop is no different. It's only us with a vast selection of dresses, shoes, jewelry, and lingerie. It's exactly the kind of bridal treatment to make a girl feel like a princess. I wish my mom and Celeste were here. I've

tried not to make my mother feel bad about this. She's been through so much with my father's stroke. The stress was getting to her, so this European vacation is important. I don't want to ruin it with guilt over her not attending my wedding of formality.

"Ivy?"

I spin to find a girl wearing dark-wash skinny jeans, silver heels, and a lavender cropped bodice top with blousy sleeves. It doesn't show much, and yet it has the illusion that it does. She stares at me with hopeful green-hazel eyes. Her blonde hair is pulled into a high ponytail, pink streaks throughout and pink wisps hugging her golden-tanned face. She has a nose ring, eyebrow piercing, and at least six earrings in each ear. She looks like a punk Barbie—so cute.

"You must be Rena." I hold my hand out to shake, but she yanks me into a hug.

"We don't have time to be formal, girl. You have to be as desperate as me for a girlfriend, being here with Wells's crew. They're as bad as my brothers." She twists with a laugh. "Sorry, Ty."

He chuckles with a, "No worries, Rena," still lounging on the couch in the midst of dresses and lingerie—a duty, I'm assuming, that is far different from his usual work.

Rena seems to think that's good enough and turns back to me, hands gripping my shoulders. "So, getting married to Wells, huh? I bet you need to verbally vomit a whole lot of shit. He's as intense as Axel and Ryker." She steps away, plucks a glass off the antique dresser, and downs her champagne in one gulp. Somehow, she still manages to appear chic while doing it. As she sets down the empty vessel, her eyebrows pinch. "I haven't let you get a word in, have I?"

"It's okay." I laugh. "You're fun to watch. Refreshing."

"I'll take it. So, are you marrying for love, money, power?" She flaps her hand. "You know what? Don't tell me. It doesn't matter. Let's focus on the dress and the sex."

Ty and I share a glance, both of us grinning.

"Let's start with the dress," I suggest.

As if I rang a service bell, Amy arrives. "Fantastic. Tell me what you have in mind. I'm here to make it all happen."

I've never thought about my dress before, never had a particular vision, so it stands to reason that tailoring it to this experience makes sense.

“Actually, I was hoping for something different from a traditional gown. Gothic. Black-and-white. Or ... stormy.”

Ty shoots me a sideways glance, picking up on the stormy reference. I shake my head subtly to tell him not to explain my reasoning to anyone, and when he nods, I know he understands. If Wells catches on, I won't deny it, but I'm not going to broadcast it either.

Amy comes back with three dresses all in the scheme I described. But I know the one immediately. A majestic ball gown steals my breath—strapless with a cinched waist; the heart-shaped bodice covered in intricate black lace, tapering down to the hips where it flares, princess style; the black lace separates into flowery vines, spread over sparkling white tulle. I've never seen a more beautiful dress.

“That one.” I point because my voice is a raw whisper, excitement about the wedding coursing through me for the first time.

“Yes, girl,” Rena says. “It's magical.”

I'm half dazed as Amy and Rena practically shove me into the dressing room. Although it needs to be taken in a bit at the waist, which Amy confirms, it's a perfect fit. When I emerge in the gown, Rena gasps, but Ty's reaction stills me. His Adam's apple bobs, as though it's hard for him to swallow, and I swear his eyes are glossy.

While the strong reaction catches me off guard, I kind of get it. Something about Ty feels like an old friend. We slipped into that so easily. It's odd how the guys have all molded to me so quickly. Other than Celeste, connecting with people has never come natural to me, which often has me feeling awkward around others, but it's not like that with any of them. And the way Wells knows exactly what to say and do to get under my skin is equal measures thrilling and infuriating.

But out of all the guys, Ty is the one who puts me most at ease.

“So, so beautiful, Freckles,” he rasps, voice husky.

Rena studies him. “Wow, that's really sweet, Ty. It's how I imagine my brothers will react if I ever trick anyone into marrying me.”

“I don't think you'll need to trick anyone. You're clearly a catch,” I say.

She curtsies with her hand under her chin. “Thank you.” Straightening, she adds, “I'm a handful though. That's what happens when you're raised by older brothers who keep you under lock and key. A rebellious princess, imprisoned in the bell tower.”

Hmm. No parents. I wonder what the story is there. Too soon to ask

something so personal though, so I twirl back to the three-way mirror and gawk at the gown some more.

“Your boobs are phenomenal, and that dress isn’t shy about shouting it,” she proclaims, ogling my chest, which makes me laugh.

“They’re fake,” I admit. “I had *far* less than a handful, and ... I did it for me.”

I’m not sure why I felt compelled to confess that, except that Rena is a knockout. At least a few inches taller than me with long, lean legs and beautiful, subtle curves. Maybe she was merely flattering me, but comparison always makes me cringe. It leaves us all feeling less than. The thief of joy. Sharing that I have implants shows none of us are perfect, but also embarrasses me. I’m aware of the stigma. *Fake tits* is a slander in half the books I read.

So, I clarify. “I hated how straight and small I was *everywhere*. I got a small D, so it complemented my body type. I wanted to get out of the shower, look in the mirror, and be excited about what I saw.”

It’s the reason my parents were comfortable with the request before I started college. They understood it was for me.

“Well, they look real. And it’s not like the pink streaks or holes all over my body are natural, so more power to you.” Her mouth curls into an audacious grin. “So, *are* you?”

“Am I?” I ask, spinning to face her.

“Turned on when you get out of the shower?”

Not exactly how I phrased it.

I cackle, heat rushing to my cheeks in mortification, and glance at Ty, who is chuckling as well. “Yep.” I roll my lips in. “Totally turned on when I step out of the shower.”

“Great. If things don’t work out with Wells, you’re all set.” She whoops with a clap, like we’ve solved all my issues.

Celeste would adore her.

“All set,” I confirm, rubbing my forehead and turning back to take one more gander at the dress.

“Did you dream of your wedding day as a little girl?” she asks, standing behind me in the mirror, her fingers playing with the button detailing down the back.

“Yeah, I guess I did. I mean, mostly I dreamed of the marriage.” I laugh, realizing how silly that seems now. “My parents have always been so happy.

They went to college together. She was a freshman while he was in his first year of medical school, and he used to study on a bench across campus, just so he could catch a glimpse of her. He waited more than a year to ask her out, worried he couldn't devote enough time to her because of his studies. I always wanted a love like that—the kind that can't walk away.”

I catch myself drifting into that dream with the stark realization that I'm probably not supposed to tell anyone this is a business deal, which would mean that Wells and I should have that type of love.

“Anyway,” I say, trying to move far away from the bricks of emotion stacking from the image of my parents falling in love, “for the wedding, I always pictured something book-themed, assuming I'd marry someone who loved literature as much as I did, or who wouldn't mind the theme. Simple. Elegant. Not overdone. A book cake. Cherished pages and quotes throughout. Candlelight. Small and intimate, like a quaint fairy tale. So that, for one day, it was as though I had fallen into the pages of my favorite love story and gotten to touch it.”

Tears stream down my face. God, is this the first time I've cried about this? It's all happened so fast. I was so worried about staying in control that I didn't think about all I was giving up. It never occurred to me to grieve.

“Ivy?” Rena mutters, puzzled expression.

“Yeah?” I sniff.

Her pierced brow kinks. “Does Wells not love books?”

It doesn't matter either way. None of this is real. But sometimes, all of it feels right, like home. I don't understand how Wells and the other guys feel familiar, like they know me well enough to be my family. My heart wants to lean into it, but in other moments, the hairs on the back of my neck rise, as though I were walking into my childhood bedroom for the three thousandth time and everything was right, except for the way the curtains were pulled back and the strange angle of a picture frame.

Familiar. Home. But ... *off*.

“He does,” I whisper, unable to see anything, the hurt dripping so doggedly that my lashes stick together, and everything—the past and future, present and hopes—blurs into a hurricane of loss.

Little Storm.

Ty pulls me into his chest, wrapping me in a warm hug with a comfort I shouldn't gather from a week-long friend, while I sob from the ache, from the fear.

“You’ll be okay, Freckles. It’ll all be okay.” His tone sounds unsure, nervous, which is reasonable. He can’t possibly guarantee a happily ever after.

And something tells me nothing will be okay, or normal, or expected ever again.

“Cold feet.” Amy’s words slice through the moment, reminding me that Ty and I are not alone for this breakdown. “Happens to the best of us. Let the tears fall today, sweetie. Tomorrow, everything will feel lighter.”

Will it? My gut says heavy is my new normal. Maybe I am just freaking out though.

“Ooh!” Rena exclaims with another champagne flute in hand. “We need accessories. Nothing brightens a day better than shoes.”

I unfurl my mangled arms from Ty’s chest as he kisses my hair and lets me go. “Bring on the shoes.”

An hour later, we’re on our way to dinner, having added a tasteful black-diamond choker, white lace lingerie, and a pair of glittery, crystal-embellished Jimmy Choos to accompany my dress.

So far, it’s been abundantly clear that Rena is one of those warm-up-fast kind of spirits, not holding back. Although, if she’s been locked up—like it seems I’m going to be—for the entirety of her life, I suppose she has to squeeze a whole friendship into this weekend.

She peers at me across the table after our plates have been cleared. “Okay, so I waited the whole meal to ask. What about sex? Will your wedding night be your first time? Any and all sexual experiences, lay it on me, girl.”

I choke on a laugh, so taken aback, mainly because Ty is beside me. My eyes shift to him and back to her with my concern.

She nods, slurping her frosty strawberry margarita. “Got it. Ty, you’re a bridesmaid today, right? Not a bodyguard and not Wells’s friend.”

He smirks, and for the briefest second, I catch his unintentional perusal of Rena. *Huh.*

Deliberating for a moment, which seems in jest with a gleaming grin now in place, he answers her, “I am here solely in support of Ivy.” Shouldering me, he tacks on, “Your secrets are safe with me, Freckles.”

I sigh. In the midst of this topsy-turvy, pre-unconventional-wedding celebration, the embarrassment might be worth harnessing a morsel of bonding. “Yes. I haven’t ever ... I’m a virgin, mainly because something

about waiting made me feel powerful and also because I never had anyone draw that carnal I-can't-wait desire out of me." I bite my lip. "That probably sounds silly."

"Not at all." She shakes her head, her pink-and-blonde ponytail swishing with the movement. "You want a man to work for it. Earn you. I like you more by the minute, Ivy. But give me more. The good, the bad, the ugly. What are we working with here?"

Humming in thought, I ingest some liquid courage and decide to share something only Celeste and my mom know. "There was this guy a couple of years ago in college. He flirted with me after class and asked me to come to a frat party. When I got there, my gut twisted. Something about him was different. He must've noticed my guard go up because, before I had a chance to bolt, he dragged me into his room by my hair, pushed me to the floor, and shoved his dick in my mouth, holding my head there. So, I ... I bit him. Hard. Really hard. The next moments are a blur. I fought him off somehow and ran. But then I freaked out and thought he'd come after me. So, I called my mom, told her what happened, and left school for a week. He must've been hurt pretty badly though because he never returned."

"Jesus," Rena gasps. "What an asshole. My brothers would kill a guy if he did that to me. I bet that was scary."

My heart rate rockets higher with the memory. It isn't a recollection I linger on very often. "In the moment, it was terrifying. Even the spine-chilling drive home." An unbidden shiver spills down my back, quickly followed by a well-earned serenity. "But the weird thing is, I didn't feel victimized afterward. I felt *empowered*." I glance at Ty, remembering how Wells said he handles erasing victims of abuse. "I know how lucky I was, and I'm not saying—"

"Hey," Ty says, squeezing my hand, "you were sharing your own experience. No need to apologize or make excuses for how you handled it or felt about it. You did perfect."

"Thanks." I smile sheepishly, vulnerability rolling off me in waves. "Anyway, before that, I only had a fling in high school with innocent messing around, and afterward, I was more certain than I'd ever been that sex wasn't happening unless the chemistry was *off the charts* and I felt safe."

"Good for you. I wish I had waited." She points a finger at Ty, her eyes downright scary. "You never heard this. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." He throws his hands up in surrender, but there's a slight

stiffness to his shoulders, screaming that he's uncomfortable. "Not a word."

"Good." She murmurs some obvious apprehension through an elongated exhale. "I did once, a year ago. It wasn't anything to brag about; it was with a guy I hardly knew, all because I was pissed at my brothers, who I also credit with all my piercings. I get one every time they dish out a new rule. I'm twenty-one, for Christ's sake."

"And see, I like you more by the minute too." Tipping my nearly empty lemon drop martini toward her, I add, "The art of quiet rebellion. But I am sorry you didn't have a better first experience."

She flaps her hand, but the regret is visible in her eyes. "It wasn't great, but if at first you don't succeed ..."

We clink our depleted drinks while I singsong, "Try, try again."

Ty groans, finishing off his rum and Coke as well. "The two of you are trouble together."

"Bridesmaid," I bark, and he chuckles.

"Fine." He cocks an eyebrow. "You need honeymoon advice, Freckles?"

"Oh, Jesus. *No*," I rush out.

I need Celeste, who treats sex as an extracurricular activity. She's shared plenty over the years. Although it's entirely possible Wells won't even be interested, which would leave me feeling foolish and rejected. As weird as all of this is and despite the fact that I waited and there's a hunch that something is *off*, I feel both safe and aroused by him. A first. So, I don't think I need advice.

I need a drink. "Let's do shots and pretend that didn't happen."

"That's a plan I can get behind," Ty says, calling the waiter over.

When the shots arrive, we lift them up, and Rena toasts, "To being bridesmaids for one badass gothic princess."



In fifteen minutes, I'll be Mrs. Ivanna Wells. The royal treatment at the spa today was amazing but did little to calm my nerves. Partly because this step feels final, five years or not.

Marriage is *binding*.

And partly because I think the marriage is merely a formality. Certificate or no certificate, I know too much. I'm already bound to Wells.

But my father raised me to be a survivor. To face challenges head-on. To be a force.

There's nothing in this life that can break me. I won't let it.

Not wanting anyone other than my father to walk me down the aisle, I asked Ty to inform Wells that I'd meet him out there. One of the Noire brothers will be conducting the ceremony for us, which will be short, since in our case, it's only a hoop to jump through. Then, we'll be on to the party.

I also asked for a few minutes to see the courtyard, alone—with all entrances guarded, *of course*. Rena told me it was decorated, and I didn't want to risk having any type of emotion in front of others, whether it be joy, sadness, or disappointment, because I'm not quite sure what I'm feeling at this point.

Grazing my black-tipped, French-manicured nails over my gown, I take a deep breath on my solo walk to the courtyard but lose it the second I step outside.

Yellow-tinged book pages are strung everywhere by bright green vines with various shades of pink roses across the brick of the building. The whole garden area is aglow with hanging candles and tiny off-white lights, casting the whole space in an intimate honey hue. On a round table, draped in white cloth, is the cake—not a traditional wedding cake, a stacked-book cake with an icing ribbon and classic titles on the spines. A huge white fireplace looms in the center, trimmed with candles, vines, and quotes from so many famous authors. And in the middle of the mantel, there's a red rose, encased in glass.

Beauty and the Beast.

Tears prick my eyes. Dangerous tears.

Tears full of hope.

I refuse to allow them to brim, let alone fall.

The ambience is so romantic and yet ...

Ty and Rena must have done this. At least, I'm not alone.

Long before I've calmed my racing pulse, everyone begins to filter into the courtyard. Including Wells, who looks dapper as always, in his all-black three-piece suit.

His eyes land on me, and he pauses. But when his breath visibly catches, my pulse ratchets all the way up into my dry throat. He stalks toward me, his emeralds full of want. Hungry. Ravenous actually.

Dueling urges war within me.

Flee or leap.

He threads his fingers into my hair, forehead pressed to mine, not caring that others are standing around us. Watching. Waiting. “You’re a goddamn vision, Ivanna Kingston. Radiant.” His voice is so thick with emotion that my knees nearly buckle. “There’s never been a more stunning bride.”

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Leap.

I melt against his touch, and my breathing staggers. “I think we’re supposed to say *I do* or something.”

“Right.” He lifts his head, separating us only inches, and keeps a possessive hand on my waist while he waves the other at Maddox Noire. “Get on with it.”

Everyone in the courtyard bursts into laughter, and I can’t help but giggle with them. This whole thing is so ridiculous, and yet Wells’s reaction couldn’t have been more perfect if I had scripted it.

By the amused sounds of our guests, it’s evident Maddox is witty with his ceremony speech, but to me, it drones more like an airport announcement—foggy and muffled. Wells keeps his intense eyes on me the entire time. Piercing me, as though he can see the deepest inner workings of my soul and wants to memorize them. My mind clouds, floating into the surrealness.

A shooting star.

When it’s time for the rings, Rena hands me a diamond-studded platinum band for Wells.

Not sure where that came from.

Wells removes my engagement ring, clasping a blue-and-white diamond-studded band onto it, and slides the set onto my shaking finger before I take the matching band and glide it onto his.

Grains of sand.

“Time to make out with your bride,” Maddox declares with a wink.

And Wells doesn’t waste a second. One hand snakes around my waist while the other weaves back into my hair. His lips land on mine with a determination that has me whimpering, my whole body liquefying in his embrace.

So, I return it with every bit of pent-up lust I’ve held since I met him. My tongue waltzes with his as my hands coast over his chest to the nape of his neck, drawing him closer. His mouth is warm and slick and coaxing. Consuming.

He tastes like cotton-candy transgressions. *Sugarcoated sin.*

And the world disappears. The courtyard. The guests. The inheritance and business deal.

Dandelion dreams.

It's only Wells and me. Sharing a kiss that is deeper and more passionate than anything I've ever known—a tethering, a renewal, a twining that has me nearly crumbling to the brick floor, desecrated rubble of my former self. An idyllic tempo thumps in my muscles and veins and bones. His hand fists in my hair, yanking on the flowing salon curls with a sting. I moan into his mouth, and he meets it with his own avid groan.

Something about his sound, erotic and demanding, along with the heat flooding my core, startles me back to reality. People are here, witnessing us come undone. I untangle my tongue from his, release my grip on his neck, and step back.

My fingers brush over my swollen lips.

That was real.

He studies me. A question hovering in the space between us.

What was that, Little Storm?

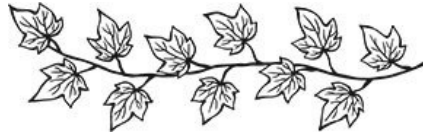
There isn't even a smidgen of hesitation in my answer. I lean in close and whisper, "That was an invitation, Mr. Wells."

His eyes light, voracious excitement swirling inside them.

Here in the candlelight with my unlikely groom, I realize, this path may be *off*, but I've always loved twisted fairy tales.

Gavin Wells might not be the hero of my story, but he may be my dark knight.

CHAPTER NINE



WELLS

That kiss was unexpected. Unexpected in the way she melted against my lips, opening her mouth to accept everything I offered, which was, admittedly, more than I'd planned on giving. But she gripped me as though I were feeding her an antidote to a poison and she needed to swallow every drop.

And her flavor.

She tasted like lemon Starbursts, which mingled with her always-enticing vanilla-raspberry aroma in the most delicious way. A deadly combination, considering my candy addiction. I have a feeling the woman standing before me—dazzling with her curls of fire adorning her slight shoulders—is my most dangerous assignment to date. Her bare pinkish-gold skin sparkles above her gown—shimmery black-and-white, smoky in parts, reminiscent of a thundercloud.

My Little Storm.

She's a vision, which I knew. Upon my first glimpse of her out here, so breathtakingly beautiful and facing this whole situation with such fierce bravery, I felt myself unraveling. Beethoven's "Für Elise" piped into the courtyard, amplifying the vanquishing swell in my chest. But until that kiss, I had confidence that I could fight this savage infatuation, which has infected me since the first day I laid eyes on her.

My cock is adamant that won't be happening.

She may have kissed me as though I had an antidote, but every encounter with her feels like being rolled in poison. True to her preferred name.

Poison Ivy. An itch that never lets up.

Exhaling, I drag my thumb across her lower lip, the one that so

desperately sucked on mine moments ago, the one she herself brushed before extending her *invitation*. Her sapphire eyes search my face, questioning, maybe wondering if I felt it too—the earth faltering on its axis with our connection. That thought rings so close to hope that I curse myself.

I don't hope. I make things happen. And I've got a fucking job to do. But, goddammit, she makes it hard to breathe.

“So beautiful, Little Storm.”

Her chin lifts, drawn to my touch like she can't resist it, and my stomach clenches for all the events leading to this one and all the ones that will guide us from here. So much she doesn't understand. I've never had a moment I wanted to freeze, to hold with my very life.

Until this.

And yet I can't.

“Thank you,” she whispers with the rise and fall of her chest, cleavage beseeching, imploring me to lick and nip and bite, marking and claiming what's mine.

I'll never be able to deny her tonight, but I don't tell her that now. Instead, I take her by the hand and lead us into the restaurant and bar Axel set up for us.

Ty informed me about her tears yesterday. She'd been so strong up to this point that it was bound to happen. But I wanted this night to be somewhat special, for her not to feel so alone. If we had dinner on the private terrace, like I had originally planned, with only my crew and the Noire family, Ivy may have felt like an outsider. The light crowd here offers her the illusion that she isn't locked away. And Ryker assured me the patrons are all vetted members, so I'm allowing it for this one evening.

For her.

Rena sits beside Ivy, talking her ear off at dinner, which I'm grateful for. It enables me to immerse myself in conversation with Axel, focusing on La Lune Noire business instead of mine. Unfortunately, it's more apparent by the minute that my thoughts are torn between my desire for my bride and my own work. Deciding it's best to take care of some business so I can focus clearly on us tonight, I shift toward Ivy. If I'm going to give in to my cravings, I want to do it with a clear head.

My fingers rake into her silky hair while I tether our gazes. “A glass of champagne to celebrate, but then I need to tend to an important phone call.”

“Oh, tonight?” Her disappointment chimes, sending a pang of guilt

through me.

This isn't me. It can't be. “Yes. Tonight. It can't wait.”

She accepts my flat answer without another word, but I see our magical moment fade into the night, and already, I want it back.

After a glass of champagne, my head isn't any clearer. Pulling her into my side by her thin waist, I lower my lips to her ear. “Time for me to go, Little Storm. Only one more glass of champagne, then switch to water.” I straighten to study her pretty face, seeing whether she's going to fight me on this. Her eyebrows pinch in confusion, so I explain, “Your invitation. I don't want you drunk tonight.”

Those gorgeous blues widen with eagerness, and I nearly haul her up to our suite at the sight.

“Only one more,” she confirms.

“Good girl, Ivy.” I kiss her forehead as her breath hitches with the praise. “I won't be long. Have fun.”

I alert the guys that I'm on my way out. They understand the need to be vigilant with Ivy in my absence, so I exit outside to the private terrace off the courtyard—not in use because I had reserved it—and pull out the burner phone I brought with me, in case.

I plug in the number and wait for him to answer.

Seconds later, he does with a gravelly, clipped, “Speak.”

“Change of plans,” I announce. “I'm married.”

He clears his throat, and I wait, allotting him the time to process all of the unspoken in my words. He grunts. “To *the* girl?”

“Yes.”

“How does that aid *me*?” he hisses, getting right to the point of all our interactions. The benefit to him or his family business.

“It's an added layer of insurance that she's in my possession. She's mine. We'll still be the ones producing what no one else can.”

He dithers there with a quiet murmur. “You did this for *her*?”

Fuck. I can already see which way this is going. Not so different than it did with Liam and Gage.

“It's complicated. But, yes.” I don't apologize. Ever. Which is why I don't lie either. It's a form of apology in essence.

“Love?” His tone is more benign than I would expect with that inquiry.

I don't think I'm capable of love. Power hungry doesn't leave much room for such frivolous emotion. But I'm indisputably a man obsessed. She gets

under my skin, into my thoughts, heating me with a mere glance. That's not what he asked though.

"No," I answer.

"If she is to take her place, your marriage will not protect her any greater. It would be an act of war to touch her either way." He pauses before adding, "And she won't be absolved of testing."

"All true. But it helps. I can be certain she won't fall into anyone else's hands. And after fighting for her position, it's in our best interest to ensure she succeeds in obtaining it. She'll also be doubly protected if she refuses it." I didn't need to admit the last reason, but he'd have sensed any lack of transparency, which would have only backfired.

"You're showing weakness," he scorns. "Cabrini's don't show weakness."

He may have helped me fight for her role, but the marriage blindsided him. It's a simple matter of changing his perspective. I need to convince him this union furthers his plans.

"I beg to differ, *Grandfather*. To be married to one of the most powerful women in the world, I'm showing *my* dominance. The Cabrini influence will be stretched to a second seat now."

The truth of that hits a chord, singing to his autocratic spirit. His timbre softens in spite of the threat he delivers. "She'll be loyalty tested now too."

Gritted teeth and suppressing a snarl. "I'm aware."

"Time frame to have her ready?"

As I note his change in direction, my confidence rises. "Two to three months."

"Good enough," he says curtly. "The seat is yours. I'll be in touch."

Hanging up the phone, I still, releasing a breath that's been held for half a decade. It worked. It fucking worked. I scrub a hand over my face, needing the scratch of the faint stubble to help me quell the victorious holler bubbling inside me.

It doesn't suffice. Since I'm alone, I pump my fist three times and whoop—a drawn-out huzzah, high-pitched and impassioned from years of toiling for this goal. The exultation stings the back of my eyes.

Christ, that felt good.

I smooth my hands over my suit, regaining my composure.

Striding back into the bar, I catch sight of the guys scattered among the Noire brothers and Ivy perched on a stool beside Rena at the bar. The crowd has thickened in the brief time I was gone, but it doesn't matter. I'll be

whisking the Little Storm back to our suite shortly.

Clearheaded. And so goddamn hungry.

I jerk my chin at Ty, who grabs Liam, Gage, and a couple of drinks, meeting me at the far end of the bar near the back exit, where we can speak freely.

Not wasting any time getting to the point, I begin as soon as they're before me. "Good news. One seat secured."

"Fuck," Gage spits while both Liam and Ty grin like the Cheshire cat. This has been a long time coming.

"It's, of course, contingent upon the actual delivery, but the marriage cinched it," I explain.

Ty chuckles, handing me a glass of scotch. "That's why you're in charge."

Liam rubs the scruff on his chin, no doubt itching to sneak outside for a triumphant smoke. "I'm not even going to fuck with you about your honeymoon night, Chief. You deserve to get your dick wet."

"How long do we have?" Gage asks, ignoring any mention of my personal involvement with Ivy.

"Two to three months to prepare her. She'll be loyalty tested due to the marriage, as expected, in addition to the rest."

"No concerns there?" Gage asks. It's one of the reasons she needs to crave the realness of this marriage, to believe in it. Since she's known me for eight days at this point, it's a valid question.

"None," Ty and I respond in unison, but I grant him the space to expound. "She gives what's given to her. She'll be fine in that respect. It's the acceptance of who she is that may be the issue."

"Agreed." I swig the last of my scotch. "We still have a lot of work ahead, but Liam was on the right track. You all deserve to celebrate. This win belongs to us all. It's been an intense five years, but the payoffs will be endless. So, enjoy your night, gentlemen. I have a bride to satisfy."

On that last word, my eyes float to Ivy, who still sits at the bar, a man beside her with his goddamn hand on her waist. She's trying to remove it, and Rena's stool is empty.

"The fuck?" I charge toward them, watching him tug her against his side while she gently nudges him away. Her passivity in this situation baffles me—so unlike my girl.

In a brief attempt to evaluate the situation and an extreme act of patience,

I halt behind her, barking my question at the asshole beside her, “Problem?”

“Nah, man. My girl’s a little drunk. Need to get her out of here,” he says, tugging on her waist again.

His girl? Motherfucker.

In less than three seconds, I scan the bar in front of them, noting the shot glasses, no other drink for him, her three-quarters-consumed glass of champagne, and most importantly, the precise distance of the asshole to the bar.

On the third second, I knock his arm off her by snapping the elbow backward, wedge myself between them, clutch the back of his head, and smash his face into the wooden bar top with a satisfying thwack. Blood gushes from his nose and mouth with a garbled shriek, but that is no longer my concern. Gage and Axel move in to take over while I throw Ivy over my shoulder. The tulle of her dress bunches and bristles against my heated cheek as I rush through the crowd toward our penthouse.

When we reach the elevator, she giggles, head still dangling at my mid-back. “You fucked that guy up. I probably shouldn’t think it was funny, but I didn’t like him at all.”

“Me neither, Little Storm.” I set her on her feet before me when we step inside, allowing her to melt into my chest, my heart pounding out in rage. “I’m not fond of your slurring either.”

Her speech pattern isn’t really that bad, but the thought of that asshole’s hands on her and her disobedience is infuriating.

“Sorry.” She pouts, ending our conversation, which is wise.

I’m so pissed off that I can barely see straight, my blood boiling. I told her not to drink. And where the hell was Rena? I send a text to Ty, telling him to check on her, right before we arrive at our suite.

We were all there, but so caught up in our celebration, not one of us had eyes on her.

Fuck.

She clings to me as we meander through the living space, dragging me with purpose toward my room. Wordlessly, I follow along, intrigued by where her drunken thoughts will take her while also trying to regroup. My rage can wait. The fucker isn’t going anywhere.

Once inside my bedroom, I shrug off my suit jacket, and her hands sail up to my jaw, fingertips skimming my stubble, thirsty eyes frolicking all over my face.

“Thought we’d stay in here tonight.” She spins, facing away from me, kicking off her heels and dropping four inches. “I need help out of this.”

I wrap my arms around her, resting my chin on her head. Indecisive. This isn’t the clearheaded honeymoon night I wanted for either of us. But, *Christ*, she smells divine.

Sweeping her hair to drape over one shoulder, I unzip her wedding dress, catching a glimpse of white lace lingerie as a quiet whimper escapes her.

My sentiments exactly, Little Storm.

I press my lips against her neck with gentle kisses and nips. “What was that sexy little whimper for?”

She tilts her neck in a subtle invitation for more. “Been waiting for my wedding night.” The words are clumsy, surely heading toward an unintelligible slur as the alcohol sets in, but her reaching behind herself to graze my cock is an abundantly clear message.

I move her hand, unfastening the buttons—a painstakingly slow process—and ruck the dress down her small form, revealing shimmery peaches-and-cream skin, perky tits spilling out of her strapless bra, and a round, plump ass on display beyond her bridal thong.

A fucking goddess before me.

Snaking my arm around her bare waist, I remove my tie and push to see how far she’s willing to take this. “Is that right? What exactly did you have in mind for *our* wedding night?”

“Hoping to ... come,” she whispers, which garners a chuckle from me. Bold little thing. Drunk but bold nonetheless.

Scooping her up, I throw her onto the bed. She squeals in surprise, and before she can catch her breath, I climb in after her, pull her panties to the side, and glide my fingers down her sweet, freshly shaven cunt while I hover over her. “So wet for me, Little Storm.”

“Mmhmm. For you,” she purrs, and something feral inside me kicks in. Something I need to tamp down. *For now.*

My fingers circle over her clit as she arches and writhes, moaning as she grows closer to climax. So quick. I smack her wet pussy, and she lets out a yelp.

“Wells,” she groans.

“You disobeyed me, Ivanna. Did you really think I’d carry you back here and make you come?”

“Shouldn’t have expected anything from you. None of this is how it was

supposed to be.” She’s trying to be indignant, but there’s a sadness threading those words that chokes me.

I crawl toward the headboard and prop myself against it, sliding her up between my legs, her back to my chest. “What isn’t?”

“This.” She flaps her hand between us. “You. Me. I was gonna be in love. Gonna make my mom and dad proud. He’d give me away. She’d cry. I’d finally lose my virginity to a man who couldn’t bear to live or breathe without me. Magical. You won’t even keep touching me.”

My chest tightens. “You keep talking, and I’ll keep touching.”

“ ’Kay,” she hums as I start stroking and dip one finger inside her. The smell of her arousal, mixing with her delicious vanilla-raspberry fragrance, has my cock jerking against her lower back. She croons a sultry little whine, so I check her eyes and find them slowly losing focus.

“Stay with me, Ivy. Have you ever been touched? Has someone finger-fucked you?”

She’s so innocent. Mine to find. Mine to protect.

Mine to shatter.

Mine.

“Yes ... no.”

I smack her pussy once more, causing her to cry out. “Let’s try that again. Which is it?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

My molars grind at the thought, rage filling me again. “Names? I’m going to need the name of anyone who’s touched you.”

“Don’t wanna talk about him when your fingers are inside me.”

So, just one. One too many, but manageable. It’s not the guy she bit. He never got that far and didn’t live to touch anyone else. Fucking rapist. My feisty girl was a force he hadn’t been prepared to go up against.

“Fair enough. We’ll come back to that later.” I plunge my finger inside her, adding a second and drawing out the most erotic gasp from her. She’s so goddamn tight, but I focus on talking. “Why did you wait for your wedding night, Ives?”

“I ... wanted to wait until I was with someone who ...” Another whimper as she inches closer to her climax.

“Someone who what?”

She ignores me as she edges toward the precipice, so I smack her pretty pink cunt again, causing her to scream out in exasperation rather than

discomfort. Her body seems roused by the smacks actually, ignited by the stings. My virgin girl enjoys pain with her pleasure. It's the sudden halt of friction infuriating her.

“Ugh. You're the worst, Wells. *Please.*”

Leaning down, I nuzzle my lips to her ear. “Please *what*, Little Storm?”

“Let me come,” she begs—a sight and sound forever imprinted on me.

Jesus.

Ghosting my fingers over her sopping panties that sprang back into place, I tease her into compliance. “Answer me then. What were you waiting for?”

She sighs. “For someone who ... don't know ... I've never had anyone make me feel both safe and excited, except some mystery guy in a mask.”

Interesting.

A sharp cackle spills out of her. “It's so stupid when I say it out loud. Might as well tell you I fantasize of being tied up and choked and all kinds of other stuff that make me completely messed up.”

Fuck, she's making this difficult. I'm frozen with that salacious image tormenting me, balls tightening, cock irate at being caged behind my zipper.

“No, baby. You're not messed up. Not at all. *You're fucking perfect.* But let's not talk about fantasies right now.” My fingers start moving beneath her wet thong again, slowly massaging and thrusting inside her, as I will myself to be content with just this. I'm not going to fuck her while she's drunk. “Good girl, answering. Tonight could've been so much fun if you'd simply done as you were told.”

Her head rolls against my chest with a groan. “What didn't I do?”

Having her here like this—nearly naked, hungry, in my arms—like I've envisioned a thousand times, is a culmination of unfathomable patience and restraint. And yet, instead of me reaping the reward, I see her on the verge of passing out.

My jaw clicks. “I told you not to get drunk, Ivanna. This might not have been everything you wanted, but I wanted to give you—I had planned on tonight—”

“I didn't drink.”

Another smack to her weeping heat. “You're *clearly* drunk.”

She throws her fist into my thigh with a grunt, her bony knuckles stabbing my muscle with a sharp jab. “Only had a *half* glass of champagne after you left me. *Alone.* On our *wedding* night. A real husband wouldn't ... and now, you're torturing me. But I get it. I don't mean anything to—”

“The glass was closer to three-quarters empty, but that champagne flute was your only drink?” My every muscle tenses, lungs heavy, stomach burning.

“Yep,” she hisses through gritted teeth. She hums, glancing up at me with a furrowed brow. “Maybe I didn’t eat enough. I do feel weird.”

I start touching her again, softening my tone. “One more question, and I’ll let you come, Ives. Do you remember anything that guy said to you?”

“Said *you* were stupid.” She breaks into giggles. “For not being with me. But he made me feel icky. Was so creepy. Said I reminded him of someone.”

Sickening worry and fury course through my veins. “Did he say who?”

“No, but you said no more questions, Wells.” She arches her back, pushing into my hand to increase the friction.

“Okay, Little Storm. Okay. You did so good. Such a good girl.” I plant a kiss in her hair and pick up my pace, spreading her juices and swirling over her clit in a steady rhythm.

Within a minute, she’s coming undone beneath me, clenching around my fingers, whole body quivering. A goddamn dream. The urge to taste her is nearly killing me, but I’m fairly certain that one taste of Ivy, and I won’t do what needs done. I’d shut us in here for weeks.

I lift my fingers to her mouth. “Clean yourself off me.”

She complies, licking and sucking with a moan, and my cock grows painfully hard.

As she settles from the aftershocks, I snuggle her closer and take my phone from my pocket, sending an instructive group text to Ty, Liam, and Gage.

Me: He roofied her. Ty, bring Landry up here to examine her. Gage, tell Axel I want to handle the guy myself.

Obviously on high alert after I bashed the guy’s face in, only seconds pass before their responses ping, one after another.

Graves: Motherfucker! I want a piece. I’ll meet you in counting room two.

Big Guy: Axel is excited you’ll be joining us. We’ve prepped the bastard.

Ty: On my way to find Landry. Should be

to you in twenty. Rena's fine. She stepped away to take a call. She feels terrible.

Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I dust my thumb over her freckles. "Hey, Little Storm."

She nestles into my chest with a purr while I string my fingers through her hair.

"You need to stay awake for me," I tell her.

Her hooded eyes land on mine. "Not sure I can. You made me so relaxed." The sexiest dazed smile leaks across her cheeks.

"I'm glad you're relaxed, baby, but let's keep chatting until the doctor gets here." Lifting her into my arms so she's lying across my lap, I cradle her and attempt to keep her talking. "I know today wasn't everything you wanted. I tried with the quotes and the cake, but ... I lost sight. *Fuck*, I'm sorry."

I guess there's a first time for everything. Ivy seems to author those for me—unabated infatuation and *apologies*.

She forces her heavy eyes open, bracing her hands on my shoulders and crawling up my body until she's straddling my lap. "Why are you sorry? I loved it ... was like a fairy tale."

Hooking her arms around my neck, she presses her lips to mine, executing a sloppier version of the earth-moving kiss from earlier. Relenting, I weave my fingers through the strings of her thong as I tangle my tongue with hers—another apology she won't remember. Heat builds at the base of my spine—an urge to have all of her. Here. Now. In dozens of obscene ways. But I separate us. I have a job to do.

"I was supposed to protect you. I should've stayed."

"You should've stayed," she agrees, unsnapping her bra, her magnificent tits bouncing free.

Fuck me.

She may have had help to fill them in, but these glorious teardrop breasts are all Ivy. So pretty.

"Had to get out of that," she explains, followed by a bemused, "I missed you." Her hazy blue beauties caper over my face, no feisty pretense in sight. "Weird, right?"

I shift my attention between guileless eyes, her luscious lips, and the pebbled pink nipples staring me down. The nipples win. I lift her breast,

pulling her into my mouth and sucking with a shared groan before answering. The knowledge that she won't remember most of this is liberating. "Not weird. I miss you all the time, Little Storm." *Truth.*

She gasps, her eyes brimming with some unspoken emotion. "You do?"

I nod, murmuring, "Always," before my tongue swirls the neglected nipple, my teeth issuing a nip that has her moaning. *Jesus*, every part of her tastes heavenly.

As if she can read my mind, she lowers her hand into her sopping panties, delivering her glistening, cum-coated fingers to my lips a moment later.

Christ, she's a pornographic fantasy.

Too tempting.

I devour her arousal with a growl, our gazes locked, hearts pounding in tandem. "Better than fucking candy, Ivy."

She brightens. My girl has a definite praise kink, among various others, from what she revealed. But Ty will be here any minute, so I'll have to explore those another time.

"I need to dress you," I say, moving her off my lap and snatching one of my T-shirts and a pair of boxers from the dresser.

"That's it?" she whines as I pull the shirt over her head, her tiny frame drowning inside it.

I help her switch out her panties for my rolled boxers next, pocketing the sopping lace thong. She won't be getting that back. Her hair is a mess, her cherry-red-painted lips now swollen from kissing, and her once-smoky makeup is smudged. Her silky-smooth legs peek out from under my shirt, nipples poking through the cotton. I've never seen anything so gorgeous. She's ravishing. I want her like this, always. My enchanting wreck.

"For tonight," I reply. "The doctor is coming to look at you, and then Ty will stay with you."

She swallows, and her face droops. "I want you."

Fuck.

She's only saying that because her inhibitions are so low, but it's piercing me all the same. Fucking with my goddamn mind. I love her smart mouth, but those words from her—*I want you*—were once a pipe dream.

My fingers dive into my hair while I soak in her downcast face. I cup her chin, pecking her forehead. "I want you too. But not tonight."

The finality in my delivery leaves no room to argue, and a knock sounds a beat later.

Opening the door, I find Ty and Dr. Landry, the discreet physician the Noire brothers use for delicate situations.

I don't waste time on pleasantries. "She's been talking, slurring, but capable of carrying on a conversation. She says she only drank half a glass of champagne. It was actually slightly below the halfway mark, closer to three-quarters, but she probably didn't consume all that was intended."

"How long ago was this?" Landry asks.

Fuck if I know. She's had me in a time warp.

Ty speaks up. "Around an hour."

"Okay, I'll examine her. She shouldn't experience any worsening symptoms at this point. Fifteen to twenty minutes is generally the time at which these types of drugs take effect. Although, tomorrow, she'll experience a hangover of sorts—spotty memory, headache, possible stomachache, or even anxiety. Feel free to reach out if you have any concerns."

"Will do," I say, masking my distress. "Thank you."

Leaving her like this feels wrong, but I also need answers.

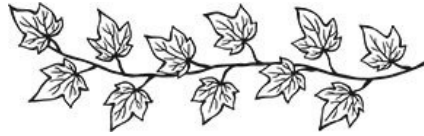
Ty notices my struggle and nudges me to the side of the room while Landry speaks to Ivy. "Go," he says. "She looks okay. I'm sure she'll just go to sleep, but I'll call you if anything changes."

"Don't leave her side," I order.

"I won't," he confirms. "I've got her."

I sigh, reluctant, but leave her with Ty, so I can focus on the bigger picture of keeping her safe. It looks like that task might not be as straightforward as we'd hoped. Married to me or not, even in our care, Ivanna Kingston is the most wanted woman in the world.

CHAPTER TEN



WELLS

All I've been thinking about since we arrived in New Orleans is her—her tears, her father's illness, Celeste's and her mother's absence, her love of books, and her hope for more.

Her infectious laugh and sassy tongue.

The way her eyes change from cerulean, to sapphire, to a tropical ocean blue, depending on the sun and her clothes and her mood.

The swell of her perky tits and the slight curve of her narrow hips.

That kiss and the invitation to have all of her.

Ivy.

And, *fuck*, the way she tastes and moves and whimpers.

Christ, I'm a fucking mess.

The need to shield her and prepare her for what's to come should be my primary focus—my only goddamn focus. Instead, I was consumed with giving her everything I could for this one day.

That isn't something we do for those under our protection. We don't concern ourselves with their emotions or losses. Feelings are a luxury we don't invest in—a sacrifice that keeps our clients alive. That's what makes us the best. Because we don't make mistakes. Tears don't compel us to take unnecessary risks.

But hearing that she broke down broke something in me.

And I nearly lost her because of it.

Jesus, fuck, I almost lost her.

That thought wrecks me, and I hate it. I don't recognize this version of myself—the one who is distracted and conflicted, who loses focus. The one whose pulse is thundering—not because I'm hopped up on adrenaline, ready

to gut an asshole for answers. No. After leaving her sad and yearning and drugged, smelling of sex and summertime, I'm the one being gutted.

I'm not the man who gets fucked up from a girl.

Except I am. I've been changing the damn rules ever since I laid eyes on her nearly five years ago.

And I knew it then.

Three weeks—twenty-one days of learning her schedule, her every move, her mannerisms. She's easy to watch. I've also been desperately trying to find out who else is after this almost-eighteen-year-old and why.

The rabbit holes in this case are deep and riddled with secrets that tunnel on through to the next. A never-ending labyrinth. It's why I've decided to meet with her father—a risk, alerting him to the danger, but the bloody corpse of the girl from a month ago haunts me. I'm by no means a selfless hero, but I can't turn this innocent girl over to be slaughtered. No matter the payoff.

I also won't walk away.

In our ten months of erasing and tracking down those who have been "missing," no case has been this convoluted or this lucrative. Completing this job is only the beginning for my team. I won't let anyone fuck with that.

The secretary waves me back. It's a highfalutin office building, far surpassing what most physicians boast, sleek and modern yet warm with a whiff of leather. Priceless art embellishes the walls. Everything screams class and wealth. I expected as much. Being one of the world's most-sought-after neurosurgeons will do that. He's put Ohio hospitals on the map.

She opens the door, allowing me to pass by her into his office. Floor-to-ceiling windows bathe the space in a bright golden glow.

As soon as his chin lifts, I smile.

"Dr. Kingston, thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

He stands, walks around his desk, and holds out his hand for a firm shake while his eyes plant boldly on mine. "My pleasure, Mr. Wells." He gestures to the seat in front of his desk. "Would you like a drink? Scotch?"

He opens a cabinet, showing he has several bottles of liquor to choose from. I've always preferred scotch though, so I accept, and he pours us each a glass of Macallan 18 on the rocks, taking his seat across from me and waiting. That small gesture—the confidence in merely eyeing me until I come out with my reasoning for seeking him out—instantly ignites my respect for

him.

Swigging the Macallan, I'm impressed. It's smoother than the scotch I'm accustomed to. "I'll get right to it, Dr. Kingston. I'm here regarding your daughter."

He sips his scotch with a subtle nod. "I see. Go on."

"I'm not sure if you're aware, but there are various people searching for her."

"I'm aware," he says, giving nothing else away.

Interesting. I expected the man to be terrified with that admission and therefore cooperative to whatever I suggested. Instead, he's unflappable, as if we were discussing her extracurricular activities, not the fact that she's being actively pursued by hit men. Maybe I need a different approach.

"Are you aware of the reason?" I ask that in part because I'm not entirely sure. We were told one thing when given this assignment. The initial motive offered checked out, but it's clear there's more to it. That much was evident once the girl, Gemma, was killed.

He hums. "Are you, Mr. Wells?"

"Partially," I admit. "We realize it goes deeper than what we've uncovered. We are confident that we're the only team to have her location at this time, and we don't intend to bring any harm to her. Our orders are to keep her safe and deliver her unscathed, but we came across another team who was hired to shoot to kill. My research, thus far, shows they aren't the only ones."

He drags his hand over his mouth. "I expected as much. Thank you for bringing it to my attention." His tone is dismissive, as though that concludes our meeting.

A disbelieving chuckle escapes me. This entire interaction is odd. "With all due respect, sir, I am not only bringing it to your attention. I have a job to do."

"Of course you do." His lips curl into a wry smirk. "But my daughter has been hunted for eighteen years. You don't actually believe I'm simply going to hand her over to you?"

I suppose not, but he's mistaken if he thinks he's calling the shots here. This isn't a negotiation. It's a courtesy—one my team wouldn't agree with, but one I couldn't seem to negate after observing the fascinating redhead for weeks. You might say I'm mildly infatuated in spite of how young she is.

"May I ask why she's being hunted and why you're living in Ohio like a

sitting duck?”

He leans forward, arms resting on the desk with an air of ease. “My wife and I wanted Ivanna to have the most normal upbringing possible. Running and looking over her shoulder was not the answer. It seems your mother may know something about that.”

My chest tightens. What in the fuck? “My mother?”

“After almost two decades of hiding my daughter in plain sight, it should be obvious I don’t lack resources. Some might even say I have the best in the world. When you scheduled your meeting with me, I conducted my own investigation on you. It was challenging since you had poofed into existence yourself, but perseverance pays off. I know who your family is, Mr. Wells.”

My mother spent her entire adult life on the run, hiding from who she was after falling in love with my father—an “unsuitable” man who adored her. She was barely eighteen herself when they met. We moved at least ten times before they died when I was sixteen.

But the trail to that information is nonexistent. How the fuck did he find out?

I clear my throat, swishing the last sip of my drink around the glass. “I can certainly respect a man who both protects his family and goes to the lengths necessary to vet someone asking to meet with him. What exactly do you know about my mother?”

“Your family and the reason my daughter is being hunted are linked. I think we may be able to help each other out.”

Fuck.

What the hell does that even mean? Who the fuck is this guy?

This isn’t how I intended this to go, and yet I’m intrigued.

“I didn’t come here to strike a deal, Dr. Kingston. I came as a courtesy, so you’d know your daughter is being extracted by a team who intends to keep her safe.”

Because my mother, who believed I shared similar cutthroat qualities with her family, made me promise that if I ever turned into a monster—like she believed her father was—I’d have a heart.

A monster with a heart—whatever the hell that means.

“Suit yourself,” he says, “but my daughter will be erased from existence before our meeting concludes, so the way I see it, we work together, trust each other, or we both lose.” His eyes aren’t smug with that statement; they hold something more like disappointment—the smallest glimpse of the world

he's been desperately trying to spin.

I reach for my phone, thinking I should check on our surveillance, but Dr. Kingston raises his hand.

"There's nothing to see, son. She's already gone. You work with me, and she returns."

There's a single text from Gage, confirming Dr. Kingston's promise.

Big Guy: Lost the mark. She just fucking disappeared.

Motherfucker.

I'm used to being the one with the upper hand in my dealings, but I see now I have more to learn.

My fingers fist in my lap. "I'm listening."

"Your crew is far superior to the one I've had guarding Ivanna. The incompetent morons didn't even detect you until last week. I'm guessing you've been around quite a bit longer." His jaw tenses with disdain. "I don't want to uproot her, so I'll need to strengthen her security. I'd like you to stay close by and keep her hidden."

While he isn't pleading, as I expected, and he's certainly more thorough and prepared than I would have ever anticipated, this I saw coming—offering a deal.

"Why would I do that? It would be in direct opposition to my orders."

"Perhaps. But I'm guessing there isn't a time frame for your orders." There isn't, but I don't respond, so at my silence, he nods and continues, "There's no time frame because they've been looking for eighteen years and they haven't found her. I have extensive information to provide you, which will drastically enhance your negotiating power when you finally do hand her over."

He wants to help me negotiate for delivering his daughter? That I didn't expect.

"You'll eventually hand her over willingly?" I keep all shock out of my voice, not letting on how off-kilter he has me.

He steeples his hands, scrutinizing me for a moment. "Yes. I believe Ivanna is exactly who Mr. O'Reilly hopes she'll be."

Jesus Christ. This guy is connected. Mr. O'Reilly is my client, but I'm not going to confirm that.

"And waiting benefits me how exactly?" I ask firmly.

“What’s the current price on her?” He quirks an eyebrow sardonically, plainly convinced money will solve everything. It could.

“Fourteen million.”

He smiles knowingly. It seems that information is old news to the doctor. “You’ll be able to request at least twenty when we’re through. And I’ll pay you ten to keep her safe and hidden for her college years.”

Seriously? She’s only midway through her senior year in high school.

My pulse thumps in my ears and wrists and temples, like a time bomb about to detonate. “College? She won’t be finished until four and a half years from now.”

“Yes. And at that time, I will personally help transition her. She’ll walk into your custody of her own accord, ready to assume her role. Your client will be in awe of your prowess.”

Thirty fucking million.

“There’s more, Mr. Wells. I know who you are, and while you might not know what you’re capable of inheriting, I can show you a gold mine. The thirty million will be chump change, but you’ll need to prove you can put my daughter first.”

What the hell? He must be referring to my grandfather’s organization. My grandfather doesn’t know who I am, but I’m aware of who he is, and while I’m not certain of the family’s inner workings or how far his influence stretches, I know he’s powerful. But I won’t be anyone’s yes man.

I think Dr. Kingston knows that though. And my extended family has nothing to do with Ivanna. No, there’s a bigger prize here—something that makes thirty million chump change.

Ten million to keep her safe and the promise of far more. Plus, the bonus of a guilt-free conscience. It’s a no-brainer. I’m certain the seven and a half million apiece will be enough to entice my guys, not to mention all the other jobs we can complete in that time. We’ve been doing well for ourselves, but this is next level.

I study the picture of Ivanna on his desk. She’s gorgeous—freckled cheeks, button nose, big blue eyes, and ginger hair. Even in a photograph, there’s something so dynamic about her. So captivating. Like she has something spectacular brewing beneath the surface, a quality she tries to hide. I sigh, knowing I was lost to this deal before I ever walked through his door. How could I not sign on to watch her when taking my eyes off her is painful?

“You have a deal, Dr. Kingston.”

He stands, buttons his suit jacket, and saunters toward me to shake my hand again as I rise and fasten my own jacket. “Glad to hear it, Mr. Wells. Ivanna will be hosting her eighteenth birthday party this weekend. Security will need to be tight. My secretary will send over the details and the contract for our agreement.”

“Very well. I’ll be in touch.” I make my way toward the door, Dr. Kingston matching my steps. He stops, his hand on the doorknob.

“What led you to her?” he asks, and for the first time, I see fear mar his features.

“A ruby necklace—serial number,” I offer, watching to see if it means anything to him.

His brow line wrinkles. “It was lost. How?”

“Gemma Frost had it from Camp Hideaway. She recently decided to have it appraised.”

“Goddammit,” he hisses. “And Gemma is—”

“Dead,” I say, confirming what he already suspected.

His eyes close briefly on a sharp inhale, but with that small breath, he screams pain and regret. Dr. Kingston is a man who will garner my respect—brilliant, cunning, and clearly has a heart. My mother would’ve liked him.

And his daughter—I guess she’ll double as my most important job and my new obsession. Not that he needs to know the latter.

That memory plagues me all the way to counting room two. Hypnotically. The rush to get here is a blur. I pause to lean against the wall, my lungs burning. This is fear. I don’t do fear. I lead. I control. I fix. I conquer. Whatever she’s fucking doing to me needs to morph into rage so I can eradicate this mess and close the goddamn deal.

The fucking bastard tried to take her from me.

He drugged her and put his hands on her.

He robbed me of fucking my bride.

He needs to suffer.

I punch in the code and swing open the door to find Axel, Ryker, Liam, and Gage playing cards at a round table while our guest slumps in a chair—bound, bloody, and gagged—in the middle of the room. They’ve already had some fun with him beyond the broken arm and nose he received upstairs.

The door slams and latches behind me with an echo. Since that

disturbance announces my arrival, I don't bother with greetings. I snick open my Benchmade Infidel switchblade, stalk toward the fucker who dared to touch Ivy, and slice off his ear.

Blood gushes and spurts, but his screams are muffled by the duct tape gagging him.

I flip the severed lobe in my hand and toss it to Gage. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

He chuckles, catching it and throwing it into the money pot with a quippy, "I'll raise you an ear," before turning back to me. "Thanks, boss. Fuck, I love it when you play."

"It's like a scene out of *Reservoir Dogs*. Dance for us, Chief," Liam taunts, pulling an appreciative grin from me with the reference.

The guy is still screaming when Axel catches my annoyed eye roll and commiserates. "Larry here is a bitch, Wells. Might as well pull up a chair."

"Never gonna happen," Gage informs. "Wells has little patience for this shit."

With a clenched jaw, I grunt. "What Gage said is true, Larry. I'm impatient, so now that I have your attention, you need to give me answers."

I rip off the tape and endure the sixty agonizing seconds of whining until he quiets to mere sputtering groans. "There we go. Now, Larry, let's start with a simple one. You were interested in *my bride*. Why?"

"Look, man. I already fucking told them." He spits blood and gathers his breath, one eye so bruised and swollen that it's a mere slit, entreating me. "She didn't look like a bride in that black-and-white gown. I thought she was hot. That's it."

"Fucking up that simple question takes a certain level of stupidity, Larry." I stab my knife into his shoulder joint and twist while he wails. Removing it, I wipe the blade on my suit pants. They're already soiled with the guy's blood. "Now, shall we try that again? *Why* were you interested in my bride?"

Larry coughs and cries. Jesus, I fucking hate sniveling sissies. They sign up to be part of the big leagues but can't handle pain.

He composes himself—*finally*. "I saw something a week ago—no, closer to two, maybe—on the dark web. Only up for a minute. Some match to one of those ancestry tests. Said she was the daughter of Eleanor Healy and some guy named O'Reilly. I went to school with Eleanor, so when I saw your girl, I thought she might be her daughter. Looks a lot like her."

I shoot a look at Liam, who jerks his chin and growls, "Thirty-seven

seconds.” He’s confirming how long the results of the ancestry test were posted.

The O’Reilly bloodline was flagged in an effort to find my girl. While we took her results down immediately, we knew there was a good chance others had made the connection—that’s why we extracted her.

“I erased it,” Liam continues, “but that doesn’t account for every person who saw it.”

Thankfully, my Little Storm is smart and has been trained well. She never offers her personal information, so she used an alias and listed Celeste’s home address and an email that had zero connection to her. That was still enough to wreak havoc, but it bought us time to get her out in a way that was less alarming. Gage intercepted two men near Celeste’s, but in order to keep the family safe, he had to take them out before retrieving information.

I turn back to Larry. “So, you wanted to, what, say hello to your high school chum’s daughter?”

He swallows. “Yeah.”

Circling him, I pace myself. While I don’t enjoy torture like Gage does because I have better ways of spending my time, I do find the art of being a step ahead invigorating. “You been in touch with Eleanor lately, Larry?”

“I asked around—Facebook and old friends.” His breathing evens out, confidence returning. “No one’s heard from her in over twenty years.”

Stopping in front of him, I smile. “Exactly. Which is precisely why Eleanor wasn’t mentioned on that ancestry test. There’s no DNA on her. Half-truths piss me the fuck off, Larry.” Strolling over to the supply cabinet, I pocket a couple of zip ties, return to the liar, and tighten one above the elbow I *didn’t* break upstairs. Equal opportunity torture for the win.

He stammers, drool dripping down his chin, “What ... what the fuck are you doing?”

“Don’t want you bleeding out ... yet,” I tell him as I step back to the cabinet to retrieve the cordless reciprocating saw.

He yowls as I turn it on, but the roaring whir of the Sawzall dampens it, so I don’t bother replacing his gag. Lowering it to his left wrist, which is bound to the arm of the chair, I chop it clean off like a tree branch. Blood spouts and sloshes, dousing my shirt and pants and spilling to the floor. Chunks of his flesh and muscle are stuck in the blade. That’ll be a bitch to clean.

The shrieking is nearly more than I can tolerate, so once I’m finished,

Liam hands me a scotch while Ryker chuckles beside him.

“It’s a nice change of pace to be the spectator,” he says, obviously enjoying the show. None of that ease trickles over to me. We may be getting somewhere, but I need more.

When the bawling lessens, I set down my scotch and join Larry, who is now covered in his own piss and vomit. “So, now that we’ve established you didn’t roffie my girl because she resembled your long-lost high school friend, who you’d happened to read about on the dark web, who do you work for?”

“Myself. I work alone, man.”

Douchebag.

“Here’s how this is going to work. I’m going to kill you, Larry. You touched what’s mine, so the sentence for that is death. Plain and simple. But I *can* be persuaded to make it less painful if you cooperate. Or I can gouge out your eyes, slice off your dick, and force you to choke on them. The choice is yours.”

Realization hits him. He chose the wrong path in life, and it ends here. That flicker of understanding generally leads to cooperation. Larry spits more blood and takes a breath. Sweat drips down his chalky face, and his body convulses, but he’s still with me.

To be sure, I reinforce his need to be forthright. “Whoever you are protecting, I can assure you, will not mourn your death, so it isn’t worth your loyalty. Let’s make this quick and therefore less torturous, Larry. Who do you work for?”

“I’m independent, like I said. It was a hit. You complete it. You get paid. That’s it.”

Fuck. “Fine. And your reference to Eleanor?”

“I really did attend high school with her,” he insists, but at my narrowed gaze, he continues, “She was mentioned in the hit, and your girl looks a lot like her.”

There is a strong resemblance.

“How did you know she was here?” I prod, flicking my knife open and shut while Larry’s eyes follow the movement.

“Coincidence. I swear. I was here with a buddy. When I saw her, I asked where she was from. She wouldn’t tell me anything, but when her friend blurted out Ohio, I took a chance.”

“That checks out,” Axel adds, face in a scowl, probably due to his sister’s

slipup.

“Amount for the hit?” I bark.

“Fifteen million,” he says, his color draining.

That’s more than I last heard. They’re growing more desperate, realizing how close she is to taking what’s hers. Motherfuckers.

“And *who* is offering the money for the hit?” I ask, hope coursing through me that we can get to the root of this once and for all. But I know deep down, my Little Storm will always be battling fatal squalls.

“Someone named Mordred,” he divulges, nearly passing out. “That’s all I know.”

Believing his final statement, I keep good on my promise, and instead of cutting the zip tie so he bleeds out, I pull out my Nighthawk Custom 1911 pistol and shoot him between the eyes.

Gage doesn’t wait for an order, knowing full well I’ll have my work cut out for me, digging into this. He slides his chair back with a screech and stands. “I’ll take care of disposal.”

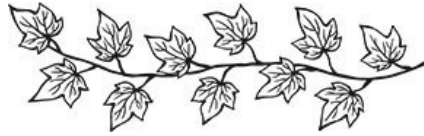
Ryker slaps him on the back. “I’ll go with.”

“Good,” I say, striding to the table and downing the finger’s worth of scotch left in my glass. “Liam, you’re with me until you relieve Ty in the morning.”

“Mordred?” Axel asks, to which Liam and Gage arch their brows, wondering how much I’ll volunteer. Not much. But I need his ears open to certain organizations. One thing the Noire brothers have access to are secrets. Things shared in the shadows.

I nod. “He’s connected to KORT.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



IVY

My head pounds through my third cup of coffee. I'm not sure what happened last night. I don't remember drinking much, but I remember feeling drunk.

Images of kissing and touching and being held by Wells flit through my mind, hovering just out of reach.

Wishes in the wind.

Waking up in Wells's bed, wearing his T-shirt and boxers—which smelled of citrus and fresh-cut wood—should have been a clear enough sign. But it was muddied because he was nowhere to be found, and Ty was sprawled out in the leather chair, watching something on his phone.

Ty hasn't said anything about what happened or where anyone else is. He asked how I was feeling, gave me some medicine with a veggie omelet, hash browns, and toast but told me I should talk to Wells when he returns. I would nag Ty about it, but he seems stressed and exhausted.

It's not that I expected this to be a romantic, stay-in-bed-all-day, can't-get-enough-of-each-other experience. This marriage wasn't supposed to be real—not in the way of sex and feelings. Hope has no jurisdiction here.

But that wedding kiss. *Sweet Jesus.*

He had to feel something, right? This spark can't be one-sided. But he wouldn't have left if he had, so that's my answer.

Liam swaggers into the suite, winks at me, and saunters to his room, adding new thoughts to my downward spiral. Looks like all the guys stayed out all night, except Ty. Maybe that's why he's upset. They stuck him on babysitting duty while they partied.

Rena mentioned a secret club downstairs that she's not allowed in, called

Magie Noire, which means black magic. Sounds like a sex club to me. Maybe that's where they all were. That thought has this chicory coffee singeing my throat like battery acid.

A shirtless Liam struts back out, jeans low on his hips, drying his hair with a towel. He's so *pretty*—golden skin and corded muscles. Tattoos lining his taut upper chest, arms, and back. He catches my gaze and smiles before walking over to Ty and smacking his shoulder. “Go shower, bro. Get an hour of shut-eye too. I've got Ivy.”

Ty nods. “Thanks, man.” Jumping up, he ambles to the kitchen, stopping by me on his way to his room. “I'll see you this afternoon, Freckles. Pool and dinner with Rena.”

“Sounds good.” I frown, leaning in for a hug. “Sorry you had to stay with me all night. Get some rest.”

He palms my head, his face filling with what looks like sorrow.

What the hell is going on?

“I was exactly where I wanted to be,” he says with a soft smile before wandering to his room.

Liam's voice cuts through the heaviness with a hint of excitement. “Go throw on jeans and a T-shirt. We're going out.”

My face lights up, but I don't ask any questions. I dart to my room, dress in my vintage Aerosmith T-shirt and ripped jean capris, dab on some lip gloss and mascara, and meet a fully dressed Liam in the living room.

“Well done, High Society. Blending in is the name of the game today. Got it?” He twirls my ponytail up onto my head and shimmies a ball cap over it.

“Okay.” I peer up at him from under the bill. “Who am I blending in with like this?”

“Sunglasses?” he asks, plowing past my inquiry.

I hurry to my room to retrieve them and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair is practically nonexistent. “I look ridiculous,” I say, returning to him.

He shakes his head. “You look perfect. We're blending in with the masses today. Can't be too careful.”

“Aren't you guys the ones with the dangerous business? Why am I the one in disguise?”

He chuckles. “You've been spotted with Wells. There's a target on your back. And right now, we're hiding from the people who know you.”

His index finger moves to his lips in a *shh* gesture as I silently clap. I'm not sure where we're going, but it feels like a prison break.

He tugs me into his side, instructs me to leave my phone, and ushers me out of the suite and through some back exit of the hotel, where a car is waiting. The driver drops us off on Bourbon Street, where Liam keeps one hand protectively around my waist and the other on the concealed gun on his hip.

It's Monday, late morning, so the street is quiet. But the lack of people doesn't hide the eccentricities of the city—the businesses are historical row houses with wrought iron balconies and heavy two-hundred-year-old doors. Some are brick, and others are painted in blues and greens and pinks. Live music streams from various restaurants as we pass, but Liam assures me we're headed to the most iconic one, so we keep on.

"I've never walked through a city," I say. "The streets smell like pot, urine, and sausage."

"Well, that's fucking perceptive." He grins. "Homeless people piss in the streets in cities, among other things. Never been to a city? I forget sometimes ..."

"Forget what?"

He swallows, an unusual glimmer of discomfort passing through his eyes. "Sometimes, you don't seem like such a princess—that's all."

"Makes sense. Sometimes, you don't seem like such a jackass."

"Cute," he snipes.

"But," I continue as he maneuvers me past a group of drunken tourists, adorned in beads and slurping tall, frothy beverages, "if you're referring to my lack of experiences, that's because my father was *almost* as paranoid as Wells. Crowds were a hard *no*, so cities, amusement parks, concerts—all places I've never been. Except one night in Vegas when I turned twenty-one. Celeste and I snuck away. Although we spent the entire time inside the MGM and Bellagio resorts, so it wasn't quite a city experience."

We pause our conversation when we reach Café Beignet, which is absolutely charming—a brick courtyard with bronze statues of local musical legends, small iron tables, and a live band. Liam takes charge, ordering two baskets of beignets, along with jambalaya and red beans and rice. The girl taking the order hands us a number for the table, so we find a seat and wait for our food.

His eyes narrow. "So, no one knew about your Vegas trip?"

“Nope.” I puff myself up with pride. “It was the one and only time I did something like that, but we nailed it.”

He smirks, kicking back in his chair. “So, you’re a rebel after all. I’ve been to my share of cities, but no concerts or amusement parks.”

I tilt my head, surprised we have that in common. “Did you have an overprotective father too?”

“I didn’t have an overprotective anything, but let’s not talk about that today.” He tips his chin, lips curling with mischief. “How did your wedding night pan out?”

“Let’s not talk about that today either,” I quip.

“That good, huh?” he says as the waiter drops off our tray.

For a few minutes, we simply focus on eating. The New Orleans cuisine is delicious, and the atmosphere is like coming up for air. After we’ve consumed the jambalaya and red beans and rice, he pushes the beignets toward me—fried rectangle pastries, blanketed in powdered sugar.

“Mmm,” I moan, taking a bite. “These are fantastic. They taste exactly like a funnel cake from our small county fair back home.”

Liam laughs. “Christ. Don’t let the French guy in the back hear you say that. You’ll get us banned. I can’t take you anywhere, High Society.”

“Can’t call me High Society when I’m in a ball cap and Aerosmith T-shirt. It doesn’t fit,” I correct.

He yanks on the bill. “You’re cute like this. Messy.”

This moment is cloaked with a haze of intimacy, and while it’s only friendship on my end—because I’m currently obsessed with the domineering man who seems to be avoiding me—I hope that’s all it is for Liam.

My heart rate spikes with a feeling of guilt. “How mad will Wells be if he finds out we came here?”

“Combustible.”

Not easing the guilt.

I push the pastry aside. “So, why did you do it? Why bring me here?”

“Because none of this is your fault, Ivy. But there’s also no stopping it.”

I’m not sure what he means by that. All of these men make me feel like I’m half asleep, missing vital information. “I really appreciate this, but I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“I don’t get in trouble. I cause it. Big difference.” His eyes twinkle, but then he scratches his scruff with a seriousness. “If it ever comes down to it, you throw me under the bus to save yourself.”

Irritation and confusion pump through me. “What the hell does that mean? With Wells?”

He leans into me. “With anyone.”

Is this some sort of weird trust test? “No. You’re a smart-ass, but I’m kinda fond of you. That’s not how I work, Liam.”

“Start, Ivy.” He exhales, and a frustration I’ve never seen in him stiffens his shoulders. “Start thinking like a survivor and start listening to Wells. *Fuck*, by all means, give him shit. God knows it’s about time he met his match, and I’m here for it. I just wanted you to hear it from me because you don’t seem to need to fight me on everything. So, cooperate. Okay? The four of us will do whatever it takes for you. This outing was my little gift, one last hurrah because everything changes when we go back.”

“What the hell is going on, Liam? I don’t understand ... any of that.”

“You don’t need to yet,” he replies cryptically.

I drop my face into my hands. My head still aches, and now, I’m riddled with anxiety, not sure if I should break the tension, bolt, or retreat into hiding. He’s trying to reveal something, and while the details are vague, his message is equal parts protective and terrifying.

“You sure know how to kill a good time,” I mutter.

He lifts my chin, smiling. “Sorry. That’s not me. Hell, I *am* the good time. I had a long night. Must’ve fucked me up and made me a pain in the ass like Wells. Won’t happen again.”

While I don’t feel relieved, that makes me laugh, and I don’t have the energy for anything else today. “I’ll let it slide. Lack of sleep will do that. Can we get some beignets to take back for the guys?”

His brows furrow. “It’s not a secret excursion if we bring back evidence.”

“Food is the way to Gage’s good graces though. He probably loves these.” I fold my hands into a plea.

“This is about the Big Guy?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “I mean, I’ll get some for Ty and Wells too. But I have a hunch Gage is a dick because someone screwed him over. It’s my mission to fuck with his head by making him like me.”

Liam howls. “That’s a good reason to show up with beignets. I’m in.”



Back in the suite, I slip into my swimsuit, waiting for Ty to wake up. I'm hoping he's refreshed and talkative tonight, so I can figure out what the hell is wrong with everyone. When I walk out into the living room, I notice Wells's door is shut. He must finally be back.

As if he can hear my thoughts, his door handle clicks a moment later.

Holy hell. I'm not ready.

A swarm of deadly butterflies assaults my insides as I watch Wells swagger out of his room, freshly showered and scrumptiously casual—for him—in gray slacks and a black button-up, flawlessly hugging his trim, athletic form. My mind instantly swirls with questions about last night—the kiss, the orgasm, and the touches that keep floating over my skin and circling my being like a lost ghost. A haunting. I'm curious if that life was ever real, or if it was merely a vision of wishes.

A butterfly's kiss.

But then, of course, there's the question of where he's been. Who he's been with.

We exchange brief greetings, and I spit out my courage as I follow him back to his bedroom. "So, last night?"

He turns, cocking his dark brow at the same moment his lips lift at the corner, as if they were threaded together. "Yes?"

Voice steady and fingers pulling over the fluffy comforter to keep me grounded, I lock my eyes on his emerald gaze with feigned confidence. "I was wondering what happened."

"Hmm." That smirk spreads to a devious smile that would weaken the Devil himself. "With what specifically? The vile man who dared to touch you?"

"Sure." Easing into the what-made-me-orgasm question is probably smart, and I barely remember that guy. "Start there."

"Taken care of." His chin dips while he relaxes into the leather chair across from the bed and casually drops a few Sour Skittles into his mouth, as if he's daring me to continue, but wondering if I'll back out now.

"That's not exactly an answer, but whatever." I wave my hand, shooing away the thought of that creepy man weighted at the bottom of the ocean as shark bait. Too many Mafia movies and dark romance novels have sullied my reality. "I'm more interested in what occurred after, in the room, when we were together."

He tilts his head, and his tongue slips out in a captivating sweep of his

lower lip, probably gathering up stray granules of sugar crystals. Lucky bastards. “You don’t remember?”

Flashes of him licking sugar off every inch of me batter my mind. Those Skittles could be downright filthy. Sweet and sour. *Spicy*.

“No.” I shake my head, crashing through my pornographic stupor to realize his answer suggests *something* did happen. It wasn’t all in my imagination. My thighs ache to squeeze away my need while my breathing becomes shallow. “Did we ...”

He kicks his legs up onto the small table before him, ankles crossed, tongue seductively sucking the lifeblood from that damn candy while he studies me as though I were the answer to his most troubling issues. “Are you asking if we consummated our marriage, Ivanna?”

My full name on his lips should be annoying, and yet it’s the sweetest it’s ever sounded. No longer pretentious, but poetic, endearing.

Even though he tends to use it as a taunt or warning.

His warnings excite me more than they should.

My skin heats and flushes. Too mortified to verbally confirm that I am indeed asking if consummation took place, I nod, slack-jawed at his lewd tasting.

He springs up with the same intense resolution all his movements hold, coasting fluidly until he’s right before me, leaning down and tucking a wisp of my hair behind my ear, his lips following the movement. His rasp wets my lobe and neck and ... bikini bottoms. “Trust me, Little Storm, if I fucked you, you’d know. You’d be feeling me for days. An experience you’d never forget.”

Good God.

A traitorous whimper escapes me, and aggravation boils in my veins that he remains cool and collected, unaffected, while I crumble in his essence. One deep breath and a bold move for the win.

“Good to know. Are you planning to? Just curious. You’re always so thorough, and it’s the only way to take annulment off the table.” That last part lands somewhere between a pathetic plea and an empty threat. Not what I was going for.

He chuckles, his arm wrapping around my bare lower back to draw me closer, as his thumb grazes over my lips and chin and jaw. Throat. There, he plants his palm, my erratic heartbeat thrashing to reach his fingertips, as though it were caged and he was freedom.

He tsks. “Greedy little thing, I see. That’s not generally how I complete my *business* transactions.”

Since the mere thought of him with another woman has bile burning my esophagus, that knowledge is quite comforting, as is this stronghold he has on me. I wish he’d tighten his grip, shove me against the wall, and make me his damn wife in the most depraved ways imaginable.

“Of course,” I whisper, peering at him from under my lashes. “It’s wise to stay in your lane, so you don’t *disappoint*, especially since it’s something I’d most certainly *never* forget.”

That hand around my throat tightens as his eyes, which normally hold a twinkle of humor and humanity, grow cold and still. An eerie winter forest. My words may have hit a nerve. The questions—which nerve and why? His two-day-old stubble shadows the set of his flexing jaw, and I wonder how long he’ll stay like this, searing my soul with anger he chooses not to voice. There are plenty of other ways we could settle things, I’m sure. His hand on my throat and his sheer dominance have me cataloging several tantalizing avenues, but by his own admission, this is business. Finally, as if the silence he’s exhibiting is my fault, he rushes a breath, moves his hand to the wall behind us, and regains himself.

“As much as I’d love to stay here and spar with you, Ivanna, watching you beg for my cock, I have unfinished business.”

Asshole.

“Fine, *Gavin*. Run away from this, but try not to let your business associates realize how much you *fear* me.”

An emotion I can’t quite identify passes through him as he rakes his gaze over my body. “Swimming?”

Him not noticing my bikini until this moment infuriates me to the point of nearly spitting.

Ducking under his arm and strutting away to my own room while he follows, I pluck my packed bag from the dresser—book, phone, cover-up, wallet, and a dull dagger, coming in three ... two ... one. “Dinner and drinks with Rena and whomever else she brings. Should be exactly the *stimulation* I crave.”

His fingers drag through his hair, mussing his damp yet styled black tresses. “That’s enough.” Disappearing into the closet, mutterings and the squeaking of hangers filling the room with angst, he emerges at last, a periwinkle-blue sundress dangling from his finger. “Put this on.”

“Isn’t that thoughtful? Thanks.” I snatch the dress, neatly folding it and placing it inside my bag. “Always good to be prepared with a change of clothes in case I *misplace* something.”

I’ve never been particularly good at knowing when to stop.

Filling a balloon until it pops.

Feeding a goldfish until it swims upside down.

Poking the gorgeous erasing king until he combusts.

Wells steps into me, hand fisting my hair with a sting of warning that sends a jolt of electricity shooting between my thighs, voice a low rumble, like a tumultuous sea. “We have an agreement, and you will conduct yourself appropriately. Put on the goddamn dress.”

“Fine.” I drop my bag with a grunt as he releases my hair. Taking out the dress, I slip it over my aqua-and-white bikini. “We’re meeting at the pool first. Might go for a swim. I will *not* be wearing the dress while in the water. I’m sure your associates will understand.” I consider threatening skinny-dipping, but even in my red-hot state, I’m aware that’s a kamikaze comment.

He says nothing, but plunges into his pocket for his phone and begins texting, holding an index finger up to me—a command to wait until I’m dismissed. Yeah, that won’t be happening. I saunter out to the kitchen, packing a bottle of water into my bag, and walk toward the door when his barking tenor breaks my stride.

“Wait for Ty. Rena will meet you both at the North Tower pool, and you may have dinner at the bistro beside it. Both have been cleared.”

“Cleared?” I hiss through gritted teeth. *Why is he making everything so difficult?*

His shoulders are relaxed once again, his demeanor controlled, and his unruly hair suddenly smoothed. *How the hell did he manage that?* “Yes, you’ll have the pool to yourselves and have a private area in the restaurant.”

A huff flows from my lungs, one part tantrum, one part disbelief at the mess I seem to have gotten myself into. “That was wholly unnecessary. Ty will be with me.”

“Safety precautions, Ivy. Can you simply enjoy the evening I’ve provided without the snark?”

The question and exasperation catch me off guard. I’ve never seen him ask anyone for anything. Atypical Wells behavior, for sure.

It nearly evokes sympathy in me. Although that makes little sense. Sympathy for what exactly? Why are they all acting so weird today?

“Whatever. Thanks.” I’m so irritated with him, with myself. With my bruised ego and insatiable lust for a man who doesn’t want me, but for all his flaws, he appears to be everything I’ve always hoped for in a *husband*. A crushing blow.

“When will you be finished?” I inquire, attempting to hide my burning disappointment.

He swallows what looks like regret. “I’ll see you in the morning. We leave at ten.”

“Got it. The *all-night* kind of business.” I breathe in my dignity, refusing to serve it to him, but I’ve never been so pissed off.

Glancing at Liam, who’s been soaking this whole scene in from the couch, I arch my brow in question and jerk my chin toward the bag of beignets tucked away on the counter.

He laughs and throws his hands out. “Do what ya gotta do, girl. I’ll handle it.”

Wells studies me, eyes flitting between Liam and me, unease written all over his face.

I scurry the few steps back into the kitchen, reach into the bag, and pluck out a powdered pastry, ripping off the corner and letting it melt on my tongue. “At least *I* bring back souvenirs from my outings.”

“Where the fuck did you get those?” he snarls with a subsequent roaring growl. Honest to God, it’s animalistic and so arousing.

My tongue flicks out slowly to lick some powdered sugar off my lip. “Café Beignet. Ever been there?”

He scrubs his hands over his face, jaw rigid. “I expressly forbade you to leave the property or go anywhere without one of us.”

Batting my lashes, I let a wicked grin tease my lips. “I felt perfectly cared for by the man I was with. Completely *satisfied*. No worries.”

Liam snickers.

And I’m being choked again. Wells isn’t exactly cutting off my airway, but he looks like he wants to. Either that or tear my clothes off and fuck me into compliance. Maybe both.

Yes, please.

He isn’t saying anything, just pressing me against the wall, staring me down, and consuming all the oxygen in the suite as Ty emerges from his room. He gauges the situation, fetches my pool tote off the floor, hooks his arm around my waist, and peels me away from Wells.

“Time to go, Freckles,” he says as he picks me up and carries me to the door.

I keep my eyes on Wells the entire time. “So we’re clear, that conversation, regarding the unorthodox way of completing our *business* transaction, was a onetime offer. No worries about me complicating things again.”

The door slams behind us with an exasperated sigh from Ty when he sets me down.

“What the hell is going on, Ty? What is wrong with all of you, and why are we leaving a day early?”

He stares at me for a beat. “You were roofied last night.”

The truth of that pummels me. “Oh, that’s why I ... by that guy at the bar.” A flash of Wells smashing his face into the bar top, bloody and shrieking, bombards my memory. And Wells sprinting with me. I gasp. “Who was he?”

“We’re working on it,” he says plainly.

And I know that’s all I’m getting. I’m mixed up in a world I don’t understand, and while they’re clearly trying to protect me, I don’t have any idea what I’m being protected from.



We’ve been home for five days, and other than visiting my father on Wednesday, I’ve locked myself in my room.

Upon returning, Wells informed me that I needed to begin training—whatever the hell that entails. I know Liam told me things would be changing and to cooperate, but my period started. And Celeste won’t text me back. And I don’t want to call my mom because she’ll hear the sadness in my voice, so we’ve only texted a few times. Basically, I’m alone and falling apart.

My sole outlets are baking while the rest of the house sleeps and texting with Rena. Chocolate chip cookies. Cherry-apple pie. Banana bread. I sent her pictures of my baked goods. She called me a *sugary rebel*. It seems she’s running out of piercing real estate and her brothers have been temperamental since we left.

Today, I’ve taken to hiding out and bingeing rom-coms. Rena claims

period self-pity is empowering. She told me to own it. So, I'm all in.

A knock raps on my door, and I yell, "Come in," with an eye roll because I don't want to pause *When Harry Met Sally*.

Ty peeks in. "You've been sulking in here for days, Freckles. I miss you. What's the story?"

I prop myself up. "Truth?"

"Always."

"I'm depressed, on my period, in no mood to *train*, and I miss Celeste, so I'm staying in bed and bingeing rom-coms today."

"Fine," he says, flopping onto my bed beside me. "I guess we're watching movies."

"You don't—"

"I do actually," he insists.

Liam struts in next. "Did I hear something about a movie day?"

Seriously?

"That time of the month," Ty shares.

I smack his chest. "That's so fucked up."

Unfazed by my slap, he laughs.

Liam crawls into bed on the other side. "It's a fact of life, High Society. Don't be so stuffy."

Before his words are even finished, Gage appears in the doorway. "What's this about?"

Liam waves his hand over his crotch. "Girl stuff."

What the hell?

I scoff. "Did you just gesture to your mangina?"

That makes all three of them cackle, which, I have to admit, is uplifting.

Gage scowls. "Shit. You must be exhausted. Cramps?"

There is not a moment with these men that isn't mystifying. The guy who once leered at me with a murderous rage wants to know if I have cramps.

"They aren't so bad," I assure him. "I'm just *mopey*."

His eyes droop as he scrunches his lips in commiseration before forcing a benevolent grin. "That pie is a fucking masterpiece."

Food is undeniably the key with that one. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Loved it." He beams. "Want a movie snack?"

My brows knit together. "You're going to make me something?"

"Yeah—"

"Microwave popcorn," Liam taunts. "I want some."

“No. Not fucking popcorn, dipshit,” Gage barks, and the two disappear, leaving me with Ty.

“So, lay it on me. What’s got you so depressed?” he asks. “And don’t say *nothing specific*.”

“Fine,” I grumble, twirling a thread from my shirt around my index finger until the skin blanches. “Why does Wells hate me?”

“Hate you?” He unravels my finger so the blood flow returns. “Wells definitely doesn’t hate you, Freckles.”

“He’s avoiding me and agitated,” I argue, smashing my head into my pillow with a groan.

“It’s complicated right now, but I thought everything he did for the wedding would show you—”

“The wedding?” My head pops up like a piece of toast, my breath catching. “I thought that was you and Rena.”

He shakes his head. “I told him what you said, but he arranged everything.”

The cake. It didn’t occur to me before, but the spines of the books were our favorites. The ones we shared my first night here. All of it was so sweet. Maybe there is something between us. My heart squeezes with hope.

When I don’t say anything, Ty adds, “When you’re feeling better, you might want to check out the library.”

He doesn’t expound because Gage and Liam return with snacks and drinks.

Gage hands me a plate of Doritos, covered in melted cheddar cheese and jalapeños, saying, “Trust me,” as he sits in my velvet chair with his own feast.

Liam settles in beside me with popcorn, and Ty shares the nachos.

“These are fantastic,” I tell Gage after sampling his gourmet specialty. “Thank you.”

He lights up like he made me a four-course meal, so Liam throws a handful of popcorn at him.

About forty-five minutes later, the room is filled with us all howling at Meg Ryan’s fake orgasm when Wells walks in.

His eyes skate over us as he stands in the doorway. “What the fuck are you all doing? I told you she needs to train today.”

That pisses me off, but Ty clutches my arm and speaks before I can. “She needs another day.”

Wells looks at me, concern mixed with vexation. “What’s going on?”

“Period party,” Gage chirps, which causes Liam to convulse with laughter beside me while Ty and I do our best to stay composed.

“For all of you?” Wells snaps.

“Moral support.” Gage nods, biting into his banana bread.

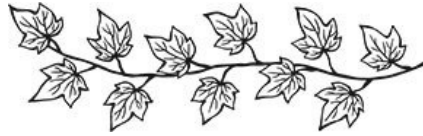
Liam smirks. “Making sure everything comes out okay, Chief.”

That’s it. Ty and I burst out cackling.

Wells shakes his head. “Jesus Christ.”

He swipes his hand through his hair and disappears, leaving me to get my fill of junk food, cheesy romance, and men who are starting to feel like family.

CHAPTER TWELVE



WELLS

After the movie day with the guys, Ivy agreed to begin training. We kept it light that first day. She's a runner, so we had her run five miles, swim several laps—because September has been unseasonably hot and we've yet to drain the pool—and started her at the shooting range.

The guys assure me she's a natural shot, so that's encouraging. I haven't witnessed it myself, deciding to hang back for now. The incident at La Lune Noire complicated everything.

For years, there have been two primary groups after Ivy—those who want her safe and well and capable of assuming her elite position, and those who want to prevent that from happening. The latter has hired team after team to find her, and we've always been a step ahead, eliminating them whenever possible. But a hit listed on the dark web could have any hit man in the country after her. That's a far greater challenge.

With so much going on, I don't trust myself around her right now. I need a clear head, and she gives me anything but.

Today, they pushed her a little harder, so I'm sure she's sore. She shut herself in her room about an hour ago, no doubt seeking solace in a hot shower.

The thought of the water cascading down her aching muscles, hands grazing over her bare curves, has my cock twitching.

Precisely why I've been distancing myself.

And jerking off constantly like a teenage boy.

The guys, whose rooms are all upstairs, have disappeared. So, I find myself alone, in my office, two doors from hers. My bedroom is in between—the proximity was intentional, but maybe a mistake. I should be working,

but she has my head completely fucked up. So, I'm sucking on a grape Tootsie Pop, centering myself with a moody chamber music mix, and daydreaming. About all things Ivy.

Her delicious scent that envelops me like a balmy blanket in a raspberry field.

Hungry blue eyes searching mine.

Pouty, pleading lips.

Hot and wet and eager.

A knock startles me into opening my eyes.

"Hey there," she says, gripping the molding and swinging herself into the office. "I thought ... I haven't seen you much, and I wanted to check in." She's so soft right now. Hair wet, face clean, feet bare, wearing my T-shirt from New Orleans, tied in a knot at her naked stomach, and tiny cotton shorts.

Fucking stunning.

"I'm glad you did, Little Storm. How's training going?"

She giggles, settling into the chair across from me. "I would've said I was pretty fit, but they're kicking my ass out there."

Jealousy surges through me, wanting those moments with her. *Mine*. I like this side of her, the worn, the calm, the compliant. It's what most people see when they look at her, the reason her storm goes undetected. The storm I seem to incite in her and can't get enough of.

I smile, pulling out my sucker and wrapping it back up for later. "I'm sorry I missed that."

"Are you?" she asks, and the question holds far more than a basic inquiry. Her eyes are wide and vulnerable. I'm not sure what I want to do with that, but she leaves me little room to teeter. "Because I've missed having you there."

Good fuck.

She holds her breath with that, and everything in me wants to scoop her onto my lap and tell her I'm going to sort all of this out, fix it, protect her. But wanting her like this can only make that job more difficult than it already is. Those cerulean doe eyes are piercing me, twisting my insides.

I hate hurting her. "I am. I'll make time to see your progress soon."

She cocks a sassy brow. "It won't look like progress unless you get a baseline, so you should train with us tomorrow."

I chuckle at how quick she is. "Valid point. I'll see what I can do."

“I have another valid point,” she says, apparently revved up to bust my throbbing blue balls this evening. “I’d like to have a better understanding of what I’m training for exactly.”

“That’s fair,” I concede. “A full explanation will come soon, but for now, I simply need you to understand that there are threats to you, and I want you prepared.”

She huffs, and just like that, my Little Storm rages. “That’s bullshit. What threats and why? Are they because of your business dealings?”

“They’re all connected to that. Yes.” Truth.

“Can you tell me more?” She leans forward, hand on my desk, the vulnerability in her now-rolling eyes a thing of the past. “Do they know who I am? Is that why you’ve got me hidden away? How dangerous are these people? Should I be scared?”

She’s right. Those are all valid questions, but the truth is so disturbing at the moment that I can’t share. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

I tell her the only thing I can. “I’m not ready to unveil more yet, but I don’t want you to be scared. I want you to be ready.”

She smacks the desk and throws herself back into her chair, twisting her long, wet hair around her palm. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with that? Why can’t you answer a damn question without launching a riddle?”

“That’s not my intent, Ivy. I want to tell you everything, but there are new developments I can’t explain fully. So, not yet.” Taking my typical hard line here probably won’t serve me well, so I try another tactic. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she confesses, no hesitation. But her next words decimate the brief swell of pride that gifts to me. “For the life of me, I don’t know why. I feel it in my gut, and I want to ... my dad taught me to trust my instincts, and I’m not the kind of girl who breaks down.” Her features hold a heaviness to them, a weightiness shackling me. “But this is crazy. Not quite right, like a Picasso painting.” She grunts while I marvel at her fascinating thought process and how supremely that Picasso comparison sums up this fucked-up, nothing-aligns situation. “I sense something, and nothing feels safe anymore—not even going back to my own home. Except you guys, oddly enough. But then you’re all aware of something that’s happening and ...” She grips her neck with a wince.

“Sore muscles?” I ask.

“Sore everything.” She blows out a broken sigh.

“Let me give you a massage, and we’ll talk through it.” My dick spits out the offer before my mind catches up. *Shit.*

Her eyes light with clear elation, and I could kick myself for the suggestion in spite of the obvious ability it has to distract her.

She rolls her lips in. “Okay. Would you mind if I lie down for it?”

Jesus Christ.

“Of course. Go to your room. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She walks out, dabbing at a fugitive tear, a lip-biting smile taking its place. Her tears make me fucking stupid. And her joy makes me dumber.

I grab a bottle of oil from my bathroom cabinet and make my way to her room. Her door is cracked open, the corner light bathing the space in a warm amber glow.

And Ivy is lying face down on her bed. Topless. My cock grows instantly.

Fucking hell.

“What? Is this okay?” she asks, making me aware that I hissed that exclamation out loud.

“Perfect. Stay there.” I roll up my sleeves, straddle her narrow hips, and squirt the oil into my palm, rubbing it between my hands and slathering it onto her back. Her skin is like goddamn silk. As I begin working it into her tense muscles, she moans. My pulse hammers in my ears and chest and stomach.

There is no hiding how much I want this woman. She must feel how hard I am against her ass. All she’s wearing are those tiny cotton shorts. In my imagination, there aren’t panties beneath them. So easy to whisk her free.

Jesus, the memory of her shaved pink pussy is haunting me. I bet she’s soaked right now. Sopping.

I move to her arms, dousing them with oil, soothing her biceps with a twisting rub, and dreaming about how she confessed to wanting to be tied up. She moans again, like she’s envisioning the same fantasy.

Bound and begging, screaming my name and quaking beneath me, while I slam into her wet cunt.

Fuck me.

I jump off the bed and move to her feet—presumably the safest area of her phenomenal body—rubbing in the oil in search of a reprieve that never comes. Her iridescent-green polished toes have to be the cutest fucking toes in existence. I’ve never been particularly into feet, but here I am, balls zinging with the urge to suck each one into my mouth in the most lewd

manner conceivable.

Working my way up her calves to her thighs, her skin slick and shiny and shimmering, I lose my goddamn mind. Every part of her is magnificent, sexy, and toned. I want these long, slippery legs wrapped around my waist, shaking with need. She whimpers in agreement as my fingers tease her upper thighs.

“God, Wells. That feels so good.” Her gravelly voice rockets a desperate hunger up my spine.

I can smell her arousal. So sweet. *Christ*, she tasted better than candy. The memory has me salivating.

Sweat beads along my hairline as my fingers inch closer, massaging the sumptuous curve of her ass at this point. No panties to be found yet. One swipe of my tongue, and I could feast on her delicacy.

But Larry’s face flickers before me. His hand on her waist. His admission to planning to kill her. The blanket hit.

The remembrance of how it was my fault because I’d gotten sucked into being with her, wanting her, pleasing her. Instead of protecting her.

I can’t.

Stooping beside her bed, I slip my fingers under her damp strands and knead her neck muscles. Her breathing staggers. She turns her head to face me, sliding her hand over mine.

“Stay with me,” she whispers in a sultry rasp.

Dear, fuck.

I’ve imagined those words, or at least the sentiment, falling from her pouty lips so many times over the years.

The guilt from our wedding night washes over me again. Leaving her when she was drugged and asking me to stay. *Jesus*, I’m fucking this all up. This is what I’ve always wanted. *Ivy*. For her to crave me the way I crave her. And now that we’re married and she’ll be loyalty tested, it’s even more important.

But I can’t risk it. And I don’t know how to stop the things we’ve already set in motion. She’s meant for a life that could take her away from me—permanently—and I can’t lose sight of the job.

Not even for her.

I kiss her forehead, sweeping her wet hair off her cheek and bare shoulder. “This isn’t a good idea right now, Ives. We need to keep it ... professional.” Voicing that is the equivalent of ingesting hydrochloric acid.

She nods, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. The amber light glints

inside her watery blues like a sea at sunset. *So goddamn beautiful.*

“Right. Thanks for the massage and the books,” she says, her voice cracking. She clears her throat. “I never thanked you for the books.”

Another example of something that shouldn’t have taken my time—researching, buying, and stocking the library shelves for her with all the best-selling rom-coms and dark romances from the last five years. The mention of that only cements that I need to step away. She confuses everything.

I stand, mindlessly stringing my fingers through her hair, wishing I could explain everything without terrifying her. Without her taking off or hating me. I told her we’d talk it through, and I didn’t do anything to ease her stress or pain. She’s hurting more now.

“Wells”—she buries her head in her pillow, muffling a sniffle—“please go. Please.”

Quietly making my way to the hallway, I stop by my office, grab my keys, and head out for the night. She needs to eat dinner, and I won’t force her to feel awkward with me there.



I’d like to say distancing myself from Ivy has helped. But my little obsession has a permanent residence in my mind. She’s there constantly.

After two more days of training, she begged for ice cream. Gage and Ty were more than happy to volunteer. It may only be a brief drive-through outing, but it’s something. She needed to get out—somewhere other than the heart-wrenching visits with her father.

Glancing at my tracker, I turn to Liam, who’s working on the couch in the great room, before I head for the shower. “The Little Storm will be home in five.”

“You’re losing it, man.” He chuckles, always intent on screwing with me.

Things have been mildly strained between us since he took Ivy out against my orders. His intentions were good, and she isn’t pushing back against my rules now, but it was an unnecessary risk. The way he deals with tension is to stir things up though.

“You said she was the light, but you call her Little Storm. Sounds like you don’t know her at all.”

Liam has a smoothness about him. He’s a charmer, capable of robbing a

man of his worth and fucking his wife, all while smiling so charismatically that, somehow, the poor schlep convinces himself he was willing to hand it all over. That's precisely why Liam is an asset on our team and why I trust him with my life. If he thinks he's justified, he doesn't hesitate, and in our line of work, hesitation equals death. If not ours, someone who we've vowed to protect.

That quality for my current situation is less desirable. Liam is used to melting panties, winning bets, outfoxing the sly. He lives for the game, the chase. And he's already mentioned that he has his sights set on my girl.

I tsk, not exposing an ounce of my concern. "Anyone can be the light when the sun is shining. It takes a goddamn force to strike with a crash so bright that even the outlines of the raging clouds are illuminated."

Liam's head falls back with a drawn-out sigh. "Fuck."

That meager exasperation may be the wisest opinion Liam has ever expressed. He might finally grasp that Ivy is mine, designed for me. That I know every curve of her face, every strength she hides, every dream she grips. So, while I pity my friend—my *brother*—for losing such an extraordinary woman, there is no other option. Ivy will always belong to me.

Having said all we need to say, I leave him to finish his late-night work, but his voice freezes me at my doorway.

"You're in love with her."

My gut wrenches. "I'm not—"

"Jesus, for once, shut the fuck up and listen to me, Chief. You know I'm the last person to give advice on this shit. But we all adore that girl. And it's fucked everything up because none of it is simple anymore. It's a goddamn mess. The thought that we'd turn her over and ... I can't even ..." His tone holds more emotion than Liam ever has—a testament to how this is wearing on us all. A testament to how much he cares for Ivy. "I know you think keeping her at arm's length will help you protect her. I get that. It's the way we've always done things. But she's already in your head. Your thoughts aren't any clearer. And she's lonely and upset. And probably fucking scared. She deserves ... if you don't give in to it, she'll find someone who will."

I spin around, heart pounding out of my chest, molars grinding. "Don't start this shit again, Graves."

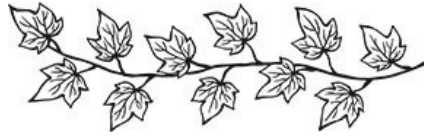
He drags a hand down his unshaven face with a shake. "That's not a threat. And I wasn't only talking about me. It's the way it'll be, and you know it. She's special. We're all in this together. We won't let you lose

focus. I'm sure it comes as a surprise, but I'm not always a motherfucker, and I'm not blind. But if you don't step up, you'll lose her one way or another."

He might as well have gut-punched me. The thought of losing her in any capacity is too much to handle. I should thank him for his warning. It proves he's trustworthy with her, telling me to step up. But figuring out how not to fuck this all up is too much right now. All of it is balled up at the base of my throat, choking me.

So, I nod, letting our eyes connect in understanding, and head to the shower with the hope that, somehow, clarity will rain down on me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



IVY

If I ignore my embarrassment for practically throwing myself at Wells, my broken heart from his rejection, and the reality that I am mixed up in something seriously fucked up, life is pretty fantastic right now.

Training is actually fun. The constant hustling keeps my mind from drifting, so I feel more present than I have in months. We're only getting started. I know they're simply building up my stamina because Ty mentioned adding knife throwing, fighting, and the obstacle course next week. They clearly enjoy torturing me.

But then again, these guys are also incredibly sweet. Even Wells—or maybe especially him. The wedding, the books, all my favorite foods stocked. That hotter-than-hell massage. He might not want me, but he is considerate about caring for me.

The biggest demonstration of that has been with my father. Somehow, he convinced Theresa to sneak us in the back door for our visits on Wednesdays because he isn't comfortable with me signing in. He's on edge when we're there, keeping my father's door closed and nervously checking the hallway. But it's the one thing he hasn't suggested I give up. Maybe because he knows it would end in an all-out war.

That isn't all Wells did concerning my father though. Yesterday, he snuck him a bottle of Macallan 18, covertly pouring him a small glass. My father isn't a scotch drinker, like Wells—or *wasn't* before his stroke. His preferred cocktail was an old-fashioned when he was at home, but whenever he was with someone else, he matched their taste. He claimed it was a bonding technique. So, not only was the Macallan the ideal drink to share with Wells, but I could also tell it made him feel less broken and a bit more like himself

even though he needed assistance to drink it. That small glass of scotch had my heart jumping out of my chest.

Unfortunately, Wells has made it clear he isn't interested in catching it.

Tonight, I'm out with Ty and Gage, getting ice cream. Since they insisted we could only use the drive-through, they elongated our outing by speeding and doing donuts like lunatics down a desolate dirt road in the 1970 Plymouth Road Runner. The dusty wind whips through the open windows, slapping the three of us with an enlivening sting as we hurtle toward nothing but our own adrenaline rushes. Every time I scream, they look at each other and laugh. So, I've taken to yelling far more than necessary just to see their faces erupt.

The air is suffused with exhaust and waffle cones, crisp apples and burned rubber.

Nostalgic belonging.

We pull into the garage, and I give them each a kiss on the cheek with a, "Thanks, boys," before hopping out of the back seat.

As weird as this all is, there's something so satisfying about being welcomed into their universe. It seems like a far more exclusive invite than La Lune Noire did.

Liam is on the couch when I make it inside, working on his laptop.

I dangle the bag of treats. "I got you a hot fudge sundae. Want it now?"

"Nah. I'll save it for later or tomorrow. Thanks."

After setting his sundae, some ice cream sandwiches, and some Popsicles for Wells in the freezer, I saunter into the room and plop down beside him on the couch with my frozen lemon cup. Ty and Gage pass through, motioning to the patio bar, but Liam jerks his head toward me. Looks like he's on guard duty until I go to bed.

"What ya working on?" I ask.

He smirks. "Money management."

"Yeah?" I shovel a spoonful of the frozen lemon into my mouth, letting it melt. "You guys have a PNC account you're balancing?"

"Something like that." He chuckles. "A few on the corner of Switzerland."

"A few?" My eyebrows reach for the two-story ceiling.

He hammers away at the keys. "Ten. Twelve. Who's counting?"

"Ahh. That explains the twelve luxury cars and four sporty motorcycles in the garage." Another spoonful of my dessert to hide my smile.

His fingers don't slow down, but he spares me a quick sidelong glance. "Listen here, High Society. We've earned it. Some might even say we paid with our lives, *sold our souls*."

I fake an exaggerated shiver. "So ominous. Is there some soul-selling happening on there right now?"

"You could say that. I'm manipulating a pulse point." He grins, and it is in every way a grin of someone who would willingly work for the Grim Reaper.

"How so?"

"Someone pissed us off. They're trying to take something that's ours. So, I found some accounts connected to their organization and emptied them." His fingers pause as his eyes find mine with a twinkle. "Into ours."

An astounded breath puffs out of my lungs. "Wow. That's impressive pulse-point manipulation. Lucrative too. Can all of you do that type of hacking?"

"Yes. All four of us can do anything needed, but we each have a role we fit into best. I'm the best at *hacking*." He says that like I've insulted him somehow. "Although I prefer tech genius, or God is fine." I laugh while he continues, "Wells leads and keeps everything—big picture down to the microscopic details—in line. Ty helps Wells with in-person dealings and leads our pro bono work. And Gage is our enforcer."

Enforcer. My stomach knots. I think I'll skate on past that for now. I'm coming to love the Big Guy and don't want to think about what being an enforcer entails. Or the fact that all four of them can step into any of those positions.

"Will you teach me?" I ask. "Some of your godlike tech genius?"

He stills, his hazel eyes lit up and concentrated on me. "You want to learn this?"

"Yeah. My father had me take some coding and programming classes in college, so I know the basics, even some amateur hacking tricks. And I'm fascinated that with a few swipes of computer keys, you can decimate someone's life."

His brow line furrows, as though what I said confounds him.

"Assuming they deserve it," I add.

He laughs. Actually, he cackles. "Of course. Since you've got your priorities straight, High Society, I'll teach you. The basement is where my elaborate setup is. We'll start after training tomorrow."

“Thanks,” I chirp, scooping the last bit of lemon ice into my mouth and setting the empty container and spoon on the coffee table.

As I sit back, Liam scoots closer, wrapping his arm around me, and I can’t tell what the intent is. He’s talking about something on the screen—computer jargon, like I requested. But his clingy arm and the thumb casually dusting my skin aren’t in teaching mode.

When his instructing lulls—him probably noticing I’m preoccupied—I wrench myself out of his embrace but turn toward him and prop my elbow on the back of the couch, my fist supporting my temple. We’re a bit closer now, and I connect my eyes to his.

“This is all really strange, isn’t it? Me here with all of you?”

“Not so strange,” he says. “You fit.”

“You think so?” That comes out strained, my lungs and voice box and pounding heart betraying me with complete confusion.

Wells ignited a blaze inside me, a desperation that hadn’t been there before. He’s the one I crave romantic overtures and assurance from, and yet Liam’s the one bestowing it—the assurance anyway.

“I know so, Ivy.”

“Where do I fit? Because I’m finding everything confusing. I wish he ...” My eyes flit toward the hallway, where Wells’s door can be seen. The sight makes me both hungry and nauseous, and I feel my heart bleeding out right here on this couch. “I mean, I wish things were clear.”

Liam studies me for a beat, his lips curling into a pensive frown as he moves his laptop onto the coffee table, like there’s nothing that could pull him away. “What things?”

“Things like ...” My voice shakes. “The specifics don’t matter.” I wave my hand with an unconvincing flop. “Where do I fit exactly?” I press. I’m not sure what I’m looking for—maybe that Liam can decode Wells’s mixed signals.

He drops his forehead against mine with a heavy sigh that smells of foresty spice and smoke and beer. The nicotine musk is still not a favorite scent, but because it’s Liam’s, I don’t detest it anymore. When he finally leans back, there’s a contemplative divot between his eyes. “As much as I wish this answer could be different, you fit with him.” He kicks his chin toward Wells’s bedroom.

My heart leaps. I want that to be true, but I don’t believe it. “He doesn’t seem to share that opinion. We may be married, and he’s been really good to

me, but he doesn't want me. He's made that clear."

"Then, he's full of shit. You'll have to trust me on this one. You're his, in every sense, even if he isn't saying it." He tucks a stray piece of my hair behind my ear. "And like I said, I wish, more than anything, that I could answer you differently, change the past or the rules, whatever, but—"

Wells swings his door open with a whoosh and swaggers out. Hair wet, gray joggers resting low on his hips—showcasing both his V and his flaccid, bulging cock below it—shirtless, laddered eight-pack abs on full display. Dreamy, as always, with his divinely sculpted golden-bronze physique.

Sweet baby Jesus.

His eyes land on us, detonating like an atomic bomb for a split second before flattening. Yummy but expressionless.

Guilt pangs my sternum. Although I have no idea why. We aren't real, and no matter how many moments we've had, Liam exhibited more interest with that brief admission than Wells has lately. If I want to decimate Liam's resolve and explore that attraction, why shouldn't I? Maybe because it wouldn't be fair to Liam. I'm married to one of his best friends, and despite this being an arrangement for my inheritance, I've never desired anyone more than Wells. We never said we'd adhere to any faithful rule, but pursuing something that could sever the possibility of Wells someday being mine isn't a risk I can handle.

Liam watches me as Wells breezes past us without a word, the air growing thick. I feel his attention on me, but I can't take mine off the gorgeous, half-naked man in the kitchen. Or the tattoo on his spine—a sword with an intricate handle, the blade piercing a stone.

The Sword in the Stone.

He's absolutely captivating. My whole being is held hostage by this magnetic pull he has over me. It's pathetic really—the way my eyes glue to every stretch and pull and flex of his muscles. Every twitch of his rosebud-pink lips and crinkle around his emerald eyes. The way his hair is damp and mussed yet still somehow impeccably styled. I should just let my jaw drop to the floor in a pool of my drool. My ogling is mortifying—far worse than my typical drifting.

Wells busies himself, filling a water bottle and sauntering back past us without sparing us a glance. He's almost at his bedroom door when his chilling rasp shatters the stale air without him turning around. "Liam, I love you like a brother, but if you value your life, you'd be wise to keep your

fucking hands off my wife.”

What in the ever-loving hell? Is he jealous?

He slams his door with a force that rattles the windows, and my head whips toward Liam, who’s laughing.

“Told ya,” he says.

“What was that? And why do I feel guilty and pissed and baffled as to why you didn’t move if you knew he’d react that way?”

His lips twitch, attempting to snuff out the last drops of his humor until they spread into a wily grin. “Never back down, or it’s an admission of guilt. He’d already seen us. My only argument was to willingly hold my position, own it and whatever else came from it. Anything else is cowardly. I really do wish I could claim you. You’re a ... rare gift. But the truth—a truth your eyes just screamed—is that you don’t belong to me. There are only three people in this world I won’t steal from. Four now, I suppose. And you belong to one of them.” He stands, folding his laptop under his arm, and plants a chaste kiss in my hair. “Good night, Ivy. Go get what’s yours.”

After Liam disappears up the grand stairway, my guilt diminishes, and my fury spikes. I rush to open Wells’s door without a knock, slamming it behind me like he did moments ago. His bedroom is both stark and luxurious, draped in satiny blacks and grays and creams, but I can’t focus on his decor now. He’s in his leather chair, heated eyes boring into me.

“What the hell was that?” I shout.

“Are you *not* my wife, Ivanna?”

“You know that’s beside the point. Since when am I your wife *like that*? If I remember correctly, you weren’t interested in fucking me!” The realization of those words strikes me at my core, my broken heart gaining purchase. His rejection has crippled me more than I realized. My stomach flips, hands shaking. But the thought of how I would react if I glimpsed Wells with his hand in Celeste’s hair is sobering. It wouldn’t be pretty. “I’m sure that was uncomfortable because it was Liam. Nothing was happening. Look, we’ve got five years of this, so we need some rules.”

His face is so drawn, so tight. He’s never looked this irate in front of me. He jumps up from his desk chair, pacing with unsteady breaths. “Rules. Fine. They”—he circles his index finger to the rest of the house—“are off-limits.”

My heart crumbles a little more when I realize this is more about some pissing contest with his crew than about me. He doesn’t want me. He just doesn’t want any of them to feast on me. That surge of hope from what

appeared to be jealousy fizzles.

“Okay,” I say, spinning toward the door. I can’t have this conversation now. My throat is dry, and my eyes sting with unshed hurt.

“And as long as we’re married,” he goes on, “we will be faithful, as should be expected in any marital union.”

The cool doorknob is in my palm, and yet my hand is instantly clammy. Again, what the hell? I twist to face him, summoning as much tranquility as I can muster in spite of my urge to spit fire.

“Let me get this straight. For the next five years, you want me to be celibate for our *fake* arrangement? I’ll be a twenty-eight-year-old virgin. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but ...” I’m not exactly sure why I felt inclined to share that tidbit, but I need to steamroll on past it before we stick there. “You’re insane—you know that? You don’t want me, but you don’t want anyone else to touch me. Fuck that.”

His fingers dive into his hair. “Maybe I am, Ivanna.” Those inky strands cavort wildly as he yanks on them with a grunt. “You make me *so fucking crazy*.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I hiss. “Is that why you nearly choked me at the hotel? So unhappy with our arrangement that you thought about ending me?” I don’t know why that flew out of my mouth. What the hell is wrong with me right now?

The truth is, I love that side of him because even though it produces a bit of fear, I know in my bones that he’d never hurt me. And the adrenaline from weaseling under his skin excites me like nothing else ever has.

His eyes widen, as though I offended him. “No. *Fuck*. I would never. You said you like that, and I—”

“When did I say that?”

“When you were drugged.” He halts there, both of us suspended, taking each other in.

God, how embarrassing. What else did I tell him when I was drugged?

His smoldering gaze is searing me, but there are no words, just the rise and fall of his corded chest muscles, golden skin stretched taut and glistening. He struts slowly toward me, erasing the few yards between us, shrinking the space until he’s right in front of me. My back thumps against the door as his forearms meet it, caging me in.

And like a lightning bolt, his words wallop me.

“You said we,” I whisper. “We will be faithful.”

“Yes,” he rasps. “We.”

The air is so soupy now that my lungs can't seem to consume it.

“I don't understand. Why? Why would you ... you keep hurting me, Wells. All these mixed signals.”

He drops his forehead to my shoulder. “That's the last thing I want, Ivy. I never want to hurt you.”

I soak in his scent of sugar and scotch and his rugged citrus cologne, terrified the answer to my next question could rip me to pieces. “What do you want then?”

“I want my wife.”

A single tear spills down my cheek. “Like you ...” I squeak. “You want me for real?”

His nose brushes against mine as he lifts his face to answer, “Yes, Little Storm. I want you in every imaginable way.”

“Oh fuck.” I turn my head, wiping the tear and trying to capture my racing thoughts. They're slipping through like grains of sand, impossible to catch. “Okay then. Not how I saw this night going.”

A sort of growl thrums from the depths of his chest. “Did you see it going somewhere with Liam?”

It was jealousy. He's hurt. As much as that delights me, I hate it too.

“No,” I breathe, the erratic drumbeat of my heart drowning out my timorous voice. “That's not what I wanted ... not what I want.”

“Which is?”

With a deep breath, I lock my eyes on his. “You, Wells. I've wanted you all along, since the first day we met, but you ... I didn't think you felt the same.”

He moves his arms off the door, one hand grazing the strip of skin above my hip with a wispy buffing, fingers on the other threading through my hair. His lips are so close to mine that I can taste the air between us. “It was vital that I waited until you knew what you wanted. There has never been anything mixed about how I feel for you. Only challenging situations. But you need to understand what this means. Once you give yourself to me, Ivy, there's no going back. Not in five years. Not ever.”

Good God, that escalated quickly. We may be married, but we haven't known each other long enough for that level of declaration. Maybe it's simply foreplay. Although there's this inkling frolicking inside me, whispering that he's always been with me, only just out of reach, which

makes no sense at all. It's the same inkling that knows he's it for me, no matter how absurd this situation has been.

"Okay." I nod, somewhat in a dream state. None of this seems real.

A butterfly's kiss.

"Tell me," he says as his teeth latch on to the lip I'm currently biting, tugging it free and soothing it with an enrapturing lick, rendering the rest of me completely boneless. "Tell me you're mine, Ivanna."

For the love of all the pretty holy things, what is he doing to me?

"I'm yours, Wells. Only yours."

He lets a heavy breath tumble out with my vow. "That's my good girl."

And his lips crash into mine as I whimper at his praise, my head bouncing off the door from the force, but I don't care. He tastes of strawberry candy, safety, and dominance. The blurring of right and wrong. I think he could make the depths of Hell feel like paradise. My legs climb to his waist. His erection presses against my core as my hips grind and my nails cut into the solid, flexed muscles of his back, gripping and scratching. Needing more.

He chuckles softly into my mouth. "So fucking greedy, Little Storm."

His hand fists in my hair, yanking it with a sting that jolts a wave of pleasure down my spine. I moan, and he peppers kisses over the column of my throat, his fingers digging into the notch below my ribs. His intensity suggests he's no less greedy, but I don't have the wherewithal to argue.

His mouth abruptly abandons this sensual ambush, hands cradling my face, his hips gluing me to the door, both of us panting. "You're so goddamn addictive. Lemon and raspberry. Vanilla. Everything I crave." Our lips touch for another gentle taste before his face grows more serious. "Clothes off."

Ordinarily, a command like that would piss me off, so for a split second, we stare each other down. A dare. But I'm convinced the payoff of obedience will be well worth it, so when I reach to shrug my shirt off, he releases my legs, tearing off my flowy, wide-legged pants in a smooth peel as he drops to his knees.

Pulling my panties to the side, he glides a finger through my folds to find me sopping. "So wet. Is this for me, baby?"

"Yes," I purr. "For you."

A smile blooms on his face as he sucks his fingers clean.

Holy. Hell.

His eyes stay connected with mine, verifying consent before he strips me of my panties. I drop my bra to the floor at the same time and stand before

him, bare. Vulnerable. Aching.

He's still kneeling before me, gaze raking up and down my naked form. "Fucking breathtaking. *Jesus.*"

That response unravels every nervous fiber within me. His hands find mine, placing them in his hair before he palms my ass and kisses teasingly at the apex of my thighs while I wiggle and writhe for more. He's merciful, and the tortured tease is brief. I whimper as he begins to gingerly lick and flick his tongue over my clit, flattening over me with languid strokes, slipping inside me and swirling back up. The sensation is nearly too much, yet still not enough.

He slings my right knee over his shoulder, gripping my hip. Then, the same on my left, sliding me up the door so it feels like I'm floating. Letting go of one hip, he plunges a finger inside me, curling it until the fullness and the warmth of his increasingly zealous tongue causes my thighs to tremble on his shoulders. I hold on for dear life. My fingers claw at his hair like an anchor while his face remains buried between my legs, his stubble prickling the skin of my inner thighs with a delicious bristle. He groans in approval, adding a second finger while I buck against him.

It burns a little, but in the best way. And a tightness builds in every muscle, a surge of electricity in every nerve ending.

I can't breathe or think. "Fuck, Wells. Oh God."

"That's it, baby. Come for me, Ives. Now." His voice is husky and stern, his order sending me right over the edge.

I'm no longer floating. I'm fucking flying. Something explosive rips through me, poaching my strength until I'm curled over his head, spasming. His mouth and fingers never stop as I quake around him. When he slides us down, puddling to the floor like a melted snowman, I have no words. I've orgasmed, of my own accord, countless times, but that was something entirely new. My body is still convulsing as I straddle him on the floor, a sheen of sweat glazing every inch of my skin.

He holds me there, in his tight embrace, for far more than a minute or two, before finally whispering in my ear, "I'll be starting every morning like that, the flavor of your sweet cunt coating my tongue. Fuck, baby."

His words draw a gasp out of me, so he holds me a bit snuggler, fingers scratching up and down my back and playing with my hair. The moment seems too tender for Wells, and yet it feels exactly right. My mind begins to slip away—his feathery touch, his hand petting my head, his breathing

steadying mine, causing my imagination to veer to other places.

I tip my chin up. “Wells, that was ... I don’t know what that was. But I want more—to taste you, to have you inside me.”

Planting an adoring nibble on my lip, he dusts his thumb over my cheekbone. “That’s good because we’re just getting started. I wanted you to catch your breath.”

He stands with me hooked on to him like a koala bear and moves us to the bed, propping himself against the headboard. “I don’t usually repeat myself, but for the sake of clarity, this is it. You’re mine now. Every part of you. You’ve been mine from the start, but now, you know it too. Understand?”

His claim on me sends my pulse skyrocketing.

“Yes,” I breathe.

He ghosts his fingers over my still-sensitive heat, drawing out a whimper that has his eyes crinkling with lust yet still hooded with warning. “Don’t test me. Someone touches you, they don’t disappear or lose a finger; they lose their life.”

That should be a red flag, an admission that sends me running, but instead, it makes me feel safe and cherished, especially after that guy roofied me. But Wells has had his share of disappearances and nights out since I’ve been with him, so I can’t help but push back.

I tilt my head, fingers clasped behind his neck, toying with his hair. “And what about you? Do I get to kill any woman who touches you?”

A grin climbs to his ears as he keeps circling my clit, just enough to leave me hungry. “I would expect nothing less, but that will never happen. There’s only you, Little Storm. Always.”

My jaw tightens. I don’t expect this dreamy thirty-one-year-old man to be inexperienced. I’m not naive. But I do expect to be told the truth.

I grip his wrist, ceasing any movement. “Seriously? I’m giving you my purity. All I’m asking in return is your honesty. I deserve that.”

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Ivanna. You have my honesty. Ask me.”

“Okay.” I huff, hating that I brought the conversation here when we’re finally moving forward, but also knowing it’s necessary. “You were out all night on more than one occasion, Wells. When was the last time you slept with someone?”

“Those nights away from you were for work,” he says, and his emeralds shout transparency. “It’s been years.”

“Years?” I gasp. “Why?”

“Two since I’ve even touched someone, and that didn’t go anywhere. And no other woman has ever been in our home, other than housekeeping.” His gaze dances all over my face. “I was waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

He sighs, both palms rising to cradle my cheeks. “You, Little Storm. I was waiting for you.”

Good God, what is this man doing to me?

The hoarse tenor delivering that admission tells me he believes it. And in the depths of my heart, I understand—or want to. I’ve been asked out plenty of times, but no one ever felt right. I was waiting for a sense of belonging, a connection, a thrill. The wind who was willing to guide my sails.

Waiting for Wells.

When his lips connect with mine again, I come undone, tasting myself on his tongue and eager to have all of him, to let him claim me like he wants. He throws me onto my back, and my legs curl around his waist as he sucks on my nipple, holding both of my wrists in his hand. The lack of control unhinges me further, and I try to shove his sweatpants down his legs with my heels. Desperate to feel him.

“Wait,” he orders. “I’ll set the pace.”

“I’m on birth control.” So, out flies one of the many thoughts in my head.

He chuckles, biting my nipple and shooting a delightful zing of pain through it. “Good. *For now*. I won’t ever be fucking my wife with a condom.”

My wife. I can’t get enough of that.

His lips coast up over my collarbone and shoulder to my neck, chilled bumps erupting over the whole of me. I arch, offering him more as his fingers tickle over my ribs and stomach and hips until they’re thrusting inside me.

His teeth snag my earlobe. “You’re drenched again, Ives.” He pulls back, releasing my wrists. “Keep them there.”

That demand, my eagerness to do whatever he tells me, and the confidence that he seems to have this all under control paints this encounter in a liberating vibrancy rather than an intimidating charcoal. Bright and vivid hues portraying my first time.

When his joggers and boxers drop to the ground, my eyes widen at the satin-skinned cock saluting me. I don’t have much experience with dicks, but Wells seems large, in girth and length. Not so big that it’s terrifying though. I

once read a dark romance where the heroine claimed the love interest had a horse dick—not to be confused with *hung like a horse*. She meant the size compared. Literally. More power to the girls who are turned on by such a monstrosity, but anything that could belong on a half-ton animal does not belong inside me.

His lips twitch with a mirthful smirk, as though he were privy to my inner monologue regarding zoo-animal comparatives to his lower half. “It’ll fit,” he promises as he crawls over my outstretched body, and at my incoherent murmuring, he adds, “We’ll fit together perfectly.”

God, I love the sound of that.

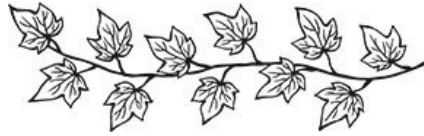
Spreading my legs wide with his knees, he teases my opening with the tip of his cock. “Eyes on me the whole time. Understood?”

“Yes.” I swallow.

“It’s going to hurt, but I’ll make it feel good too.” He hovers above me, hands pinning mine to the bed, and kisses my nose while he glides slowly inside me.

And as he deepens his position, inch by inch—a glorious, burning fullness splitting the depths of my center—I surrender all that I am. There’s no going back. Forever and always, I’ll belong to Gavin Wells.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



WELLS

She's fucking perfect.

Worth every agonizing second I waited.

And here, naked in my bed—innocent sapphire eyes glued to mine, nails digging into my hands as I restrain myself and push into her tight, warm cunt at a snail's pace, thrusting past a bit of resistance—she's my ultimate reward.

And I don't give a fuck that I don't deserve her.

She's absolutely exquisite and completely mine.

Better than any fantasy I've ever had of her.

She's also not breathing.

"Breathe, Ives."

She nods, sucks in a sharp breath, and holds it, chewing her lip.

I still, my muscles tensing. "Talk to me, Little Storm. I'm in. Are you okay?"

She swallows but says nothing.

"Ivanna," I warn.

"Sorry," she whispers, and a smile crawls up her cheeks while she bats her long, dark lashes at me. "Did you think you broke me with your big dick, Mr. Wells?" She giggles, those innocent eyes creased with snark and mischief.

I bite her shoulder and start to move inside her, drawing out the sexiest little whimper. "You're such a brat, Mrs. Wells. What am I going to do with you?"

"So we're clear, you are really big, and it burns. My insides are on fire, but ... I like it. I guess that means you can try to fuck the brat out of me. Isn't that what you ..." She trails off with a pant, losing herself to the moment,

eyes growing heavy but still on me, as I ordered.

“I have plenty of ideas of how to fuck the brat out of you, Ivy, but not tonight.” I kneel, hoisting her ass up with the inside of my thighs for a better view and deeper seat. She gasps at the change of angle but moans as soon as my thumb circles her clit.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous like this. Perky tits bouncing, thrill and hunger passing through her ocean blues. Brave, ardent, and vulnerable in a way no one else has ever seen.

Mine.

I’ve never cared much about taking virginity, but I’m desperate for this woman. Owning this experience with her is an irrefutable carnal awakening.

“Why?” she purrs as I push into her harder. “Why not tonight? Gotta work up your courage, huh, Chief?”

The sound of that title on her tongue, sass or not, is unleashing something feral in me. As is that smirk on her lips, like she’s drunk on the pain and pleasure.

I smile, arching a brow and pausing my thumb. “Let’s see your courage. What part of you is on fire, Ivanna?”

She rolls her lips in, cheeks flushing. I’m buried to the hilt inside her, both of us bathing in the blood of her innocence, and she’s embarrassed by a word. A whimper falls from her lips, aching for the friction because she was already growing close to her climax, which is good because it’s been too long for me and I won’t last much longer. I’ve been edging myself in preparation for this, but she’s so goddamn wet and warm and tight.

“My pussy,” she whispers.

“Good girl.” I smack her breast, testing, and her dazed eyes brighten. “Is that what you wanted? A little pain? Want me to fuck your sweet cunt rough?” I ask as I resume my massage on her clit.

Nodding, she pants, “More. Please. I’m so close.”

Jesus, the things I want to do to her.

With another pump up to the hilt, I praise her, “You’re doing so good, so beautiful, taking every inch of me.”

She whines—the most erotic sound I’ve ever heard. “I think I’m going to ...”

I continue my even thrusting, doing my best to pace myself. “What, Little Storm? You’re going to what?”

Her eyes crinkle, bashful yet fearless—accepting the challenge I already

know she has in her. “Come,” she rasps. “I’m gonna come.”

“There you go. Come on my cock like a good girl.” I smack the side of her other breast to send her over the precipice, and she arches her back, pushing against me and quaking with a scream. My hand shoots to her mouth, smothering her cries; I’m unwilling to share her noises with anyone.

“Wells!” she wails into my palm, hazy sapphires locked on mine while she comes apart. Her walls clench my cock as her every muscle contracts. Body trembling, her skin glistens with a layer of sweat, and her limbs fall weak.

The most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

It’s too much for me. I scoop her into my arms, pumping into her, less gentle than I should be, as I chase my own release. “I knew you’d feel like this—made for me. You’re so fucking perfect, Ivy. My brat, my storm, my good girl.”

She burrows her face into my neck as I hold her, shaking as I come, and eventually, I fall onto my back, still deep inside her, her fiery strands fanned across my chest. I tighten my arms around her, fully aware of the precious gift I’m holding. Unable to grasp that she’s even real. I’ve dreamed of this for so long.

And fear crashes into me, mowing me down with a greater force than it did the night I knew my whole family was dying, miles away from me. Helpless.

Christ, I can’t lose her.

But I also don’t want to miss these moments with her because I’m tied in knots.

I drink in a shaky breath and rake my fingers through her hair, kissing her forehead. “Let’s go get cleaned up.”

“Okay.” She lifts her head, eyes skating over my face, knuckles grazing the stubble on my jaw. “I knew you’d feel like that too. Perfect for me.”

Her lips meet mine, and I deepen the kiss, sitting up, curling her legs around my waist, and walking us to the shower. Savoring her with every step.

The stone walls run the length of my bathroom, about fifteen feet. There’s a large rain head in the middle and several other nozzles on the sides. I flip them on, wait for the hot water, and set Ivy beneath the rain sprayer.

She takes us both in, painted in a mixture of cum and blood, along with the crimson flowing down the drain, and gasps. “Oh God. I’m so sorry. Your sheets—”

I clutch her chin. “No. Don’t apologize. We were on the comforter. It won’t stain because it’s black, and I have a spare. Everything was perfect. *You are perfect.*”

Pumping some soap into my hand, I lather her up, scrubbing away the markings of all she entrusted to me. The savage beast inside me silently rebuffs the gesture, yearning to brand every inch of her as mine. *In time.* I continue over the rest of her, and before I can move to myself, she takes over doing the same for me. Wiping me clean—my thighs and balls first—smiling when my still-half-mast cock twitches in her hand.

“This is good. Us. Right?” Her eyes gleam with hope, her chest frozen in place. She needs reassurance. I’m sure her emotions are all over the place right now.

“So good,” I promise her, rubbing shampoo into her hair as she continues soaping my chest and abs. “I’ll get your things moved into this room, but tonight, you’ll have to smell like me.”

“I love the way you smell.” She grins, relief flooding her features. “Will you tell me about your tattoos?” Her palms skim the ones curling over my shoulders. A griffin on one, the skeleton of a tree frog on the other. As the pads of her fingers snag on the raised scar tissue those tattoos cover, she swallows, probing me with questions she doesn’t voice.

Spinning her so she’s facing away from me and no longer directly under the rain head, I tilt her chin up, pushing the bubbles down her back. I’m enjoying the view far too much to share tonight. “Those are from a past life, better saved for a future conversation,” I say with a pat on her ass.

She peers over her shoulder at me, her lips sloping downward into a contemplative frown. “What about the sword in the stone? Past life too?”

“No. That’s for this one.” I add a dollop of conditioner to her hair. “It’s a reminder that we all have a purpose inside us, something we’re meant for.”

“I love that,” she sings, the awe in her voice rising with the steam. “Found yours?”

My fingers comb through her hair, untangling it before dusting over the channel of her spine to the dip below her dainty ribs, pointed hip bones, round ass. Ravishing.

“I have.” That may be true, but unease swarms in my bones. The realization of how different the perspective of our beginning will be is making me dizzy. This experience might feel tainted when she discovers who I am.

“Wow,” she muses, and the echo of it crashes into me. “That must be relieving, enlightening. Know how to accomplish taking your sword?”

Yep. She’s standing right in front of me.

Fuck.

I pull her back into my chest, coiling my arms around her. “Sometimes, there are several paths to the same destination.”

I’m not sure how that applies here, but I’ll find the right one for us, Little Storm.

She twists in my arms until she’s facing me, chin lifted. “I have no idea what mine is. My purpose or *sword*. My father told me he had something exciting planned for me after I graduated, but ... six weeks before, he had the stroke. My mother didn’t know his plans, and I’ve felt a little lost since.” Her lip trembles with that admission, but she fights it, searching me with her watery blues. “But I’m happy to be a passenger on your purpose until I find my own.”

“You’re no one’s passenger, Ivy. You’re the destination.”

She blows out a breath and drops her head, so I shut off the water, wrap her in a fluffy towel, and move us into the open area of the bathroom.

As I’m drying her off, I catch her wistful eyes in the mirror. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” She notes my narrowed gaze and continues before I have a chance to warn, “Our night has been so wonderful, Wells. I don’t want to be too much of a girl right now—that’s all.”

Cupping her pussy and pinching her nipple beneath the towel, I smirk. “I can assure you, I’m very happy with how much of a girl you are.”

“Cute.” She slants her head, still eyeing me in the reflection, and sticks her tongue out.

My eyebrows dart up. “I honestly don’t know the last time someone’s done that to me. *Refreshing*. Now, tell me what you were thinking that makes you too much of a girl.”

She swallows, and her gaze drops from mine. “It feels like a big switch. I mean, at the wedding, I thought you maybe wanted to be with me, but then you didn’t. And now, you’re being so sweet, and I’ve wanted this and ...”

I set the towel on the counter and grab a brush from my drawer. “It’s a lot. September’s been a big month. You’re allowed to have big emotions, Ivanna. We’ll figure it out.”

The last sentiment is more for me than her. She nods, and I start to work

the bristles through her hair, relishing this vulnerable candor between us.

“Would you have accepted whatever your father had in mind for you?” I ask.

“Most likely,” she says, watching me in the mirror. “He knew me better than anyone. If I didn’t agree, he would’ve respected that. But I trusted him. He’d never point me toward something lightly.”

He certainly wouldn’t have. He’s the most thorough, well-thought-out man I’ve ever known. I’m sure being able to anticipate every angle is a necessity in neurosurgery, but Dr. Thomas Kingston is a genius, even in my world. And he used every skill he had to protect his daughter.

This would all be different if he hadn’t fallen ill. He would’ve helped me transition her long before that ancestry test. It would have been dangerous, but presumably smoother. Although we wouldn’t be standing here as husband and wife. Not yet anyway. Maybe not ever because my motives would have clouded everything between us before she fell for me even if her father encouraged her to look past it.

Dr. Kingston pulls up the driveway in his Aston Martin V12 Vantage. I stroll out of the garage to meet him. It’s just us today. The guys know him well enough now, but I appreciate our one-on-one time, and they’re all working.

He steps out of the car, a broad smile on his face. “Gavin,” he croons, handing me a bottle of Macallan 18 and pulling me in for a hug. “Good to see you, son.”

“You too, sir. Always. Thank you for the scotch.”

“Thought we’d do a little celebrating. Eight more months. Our girl has grown to be quite impressive.”

Seeing beyond his doting father confidence, I notice the “our girl” in his words. In all the times we’ve met over the years, he’s never said that before.

I chuckle. “She’s a force, Tom. Impressive is an understatement.”

He smacks my back as we walk to the patio, hand gripping my shoulder. “And you paved the way for her. Well done on the votes.”

“Thank you. It took some effort, but my grandfather saw the payoff.”

“And you will too. I’m happy for you, Gavin. I told you I needed you to put Ivanna first, and you’ve done that. You earned your place at the table in their eyes and mine.”

I smile and nod. I’m a multimillionaire many times over, probably edging

to billionaire status by thirty-five. And the power will be beyond what I'd ever imagined, but it all feels a little empty, more removed than I expected. Like I'm losing something. Losing her. When she isn't even mine.

"Did I ever tell you the story of how I fell for Natasha?" he asks, sitting at the table while I pour us each a drink.

"I don't think you have."

"I was in medical school, dedicating every moment to studying and mastering neuroscience and physiology, determined to be the best, when this blue-eyed blonde stole my attention. Back against the tree, books all over the grass, pencil in her mouth, and hair falling out of a ponytail. The most beautiful mess I'd ever seen. I discovered she was a freshman, psychology major, taking a heavy class load. Pursuing a relationship would've been bad news for both of us, a distraction that could derail our career paths. So, for a year, I allowed myself only glimpses. Trying to let that be enough. Until—fifteen months after I first saw her—I couldn't stand it for another minute. And the rest is history. We were a perfect fit."

The image of him so young, chasing after a girl, is amusing. A grin tips my lips. "And now, you've been married how long?"

He sighs. "Almost forty years. Damn good years. Even the hard ones."

He's not usually so reminiscent when we're together. While he isn't all business, he generally kicks into mentoring mode.

"I've never met anyone more deserving of a good life, Tom." It's true. He's the best man I know. Even in his shadier dealings, he conducts himself with a veneer of integrity. It's a wonder we've built such a close, personal relationship when he knows my methods of business are far less honorable than his.

"You and I aren't so different, Gavin." He chuckles as if he knows my thoughts. "Different paths, but both take a shit ton of tenacity and dedication. Both of us do whatever it takes to save the lives of those in our care, using any means necessary. It can be humbling to imagine bringing anyone into that. Sometimes, it isn't up to us though—the way someone gets under our skin, pumps through our veins."

He stares pointedly at me. "I've seen the expression pass over you—the look I had on my face for fifteen months—when you speak about my daughter." He raises a firm palm, halting my objections. "I'm not suggesting anything happen now. She's got her work cut out for her and preparing her and protecting her must always be the priority. I don't question that keeping

her safe would be your priority though. You've become like a son to me over these years, earned my respect and my trust. So, if something should take shape, you have my blessing."

The men I live and work with don't seem to notice, but the doctor misses nothing, well aware of the infatuation I have for the Little Storm. He's lost his goddamn mind if he thinks his daughter, who has been raised with ethics and morals and strength, would ever willingly give herself to the person hired to hunt her down and turn her over for profit though. The truth of that thought slices through me.

I pluck a cigarette from my pocket, lighting it with a deep drag and blowing out the smoke to settle my nerves. "That means a lot to me, Tom, because you have my utmost respect. Having yours is an unfathomable honor. And Ivanna has been a joy to watch and protect, but she—"

"You need to quit smoking. Not just because it's a terrible habit, doing unspeakable things to your body, nervous system included, but Ivanna detests the smell. She wouldn't look twice at someone who smoked."

Something about that advice, breaking down the obstacles between us into simple hurdles, feels like a road map. What if every barrier to her is merely a fire I need to extinguish, one by one? I've never not gone after what I want. And he isn't wrong; I want his daughter. More than I've ever wanted anything. Fantasies about the redheaded vixen have kept me from touching any other woman for more than a year. No one compares. And Ivanna Kingston grows more tempting by the day. She deserves better, but if she's going to be in my world, she needs to be mine.

I drop the cigarette to the ground without a word, crushing it with the toe of my shoe.

Tom sips his scotch with a chuckle. "You're a good man, Gavin."

I stroke my forehead, rubbing the memory away with a sickening pang. Fuck. She's got my emotions all over the place.

"Pee," I tell her, "so you don't get a UTI. I'll change the bedding and make you some food."

"Did you just order me to pee?"

I kiss her temple. "Yes. Don't fight me when I'm taking care of you. I'll be back in a few."

She rolls her lips, a coquettish smile tipping the corners. "Okay."

I shut her in there, switch out the comforter, throw on my joggers, and

head to the kitchen, pulling out some berries, eggs, milk, butter, and bread. Before the eggs are scrambled and the toast is browned, Ivy is standing beside me, wearing nothing but one of my button-ups.

“Ivanna, I told you I’d be back. I don’t want you out here, wearing that. I want you naked in my bed.”

A smile explodes across her gorgeous, clean face as she braces her hip against the counter. “No one is out here, except us, they’ve seen me in less, and it’ll be fun to rip off. Plus, I have questions.”

Squashing the vexing memory of them all gawking at her in the tiny blue bikini, I bite. “Questions?”

“Favorite food? Color? Side of the bed?”

I stir while grabbing a knife for the butter. “Lasagna. Whatever shade of blue your eyes are at any given moment. And nearest to the door.”

An under-her-breath giggle falls before she asks, “Any side that’s near the door? Why?”

“For protection.”

She nods, biting away a smile. “Making eggs?”

“For you.” I open the fridge, snatch a blue Gatorade, and hand it to her. “Drink that.”

Her nose scrunches, lips twitching. “You’re making me eggs at midnight and forcing a sports drink down my throat because we had sex?” She looks around on the last word, as if her in my shirt isn’t broadcasting that loud and clear.

I pull the toast out, buttering each slice. “You’ve been training strenuously as well. You need protein, vitamins, and hydration.”

She laughs, stretches on her tiptoes, and pecks my cheek. “Thank you.”

My eyes widen at her lack of protesting, but I take it as a small win, nestle her against me, and kiss her until she moans. Sliding my hand under the shirt, I find she’s in a pair of my boxers. I slip a finger inside, gliding through her slick folds. A cursory glance at my glistening finger reveals her bleeding has stalled, but her desire hasn’t waned.

I growl, “You’re soaked again, Little Storm.”

“Mmhmm. I’m still hungry—for more than eggs.” She grabs my dick with a purr, clouding my goddamn head.

“You’ll be sore. We should—”

“Fine,” she snipes, wrenching out of my arms. “I’ll take care of myself when you fall asleep.”

“No.” I curl my fingers onto her hips, holding her in place. “There’ll be none of that from now on. Unless I’m watching.”

She scoffs. “What?”

My lips move to her ear as I cup her over the boxers. “This cunt is mine now. I own your pleasure, Ivanna. You need to come, you ask me.”

Her breath hitches. She’s undeniably aroused by that demand, and yet her strong-willed mind readies for a fight. “What if you’re not home?”

I scrape the eggs onto a plate with the toast and fruit. “You wait.”

“Asleep?”

“Wake me up.”

“Not in the mood?”

“Never gonna happen.”

“Refusing me because you think I’m sore?”

I smile, wink, and hand her the plate with a fork. “I’ll come up with something. Eat your damn food.”

She laughs as she moves to a stool at the island. Her full, infectious cackle bounces off the ceiling and apparently acts as a beacon to the guys, who saunter in from the patio.

Here we go.

The three of them are all sporting smiles like the fucking Joker on their faces.

And Liam starts clapping like a jackass. “Aww. Look at the happy couple. Finally fuck your bride, Chief?”

“Jesus Christ,” I hiss.

Ivy’s face blushes a lobster red as she stabs her eggs with a coy grin, but no comeback.

I walk toward Liam and palm the back of his neck. “Didn’t you say you weren’t always a motherfucker?”

“I gave you all I had in that department earlier, and it looks like it paid dividends, so—”

“Yeah. Thanks, but shut your suck, Graves.”

He snickers, but keeps his mouth shut.

Ty must notice Ivy’s discomfort. He hugs her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. “Happy looks good on you, Freckles.”

She reaches for his hand. “Thanks, Ty. I am.”

Gage drops onto the kitchen stool beside her. “Does this mean you won’t be baking anymore?”

That eases all the tension, and she bursts out laughing, shooting a look to Liam, who winks back, affirming a proud, “Mission accomplished, High Society.”

I’m guessing that’s in regard to the beignets. When I told him he was a fucking moron for defying orders, putting Ivy at risk, and returning with a souvenir of his insubordination, he insisted it was a sacrifice to help her acclimate because she wanted to win Gage over with food. Looks like it worked.

“I’ll still bake, Big Guy,” she vows. “I don’t *only* do it when I’m sad. Do you like lasagna?”

His whole face beams, wrapped around the pint-size finger he screamed about weeks ago. She seems so sweet and harmless, using baked goods to win over the one guy in the house who I was nervous she’d always be at odds with.

But my girl is cunning. A genius, like the man who raised her. In the most unsuspecting package.

Lethal.

We chat with the guys while Ivy eats, and they finally bid us good night with a handful of jeers that she fields much better. She was right. Ripping that shirt off her will be a lot of fun. I swoop her into my arms and sprint back to *our* bedroom while she squeals.

“I came up with something that won’t make me a bit sore, at least not in the same area,” she says with a sexy smirk as I drop her onto the bed.

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” She bounces onto her knees and tugs at the waistband of my sweatpants with a suggestive lick of her luscious lips.

I hold her hand still. “You want to suck my cock, Little Storm?”

I didn’t entertain the idea earlier because of that asshole in college who had tried to hurt her, but if she’s asking.

She nods emphatically, her teeth sinking seductively into that pouty lip. “I do.”

“Get off the bed.”

When she obeys, I tear the shirt open, buttons popping as she giggles, the abused fabric collapsing to the floor.

So gorgeous.

“Take off the boxers too,” I instruct.

She complies and looks back to me with one brow bowed, so I keep

guiding her.

“Free me, but then I’ll sit on the edge of the bed, and you kneel.”

She removes my pants, rolling the waistband down to reveal my solid dick bobbing in earnest. Her eyes roam, studying me, while I kick the garments to the side and wait on the bed for her to process. She notes the burn marks on my hip with a subtle wince, but doesn’t linger there, moving wide eyes back to my aching length.

I squeeze her hand. “Only if you’re sure.” Too much hesitation on my part may tip her off that I know her experience, but I need her to be certain.

“I told you I was.” There’s an edge to her tone.

Defensiveness? Regret for volunteering? Remembrance of her assault?

“Say it,” I order.

She rolls her eyes with a huff. “Why?”

“Because I appreciate clarity, I enjoy hearing you say filthy words, and I told you to.”

She balks, and we stare each other down for three solid minutes before she lowers herself between my legs. “I want to give you a blow job, Wells. I’m not sure I’ll be very good at it, but I’d like to try.”

I lift her chin. “You’re already more than enough.” Smoothing my hand over her head, I stare into eager eyes searching mine for direction. “If you need to stop, pinch my leg. Hard. You can start by licking, and when you’re ready, take me into your throat and suck.”

She does exactly as I said, licking up and down the shaft with a few pumps of her fist before taking me into her mouth and sucking. I scrunch her hair into my fist, careful not to force her head down, and keep her big, watery eyes on mine as her pouty lips perform magic, rosy cheeks hollow from her work, drool escaping down her chin.

Breathtaking.

“Such a good girl, Ivy. So beautiful with my cock in your mouth. Open your throat and breathe through your nose.”

She moans as she opens more, taking me deeper, the vibrations of her noises surging through me.

I love that she’s so turned on blowing me.

When she gags and sputters, my abs tighten in ecstasy and concern, but those liquid blues peer at me from beneath her long lashes with pride and assurance as she adjusts to the intrusion, and I grow harder in her warmth. She strokes the part of my cock she can’t fit and moves her other hand to my

balls, gingerly kneading.

“Fuck,” I hiss, astonished by her natural finesse at giving head. “You’re a goddamn miracle, Little Storm. So perfect.”

Two more minutes and I explode in her mouth with a grunt. “Swallow every drop.” I choke out the command, breathless as my cum shoots down her throat.

Pupils blown and face tear-streaked, she complies, stands, and grins as I scoop her into my arms and fall back onto the bed.

“That was okay?” she whispers.

Rolling us so that my weight cages her, I steady my breathing while drinking in the remnants of her performance with a devouring kiss, tasting myself on her tongue. “Not okay. Phenomenal. You get better by the second, even when I think it isn’t possible.”

She beams. “Right back at ya, hot stuff. You’re a real-life fantasy.”

I sweep some damp strands off her forehead. “You know, on our wedding night, when your inhibitions were low from the roofie, you told me about some fantasies.”

“Oh yeah, the choking.” She grimaces. “Did I say anything else?”

“That you also wanted to be tied up, among other things.”

She winces at my words.

“Look at me, Ives.” When her eyes find mine, I continue, “Do not be embarrassed or ashamed. Not with me. Fantasies are normal. We can talk about anything you want to try.”

Her teeth pierce her lower lip. “Since I’m inexperienced, I don’t really know what I like. I mean, I’m pretty certain I’d like bondage, but breath play sounds a little scary. I just like the idea ...” She pauses, as though it’s too much to get out, pinning her lips tight.

“Keep going,” I urge, gently kissing the corner of her mouth, my tongue slipping out to caress the seam of her lips while she parts them with a sultry purr.

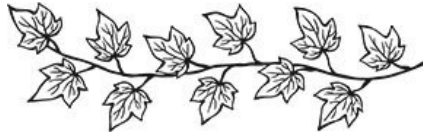
Her chest rises against mine with a deep breath before she spits out her words. “I like the thought of being used, dominated, not having a choice. Something about it makes me feel desired and needed.”

“You are unquestionably both, Little Storm, and I have plenty of ideas on how we can live out your fantasies.” I dust my knuckles over her smattering of freckles, finishing with a smooch on her button nose. “Now, lie there and don’t come until I tell you. Understand?”

With that, my lips glide down her body, sprinkling her with kisses along the way. I plant myself between her thighs, feasting on her sweet cunt, the taste of the two of us mixed together an intoxicating cocktail. She begs me for her release until I ultimately grant permission.

We fall asleep afterward, Ivy tucked in my arms, where she belongs. But she wakes to me in the same position between her legs, the same plea on her lips. Our perfect beginning.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



IVY

If I could live only one snippet of life, it would be a string of endless Octobers.

Our days are nothing short of magical. Cinnamon and nutmeg infused gatherings. The cool breeze rustling up vibrant-colored leaves while we train—running and climbing and hollering like kids on the cusp of freedom in a schoolyard. The pumpkin coffee and hot meals Wells forces on me—nervous I’ve gotten too cold or worn out. The smoke and flames that light up the inky sky when they spin campfire tales—stories that I lock away because although I don’t feel captive, the stories read like clues to my deliverance.

It’s been nearly a month and a half in this new world, edging close to three weeks since Wells and I became a couple between the sheets. Everything before—before we met, before I was folded into this odd but comforting family, before Wells made me feel things I’d only read in novels—is like a distant dream. I’m no closer to understanding what’s got him so shaken or what the threat to me is, but my trust in him has grown. It’s not a gut feeling I’m relying on now. I see it in all the tiny ways he cares for me.

The conviction in what we’re building is news I’ve wanted to shout from the rooftops, but being concealed from civilization makes that challenging. The brief contact with the three women in my life has been enough to suffice. My mother cried the last time I spoke to her, so relieved that I was well and happy. Rena has been a constant source of encouragement. And I finally received a response from Celeste the day after Wells and I had sex. I should have known that would be what would wake her up. She’s been busy, battling shoddy service, plunging into heart-stopping adventures, and being “fucked into a coma”—her words, not mine. She was ecstatic for me, but I don’t

expect her communication to be any better moving forward. There's no resentment on my end though. It's good she has this experience before she signs herself away to be some politician's mannequin wife. And I can't complain because it seems I'm meant to be right where I am.

Somewhere, among these men, is my purpose, or *my sword*, as Wells put it. I don't know what that means or why I feel it, but it's here. A belonging. Until I figure it out, I'm content to be swept up with Wells in this autumn retreat though.

As I sit at the dining table for our late afternoon dinner, I realize my thoughts have drifted because eight amused eyes are staring at me while I chew. I wonder how long I was chasing that shooting star.

Covering my dreamlike absence, I clear my throat and deflect. "How did you guys meet?"

Liam lifts a slice of pizza to his mouth, gaze still on me. "Military."

Gage bangs his fist on the table, the pizza box jumping with a start. "The fuck, man?"

I'd love to know who burned him. Everything is always so melodramatic.

"She's with us," Ty snaps. "If we're bringing her in, she's *in*. Christ, she's his fucking wife."

Ty is best-friend-for-life material, which would make Celeste turn fifty shades of green, but we'll cross that bridge when she's done mounting *things* halfway across the globe.

Wells quietly studies them all before locking on to me. "We were Navy SEALs."

"Wow," I say, noting how quiet they've all become, like I've unlocked some mysterious treasure.

It certainly explains a lot. The way they silently communicate and bounce off one another. The power and authority they all seem to drip. While I don't know much about the Navy SEALs, I know they're hard-core. Maybe that's the source of the burn marks and scars Wells refuses to talk about.

"So, you're all from different parts of the US?" I ask.

Liam nods with a wink, unfazed by my questions, and yet the air feels thick. Although since they're allowing me to pry, I don't see why I should stop yet.

"And family? Your families must be all over then? Missing you."

Gage huffs. "Wrong. Assumptions brought about by the cushy life others have sacrificed to give you."

He's obviously in one of his moods. Makes me wish I had a brownie to shove down his tonsils, but I won't let his tantrum goad me.

My irritation splashes into guilt, but I'm not even sure for what. It's not really me he's mad at—can't be—but I've certainly poured salt into an unhealed wound. Turning toward Wells, I cock a questioning brow.

He, again, looks them all over before acknowledging me. "No family."

It takes a good ten seconds for my mind to latch on to that. When it does, there's no stopping the gasp that falls from me, slicing through the quiet like the thwack of a fallen tree. "None of you ... have anyone? I don't understand."

"Part of how we came together in the Navy," Ty supplies, and while I don't know quite what that means, he's likely not referring to an orphan support group.

The somber mood of the table has me anxious. It's as though they're waiting—waiting to see if I pity them or dig deeper than they're willing to let me go. But if they're truly accepting me, letting me become the family they lack, I'm going to make it the easiest decision they've ever made.

I snatch another piece of pizza from the box with a sigh. "Well, thank God. That'll make Thanksgiving a lot fucking easier."

Ty and Liam immediately burst into laughter, which has Wells chuckling too. But while Gage is smirking, he seems unsure, so I test the waters.

"Especially yours, Big Guy. If genetics are any indication, one of you is more than enough. I can only bake so many pies."

He nods with a faint grin, and while I don't think that means he suddenly trusts me with his past, he's more at ease.

Dinner continues with our usual light banter, but once it ends, I chase Wells down in the library. He's lounging in the reading chair he likes with a scotch in hand, some symphony I don't recognize rumbling quietly in the background.

I slide myself onto the arm, planting my feet in his lap and sweeping my fingers through his hair. "What happened to your family?"

His emeralds dance all over my face while he sips his drink. "They were killed in a tornado when I was sixteen. I was at a friend's house, the next town over."

My heart cracks wide open, but I fight the emotion, for fear it will close him off. "Your mom and dad?"

He nods. "And my younger brother."

I clutch my chest, tears brimming my eyes, barely able to hold it in. “Jesus, Wells, that’s awful.”

He sets down his drink and drags me onto his lap, so I’m curled in his arms. “It was another lifetime. I’m okay. I have you.”

Another lifetime. Like the tattoos.

“Don’t do that—gloss over it and shut me out. Don’t you miss them?”

“Of course, but holding on to the past won’t bring them back.” His fingers string through my hair, and I lose myself to his pacifying touch for a few moments—until a baffling connection jolts me alert.

“Your family died in a tornado, but you call me Little Storm. Why?”

His arms tighten around me. “Sometimes, storms come to decimate everything we deem important. Other times, they come to clear our path.”

“Which one am I?”

“Both,” he rasps.

I don’t know what to do with that. Wells has a poetic side to him, the part of him that loves literature, that chooses books with lost love and unmet longings. Maybe he sees our love story as a tragedy rather than a romance.

“Both?” I squeak, the emotion finally dripping onto my cheek.

He wipes my tear and cups my chin, securing it in place so I meet his eyes. “You changed everything, Ivanna. Turned it all upside down. The moment I saw you, I knew I was lost to whatever path you carved for me.”

Sometimes, the way he touches me or phrases things, it’s like a whisper in disguise. A ripple in a pond.

It’s my eighteenth birthday party—a masquerade ball, like I requested—but I’m angry. This afternoon, my father informed me that I have to attend the local university and that my security detail will be increased. I love him, trust him, and want to make him happy, but I was hoping to go away for school.

I wander out to our terrace. It’s my favorite place, overlooking the pond. The cold December night air causes my bare arms to erupt in goose bumps, but I don’t care. I can’t go back in there right now. My hope was that the masks would add an element of mystery while also veiling how alone I always feel surrounded by people. It didn’t quite work.

As I’m staring at the way the moonlight capers off the water, a stone suddenly skips across the glassy surface, ripples bleeding out to the rim. I jerk my head up, searching for the author of the enthralling ripples.

On the other side of the terrace, shrouded in shadows, beneath a black-and-silver mask, and devastating in an impeccably tailored suit, a man peers back at me. I'm not usually afraid, nor am I bold. Social etiquette generally has me evaluating someone's actions before choosing my own.

But here, masked and facing an equally hidden man, I don't feel the need to be meek. He doesn't say a word as I walk toward him. He only watches.

When I'm inches from him, I pluck one of the stones from his palm, rubbing my thumb over it and noticing how smooth yet unbelievably ordinary it is. "Skipping stones—one of those simple yet captivating activities." I send it to hop on the water like the one before it. "It's remarkable how something so ordinary can skirt the surface of something so much larger, causing ripples that shake the entirety of the pond."

He chuckles a little under his breath. "Why stand out here in the cold, alone, on your birthday?"

I lift my chin, curious to who lies beneath the mask. His voice is mesmerizing and not one I've ever heard before. But he knows who I am.

Not wanting to lose the mystique that I built my entire birthday around, I don't ask him any questions and instead look back at the pond and answer his. "I was angry, but I love it out here, no matter the weather. The way the sunrise colors the water and the moonlight whispers across it. The way something as small as a pebble can change it. I always feel hopeful out here, like maybe—even though in the grand scheme of the world, I'm somewhat ordinary—I can make big changes. I don't need to be the pond. I like the element of surprise in being the tiny pebble who shakes it."

Even with his mask on, I can feel his eyes on me, raking over my body. My pulse races, my cheeks heat, and a pool of warmth wets my panties. I've never been so affected by a man. Maybe because I've only been around boys. Or maybe because the mask adds a bit of danger.

He moves closer, and my breath catches when his hand glides over the small of my back. He smells like smoke and alcohol and leather—a lodge. Not a combination I particularly like, and yet, somehow, it works. His lips brush against my ear. "Happy birthday. You are absolutely magnificent. 'Never love anyone who treats you like you're ordinary.' "

"Thank you. That's a quote by Oscar Wilde."

He releases a hushed chortle, an audible grin, and even without seeing it, I feel victorious for having earned it.

"See. Magnificent, Ivanna."

*And poof. He's gone.
A butterfly's kiss.
My heart will never be the same.*

“Ivy.” Wells’s voice skates across the glint of that memory. “You took a little vacation. Where’d you go?”

“I was thinking about my parents’ home, the pond. I’ve always thought of myself as ordinary, not in a bad way, but my life ...”

He saves my nonsensical rambling. “There isn’t one tiny cell in you that’s ordinary. You’re—”

My lips press into his, craving his touch even more than his beautiful words. He’s a dream I hope I never wake from. He deepens the kiss, holding my face, sliding his tongue against mine, nibbling my lip, until his fingers trickle down beneath the waistband of my yoga pants and into my panties.

“So wet,” he praises.

“For you.” I smile against his lips. “But we can’t. I have shooting practice, and you have your call.”

He plunges a finger inside me, steamrolling over my objections. “I have three minutes to make you come, so your pretty pussy doesn’t forget me while you’re out there.”

“I never forget.” A moan escapes me as his thumb circles my clit, sprinkling in some inciting flicks and pinches.

“Shh. Your sounds are for me only, and I can’t very well gag you in the library. Whose are you?”

“Yours,” I purr, biting back a whimper.

“Mine. All mine, Ivanna.” He picks up his pace, and my back arches as I draw nearer. “That’s my girl. Come for me now, baby.”

His command flings me over the edge, his lips crashing into mine to swallow the moans I can’t contain.

And while I quake with aftershocks, he holds me, mouth still on mine, fingers threaded in my hair, thumb caressing my cheek with a tender stroke. I’m undone. Gavin Wells can shatter my universe in three minutes flat, simply by canoodling me in a library chair.

Too soon, we go our separate ways. Ty is driving us out on the golf cart to shoot and then passing me off to Liam to run back.

This is the way Wells and I have been, the way I hope we’ll always be. Sneaking off and stealing moments. Unable to get enough of one another. As

demanding as he is, my submitting to him is always worth it. He rates my pleasure far above his own. I wake up with him between my legs and find him there several times throughout the day. Brisk reminders. As if any part of me could forget, least of all my lady parts, which are constantly sore in the best of ways.

He's inscribed in my marrow now, essential to my makeup, a vital part of every move I make.

And he wasn't kidding about my noises. He had our bedroom soundproofed last week, which led to an endless stream of taunts from the guys, but he claimed it was worth it as soon as we took it for a test run— uninhibited screams for the win.

I hold my stance, feet shoulder width apart, eyeing the target through the red-dot scope, elbows slightly bent. In the month I've been training, it's become second nature. I unload my rounds into the silhouette, and Ty surveys my target.

"Fuck, Freckles. That was incredible."

I beam, excited I've become so consistent. It's odd how confident this bizarre training has made me. Sometimes, I miss painting and think about asking for supplies and a day off to create, but I've come to enjoy this even more.

We move to throwing knives next. That needs some work, but I'm definitely improving.

"Are you training me to be a circus performer?" I tease.

Ty chuckles, handing me a knife. "Nope. Go again."

I throw, hitting a smidgen right of the center, which garners an impressed whoop from him. "Assassin?" I ask.

"Nope." He smiles, his brown eyes gleaming with a razzing twinkle. "But I'm sure Wells would appreciate an all-black catsuit." He points to the next knife. "Again."

"For about three seconds," I say with a smirk as I let that one fly. Left of center this time. I overcorrected. "Then, he'd rip it off."

He laughs. "I'm sure."

"Is this all on the chance that we'll be sucked into another dimension where *Braveheart* is our reality?"

That one pauses him. He stares at me for a beat, hands on his hips, shoulders slumped in defeat. "Yep. That's it," he deadpans, "but don't tell them I told you."

“Time travel. Should’ve known.” I set the last knife back down, worrying my lip as I dare to poke my nose where it may not belong. “Can I ask you something else, something serious?”

He heaves a deep breath, fingers kneading his forehead. “Sure. I’ll answer, but I won’t talk about it. You’ll have to be okay with that.”

I nod. “Of course. I don’t want to pry. I—”

“My father died when I was six. My mother raised my two younger sisters and me on her own, eventually remarrying when I was fifteen. A couple of years later, I noticed things seemed off with him, with my sisters.” He clears his throat, his spine wooden, face growing pallid. “Long story short, I found out he was abusing them. I confronted him. He said he’d come clean with my mom and leave her to get help. Instead, he killed the three of them and himself that afternoon while I was at baseball practice.”

The image of that is gutting. I hunch, arms across my middle, tears streaming down my cheeks. “I’m so sorry. I don’t ... I shouldn’t have asked.”

He tugs me into his arms, pressing me into his chest. “Don’t apologize for being a friend. Just let us take care of you. Okay?”

My wet face burrows into his shoulder in agreement, but I find it all so backward. These men have all endured unspeakable loss, yet they insist on taking care of me. Gage’s rage makes far more sense.

“What the fuck kind of sissy Mary training is this?” Liam’s voice cuts through our moment, which, by the relieved expression on Ty’s face when he steps back, is perfect timing. “Looks like you’re good”—he gestures to the knives stuck in the target—“but not tear-worthy, High Society. Maybe we should work on fighting techniques instead of running. Someone needs to toughen you up.”

Ty chuckles and smacks his back. “That’s your funeral, man.”

“Seriously?” Liam’s eyes bulge in incredulous offense. “She could fit in my pocket.”

I scoff. “I am nearly average height. *Thanks*. And Ty means because Wells said only he trains me to fight.”

“Right. So we don’t get too *close and personal*.” He waggles his brows and fingers in flawless synchronicity, which makes me laugh.

Ty looks between us, scratching his chin with a reluctance to leave, but I assure him I’m good, so he hops into the golf cart and heads back.

Liam stares me down for a minute. “Let’s get this over with. There will be no cry-fest for me. It’s clear you had one with Ty. Probably Wells too. My

story isn't sad."

"Oh. That's good." I strut toward the obstacle course, feigning apathy, where we'll climb the walls, nets, and ropes before our run. "Confusing but good."

"That's it?" he balks behind me. "No curiosity?"

I spin. "Didn't it kill the cat?"

He yanks on my ponytail with a smirk. "Cute."

"I only want to know if you want me to. I shouldn't have asked—"

He cuts me short with a firm grip of my chin, although his eyes crease with compassion. "Rough stories, sure, but they wouldn't tell you if they didn't want to. Don't ask Gage. You might not survive." He drops his hand while still pinning me in place with an odd intensity rolling off him. "But, like I said, mine isn't so bad. Single mom, died when I was three. Spent my childhood in the system, and then I found these guys."

"Okay. Thanks for telling me." I take off for the course, mind racing with the inability to adequately process all I've learned in one day. I need a quiet minute. My muscles burn, joints aching, as I push myself to scale and swing, jump and crouch. Liam stays in step. He could easily pass me by, but he doesn't, in case I struggle.

When we both touch ground after using the rope to climb down from the high tower wall, I stop to catch my breath, hands on my hips.

"Just because you don't have a dramatic moment to mark when you lost everything," I argue, "doesn't mean the lack of family is any less tragic."

He leans into me until I'm pressed against the wall—always pushing the limits of what Wells would appreciate—but the emotion swimming in his eyes cements my stance. "Don't do that. Don't pity me for one second. They're my family. *You* are my family. Anything else I want, I take. It doesn't matter what I didn't have. It matters what I do." Not allowing me a chance to tango with the declaration that I'm his family, he steps back and points. "Now, run."

I flash a teasing smirk, knowing Liam appreciates levity. "Want a head start, black lung?"

"Black lung?" He scoops me up and carries me like a football, trekking a good hundred-yard dash while I howl and smack him, and he chuckles at my pitiful fight—a sight Wells will surely have his head for.

The sky opens up, as if it were working on Wells's behalf, dumping sheets of rain on us with a booming crack.

“Fuck,” Liam hisses, dropping me on my feet. “Time to shock those tiny lead legs into action, High Society.”

We sprint through the torrential downpour, drenched to the bone by the time we close in on the drained pool, but still laughing like kids. From there, we can see Wells emerge from beneath the slatted pergola in his dress pants and rolled-sleeve button-up, also soaked, heading for us.

Wet and dreamy. Delicious and commanding.

Liam bends toward my ear, speaking over the crashing thunder. “Looks like you’re getting rescued, Ivy. Tomorrow, you’re helping me wreak havoc in the cyber world, right?”

“Can’t wait!” I yell as we navigate the backyard puddles.

“Enjoy your night.”

He winks and splits off as Wells bolts straight for me, hoisting me up so I’m curled around him and darting past the patio. I have no idea why he’s not headed to the closest door, but I bury my face in his neck and don’t ask. He sets me down in front of the side door to the garage.

“What are we doing?” I ask.

“This.” His lips collide with mine so fast that I can’t breathe, palms cradling my face for a tangling that heats me, even in the chill of the downpour. He rests his forehead on mine and pants. “You in the rain, smiling, carrying on. *I want those moments.*” And he’s kissing me again.

Good God, this man. He makes me feel so treasured. I melt against him, not caring about the sting of the pelting raindrops against my cheeks, or the clothes sticking to me like a second skin, or the crisp smell of the earth invading my nostrils. He’s all that matters.

I whisk my fingers over his wet stubble. “You really are crazy—you know that? I’ll have lots of moments with them because you’ve made me a part of your family, but I’m still yours.”

He punches the code into the garage, moving us inside as his mouth stays tethered to mine. “We’ve already established that you make me crazy. And, yes, all mine.” He hauls the door shut behind us and yanks off my T-shirt and sports bra. “Turn around.”

When I do as he said, he reaches around and tweaks my nipples, causing me to rise on my tiptoes with a whimper, before he pulls my wrists behind my back to cuff them. My heart thrashes wildly. I’m instantly nervous and excited and so unbelievably turned on.

We’ve established the safe word—*meatloaf*. My pick, due to the song

“I’d Do Anything for Love (But I Won’t Do That).” Wells found it both amusing and appropriate. I haven’t needed to use it yet. He seems to strike the ideal balance of dominance for me, primal and demanding yet somehow tender and attentive.

He tugs on the cuffs, and despite the velvety lining, they pinch, and my back straightens to attention.

He bites the shell of my ear with a growl. “Pick your favorite car, Ivanna.”

Blood flow thumps like a drum in my ears. “That’s such a big decision. I’m not sure. I mean, the Bugatti Chiron is a clear contender simply because there’s only a few hundred in existence, and I’ve never seen one in person, but the classics—”

“I’m not patient enough to wait through your internal debate.” He laughs—the roar ricocheting off the walls and steel to encircle me in warmth.

I’m suddenly thrown over his shoulder, hanging upside down and bound as he carries me across the garage to the Bugatti. And while I don’t understand what the hell we’re doing, dangling half naked in front of a three-million-dollar car feels downright scandalous.

Panic sets in, pulling me out of the moment. “Wells, I need to shower. I was on the course and running.” I took one before our early dinner and didn’t really work up a sweat before the downpour, but still.

He twists me and lays my upper half face down on the car, ignoring what I said and peeling my shoes, yoga pants, and panties off. “I need to fuck you, Ivanna. Then, we’ll shower.”

Before I can protest, his hand glides over my pussy, and I already anticipate the praise coming.

“You’re fucking drenched. Sopping. Jesus, you’re so beautiful, glistening for me.” He thrusts two fingers into me, and I gasp.

“I want to hear you,” he rasps. “Hear you pant while I finger-fuck you, moan when I slam my cock into this sweet cunt, and scream when you come with my name on your lips.”

His dirty talk, his fingers inside me, his complete control over me—I’m lost.

My breaths are uneven and craggy, but I force out one more objection. “Not on the car, Wells. God, what if I scratch it?”

He ignores me again, unzips his pants, and thrusts into me with a grunt. “This moment with you is worth a hundred of these, Little Storm. It’s worth

every car in this garage a hundred times over. *Every* moment with you is.”

His sweetness does not match the raw, feral unhinging of this scene, and yet it is perfectly Wells. He reaches in front of me, circling my clit while he slams into me, as he promised, the whole car swaying with each pump. My wet breasts, stomach, and cheek are melded to the hood like a slide in summertime, jostling with the shift of the Bugatti, as if we were one. The strands of my wet ponytail swish across it like an erotic car wash.

I moan, his touch and domination, the roughness and obscenity of the moment edging me closer. “Oh God, Wells.”

“That’s it. Let me hear you, Ives. My greedy girl. Who owns you?”

“You do,” I purr.

He drives into me, his hand never slowing the decadent massage on my clit, the other pulling on my sopping strands until my scalp tingles. “I do,” he confirms. “Good girl. My pretty little slut.”

That should not undo me the way it does. “*Fuck*. I’m so close.”

“You do not come until I tell you to,” he orders. “Understand?”

That has the exact opposite effect as it should. It takes all my effort to hold on to what is palpably intent on ripping through me. “Please, Wells. I can’t.”

“You’re so goddamn perfect. Every inch of you.” He punctuates each sentiment with a more vigorous thrust while I teeter on the ridge of utter rhapsody. “Needy and begging for my cock.”

More.

“So gorgeous.”

Harder.

“Mine.”

“Yours,” I confirm. “Please don’t stop. Please.”

“Come, baby.”

And do I ever obey. *Holy Moses*. A volt of electricity soars up my spine. The garage fades to black as I scream his name, spotted rings pass through my heavy slit-open lids, and the little glimpses of the bright blue vehicle in front of me flash like a trip through space. I shake so violently that my legs come off the ground while Wells takes what he needs from me, holding nothing back. His grunts mesh with my screams and the chorus of slapping skin to compose a melody of euphoria.

“Fuck,” he hisses with one final thrust.

After a moment of stillness, his cock is gone, and his fingers peruse my

entrance, pushing his cum back inside, as he often does. He removes the cuffs, lifting me off the car and into his arms, holding my wet, shaky, naked body to his, clad in drenched business attire.

“My perfect, precious girl,” he breathes. “Nothing else matters now. Understand? Nothing.”

And even though I can't possibly comprehend the pain Wells or any of the guys went through, somehow, I understand. Nothing else matters now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



WELLS

She punches at my chin. Intercepting her fist, I lower her arm and spin her back to my front, securing my forearm over her throat, but not taking away her air. She throws an elbow to my ribs seconds before her head jerks into my jaw with astounding force. I tighten my grip, so she clutches my forearm with both hands, lifts herself enough to slam her heels into my toes with a grunt, hurls another elbow to my ribs, and wriggles loose.

It might not have been sufficient to evade an attacker, but she's progressing, faster and stronger, so I allow her to untangle from me.

"Good," I encourage. "Again."

"Wells, we've been at this for hours. I'm exhausted."

I'm sure she is, and when we're done, I'll gladly pamper her and attend to her every need, but I'm growing more anxious by the day, so we're not stopping.

"This is important," I insist. "You're exhausted because you spent four hours in the basement with Liam."

A simpering smile creases her eyes. She knows how much I hate the two of them down there, mastering cyber skills or not. "That's not exhausting. I mean, admittedly, I sometimes drift off to some escape in my mind while he's talking, but he's so proud of himself that he rarely notices. So, actually, it's a nice break." She bends over to grab her water bottle, her round ass pointed temptingly at my face.

Goddamn, I'm grateful she's mine.

How can one person be so fierce, adorable, and sexy?

I chuckle, meeting her sparkling sapphires when she rises with water in hand. "He is always conspicuously proud of himself." I graze my knuckle

over her cheekbone. “And I’m proud of *you*. Liam is impressed, which is tough to do. But we need to keep at this.”

“Tell me why.” She flips her water bottle end over end, catching it with a huff when I don’t respond. “Tell me what all this is for. It’s been months. In September, you told me you’d explain things soon. It’s November, for God’s sake.”

“I understand your frustration.”

“Empathy isn’t going to cut it this time,” she snaps, and I see her cogs turning, deliberating her approach.

Jesus, she’s fun to watch.

She wants to rage, but her features soften as she reaches for my hand—a calculated move—her thumb sweeping over my skin. “Look, Wells, I love this life with you. I do. With all of you. And I don’t even care that we’re holed up here, but I need answers. I deserve answers.”

I swing her into my chest, fisting her hair and nuzzling my mouth and nose against her neck. Even sweaty, she smells delectable.

“Yes, you do,” I concede.

I planned on sharing some background information with her tonight, although I didn’t intend on explaining how it relates to her. Which still has to be the plan. I’m not ready. Not that time seems to be offering me valuable ideas on how to eliminate the threat or keep our marriage from crumbling when she knows the truth.

Last week, in my meeting with the guys, I proposed we embark on a cross-country trip, killing every hit man we could find as a preventative measure. Gage was all for it, but Liam and Ty voted me down, claiming it was too extreme at this juncture. It seems Liam is keeping to his word of not letting me lose touch. He insists I’m becoming unhinged—prepared to dismember and burn every goddamn motherfucker who has ever looked at my girl cross-eyed. He’s right.

But that doesn’t help me now with Ivy.

She pounds her tiny fists against my chest, the water bottle adding an extra thump. “Wells, God, you can’t distract me with sex all the time.”

“No?” I nip her skin, my breath inducing a trail of goose bumps, leading to her fabulous erect nipples poking through her cropped workout T-shirt. “Your body would say otherwise, Little Storm.”

“Yeah,” she pants, sagging against me in defeat. “That’s true; my body betrays me every time you touch me, but I’m asking you to please talk to

me.”

Loosening my fisted grip, I thread my fingers into her hair, holding her face, her sweet plea my undoing. “Okay.” A kiss on the forehead. “Two weeks.” Another on her button nose. “I promise to tell you everything the day after Thanksgiving.” A final one on her pouty lips, slipping my tongue inside and drawing out the purr I’m so addicted to.

She pulls back, heady, eyelids hooded, breathless. “Why not now?”

“Ivanna,” I growl in warning.

“Fine.” She sighs. “Two weeks, but fighting practice is over.”

Stretching up for another kiss, she bites my bottom lip instead, forceful enough to draw a drop of blood before she scurries away. I lap up the coppery taste with a smile.

Christ, I love how she bites back.

I’ll give her five minutes to revel in her victory. Then, I’ll tame the brat in the shower.



Campfires are Ivy’s favorite. She relaxes and laughs and lets go, basking in the scents of smoking wood, crisp air, and musty earth. The soothing crackle of burning logs. It’s why I share about our dealings out here, in small doses. She soaks it in but doesn’t allow it to shake her. We’ve alluded to even the ugliest sides of our business at this point. She knows who we are, who I am. And she hasn’t run—not that I’d let her leave me, but her not wanting to is the best-case scenario.

Tonight is special. It’s a warm evening for the second week of November at sixty degrees. We’ve had s’mores, drinks, and plenty of comic relief. It’s the ideal atmosphere to casually present her with who she is, without blatantly saying it.

So, I begin. “About twenty-five years ago, the FBI was investigating *crime* families and intent on prosecuting as many as they could. There were several across the country. Not all of the families in power were bad though. There were some who had been attempting to legitimize their dealings. No longer thugs in suits, collecting payments and killing for drugs and prostitution deals gone wrong, these families were reworking businesses, building empires built on above-board needs. Like the Noire brothers.”

I sip my scotch and watch as she processes, always trying to catch the grains of sand she's afraid will slip away.

Setting my glass down, I clear my throat. "There was a convention of sorts to discuss how they might shake the FBI. The heads of families from all over the country attended, as well as a couple of leaders of secret societies. Five ended up playing poker in a back room. And as they sat around that table, an idea was born."

Her eyes glimmer with excitement. Ty and Liam chuckle, and even Gage is nodding, enjoying that our girl has a fire ablaze inside her. She snags my bag of Skittles, a bad habit I've passed on to her, picking out the reds and yellows while I continue.

"In attendance was the O'Reilly family, an Irish Mafia out of Chicago. The Cabrini family, an Italian Mafia out of New York. The Order, an Upper Midwest secret society, composed of ordinary citizens, who hid their power in plain sight as doctors, lawyers, CEOs, and administrators. The Balzano family, a Las Vegas Italian Mafia. And Pax Logan, who was in attendance because he owned the financial institution of choice for shady dealings—according to the FBI, of course."

"Wow," she says, holding up a red Skittle for inspection in the dim firelight. "That's quite the group. Leverage throughout the whole country."

"Exactly," Ty confirms, stoking the burning logs with his marshmallow stick. "And they all had different specialties."

"What specialties?" she asks.

I steal the candy back and chomp on a mouthful while the flurry of embers settles and Gage answers, "O'Reilly already had deep influence in politics. Cabrini was making strides in power and data mining. The Order had several connections in transportation, construction, and Big Pharma. The Balzano family reigned over hospitality, and obviously, Pax Logan ruled banks and credit unions."

"The idea," I add, "was that they come together and unite their influence to essentially become so powerful that no one in the world could touch them, not even the FBI. They would rule in a primarily legitimate capacity."

Her brows furrow in doubt. "So, their dealings were legal?"

My smart girl.

"Ish." Liam swigs his beer with a twinkle.

She tilts her head, amusement coasting across her face. "What?"

"Legal-ish." He chuckles, dragging a hit from his cigarette. "More of

those gray areas, High Society. Simply put, they aren't people you cross or even mildly disappoint."

I let her noodle on that while I shade the outline I've already offered. "They each leaned into their areas of expertise, which became their ultimate domain. But any decisions regarding dominating the nation or issues that might cross family boundaries or affect an untouchable from another family or organization must be voted on by the five seats."

"So, they're in power now? It worked?"

"Very well," I assure her. "They took inspiration from Knights of the Round Table, labeling themselves KORT. Every decision they make must be for the good of the *kingdom* as a whole."

She scoffs. "And this isn't alarming to the FBI?"

Ty pokes at the hot ashes again. "They own half the government and happily trade information with the FBI when it serves them."

I nod. "Those five seats are the most powerful people in the country, among the most influential in the world."

She swallows what appears to be a cocktail of fear and awe. "More powerful than the president and our government leaders?"

"They choose the leaders of our country and place them in power, all who remain under their thumb," I reply, clarifying just how far and wide their supreme influence stretches. "They have the capacity to unleash a smear campaign so damaging that impeachment would be the least of the politician's worries. They can also erase the ugliest of scandals. And political parties are irrelevant. It's all who can serve KORT's needs. They have people everywhere."

"Puppeteers," she rasps, barely above a whisper, as though the fire has entranced her.

"Yes," I say, wondering how this is settling inside her. It's what she was born for, but not officially bred to become. A nature versus nurture moment.

Her eyes snap to mine. "A cabal. And you work for them? Or with them? Is that who you erase people for?"

I choose to answer the simplest of those three queries. "Our erasing business is independent. We receive jobs from the government, from KORT, from individuals. Very few know who we are. They're hiring a nameless service."

She heaves a breath. "People think you're financial advisers."

"Those who choose to inquire, yes."

Very rarely do we need a cover. We don't associate with those who question what we do, unless we're infiltrating a group for answers.

"This has something to do with me." She wiggles in her seat, skimming her fingertips over the hem of her hoodie. "Somehow."

Liam and Ty both shoot me a sidelong glance while Gage sighs.

I stall for a beat, impressed yet not prepared to go down this road tonight. "What makes you say that, Ives?"

Her eyes float over each of us with a subtle shake of her head. "I was never very good in school. It was taxing to stay focused. Even social settings were challenging. No one befriends the girl who spaces out during an important story. So, my dad worked with me. It's difficult to explain, but I can understand more from body language than from the words falling from a person's lips. Sometimes, my brain disconnects from those, tucks them away. But the way a person holds themselves, their stature, the squint of their eyes, the cadence of their voice and breaths. The way you all bounced off one another. This information was important. You wanted me to connect with what you were telling me."

Jesus Christ. She's fucking brilliant.

The guys say nothing, waiting for my response. All eyes on me. As well as I know this woman, she still surprises me.

I dust my thumb over my lip, deciding. "It does. You are incredibly perceptive. And intuitive. That was an early installment. The rest will come as we discussed."

She tightens her jaw, but lounges back into her chair. "That's fine. It allots me time to compose better questions."

Again, surprising.

We move into lighter conversation until I see her loosening up. Her eyes fill with heat when she finds me watching her. She nibbles her lower lip, and that is all the invitation needed. I signal subtly to Ty, who eyes Liam and Gage. They all say their good nights to Ivy—a delicate palming of her head, a shoulder squeeze, a kiss in her hair. I've trained myself to accept it. She feels at home and cherished here, and although I want to be the only one who offers her that, she needs them like I do. We really are a family now. I'll do whatever it takes to keep that intact. Things she probably can't fathom.

Without waiting for them to disappear all the way to the house, I voice my command. "Come here."

As always, her eyes tell me she's toying with the idea of defying me, but

my girl wants to be dominated. Craves it. So, without protest, she rises and stands before me. I tap my thigh, ordering her to sit. She falls into my lap, her back to my chest. Both my arms wrap around her waist, bunching her oversized sweatshirt.

I undo the button and zipper on her jeans, sliding my hand inside her panties, but before I can praise her readiness for me, she mutters, "What if they come back?"

"They won't." My answer is absolute as I spread her arousal over her clit.

She murmurs a faint purr. "Does everyone always do what you tell them to?"

"Yes." I chuckle. "Except you sometimes."

"True," she says, and I hear the bratty, victorious grin. "Why? Why do people listen?"

"I can be persuasive, and most would prefer not to force my ... *persuasion.*"

That sugarcoated honesty has her breath hitching because my naughty wife is probably envisioning all the ways I've encouraged her to obey and all the ways we've yet to explore. My lips brush across her ear, followed by a gentle nibble.

"You like that, Little Storm? The power, the control, the *danger*?" I shove three fingers inside her, my thumb circling her clit as her moans break into the quiet. "No need to answer, Ives. You're soaked. Your greedy pussy is making a mess all over my hand. I bet you could come already."

Her breathing picks up with a whimper as she rocks into my palm. "Please," she begs.

My teeth nip at her neck, no intention of making her hold out. I have more in store. With a gravelly tenor, I bid her release. "Come now, baby."

And she does. Her head drops back to my shoulder, her thighs quake uncontrollably, and her back bows with a groan as the pleasure bursts through her.

I move the fabric of her sweatshirt and kiss the dip between her neck and collarbone while she floats down from her high. "Good girl. So good, coming when you're told. Now, take your pants off and straddle me."

She stills for a beat, tentatively drinking in my request. Her arm clasps mine in an embrace. "Maybe we should go inside."

"You know I hate repeating myself. Don't make me tell you twice."

Ivy likes it rough, and I enjoy that too. But tonight, the thought of the

cool autumn air on her bare cunt—*mine*—as she obeys my commands has me enraptured. I just want her.

Here. Now.

Submitting.

She leaps off me, bites her lip, and strips as gracefully as she can in the dark, her bare feet sinking into the grassy turf. We couldn't do this on a colder night, but the warmth has had me envisioning her bare and mounting me the entire time we've been out here. She puffs a breath, either noticing my hungry eyes raking over her sexy legs or feeling the slight breeze enveloping her pussy. I direct my gaze to my lap, so she climbs on, hooking her arms behind my neck. I unzip her hoodie, rip the cotton shirt she has underneath in half, and release her front-clasp bra as she gasps.

"I want to see everything I own," I tell her.

Her tits jounce with a heavy breath. "Why out here? It's chilly."

"You're always radiant, but here, the flames licking up behind you"—I twirl a wisp of her hair—"these gorgeous strands blending with the blaze. Your eyes as brilliant as the stars lighting the midnight sky ... I want you right here, like this. Mine."

She brightens from the praise, and something about her here reminds me of nights I spent as a prisoner of war, wondering what I had to live for besides the three tortured men under my command.

"You're the vision of what soldiers fight for, Ivy, a glimpse of beauty in the dark."

Her eyes are swimming now, brimming like an all-consuming tropical wave. "Sometimes, it seems like ... the way you look at me ..."

"It seems like what?" I prod. Although I know the answer. She sees it. She has to, like everyone does. The way she's wormed her way into my veins, pumping life in and out of me. But I won't say those words to her until she knows who is loving her. Not until I've explained everything.

She rolls her lips in, retreating. "Nothing."

"Ivanna," I warn because I don't want her hiding anything from me.

She doesn't look at me, and I hate that she's uncertain in the slightest, but all I can do now is show her.

"I like the way you see me—that's all," she whispers.

I slide my hands against her cheeks, cradling her face, and my eyes dance over her, taking her in. "I do see you, Ivy. Amazing, brilliant, and beautiful in every goddamn way. My good girl." My lips smash into hers, sealing in her

whimper with the intensity I've found is impossible to hide. "Now, take out my cock and let me fuck you like a good little slut."

She beams a smile that could outshine angels. Fucking made for me—craving both the praise I yearn to give her along with the darkness we both have lurking inside us. She unzips my jeans and frees me, stroking my dick and swirling her thumb around in the precum before she lifts that thumb to her mouth for a taste, sucking it clean with a moan.

Jesus Christ, this girl.

Her eyes close as she becomes lost in the amorous savoring and confesses in a raspy warble, "I love being your slut."

A goddamn fantasy.

She guides the head into her pussy, dropping down on me as I hiss, "Fuck, Ives."

She bounces a few times before I get my bearings.

"You're so tight. Such a perfect weeping cunt, coating my cock." I meet her gaze. "Eyes on me. Touch yourself while you ride me."

Striking blue eyes locked on mine, she lowers her hand, massaging her clit with a gasp as I lift my palm to her throat. I don't squeeze hard. I won't venture into breath play unless she requests it since she's admitted it scares her. But the element of peril excites her, and I aim to give my girl what she needs. She nods in encouragement, so I tighten my grip slightly.

Moving my other hand to her breast, I slap the inside and pinch her nipple until she yelps, riding me harder, rubbing herself more vigorously. "That's my good girl. Take what you need, Little Storm."

A sheen of sweat breaks out over her skin, like it always does when she's ready, a shimmering luster declaring her peak. "I'm going to ... please let me come, Wells."

Her polite begging sends a rush of heat blasting through my abdomen. "Jesus, fuck," I growl. "Yes. Come with me, Ives. Now."

And with a scream that slices into the inky night, she comes apart in my arms while I shudder around her.

When we're both composed, I dress my wife, carry her to our bed, and remind her that she's mine again and again. Our days are numbered before everything gets all fucked up. I'm determined to make them count.



It's been four days since I divulged some information about KORT to Ivy. She hasn't asked a single question, probably storing them up to bulldoze me with an onslaught on Black Friday.

I tap my desk, sucking on a mouthful of Sour Skittles, while I lead my early morning meeting with the guys and she sleeps. "Status?"

"Yeah." Liam scratches at the stubble lining his jaw. "Those accounts I drained at the end of September, based on a damn hunch from a flimsy connection, panned out—slowed the fucker's activity for sure. I still don't have an identity though. The asshole's good. The first IP address was completely untraceable. The second was concealed enough that I only have it narrowed down to the Midwest region. Looks like that was done through someone working for him—slightly sloppier. When was your phone call with O'Reilly?"

"Last night. Why?"

Liam's face is drawn, serious, nauseating the fuck out of me. "The hit was rescinded today, marked as completed. He's been silent for the past several weeks. I assumed that was because he knew I was fucking with him. But this was a clear message to lay off. The good news is, she's not being hunted by every hit man in the country, but the timing—"

"If it was the funding, it would've happened sooner." I jump out of my chair, unsettled.

Sounds like her pursuers know identity, location, and delivery dates will be revealed shortly.

"Yes," he confirms.

"What exactly was discussed in the call?" Ty probes.

Pacing behind my desk, I spit it all out, "O'Reilly wants to meet her, which is a fair request before she undergoes her trial. I told him I'd arrange a meeting by the end of the month. I'd love to believe that message got out and the hit being rescinded is due to acceptance that the seat is hers, but that's doubtful."

Liam sighs, dragging his hand down his face. "My thoughts too."

"I also spoke to Cabrini." *Fuck*. I should've known better, speaking to both in the same day. It makes all of the contacts in both circles suspect rather than narrowing it to one.

"Fucking hell," Gage barks. He rarely speaks up in these meetings unless we have a mark for him to stalk. His exasperation is a testament to his attachment to my Little Storm.

“And he wanted?” Ty asks, feigning calmness while the rest of us quietly unravel.

I swipe my hand back and forth over my hair, beating a well-worn path into the wood floor. “The Cabrini name is on the line. He’s announced me as his successor, and of course, the knowledge that Ivy’s in my custody has also been released—not that anyone, including him, knows our location yet. He didn’t share about our marriage because I want to do that with O’Reilly in person. But he’s anxious, said we both need to be ready by December first.”

Ty scoffs, finally showing the heaviness we all feel. “If you’re arranging a meeting and we’ve got a December first deadline, don’t you think it’s fucking time we tell her who she is?”

“The day after Thanksgiving,” I affirm what I’ve already told them.

“Laying it on her at the last minute like that, do you really think that’s best?” he snaps.

My hand yanks at my mussed hair with a sting. “I don’t fucking know.”

“Well, I do, *Chief*,” Ty snarls, rising with a glower. “It’s bullshit. She needs to know now.”

“Sit the fuck down, Ty,” Liam orders through clenched teeth. “We’re not gonna start fighting about this. It’s complicated enough.”

“What if she runs?” Gage voices the aching question we all have. “She’ll be in danger, and we’ll be fucked for a failed promise, needing to run as well.”

I drop into my chair. “Fuck. I’m not ready. I can’t—”

“I can,” Ty says, composed and seated, but inflexible nonetheless. “She may be your wife but keeping her in the dark doesn’t work for me. You’re underestimating how she feels about you, Wells. How she feels about all of us. She won’t give that up. But she deserves time to accept this before they put her through whatever version of hell we all have waiting.”

He’s right. Waiting is cowardly. It wouldn’t even be a consideration if it was anyone else, but the thought that she’d stop trusting me and do something to put herself in danger has my stomach in knots, my chest caving in, and my head in a goddamn fog.

“No one has our location,” Liam chimes. “We tell her now—or soon—and see how she handles it. If things go south, we’ve got time to do what’s necessary to protect her and disappear.”

My head snaps up. “Without her? ’Cause fuck that! She’ll have to forgive me because I’ll chase her to the ends of the earth.”

Liam shakes his head, his features more subdued than usual. “Not without her. We don’t go anywhere without her.”

“Agreed,” Gage says, which, again, screams how special my Little Storm is. Two months ago, he would have thrown her to them to save our asses without a second thought.

“Glad we’re all on the same page.” Ty sighs, arms folded across his chest. “It needs to happen in the next forty-eight hours.”

“You’re overstepping, Reynolds,” I snipe, spitting Ty’s last name as a reprimand.

It’s understandable that he’s upset and protective over Ivy. And in all the years we’ve known one another, he’s never been disrespectful, but I can’t let it start now. Disrespect is a product of doubt. They need to know I can handle this.

“I will get it done, and *you* will leave it in my hands.”

He nods, resting his elbows on his knees and blowing out a trembling breath. The sight has me reeling. Ty has mastered hiding pain, and here he is, losing himself.

Fuck, I wish I could talk to Tom. Maybe as much as Ivy needs him. Carrying everything these past five years was a hell of a lot easier with him as a sounding board. These guys have me, and I had him. Now, I’m alone and fucking up everything he cherished.

As I rise from my chair, my eyes land on each of them with assurance. “I need some time with Ivy today. Get to work and find out who the fucking leak is with O’Reilly or Cabrini.”

With that, I head back to my bedroom, anxious to see my girl and wake her up properly. I open the door and still at the sight. My Little Storm is waking herself up with a toy, it seems.

Eyes closed. Back bowed. Quiet moans. A goddamn vision.

“Ivanna,” I growl, abruptly shutting the door.

Blue gems, cerulean in the early glow, guilty and astonished, land on me. She scrunches her nose. “Good morning.”

“Not so good when I find you defying me.”

She shimmies up to a sitting position, letting the comforter fall from her magnificent tits. *Brilliant move*. “You’ve conditioned me to certain expectations upon waking, and you weren’t here.”

A well-crafted argument on the fly also.

Wordlessly, I stroll around the bed, rubbing my chin and relishing the

sight of her sweating it out. She's probably needy, too, seeing as she wasn't finished. That I can certainly use to my advantage. I hold out my hand to her, and she begrudgingly plops her suction vibrator into my palm. She stares at it, then me, and tilts her head, lips quirked with snark.

"You can take it," she says, waving her fingers at me in a jazz hand. "But you can't take these."

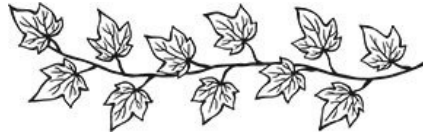
My beautiful brat.

Tossing the toy between my palms, I hum. "Wanna play, Ives?"

She bites her lip and nods, eager and willing as always, because she's a fucking goddess.

"Careful what you wish for, Little Storm."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



IVY

His smile is equal parts sinister and enticing. I'm not sure why I enjoy pushing him, but I do. The truth: I knew he might catch me. Hoped he would.

Since our first morning together, Wells has woken me up with his face between my legs, devouring me until a mind-blowing orgasm explodes, contorting my muscles into Jell-O. When he wasn't here today, I missed him. Not only the jelly-limb orgasm, but also the cuddling and encouragement and talking about the day's plans or dreams of the future. His absence was the loneliest I'd felt since before my first night in his arms.

So, I'm not at all upset that, right now, he's choosing to stay with me and *teach me a lesson*. His lessons generally result in me conceding to his demands because he causes an eclipse in my brain while my body convulses beneath his. And I'm here for it.

He disappears into our closet and reemerges with a cedarwood box. "I've been buying us some things for a rainy day."

My eyebrows dart up in intrigue. It's not raining, but I'll bite. "What kinds of things?"

"Toys," he states plainly, cozying up beside me on the bed. Him, dashing in his dress slacks, button-up, and tie. And me, naked beneath the comforter. I suspect he relishes the power play of that.

His emeralds glimmer as they frolic over my face. "Up for some fun with some of these?"

The box is full of various vibrators, clamps, and oils. He's been building a healthy reservoir.

"Yes," I say because Wells always requires a clear answer and clarity is streaming down my legs.

“Good girl,” he praises, his hand smoothing over my hair as his other holds up a butt plug. There’s a glittery pink gem on the top while the rest is stainless steel and shaped like a fat carrot. I’m familiar because of the books I read and because of Celeste. She’s always a wealth of information about freaky things. She’d be so proud.

My eyes flit to his, my teeth sinking into my lip. “You want me to wear that now?”

“Yes. I’m going to fuck you there one day soon, so this will be *training*. We’ll use the medium size today. Shouldn’t hurt. This is only one of the things we’re trying.”

I love when he tells me what he’s going to do to me, as though he’s the one in charge of my body, calling all the shots, and I have no choice. I’m drifting, stuck on the promise of *other things*.

He chuckles, clutching my jaw and kissing me so deeply that he fills me up with his joy and amusement, whisking me back to the present. A warmth spreads through my whole body. I push the covers away, climb on his lap, and wrap myself around him.

His fingertips skate up and down my spine with a sensual tingle, but then he stops, his teeth snagging my earlobe as bumps erupt over my skin. “Not this morning, Little Storm. You made your choice. It’s you and your toys.”

I slant my head, studying him. “You’re not going to play with me?”

He peels me off him, looming over me again from the side of the bed. His colossal frame always dwarfs me. The man is a foot taller when I’m standing, but when he towers over me while I’m lying on the bed, it’s intimidating. And also utterly alluring. He doesn’t answer, reminding me that he already did, and he doesn’t repeat himself.

“*You made your choice. It’s you and your toys.*”

“Up on all fours,” he orders.

While I’m disappointed he won’t be joining me, my interest and yearning are exuberantly piqued. So, I obey, perching on all fours.

“Crawl,” he commands. “One lap around so I can see what’s mine. Finish in the center of the bed so you’re facing the headboard.”

I feel absolutely ridiculous, crawling around naked while he’s dressed in business attire and ogling. But then again, the moment is so obscene that it’s liberating.

Once I’m in place, he instructs me to put my head and shoulders flat on the bed, ass up in the air. After a few stinging spanks to both cheeks and my

heart fluttering with an enticing humiliation, he spreads my arousal, mixes in some watery lube, and gradually slides in the plug, allotting time for me to adjust. He's right; it doesn't hurt beyond a passing, prickling burn of pressure, only offers a sense of fullness. Although my pain tolerance is admittedly high.

He huffs a breath. "Fuck, baby. You're breathtaking. So goddamn beautiful." His hand rubs over the spots he spanked moments ago, soothing, then down to my entrance, dipping inside and curling far too briefly. "Flat on your back."

I whimper at the loss of his fingers and roll over to see him sucking them.

He winks. "Can't let your defiance cheat me out of a taste," he says, voice husky in a way that makes me wonder which one of us is about to be taught the lesson.

He stretches me out like a star, strapping leather cuffs onto my ankles and wrists that restrain them to the bed. There's not much give, so I'm stuck in this position.

His hand trails over me, rolling my nipples between his fingers, grazing my ribs and thighs and clit with whispered praises along the journey. "Such a pretty pussy, wide open for me."

He reaches into the box, selecting the nipple clamps, and when he raises one to his mouth, swirling his tongue around it and then my pebbled nipple, my heart batters my sternum. I gasp as he secures it in place, the sensation a delicious twinge that has me panting. He repeats it all on the other breast, and I'm wiggling and writhing in need.

Fuck. I think he's going to leave me here, denying me, keeping me desperate.

"Are you going to torture me with edging?" I ask, panic threading my tone.

A shadow of him doing just that capers in the depths of my mind even though he hasn't as of yet. Seems like it would be his go-to form of discipline though.

"No, Ivanna. If you haven't noticed by now, I love to give my girl what she wants. So, I'm going to deliver as many orgasms from these vibrators as possible."

And this is a punishment? Sign me up.

"Okay," I whisper, unable to hide my enthusiasm and longing.

He chuckles, plucking a wand from the box, turning it on, and dragging it

all over—from my breasts to my thighs—everywhere but where I want it most.

“Please,” I squeak, breathless already.

“I love your pleas, Little Storm. You’re so gorgeous here. Bound and begging. Mouthwatering cunt glistening for me. A jewel decorating that luscious ass. Thighs glazed with your desire. Greedy. My pretty slut to use how I want.”

I moan at his words, yanking on my restraints because I’m desperate to be touched.

“What’s your safe word?” he asks, his tenor firm and serious.

“Meatloaf.”

“Good girl. I’m going to make you come over and over. If you need to stop, use your safe word. Understand?”

“I understand.”

With my confirmation, he presses a small remote, and suddenly, the plug in my ass is vibrating, elevating my intense need. Next, he inserts the wand, and my pussy is crammed with an expansive fullness, leaving me heady. He retrieves my suction vibrator and parks it right on my clit. The preparation buildup lit an inferno inside me that fans to a blaze, igniting low in my belly and rocketing through me so vehemently that I’m caught off guard, screaming through the burning release. My body melts into the mattress, heavy and light, all at once, the room spinning as my limbs twitch.

He waits a few minutes, his fingers ghosting over my swollen clit, and begins again. This orgasm blasts through me like a detonated bomb—even more lethal than the last. As the next one rolls through me, all I can think is, *It’s a good thing I’m bound because my thrashing body would probably be in a heap on the floor.* I’ve lost all control, and I love it.

“I want you, Wells,” I trill, delirious from the euphoria. “Please. I want to feel you.”

“You’re doing fine with the toys, Little Storm. It’s what you wanted. No need for my cock.” His words are taunting, teaching for sure, but his tented slacks and thirsty, hooded eyes drinking me in tell me he wants to partake.

“Come on me,” I beg, trying any angle to bring him some of the ecstasy I’m hogging. “Mark me as yours.”

His ravenous emeralds squint in contemplation, but then a rosebud vibrator is swirling over me, and I’m quaking and bucking and hollering until my larynx is raw.

During the next break, I close my eyes, attempting to center myself and catch my breath, when I'm startled by the warm drips of his cum painting my face and chest and stomach. He grunts and smears it over my lips as my tongue flicks out for more.

"Jesus, baby," he croons, roughly stroking his steel dick. "So beautiful. My filthy little cumslut. So hungry and perfect." He dusts my unkempt hair off my damp forehead. "Still okay, Ives?"

Being slathered in his cum revives some untapped carnal cravings within me. "More," I purr.

He smiles, assaulting my clit with a rhythm that shoves me over the edge in about two seconds flat, barreling to another realm of weightless glory. And another after that. But something changes. The taste of him on my lips, the remembrance of how lonely I felt without him in the few quiet minutes of morning, the foreboding in my gut that I could lose him. The sensitivity throbbing.

Oh shit. I'm so overwhelmed. So scared. So shaken and sad. It hurts. Everywhere hurts.

"Meatloaf. *Fuck.* Meatloaf." Tears trickle over my cheeks.

In seconds, my restraints are off, and he's scooping me into his arms, petting my head, and peppering me with kisses. "I've got you, Ivy. I'm here. Talk to me."

I glue myself to him, clinging like a life jacket—only I'm the one who needs rescued from drowning. My sobs rack through my body as he gingerly removes the plug and clamps, the absence of both aching with a sting far worse than when they were introduced.

He nestles me snugly against him, fingers raking through my hair and tickling warmth over my skin. "That's my good girl. You did so good. You're okay now, baby."

"I'm sorry," I whine into his neck, wetting his heather-gray collar with my weeping. "I didn't want to say it, but I got so scared and sad. I'm not usually a crier, and I know it doesn't make sense—"

"It makes absolute sense. Your emotions were heightened, making it difficult to ignore the ones you've been pushing aside. You did perfect using your word. I'm so proud of you, Ives. So proud. Tell me why you're scared and sad."

His praise increases my sobs because I realize I'm in love with this man, in love with my husband, which should be a wonderful thing. Except that

something feels flimsy, like it could all slip through my fingers at any moment. My lungs burn. I've never been so terrified to lose anything.

He rises with me still cloaking him like a spent sloth and carries me to the bathroom, where he draws a bath. Sitting on the side of the tub with me, he continues to whisper tranquil affirmations while his fingers twirl my hair. It's all a blur.

Next thing I know, we're both in the tub, Wells behind me, clutching me against his chest while he washes me. No recollection of him disrobing or either of us gliding into the bubbles.

Dandelion dreams.

I tilt my head up to him, and he smiles, kissing my nose.

"There's my girl."

"Hi." I breathe. "I'm sor—"

"Do not apologize," he cuts in. "Think of this like another lesson in your training."

"You want me to view our sex life as training?" I mumble, wholly relaxed.

His warm chuckle filters through the air as his hands rove all over me, massaging my muscles beneath the suds. "Yes. In part. There are times to be a force, times to submit, and times to say you've had enough. It's all okay. All important."

"I thought you liked using me, owning me. Being a force and saying *I've had enough* don't really align with that," I counter.

"They do. You're mine in every way, Little Storm. Out there, I worship you as my queen, and in here, I make you my slut. But only because queen by day and slut by night works for us both. Which is why, wherever we are, I need you to tell me if something's too much. Because you're my priority. Always. Understand?"

I nod, but the lack of verbal confirmation has him pressing for more, gripping my chin so I look at him again.

"Tell me you know there is nothing more important to me than you. No matter what else happens, I need you to know that."

The vulnerability in his face is almost haunting, as if his emotions are teeming inside him, like mine are. There's no denying the truth in his declaration, which wrecks me further, in the best of ways.

"I know I'm your greatest priority," I assure him. "My gut shouts it. It's what scared me, the way I feel about you. Sometimes, I don't understand this

between us. It came out of nowhere. How did I find you?”

His features contort with an emotion I can't identify. “It's the other way around, baby. A million-dollar question.”

“Thank you.” I lean my head back against his solid chest, scratching my fingers over his thighs while he continues kneading my muscles. “Why do you care if I touch myself?”

“I'm not against you making yourself feel good. If we had to be apart for a while, it would be different. But I'm selfish, Ivy. I want the moments—your noises and smiles and pleas. Your pleasure and joy. I want the intimacy with you.”

I blow out a breath, overcome with how fortunate I am. “Wow. That's a good reason.” My eyes find his over my shoulder. “How long until you have to get back to work this morning?”

“I'm all yours today.”

My heart leaps. “You're taking a day off?”

Wells never takes a day off, not even in New Orleans.

“Yes.” His arms clasp around me, nose nuzzling my neck. “I'm right where I want to be. We can do whatever you want.”

“Really? Whatever I want?” I twist to see him better, wagging my brow.

“Yep. We can watch a sappy rom-com, read a book together, bake something. You name it.”

Oh hell. He really means a day for me. “All of the above.”

He kisses me on the cheek, smiling so brightly in my peripheral vision, as though he hasn't a care in the world. “Done.”

Craning my neck, I let my gaze meander over his features—strong jaw, impeccably manicured two-day scruff, bright emerald eyes, rimmed with thick, dark lashes and contrasting against his golden skin and raven-black hair. A masterpiece.

I turn back to the bubbles, building a foamy monument before us. “Someday, I'd like to paint you.”

“Hmm.” He steals my suds, working them into my hair, fingertips scraping against my scalp. “Nude?”

“No.” I laugh. “That godlike, sculpted physique is for my eyes only. But I'd like to paint you in a suit. I don't usually paint people—primarily, it's places I dream about—but you've invaded those more than any geographical location, real or imagined, and you're so beautiful.”

He threads his fingers into my wet strands, tipping my chin to him and

curling around me. His tongue rolls against mine for a kiss so passionate that I lose my breath, frantically twisting myself to straddle him, our bodies compressing to become one.

He makes it clear sex is off the table today, so when we get out of the bath, he insists I replenish with a sports drink while he prepares breakfast—coffee and omelets with a side of Skittles that we eat in bed while watching *The Wedding Planner* and *The Wedding Singer*. If he wasn't already married to me, my choices may be alarming, but thankfully, we're beyond that.

After the chick flicks, we share our hopes and a picnic by the pond before an afternoon in the library, scanning books and picking one to read together. It's the most harmonious activity I've ever shared with anyone—his legs entwining me, arms draped around my waist, his rasp low in my ear while reading a love story to me. My heart nearly bursts out of my chest, fluttering through every page.

The fairy tale continues all evening. We bake bread and meatloaf and cheesy potatoes, laughing through the meal at our private joke every time the guys say *meatloaf*. We whip up snickerdoodles for dessert—garnering me a big fat kiss on the cheek from Gage—and retreat back to the bedroom for another chapter. I fall asleep in Wells's arms and wake to him still cuddling me, certain I experienced the best twenty-four hours of my life. And more importantly, that there's nowhere I belong more, and it's only the beginning.



Wells is conducting his morning meeting with the guys later than usual, due to us sleeping in and his insistence on taking care of me before we risked a repeat itch from yesterday, so I've wandered into the basement. I'm down here nearly every day, working with Liam, learning the ins and outs of the cyber world—something I find fascinating. But last week, I noticed a baseboard loose and had an idea. It's been a distraction since.

Taking out a paint pen, recently purchased after I put it on the shopping list that Wells's staff magically fulfills, I lift the loose chunk of baseboard onto my lap and start scrolling my inspiration across the underside in artful penmanship. My own version of a time capsule. I'm not sure how long we'll stay in this house—part of me thinks forever wouldn't be enough. It's home in every sense of the word—a place I've grown into myself and become.

I set it down, examining my handiwork and blowing it dry to ensure it doesn't smear.

Within these walls, I am traveling an epic journey, mining a piece of my soul that I never knew was missing—all because of the love of one astounding man, whose heart is the shooting star I caught, and the comfort of a family of men who offered the net to catch it.

I am forever yours, Gavin Wells. Thank you for this life.

Using the hammer and nail I brought with me, I fasten the baseboard in place. My little secret. It's kind of silly, but it's something I can show him years from now, maybe on our fifth anniversary since wood is the designated gift—courtesy of my research this morning.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, so I whip it out to find a text from Rena.

Rena: What's up, girlie? Tell me something good.

I don't even have to think, knowing exactly what she wants to hear most.

Me: Wells tied me up and shattered me with orgasms until I blacked out yesterday. Then, he wooed me—a bath, breakfast in bed, candy, picnic, rom-coms, baking, and reading together.

Rena: Your perfect day! Gotta love a man who knows how to make upside-down romance seem planned—getting the sex out of the way so you can concentrate.

Me: Exactly. I was utterly boneless.

Rena: LOL. I bet. Now, I'm jealous. I need a man. Sigh. Preferably someone who can fuck me into oblivion. Find me one. ASAP.

I laugh. Rena's texts are a daily highlight. I hope she finds someone.

Me: I sense the state of emergency. Top of my list.

Rena: Great. Gotta run. Thinking of tattooing my tits and wearing a plunging neckline to piss Axel off. Thoughts?

Sometimes she worries me though.

Me: Uh ... don't. Too extreme. Piercings are removable. Tattoos aren't. Best not done in a moment of rage. What'd he do?

Rena: Sent out an APB for me all over the resort because I went on a date. The sissy practically pissed himself, ditching me.

Me: Sounds like Axel saved you.

Rena: That's what Axel said. Whose side are you on? He won't be happy until I'm a nun, but then he'll off the priest.

Me: Yours. Always yours. No priests will be harmed in the love life of Rena Noire.

Rena: Fine. I'll think of something else. Maybe a chain between my facial piercings.

Me: Now, you're talking. Go for a good one—diamond encrusted.

Rena: Perfect. Love you, girl.

Me: Love you too.

I put my phone back in my pocket and saunter upstairs to find Ty perched at the island, eating a bowl of cereal. I scooch in next to him. "You like Rena, don't you? I saw you checking her out at La Lune Noire."

His eyes brighten for a half second before he masks his interest. "Off-

limits.”

“Who says?” I shrug, scrunching my lips.

He barks a laugh, sharper than his customarily light one, while sliding off his stool, rounding the island to rinse his bowl, and sticking it in the dishwasher. “Five raging Noire brothers whom I consider close friends. Not happening.”

Ignoring his reasoning, I press. “She was checking you out too, and she needs a good man.” He chuckles, the sound holding the slightest hint of longing, so I push further. “She keeps going on dates with these losers and —”

“Does Axel know?” His brow creases.

Jealous?

“Yes, but—”

“Then, it’s handled, Freckles. Off-limits is off-limits. End of discussion.”

I smack the counter, irritated by his obstinacy. *End of discussion. Who does he think he is? Wells?* “Ty, you never date. None of you do.”

He tilts his head, mouth in a cocky scowl. “Just because you don’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not happening. We don’t bring women to the house, and I have no interest in anything serious.”

Liam ambles in with an odd expression, gaze heavy on me like wet cement. And Gage strides along behind him, equally as off. I’d be annoyed they interrupted our conversation, but they seem as though they’ve both swallowed a secret.

“What’s wrong with the two of you?” I chirp.

Liam’s eyes widen as if I caught him with his dick out. He adjusts himself—not his dick, his face—usual smirk in place. “Nothing. Morning to you too, High Society.”

I glance at Ty, who I assumed would be laughing with me, but he’s scrolling on his phone, unaware of the bizarre vibe floating through the kitchen.

“Tell me what the hell is wrong with you,” I snap at all of them. “You’re freaking me out.”

Gage ruffles the plastic wrap on the cookies, glowering at Liam and then peering back at me. “Wells was looking for you, Ivy.” He stuffs a snickerdoodle in his mouth without any further explanation.

The three stand silently, staring at me, concern on their faces. *Or maybe confusion?*

I do need to find Wells because my stomach is suddenly knotted with that foreboding twinge from yesterday.

Strutting into his office, I find him chomping on a Tootsie Pop as though it's public enemy number one. He squints one eye like a pirate upon my entrance, and now, I'm completely weirded out.

"What the hell is going on?" I bite out. "You're all being freakishly bizarre."

"Jesus Christ," he hisses, popping out his mutilated sucker. "What did the morons do?"

I laugh, entertained by his exasperation. "Rough morning meeting?"

"Yes," he sighs. Whatever stress he's dealing with is evident in his gloomy features. My carefree man from yesterday is pained. He forces a smile. "I'm glad you're here. Have a seat."

"You're scaring me," I whisper, my gut screaming in apprehension.

"Don't be nervous. I want to discuss some things. No sense in waiting until after Thanksgiving."

My heart races; my throat dries. *This is it.*

I roll my lips in anticipation as he leans forward, studying my movements.

"Ivy, it's you and me. No matter what you're feeling, I've got you. Okay, baby?"

I nod. "Okay."

He reclines back into his chair, tossing his chewed lollipop stick into the trash. "It's hard to know where to begin, so let's start with what we spoke about at the fire the other night. Do you remember that one of the five groups in KORT is The Order?"

"Yes." I swallow, rubbing my sweaty palms over my pants to dry them and let the texture ground me.

"Your father was—*is*—a member of The Order, intimately familiar with KORT." His fingers dive into his superbly styled hair, mussing it. "He had the means and connections necessary to protect you. Doing so was an act of treason against KORT, but he didn't care. He gave everything he had to keep you safe. That was his greatest life purpose."

So many questions flicker through me. I spew them all so I don't lose them. "Why do I need protected? From what? And how do you know this? Did you know my father before his stroke?"

He heaves a breath. "Let me take those one at a time. This is a lot, so if

you need me to stop at any point, tell me.” His eyes ping-pong between mine. “You were born to Daniel O’Reilly and Eleanor Healy. He loved her but refused to leave KORT for her. He was head of his family and newly in one of the most powerful seats in the world. No amount of assuring Eleanor that he would be conducting less dangerous business worked. At seven months pregnant, she disappeared, never to be seen again. Most people thought you were both dead. But O’Reilly believed Eleanor would’ve seen to it that you were safe. He wanted you back, wanted you to be heir to all he was building, and searched tirelessly for you.”

An eerie calmness washes over me as though I’m detached from the core of my being, like my heart and soul have checked out while my brain sorts through this. Numb. No feelings. Not even in my body. It must be bidding me farewell, exploring lighter days with my inner essence.

He clears his throat. “You ended up being raised by your parents, who took great care to keep you hidden at the request of your birth mother. But your father—Dr. Kingston—understanding the expectations as a member of The Order, believed you were capable of being who KORT needed to fill the O’Reilly seat someday, so he intended to train you for it and have you reveal yourself when the time was right.”

“This is fucking absurd.” *I’ve seen pictures of my mom pregnant, but I also remember overhearing she lost a baby.* “My parents aren’t my birth parents? I’m actually some heir? Why does that put me in danger?”

Those words sound angry. He probably thinks I’m raging, but I don’t feel angry. I feel absent.

Vacant.

“It’s complicated, but simply put, not everyone wants you to inherit the seat. We can delve into that in greater detail later.”

“So, the roofie? It was targeted?” Some sort of fight-or-flight response has me flinging questions and responses. I’m not even absorbing his words. They trickle over me and rush for the drain.

A leaky faucet.

“Yes. It was connected.” Wells’s voice is flat, like this is everyday business. That, somehow, a person tracked me down to what, kill me? Because I’m *not* me.

“What happened to him? The guy who roofied me.” My spine tingles, a chilling cognizance skittering over me with that inquiry. I think I know.

“Dead.” He hedges for a beat before clarifying. “I killed him.”

Right. That's what I anticipated. He once admitted to hurting *not good* people. Still shocking yet oddly reassuring.

"And you?" I mutter, half dazed. "When did you first enter the picture?"

"I was hired to find you." His answer echoes through the room like I'm drunk in a tunnel.

A lump lodges inside my esophagus, dizzying me with the inability to swallow, but there's so much more to this blind suffocation. My vision is blurred and spotted by a lifetime of lies. Pretty ones, wrapped in bows of love and normalcy—game nights and art classes. Ice cream for breakfast on birthdays and Shirley Temple toasts at celebrations.

I'm crashing into an invisible wall of realization that I'm not who I thought I was—nothing I believed was real. I'm not real. The curtain's been pulled back to show it was all an illusion. But I'm not sure where that leaves me, other than sawed in half.

And that's merely my childhood.

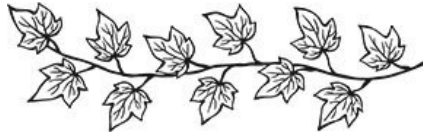
What about this? The whispers of a future, the hopes spilled at our picnic, the dreams shared during pillow talk, the touches that tingled of home, prickling my depths with my greatest desires—visions of babies and holidays and exotic getaways. An unlikely family found in those three winsome yet obstinate guys. An epic love who would carry me through every rocky step.

I knew a secret was looming. I prepared myself, thinking Wells had an enemy who was targeting me, but this? I didn't expect to have my quaint life ripped out from underneath me so I could either be hurled into a sinister position I know nothing about or hunted by those who'd prefer me to be a corpse over assuming it.

My brain shudders in my skull, like we're enduring an earthquake and I'm left with nothing to provide stability—destined to be jostled until it siphons the blood from my veins. There's only one thing I can manage to ask—my deepest fear—frozen to the knowledge that I'm a job to the man I'm hopelessly in love with—*my husband*.

"Was this ... you and me ... was any of it real?" And the pain of having to ask that question opens a floodgate I'm afraid might never close.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



IVY

The room is closing in on me. Tears are streaming over my cheeks, sweat cascading down my spine. The words are out, but I'm shaking, terrified of his answer. Yesterday was the happiest I'd ever felt, and today—well, today, I don't know what to feel or think or be.

Was any of it real?

Before the question even concludes, Wells leaps out of his chair, rounds his desk, and kneels before me. Something about witnessing this dominant man on his knees in worry is jarring, as if this situation wasn't dizzying enough.

He sweeps a tendril of hair behind my ear and brushes his fingertips over my cheeks, collecting the drops of my disillusionment. His face is as twisted as my stomach. "Yes, Ivanna. Every moment between us has been real."

"How can I trust that when you've been hiding everything from me? When I'm a job? Why would I believe you?"

His eyebrows knit as though there's an obvious answer. "Because I'm in love with you. So in love that you make me lose my goddamn mind. I don't even know when it first happened, but I know you feel it. You know my feelings are genuine. You're my everything." His eyes are brimming with unshed tears—yet another sight I never thought I'd see.

Mine won't stop falling because I do feel the truth in that declaration. I felt it in moments before it ever made sense. And this is what I wanted—to be loved by Gavin Wells—but not like this.

"Say something, Ives. Please. Fight me. Yell at me. But talk to me." His request makes me wonder how long I've been sitting here, aching and dazed.

Time hasn't felt this confusing since my father's stroke. In those first

days, hours could feel like seconds, minutes like months.

Grains of sand.

My eyes flick to his, jade now with the anguish speckling them. I need to muddle my way through this, collect the breadcrumbs leading to the big picture. Self-pity has no place here, nor does empathy for the man crouched at my feet.

I lift my chin. “When were you hired to find me?”

“About five and a half years ago. But it took us nearly eight months to track you down.”

Fuck. Every answer knocks my balance off more.

“You’ve known who I was and where I was for five years?” I gasp.

“Yes,” he says plainly, allotting me time to process.

Too many loose ends sway from that, so I begin with the one producing the most rage inside me. “And you planned to turn me over for what? How much money?”

“Once I saw you, I wasn’t ready to turn you over, so I met with your father. It was the week of your eighteenth birthday. Tom was expecting me—always a step ahead of this mess. We discussed the situation and agreed to keep you safe until you were prepared. So, I waited through the college years, watching and protecting you.”

While I appreciate that little tidbit of information, his evasiveness stirs up a violent storm inside me—true to his nickname for me.

My jaw locks. “How much was I worth to you?”

His fingers skate up and down my thighs—a plea. “Don’t think of it like that. You’re priceless to me, Ivy. My whole world. You know that.”

I shove my chair back, springing out of it like it’s an active volcano spurting me forth. “And you know what I’m fucking asking!”

He rises off the floor, dragging a hand down his scruff, somehow more haggard than normal. “Millions. Fourteen when we accepted this job, but it was a father with deep pockets, searching for his daughter. That’s what we were hired for.”

Fourteen million.

Jesus Christ. What the hell is happening?

I’m not illogical. I understand the angle that I was just another person to find. Wells didn’t owe me anything then, but he does now. “Was my father—the man who raised me—paying you to protect me for those five years?”

“Yes. Ten million.”

That pisses me off for whatever reason. *Fuck*. I'm so angry. And so damn hot. I rip off my hoodie and chuck it to the couch behind me, leaving myself in a tiny tank. "Not so noble then, Mr. Wells. Double-dipping to milk every cent out of me."

With a grunt, he yanks on his hair like the strands hold the solution to all of this. "I'm sure it seems that way. But no. We used extensive time and resources to keep you hidden. His money was designated for that." He spins away from me for a beat, turning back with eyes so heavy that it stills me. "I trusted your father. We became close. He was a friend." He flings his hand through the air. "Hell, he was the closest thing I've had to a father since I lost mine. During those four and a half years before he was sick, with his help and approval, I worked to make your situation more favorable. I alerted O'Reilly that I'd found you but wouldn't turn you over until you were ready. And I helped him start gaining the votes."

I don't know which piece of that to dissect first, so I dig into the piece that makes the least sense. "Votes?"

He rests his hands on his hips, more relaxed with this line of questioning, I guess. "No woman has ever been Head of Family with these groups or held a seat with KORT. It was a move requiring approval from three seats. It took years."

"And my father, *Dr. Kingston*, was in favor of securing those votes? Why would he help you do that? This is what he wanted? Me to have a seat in this cabal?"

Flipping the chair that I was sitting in to face where I'm pacing, he drops into it. "Tom raised you to be strong and capable. He believed you deserved it. And he felt Eleanor's hopes for you to have a normal life had been fulfilled. It's an honor, a position of the utmost power. He wanted you to have the choice as an adult."

I freeze, glaring at him as my heart plummets to my stomach. "And what was in it for you?"

He rubs his forehead. "When Tom first explained it all to me and we sought to obtain the votes, it was because the finder's fee would increase."

Since that nauseates me to the point of nearly losing my breakfast, I give myself whiplash by doubling back. "You call him Tom. You guys were close." It's not a question, simply a paraphrasing of some of what he's explained. A fact that has the tears flowing again.

That's why my dad reacted when he saw Wells that first day with me.

Was he happy to see Wells? Relieved?

He bends forward, elbows on his knees with a shaky breath. “Yes. He was a mentor, a friend. He treated me like a son.” His voice is strained. He’s undeniably broken from the loss, and that stakes me right through the heart. “I miss him every day. And he knew I was taken with you. He approved.”

I collapse onto the couch, like I’ve been pummeled by a freight train. It feels as though there are pieces of me scattered all over this room. Completely disconnected. “So, the day we met, you and Ty knew ... and you already felt something for me ... how?”

“You’d been under my skin for years, Ives, since the beginning. Although you were so young then, but you still got to me—an obsession in ways. I thought day and night about how to make this all easier on you, how to keep you safe. I watched you thrive in college, saw how strong you were, how you were the light in every goddamn room you walked into, and I dreamed about how maybe, one day, you’d be mine. But, *Jesus*, you’re more than I ever imagined, baby.”

In other circumstances, that would be the most romantic profession I’d ever heard, but instead, it’s merely another fragment lying in the rubble.

“Why didn’t you just tell me all of this when we met? Or come to my house before that and explain who you were, who I was?”

“After your father had the stroke, we needed time.” His eyes close with a heavy breath. “You to grieve and me to come up with a new plan because he was supposed to explain everything—to prepare you and ease you into it. That was the exciting plan he had for you after graduation.”

So much about that statement unhinges me. This is what my father wanted, and when I told my husband about the plans I’d never know about and how lost I felt, he never let on that he knew. That stings regardless of his reasoning. It taints our intimacy.

My hand crawls up to my chest, an avalanche of conflicting emotions crushing me.

Wells clears his throat, although it’s more of a groan, like he’s in physical pain. “I told O’Reilly I needed to give you an extra year due to a family tragedy. He was disappointed but understanding. Then, that ancestry test hit, and I had to get you out of there. But I wanted to do it in the least frightening way possible. If I’d told you all this to begin with, do you honestly believe you’d have willingly come with me so I could protect you properly?”

“No, I wouldn’t have.” I’d have thought he was a lunatic and never heard

him out. It would've all been far smoother if my dad had told me years ago. It certainly would have explained why I was forbidden to have social media accounts or to go anywhere with crowds or to ever share personal information with someone who hadn't been vetted.

My lungs burn. "My dad. You said it was treason. Will they—"

"No. Part of the deal I made was that your parents wouldn't be held accountable and would be considered untouchables. O'Reilly isn't thrilled that you were kept from him. Until recently, no one knew Tom's identity or yours. I think it's suspected now, although you did so good, using a fake name and Celeste's address on the ancestry forms. Brilliant, as always. Tom taught you well. Anyway, O'Reilly is grateful you were well cared for. He's not a vengeful man, and he knows you love your parents, so he agreed to let it go."

"Okay," I whisper, fiddling with the hem on my tank. "And the danger I'm in, if I reveal my identity to O'Reilly, does that solve it?"

"Maybe." He buries his face in his hands. I've never seen him so drained. His eyes finally snap to mine. "There's a lot to discuss with that. Assuming a seat isn't a simple process. They'll want to see that you're capable. That, alone, could be a treacherous venture. Although they've assured me your safety won't be compromised. And there are those in the organization who are adamant that a woman, especially one not raised in the life, should not be permitted to hold the seat. That poses a separate danger, far more threatening."

I scoff. "So, the board I'm supposed to work for is an organization full of misogynistic pigs?"

"You won't be working *for* them. You'll be running the country *with* them. As powerful as any of them—an equal. And, yes, they may support women in public offices, but convincing them a woman should be the one pulling the strings was a challenge." He smiles—a genuine, doting smile. "I'm confident you'd destroy that perspective."

I hold up my hand, not capable of handling his praise at the moment. It hurts. "Thanks, but I need time, Wells. To make sense of this. It's so fucked up. I need to go—"

"Where?" His face is riddled with panic.

"For now, to my old room, maybe for a run. Alone. Since I'm surrounded by people who, regardless of their reasons, have been pretending, lying, and using me as a paycheck. I don't know how to trust any of you."

A frown tugs the corners of his lips down—lips that were all over me, making me scream expletives into my pillow hours ago. “I won’t claim that I’ve done everything perfectly, Ivanna. But I’ve done *everything* with you, your father, and those three men out there in mind. Carried it all the best I could.”

I nod and start for the door, believing at least in some capacity that’s true, when another nagging suspicion crashes over me. “There was a guy in college who hurt me. He—”

“Yes,” he avows, no faltering. “I killed that fucking rapist. And I won’t hesitate to kill anyone who dares to touch you or even thinks about harming you.”

My eyes close on a cleansing inhale-exhale cycle. I’m unsure what to do with that. Ambivalent. If I’m honest with myself, it speaks to my heart with some peculiar primal fluttering, like when a cat delivers a dead rat to their owner. Disturbing and endearing at once. But I can’t tarry there because it also enrages me. He knew. They all knew everything about me. My darkest moments.

Wells stands, stepping toward me, but suddenly thinks better of it and restrains himself, stashing his hands in his pockets. “Do not run alone. It isn’t safe. We can pace ourselves away from you, but I won’t allow you to go alone.”

I don’t answer, too infuriated, sick of the restrictions. He can choke on his fucking orders.

Heading for my old room, I pass the guys, who are all perched on the couch in the great room with coffees, flames flickering in the fireplace, like they’re the stars of a morning show. Their lingering eyes scream that I’m the top story and they’ve been gathering quotes. They follow my every move, and while I’m not immature enough to spit fire like a dragon, as I’d prefer, I’m also not evolved enough to smile and ease their discomfort. I turn my back on them, but unfortunately, it’s me who loses. They all have each other, but as I shut the door to the empty room, the silence shouts how alone I am.



My thoughts have been spinning a million miles a minute. Time has warped to nothing, my existence distorting into a Salvador Dali painting—surreal

with the burden of melting clocks.

I've sat on my old bed, in this dark room, for the entire day. The guys stop by, dangling gifts of meals and drinks at the locked door. I answer cordially, accept the offering, and promptly lock myself in again. I'm not one for the silent treatment. I prefer to unload my grievances and move on. But this is too much. I can't have conversations with them when I don't know what I'm thinking.

I tried calling Celeste, but to no avail. I'm afraid to call my mom. If she'd known about my father's plans for me after graduation, she would've told me. So, until I know how I want to respond, I'll keep it to myself so I don't terrify her. And Rena, as much as I adore her, she's the sister of men who are not much different than the ones in this house and their close allies. I don't think she'd share anything I said, but I'm not sure who I can trust.

So, I'm isolated from everyone, desperate for my father and his direction. Wells was right. It would've been different if my father had delivered this information. He had a way of cushioning everything, bathing even the harshest messages in a golden light. It's why our house was constantly visited by men who sought guidance. Thomas Kingston always knew how to navigate even the rockiest terrain. He would have pumped me up for this, encouraged me to accept the role I was born to conquer.

Maybe that's the most confusing part. The truth in everything Wells said was most apparent when he spoke of my father—his wisdom, how he treated him like a son. How Wells misses him every day. The knowledge of their bond strengthens my love for Wells, and I hate myself for it because I feel like a fool.

Although, when I strip the emotions away, logic shows me Wells did the best he could with a difficult situation. It isn't lost on me that he promised ten million in the prenup should he not keep me safe or break our arrangement—the exact amount my father had paid him to protect me. He's been honorable, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm not who I thought I was. Or that life will never be the same. Or that the relationships with the men who mean everything to me were essentially built on a secret, whether for my own safety or not.

But no matter how angry I get, Wells's words from the last months swirl around me.

“You, Little Storm. I was waiting for you.”

“Sometimes, storms come to decimate everything we deem important. Other times, they come to clear our path.”

“You changed everything, Ivanna. Turned it all upside down. The moment I saw you, I knew I was lost to whatever path you carved for me.”

“This moment with you is worth a hundred of these, Little Storm. It’s worth every car in this garage a hundred times over. Every moment with you is.”

“Tell me you know there is nothing more important to me than you. No matter what else happens, I need you to know that.”

“Because I’m in love with you. So in love that you make me lose my goddamn mind.”

He’s been holding this secret, carrying the weight of this fucked-up world, and trying to prove how much I mean to him through it all. So have the guys—Ty asking me to let him take care of me, Liam claiming I was his family, and even Gage accepting me through each and every baked good.

My head hurts too much to think anymore, so I request a bottle of wine from Liam through a text, who delivers it with nachos prepared by Gage. Ty sneaks in as I take the goods to peck my forehead. The alcohol, the snack, and a Hallmark movie—where the heroine’s life is crumbling because she might lose the family farm, but a billionaire passing through falls in love with her and saves it all—distract me from my sulking.

I wish I had a farm. With screaming goats or fainting ones. So simple.

I climb under the covers as the wine dwindles and the next movie begins.

I must’ve passed out. My body feels heavy, pinned to the mattress. Cotton fills my mouth, and my head spins, courtesy of that bottle of wine I consumed. When I open my eyes, it’s pitch-black, and the house is still and quiet, except for a soft murmur. I glance around for the source, and as my eyes adjust, I find Wells sprawled beside me, which is also when I realize I’m in our bedroom, wearing one of his T-shirts, and his arm is draped across my waist possessively.

I smack his bicep and catapult myself upright. “What the fuck am I doing in here, Wells?” After all the liberties he’s taken, I’m not sure why this is the one ruffling me, but it is.

He boosts himself up onto his elbows. “What’s wrong, Ives?”

Irritated at his nonchalant attitude regarding this moment, I groan. “How did I get in here?”

He yawns. “I unlocked the door last night and carried you to bed.”

I bend my knees to my chest, fisting my hair on both sides of my aching head. All that sadness I was feeling has morphed into full-blown fury. And I’m too tired and worn out not to throw a tantrum. “What part of me needing time and space was confusing?”

He pops up, back ramrod straight and towering over me in only his boxers, which I suppose is a concession since he generally sleeps naked and insists on me doing the same. “Not confusing at all. I gave you the day, and I’m happy to let you wallow today and tomorrow and every day this week. But you are my wife, Ivanna. You belong in our bed.”

My jaw falls slack. “That’s your concern? Are you serious right now?”

“Deadly,” he affirms, moving to prop himself against the headboard.

I scoff, shaking my head in disbelief. “You gave me *a day* to accept that I am not who I thought, that I have people attempting to end me, that I was adopted or essentially stolen, and that I am married to a man and living with men who knew who I was, watched me for five years, and murdered people on my behalf, but pretended we just met. How generous. Oh.” I sling my arms through the air. “And let’s not forget there’s a multimillion-dollar price on my head.”

“Yeah.” He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his stubble. “It’s a lot. All the more reason you needed to come to bed with me.”

“That is a fucked-up, self-serving theory, Wells.”

“No, it’s not, Ives. I told you there was nothing more important to me than you. No truer words have ever been spoken. You are entitled to be angry and sad or whatever you’re feeling, but I won’t leave you alone to deal with it. I love you too much. Hate me. I can live with that, but you’re not getting rid of me.”

“No? What if I take off?” I realize the stupidity in my question the second it flies out of my mouth.

“Really?” He laughs, a full-bodied howl, which fills me with visions of vocal-cord gouging. Yes, it’s safe to say I’m untethered. “You’re married to the best eraser and identity miner in the world. I’d chase you to the ends of the earth, Little Storm.” He tucks a hair behind my ear and opens his arms. “Stop being so stubborn and let me hold you. We’ll figure this out. Together.”

I hesitate, glaring at him, hating how much I treasure his claim on me, how much it warms me that he keeps saying he loves me, and how I can’t

fathom getting through this without him. Curling in on myself, the sobs I've been fending off rumble in my throat.

"Talk to me, Ivanna."

"I'm in love with you, too, and I hate you for it," I confess wearily. "I'm such a fool."

He drags my coiled body into his embrace, cuddling me through my grief with soothing words and delicate scratches.

"Me letting you hold me doesn't make this all okay," I whine.

"Of course it doesn't," he agrees.

I sniff, sucking up a grotesque amount of snot. "I'm still mad at you, still need time."

"Understandable," he coos, petting my head, "but you'll sort it out from our bed, in my arms. We'll also be having a family meeting today, so we can start to work through this. The guys are distraught, to say the least."

"You're obnoxious," I hiss, but all he does is chuckle and kiss my hair.



The "family meeting" is the four of them, humbler than I've ever seen them, empathizing with my despondency and assuring me I'm their top priority. They also share stories about my father, how he applauded the two-story library, was in awe of the obstacle course, and was completely enamored with their car collection. He even drove the Bugatti, which makes my moment with Wells all the more scandalous. Still, I'd give anything to have seen that. The stories knock down my walls, brick by brick. Although, even as the anger toward them dissipates, I'm still reeling and disheartened.

I peer around the kitchen table, searching each of them. "What happens if I refuse to take the seat? Will the threats dissipate?"

"There are various possibilities," Wells says, squeezing my hand. "Too much has happened to hide you as Ivanna Wells or Ivanna Kingston. You can't safely go back to your old life for a myriad of reasons. It's an honor to be welcomed into KORT. Rejecting them will be seen as a slap in the face, especially to those who voted you in. You'll, at a minimum, be expected to devote your life to the cause in some capacity."

Ty groans with a hasty knock on the table. "You could run though."

"We can erase you," Liam adds while Gage and Wells nod in agreement.

My heart sinks at the thought. I try to fix a brave face, but the loss spills over my cheeks. “My mom and dad? Celeste?”

“No,” Ty whispers. “You’d need to sever contact.”

Wells scoots closer, leaving no space between us, hand clutching my shaking shoulder as he silently waits for me to process.

I heave a ragged breath, licking a salty tear from my lip. “And you guys?”

“We’d go with you,” Wells says, sweeping my hair off my neck. “I told you there’s no leaving me, Little Storm.”

That much I knew after our talk at dawn, but the others are a surprise.

My eyes scan the other three, pulse hammering in my neck and toes and temple, as I’m unable to comprehend what they’re offering. “You’d all go? Why would you give all this up?”

Gage taps the table, a nervous finger pecking the wood. “In full transparency, your disappearance would be considered a default on our end. We’d be held accountable. But we’d choose to go with you either way. It’s already been discussed.”

That simultaneously swells my heart and wrecks me. “That means the world to me, but I’m so sorry. I—”

Wells lifts my chin. “Do not apologize.”

He hates apologies. I know that, but I don’t know what else to say. My choice dictates the lives of four other people. My disappearance would shatter my mom. She’d never stop looking for me. Celeste would be broken. It’s so absurd. It doesn’t feel like a choice.

“And my father ... this is what he wanted for me?”

“He wanted you to have the opportunity. He believed you deserved it, but he would respect any choice you make. You know that.” Wells’s statement strikes me to my core, flattening my reservations even further. He conveyed similar sentiments yesterday.

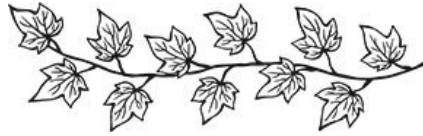
All I’ve ever wanted was to make my father proud. If he thought I could do this, thought I should, I have to try.

I straighten in my chair, whisking the tears away with a quick swipe of my fingers. My eyes are surely bloodshot and swollen, but I don’t expect that to improve anytime soon. “Thank you. I need a few days to come to terms with this. I appreciate you all for protecting me, for honoring my father’s wishes, and for your willingness to stick with me.”

The words produce an all-out torrent that has the guys jumping out of their seats, smothering me with hugs in a family huddle.

In this new upside-down reality, at least I can count on them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



WELLS

Today is Thanksgiving. This week has been arduous, but with the bomb I dropped, that was to be expected. Ivy has shed more tears than I've ever seen from her. She's also been edgy, which was anticipated. We've all been diligent in giving her space.

Yesterday, we went to see her father, per our usual Wednesday appointment. He doesn't permit her to visit on holidays, believing it would interrupt the joy of the day. His wisdom and foresight never cease to amaze me.

Unfortunately, he was having a terrible day, unable to offer even the slightest confirmation in acknowledgment to what Ivy shared. And when she bawled in his lap, I nearly lost it myself, sick for both of them. It was grueling enough to see my girl in so much pain, but to watch the man I admire most in this world suffer, trapped inside a body that simply won't cooperate while his little girl sobbed, added another level of torment. She was quiet most of the night. It was yet one more example of why I've grown more hesitant by the day to let her travel the path to KORT.

But today, I'm perched in the doorway—hands in my pockets, feet crossed at the ankles, in a state of awe—watching Ivy and the guys, all in aprons, bopping around the kitchen to Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds." She insisted we have a traditional meal and prepare it ourselves, forbidding any meal-prep intervention from our chef. My job was the turkey, which we stuffed and placed in the oven a few hours ago.

Now, she has the guys helping her with the sides, football silently playing on the TV while they all harmoniously spin and mix and bellow into utensils—a state of ease and goofiness the three men would have never been found in

prior to my Little Storm. They're following her every command and dance move, and she's glowing like the goddamn sun.

A few days ago, I told her O'Reilly wanted to meet her. She, understandably, feels reluctant to speak with him and hasn't given me an answer. I haven't pushed her even though he's growing anxious and the clock is ticking. She'll be thrust into this life in one week—unless we decide to run. Seeing her here so carefree makes me think that's the better option. I couldn't have imagined giving everything up a few years ago, probably not even two months ago, but now, I'd walk away from all of it for her. We all would.

Dinner is far better than expected. Ivy runs a tight ship. After pie, she clanks her fork against her wineglass with three short dings. Our eyes all snap to her cheerful blues.

“This is one of the best Thanksgivings I've ever had. I love you all so much, and I love my father for his infinite wisdom in forcing me to remain present. It gifted me moments I will always cherish. So, thank you.” She clears her throat, emotions obviously welling up again. “I've made my decision. I'm ready to meet O'Reilly, and when the time comes for me to take the seat, I'd like you all to work with me. I don't expect you to give up doing what you're so masterful at, but I'd like to know I can count on your expertise and counsel in those uncharted waters.”

I didn't think it was possible for these guys to adore her more, but that little speech has them all fawning over her the rest of the evening. She's proven her loyalty to them again and again. Outside of the four of us, we can't say that about anyone else. We've all lost so much. Ivy's become the constant we seamlessly orbit around.

Once everything is cleaned up, I set out for our bedroom in pursuit of my Little Storm. When I enter the steam-filled bathroom, she peeks around the corner of the stone shower, face bright and beaming.

“Coming in?” she asks, eyebrows waggling playfully.

We've been less intimate this week with her emotions all over the place. Aside from the morning wake-up call I offer, I've let her set the pace in that arena, but I don't need to be asked twice. I drop my clothes into the hamper and join her. She falls against me, her body molding to mine. Although she's plastered on a light and airy demeanor today, as she melts into my chest, I realize it was for our benefit, and it's weighing on her. She's made her decision for us, for her father, probably for her mother and Celeste as well.

“Ives, look at me, baby. This is important.” I lift her chin, the droplets of

water dotting her freckles.

She's so goddamn beautiful; she steals my breath. Her sapphires are heavy, holding all I've laid upon her this past week.

I kiss her dainty nose and settle on those big doe eyes. "Without taking anyone else into consideration, if you could choose between a life on the run, a life where you were free but had to look over your shoulder at every turn, or a life that kept your family close but forced you into a dangerous role with impossible choices, which would you choose?"

Her stormy blues lock on to mine, a tear of overwhelm mixing with the shower drippings and trickling down her cheek. "I've thought about it in those terms for days, and I always arrive at the same answer. I'd choose whichever life you were in. That's the only choice for me."

Fuck.

"That's not excluding everyone else, but I get it because my answer is the same in regard to you. What if being together this way means enduring unfathomable pain?"

She reaches for my body wash, squirting it onto a loofah and lathering me up. "You've worked too hard to disappear. You'll protect me."

I push her hair back from her face, cupping her cheeks. "Always, baby. But sometimes, the protection is the very thing that hurts."

She sighs, shakes her head free, and continues scrubbing me. "I'm not sure how else to say it, Wells. I wish you had trusted me with all of this sooner, but it's okay. I'm okay. And my answer won't change, no matter what you throw at me. I want you, this life with you, the life with those men out there and Celeste and my parents, whatever that means. It's worth every risk."

I don't know what to do with that answer because I'm sickened by the possibilities in store. I'd burn the whole fucking world for her, but not even I can promise she won't be singed in the process. Not in this life. The life I'm thrusting her into, believing it was what she was made for, trusting her father's plans. For the first time, I understand why my mother chose to disappear—an action I always saw as cowardly and shortsighted. She had the world at her fingertips, but at what cost? She chose a tentative existence for my father, my brother, and me—a far braver move than what I credited to her.

I smooth my hands down Ivy's arms, her silky skin and vanilla-raspberry soap awakening my cock, even as I ache with concern. "We can run. I don't

need this. It was a mistake to push you into this life. You're all I want, Little Storm. That's it."

"I'm not running," she insists.

"You don't realize what it entails. It's not safe. I can't ..." *I can't fucking lose you.*

"You helped my father obtain the votes, right?" She hangs up the loofah, eyes fiery and set on me.

"Yes." I smirk, knowing her mind is already made up. Her determination blazes through any objections I have. It's the very storm in her that I love.

Her shoulders rise with the steam. "Was it only because I'd be worth more? Did you believe I'd fail once I got there?"

That question deflates me even though I know she's merely proving her point. "Of course not."

"So, you believed in me?" She tilts her head, jutting her hip to the side, her tits bouncing deliciously with the movement.

"Yes." I chuckle, tapping her nose. "More than anyone."

She nods, her fingers weaving into my wet hair. "Then, believe in me now. Believe I have what it takes to handle this because I want to do this. For me. For you. *For us.* For my father. Our family. My motivations are endless. I won't let fear rob either of us of something that has the potential to be amazing."

I'm not sure how to fully accept that. She's stronger than me. I've never let fear dictate my decisions, but when it comes to Ivy, the countless possibilities of her being hurt, I crumble. So, I default to an area we both draw strength from, seal her mouth to mine, and decide to worry about the rest tomorrow.

Lifting her legs to my hips, I smash her against the stone wall, gripping both of her wrists above her head while gliding my cock between her folds and fucking her wet cunt wildly. I'm sure I'm leaving bruises all over her back, but I don't let up. Her moans assure me she's right there with me. My girl likes it rough. She wants to be claimed. The very thought has me biting her neck and collarbone to leave my mark, showing the world she's mine. That's far more important than who I am.

"Who are you, baby?"

"Your good girl," she rasps, her heels digging into my lower back as I slam into her.

"That's right, Ivy. My good fucking girl. Nothing changes that."

Understand? Nothing.”

“Always yours,” she pants. “God, Wells, I’ve missed you. You feel so good.”

I can’t get enough of her like this, so I step out of the shower, still buried to the hilt inside her, and walk us to the bed, both of us drenched. Dropping a pillow near the edge, I lay Ivy down on her back, hips elevated with the pillow, ankles slung over my shoulders as I stand before her, heel of my palm circling her clit while the other hand smacks her breasts and tweaks her nipples. She digs her nails into my thighs, scraping, drawing out a feral groan from me. And I thrust with everything I have while Ivy wails my name, her perfect pussy sucking in my cock. Our eyes never leave one another’s as I hold her gaze hostage, owning her. Every pump and mark and grunt a reminder of whose she is. Whose *I* am. This woman knows the deepest parts of me—parts I didn’t know existed.

“I love you so fucking much, Little Storm.”

Her striking sapphires crease as she beams seconds before her release. “I love you too, Chief.”

I might not know what the future holds. KORT is unpredictable, possessing both the keys to the kingdom and a ticket to Hell. There’s no telling which we’ll draw. But right here, I know what she needs, what her body craves, her every ache and longing. That’s what I can deliver. Granting my girl her greatest fantasies so she knows without a doubt that she’s mine.

My pretty little slut.

My good girl.

My fucking queen.



We landed in Charleston, South Carolina, two hours ago. It’s the Sunday after Thanksgiving. I picked a neutral location for our meeting with O’Reilly, giving us time to sweep the hotel suite and control the situation. Ty and Liam have Ivy waiting in a connected room while Gage and I greet O’Reilly and his guard. He wanted three, his customary detail, but I refused. We have no reason to harm him, but every reason to be leery of anyone in his circle, seeing as we still haven’t identified the leak or the people intent on taking Ivy down.

Upon his arrival, I swing open the door.

He immediately offers his hand. “Mr. Wells, we meet at last.”

He’s about three inches shorter than my six-three stature with broad shoulders and blue eyes like Ivy’s. Both his full head of brownish-auburn hair and short beard are speckled with gray. At fifty-three, he’s retiring to enjoy what he’s earned and doing so while he’s still spry enough to mentor Ivy. He’s also confident she’s far safer in the seat than as an heir apparent. He shared as much in our last call.

I return the firm shake. “It’s been a long time coming. Good to finally meet you, sir.”

He and his guard, who briefly introduces himself as Robert O’Reilly, strut into the suite, glancing around for Ivy and turning back to face me once her absence is registered.

“I don’t have to tell you how anxious I am to meet my baby girl,” he states firmly. “Long time coming is an understatement.”

I gesture to the dining table. “I’d like to discuss some things before Ivy joins us.” Using her shortened name helps in keeping her full identity hidden—something we’ll only need to continue for the remainder of this meeting. After that, KORT will know that Ivanna Kingston Wells is the missing O’Reilly heir.

He unbuttons his suit jacket, taking a seat at the table. “Fine.”

I join him, forgiving his clipped tone. I know I’m not the main event. “Can I offer you a drink?”

“Bourbon, if you have it.”

Gage clears his throat. “A bourbon man. I’ve got just the thing.” He pours O’Reilly an Old Rip Van Winkle 10 Year on the rocks and a glass of Macallan for me while I move us forward.

“Ivy and I were married in September.”

He scoffs, fingers tapping the table with a harrumph. “It wasn’t enough to gain the seat? You married her?”

Not sure why it matters to him, so I refrain from offering further explanation. “Yes.”

He accepts his bourbon from Gage with a gracious nod, eyes returning to me. “The board will see this as a breach of trust, a power play.”

“With all due respect, Mr. O’Reilly, I don’t give a flying fuck what anyone thinks. They have no leg to stand on here because it’s done. She’s mine. I’m the one who is delivering what no one else could, so it seems

appreciation is more in order than mistrust.”

He wrenches his lips up, seemingly more amused by my bluntness than offended. “Certainly. I am appreciative. You’ve found her and kept her safe, no matter your motives. It will be noted.”

“My motive is her protection.” I swig a hefty gulp of my scotch, agitated that my motivations could possibly be called into question. “Her safety *must* be guaranteed, or she will *not* be accepting the seat.”

Ivy may think it’s up to her, but it isn’t. I won’t hesitate to upend this whole endeavor or erase us all if things go sideways, despite her decision.

His eyebrows knit with an indignant chuckle. “As I’ve stated in the past, her well-being is also my top concern. I didn’t spend twenty-three years searching for her to put her in harm’s way. However, I am exempt from planning her trial and possibly her loyalty test for the marriage. My hands are tied there.”

That is, unfortunately, true and a fact that has my stomach in knots. Most people undergoing the trials have multiple connections, having grown up in the life. Ivy’s only ally is removed from speaking on her behalf because he chose her as his successor. It breeds a shitload of uncertainty.

“Understood,” I allow, acknowledging the bind he’s in. “I haven’t announced our marriage to the board, so when you pass it on, pass the warning on as well.”

He smirks. “Not prepared to do it yourself, having obtained the seat?” The reality of my fragile position hits him with that question. “Ahh, you’re awaiting your trial as well.”

“Yes.” A sigh huffs out of me, the weight of everything crashing into me at once. “Regarding that, Ivy doesn’t know I have a seat.”

“Why is that?” He tilts his head, lifting his glass with a taunting glare. “So protective yet secret keeping so soon?”

Although he’s her birth father, Ivy is mine, and explaining myself is not something I’m pleased to be doing. “I’ll tell her at the conclusion of her trial. She needs to focus on what she’ll be navigating, not worrying about me.”

His lips twitch with a thoughtful frown. “Noble.”

I swish the dwindling amber liquid around, setting the crystal glass back on the table with a clink. “My job as *her husband* is to place her needs above my own and protect her, Mr. O’Reilly. I will not allow anything or *anyone* to interfere with that.”

“Noted.” He taps a finger on the side of his glass, his gaze lifting to mine.

“You’re brazen, Mr. Wells, but I like you. You and your team have managed impressive work, conquering a feat countless teams before you failed at, and I respect your no-nonsense approach to caring for my daughter. I’ll share my approval with your grandfather and the board.” He lifts his drink, pausing in thought. “Does Ivy know of your relation?”

“No.” I hate keeping anything else from her, but I don’t want her distracted by anything other than her own trial.

“Fine,” he says. “It will remain that way. May I meet her now?”

I flick my eyes to Gage, who leaves the room to open the adjoining door in the back living room of the suite. Moments later, Ivy saunters in, flanked by Liam and Ty, with Gage manning O’Reilly’s guard, Robert.

She offers her hand, combating the awkwardness I know she’s battling. “Mr. O’Reilly, it’s an honor to meet you.”

Standing to greet her, he takes her hand in both of his, eyes glossy. “The honor is all mine, sweet girl. I ...” He clears his throat, plainly choked up. “I’ve waited for this moment for so long, and you are far more lovely than I could have imagined. You favor your mother. She was incredibly beautiful.”

Ivy swallows, obviously grappling with her discomfort. “Thank you.” She takes her seat beside me and across from him, smoothing her sensible forest-green dress down—the linen fabric and her three-strand pearl choker cover my marks completely, but I know they’re there.

Mine.

Her back stiffens ramrod straight in the chair, and her teeth snag her lower lip before she corrects and heaves a steadying breath.

Ty joins us at the table, choosing the chair at the end, centered between Ivy and our guest, while Liam hovers directly behind her, and Gage returns to his position after delivering a glass of lemonade to Ivy.

O’Reilly regains himself, a smile coasting across his face as he takes her in. “So, tell me about yourself, Ivy.”

She rolls her lips in, her eyes studying him for a beat. “What would you like to know, sir? My qualifications for the position or something else?”

He chuckles adoringly. “No, dear. For the moment, humor me as a father who is at last in the presence of the daughter stolen from him. Did you have a good childhood?”

Her hand reaches over to my lap, clutching mine for support as her voice quivers. “The best.”

To O’Reilly’s credit, he keeps his face unreadable with that admission. “I

hear you're quite close with your parents."

"Very," she confirms. "I'm not sure what to share here, how it will be received. I only found out about you a week and a half ago, so while you've had over two decades to wonder about me, I've had days. I don't know if this will make it easier or if it will be hurtful, but all I can offer is my truth. Which is to say, the man and woman who raised me are the best human beings on the planet. They gave everything they had so I could have a fairy tale-worthy childhood. I was loved and valued and encouraged." Tears brim in her eyes, but she discreetly blinks them away before they fall. "I hope that brings you some peace."

That's my girl. So brave and well spoken. No apologizing and no lying. I'm overwhelmed with pride and awe.

O'Reilly smiles, doing his best to cut the tension, which is so thick that it's laborious to breathe. "It does, Ivy. I only wanted the best for you. You have your mother's beauty, but you've obviously inherited my ability to phrase truth with eloquence. I expect you to do well."

She laughs, but it's forced, her thumb dusting over my hand for the strength she already possesses. "I'm sure nature has something to do with it. But I'd be remiss if I didn't credit my father—the man who raised me. He worked tirelessly to help me communicate well, to read people. It didn't come naturally."

Her fierce love for Tom won't allow him to be discredited. I hope O'Reilly recognizes that for the staggering loyalty it is and not a slight.

"Understood," he says. "It sounds as though I have an admirable man to thank, in addition to your mother. Do you have any questions for me?"

She drinks in a cleansing breath. "About the position, yes. I'm sure, in time, more personal ones will surface. What will my duties be?"

He relaxes a bit in his chair, evidently entering a more comfortable talking point. "The specifics won't be revealed until you've passed your trial. But I can tell you that you'll be responsible for making the final decisions for KORT as a whole—one of five who vote on issues. As far as our domain goes, you'll delegate much of the work, building files on prospective politicians, judges, law enforcement, and several other government roles. You'll be responsible for reviewing those files, meeting with potential candidates, and assessing those who mesh with our goals. We handle all of that. It's our insight that determines those in line to be the country's leaders. Much of my choosing has often stemmed from gut feelings, which can't be

taught. But you'll find your way."

Her breath catches, tone strained again, hand squeezing the life out of mine. "Maybe there's something to that nature angle. My gut is generally spot-on. I rely on it far more than my thoughts."

O'Reilly grins, his eyes crinkling in a delighted twinkle. She threw him a bone, and the man is eating it up. "That's wonderful to hear. Remarkable. You'll do very well then. After your trial—"

"May I ask something regarding the trial?" she cuts in. When he nods, she continues, "What can I expect? What does it entail?"

His head tilts in what appears to be regret, hand scratching at his beard. "Unfortunately, I'm not authorized to reveal any information about the trials. They are formatted to the individual, different for each person—a test of aptitude and strength. In all honesty, I was skeptical about how you'd fare, not knowing anything about your upbringing, but having met you, I think you'll persevere through whatever they throw at you. So, once you've passed, I'll introduce you to your team, most of whom are your relatives as well."

"As far as my team goes, Wells and his crew will be my most trusted consultants."

Fuck, I love how bold she is. Her mind is made up, and she's not taking any chances.

He glances at me, no doubt wondering how we'll maneuver those positions once we both have a seat—the least of my concerns. "Very well. Would you like to see some pictures of your family?"

She fiddles with her nails, her thumb picking at the ones not clasped in mine, clearly anxious about him referring to people she doesn't know as family. But my brave girl smiles and sips her lemonade. "I'd love to."

He rises, rounding the table and seizing the chair beside her. Liam, Ty, and Gage scrutinize his every move like hawks prepared to pounce.

Setting his phone down in front of her, O'Reilly flips through pictures. "This is my wife, Deidre. We've been married for eleven years. And this is her son, Declan, who's twenty. By pure happenstance, we're one of those odd families with names that begin with the same letter. My name is Daniel, if you didn't know, which you can call me."

"Of course I knew. Thank you, Daniel. You have a beautiful family." Always the picture of grace and elegance.

Natasha deserves a pat for her daughter's manners. She raised Ivy to have impeccable social decorum.

A sadness passes through O'Reilly as she mentions his family, and I realize I've been so focused on keeping her safe and preparing her for the trial and the seat that I underestimated the emotional toll this meeting would take on them both. No matter how this ends, their beginning is rooted in brokenness.

He flips to the next picture. "This is your Aunt Maureen. She's my half-sister, not from the O'Reilly bloodline, and a bit of a prima donna." He chuckles, a bellow far more buoyant than before. "But family is family. This is her husband, Kent, and their three adorable rug rats. And these are my cousins—yours too. I won't name them all now. This is Robert, my right-hand man." He gestures to his guard, who steps forward and exchanges a charming handshake and greeting with Ivy before Daniel continues, "It's a big family. Most everyone works for the organization in some capacity, so you'll get to know them all well in time."

"I'm looking forward to it," Ivy chirps, too syrupy to be entirely genuine.

That's my cue.

I slide my arm across her shoulders, glancing at my watch. "Our time is dwindling, I'm afraid."

"Of course," he says, notably disappointed. His blue eyes lock on to Ivy's. "Let's at least share a meal first. Time for me to get to know you, your husband, and your trusted friends. I insist."

Ivy agrees, so we have dinner catered to the suite. Once the guys all join the conversation, she relaxes considerably, but my gut still stirs with apprehension about all that's awaiting her.

We pop open a bottle of champagne on the flight home, toasting to a meeting gone well. She seems lighter and more at ease, excited even. As she hauls me into the plane's bedroom for another claiming, I bury my reservations and simply treasure this fusion with my gorgeous wife.

"Hey," she whispers, tugging me into a hug while I button my shirt, preparing for our arrival. "I'm good. Ready."

I hope so because our window to turn back is nearly closed. O'Reilly may have already shared her identity.

Kissing her forehead, I string my fingers through her hair. "I know, Little Storm. My brilliant girl."

She nuzzles her cheek against my chest, fingers laced at the nape of my neck. "This is my sword, Wells. I feel it now. If I don't seize it with both hands, I'll regret it."

Any notions I had to shield her from the hellfire looming melt away with that proclamation. We were both carved for this world. I won't rob her of her chance to rule. If my wife wants this sword, then she'll wield it. And I'll slash any obstacle that stands in her way.

CHAPTER TWENTY



IVY

Wells and I are lazing by the pond, drinking an after-lunch cup of coffee. Both of us relish the quiet out here—the crisp air, the birds trilling their farewell tune before they travel south, the solitary, triumphant leaves boasting about hanging on the longest. The glassy surface of the water reflects a world of beauty. It’s a placid stretch between an exhausting morning and his hectic afternoon. He’s got something to take care of with Ty and Gage in a bit, so Liam and I will be hanging out.

It’s been four days since I met Daniel O’Reilly. He’s a sweet man, but the kinship bond he was undoubtedly hoping for isn’t quite there for me. I am excited to learn from him though. We haven’t heard anything from KORT yet. Everything is hovering in limbo. I’m not sure what to expect, so I’m trying not to dwell on it. While we’ve still been training each morning, our afternoons and evenings have been reserved for lighter activities, knowing the days ahead may be anything but.

Wells twines our fingers together, lifting our interlocked hands to his mouth for a kiss. “Still feeling positive, Ives? Confident?” He asks me this every day, gauging my anxiety level when I think his is far worse.

My gut might have felt good about him from the start, but I had no idea what a romantic he’d be—so doting. He’s more than I could’ve ever hoped for in a husband. It makes sense that my father approved, which gifts me an unexpected piece of my dad.

I fall against Wells’s shoulder, my free arm cinching around his waist. “I’m good. Promise. I was trained by the best after all. What’s there to fear?” It’s a flippant response. I’m actually super nervous, but the strength of Wells and the guys keeps me encouraged.

“Right, beautiful,” he says, kissing my hair and moving our tethered hands to my lower back so he can curl me into a snuggler hug.

The crack of a twig alerts us that Liam is here to invade our peaceful respite. We twist to see him smirking.

“Time’s up, lovebirds.”

Wells turns back to me, eyes cavernous, as they’ve been every moment he’s stepped away from me this past week. His voice is marked by a hoarse tenor. “Time to part, Little Storm.” He grazes his knuckles over my cheek. “Have fun.”

“Oh, she’s gonna have the time of her life,” Liam says, twirling keys around his index finger with a jingle. “Want to drive the Shelby Cobra, High Society?”

I shoot up off the ground, hands covering my mouth. “No fucking way!”

When they told me my father drove the Bugatti, I assured them I would be far too nervous to burn the same rubber, but it would be a dream to drive the Shelby Cobra. So much has happened that I completely forgot about it.

Liam and Wells both chortle.

“Yep,” Liam confirms, tossing me the keys. “Thought we’d go get some of those hot cinnamon-sugar doughnuts you like too.”

After tackling Liam with a back-breaking thank-you, I jump down and smack Wells on the chest. His steel physique is unbudgeable. “Did you know he was taking me to do this?”

He chuckles, picking me up, plopping me into the golf cart, and scooting in beside me while Liam hops in to drive us back. “Wouldn’t have been as exciting if you had known hours ahead of time.”

As the golf cart wheels toward the house, his arm snakes around my waist, his fingers thread into my hair, and his lips meld with mine for a knee-weakening kiss. It’s good we’re sitting.

He rests his forehead against mine right as we pull up to the patio. “Love you, Little Storm. I’ll meet you back here later. Drive safe.”

“Love you too. Thanks for this, *Chief*. I miss you already.” I plant one more peck on his lips, adding a playful nibble, and hug him so tightly that my body aches from the lack of his warmth and security when I let go.

Wells heads to the garage to leave with Ty and Gage while I rush off to change, shouting to Liam over my shoulder, “Give me ten minutes.”

“No worries, Ivy. I’ve got *all* day, which is good because you’ll never make it back out here in ten.”

Accepting that as a challenge, I rush into my room, swapping my lounge attire for jeans and a sweater. And boots—boots weather should be a celebrated season in itself. Unfortunately, Wells stored my brown leather lace-up boots, along with my other winter shoes, in the land where only tall people venture, so I hop and swat, too impatient to drag a chair in here. My efforts pay off though, and I knock said vital footwear onto the floor in an ungraceful tumbling with three other boxes. Liam is going to gloat at my inability to hurry, which will be terribly annoying.

Wrestling my boots on, I lace them up and start to reassemble the contents of the other boxes. Two are pairs of my shoes, and one belongs to Wells—a pair of old combat boots. I pack them all away and ready myself to return them to the high shelf. Until a glimmer catches my eye, taking my breath away. It's a ruby necklace on a platinum chain.

And it's mine.

No, it can't be. That's ridiculous. I flip it over to check for the numbers that were engraved on the back of mine—a serial number imprinted on high-valued jewelry. I remember the number—one of those odd things stuck in my head. It was a necklace I was forbidden to wear, kept in my mother's jewelry box for when I grew up, which made it the most enticing prize in our home. My fingers brushed over that number more times than I could count.

Doing the same now, I see it matches. *What the hell?*

I don't understand why he would have this since I lost it when I was fourteen or fifteen, away at camp—an offense that devastated my parents and got me grounded for an exorbitant amount of time. It was a fatal mistake because I had spent months asking to attend that camp, and that transgression guaranteed I'd never go again.

My pulse thumps in my eye sockets and temples and ears as I wonder what else Wells has left out, but I bury that thought. I'm sure there's a simple explanation. We've been through too much to leap to conclusions.

I stack some empty suitcases to stand on, return all the boxes to their rightful spots, and jump down, the necklace still in my hand, twirling in circles. Undecided. Finally, I mosey into the bathroom, pull out my makeup bag, and stick the necklace in an inside pocket—for safekeeping and easy access later. I'll ask Wells about it tonight.

Banishing the uneasy feeling swarming my stomach, I pluck the keys off the dresser and scurry out to find Liam, his arms crossed and snickering.

“Not a word,” I snap.

He holds up surrendering hands and follows me to the garage. Once I'm seated in the driver's seat, windows down in spite of the chill, Liam grinning ear to ear, my only thoughts are about freedom and the wind flapping my hair. We buy a plentiful stash of the warmest, gooiest, coziest doughnuts in existence, along with two lattes—pumpkin for me—and stop at a nearby park to enjoy them.

The mid-afternoon sun is peeking out from behind the gray clouds, a snug golden blanket enveloping our snack break. The autumn perfection keeps beckoning my mind to drift into dandelion dreams—damp earth and yeast and pumpkin spice floating on the breeze—but Liam is an agitator, bugging me with a childlike nagging to stay present. In his defense, his phone is lying on the table, but he hasn't touched it, offering me his full attention. So, I return it.

We're perched side by side at a picnic table, giggling like kids over the fact that we're eating far too many of these delicacies. If we don't stop, there won't be any left to take home—a crime against Gage, which is punishable by slow torture, surely resulting in death.

“Thanks for giving me your afternoon, High Society.” Liam is straddling the bench beside me, and I can feel his arrogant twinkle on my face.

I knock him in the ribs with my elbow. “Seriously, Liam? You didn't have to bribe me with sugar and your sweet ride to spend time with you, but this was amazing.” My mouth twitches into a gratified beam as I think about the drive here. “I really opened her up, right?”

“You sure did.” He chuckles, wrapping a friendly arm around my waist for a tickling pinch. “And you looked good doing it—so *dainty*.”

That earns a scowl from me, so I turn to share my glower, and a cinnamon-sugar doughnut smashes into my mouth as he howls.

I shake my head like a bulldog biting into a steak, tuck my chin back, and attempt to chew while laughing and shoving the other half into his mouth, crushing it so the granules of cinnamon and sugar disappear inside his golden scruff.

“You should know better than to mess with me,” I quip as he smirks and scrubs his hand over his stubble.

We both breathe for a beat, swallowing the remainder of our desecrated treats. He reaches over and dusts my wind-chilled nose. “You've got a little something”—he circles his finger around my face—“right ... there.”

“What? Here?” I point at my pouted lips, coated in the powdery grains,

and cross my eyes with a teasing giggle.

And I lose my damn breath because his hand glides over my cheek at the same time his mouth presses into mine, his sweet and smoky fragrance invading my nostrils as my heart pounds against my sternum.

My hands move to his chest, shoving him away. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Jesus, Wells is going to fuck him up for that.

Blood rushes to my face, heating me with equal measures of fury, terror, and sadness.

He scratches his chin, a stunned expression on his face, and a haunting ache pangs in my chest. Maybe he got swept up in the moment. This is Liam. I should give him the benefit of the doubt. My mind says that, but my lungs have forgotten how to function. He’s not saying anything, and I’ve never seen Liam speechless, so I try a different approach.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Not really.” He puffs a breath, his messy dirty-blond locks fluttering with the wind, and my heart plummets to my stomach.

Liam’s emotions wreck me, partly because I know his rocky childhood shaped him far more than he’d like. He’s more fragile than he lets on, but there isn’t anywhere to share that—not when he works so hard to be the quick-witted bad boy who isn’t fazed by anything. This probably has nothing to do with me and everything to do with him feeling lonely or something. I can’t imagine how hurtful it was to be shuffled from family to family, never feeling chosen.

His eyes land on me. “Sometimes, I wonder if things would’ve been different if I’d met you first.”

Fuck. Not expecting that.

My stomach knots, but he’s obviously dealing with something. He’s the one who told me I belonged with Wells back in September, so none of this makes sense. Wells would be furious that I’m not decking him, but I also know he loves Liam like a brother. I’m not going to shut him out. We have to work through this so I have a positive spin to offer my husband.

“What do you mean?” Despite the stress, I try to keep my tone gentle.

“You and Wells are amazing together, but we could’ve been—”

“Don’t.” I twist so I’m facing him, mimicking his straddling pose, his hands resting inches from my knees. “Nothing good will come of this discussion, Liam. There’s someone out there who is perfect for you. You’re

quite the catch, but this conversation will only complicate things.”

His face is uncharacteristically crestfallen, making my bones ache, and his voice is strained. “You can’t even humor me? Tell me if I would’ve had a chance.”

I steady my breathing and squeeze his hand before letting it drop back to the bench. Bending my knees up to my chest, I clasp my hands over my shins—my body language screaming that I’m closed off while my words attempt to secure a life raft for the two of us. “I’m not sure how much you know about the day I met Wells, but I saw Ty first. Wells might have known me, been watching me, had feelings for me, but my experience is that I literally ran into two beautiful men, and when I lifted my head, it was Ty who my gaze landed on. I immediately thought he was gorgeous and had kind eyes, but it didn’t matter because Wells had this magnetic pull on me from the first second. Once I turned my head, I couldn’t look away. Ty and I share something special. I adore Ty, trust him. He’s become a part of me. But it could have never been more because he’s not Wells.”

I heave a deep breath, doing my best to keep my gaze trained on Liam while his hazels search me. “If I had met you first, Liam, I would’ve known how incredible you were. We might have hit it off because there was some chemistry between us. And like Ty, you’re gorgeous and we absolutely share something special. Surprisingly, your cockiness is endearing. Even when you were a bit of a dick in the beginning, I liked you.”

I laugh, and so does he. And when he tucks a flyaway hair behind my ear, I resist the urge to clobber him because I’m delivering a blow. “But no matter what I had thought when I met you, when Wells showed up, I’d have gravitated toward him. I’m his. I *belong* with him.”

“I’m not denying that. But like you said, you’re also Ty’s and Gage’s. And you are most definitely *mine* too, Ivy.” His eyes are so heavy, so regretful; it’s breaking me. “Surely, you see how you’ve changed all of us.”

My hand crawls up to my throat, the doughnuts mushing into a giant dough ball clambering its way back up. “Liam, I love you all. You know that. But I’m *married* to Wells. I’m—”

He grunts, rubbing a hand down the side of his face. “I deserved a goddamn shot. I told him I wanted one, but I stepped aside.” He lights a cigarette, dragging on it aggressively and puffing a frustrated plume of smoke away from me. “Do you have any idea what it’s been like watching you fall for him?”

My patience and comfort with this are dwindling fast, my fingers diving into my hair. “It’s too late. This isn’t how or when you shoot your shot. *Fuck*. It’s ruining everything. Don’t you see that? Wells is going to freak, maybe kill you, and if he doesn’t, he’ll ostracize you.” I drop my face into my hands, unshed tears pricking my eyes. “And I can’t bear the thought of that because I know we’re all you have. *And I need you, Liam*. You might not have me the way you want, but you *do* have me. *Jesus*, this is going to destroy us all. Why would you do this?”

The more I think about it, the more panic sets in. I’m up, pacing, nearly hyperventilating, and he’s watching me, remorseful.

“Fuck, Ivy. Goddammit,” he hisses, smashing his half-smoked bud into the grass. “You and the guys mean everything to me. I get it—”

“It’s a little late for that! God, you fucked everything up. Don’t talk to me right now. We have to get back.” I pluck the keys from the table and chuck them at him. “Just drive and let me figure out how to handle this. *Shit*. I kinda hate you for this.”

On the thirty-minute drive back, we don’t speak. Liam mutters a few apologies, but I don’t respond, too focused on how I can salvage this for all of us. These men mean everything to me; they’re my family. I won’t allow this to break us, and I won’t let them lose each other over me.

As we wait for the wrought iron driveway gate to open, he glances my way. “Can we please smooth this over before they get back?”

I clear my throat, composing myself to word this the best I can as he prepares to roll through the nearly open gate. “You’ll never lose me. Family means everything to me, and *you* are my family in every sense of the word. I don’t give up on someone because they have a moment of temporary insanity, so you’re stuck with me. Forever.”

He stops the car with a jerk even though we’re at the end of the drive. His jaw falls slack. “You’re really something, High Society.”

Wells is going to flare into an unbearable rage, but that shock on Liam’s face tells me enduring it will be worth it. I can pacify Wells because he’ll know I chose him, but now, Liam sees he’s chosen too.

My hand tugs at the door handle, swinging it open, but before I step out, I peer over my shoulder at him. “Don’t breathe easy yet, Liam. I won’t keep this from Wells, so prepare for a rough road ahead. I may need to put some space between us while we work out the kinks, but we’ll be okay. Promise. We just need time.” With that, I hop onto the driveway, prepared to sprint to

the house and hide while he parks in the garage.

Liam throws the car in Park, springing off his seat, rounding the hood, and hooking a finger into my belt loop to keep me stationed. “I fucked up, Ivy. I don’t want you burdened with this. You’re too good for all of us, and, *fuck*, I’m so sorry. I’ll handle it with—”

A startling bang splices the chilly air, separating the sky and ground and Liam’s humble voice. He smashes into me, throwing me to the crushed-stone driveway. It knocks the wind out of my lungs with a stabbing jolt, my ears ringing, the world tilting. I’m weighted and frozen, but Liam is army-crawling, dragging me to the front passenger wheel while my puffy coat snags on the rocky ground. He coils his body around my head and chest, his gun drawn.

Blood. Everywhere.

Fuck.

There’s a trail of blood from where he hauled me. It’s all over me. And him.

All over Liam.

Something smells burned, but the world is soundless and still. Paralyzed. Until it isn’t. When every noise bombards me at once. Yelling and shrieking in the distance, trees rustling, the idling car, dogs barking, and Liam.

His bloody hand grips my jaw so tight that it throbs. “Ivy! Fuck! Listen to me!”

My eyes find his, bloodshot and determined but laced with fear. “What?” I squeak. “There’s blood. Am I shot?”

“I am,” he says flatly, still gripping my jaw. “Fucking run. I’ll cover you. Go to the safe room in the basement. If you can’t get in the house, there’s a storm shelter beneath the shooting range. Go! Wells will find you.”

A commotion in the woods around the house pulls my attention. A fight. *What the hell is going on?*

Liam fires several deafening rounds at a figure in front of the trees while screaming, “Ivy! Goddammit! Run!”

Time feels stretched out yet rushed. My scrutiny returns to him. His face is pale, ashen, not at all like my arrogant golden boy.

“Why aren’t you coming with me?” But as the words leave my lips, my brain hammers home the reality of the situation.

Liam pants, grunts, and lies down. His long-sleeved sky-blue Henley is soaked through, crimson now, and blood trickles from his nose.

I lift his shirt, and his body trembles. “Oh God. No! Fuck, Liam!”

As I try to find the source of the bleeding, my fingers only seem to smear it. He grips my wrist to stop me, his eyes glossy and red-rimmed.

“I’ve lost too much blood. I can’t move fast enough. You need to go. Now.” His voice is raw and husky, the strength waning with every word.

“No.” Sobbing, I shake my head, my mind made up. “I won’t leave you. I can’t. I’m so sorry, Liam. I’m so sorry for everything. Please don’t leave me. Please—”

He coughs and sputters, his thumb dusting gingerly over my hand—a dichotomy to the terror encircling us. “You did everything right, gave me more, were worth it all, baby girl. My gun. Go ...” His eyes are so stern, even as I see the life draining from them. “They’re here for you,” he rasps, and a chill skitters up my spine.

I weep into his chest and kiss his forehead. “You are so loved, Liam Graves. My forever family.” Prying his bloody fingers off his gun, I move to a stooping stance.

And I run. And run.

The driveway seems to have lengthened. Seconds morph to days. And my senses stack from overwhelm. All the sounds meld to mine—my ragged breaths, my thrashing pulse, my pounding steps. My sobs. The smell of Liam’s blood coating me and the sweat dripping between my breasts and down my spine. The salt of my tears.

The gothic mansion—home—blurs to a horror house.

I don’t have a fucking key. *Why didn’t I grab the keys?* I glance back at the car. It’s too far, so I sprint around the garage and break into an Olympic dash to the shooting range.

Damn grains of sand.

It’s all slipping away. Falling through the cracks.

In a blink, I’m at the obstacle course, the shooting range finally in sight.

Almost.

A hand on my mouth. A bump on the head.

“Fucking hell,” someone snarls.

Everything is spotted and muffled and black.

I’m floating. Cloud surfing. Or drowning. Maybe sailing, rocking in waves. Can’t be sure. But there’s a steady motion to it and voices I can’t make out.

Angry or anxious.

Distressed.

My brain is fuzzy.

Someone must be carrying me.

Who the fuck has me? Am I being saved or being taken?

I can't scream. *Why can't I scream? Or think straight?*

Liam.

Did they find Liam?

My eyelids are glued shut. They won't open, no matter how hard I try. And the motion is making me nauseous. Seasick. I cry out for Wells, wailing about Liam, but all that comes out are garbled moans.

Where are we going? Why won't they stop and tell me what's happening?

What's wrong with me?

Time muddies, but eventually, the rocking stops.

The voices quiet.

There's only Wells. I sense him.

His presence. His concern. His love.

His sugar and scotch mingle with bleach and blood, making my nostrils itch.

He smooths his palm over my hair, his lips close to my ear, breath wetting my lobe and inducing goose bumps. Classic Wells. "You wanted to be a pebble, Ivanna, shaking the surface of the pond, but you are so much more. You can fill it up or empty the whole goddamn thing simply by the direction you choose. You're the storm, baby. Be the fucking storm."

I knew it was you, Wells. My masked heartthrob, skipping stones and sharing dreams.

He sweeps a thumb over my cheekbone and kisses my forehead, but then he's gone.

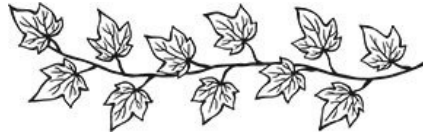
A cool sting rushes through my veins, numbing my limbs and spinning my body until it's weightless.

Hazy.

Vacant.

And my world goes silent.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



IVY

There's an incessant beeping, intent on frying my nerves. And a whirring sound.

Everything is white, the kind of white that might shine near the heavens. The kind that blurs and blinds.

And that's with my lids shut because they refuse to open.

My bones are stiff, muscles aching. I don't know how to mark the time. How long have I been here? Unmoving.

Asleep but awake.

Imprisoned in a constant state of confusion.

Sometimes, I hear voices. Most I don't recognize.

Except my mom's. I hear my mom's voice. Her cries.

I feel her touches. On my hair, my cheek, my hands.

She covers me with blankets. I'm always cold. So cold.

And she knows.

She's angry now, arguing with someone. Yelling. She never raises her voice. It isn't ladylike or proper.

I love that about her—her composure and self-control, how she can care for people, juggle tasks, and entertain, all while having the grace of a 1950s sitcom housewife, no matter the circumstances. Elegance at its finest.

“She was supposed to have woken up by now. I want answers.” Her tone is woven with warning, fierce. So unlike her. My father would be so proud.

I wish I could open my eyes for her, but something keeps pulling me under. Like I'm drifting into the deepest parts of the sea, too heavy to swim or float. Sinking. It's him. My father. He's calling me to his office.

Fourth-grade parent-teacher conferences were last night. I always try my best in school, but sometimes, I can't focus on what the teachers are saying. I enter my father's office, dropping into the chair I like to sit in. My feet dangle, so I swing them, watching the buckles on my shoes flap with a hypnotic clack. Soothing.

He takes the chair beside me instead of the one at his desk. "How's my girl?"

"I'm good, Daddy. I think. Am I in trouble?"

"Quite the opposite." He grins. He always makes me feel better, even when I mess up. "Our shortcomings can shout to the world that we're at a disadvantage in some capacity, Ivanna. Perhaps that's true at times. But when you recognize your strengths and weaknesses, you control the narrative. People will dismiss you based on what they believe your deficiency to be, which means mastering it will leave you with the upper hand."

I like that he talks to me like a grown-up, but sometimes, the meaning is lost on me. I pinch my eyebrows together, confused. "I'm not sure I understand, Daddy."

He squeezes my leg. "That's okay, angel. Let me try another way. What do your teachers often report about you?"

A shameful groan falls from me as I roll my lips in. "That I get lost in my mind, am often late and zoned out."

"That's right," he says with an encouraging smile. "Later, after zoning out, do you ever remember something the teacher said?"

My feet kick back and forth, the leather of my shoes swishing with a satisfying whirring rhythm as I think about his question. "Sometimes, I guess. Yes. Like when I'm doing my homework in the evening, sometimes, her instructions hit me even though my thoughts were drifting when she gave them."

He springs up from his chair with a pat on my head. "That's right. You process things differently, Ivanna. It takes time for your mind to register the information, but it's still in there."

"But that's bad," I say, remembering how Mrs. Tucker's face twists and reddens when she snaps her fingers at me and tells me I'm not paying attention. "That's why she gets frustrated."

His face softens, his lips tipping into a frown. Saddened by what I said. "It's why she gets frustrated, but it isn't bad. People are often critical of variances they don't understand. But we're going to hone it into your

greatest asset.”

“How?” I ask.

“By learning how to recover the information you and everyone else thinks you’re missing. But let it be our secret. Don’t tell anyone what you can do.”

“I won’t,” I confirm.

“Good, angel. We’ll start practicing right away.”



My father and I are in the kitchen, eating bowls of ice cream. His guests left a little while ago.

He taps his spoon on his bowl with a tink. “Think, sweet girl. You were in the corner with your book, and your mother and I were with the Palmers. What did we talk about?”

I’m not sure why Dad always wants me to do this, but he seems to think it’s important. We’ve been playing this little game for a few years now. I turned thirteen three months ago, and I think I’m getting pretty good at it.

Closing my eyes, I try to think about the evening. I was reading Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, imagining what it would be like to be magical and capable of conquering even the darkest evil. Harry was so ordinary, and yet he rose. He shook everything up. He belonged. I’ve never really had that feeling, like I fit. Except with Celeste. She looks the part, but still doesn’t fit. She’s the polished Celeste to the world, but always wild Lettie to me. Other than her and my parents, books make me feel like I belong, heaping comfort like a weighted blanket.

The chatter tonight was a monotonous hum in the background. I wanted my headphones to block everyone out because the noise made me anxious, but I knew Dad didn’t want me to use them. So, I concentrated on the words on the page, the visions dancing in my mind’s eye, while Mrs. Palmer gabbed on and on.

“She ...” I bite my lip, choosing the piece of the conversation that needs plucked. “Mr. and Mrs. Palmer want you and Mom to go to the lake house.”

His eyes brighten. “Good. Anything else?”

My head spins, trying to remember, when it suddenly washes over me. “May nineteenth. Mr. Palmer said it should work for you because you don’t have a full schedule that day.” I scoop a spoonful of butter pecan ice cream

into my mouth, pondering the conversation more. “How does he know when you have patients?”

“Exactly.” My father beams. “Mr. Palmer has been having an inappropriate relationship with my secretary. And you, Ivanna, identified his one slipup in a night full of jabbering.”

I drop my spoon, astounded by that realization—people’s darkest secrets lay bare inside innocent chitchat and relaxed moments when they forget to hide.

My eyes flit to his. “Why is this so important for me to learn, Dad?”

He props his elbows on the island, stealing a bite of my ice cream since his is gone. And he smiles—the smile that is only for me. He has a special one for my mother too. But the one reserved for me is full of pride and adoration. It makes me feel invincible.

“Information is more powerful than a bullet, Ivanna. I’m arming you.”

My eyelids fly open. Wells. Liam.

The bullet. And shooting. The blood and screaming.

The light pierces my eyes until they water all over my temples.

“Wells?” I whisper. It takes every bit of strength I have. My throat is dry, tongue heavy, head pounding.

My eyes float over the room. The beeping and whirring are above me. Machines. A prickling pinch in my hand—IV. My skin is pale and dry, bluish and chilled. And it all smells sterile and sick at once.

“Ivanna,” my mother shrieks. “Oh, my sweet, sweet girl.” Her hand slides over my cheek while her other frantically presses buttons near my shoulder.

“Wells?” I chirp again. I want Wells.

“Yes, sweetheart, you’ll be well soon.” She nods, and her lips twitch with a maternal devotion. “It’s all okay now.”

No. Why doesn’t she understand what I’m asking? My head is so groggy, the light is painful, and my voice is not cooperating. I’m so thirsty.

I try again. “Husband,” I pant. “Wells.”

She flaps her *nonsense* hand at me and brushes some matted hair off my jaw. “It’s all been taken care of, Ivanna. What a weird thing to wake up worrying about. Honestly, let’s focus on getting you up and moving first.”

She’s not making any sense.

A nurse barrels into the room. Her smile stretches across her face, and she squeezes my mother’s arm. “Oh, happy day,” she croons, tapping at the

machine next to the bed. “So glad you could join us, Ivanna. My name is Nurse Nelly. Your mama and I have been waiting on you.”

“Wells? Liam?” I ask, hoping she’ll get my husband and tell me what happened to Liam. My heart sinks as the memory assaults me. I watched him fade away, but I need someone to say it. To tell me he’s really gone. Tears stream down my cheeks at the thought.

“We’re going to get the doctor in here. You don’t worry your pretty head about a thing,” Nelly says.

This is making me dizzy. Maybe my words aren’t clear. I study them both as they scurry about, tittering gleefully, until a doctor arrives, examining my eyes with a tiny flashlight. I follow it, as I know he wants me to, and wait patiently to ask him my questions.

“Hi, Ivanna. I’m Dr. Barret. Your father was an invaluable mentor to me in my early years, so I feel privileged to be here with you. How are you feeling?” he asks while glancing at the clock and checking my pulse.

“Heavy,” I say.

He chuckles. “Okay. I’ll take that as a win if it’s your primary complaint. Do you know what happened to you?”

I think back. Nothing is clear after running away from Liam. *Why did I leave him?*

I shake my head and swallow a small amount of saliva, nearly choking on it. “No.” I cough.

The nurse appears out of nowhere on the other side of the bed, rubbing an ice chip on my lips. I lap at the cool water melting into my mouth while the doctor addresses me.

“You took a bad fall, Ivanna. There was significant swelling. We had to put you into a medically induced coma to let you heal and decided to bring you out of it a few days ago.”

A coma? Jesus, how long have I been here? “What day is it?” I puff.

“Today is December tenth,” he shares.

I heave a breath. I’ve been out for a while, and the guys aren’t here. Shit. Were they hurt too?

“Ten days,” I whisper.

He tilts his head, index finger bent over his chin. “In December, yes. You’ve been in a coma for a little over thirteen weeks.”

What? No. I heard wrong. “Days,” I correct.

He sighs, a regretful expression coasting over his features. “Weeks,

Ivanna. Since September sixth.”

I can't breathe. My chest is cracking, a spasm rocking through it. “Wells. I want Wells,” I cry and suck in the air with a whistling hiccup.

My mother wipes her bloodshot eyes with a tissue, tears cascading down her cheeks. And bags. She never has purple bags under her eyes like that. Nelly wraps an arm around her shaking shoulders, soothing her.

Peering back at me, a deep divot between his eyes smooching his forehead, Dr. Barret straightens his lips into a line. Not a smile. Not a frown. “Tell me more about why you're upset, Ivanna. What are you asking?”

Strength courses through my arms. Anger rising. “I want my husband. Wells.” Gravel scratches my vocal cords, but that was clear. I heard it. There's no way they can't understand me.

The doctor twists around to my mother, and she and the nurse share his baffled grimace. She shakes her head at him with a sigh.

My jaw tenses, hands fisting. The IV tape jabs at my skin with a needling prod, stretching until tiny cracks creep into the dryness. I grunt. “And Ty and Gage. Are they okay? Did Liam survive?”

He doesn't answer me. Instead, he sits in a chair beside the bed, his almond eyes skating all over my face in the curiosity a doctor holds when scientifically intrigued. “Can you tell me your full name?”

I huff, annoyed he's asking me such stupid questions and not answering my important ones. “Ivanna Kingston Wells.”

His lips purse. “Can you tell me about the Wells name? Where does that come from?”

“My husband.” I shoot a glare at my mother, not understanding why she's staying silent instead of explaining this, but she's crying. I clear my throat. “Gavin Wells. We were married in September at La Lune Noire in New Orleans. We live with our three friends—Ty, Liam, and Gage—in Starlit Hills. Liam was shot at our home. Please tell me how he's doing.” My breathing staggers, and my heart beats erratically.

The doctor strokes his chin, eyes growing heavy as he glances between my mother and me. “I'm sorry, Ivanna. Comas are tricky things. Sometimes, patients have extensive dreams. Some even have nightmares. It can be a challenge to differentiate between what was imagined and what is in fact reality.” He sets a serious gaze on me. “You are Ivanna Kingston, daughter of Thomas and Natasha Kingston. Labor Day weekend, you were running down the steps during an argument with your mother. You tumbled down the last

several stairs, banging your head on the way and ultimately hitting it on the marble floor.”

“No.” I search my mother’s face. Why is she doing this? “No. That’s not possible. And you know it! Mom, tell him how fucked up that is. You were in Switzerland and then Italy, France, and Greece. We talked. I got married. I sent you pictures.”

She drops her traitorous blue eyes to the floor. The machine next to me starts beeping faster, mimicking my pulse.

My whole body is trembling. “I want my fucking husband. Right! Now!”

My mother is sobbing, hands covering her face.

The rage in my veins pumps like a steroid, strengthening me with the same venomous energy surging through one of those test-tube villains. I rip my IV out, ignoring the sharp sting as blood seeps from the wound, and throw myself out of the bed. My knees buckle. Dr. Barret catches me, but I shove him away and stumble toward the door.

But they’re all on me. More people trickle into the room. Gripping my arms and barking orders back and forth as I thrash and scream.

Bite and spit and kick.

It takes four of them to exhaust me. They drag me back to the bed, restraining me while I growl and shout for Wells over and over. And Ty. And Gage. *Please help me.*

Are they with Liam? Did he survive?

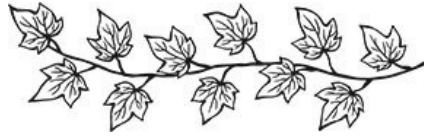
My throat is raw and bloody from screaming, sweat coating my skin, limbs shaking. They strap me down as I wail.

What kind of nightmare is this?

A prick in the neck. My veins run ice cold, my entire body breaking into a violent shiver. Teeth chattering. Their faces and voices and lies and torture grow fuzzy, fading into that blinding heavenly light.

And my world returns to a suffocating stillness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



IVY

I'm home from college for the weekend. It's my senior year, six weeks before graduation, and my parents are hosting a couple for dinner. While they mingle in the formal living room, sipping cocktails, I'm studying in my father's office.

He insisted that I minor in computers. Who knows why. He's always trying to help me be well rounded and prepared. For what, I'm not sure. As an artist, I can't see how computer language will aid me, but I've found I have a knack for it, and it makes him happy, so why not?

As I complete my assignment, the blathering continues to filter in. It's nothing more than background noise, along with my music playing, so I lose myself in my work.

After years of my father's information challenges, my brain instinctually knows when to tune in and out. Sometimes, the information gets tucked away, popping up at random when something triggers it. Other times, it draws me out of my daze and beckons my immediate assessment. Tonight, my head is all over the place—the computer, the conversation, the song lyrics, and post-graduation plans. Still, even in my chaotic brain haze, I'm aware.

My mother takes Mrs. Stetson on a tour of the terrace, pool, and pond. Spring is generally a beautiful time out there, but we're still enduring April showers, so the entertainment area is a soggy mess. It's common etiquette to share all the nooks and crannies though, so off they go.

I code a new site into existence and then hack it for fun. The hacking isn't part of the class, but the study partner I was assigned isn't the most ethical student. She was exactly who I would've picked to partner with, myself. She teaches me silly little tricks when we get bored. While I haven't mastered the

ins and outs, I enjoy the art of finding an alternate route.

The men light cigars, and my father breaks out his aged brandy. Being a doctor, my father detests smoking, but he claims cigars are the exception because when smoked in a social situation, they're a bonding tool. That's a man thing, for sure. Lettie and I have never needed a Cuban to dish. She'd make a dick joke if I said that to her, hoping for a different kind of Cuban in her mouth.

Mr. Stetson's voice lowers, which draws my attention, my subconscious adamant that I should soak in their conversation even though I'm thoroughly immersed in my computer jargon. "Monroe Montgomery was a mess at our meeting last week. It seems Dalton is in trouble again."

"What sort of trouble this time?" my father drones. He has a way of playing the hardly interested role, which encourages people to entice him with what they know. He's a man others long to impress and, in turn, spill to.

"Similar," Mr. Stetson says. "You know the Holden girl disappeared about two and a half years ago after filing a domestic violence complaint against him. Montgomery never said so at the time, but I had a feeling he helped Dalton get rid of the girl. Her body, that is. He's not a terrible man, but I think he'd sell his soul for his son. Of course, that's all speculation, but the events didn't sit right."

My father grunts, irritation clear in his tone. "Not an easy thing to voice without proof."

"Exactly, so I kept my mouth shut." Mr. Stetson's tenor is laced with a shaky nervousness. "Nothing I could do at that point anyway. But last week, he mentioned the Phillips girl disappeared at Christmas—Mercy. She's never filed an official report, but she's been hospitalized with significant bruises and broken bones, and she gave birth to Dalton's son six months before going missing."

"And the boy?" my father asks. I can hear his keen interest rising.

Mr. Stetson sighs. "Gone too. Montgomery was beside himself, muttering nonsense mostly, but said something about not being able to choose his son over his grandson. That this time was different and he wouldn't find himself digging in the Dundee Caverns."

Glass rattles. My father must be pouring a drink. He hums. "That sounds an awful lot like an admission, Walt."

Regret and panic and fear huff out through a muffled groan. "None of us are sinless, but this—enabling abuse and murder of innocent girls and a baby

—it’s against the code. The Holden girl was only nineteen. And Mercy ... Christ, Tom, I went to college with her father. If she’s ...”

“Don’t.” My father’s stern timbre wraps around his order for Mr. Stetson to leave it alone. “Let me look into it.”

The memory floods me like a drowning of sorts because my father had his stroke two days later, probably before he could uncover anything. And mixed into those details are specks of La Lune Noire when I was reading in the Noire brothers’ penthouse suite with my AirPods on Transparency mode. Axel and Ryker were anxious, questioning Wells and Ty about Dalton, Mercy, and the Holden girl who had gone missing.

More truth. More proof I’m not losing my fucking mind, which I know, but when people keep insisting I dreamed a reality while suffering from a head injury, it’s challenging not to fall into an abyss of doubt.

Am I crazy?

The answer is *fuck no*.

Not in the way they think. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t sense a subtle unraveling occurring deep inside me. Patience is a virtue though. That’s Etiquette 101.

People tend to believe the picture of rage is painted in tantrums and threats and violent outbursts. But sometimes, rage finds a home in silent calculation.

It’s been a week since I was sedated after identifying both the betrayal of my mother and the outright gaslighting of the staff here, which means I spent my twenty-third birthday caged, like a science experiment gone wrong. I’m not sure what their angle is, but it’s obvious punching and biting my way out of here isn’t the answer.

I attempted to sign myself out a few days ago. Physically, I feel fine—another sign my body hasn’t been bedridden for three months—but due to my unhinging and “necessary sedation,” I was evaluated, placed on a three-day psych hold, and admitted for insisting that I did not dream up my husband, his friends, and the last three months of my life. How fucked up is that?

My mother walks into the room, a latte in hand. She sets it on the table tray attached to my bed. “I came with a peace offering. Can we talk?”

“That depends.” My eyes remain firmly on the television. The sound is off, and I haven’t a clue what I’m watching—some sort of baking competition show. I’ve been quietly seething, devising my plan, but also

trying to stuff some more recipes into my apron for Gage and the guys.

She lowers herself into the chair at my bedside, legs crossed at the ankles. “On what, Ivanna?” Her voice is far chipper than my current incarceration warrants.

“Do you have my wedding rings? May I have my phone or at least use yours? Are you prepared to admit that you’ve been in Europe for three months and cried on the phone when you heard how happy I was with my husband?”

She sighs, hands clasped in her lap. “I do not. You may not. I am not.”

A saccharine smile blooms across my face while syrup glazes my voice. “Then, take your fucking coffee and get the hell out.”

“Seriously, Ivanna.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “It’s like you’re a different person. You never spoke to me like this.”

My head whips toward her so fast that my neck cricks in protest. “And you never lied to me before, *Mother*.” I scoff at the use of her name. “Actually, that’s not even true. You lied to me my whole life. I don’t know why I’m surprised.” As angry as I am, I won’t strip her of her maternal title by shoving what we both know down her throat any further. That isn’t the way I want to handle that discussion.

Her eyes brim with tears as she wrings her hands—a gesture reserved for utter desperation, like my father’s stroke—and a part of me shatters. I love my mom, but I won’t allow anyone to do this to me. Not even her.

She dabs at the corner of her eye with her ring finger, her lips quivering. “I know you don’t understand this, but I’m doing what’s best for you, Ivanna.”

There’s a confession in those words, along with a plea. My heart hammers with hope. “I don’t want to be at odds with you, Mom. What’s best for me is the truth and my husband and my freedom to leave this place.”

She huffs and shakes her head. “That was the only truth I can offer. It’s your job to secure your freedom. I can’t do that for you.”

I turn back to the television, more disappointed than I was when she walked in. She just admitted that lying to me is best—her truth. No clue what to do with that, and she’ll never admit that’s what she meant.

Seething resumed.

“The peace offering wasn’t the cup of coffee,” she says, her voice small, like a little girl’s.

Not interested in anything less than a full admission of her despicable,

outright lies, I unmute the baking show in answer to her stupid fucking peace offering.

“Someone is here to see you,” she announces above the racket.

I click the power button and twist in my bed, breath caught in my lungs. “Wells?”

Her eyes close, and she swallows. So *not* Wells.

She rises from her chair and clacks her heels the few yards to the door. “Come in, dear.”

Celeste struts in with a bright smile and her arms open wide. “Hey, bestie!”

Jumping out of bed, I thrust myself into her embrace, knowing she’ll help me navigate this. Celeste will talk some sense into them. I have no words though. The first tears since the day they sedated me flow. I’ve been stifling the anguish, but Celeste is always safe. “God, I missed you, Lettie.”

Not letting go, she allows me to sob all over her dove-white cashmere sweater, the angelic-white palette highlighting her espresso hair and dark eyes. She’s stunning, as always, with her matching calf-length pencil skirt, high-heeled brown boots, and buttery-tan coat draped over her forearm. “I’ve been worried sick, Ivy,” she trills. “Going out of my mind. And I missed your birthday.”

Everyone did.

I lift my face from her shoulder, feeling so small in this moment. She’s three inches taller, and her boots provide another three or four. But it’s more. She’s whole, and I’m the picture of brokenness.

She glances between my mother and me. “So, I sweet-talked us a stroll around the grounds. Put your shoes and coat on, grab that coffee, and let’s get some air.”

My mother brought me clothes last week—items that were at my home with Wells, which has been screwing with my head, but I brush my bafflement over that tidbit aside and do as Celeste instructed. After I chug the latte for a caffeine buzz and discard the cup, we mosey out to a walled-off garden, a winding stamped-concrete pathway snaking through the bare trees and empty flower beds. Winter and death surrounding us.

“Do you have your phone?” I ask when we’re shrouded by vast, desolate tree branches.

She snickers. “I was told not to give it to you. Not that I ever do what I’m told, but talk to me first.”

“Fine. Can you show the doctors and my mother our texts so I can get out of here?”

Her fingers curl around my bicep, tight enough that it pinches through my coat. “What texts?”

I turn, incredulous, eyelids fluttering. *Why is everyone so exhausting?* “The ones where I told you about Wells, our out-of-this-world sex, and you told me you were busy being fucked into a coma.”

She chuckles under her breath briefly, but then frowns. “That does sound like something I’d say, and I did indeed get fucked into another state of consciousness, but I never heard from you. Your mother texted me a few days after I left, telling me about the accident.”

My jaw drops, but before I can respond, she wraps an arm around my shoulders and continues, “I would’ve come back, but your mom said I shouldn’t since you were in a coma.”

“No.” My feet won’t move. I’m a statue of pain and anger and disbelief. “That’s not possible.”

She drags me to a bench, covertly pulling out her phone and showing me our text thread, which is blank after the morning she flew out. But the thread with my mom isn’t. Updates. Pictures. Every month since September, with the last photo sent on December 3 followed by an update a week later that I was finally awake.

The color drains from my face in a rush that makes me feel lightheaded, even as the icy wind slaps at my cheeks and nose. My whole body is trembling. The sky and pathway and brick walls tilt and quake, like the day I lost Liam. This can’t be happening. It wasn’t my imagination. It wasn’t.

Celeste twists toward me, her leather-gloved hands clutching mine. “Ivy, tell me everything. All signs seem to point toward a head injury, but I’m always in your corner. Ride or die, babe. Let’s untangle this together.”

I heave a deep breath, and my voice quivers as I recount the last three months, starting the moment she wheeled her suitcase toward airport security. I cover the inheritance issue, meeting Wells and Ty, moving in, and marrying Wells in New Orleans. Meeting Rena and getting roofied, falling in love and having earth-shattering sex, training and campfires and endearing moments with the guys. Finding out who I was and the role I was expected to fill, and our ancestry test being the catalyst to it all. Thanksgiving, meeting O’Reilly, and Liam—the kiss, the shooting, watching the life leave his eyes while he bled out in my arms. And finally, running, hearing Wells, waking up here,

and fighting the doctor, nurse, and orderlies until they restrained and drugged me.

Her brows are pinched, jaw slack.

She's speechless. Celeste is never speechless.

She pulls me against her for a hug. "That's the most fucked-up story I've ever heard." Her heavy breaths crash like waves between us, breaking into a silent bafflement that I hope lands on the shore of belief. "Okay," she says, "there's a lot to unpack there, but if we're going to prove it, we need to get started."

I gasp, squeezing her tighter, shocked and grateful that there's someone who will ride this out with me. "Thank you, Lettie."

She pats at a tear rolling down her pink-tinged cheek. "Of course, but I'll only help if I get the nitty-gritty details of the kinky sex you had, and you swear not to call me Lettie in front of other people."

Finally, a smidgen of laughter rumbles from my chest. "Deal." I clear my head, sifting through all the things we need to look into. "I'm not permitted internet access, so I need your help."

She pulls up the Notes app on her phone. "I'll start as soon as I leave. Give me the details."

Listing off the names and some characteristics about each of my guys, our address, and some information on Rena—since, without my phone, I don't have her number—I rack my brain for what else I could offer. I'm not ready to dive into that information about Mercy and Dalton yet, so I store it away for later.

"That's enough for tonight, and our time is almost up," Celeste says, pocketing her phone. "In the meantime, you need to figure out how to get yourself out of here."

"I'm trying. I know what I have to do, but my pride has been getting the best of me." I lift my chin. "I have to tell them what they want to hear."

She nods. "Yes, you do. This is a good window for that. Tell them I convinced you, so you can get out of here and investigate this with me."

I'm not sure if she really believes me, but Celeste has always been my best friend, my champion—the one who wouldn't let other kids poke fun at me for zoning out, the one who encouraged my painting, the one who didn't judge, no matter how far we strayed on a viewpoint. I appreciate the effort even if she isn't convinced, but that gives me an idea. On the stroll back, I stop abruptly. "When you come tomorrow, can you sneak me in a knife?"

“A knife? Ivy, I don’t ... I don’t know,” she stammers.

“I’m not going to hurt myself or anyone else,” I promise, “but I think I can erase some of your doubts. Grab a chef’s knife out of your butcher block. Hide it inside the lining of your coat.”

“There’s a metal detector at the entrance,” she protests, swallowing, and for the briefest moment, she looks at me like she doesn’t know me. But then she grits her teeth. “I know a guy in the kitchen here. I think I can *maybe* snag one from there. I do owe you a birthday present. This can be my *Thelma & Louise* contribution.”

Leave it to Celeste to *know a guy* anywhere we find ourselves.

“Fantastic, Lettie.” I throw my arms around her. “I knew I could count on you. Please find my husband.”

“On it,” she whispers, hugging me back.



In my morning therapy session, I laid the foundation for my *belief* that I’d been in a coma and Wells was only a dream. Apparently, that’s progress, but I still have some work to do—whatever the hell that means.

When Celeste struts in, I’m already dressed for our walk. Her face is tense, which has my stomach in knots.

Once we’re secluded, I turn to her. “What did you find?”

She purses her lips. “Not much. The men don’t exist, Ivy. I mean, people with those names exist, but not with the physical characteristics you offered or the age range and military background. I took screenshots of anyone with their names.”

She passes me her phone, and I scroll through the pictures. None of them are my guys.

“What the fuck?” I hiss as my mind races. “This doesn’t make any sense. What about the house?”

“Empty.” She huffs and hesitates, but my gaze stays planted, waiting for her whiskey-colored eyes to rise to mine. “Has been for a year. It’s for sale.”

A pang of terror stabs me in the chest. My hand presses against my sternum, trying to ease the horror threatening to stop my heart. Jesus, I do feel crazy. But I know it was real.

“Celeste,” I snarl, “how would I give you that address and be able to

describe the house?”

Her lips quiver in a frown. “I don’t know. It’s weird, for sure, but that’s what I found.”

“And Rena?” I choke the question out, not sure I can handle anything else today.

“No one would let me talk to her. I explained who I was, that I knew you, but was refused the connection. I left several messages.”

I grunt and stroke my freezing forehead, sweat-soaked in spite of the frigid temperature. “*Fuck*. Every day is worse than the one before. I’m spiraling here. There has to be an explanation. Maybe this is my trial?”

She tilts her head, and pity shadows her features. It’s like a punch in the gut. I’m losing her.

“Ivy, let’s say everything you remember is correct. Your masked stranger from your eighteenth birthday party was lurking around, protecting and falling in love with you for all these years because some secret cabal wants you to inherit your birth father’s role, but you have to undergo a trial to prove your competence. How does being committed to a psych ward while your husband and friends disappear from existence accomplish that?”

My fingers fist into my hair. “I don’t know. I hear it and know it’s ridiculous, but it wasn’t my imagination. You have to believe me.” Tears drip down my chilled face like tiny icicles, chapping the tight skin.

I can still feel Wells. The way he held me and petted my hair. The way his lips melted against mine, his tongue tangling with the perfect intensity to transport me to the land of euphoric bliss. His raspy tenor wetting my ear. His wake-up calls and orders and infectious laugh that had to be earned. The way he listened to my every desire and hope and fantasy, reading between the lines and writing them into our story.

His sugar and scotch that smelled like coming home.

And movies and games and cooking with Liam and Ty and Gage. Campfires and training. Giggling like kids. Secrets and dreams. *Family*.

Celeste sweeps my hair behind my shoulder, her tone softening. “I believe one of two things: either you had extensive trauma and that beautiful brain of yours imagined a blockbuster-worthy plot, or that man you love royally fucked you over, using all his erasing skills to abandon you and let you rot in this mindfuck.”

Jesus, what if she’s right? But what would he gain from that? If nothing else, I was one hell of a payday.

It hurts to even entertain that, but they wouldn't give up millions for nothing. Although that makes more sense than someone killing them. If they were dead, it wouldn't account for the house that's now empty and up for sale or the records showing it's been that way for a year. And no one would be lying to me. They'd tell me my husband perished. It's an endless fucking circle of nonsense.

"I don't like either of those narratives," I say, wiping my wet cheeks.

"I know." She passes her phone back to me. "Look at the pictures of you again and the dates."

She's already resigned herself to the lies being spun, and I have no idea of how to combat them.

I swipe through the photos of me in the hospital bed. One from each month. "My face isn't showing in the first three," I mutter, half to myself. "Only my hair peeking out."

Pulling up the last one, I dissect it, bit by bit. Dr. Barret is checking my chart. My face is visible in that one. It's definitely me. My heart shoots up into my throat as I zoom in on the image.

"There." I point at his stethoscope—or more specifically, the reflection in it. "That's my mom, and that man there is Wells. That's his suit and his belt. And that glint on his finger is his wedding ring. I'm certain." The reflection is distorted and only shows their midsections, but that's my husband.

Celeste looks, doubt still veiling her face, brow crooked. "Anyone could —"

"Those are Armani suit pants and a Stefano Ricci leather belt—exactly what he wears. Who would be in my hospital room, talking to my mom, wearing that?"

Her mouth falls open to answer, but she says nothing.

My hope soars like a kite. "Did you bring the knife?"

She closes her eyes on a deep breath. "Yes."

"Give it to me."

She glances around, uncertain, but digs into her coat lining, sliding it to me. I take the knife from her and hide myself from anyone inside, stepping behind the massive oak beside the bench. To test the weight, I toss the knife into the air and catch it. After the quick flip, Celeste's eyes widen, but I don't say anything. I also need to test the balance point, so I spin it like I'm twirling a pencil, allowing it to stop on my index finger. Steady.

Confident enough to throw, I point out a leaf a little less than twenty feet

away. “See that lonely brown leaf dangling in front of the tree trunk over there?”

She peers over at the leaf, eyes squinted with intrigue. “Yes?”

With her hesitant answer ringing in my ears, I launch the knife, shredding part of the crinkly brown leaf but pinning the rest to the trunk.

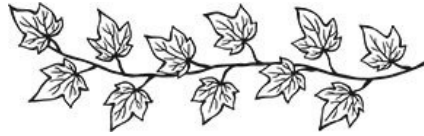
I can hear Ty whoop in my mind. “*You slaughtered that, Freckles.*”

Celeste’s hand covers her mouth with a gasp, brown eyes startled into round orbs of shock. “What the hell was that?”

“Proof,” I quip as a small rush of victory courses through my veins.

“Yeah, okay.” She nods, breathless. “We have to get you out of here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



IVY

It has taken two more weeks and several “breakthroughs,” to be released from the psych ward. It’s January 2. I’ve been away from Wells and the guys for a month without a single whisper of them still with me—a belief I’ve been clutching as a lifeline. It’s disheartening, to say the least, as is walking into my childhood bedroom, where everything is in the precise place it was before I moved in with Wells. Shock and devastation are my new normal, it would seem.

The tedious minutes in the hospital gave me ample time to form theories though, which is where my research will focus. Sadly, the one I’m most convinced of breaks my heart.

Theory one: this is my trial. I’m not convinced what the objective for said trial is, but all signs point to that being a logical reason for the extensive gaslighting. That theory also aligns with the timing, but I can’t understand how my mother’s deceit or Wells, Ty, and Gage abandoning me plays into it. There’s no denying the guys erased themselves, which means if this is my trial, they turned me over, took the money, and left me.

And that pisses me the fuck off.

But I’m reasonable, so I’ll continue to build my case against them before I act.

Theory two: Liam was shot by the people hunting me, so Wells stashed me in the hospital as a means of protection. That one has holes all over it and is most likely my wishful thinking. How could I be safer away from Wells? If the people hunting me know my name and location, why am I not currently riddled with bullets? And finally, how could lying to me protect me further? It would have been far safer to have me in on that plan so I wasn’t constantly

shouting who I was. Theory two is weak and makes me miss Liam.

Theory three: I'm losing my fucking mind. I've already chucked that one, but it's important to give the elephant in the room a name.

Theory four: Wells, Ty, and Gage fought off my hunters, and on a last-minute whim, they decided my shock in that situation was proof that I wasn't fit for their world, so they forfeited the money and left me here, hoping I'd eventually be convinced it was all imagined. Possible, but unlikely. Wells was so territorial; I can't imagine him walking away with nothing. No power. No payment. No wife. That has loss written all over it, and Gavin Wells doesn't lose. If he was concerned I couldn't hack it in his world, he would either erase me with him or lock me up somewhere he could still reap the benefits.

Theory five: Liam survived and spit out a deathbed confession to Wells about kissing me, so they both decided I wasn't worth it. Doubtful. I've been over everything said between us before the shooting, and I handled that incident in a way that oozed grace and loyalty all over both of them. This would land them in the unforgivable asshole category without question. Besides, if Wells knew Liam kissed me, he'd need to mark me for his own alpha satisfaction.

Those are all the theories I've got, and none of them bode well for the men my heart still beats for.

My time hasn't only been spent on theories though. A lot of smaller details have become clear.

I'm fairly certain that Wells and the guys have control of my phone. It was returned to me upon discharge, and while Celeste drove me home, I spent the entire ride scouring it. Rena's number and any correspondence between us are missing, as are any traces of the guys—no pictures, no communication, no search history. No activity at all since I left Celeste at the airport. But I did find an embedded program linked to an unidentifiable IP address. I'm still working on that. I think that when Wells snatched my phone the first day we met—to input his information—he installed that program. From that moment on, they controlled whether my texts reached someone or not—and vice versa. Celeste fell firmly in the *unapproved* category, which leads to my next hunch.

Wells was responsible for Celeste's last-minute invite for the six-continent adventure trip. I had used her home address on my ancestry form, so this assumption wins them the benefit of the doubt since I assume it was to

keep her safe. I'm not sure how us texting would have compromised her safety, but it seems connected. The texts we did share were obviously one of the guys taking pity on me and furnishing a *false* mingling with my best friend.

The pictures Celeste has of me in the hospital are troublesome, but my guess is, they used someone who looked like me since it was only my red hair showing. Why? I'm not sure. Probably as an attempt to hide me from the people hunting me in case the link was made—another motivation which points to their honor. Of course, it's odd they didn't fill me in on any of these tidbits when they told me everything else, which brings it all into question.

I'm not going to remove the program on my phone. Until I have a fuller picture, it's best they think I'm not onto them.

Nervous to use any computer in my house and unwilling to bunk down the hall from my lying mother, I shower, dress, and pack a bag to stay at Celeste's. On the way, I make a couple of stops.

The first is to see my father. It isn't a productive visit. He's a mess of confusion today. My heart breaks for the time stolen from us—four Wednesdays—and I let a few tears fall with his arms around me, wishing I knew what he'd want me to do. After our time, I ask around for Theresa, hoping she can confirm speaking with Wells on multiple occasions. It's not that I don't trust myself, but I'd love to have one person blow the theory that I'm delusional out of the water, mainly because it would be sweet justice to watch my mother squirm as she ate her lies. Unfortunately, Theresa retired unexpectedly and is living somewhere in Hawaii. And when I request the sign-in logs, which Wells and I used only on the first visit in September, I'm told they only keep three months' worth.

The whole encounter has me hot. My heart thrashes with fury. Did he have us entering covertly through a back entrance for my protection or for this impending mindfuck?

On the way to my next stop, I drive past our home. Flashes of Liam's bloody body, his sweet words telling me I was worth it, and his command to run assault me to near shattering. I'm trembling in my idling Ferrari, staring at a home that isn't ours anymore. Regardless of what their motives are, there's a *For Sale* sign in the yard. The walls that shaped me and made me feel alive, that filled me with hope and purpose and family, are being tossed aside. Wells said we'd stay if I wanted, but that was just another lie.

I drive on, swinging by the pub Wells and I met at for our marriage

negotiation, hoping Abby—the manager—can help me piece things together.

She's standing before me, her blonde hair swept up and face void of expression as she dries some glasses with a dish towel. "Sorry, girl. I meet a lot of people. I can't place you."

Annoyed, I release a slow breath and jog her memory. "We met in September, Labor Day evening. I was with Wells. I gave you my information in case he murdered me. You thought it was hilarious. And then I realized you two knew each other."

She laughs, eyes barely meeting mine. "That seems like an encounter I'd remember."

Is she fucking serious? I'm about two seconds from going gangster on people and giving them a piss-in-their-pants incentive to stop fucking with me.

My teeth grind. "Look, Abby, I don't know what game Wells is fucking playing or what the hell your role is, but I am becoming seriously unhinged. So, cut the shit."

She slams a glass onto the rubber drying mat on the bar top. "I'm sorry you're having a tough time, but that subtle threat is my limit. Time to go, darling."

Two beefy guys start toward me, which has me rolling my eyes.

"Who owns this place?" I ask.

Her gaze flits to mine, and there is the briefest hint of panic—an apology she's gulping down. I hit on something.

"The owner prefers to remain as a silent partner," she supplies. "Any issues are mine to handle."

I scoff, realization smacking me in the face like a baseball bat. "It's him, isn't it? He owns this place. That's why he brought me here—so he could control the situation. He was always ten steps ahead, setting my life ablaze while I chased the fireworks. He still is. *Fuck.*"

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her quavering tenor telling me I nailed it. Somehow, she's at his mercy too. "But you need to leave."

I hold up surrendering hands to her and the beefy men in tiny shirts. "I'm going. I got what I came for. Thanks."

Angry sobs rack my body on the way to Celeste's. I don't know what to think. That's not exactly true because the lies are stacking into a glass tower of deceit. But the fragments of my shattered heart don't want to believe it—pieces so fractured and bruised and scattered that I'll never be whole again,

and yet they're still begging for Wells. For his gentle touches to be the dusting of his devotion. For his rough and carnal need to be unbridled passion tethering us together. For his poetic declarations to be the lyrics of our love song.

Celeste receives me at her parents' home with wine, junk food, and her bedroom full of computers for us to continue digging. I'm too weepy for the wine, but I down a glass anyway. The house is a seventeen-thousand-square-foot mansion, empty because her parents spend January in Fiji. As I lie on her bed, an urge to give up chills me. I'm tired. So fucking tired of everything.

But after I have an ugly-cry pity party and a wine-induced catnap, my rage grows into a looming giant.

I gave Wells my heart, my trust, my forgiveness, my innocence, and my fantasies. My loyalty. And aside from my purity and erotic imaginings, I gave Ty, Liam, and Gage the same. I will not surrender whatever I have left—fragmented or not.

Popping up, I wipe my face, still damp with tears seeping out in my sleep, and think back on the random memories my mind conjured up while I was forsaken in the hospital—breadcrumbs dropped when the guys spoke freely because I was zoned out.

There are three that my brain swirls over. There was a casual mention of *two seats* once when I was reading in the great room. I'm not sure how that will aid me, but any information about KORT seems advantageous. Another time, after training, we were on the back patio. I was lost to the floating clouds, the squawking birds, the weight of my aching muscles, and Gage mentioned someone named Mordred in passing. They were discussing leads on finding the person responsible for issuing a hit. The rest of the conversation is hazy, but it's worth investigating.

The last one flickers with a glow of golden light because it coincided with an emotional afternoon.

I'm in the library with Wells. The guys just told me they have no family, and Wells explained how his was killed by a tornado. My face burrows into his chest while his fingers string through my hair. I'm nestled in his arms, reeling at the thought of such loss and hating that I can't take it away. My mind wanders, but there's background chatter.

Ty, Liam, and Gage are still in the kitchen, cleaning up and tossing insults back and forth.

Liam scoffs at a grumpy comment Gage made. He's grumbling about something he lost, but Liam seems to be blowing him off.

"Jason Petrovsky spent his whole life fighting for scraps, whereas I seize the pot of gold with ease," Liam says.

My drifting attention returns to Wells, who tells me I changed everything, that he was lost to whatever path I carved for him, like a storm. Something about it reminds me of my masked heartthrob. Wells never sees me as ordinary. After that, he finger-fucks me into a mind-blowing orgasm before I set off to train with Ty.

It's strange how some of Wells's sweet declarations seem more oriented toward my monetary worth now, like maybe the path he'd referred to was regarding his financial gain for finding me. And the further gain he garnered from protecting me for my father. Is that how he meant them, or are they simply shrouded by the shadows of deception now?

Researching KORT proves to be fruitless. I dig into each of the family names Wells offered, but nothing on the actual organization comes up, not even on the dark web. It's not rocket science to narrow down who likely holds the seats, but that still doesn't provide much for my situation.

The search on Mordred is slightly more valuable and certainly more chilling. I can't find anything directly posted by him, but I do eventually discover him mentioned in a thread between two other men regarding a hit on the "O'Reilly girl." The leads they share aren't correct, but this conversation is seven weeks old.

For my own sanity, I move on to the Jason Petrovsky breadcrumb, hoping it turns up less horror-film vibes. It takes a lot of weeding out at first because I have nothing to go on besides the name and his connection to Liam. But then I check to see if maybe they knew each other in the Navy SEALs, and that's when things get interesting. There's no record of my guys in the Navy, but there is of Jason Petrovsky.

He died with the rest of his unit six years ago—a fireteam sent on a mission to uncover and invade a terrorist camp in the Middle East. An outraged reporter from the *New York Times* tagged them the Orphan Unit because none of the soldiers had families to go home to and claimed it was a suicide mission.

There's a picture of the men who perished. Jason stands in the middle, a hair taller than the next towering man. But the most astounding characteristic

about Jason is that he looks identical to Liam Graves.

And Wells, or Chad Folsom, stands beside him—chief of the unit. Not surprisingly, Ty and Gage are there too—Andrew Michaels and Joshua Ricci, respectively. Looks as though the dead soldiers resurrected themselves to a whole new life.

It's not that surprising, considering their career, but it feels like a final betrayal. The men who I felt were an extension of me aren't men I know at all.

Doing a deep dive into Chad Folsom, I find out all I can about Wells's family, even uncovering the Oklahoma town's tribute to those who died in the tornado, including his mom, dad, and brother. His mom was beautiful. She had Wells's raven-black hair and a smile brighter than the sun. And she feels familiar.

I open the folder on the computer of articles and pictures I've snipped over the past twelve hours of research, and my pulse accelerates when I reach the Cabrini clippings. His daughter disappeared at the age of nineteen, and her picture is remarkably like that of Wells's mom.

Fuck. Wells never mentioned he was a Cabrini, which seems like it would be pertinent information.

There's another Cabrini daughter, but according to her social media, she's a kindergarten teacher, so I doubt she's in the seat. Plus, Wells mentioned that no woman has ever held one, and she has no children. I'm guessing the person who possesses the current Cabrini reign is Wells's grandfather.

Two seats. Was Wells in line for the seat? Why did he hide that from me? Is that where he disappeared to? He got his money and left to assume his position of power? Maybe that's a jump, but it doesn't look like it.

I share everything I found with Celeste, and her jaw tightens with each detail.

She hisses a string of expletives before adding, "Maybe it was you or the chair."

It's not as though that thought didn't occur to me, but my heart is still hitched to Wells, broken but refusing to let go. "Why do all your theories immediately paint Wells as a villain?"

She huffs, exasperated and pissed off. Celeste has plainly had more than she can take. "Because from where I'm standing, *objectively*, there is no other option. Look at the extent to which he's fucked with you, Ivy. You're dealing with all of this, and the asshole is nowhere to be seen. He lied to you for

months and then only divulged half of the truth. How else am I supposed to view him?”

Her animosity against him shoves me into defensive mode. “I get it, but you know me. You know my gut, and I’m telling you, that man loved me. Better than I’d ever imagined being loved. What if he’s suffering somewhere too?”

“I don’t know what else to say.” She sighs, hurling a hand into the air. “Maybe it was complicated. Maybe some of his feelings were authentic, and that’s what you picked up on, more so because you also wanted it to be true. But the evidence suggests that whatever he felt, he chose some other gain over you.”

Maybe she’s right. I can even see Gage being convinced of that even though we were getting close those last few weeks. But Ty? Not with his past, not with our friendship. He wouldn’t just throw me out. This can’t be right.

The last loose end to check out is the gallery I sell my art to. The owner always claimed I had a superfan who bought all my pieces. I think it might have been Wells, so I’d like to pop in and talk with her.

Since I haven’t slept since my cry-fest when I took a power nap on Celeste’s bed, I close my eyes for a few hours, waking restless and eager to move forward. I’m applying my makeup after a shower when the last day in my old home washes over me. I unzip the inside compartment of my makeup bag and find the ruby necklace. My pulse gallops, blood swishing in my ears in a berserk charge.

Holy hell. Physical proof.

As I wander out in search of Celeste, I’m gleeful and dazed and jabbering on and on about finding the necklace with Wells’s boots and hiding it.

“Holy shit!” she exclaims. “We were like, what, fifteen when you lost that?”

“Yeah.” That answer is breathy because I’m captivated by the necklace dangling from my hand as though it might be a figment of my imagination.

“Who was the girl we hung out with at the camp? The one who had a crush on your security guard. Gemma someone?”

“Gemma Frost,” I supply.

Celeste drops into the desk chair, opening the laptop with a renewed vigor. “Let’s look her up. She was with us when the necklace got lost. Honestly, I always wondered if she stole it.”

I shake my head dubiously. “She had no reason to do that. Her parents were more loaded than mine.”

Celeste shrugs. “Maybe she’s connected to Wells.”

“That’s a stretch,” I snarl.

“It’s all a stretch, sweet pea. Your life is like a drunken one-night stand when you wake up stranded without your clothes.”

I snap my head toward her, equal parts alarmed and amused.

She flaps her hand with a huff. “Fucked up is all I meant. Don’t judge.”

“Right.” I chuckle, moseying back to the bathroom to finish my makeup.

Moments later, she gasps. “Fucking Christ, Ivy!”

I peek my head out while curling my lashes. “Did you find her?”

She spins her desk chair to face me, a contrite frown tugging her lips down. “Not exactly. She disappeared—one month before your eighteenth birthday.” Her tone is threaded with suspicion, and I can’t blame her. The timing of that is suspect for sure.

My gut stirs. I know it isn’t a coincidence. Too many ominous pieces have collided for me to believe anything related to my life is fortuitous. Maybe Gemma did steal this necklace, but I can’t fathom how Wells or anyone else knew it was mine.



Before driving out to the Victoria Shops to talk with the gallery owner at The Art Garden, I drop by my house to search my dad’s office, hoping I can find something about his dealings with Wells, The Order, or KORT. It takes less than thirty seconds to happen upon an envelope with my name in my father’s top desk drawer. I’ve been in this desk countless times since he fell ill, and this wasn’t here. I bristle from the eerie feeling it sends crashing over me, but this is my father’s handwriting.

Inside is a letter from my father’s lawyers, informing me of a safe deposit box set up by my father. Looks like I’ll be heading there.

Hopping back in the car, I take off for the bank, unsurprised that it’s part of the Pax Logan empire—the seat in KORT that manages financial institutions. After I present my ID and the security information from the lawyers, I’m shown to a room and offered private time with the contents of my box.

A mingling of hope and fear sends a frisson of apprehension up my spine as I lift the letter resting on top of a box. I unfold it with my shaky hands, and my eyes brim with tears at the sight of the first line.

My dear, sweet Ivanna,

You reading these words means, for some unfortunate reason, I was unable to deliver them to you in person. This would be one of life's ironies. I fought to grant you extra time to grow and become, but that robbed us of precious moments I had so desperately wanted to share with you—to be the one who could show you who you were born to be and help you with the transition.

By now, you've discovered who you are, who you were meant to be, and what I worked so tirelessly to prepare you to face. All those years of extra protection and mastering unique skills were my way of attempting to be your hero even if, at times, it may have seemed overbearing or senseless.

Maybe you're wondering about how your mom and I were blessed with the huge honor of raising you. It's peculiar, the way life weaves things together. Your mother and I had been trying for a baby for many years. She suffered through seven miscarriages and two stillbirths, the last one being one month before you arrived in our arms.

Eleanor Healy, your birth mom, was much younger than us, in her early twenties, on the run, and terrified. She'd heard about us through the organization, about Mom's pregnancy losses, and my reputation for being someone in the organization people could trust to be discreet. Scared, with nowhere to go, she showed up

on our doorstep eight months pregnant and eager for us to raise her baby. We were living in Minnesota at the time, mere days into grieving the loss of yet another child.

I knew who she was, knew O'Reilly was searching for her, and also knew her future was grim, having run as she did. We took care of her for a month, undecided how to handle the situation. I'd always kept your mother out of these types of affairs, and this was no exception. I shared very few details, but she didn't care. All she wanted was you.

To say I was conflicted would be an understatement. Watching your mother suffer all those years was the most painful thing I'd ever faced, but the thought of O'Reilly searching for you both was also agonizing. In the end, it was Eleanor's pleas to offer you a normal life and your angelic blue eyes that solidified it. Once you cooed in my arms, there was nothing I wouldn't do for you even if it cost me my life.

Eleanor took off a few days later, leaving behind a ruby necklace, a warning it was registered, and a request to give it to you as a token of her love when you were older. It was one of the most heroic acts of parenting I'd ever witnessed. She feared if you stayed together, she couldn't protect you long-term, so she left you with someone who could.

Since so many people had seen Mom pregnant and we hadn't shared the loss, it was easy to pass you off as ours. And there wasn't a day we didn't take that job seriously or remind ourselves what a precious gift we were holding.

I wish I was there to hold you right now, to help you feel that truth. But just as I would have in person, I want to tell you how much I love you and believe in you, Ivanna. I believe in your ability to conquer any obstacle in your path, to be an absolute force at whatever you set out to do, and most importantly, to make the best choice for yourself.

I used my greatest discernment to hold up your hopes and dreams beside the staggering life awaiting you and decide if it was worth clearing the path for you to pursue your KORT position, but it was always with your happiness in mind. That world and role hold privilege and power that you are deserving of, due to both birthright and competence, but that path also carries weight, stress, and danger that may not be what you desire.

So, if the fate you're facing isn't what you want, run, sweet girl.

Run.

Sometimes, in this world, it's the bravest choice.

Remember that no matter where you go, I'll always be with you.

The honor and joy of raising you was by far my greatest treasure.

Love,

Dad

Opening the black box lying beneath the letter while still shaking with emotion, I find five passports and five driver's licenses with various different names, all with my picture—although in some of them my hair color is

brown. Each identity comes with other necessary documents as well. There's also one million dollars in cash stuffed inside a tote bag and a key with a note to open a floor panel beneath his desk.

Leaving the bank with my new identities, cash, and encouragement from my father, I rush home to see what else awaits me, my strength and hope revived. Crawling under his desk, I roll back the Persian rug and find a safe in the wooden floorboard. I have to slide his desk to open it. Inside is a huge black duffel bag, the contents of which is my very own artillery stash—guns, ammo, knives, body armor, and burner phones.

My father readied me to leave and not look back, but he didn't expect me to go quietly into the night unless that's what I wanted. Since I was ten years old, he's been weaponizing me to soak up information, and now, he's arming me to fight. It's exactly the bolstering I need. I've always loved making my father proud.

KORT, Wells, Ty, Gage, Liam—if he's still alive—whichever pompous, high-handed men's club is responsible—they fucked with the wrong girl.

I'm not opposed to running. Other than Celeste, there's nothing here for me. I could disappear and start a life as someone normal—fall in love with an average guy, who doesn't secretly have another identity, isn't involved in some national cabal or erasing people, and doesn't throw me over his shoulder in handcuffs and fuck me on a three-million-dollar car because he can.

Sadly, that seems excruciatingly boring.

Liam insisted I'd changed them, but maybe the real story is how much they all changed me.

As much as I want to run, I want something else more. I want them to chase me, to suffer, to fret. Being chased by the very people who so willingly cast me aside like last night's trash might seem like an unlikely pipe dream.

Unless.

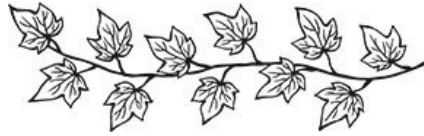
Unless I manipulate their fucking pulse points.

Flashes of a plan float through my mind, the marrying of all the ways I was fucked over and all the breadcrumbs they unknowingly provided coasting into place like a satisfactory game of Tetris. I mosey up the stairs to my art room—Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds" crooning in my head as I bop along, like I did with the guys on Thanksgiving. Thrilling jitters rocket up my spine for the first time in over a month.

Tonight, I paint.

Tomorrow, I orchestrate.
It's time to play, boys.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



IVY

Celeste grins with a devious reverence. “Holy fuck, bestie, I’m speechless. And we know how rarely that happens without a cock involved.”

She’s referring to the plan I laid out and the canvas piece I spent twenty hours on. The art is my most impressive work thus far. Although I’ve got something in mind for later that will definitely smoke this one.

And the plan. It’s like a knife cutting through all my thoughts and feelings. Jagged enough to release me from the fusion my heart still clings to—a fusion that binds more like a shackling now. If I’m honest with myself, I know nothing can ever completely sever that connection. That bond—like those men—pumps through my veins like an awakening. A rebirth.

A venom.

No matter how cold my blood runs, the warmth of those days will be a haunting.

Gavin Wells isn’t my hero or my villain.

He’s my ghost.

There’s a sleekness to the knife-like plan though. The cool touch of the steel blade. The empowerment that drips from gripping the hilt. The reflection of all that lies before me.

An acceptance of what I must do, swallowing and emancipating me in a harrowing guzzle.

I laugh, hooking my arms around Celeste’s shoulders. “I’m going to miss you something fierce, Lettie, but I know you’re always with me.”

“Always,” she agrees. “If you’re going nowhere, I’m coming with you.”

“Right back at ya,” I say, choking down the crashing finality our childhood promise brings. “Are you good to go?”

She pulls back and winks one of her misty eyes on a choppy breath. “All set and so honored.”

That’s where we part. Goodbyes have always been rough for me. Perhaps my subconscious always recognized the shadowy silhouettes of my fate—the people and love and stability that could be no more than temporary blessings. Fleeting. Maybe that’s why my mind insists on skipping away to foreign places while the present world drones on. Those escapes are mine to keep. You can’t imprison someone who has another world in their mind.

On the way to my destination, I drop by the Victoria Shops. I haven’t been to The Art Garden—my favorite local gallery—since the day I pummeled into Wells and Ty, but I choose not to dwell on the remembrance. Instead, I proudly tote my painting inside and look for the owner, Suzanna.

At the tinkling of the bell, she emerges from the back, and a smile instantly splits her face. She’s fabulous in a way that can’t be ignored. Early forties with a face refusing to age. Rich brown skin and springy curls complement her artsy-meets-cottagecore style that only she can pull off. A vibrant yellow-and-violet scarf wraps around her head, but it’s her expressions that are always the loudest.

“Ivy Kingston!” she squeals. “Where have you been, girl? I’ve called. You’ve ghosted.” She smooshes her lips into an embellished pout. “I need a fix from my favorite artist.”

She’s called. I tamp down the irritation that comment swells, knowing the outlet for it is imminent.

Toeing her amplified mannerisms, I cock my hip and bat my lashes. “Well, I’m here now, and I’ve missed you too. *So much* that I spent the last two days creating something for you.”

She claps her hands in rapid succession before swirling her arm impatiently. “Let me see it, girl.”

Flipping the portrait around, I regard the brief flicker of recognition sailing through her eyes. At least one of my guys is familiar—probably Wells. *A parting gift.* She schools her features and studies the four men on the canvas.

Wells and Liam tower in the center as the tallest. Wells rises formidably as the dominant chief, dressed to the nines in his charcoal-gray three-piece Armani suit and crisp white button-up, his eyes a commanding emerald, the crinkles at the corners a subtle hint of what lies beneath. Liam sports a maroon button-up, no tie, no jacket. The deep crimson highlights his golden

locks so they shine like a touch of Heaven. Flanking them are Ty and Gage. Ty is on Wells's side, like the day we met. Suit, but no tie. His tawny-brown skin, soft curls, and kind eyes shimmer—a beacon of authenticity. Finally, Gage—the shortest of the four while still over six feet, but also the most muscular—borders Liam. He's in a black button-up, sleeves rolled to his elbows to showcase his thick, corded forearms, one too many buttons undone, ink visible, and a skeptical glower squinting his amber eyes. And yet, squinting back, a twinkle lies in wait.

But the most telling elements in this portrait are their smiles. Subtle and knowing. Wicked with secrets.

Their lips broadcast their conceit. Their billowing god complex hissing in warning that these are men who take pride in speaking lives into existence or whispering them to ashes.

A simple nod.

A blink of an eye.

The twitch of a boastful grin.

No matter the circumstances. No matter the intent. They breathe life and death. Light and dark. Heaven and Hell.

Suzanna peers back at me, a sharp awareness paining her eyes with the rise and fall of her chest. She's been selling my art for years. My paintings read like a teen girl's diary to her, and while she doesn't know why, she recognizes anguish.

"It's phenomenal." Her hand crawls to her throat. "Really, Ivy, are you sure you want to part with this one?"

My eyes scan over their faces, and I choke down the urge to brush my fingers over the texture of their features. "I already have. You know who it belongs to."

She nods, her typically joyful lips tightened into a brittle smile, but she doesn't ask any questions. She was discreet after my dad got sick, too, when all my paintings were tinged with death. It delights me that she sees this is the same.



Two hours later, I'm standing at the kitchen island with my realtor, Simone.

"That's about it for the tour," she says. "Although I can't imagine what

else one home could offer. What do you think?”

Not interested in senseless fluff, I give it to her straight. “I’ll take it.” I whip a folder out of my bag with everything she needs, handing her a huge stack of papers. “This is your signed copy of the home purchase. All the necessary documents have been filed with the county and state.” Her brows crease as she stammers, but I plow on through. “The cash is being transferred as we speak.”

She scrunches her forehead with the tilt of her head, her ponytail swishing through the air. Apparently, my taking initiative and doing her work have unmoored her. “I’m sorry. I don’t ... that’s not how home sales work.”

Here’s the thing about Simone, the reason she’s my realtor: At only twenty-one years old, she’s over one hundred thousand dollars in debt. Poor girl. She recently applied at four strip clubs but is dreading the idea. Sick about it. She cried through the first two interviews. Today, I’m Simone’s fucking savior.

I offer my best mollifying smile, hoping the girl has better sense now than she did when racking up credit card debt. “It does for this one.”

Moving us forward, I show her the documents again so she can see the signatures are in all the right places. Seller’s. Buyer’s—I’m using one of the aliases my father provided me. It’s all there. Title and taxes and all the red tape sealed, signed, and delivered. She’ll barely need to lift a finger.

“I paid three hundred thousand over asking for good measure. The owners certainly won’t have a problem with that,” I assure her. “And here’s the best part, Simone: in addition to your commission, I’ve transferred five hundred thousand dollars into your account.”

She murmurs unintelligible mutterings through a slicing exhale, her lips opening and closing without coherent words. It’s like she’s broken.

Toughen up, girl.

“All you have to do, Simone, is take the paperwork, drive into town, and wait about an hour. I’ll email you a video and a phone number to pass on to the owners. Once you’ve completed that, the money is yours.”

The briefest shadow of conflict envelops her like octopus tentacles snaring prey, but I squash that, freeing her to take the plunge.

“Go ahead and check your account. The funds are pending,” I tell her.

She does, and when my claim is confirmed, she comes to her senses, shrieking, bouncing, and hugging me, her clipboard and purse crashing to the ceramic tile with a clatter.

After she exits, I mosey down to the basement—scents of sugar and citrus, leather and smoke engulfing me with every step—and rip off the baseboard that was going to be my cheesy five-year anniversary gift. Evidence of too many rom-com movies and romance novels.

Within these walls, I am traveling an epic journey, mining a piece of my soul that I never knew was missing—all because of the love of one astounding man, whose heart is the shooting star I caught, and the comfort of a family of men who offered the net to catch it.

I am forever yours, Gavin Wells. Thank you for this life.

Good God, I was a sappy fool.

Back upstairs, I cram it into my bag and head outside to the empty grounds. The drained pool is still here—a lifeless monument paying homage to the vacant home. But the obstacle course, shooting range, and firepit have all vanished. The glassy pond mirrors the loss. An empty palette is always easiest though.

Even in the desolation, I can see the frayed edges of what was, worn and tattered and tinged by hazy golden dust, almost as if I'd dreamed it. And yet, standing here, heart torn between the tethering it longs for and the adoption of the justice it's steering toward, I can't help but reach out and brush it.

My fingertips tingle, cheeks flushing with the heat of what was once real and mine.

It's a brisk morning. I thought we were bundled up and trekking through our acreage in the foggy amber light to snuggle by the pond, but something feral seized Wells on the way. His eyes glint with a roguish glee. Boyish and imposing at once.

He scoops me up, sprinting with me thrown over his shoulder as I squeal, and drops me before the obstacle course with a soul-scathing kiss, like he's branding my insides. When my knees are good and weak, those emeralds twinkle with a dare.

He tucks a wisp of my hair behind my icy earlobe. "I told you I'd chase you to the ends of the earth, Little Storm. Let's give it a go right here."

Yesterday was Thanksgiving, and the past week, I've been less in the

mood for anything, even our mind-blowing sex. He's obviously wound tight even though he fucked me into the stone tiles of the shower last night and I returned his wake-up call with a thigh-shaking, deep-throated blow job this morning. The ravenous set of his lips screams how much he's missed me.

I shake my head with a rebuking smirk, jutting my hip to the side. "With the right motivation, I can outrun anyone." My eyebrows hike up my forehead as I scrape my teeth over my lip in a taunt. "Most especially, you, Chief."

He howls like he did the last time I told him I'd run, the thunderous bellow ricocheting off the surrounding woods with a haughty echo. His fingers curl around my jaw. "There's no incentive in this life that out trumps my need for you, Ivy." His teeth nip at my ear, then at my neck below it, peppering my skin with kisses as a crest of electricity shivers through me. "Being a brat only makes me crave you more. Go," he rasps. "Two-minute head start, but when I catch you, I fuck you in all the ways I want."

Breathless and shaky, I lunge for the first ledge I can reach, heaving myself up the spider climbing wall, limbs quivering with equal measures of arousal and determination. The two-minute head start offers false confidence. I breeze through the course until the cargo net, when I realize he's gaining on me. With limbs twice the length of mine, his stride is massive.

"Fuck me," I hiss, glancing behind me as my chest tightens, blood drumming in my ears, heat pooling between my legs.

"That's the spirit, Little Storm, readying yourself to be impaled on my dick." His wolfish grin, the glint in his eyes, and the sparkle of his teeth could make Lucifer shudder, simply because of his relentless tenacity.

A tremulous moan rumbles in my throat. If it wasn't for my pesky pride, I'd surrender right here. The real prize is getting caught. In my tantalized haze, my foot slips through one of the holes, and I lose more precious seconds. So, when I finally slither my way onto the high tower, it's unsurprising that he flips me over, clamping my wrists in his hand. His power over me is a clutching of sweet freedom. I'm elated to help him celebrate his win.

"Mine," he growls in a savage claiming.

Biting my lip with an exhilarated hunger, I agree, "Yours."

"That's my good girl." He folds the waistband of my pants, shimmying them down my hips with a victorious grin.

It's not quite forty-five degrees, our breaths puffing out in a smoky white,

but my skin is so feverish with need, the damp, frosty air is delicious on my exposed heat.

I glance around. Awareness that we're in the middle of the yard on the highest point while the sun illuminates us bathes me in a titillating humiliation. Pearls of sweat dot my hairline and breasts and spine with a rousing panic. "Here? Why here?"

"The guys have been instructed to stay inside," he informs me, circling my clit with a euphoric rhythm, as if that is the sole reason this is an odd place to be fucking.

"Wells—"

"Here, Ives, because I want you to remember there is no height I won't climb for you, no distance I won't travel, no depth I won't dive." His voice is thick with emotion as his fingers plunge into me. "So wet for me," he praises.

And his kiss is lyrical, as though he's penning me a ballad, telling me I'm his and, together, we'll be okay. The chase, the height, the lesson—so poetically Wells. My tongue dances with his to the tune of his promises, his passion, and his love, which burrow deeper into my soul.

"I'm going to fuck your pretty pussy up here, Little Storm. And then I'm going to haul you down there, carry you back to the house, and fuck your ass, so you remember there isn't a part of you that isn't mine."

I whimper, bucking against his fingers, set ablaze at the image of how he'll own me in a new way today.

His hand rises to my throat, tightening the way I love. The breath of his chuckle heats and chills me at once, and his lips tickle mine as they speak. "That's my filthy slut. So goddamn greedy. You'll have my cum filling every hole today."

He peels my panties and his joggers down, just enough, and in a blurry sweep, he thrusts inside me. I gasp and whimper, drunk on his possessiveness and the fullness of him stretching me.

It's as though we're making love in the clouds, floating and free. Yes, it's the wild and territorial seizing I crave from Wells, but his passion, with the sky engulfing us and the brisk air lapping at my sopping core, is a fairy tale. A rescuing.

A butterfly's kiss.

Our orgasms detonate in unison, guttural cries singing from the high tower.

And a while after we find our footing on solid ground, he makes good on

another promise in the warmth of his office, bending me over his desk as pens and papers skitter across the wood. He inserts a remote-controlled vibrator into my pussy, commanding it to tease my clit and center while lubing me up, and pushes his way into an area I never imagined giving away. But Wells colors the experience as both an erotic takeover and a tender act of love. His brand of dominance molds to even the most hidden parts of me.

“Relax and let me in,” he whispers, the demand as smooth as velvet. “Fuck, you’re so tight, so perfect, baby. Such a good girl taking my cock.”

He grunts in tandem with my pants and moans as the glorious fullness morphs from discomfort to a spark to a jolt of surging frisson. I’m full. So fucking full.

“Jesus, I love you, Ives.”

With those words and my parroted declaration, we grip each other for a shattering that renders me more whole than I’ve ever been.

The memory swirls on the crisp breeze, making me heady. I drop my bag on the straw-like dead grass from the tower, selecting the black spray paint first. After testing it, I mark the outline of the piece I have in my mind, taking my time to keep the lines precise and tight. Clean but flowy.

The area is so vast without the massive workout structure, and I utilize it all. Several spray cans later, I’m delighted with my masterpiece and grateful the season is late in delivering snow this year.

Dragging a trowel, I dig a shallow trench on either side of the lines and trace it all with the fluid. Content with that, I jog back to the house—a jaunt I’ve made a hundred times.

My AirPods are in, imparting more recent classics than what Wells prefers. “Here Comes the Sun” by The Beatles blares in my ears like a therapeutic soundtrack as I sprinkle gasoline and gunpowder over each of the rooms, dousing my memories and theirs in a lustral two-step. My guys wanted to sell our home and pretend our time together didn’t happen.

This is far more cathartic.

If insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, then I’m nailing this sanity angle.

As I make my way back to the glass French doors to the patio, I take one last wistful glance at the ghosts drifting through the space that once swelled with boisterous laughter and men who willingly cradled my pain. Visions of the period party. Liam’s quick wit, mischievous grin, and dark web tutorials.

Ty's sweet hugs, our movie-character game, and easy banter. Gage's nachos, his pledge to stay with me, his enthusiasm for my baked goods.

And Wells holding it together for all of us so those moments were viable.

The flick of a match.

The crackling spark.

A wheezing blaze devouring it all.

And vomiting ashes.

A satisfying whoosh resounds as the flames lick up—a balm cauterizing all the wounds they inflicted. And that's the crux of it. No matter the motives—even if, in some twisted way, they believed this mindfuck was some form of safety, protection, or saving—they robbed me, allowing me to be tortured under the guise of nonsensical reasoning.

Standing on the patio, I heed the warmth. My nostrils flare, a tickle evoked from the sulfuric aroma of singeing, not unsimilar to our campfire nights, as the chill of the January air wars with the burn of my goodbye.

A final letting go. A disengaging.

My eyes look on with pride, the growing blaze stinging them into a squint, captivated by the scorching, melting, smoldering.

The flames writhe to curl with greed around the cabinets and drywall—painting a blackened and charred version of the hollowness they left me. A more accurate depiction.

The stone won't burn. I like that.

To leave smoke stains and walls enclosing ashes. A shell of what was.

Of what isn't.

A fortress of all that was stolen. Erased, if you will.

Ivy can be terribly difficult to eradicate after all. You might say I'm simply doing my part to accomplish what they began.

But the thing about burning ivy—the poisonous kind—is that those plumes of smoke release toxic spores, harmful to anyone who comes into contact with it.

They might not have factored that in.

It's not as though they didn't know who they were dealing with. They'd watched and studied me for five years, learning both my loyalty and my rage.

They pretended to be mine, to love me, to become my family, supplying them with ample time to understand exactly what I was capable of.

Who *they* were creating me to be.

It's sad really. A massive oversight. And they call themselves the best.

Now, they'll choke on the smoke of their own deceit.
The spores of their arrogance.

The air is toxic, boys.

I tuck in my hair, nice and tight, lowering the black ski mask and cinching my hood. Sifting through my bag, I find the drone, flying it high into the air to capture a pretty aerial view.

After I maneuver it above the house, I skip out to my artwork and light my ardent message. The whoosh isn't nearly as dramatic as the house was, but the video will be. I fly my little filming spaceship around a few more times, pleased with the production.

My work here is adequately underway, so I gather my things, jump in the car, and cover the long stretch of road in a blur. Once the video is sent to Simone, I rest my burner phone on my thigh and settle in for my drive while I await the call.

Unsurprisingly, it comes within twenty minutes, hardly long enough for them to have watched my entire film, accounting for Simone's delivery time. The ring stirs giddy flutters low in my belly. I flick the Answer button and lift the phone to my ear without a word.

"Hey, Freckles." Ty's voice is a bruise and a balm, rolled into one, but the bruising is more identifiable now.

"Ty, I should have known they'd appoint you—the placater. Good to hear you're alive and well, but *don't* fucking call me Freckles."

He clears his throat, my demand sobering his voice to a tentative huskiness. "Okay, Ivy. I know you're in pain—"

"In pain?" My tone remains placid, detached, and resolute, but I won't skirt the issues. "You think I'm in pain? I'm not in pain, Ty. I'm numb. Pain is stubbing your toe, breaking an arm, not being able to walk after twenty-four hours of earth-shattering sex. Pain is *not* watching a man you love bleed out, trying to save you, before having your world ripped out from under you, only to discover that everyone you've ever loved is lying to you, pretending your life isn't real, and preying on your deepest insecurities." *Fuck the calm stoicism.* "I thought I was losing my fucking mind, Ty!"

He groans a wounded bleat.

Is this hard for him? Hearing what they did to me? I hope to hell it is.

"I know," he admits. "It's complicated, and there's only so much we can share, but we—"

Motherfucking pussies.

Plowing through whatever bullshit he's about to spew, I cut in with what I need to know most. "What about Liam? Did he survive?"

There's a quaver to his words when he says, "I'm so sorry, Ivy. I ..."

"Right." *Fuck. God, Liam. I'm so sorry.* That's a gutting I wasn't prepared for, whether I saw it with my own eyes or not. *Jesus, it hurts.* Moving on. "I didn't have you call me in the hopes of securing answers or catching up."

His tone lightens, as if he's flooded with relief that I won't beg him to tell me why they've done this to me. "What for then?"

"Did you get my message?"

"We did." His response is woven with a hint of ire. "What the hell did you accomplish by setting the house on fire? Other than calling attention to yourself?"

"Oh, Mr. Andrew Michaels, tut-tut, now. Ivanna Kingston was nowhere near that tragic fire. Question the realtor or anyone else for that matter. And of course, we know Ivy Wells doesn't exist, much like Tytan and Andrew. But it is lovely when life hands us visual metaphors. Your memories went up in smoke, just like mine. It burns a little, doesn't it? Although, you're all so fond of smoke and mirrors, it probably feels like home anyway."

"Fuck, Ivy." He sighs, and I hear the agony again, but like his lack of explanation, my empathy isn't there. "You don't sound like you. I'm worried."

"Don't be." A tear spills down my face, and my jaw tenses. I scold the part of myself willing to mourn and break. *They don't deserve that.*

"I'd do anything to hug you right now." The tremor in Ty's usually upbeat delivery should please me, but it only seems to twist the dagger they speared me with.

If he's sharing wounds though, I can hop on that train. "That's the thing, Ty. I would've loved that, but you stole it from me. You stole my identity, my life and dreams, my epic love and memories, my best friend, my family, and my hope. And you weren't only part of it. Your lack of explanation tells me you authored it." My voice cracks on the last three words, and I loathe myself for not controlling it better.

He exhales a gush as we remain silent for a few beats before he finally breaks it. "Freckles—"

"Don't," I chide, eyes trained on the bleak stretch of road ahead. "Part of me hates you for what you did—*all* of you. But there will always be a part of

me that loves what you gave me before that. Unfortunately, *that me*, the one you knew and were best friends with, no longer exists.”

“Don’t say that, Ivy. That’s giving up. It’s almost over. And Wells, he’s a goddamn mess—I don’t give a fuck!” He shouts that last line, presumably to someone else because it sounds muffled and is trailed by indistinct, angry murmurs, which fade as his voice chimes clear again. “That man loves you so —”

Balking, I break off his futile vow. “I wondered when we’d be getting to him. I’m sure *Chief Folsom* isn’t far, probably basking in the glow of his hard-won seat and listening in. Gage too. Here’s a message you can share. Examine that video a little closer and the documents the realtor sent over. I think you’ll be tickled with what you find.”

My teeth notch into my lip. I know how caustic and scathing this last detail will be, but if I want to be chased ... “And this will be especially meaningful to Wells. Tell him Liam gave me everything I need—the tools, clues, skills. But most importantly, he seduced me with a knee-weakening parting kiss. It’s his lips and taste that have been lingering on mine for the past five weeks. That’s the one memory that will never go up in smoke.”

A chorus of screaming expletives, many with my name attached, roar through the phone, so I end the call with a delightful vision—Wells’s incensed grimace, clenching jaw, enraged emeralds shooting spears of fury. His hisses of, “Jesus fucking Christ, Ivanna,” while his blanching knuckles strangle his hair. It’s all so palpable, like he’s seated here with me.

Chucking the burner phone out my window into the thick brush, I imagine it skating across a pond, ripples ringing it as it sinks.

How’s that for making a splash, Liam?

Full fucking circle. I think he’d be proud.

“Pulse points? What are those?” I ask, intrigued by this odd line of work.

Liam stands, probably hoping to end this so he can eat, but I’m far hungrier for answers. Thankfully, he continues his explanation. “People they can’t resist calling. Investments they weren’t willing to lose. Something that is too difficult to completely leave behind. It’s different for everyone. Most teams don’t manage their erased clients for very long, like we do. We’re always keeping tabs, ensuring they aren’t fucking it up. But lack of diligence is generally our gain when we’re looking for someone.”

I glance up at Wells, who nods for me to keep going. “So, how do you

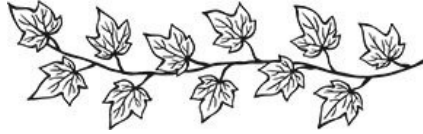
manipulate the pulse points? Monitor phones and other forms of contact, I'm sure. Is that it?"

"It's normally enough," Liam says. "But sometimes, we need to make a big splash. Get their attention so they show themselves or even come after us. Every mouse in hiding has a piece of cheese they can't resist."

The chaos of the fire and the call is still buzzing like a live wire with the flickering of that memory—my first introduction to the garage full of cars and their covert business. I can hear Liam's warm chuckle, see the twinkle in his eye as I speed down the highway. He's with me.

"Well, fuck, that was one hell of a pulse-point manipulation, High Society."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



WELLS

“Goddamn motherfucker!”

My fist strikes. Ice picks of white-hot, unbridled rage split my knuckles open, spilling my boiling blood.

I rear back again.

Blinded.

Wrathful.

Murderous.

Broken.

Another wallop so violent that the force yanks me with it. My scotch-induced trance sobering from the collision.

Blood pours.

It’s not enough.

No amount could atone.

Like a flip of a switch, clamoring and pandemonium pummel into me, my brain swimming against the current in a sea of shouts and commands.

Gage smashes me into the wall, pinning me there. In all our years, he’s never done that. Never had to. I’m the one who’s always in control. His face is stark, irises darkened with affliction as he flexes his temple vein with warning.

“Not like this, Chief,” he urges, but the room is still abuzz with outrage, and I can’t restrain myself from shoving against him. In my fury of adrenaline, he wrestles to contain me as Ty’s voice crashes through my bloodthirsty haze.

“It was the loyalty test, Wells. And he took a fucking bullet for her!”

Loyalty test. They all fucking knew.

The five most agonizing weeks of my life are somehow worsened by what he stole.

Gage loosens his clutch on my neck, stepping aside in a credulous act of trust. No one should trust me in this state. I pull my pistol from the harness, raising it before any of them can blink, my seething gaze scanning Gage and Ty.

And Liam.

His face is cracked and bruised and bloody from my punches. Swollen and guilty. His arm is stationed stiffly at his side, wounds from his chest surgery still healing.

But all I see is her.

Her hollow eyes and pleading cries.

The gauntlet of torture inflicted.

Her withering spirit spiraling and distorting until it emerged as a destructive disconnect.

Bile coats my heavy tongue. I detest every last one of them, including myself.

But Liam. He kissed her. Laid down his life. *Her hero.*

It's my only thought, looping in an internal rant that drowns their indignant demands.

Liam gathers the blood pooling from his brow, nose, and mouth with a swipe of his shirt, his valiant chest scars mocking me. "It's all on video. I didn't even use my typical polished moves. It was innocent."

"Innocent?" The word tumbles out, charged with poisonous accusation. He's always wanted her. Nothing about this is innocent.

Except my Little Storm.

That much I know.

He slinks down the wall, unfazed by my gun threatening him. "Yes," he snarls, stretching his legs out to find a less painful position. "Watch it. *Goddammit*, I did it *for you, for her*, and it nearly cost me everything." His eyes narrow at mine, glossy and plagued, a reflection of my own torment. "It nearly cost *me* Ivy."

I reholster my gun and drop into a chair. *Fucking Christ, I can't get my head straight.*

Ty drags a chair beside me, collapsing with a remorseful groan. "Your grandfather contacted us, giving us the option over someone else *he'd choose* to do God knows what. We weren't about to let that happen. Gage and I

couldn't sell it to her. It had to be Liam."

It had to be Liam. That isn't the cushion Ty intends. It had to be him because on some level, she deemed him an option. My gut wrenches. "Let me see it."

Liam's finger swipes over his phone without hesitation. "There's a time-lapsed part in the car. She wouldn't talk to me. Ty edited and sent it to KORT while I was in surgery."

It pings on my phone, and I put my earbuds in, not willing to share this even though I know they've seen it. The video is shoddy, the angle poor. She didn't know she was being filmed. In the dark, like always. I watch their playfulness, their lighthearted laughs volleyed back and forth. Different from her and Ty. Different from us.

She enlivens with a zeal when he smashes the doughnut into her pouty lips, my little brat ready for a takedown, giving it right back.

Then the kiss.

Liam's right. It's quick and chaste. Not his usual ferocious swallowing. Eviscerating all the same.

And her eyes. They pool with both betrayal and empathy. Her serene demeanor is sweet, letting him down gently, before the panic hits her and her storm brews, clouded with conflict. In a flash, they're parked in the driveway.

Talk about nailing a fucking loyalty test on every account—grace for us all. Over and above what would be expected.

Jesus. That's why Liam said *nearly*. Ivy made it clear he'd never lose her, and in spite of my impulse to disembowel him, I love her even more for it.

There's no video once they're out of the car. Only the shot blaring through the stale air. Her sobs. Her shock. Her terror and pleas. Liam calling her *baby girl* and telling her she was worth it all—deathbed devotion completely removed from the loyalty test. If I don't tarry there, a thankfulness bubbles over from my boiling blood.

He protected her, would've died for her.

Then, she's gone, and I'm frozen, staring at the blacked-out screen, wondering if any part of that girl is left. I'll love her regardless, but she's harder.

Because I allowed this to be her fate.

Both Gage and Ty are eyeing me, foreheads scrunched in question. Ty spins the monitor they're viewing. It's stilled on our land, an image ablaze.

"Know what that is?" he asks when I remove my earbuds, his tenor leery.

The answer is an anvil clobbering me. My lungs empty all the air inside them. “It’s a phoenix. A phoenix clutching a sword.”

They all gape at me to confirm what they’re already speculating.

I exhale another ragged breath. “She’s erasing herself and taking *her sword* with her.” A *fuck you* to both us and KORT. I don’t share that though, not with all the chairs on video conference.

Gage muted their chatter, but they’re still privy to ours—the only reason Ty, *only Ty*, was permitted to call Ivy and also why he couldn’t share anything.

I snap into action. She spoke to us on a burner, but she was in the Ferrari, and we have that tracked too. I pull up the tracking app, gushing relief. “I’ve got her.”

Ty’s face relaxes as Liam whoops a stilted laugh. Our heads all whip toward him in question. His eyes twinkle in a way they haven’t since *before*.

“Our girl is ... fucking impressive. Not only did she handle all aspects of closing—proper paperwork filing, lifted signatures, the whole gambit. But you know how she paid for the house?” He makes us wait through a silent drum roll. “Us. She funneled our money from one account to another, minus the big fat bonus she afforded the realtor.” He howls with pride. “And torched it all. Ruthless, but fucking genius.”

Gage claps with a hearty cackle. “Jesus, I fucking love that girl.”

Ty’s face twists, his mouth creased with mirth. “You finding her playing us endearing is baffling.”

“We deserve it,” Gage insists, shrugging. “I’m not a moron. Ivy is who I want by my side when I get mine.”

When I glance at the tracker, panic seizes me. He’s right. Much like her *message*, my Little Storm is on fire. Even with her in our sights, we need to be on.

“She’s got thirty minutes on us,” I announce.

They swiftly pack what we need from the apartment we’ve been holed up in, without me issuing the order, none of us sparing a glance for the members of KORT awaiting on the screen. They can fuck their trials.

We climb in Gage’s Jeep, charging after the blinking dot that is my wife.

“Fucking hell, she’s driving possessed,” Gage roars, but it’s steeped in admiration.

“Sounded possessed too,” Ty muses, chewing another goddamn hole in his lip.

He's been tied in knots, mangled really. We all have. The last five weeks have colored our prisoners-of-war days in a pastel easiness. They weren't. But it was all training and instinct kicking in—until we ultimately ravaged, killed, and tunneled our way out, just so the US government could inform us we'd been so successful at hunting the terrorists that when the rest of our unit blew up, they buried us too. Erased so we could become independent-contract erasers and identity miners—a secret weapon. That whole time period is murky, tinged more with exhaustion and raw determination than torture.

But these weeks away from Ivy, helplessly viewing her agony, not having her in my arms? I've never known a greater suffering. Neither have the three men crowded in this vehicle.

Gage struggles to close the gap, but fortunately, it's clear where she's headed.

"The private hangar off 76," I offer. "She's taking Tom's plane."

"Fuck," Liam hisses from the back seat.

I dismiss his panic with a terse grunt. "No. It's tracked. I installed it after she and Celeste took the Carvers' plane to Vegas in the middle of the night."

After the girls pulled that stunt on Ivy's twenty-first birthday and skipped town without our knowledge, we installed a tracker on both Tom's plane and the Carver family's plane. Leaving at one in the morning had been the genius part of the girls' plan—when everyone believed Ivy was tucked in bed at Celeste's house. Five hours after they'd left, we realized they were gone and were able to catch up to them, but it was a harrowing night.

Tom's jet is already preparing for takeoff when we're still a good ten minutes out. But I tap into the registered coordinates. We have a plane in this hangar, too, for precisely this purpose—*storm chasing*. They staff round-the-clock, last-minute flight crews, so those in certain lines of work can flee at a moment's notice.

"Paris," I supply, a consoling blanket assuaging some of my fears.

We'll find her. We'll get to her first. Does she know she's still being hunted? That she will be until she's firmly in that seat? And even then. Or is she so blinded by her vengeance that she'll be careless? The thought pulverizes both the consolation and my stomach, the gastric lining clawing its way into my throat. I choke back a heave as we exit the Jeep, locate Ivy's Ferrari—hidden behind a service truck—and board the plane, setting off for the City of Light.

Jesus Christ, I need some goddamn light.

Antsy at the notion of enduring nine hours suspended above the ocean with no control, I rummage through my chaotic mind for next steps, wrangling some semblance of organization. This frenzied fog she's immersed me in is foreign.

"The Order has three primary hotels their members stay in," I share. "Tom and Natasha may have mentioned them to Ivy at some point. We should start there."

"On it," Liam calls. "I'll pull up security feeds so we know if she enters."

I nod, still conflicted. Still hating him. And yet maybe he's the one who lost the most. I don't interrupt his task to ask what I'm terrified to know. He needs to concentrate, and I need to call KORT now that we're in flight.

Pouring myself a scotch on the rocks, I gather myself to face the arrogant bastards. After the video clicks on, their pompous, aggravated glowers staring back, I bark, "Trials are fucking over."

"That's our call," the Balzano asshole chimes in, plainly affronted by my boldness.

"Not anymore," I reply with a confident sip. "She's fleeing. I told you from the start that my wife was my top priority and that she needed to be yours. You lost her, so—"

"Hmm." My grandfather steeple his hands. "Seems as though she outplayed not only us, but you and your crew as well."

True. The Little Storm blew us all to bits.

My trial was to erase us from existence. Hers was to uncover the truth,

"Defeat accepted," I quip with a smarmy grin, lifting my glass in a plasticky toast. "I'm going to get my wife. Neither of us gives a fuck about the seats, but if anyone deserves one—"

"It's her," he agrees.

Payne Logan—the Pax Logan seat-holder—nods, adding, "Flawless execution. She uncovered your motives, your seat, your past, and how to call you out."

If I wasn't so consumed with reaching her, I'd be swelling with pride. I am actually. Always am. "You'll man her parents?"

"Done," O'Reilly says. "Consider your trial a pass too. Welcome to the family."

Family. Ivy is my family. I don't give a shit about these fuckers anymore. The only reason I went along with this asinine trial was for her, because she'd insisted she wanted that seat. No amount of warning could have prepared her,

but as agonizing as it was to watch, I couldn't rob her of it. Not when I knew she was safe.

When I don't respond, Jared Austen, The Order's chair, regards me with a considering glance. "For what it's worth, both trials were impressive, but the undying loyalty on both sides ... not something we see." He chuckles. "Stealing your money and burning your shit to the ground aside. Tom and Natasha will be monitored. Go get your girl—our O'Reilly *dame*." That's the female equivalent of a knight, but Ivy will be the queen of that board, and they all know it.



Ivy may have led us right to her, but she disguised herself well, so the security footage was challenging. Fortunately, few young women check in to upscale Paris hotels alone.

We're knocking on her door, choosing to let her welcome us instead of barging in. The clanks and rustling from inside suggest she's coming. So, when the click of the lock dings, I'm flooded with the first showers of relief in months. The door swings open with a swoosh.

"Hello, boys." Celeste's haughty smirk leers back, her voice a taunting trill. "C'mon in."

"Celeste," I say, brittle and hot.

Her disposition reveals the haunting truth—Ivy isn't here. And the wind rushes out of me, blood draining from my face. Shouldering past her into the suite, I attempt to regroup as bile swishes in the back of my throat again.

She gives us a scrutinizing once-over, eyes scanning Liam with baffled snark. "Looky here. The dead one was resurrected." She slams the heavy door with a bang, spinning to face us, Liam still her focus. "Was that part of your mindfuck? Got rejected so you played dead?"

Liam shoots her a glower of daggers, as homicidal as mine on him earlier. "The fuck? You think I faked being shot, *princess*?" He spits the insult while rolling his shirt up to reveal the fresh scar and quirking one brow. "And it was a loyalty test. Rejection *was* the goal, so I nailed it."

Her eyes alight at the sight of his bare chest and abs before she nurses her contempt again, searing him with a malevolent scowl. "Loyalty test." She releases a laugh that can only be classified as a guffaw. "What I think—no,

what *I know*—is that Ivy’s gut is spot-on. If you were faking that confession, she’d have sensed it. You didn’t *nail* what you were hoping to.”

Fuck, that pisses me off. My fingers cramp with an itch to fist. “With all due respect, Celeste, we don’t have time for a pissing contest. Where the hell is my wife?”

“Haven’t a clue,” she singsongs, sauntering through the suite and elegantly lowering herself into a dining table chair.

I don’t miss the guys gaping. Celeste has voluptuous curves, the kind Liam generally salivates over. Truth be told, he’s drooled over hers on more than one occasion.

But her beauty will not save her from my wrath.

I stalk nearer to her, my breaths puffing out jagged, jaw clenched. “Cut the goddamn shit and tell me where she is. She’s in danger.”

“Yeah,” she hisses. “From you. I don’t know where your wife is, *Cabrini*, because you erased your marriage. You made your choice.”

That tramples me like a stampede. Ivy knows about my seat. Thinks I chose it over us. Her brief mentioning of it on the phone with Ty, and Payne Logan’s casual comment, finally take root.

As I snarl a slew of expletives through gnashing teeth, Ty breezes past me, squatting before Celeste. “It’s complicated, Celeste. I don’t know how much Ivy told—”

“Everything,” she croons.

“Okay, then you’ll understand,” Ty says, trying to soothe her. “That was her trial. It’s over, and we need to get to her. Quickly. We love Ivy—”

She raises a hasty palm, and Gage bares his teeth with a growl, but I level him with a pointed gaze, hoping Ty can make some progress.

“Save it,” she scoffs. “Love is *not* what you’ve given her. Ivy is the embodiment of karma. She gives what she gets. And for a long while, she hung on to what you’d once given her, but eventually—”

“I know that about Ivy,” Ty says. He does. He used nearly the same words with Gage after the wedding. His tone is sedate, solemn. “We were right there with her the whole time even though she didn’t know. We will *never* leave her, but she wanted the seat, so we protected her while letting her achieve it. And now, *you* need to protect her, Celeste, because she passed the trial, and there are people who want to hunt her down before she assumes her position.”

Celeste considers this for a drawn-out minute that has Liam, Gage, and

me prepared to pounce and strangle her, but Ty motions to stand down, so we seethe in silence.

Finally, she flips her dark hair over her shoulder while her eyes bore into me. “Even if that’s true, you broke her heart, erasing her best qualities in the process of stealing her reality. I’m not sure you can come back from that. Any of you.”

She glances down, and my body pitches forward out of instinct, halting rigidly when she peers up again, lips parted to continue, “I don’t know where she is. She wouldn’t tell me, but she left me with a message. If you want her, you’ll have to work for it.”

I shove my hands into my pockets, fixing a tranquil grin in place to camouflage my terror and aggression. “There’s nothing that could keep me from her. Deep down, she knows that.”

She swallows, eyes soft and despondent. “I think she does.”

“The message?” I ask, knowing every minute counts.

Rising, she strides to the closet, digs in her purse, and emerges with a slip of paper. I unfold it the second she hands it to me.

*Like beauty, art appreciation lies in the eye of the beholder.
So, when the storm retreats, look to the one who's missing to
clear the path.*

My quizzical gaze shoots to Celeste, but she shakes her head at me.

“Ivy needs one person she can count on,” she says. “My advice is not to overanalyze. Resort to what worked *before*.”

I scan the clue again, honing in on *art*. Her paintings.

“Thank you.” Scribbling my number on the bottom of the paper, I rip it off and slide it across the counter she’s now standing behind. “Put my number in your phone. Now. If Ivy reaches out ...” I pause, aware how deeply my wife loves Celeste. “You need to leave here. Go somewhere you can’t be—”

“Ivy told me that, too, and arranged it all. Now that you’ve arrived, the pilot will fly Dr. Kingston’s jet back without me. I’m going to visit a friend. He’ll see me home.”

Of course, Ivy handled it. My good, smart girl. Ten steps ahead.

We file out, Gage with a parting grunt and Liam spitting a rancorous,

“Later, *Carver*.”

It’s the middle of the night in Ohio, so we have to wait six hours into the flight to speak with Suzanna at the gallery.

I’m too keyed up to sleep, so I drown my rage in scotch and candy, ranting incessantly. “She ditched her phone. Her car. She’s God knows where. I should’ve fucking chipped her like I wanted.”

After she was roofied, it was a serious consideration. I don’t know that Tom would’ve liked it, but he wouldn’t have faulted me either.

Ty gazes at me from his seat, steely and vexed. “We agreed that was a violation.”

“No. *You* decided it was a goddamn violation!” I lunge toward him, clamping on to his collar rough enough to drag him forward. “What if they find her, Ty? Rape her? Sell her? Kill her? What about *those* fucking violations?”

His eyes brim with anxiety, and I don’t even care how close to home that hits. All the more reason he should’ve supported the idea instead of fighting me on it. But too caught up in Ivy’s feelings, I heeded his warning that she’d hate me for it.

Fucking pussy.

“I was trying to protect her sense of autonomy and *your* relationship. She wouldn’t have forgiven you for that,” he snipes as I release his shirt.

“Fuck that!” I spit, pacing. “She’d be hating me in the safety of my arms right now. *That* I could live with.” I guzzle my drink with a kick to the bar cabinet. The miniature door flies off the hinges. The screech and the burn of the scotch are mildly satisfying. I’d like to rip every inch of this plane to shreds.

“You’re three sheets, Chief.” Liam snickers. “Take a nap.”

Maybe I’ll tear *him* to shreds. I pour another glass—not bothering with ice—analyzing the man who’s been a brother to me for nearly a decade. A lifetime in our case.

“Celeste was right.” I swirl the amber liquid with a festering venom. “Everything you said to Ivy was true. That’s why it had to be you.”

His eyebrows dart up, but instead of disputing my allegation, he stares at me.

My voice is drenched in serene ire as I drop into my seat. “Say it, Graves. I deserve to know what the hell I’m dealing with.”

“You’re not dealing with anything. Ivy and I are cool. End of story.” He

swigs his beer, eyes boring into mine.

“Coward,” I bark.

He lurches out of his chair, landing a foot from mine. “What do you want me to say? Huh, Chief? Want me to tell you I wish she were mine? That I love the feel of her in my arms, the sound of her musical laugh, the smell of her raspberry hair?”

I rise, meeting him eye to eye for the spearing truth that will impale me.

“That I’ve thought and dreamed about—”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” I warn, poking him in the sternum, left of his wound.

At the same time, Gage hisses, “Fucking hell, Liam,” and Ty throws his head back with a, “Fuck, man.”

The four of us square off while soaring over the Atlantic.

Liam scrubs a hand over his face, scratching at the scruff. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t love her like you do, like you always have. Not enough. And she doesn’t want me to. It was *always* you. It’s why I stepped aside. She deserves you. There were moments, opportunities. Chemistry.” I growl at the thought, but he ignores me, casting a hand through the air. “But if you were in the room, her eyes were glued. Like she told me at the park, she couldn’t look away. Still can’t.”

He sighs, stumbling backward to his chair, nearly as intoxicated as me. “I love you both. That’s why I took a bullet before I ever got shot. I didn’t want to do it.” His explanation becomes thick with emotion. “Honestly, I thought she’d never speak to me again, which would’ve killed me anyway, but then —”

“Yeah,” I acknowledge. She chose him too—a monumental gesture in Liam’s world. “That’s my Little Storm. Fierce.” I swallow my contempt. The brutality of his loss is enough. “Especially for us.”



After sleeping off my drunken misery, I’m able to contact Suzanna. Ivy does have a recent painting. She agrees to text me a picture until I can pick it up. I have a storage room full of Ivy’s art. Some used to hang in the house—my bedroom, above the fireplace, in the hallway. I kept them hidden until Tom called me out on my obsession with his daughter. That conversation freed me

to display them, which he found hilarious. No one but Tom knew whose they were. It was something tangible of hers, something I could keep. Until she moved in. The trade-off was well worth it.

My phone vibrates in my hand, but it isn't Suzanna. It's also not a call I'm thrilled to field. I answer after a cleansing breath. "Hello, Natasha."

"Where the hell is she, Gavin?"

"How did you know she was gone?" I ask, hoping Ivy dropped a breadcrumb with her mother.

"She left me a note." Her voice quivers.

"Read it to me," I demand, and to my surprise, she doesn't argue or snarl.

"*Dear Mom. You gave me twenty-three beautiful years of love and freedom. I won't forget that. Even now. Ivanna.*" She sighs. "She hasn't spoken to me since she got released, and now ... this is a goodbye. Where is she?"

"I'm working on it. We—"

"You're working on it?" she sneers. "You *promised* she'd be safe. Tom told me to trust you, and in spite of *all* my reservations, I went along with this preposterous ruse because I trusted *his* judgment, and, in turn, yours. But so help me, if something happens—"

"We have strong leads," I assure her. "I'll get to her."

Silence crackles through the line until she clears her throat. "Tom left me a letter to give her if things went sideways. I planted it, nervous she wouldn't take it from me. I assumed it would make things better. He's always known how to, but ..."

It's not surprising he'd offer her a contingency plan, but I'm disappointed I don't know the finer details. "Any idea of what was in it?"

"No," she says. "His instructions said it contained everything she needed to *understand and act.*"

Not giving Natasha the details was for her own protection. It sounds like he presented Ivy with an escape route. And she took it.

I pour myself three fingers of scotch, just enough to take the rapidly building edge off. "Thanks. That helps."

"How much danger is she in?"

Too much. "Natasha, your daughter's life means more to me than my own. I won't stop until we find her and bring her home."

"She thinks I betrayed her." She sniffs—a mannerism attesting to the fucking mess she is. Natasha Kingston doesn't broadcast emotions.

“I’ll fix it,” I vow. “I’ll be in touch.”

Natasha has been as much of a victim as anyone in all of this. Tom left her a letter with his living will, explaining most high-level details. She knew Ivanna had come to them through a delicate situation, but after her pregnancy losses, all she cared about was keeping the baby in her arms.

In his letter, Tom told her, when the time was right, I’d reach out to take Ivy, which was exactly what I did. The surprise I wasn’t prepared for was his emergency plan—the letter instructed Natasha to threaten Ivy’s inheritance with a marriage requirement should an urgent need for extraction occur. He knew that would set her off and send her running into my arms, provided I positioned myself in precisely the right place to catch her. Natasha shared the plan with me the same day I arranged Celeste’s excursion. It was a pat on the back from Tom—a reminder he believed in me, trusted me with his most cherished treasure.

At the time, only Ty recognized my infatuation with Ivy. That was why I took him with me for our first run-in, although her suggesting marriage so flippantly was a shock to us both. Tom knew his daughter brilliantly, and Natasha never wavered in her trust of his plan, although she was pissy with me. All things considered, I didn’t take offense. She did her part to send Ivy my way, and I put the decoy in place at the hospital, giving us a fixed point to monitor for her hunters.

We had armed guards on the room at all times, doctors from The Order who accepted there was a hit on Tom’s daughter and helped, and the decoy was a trained marksman herself. It was never supposed to be used for the trial, but when KORT laid out the plan, I breathed a sigh of relief because Ivy would be in our sights. Safe. And Natasha, happy to have her daughter back, willingly played her part even though it meant deceiving Ivy.

We both prioritized her safety.

I expected Ivy to rage, wanted her to so KORT could witness her brilliance. There was no doubt she’d work tirelessly to uncover the truth—exactly what they were looking for—but even I’m astonished by the prowess she used to send us on a wild goose chase.

They linked our trials together, essentially pitting us against each other as punishment for our marriage—me erasing us and her uncovering us. I’m not aggrieved in the slightest that my wife came out on top. I’m enraged that my grief over her anguish allowed me to miss her schemes.

We’ve always kept emotions out of our jobs, certain it could alter focus

and compromise safety. Wisdom. Loving Ivy is the very reason she slipped out of our clutches.

Seconds after I end the call with Natasha, Suzanna's text pings with Ivy's painting. My heart stills as I study her depiction of the four of us, capturing unique characteristics of each. So talented. Our smiles are more imperious than necessary, but that's my perceptive girl.

Glancing at her clue again, I catch the vital words.

Look to the one who's missing to clear the path.

Liam. She thinks Liam died. As my eyes scan over him, his belt floats out of the picture—or rather, what's on it.

A goddamn ruby.

How the fuck did she get that?

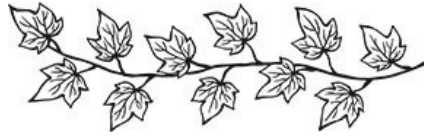
I weave my fingers through my hair, a tremble rumbling in my chest as I whip my glass, the shards shattering, scotch spraying. “Jesus! Fuck!”

Three sets of alarmed eyes search mine.

“She's got the ruby necklace,” I explain. “And I'd say she knows it's registered.”

What she might not know is that she won't only be leading us to her. That necklace is like a bat signal for her hunters.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



IVY

There isn't much to fear at this point. Being stripped of everything you deem important will do that. But this city with its weed smoking, scantily clad street hustlers, and blitzed groupies is frightening to navigate.

The scents of piss and pot. Sausage and yeast.

Of covert outings and funnel cakes.

My destination smells of a different sort of allure—sex and thrill. Top-shelf whiskey and dessert champagne. Roaring Twenties transgressions rather than titty-flashing bead begging.

A different threat too.

Glitter and lace debauchery.

Risks threaded with tangled temptations of privilege and liberation. When, in actuality, the sin is simply beaded on a strand of pearls.

Pretty enough for pomp.

Strong enough to strangle.

But the men who pull those strings are dark and cold. Wicked depravity personified.

I know what I'm walking into. I also know I hold the trump card, and they're betting men.

Because I remember all the passwords—like my brain filed them, instinctually sensing I'd be in possession of something valuable while also a fugitive—I enter the elite guest entrance with ease. With a concealed gun. And two knives. The members who enter here have a special clearance, so no pat-downs. I'm stuck in a holding lobby nonetheless, awaiting approval.

Bernard—the butler who attended to the guys and me in September—greet me, his eyes narrowing in an attempt to place who I am. His face

scrunches when the recognition dawns on him. My hair is a chestnut brown now—a temporary means to my escape since my ginger locks are a dead giveaway. Bernard doesn't appear altogether pleased to see me.

"Ms. Kingston," he drones my maiden name.

Ahh, like the rest of the world, Wells doesn't exist in his.

"Good evening, Bernard."

He sighs, charmed and conflicted. "What can I do for you? Miss Rena will not—"

"I'm not here to see her." Hoping I will but won't hold my breath.

"Oh?" he muses, intrigued. "Then, how may I assist you?"

"I'd like to see Ryker," I state firmly.

He balks, plainly annoyed that I've deigned to request Noire royalty. "Ms. Kingston, the Noire family is otherwise engaged."

A sardonic smirk tips my lips, matching his self-righteous indignation. This might be the Noire kingdom, but I have the crown jewel. "Tell him I have Montgomery intel."

His eyes widen, and without another word, he reaches for the house phone. "Master Ryker, you have a guest. No. Female, sir." He muffles his voice with his hand, but I catch his mutterings anyway. "Ms. Ivanna Kingston ... Montgomery tip." With that, he clicks the receiver and regards me. "Master Ryker will be here momentarily."

While his harsh expression mellows, he doesn't engage in idle small talk. He guards me. Like I'm an assassin infiltrating La Lune Noire.

Ryker steps off the elevator moments later, wooden and icy. Disdain marring his chiseled features. His eyes meet mine, and he flicks his wrist for me to follow.

He doesn't speak in the elevator, and neither do I. He wants to take me to his suite so I feel trapped and he can fuck with me. I already anticipated that, so his this-is-your-last-meal energy doesn't faze me.

We flounce into the penthouse, impatience marking his hasty stride. The door closes behind me with an ominous click of the lock. A warning.

He brooks no niceties. "The fuck are you doing here?"

I considered asking for Axel. He's just as deranged and threatening, but he plasters on a prettier facade. Ryker makes no apologies for his ruthless demeanor, which is admittedly intimidating, but also the reason I requested him. He's easier to read.

Unwilling to let his sadistic nature torpedo me, I fix a straight-lipped grin

and get to the point. “I have something you want, but I need something in return.”

He scoffs, shoving his hands in his pockets, his eyes swirling with a thirst for death and blood and revenge. I can work with that.

He leans in close, expecting me to retreat, but I steel my spine as he attempts to lance me with his gritty rebuke. “I don’t make trades, *darling*, and I doubt you have *anything* I want.”

“Actually, I possess what *you* want most in this world. The shovel to bury Montgomery, but ...” I bite my lip with a never-mind shrug. “If you’re not interested, forget it.”

His palm slams against the door behind me, thrusting me against it in the process. “If you’re fucking with me, I won’t think twice about killing you.”

“That’s fair,” I chirp, appeasing the psychopath and ducking under his arm. “I’m not fucking with you, but to be clear, if I don’t check in after this, my contact has been informed to alert Wells that I was meeting with you and didn’t make it out. And since he has Mercy, well, you can bridge that.”

I pick at my nails as if I’m bored while he growls. This guy. As if I didn’t live with four snarling, overweening men drunk on power.

Not even breaking a sweat, jackass.

He crosses the room, halting at a hallway with a scowl. “Come,” he orders.

I follow like an obedient pet—with canine teeth capable of gnawing through his carotid artery if need be. We enter a huge conference room, a massive oval table in the center and two desks on either end.

He pours two glasses of whiskey, slamming mine down on the table. “Start fucking talking.”

So hospitable.

I stride to the table but remain standing with a stony gaze on him until he sits, and I join him. “About a month ago, a memory surfaced of a conversation I’d overheard regarding your *interests*.”

He swigs his drink. “And why the fuck do you know anything about my interests? Playing all of us with that AirPods, reading ruse, *sweetheart*?”

Jesus, he makes terms of endearment sound menacing.

“Yes,” I admit. No point in lying. “It wasn’t calculated. Sometimes, far-off things stick in my brain.” Sipping the putrid liquid, I mask my choking. Although my froggy squeak betrays me, which provokes a twitch in Ryker’s lips—the first hint at humanity. Clearing my throat, I add, “That skill of mine

is like a late, shiny Christmas gift to you though.”

His features soften in the way marble shines—still hard and cold but reflecting a glimpse of light. “Get on with it.”

Wells barked the same command to Maddox at our wedding.

Ignoring the brick sinking into the pit of my stomach from the flash of my wedding day, I manage a smile. “Here’s the deal: In exchange for the information that will open a *casket*, I need you to take a necklace of mine to a jeweler here tomorrow. I’m sure there’s one you trust or own. Have them run the serial number and leave them with a picture of Wells and a note. The jeweler should know running the number will beckon a slew of thugs with millions flashing in their eyes. I don’t want anyone hurt. And the note is only for Wells.”

“Why wouldn’t I call Wells, tell him I have you, and let him fuck the information on Montgomery out of you?”

Ahh, that’s one way to go. The thought has me squirming in my seat.

Not now.

“Because,” I argue, “you’d have to wait for it, you’d risk him not letting me share it, and because you and I aren’t so different. We’re both desperate for someone out of our grasp, and this plan of mine clamps down on them both.”

He squints his glacial blues, his finger circling the rim of his glass. “Sounds to me like you’re playing with fire and—”

“I’ve already done that. I literally burned our old life to the ground.” No sense holding back. “You’d be wise to take me seriously.”

He snickers, chugs his whiskey, and rises to retrieve the bottle from the bar. One glass isn’t going to cut it for this conversation, *obviously*. “I don’t know much about the shit involving you. I can see the appeal in fucking your husband over. But why purposely call out the thugs and hit men after you?”

“I’ll be tapped into the jeweler’s security, letting me see the face of every asshole trying to kill me. And fucking with Wells is cathartic,” I confess. “Two birds.”

That wins me favor.

Ryker cackles, spilling another glass of whiskey into his mouth. “Nothing worse than an underestimated badass bitch.”

Far more endearing than sweetheart out of his mouth.

I clink his empty glass and venture another sip. It’s only mildly smoother, but the burn is strangely satisfying. “So? Deal?”

He combs his fingers through his waxy brown tresses. “Fine. Better be good.”

Since this isn’t the type of deal brokered with a contract, I take him at his word. Something tells me Ryker’s good on it.

“My father had a conversation with a man last April. A month ago, it resurfaced in my mind. The man was distressed because Dalton Montgomery was causing his father, Monroe Montgomery, trouble again. He mentioned that Monroe had helped Dalton bury Hailey Holden in the Dundee Caverns.” Ryker’s eyes darken with a murderous gleam, but I don’t stop. “Here’s the kicker: Monroe was disgusted with his son and said he couldn’t choose Dalton over his grandson. He wanted nothing to do with hurting Mercy or her son, Jett. He’s desperate to have Jett back.”

Ryker drags his fingers across his mouth, processing. His mind is clearly a runaway train, but there’s excitement chugging within it.

I swirl my dwindling caramel-colored liquid, like I’ve seen Wells do with his scotch countless times. “I did a little digging. While I can’t pinpoint the exact location of where Hailey might be buried, I found an area mentioned on the dark web.” Pulling a map from my purse, I slide it toward him, the suspected area circled. “The caverns don’t offer a lot of *burial grounds*, so while it might be a jump, it’s not a long one. If you tell Monroe that you know what he and Dalton did to Hailey and that you have Mercy and her son in your possession, he’ll take Dalton down himself in the spirit of saving his grandson and his own ass, and Mercy can return to you. Your hands will appear squeaky clean, and she’ll be relieved that the Holden family has closure.”

“Fuck me,” he mumbles, scrubbing both hands over his face like he’s waking up. “Jesus. Wells is a fucking moron. What the hell happened with you two?”

That begs the question, what *does* he know? Or think he knows?

“Sometimes, things aren’t what they seem.” It’s the only answer that makes sense here. The only one I’m capable of offering that isn’t woven with self-deprecation or information I can’t divulge.

Ryker is someone I could’ve been friends with in another life. He’s unabashedly himself, not hiding anything—threat, power, anger, relief. Gratefulness. It reassures me I did this right. I could’ve found another way with the necklace, not risking the Noire brothers calling Wells. But I wanted to do this. For Hailey Holden. For Mercy. For Ryker. And for my father. It’s

what he would want, why people trusted him.

That thought seems to coast over Ryker as well—realizing he won the fatter pot in this gamble. He moves to pour me a little more whiskey, but I lift my palm to stop him.

“You can stay the night,” he says. “You’ve earned your place here, separate from Wells’s crew.”

I roll my lips in, the thought of Rena and maybe Ryker being yet one more place I could’ve fit knotting me up. *Could have*. “I can’t. I’m not safe here, and I’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

“There’s no safer place for you than with us.” He slings that with a shadow of offense.

But I know all about relying on villains to protect me from other villains. I’ve lived it.

And died to it.

“Thank you,” I say, standing. “I know you’d be capable of protecting me, but it’s not the kind of freedom I’m chasing. If we could just work out the details for the necklace, I’ll be out of your hair.”

He nods in agreement, and after sauntering away to grab a pen and notebook from his desk, he writes down all the information on the jeweler, referring to his phone a few times. Glancing up at me, he asks, “Is the time important?”

I ponder that. I’ve got a ten-hour drive ahead, and I’d like to be settled with the security system before the jeweler checks the serial number. It’s late afternoon now. “Four p.m., if it isn’t any trouble.”

“No trouble,” he says, still scribbling down some information. “The whole staff is under our thumb, so we’ll handle the threats. No worries there either.”

I titter a quiet chuckle, my chest tightening at the threats that will undoubtedly be unraveling in a frenzy. “Wells may be the worst to—”

“I’ll handle him.” He waves me off, plainly nettled by the idea that Wells could be an issue. *Cockfighting*. “He’ll at least know you’re in one piece. And luring the people after you makes his job easier. He should fucking thank me.”

Yeah, I wouldn’t count on that.

I’m not sure why his flippant remark about Wells slices me the way it does, but I’m suddenly consumed with worry. What if he doesn’t come after me? What if he really was willing to let me go and I’m deluding myself into

believing he cares enough to chase me? What if, like the phantom ache between my legs that I feel every damn morning upon waking, I'm nothing more than that? A quiet whisper of what was?

Ryker scans my face, his icy eyes and sculpted features melting into domineering agitation. That's probably as gentle as he gets. "You're staying for dinner."

My mouth falls open to protest, but he doesn't allow me to speak.

"It isn't a request. You're staying. Rena will join us here in the suite."

There's an undercurrent to his demand. My good-faith information earned me not just an invitation to La Lune Noire, but one to their inner circle. Another family to leave behind.

"If Axel sees me—"

"No one will contact Wells or his crew tonight," he assures me. "I'll see to it. He'll be calling us tomorrow anyway."

With that, he trades me the jeweler info for the necklace and a note with two pictures of Wells taped to it: one from his service years, the other from my painting—best I could do. He locks the ruby necklace and the envelope in a safe under his desk and swipes his phone, presumably for our dinner arrangements, while I fidget, torn between staying and fleeing.

Amid my internal debate, he ushers me out to the dining room. "Sit," he orders.

And I do. Not out of fear or obligation. But because that barking command was a taste of home. An echo of my husband, the man whose orders shattered me and made me whole.

Rena waltzes in moments later, arms out and squawking as I bounce up to greet her. She made good on her piercing chains with an elegant nose-to-eyebrow adornment, and with the thin material of her shirt, it looks as though her nipples have capitalized on their prime piercing real estate. God love her.

It floods me with thoughts of the clamps Wells was so fond of—the delightful sting of the pain and pleasure, magnified by his praise. I can't imagine exploring that ache inside me with anyone else, but I brush off the reminiscence.

Rena swallows me with an alarming amount of force, a hug reaching my bones and heart and forgotten past. "Where the fuck have you been, girl?"

Ryker levels her with an admonishing glare, but I laugh and simply say, "A secret mission of sorts."

She skips backward, a wistful chide on her magenta-painted lips. "Secret

mission? I tracked you down to a hospital in Ohio, where I presume you dyed your hair this foxy brown. The only secret is what the hell was wrong—”

“You were told to leave it the fuck alone!” Ryker scolds, his booming tenor ricocheting off every solid surface in the suite.

Rena flip-flops her hand like she’s swatting at a bug. “Please. Like you get to school me on that shit, *Mr. Walk Away.*”

Ryker snarls, bulldog mode in overdrive. “Axel and I don’t want you mixed up in whatever the hell this is!”

She howls, twisting her pink-and-gold strands, and rolling her wild hazel eyes—a brighter green than I remember. “And yet you’re arranging a quiet dinner for us all? How hypocritically quaint.”

I’m amused by the exchange, but also sickened by the derisive chasm I’m wedging between them. I’ve endured enough of that for a lifetime. “I don’t want to cause any trouble. Thank you for everything, Ryker. I—”

“For Christ’s sake, Ivy.” A deep groove pierces Ryker’s forehead as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Sit the fuck down and have a meal with my defiant pest.”

All righty then. Heaping on the nostalgia. It’s almost as if Wells’s ghost were hovering in the hopes of a good old choking.

God, I miss that. Our standoffs. The way we challenged each other until we were both fervent and unhinged. He was right that time he told me I wanted to be on his leash. I’d never craved anything like that before, but with Wells, handing him complete control was a drug. Because, *Jesus*, he knew how to wield it. The image has me rapt with a ravenous want.

Fuck, it’s been too long.

My cheeks heat, and a dizziness engulfs me. So, while not due to Ryker’s intensity, I sport a sheepish grin and sit.

Rena levels Ryker with a hostile glower, lifts her thumb to her nose, wiggles her outstretched fingers, and sticks out her tongue before plopping down beside me.

Gasoline on the fire, girl. I get it.

We share dinner, and I dodge her inquisition like an NFL quarterback superstar, fake-outs complete with intrigue regarding her latest rebellion. The rest of the Noire brothers, aside from Axel, filter in and out, casting me flirty smirks and sly winks, causing Ryker to blow a gasket with every gesture. I’d love to say the whole scene offers me a glint of hope, but with every smile and laugh and remembrance, it’s as though the last layers of connection are

being peeled away. After this, I'll be gone. Erased. Reborn to a world I know nothing about.

Alone.

What if my guys don't fight for me? That field of ashes in Ohio isn't enough to lay it all to rest. Not the love that binds me to them. I'm adrift between the heavens and the embers. Desperate for that taste of the cloudy haze of languid happy they had me floating on. And yet, if they can't make sense of what they've done to me, then finding me won't be enough anyway. I'll burn them all like our abandoned home.

I'd rather have a taste of Heaven though.

Wells's words wrap around me like the crumpled bedsheets from a morning snuggle when we were more tangled up than a pretzel, his fingers scampering over every inch of my skin, his emeralds full of adoration. "*No moment before you was living. You, Little Storm, are my life, the light striking through the darkness, as close to Heaven as I'll ever get.*"

It had to be real for him.

"She's fine. She'll come back when she's ready." Rena's warble disintegrates the amber pixels of my memory.

Dandelion dreams.

Blown and scattered and lost to the frigid breeze.

Ryker's eyes are creased in both humor and fascination, but I rejoin the chatter as though I never drifted away. As it nears my time to go, the air thickens with tension. Rena can't understand why I won't give her my plans or contact information. She won't accept this as goodbye, and it breaks me a little. A rogue tear trickles out before Ryker insists she leave, so with a final hug, she begrudgingly tromps away with a plethora of grumbles that make me smile.

I wonder if this will result in a piercing.

Ryker escorts me to the private exit, insisting he walk me to my vehicle, but I can't allow that.

"I'm sorry," I say, "but I need to disappear now. If you see the car, it'll cause me a whole extra step."

"That's fine." He ignores my reasoning, urging me forward and passing me the black backpack that was slung over his shoulder. When I stare at him in question, he unzips it with a vexed scowl. It's full of stacks of hundred-dollar bills—has to be a couple hundred thousand.

"I can't take that. I have money, Ryker."

“You will,” he demands. “Buy a new car if you want.”

I stop, dead in the middle of the parking lot, shrouded by shadows and secrets with a guy who threatened to kill me a few hours ago. “Why?”

He considers my question—aware it isn’t simply about the money—seemingly turning his words over, his hand scratching his chin. If he didn’t have that aggressive marble edge to him, he’d have a baby face. But something robbed him of his boyish charm, and I suppose I understand that. His icy eyes meet mine with a tender warmth that seems meant for someone distant rather than me.

“Two reasons. That information was priceless, and your request wasn’t. I don’t like outstanding debts.” He swallows a disquieting groan. “I don’t know what I’m missing. You and Wells are mixed up in some fucked-up shit, and for the sake of my family, I’m not going to pry. But, Ivy, I’ve only looked at one girl the way Wells looked at you. Hell, all four of those guys were fierce for you. But Wells ... *fuck*. Leave a window ajar for the guy.”

When I came to see Ryker, it never occurred to me how much he’d be a haunting of my guys.

Tears brim as I search for words, so he tucks me into his chest while I nod and whisper, “It’s cracked. The rest is up to him.”

“Good enough.” He drags me forward until I’m mindlessly marching us toward the car. “Are you armed?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl,” he says, and the pang of torment that shoots through me nearly knocks me to my knees.

When we reach the car, he notes my trembling. As I slide myself inside, he braces the door open, stern eyes zeroing in on my clammy forehead.

“Where’s your head at? Your feistiness waned an hour ago.”

I choke back the sludge of sorrow fusing into a boulder in my throat. When you strip away the people and love and purpose from a life, what’s left to live for? What marks it as living, other than another day toward the grave? That’s the most morbid thought I’ve ever had. But the adrenaline of the search and fight and fire is all wearing off, and nothing but naked pain remains.

My eyes flit to his, and I get it—I’m making this complicated for him. Leaving broken so he’s left cleaning up the mess with his friend. But I can’t muster the strength to plaster on a fake smile, so I simply say, “My head? Old ghosts.”

And somehow, the flicker of his dark lashes in the moonlight tells me he understands.

“Burner phone?” he asks.

“Yep.” *Several.*

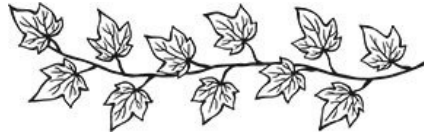
He removes a small card from his pocket, ripping it in half so only the number is visible on the part he hands me. “Memorize it. If you need anything ...” He glances somewhere far off before returning to me. “No questions asked.”

I stare at it, searching for ... what? I’m not sure. Maybe a sign that it doesn’t all end like this. “Thank you.”

He taps the hood. “No. Thank you for Mercy. For being good to Rena. Be safe. Be smart.”

The door closes with a bang, and it’s only me, the ten-hour drive ahead, my sullied memories, and my new existence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



WELLS

We're at her mercy, which is presumably exactly what she wants.

Her plans are meticulously exhaustive.

No stones unturned. No frayed ends.

No embers smoldering.

In any other case, I'd have two thoughts: Time is of the essence because every minute missing is another mile into hiding. And given time, even the best accidentally reveal themselves.

But with Ivy, it's not about her slipping up and mistakenly showing herself or even bridging another mile. She's summoning us to her—whether it be to fuck with us or test whether I really will chase her to the ends of the earth, I'm not sure.

I could always read her.

By the time I spoke with her that evening at the masquerade party for her eighteenth birthday, I'd been watching her for a month. As far as marks go, I felt I had a keen perception of her, but in our brief moments by the pond, she blew it all away.

She was more.

Stronger.

Pluckier.

Stormier beneath her well-mannered posture.

She aspired to be the tiny, unexpected pebble shaking the pond, and for some inexplicable reason, I wanted to buff every jagged edge to help her skip across those waters.

After that moonlit encounter, she bloomed before my eyes—a night flower in search of illumination. Knowing her deepest motivation and how

she held herself when faced with disappointment supplied insight into her thought process. In time, it was like I was in her head.

And she was most definitely in mine.

But her voice on the phone with Ty two days ago was distant.irate and dejected, as anticipated. But also disassociated. Detached.

The last forty-eight hours, it's felt like she's severed my inside view.

Anticipating her next move is more muddled than it's ever been. And patient stakeouts of my Little Storm are not my style anymore. I can't twiddle my thumbs and ... wait.

But sadly, although we're exhausting every angle—tracking down every vehicle registered to anyone Ivy's ever met, combing through traffic cameras and airport surveillance, and examining any other needles we can sift out—the waiting is what it all amounts to.

Waiting until that motherfucking ruby necklace dings in the system like Pavlov's dog bell to every goddamn hit man in the United States.

Then, we'll race against the clock, hurdling her barriers one by one. She might have burned our home, but I'll burn every inch of land leading to her regardless of what it holds, leaving a charred path in my wake.

We're in Ohio, back at the apartment we occupied to observe her trial. I'm frantically scouring the dark web, refreshing alerts, and eating myself into a sugar coma. No scotch today. I need to be ready.

At four o'clock, as I'm swishing the lemon Skittles juice around my mouth, salivating because it's reminiscent of Ivy's flavor, it happens. The ruby necklace flashes in the jeweler's system.

"There," I direct Liam, whose fingers prance over the keys in a violent dance.

"Fucking. Goddamn. Asswipes," he mutters, eyes trained on the screen while my stomach churns in a turbulent spin. The pound of every punched key pierces me as I screenshot the information. He grunts, shaking out his fingers. "Done."

"Fifty-three seconds," I say, both of us panting as though we've just finished our SEALs workout. "How bad is it?"

He rubs his forehead with worried strokes. "It could've been copied for repost later. Anyone with an alert could have it, but it's been years, so we can hope."

"New Orleans." I study the address, a bubble of solace swelling that it's the jeweler around the corner from La Lune Noire. "Maybe Axel has her."

Ty and Gage gather our go bags while I connect us to Axel via speaker. The unnerving ring reverberating through the space is like a somber overture.

He answers with a clipped, “Yeah?”

“Is she there?” I rush out.

“No,” he says, his curt response echoing in a way that magnifies the tunnel of loss and betrayal I see us barreling into.

Motherfucker.

“Since you know who I’m talking about, she was,” I snipe.

Three beats of silence on his end and a slew of curses from my crew later, he sighs. “Yes. She was.”

Shoving my chair backward as I spring up, I shout over the clank of it toppling to the ground, “The fuck? I hope to hell for your sake that you know where she is, Axel.”

“I’m tracking Ryker down. He’ll explain.” A frustrated grunt seeps through the speaker. “I wasn’t here, man.”

“Bullshit.” I scoff. “You should’ve called—”

“He’s my brother. You know how it is.” He leaves no room to argue with his sorry-ass excuse for whatever the hell they’ve done, but the divisiveness of his statement is crystal clear.

A minute later, we’re out the door, loading into the Jeep when Ryker booms through the phone, deadpanning, “Wells.”

“Where the fuck is she?” I hiss, nearly wrenching my door off the hinges with the slam.

“That I don’t know,” he says, no urgency and plainly ignoring mine, as though we were discussing what was for dinner.

Gage steers us toward the highway, leading to our jet that’s stationed only minutes away at a nearby hangar—closer than the other one for emergencies like this—while Ty and Liam crack into all security footage in the jeweler and surrounding area, and I deal with Ryker.

“Start fucking talking.”

His middle finger is audible, his voice like stone. “She was only here for dinner. I took good care of her, and she went on her way.”

He’s got to be fucking high.

I try another way. “Know anything about a necklace?”

“Sure do,” he quips. “But probably no more than you.”

“Ryker, goddammit!” I bark as Gage swerves around traffic. “We don’t have time for your fucking around!”

Ryker isn't an easy personality, but he's our friend and confidante. We've been on the same side of countless deals, so I'm failing to grasp his glitch here.

He balks. "Your girl had something I wanted, and I dropped her necklace off at a jeweler."

"And you let her go? Un-fucking-believable," I drone, gearing up to tear him apart, limb by limb, with my bare hands. "Without fucking calling me?"

"I did," he sneers. "You told us as far as she or anyone else was concerned, you four don't exist. Remember? So—"

"Fucking bullshit!" I bellow, punching my fist into the dash, not even caring that my knuckles are cracked and bloody again.

"Let me lay it out like this, Wells." His pitch deepens with indignation. "Remember when I wanted to finance everything for Mercy's escape, and she begged you to take her on pro bono so she could do it *her* way? I'm sure you do because that's what *you* fucking did. I know she's taken care of, but you kept me out of it. Consider the favor returned."

"She was a victim of abuse and desperate for control," Ty snaps. "Fucking different! That was a matter of integrity and compassion. This is spite!"

"Fuck off, man. It wasn't spite." Ryker grunts, rearing for a fight I should have seen coming. He's been livid about Mercy, but this is too goddamn far. "Your girl might not have been physically beaten, but that hollow look in her eyes was unmistakable. Like I said, I followed your lead."

Motherfucking prick.

"Difference is," Liam growls, "Ty has eyes on your girl, Mercy, at all times."

"You fucking sent ours off alone, asshole," Gage adds as he veers into the far lane, weaving between cars as horns blare around us, his knuckles blanching on the steering wheel.

"Fucking hell. I gave her three hundred grand, my number, made sure she was armed, had a safe vehicle and a burner phone. I didn't call you because I don't know what the hell you guys are messed up in. Your girl had shown up here, asking for *me*. If she wanted you, she would've hung near whatever the fuck she burned to the ground." Despite the accusation inside that observation, his tone has tempered considerably.

But I don't have the patience for this bullshit. The Noire brothers, especially Ryker, don't give assistance for free. Ivy paid for that help one

way or another.

So, I don't dance around it. "What the fuck did she give you?"

No hesitation. "Hailey Holden and a smoking gun."

Ty gasps. "How the hell?"

How in the hell is right? Jesus Christ, Ivy is running circles around us all. A goddamn cyclone. Why was she even digging for that?

"She's brilliant and a little scary." Ryker's boisterous laugh fills the car. Looks like the Little Storm won him over, which explains his attitude. He's not just spiteful regarding Mercy; he's protective over Ivy. "Kinda fucking crazy in the best sort of way. I already set what she gave me in motion. I fucking own Monroe Montgomery, and Dalton is finished. Ivy earned her place with me, so if you're trying to bleed my loyalty, it's already spent."

"Loyal?" I choke on a dubious roar. "Jesus Christ, you *know* she's being hunted."

"So does she," he says with serene confidence. "My money's on her."

We're pulling into the hangar, so I suppress my urge to threaten his life and move us forward. "Give me what you know so we can protect her. Plate number? Direction? Appearance changes? Anything."

He rattles off the plate number before tacking on, "She was planning to buy a new car. Don't know where she's headed. Brown hair now. Everything else the same. Skinny jeans, black sweater, and boots. She left you a note at the jeweler, and she'll be hacking into the security system there. We're also monitoring it for any suspicious activity or shady customers. She wants to see who's after her. Doing your fucking job for you. That girl has skill."

My anger toward him dissipates as I hear his words, laced with the loyalty he mentioned. And pride. For my wife. I might not appreciate him letting her go, but he looked out for her nonetheless, and I can't fault him for being dragged under her spell.

"We'll be there in about four hours," I tell him. "You'll detain anyone inquiring about the ruby necklace?"

"Will do," he says. "Already planned on it."

"Thanks." I'm about to end the call when it strikes me in the pit of my gut that he sat across the table from Ivy, shared a meal, maybe a laugh. He quite possibly wiped a tear away and wrapped her in a consoling embrace. Jealousy rages like lava surging through my veins. And worry. "Hey, Ryker, you said she was hollow?"

"She stormed in here like a Mafia princess with nothing to fear—all feisty

and arrogant. High-roller confidence. But after we had dinner with Rena, something broke. She was ... I don't know what kind of bullshit you're all messed up with, why you ghosted her, but you fucked that shit up good, brother."

He isn't wrong, and it doesn't matter that it was all for her.
I still let her break.



Four hours later, I'm striding into the jeweler's while the guys wait impatiently in the car Axel sent for us. Ryker arranged a private after-hours meeting for me since the jewelry store closes at seven.

No one else has shown up for the ruby necklace yet. Not surprising since they were only provided three hours today. We expect tomorrow to begin drawing out the dogs. I hate this plan, the danger it imposes. While Ryker was correct that Ivy is brilliant for choreographing this scheme, the marionette masters in this game aren't the ones who will be showing their faces. And unfortunately, there are always endless strings of puppets. It's possible we'll detain someone who squeals something more, but with Ivy out there alone, the chance of it going sideways is far more likely.

The jeweler studies me against a picture, finally handing me the ruby necklace and an envelope. Inside is a note in my Little Storm's handwriting.

"A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it." —George Moore

A single quote, but it encompasses the journey we've traveled already to find her and evokes a potent recollection.

She's curled up in my arms after our picnic by the pond. We've been so normal today, a morning of fervent orgasms, followed by a bath and breakfast and rom-coms. I know things will shift once she knows the truth tomorrow, but I needed today—the feel of her petite frame folded into mine, the sound of her melodic rasp as she shares her hopes, the symphony of her giggles. In a life brimming with surreal pressures and pleasures, these moments with her are still the hardest to capture.

Fuck, I'm so in love with this woman. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her. She's ... everything. All that matters.

"Tell me, Little Storm, all the places you want to go and explore. We'll make a list and check them off one by one."

"There are so many countries and cities and wonders I'd like to see. Anywhere with you would be special, but there's one place I want to go more than anywhere else."

I plant a kiss in her hair, my lips moving against the silky strands. "Name it. We'll make it happen."

"I want to see the town you grew up in," she says.

My laughter filters into the air, skirting the glassy surface of the pond and floating up into the clouds. "Ives, no one wants to go to that Podunk town."

"I do," she insists, her eyes latching on to mine beneath the fringe of her dark lashes. "I know it's where you lost everything. I'm sure it wouldn't be easy to return to the birthplace of such trauma and devastation, but it was also the place you learned to ride a bike. Where you skinned your knee, and your mom swept your hair off your forehead and assured you it would heal. It's where you played catch with your dad and teased your little brother. There's a piece of you there, Wells—a piece that tornado didn't steal. You always tell me how selfish you are for my moments. I'm selfish for you too. I want those forgotten slivers you've tucked away—the ones no one else sees. The beautiful and the broken."

Not all of my childhood was spent in the same town, but the picture she paints isn't far off. Aside from the multiple moves before anchoring in Oklahoma when I was twelve, my childhood was as quaint as a Norman Rockwell masterpiece. But returning to Brass City, where my parents and brother perished, isn't an option for me—that town thinks I'm dead—but I don't tell her that the one place she's requested is the only destination too dangerous for me to take her.

I slide her up onto my lap, nestle her against the warmth of my chest, bury another kiss in her raspberry-vanilla hair, and whisper, "You have more of me than anyone ever has. Every sliver is yours."

"Fuck," I hiss, rousing from the nostalgic glow. "I know where she is." I rush out of the jeweler, turning back to Ryker. "You'll contact me if she—"

"Of course. We'll let you know if we find anything."

Once I'm back in the car, Axel's driver hustles us to the private airport,

but it isn't until we're loaded on the plane that I inform the guys where we're headed. "Brass City, Oklahoma."

"Fucking hell," Gage hisses while Ty and Liam sputter with him.

"Jesus, Chief." Liam snickers, although it's dripping with more astonishment than humor. "After this, you'll think twice about pissing off High Society. Brutal."

"We'll go. You can't—"

I cut off Ty's objection before it starts. "I'm going to get my wife even if I have to rise from the dead or meet my maker to do it."

Returning to the towns we've been erased from isn't only dangerous; it's an act of treason against the government, punishable by death, per the agreement we signed with the CIA. It was the primary stipulation required of us, which we were told was generous, as if killing us off after we clawed our way out of an enemy camp, where we had been tortured and starved for weeks, was a gift. I've never nursed the resentment over it that Gage harbors, but as we take flight for my hometown, it courses through my veins.

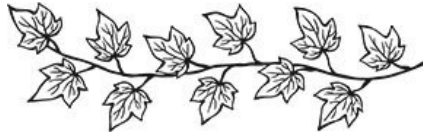
"What's her angle?" Liam asks. "She already spilled that she knows who we are."

My hand brushes over the unkempt scruff growing wildly on my chin and jaw. "She wants to know I'd walk through fire to reach her, even ones she sets. So, that's what I'll do."

"Burn for her," Gage mutters, half to himself, and I know there's a deeper meaning looming inside his statement.

"Exactly."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



IVY

I'm hunkered down in a small-town inn—Hallmark inspired, no doubt—about a mile from where Wells grew up. I didn't give him any specifics about where I'd be staying, assuming his keen skills and ability to sense me would guide him here. I'm aware that Brass City is not the easiest place for him to venture into since this town believes he's dead, but I needed to see what lengths he'd go to. This is the only destination that poses a threat to the man who has the world in his pocket.

After ten hours of driving, trading in my car, and hacking into the surveillance of the jeweler and surrounding traffic cameras, I'm exhausted and lonely. Missing Wells has manifested into a physical torment. Seeing his face on the security footage earlier, knowing he's coming for me, has sucked the marrow out of my bones and replaced it with a distressing ache.

I might not tell him this right away, but I saw the worry etching his face, the authentic strain and fear. Despite all the fuckery that has ensued the past six weeks, the sight of him hurting is agonizing. He's already secured my forgiveness—at least in part. Maybe that makes me weak. And if he doesn't show up for me, I might set his plane on fire. But if he holds out his arms, I can't imagine not jumping at the chance to be his again.

His good girl.

His slut.

His wife and queen.

It's nearly midnight. No one, other than Wells and Ryker, was on the jeweler's security footage tonight. When Wells scurried back out after only three minutes, Ryker flicked those icy eyes up to the camera with a wink. Someday, I'll find a way to thank him because the information I supplied has

been more than paid for. I would have offered it for nothing.

As I'm snuggled up in the dark, munching on a plate of jalapeño Dorito nachos—Gage's specialty—I decide to review the street surveillance, starting with the present, which is notably active. I haven't paid much attention to that yet. People roam the streets—some draped in beads and some carrying tall, phallic-shaped cocktails with gigantic, swirling straws. Most seem to be headed in the direction of Bourbon Street. It's more than a month before Mardi Gras, but the town is buzzing.

In the sea of chaos, it's the bland and ordinary that beg my investigation. A black sedan with blacked-out windows is idling three blocks from the jeweler. After speaking with some riffraff, smoking a joint on the side of the road, two well-dressed women pile into the vehicle.

Two women I recognize.

Holy shit!

So many dots connect that my stomach creeps into my throat like an immigrant in desperate search of asylum. I have to remind myself that they're ten hours away, not in front of me, not on the street below my window, as the computer screen makes it seem.

Whipping out a burner phone, I text Ryker the information so he can alert Wells. I wonder if that will keep him from coming for me. *God, I hope not.* As I'm lamenting over the idea that Wells might abandon his expedition to catch me and instead seek revenge on those who have been viciously hunting me like wild game, a news story scrolling across the home page of one of my laptops stabs me in the chest like a bolt of lightning. Breathless, I hit the play button to hear the familiar Ohio reporter deliver the story.

“We have just received reports that world-renowned neurosurgeon and beloved community icon of Royal Oaks, Ohio, Dr. Thomas Kingston, has died at the age of sixty-eight. Dr. Kingston suffered a stroke in April of last year, a devastation in the healthcare industry, where he set the pace and delivered happy outcomes on cases others wouldn't even touch. Aside from the reeling in the medical community, the citizens of Royal Oaks have been mourning his suffering these past months, just as we will all be grieving his loss. The family is asking for discretion and privacy while they make arrangements but will be releasing a statement in the coming days.”

Jesus, Dad. Oh my God.

My hands shake so violently that it takes three attempts to dial my mother, who doesn't answer, even after several tries. It's a burner, but she

knows I left. She'd be glued to her phone, awaiting my call.

That means one of two things.

She's so distraught that she didn't hear it ring.

Or this is a fake news story to lure me out of my hole.

It's so fucked up that I have to think like that, and yet it's a glimmer of hope that my screwy life may mean my father is still alive.

It could also mean the lunatics trying to kill me have my mom.

Fuck.

It takes me all of four minutes to pack my shit and get on the road.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



WELLS

“Your girl sent a text,” Ryker says after I swipe the Answer button.

With my heart thrashing in my chest, I wipe the sweat from my brow bone, certain she’d only contact him if she was in trouble. “Go ahead.”

After a beat, he clears his throat. “*Tell Wells Mordred is Deidre and Aunt Maureen.*”

Another detail I didn’t realize Ivy knew—that her hits were ordered by someone who goes by the name of Mordred. I mull over the idea that it could be O’Reilly’s wife and half-sister conspiring together. They both have motive—kids who could’ve been considered for the seat. Although Deidre’s son isn’t blood relation so that would’ve been a stretch, and Maureen’s kids aren’t old enough. Plus, she’s born from O’Reilly’s mother with another man, not part of the O’Reilly bloodline, so again, a stretch. Still, we’ve considered this angle before, but with so many people in opposition to Ivy rising out of the shadows to seize the power, the list was long, and neither woman pulled ahead in suspicion. They’d be the closest to tasting the power and swallowing the bitterness of its loss though. It fits, and Ivy wouldn’t flippantly suggest it without a valid lead.

“That’s all?” I ask.

“Yep.” Ryker’s tone is curt, coated in a tension I find surprising. I’d say he’s second-guessing his decision to let her go, but that may be my own coloring of the situation.

“Got her number for me?”

“Texting it now,” he says.

“Thanks, man.” I end the call and immediately dial Ivy’s burner.

It rings endlessly, so I assume she’s already disassembled it and thrown it

away. She's been so smart with every minuscule detail; it's impossible not to be in awe even though it's to our detriment. Since I can't reach her, I vet the ladies while Ty and Gage do the same, and Liam hunts for Ivy's accommodations. We're still an hour out from Oklahoma. I doubt Ivy is in immediate danger there. She must've found something we missed or seen something on the security footage from the jeweler. Otherwise, the message would've been more urgent.

"Tom," Ty rasps in the seat beside me, his voice thick with a film of panic. Slack-jawed, he turns his laptop toward me. Flashing on the screen is an announcement of Tom's passing. "Do you think?" He's asking if I think it's real or if I believe it's a ploy to propel Ivy to show herself.

"I don't know." I lift my phone and jerk my head toward Liam and Gage. "Fill them in while I call Natasha."

The never-ending ring resounds like a death march against my eardrum. Natasha always answers, and with Ivy missing, not even grief would keep her from picking up. My mind leaps to the worst, which is also the most likely. This is a tool to coax Ivy out, and Tom and Natasha will be the pawns to drive it home.

Liam's eyes snap to mine, bloodshot and anxious. "What do we do? We can continue to Brass City. She might not see this until tomorrow. I'm fairly certain she's staying in a small inn near your childhood home, but I'm not a hundred percent. The drive from the hangar is fifty minutes, so it could take us until sunup to get her."

My mind bounds through all the options. As disconnected as I've felt from my Little Storm, I can feel her now. The connection between her and Tom has always been a palpable force—a bond transforming the molecules of the air with its sticky energy into a rope of unified thought, one that tethers them together. It all unfurls before me, like that twining somehow extends itself to draw me into their web.

"Ryker said she'd be watching surveillance footage. She has to have seen the news article. She'd have called her mom first and jumped to the same conclusion we have." I weave my fingers into my hair, apprehension rushing through me. "There's no way she'd just sit tight."

"Agreed," Liam says. "This is exactly the kind of thing I taught her. It's what I'd use—her piece of cheese. She has to know that, but she'd be too enticed by it."

"Maybe," Ty groans, his voice strained and raw. The composure he so

often leans into is slipping through his fingers. “But wouldn’t that give her a reason to wait? She’d fucking contact us if she was moving on, right? If she’s seen the jeweler’s footage, she’s gotta know we’re close. She went through all the trouble to string us along and even sent the tip. Tell me she wouldn’t fucking sprint headfirst into this goddamn trap without us!” He shoves his laptop to the ground, his head dropping into his hands as the clatter slices the stale air.

“She’s still unsure about us,” I mutter to no one in particular. “Yes, she knows it could be a trap, but she’ll go anyway, unwilling to bank on us. Without hesitation, she’ll risk her life for both Tom and Natasha.”

Gage paces with a growl, undoubtedly envisioning the nightmare unfolding before us. His eyes are heavy-lidded and shaded with dark purplish circles. None of us have slept in days—or really a month and a half. And the peace that seemed to be in our grasp moments ago was just shattered. “We gotta make a call, Chief. Oklahoma or Ohio?”

Fuck. I’m so desperate to reach her, to clutch those wispy strands of hope floating between us, that in my cloudy haze, I nearly make the wrong decision in the hopes of holding her tonight. *Nearly.* I know my girl. She doesn’t sit quietly and wait. She shakes the pond.

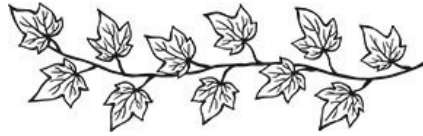
“Ohio,” I direct. “She’ll go to Tom’s treatment center first—Shady Pines. Gage, inform the pilot. Liam, monitor every security camera in Brass City and see if we can get a handle on what she’s driving or which route she’s taking. Ty, check flights from airports on the way. It’s a fourteen-hour drive. She probably won’t find one that makes sense, but let’s rule it out. I’ll call O’Reilly.”

I’m coming, Little Storm. Hang on, baby.

I swallow a breath of dread. We’re no longer racing against Ivy or the clock.

We’re neck and neck with her killers.

CHAPTER THIRTY



IVY

All I see is red.

Somewhere in my mind, I know this is fruitless. Barreling toward my executioners is an ass-backward strategy. But my father risked his life for me every day. And my mother doesn't belong anywhere near this world.

So, I steer toward the treatment center, Shady Pines. It's fuzzy and fast, and my gut is devising resolutions without my brain's consent. The margins of said resolutions are frayed and tattered and stained in various shades of crimson.

Grave and threatening calamities color everything darker.

My mother is missing. I contacted our housekeeper, Gertie, at the crack of dawn. She's quiet and kindhearted, fancying herself a silent fairy who flies in the background, magically granting our wishes from the shadows. Gertie is the one who inspired my baking hobby. Years of pastries and pies miraculously appearing on our countertop to either celebrate momentous occasions or lament disquieting ones revealed the enchantment sugary warmth could provide. I've never heard her speak much above a whisper.

Until this morning.

She wailed hysterically, claiming my mother had vanished into thin air.

It required some finagling, but armed with Gertie's timeline, I hacked into the city's traffic cameras a couple of hours ago and found the assholes who had taken my mother.

They're holding her in a dilapidated warehouse on the outskirts of town. The clarity on the video was questionable as I watched the second vehicle glide into the parking lot, but I suspect my dad may be there too.

I texted the information to Ryker—address, license plates, grainy captor

descriptions, and my tentative plans. He promised me he'd relay it to Wells and then proceeded to text me a slew of expletives and commands, which could've been summed up in a simple *stay the fuck out of there*. When I eventually blew him off after assuring him I had it all under control, I acquired a deeper empathy for Rena because he called me incessantly until I dismantled another burner. My father had twenty in my bag. He's a genius. I've peeled through about half of them—all so I could circumvent the domineering men in my life.

I tried to hack into the Shady Pines' security cameras to assure myself my father wasn't there, but the whole system is down. And when I called, they adamantly declared they'd been advised by legal counsel not to divulge any information regarding Dr. Kingston.

My father.

What in the actual fuck?

My rage has sought solace in plans concocted through silent seething, in flames swallowing the hollowness of betrayal, in breadcrumbs scattered for the ravenous loved ones who mirrored traitors.

Fury from behind a curtain, like the Great and Powerful Oz.

Today, the veil tears.

I'm swaddled in a lung-suffocating bulletproof vest and adorned head to toe with weapons, like a psychotic assassin. And you know, I hope they see me fucking coming because if I'm going to unload a mag of rage into someone, I want them looking me in my eyes when I'm doing it.

Like I'm a badass gangster.

Yeah, that's what I'm telling myself to pump up for the impending wrath, but I'm actually just a girl who grew up with pigtailed braids and family dinners and a healthy interest in superhero movies.

I'm not a killer.

I'm scared out of my wits.

But for the two people who devoted their lives to shroud me in a protective cocoon, even though I'm still pissed as all get-out at my mother, I'll become one.

I'll sell that part of my soul to keep theirs intact—an aberration from the skittery career plans Celeste and I cooked up. The life of a gallery owner billows out more like a hazy delusion than an achievable aspiration.

But erasing myself, hacking into security systems, and laying traps for the country's most savage triggermen?

An even greater crackbrained hallucination.

How is this my fucking life?

I'm confident Wells will swoop in and rescue my mother. The riled hit men trying to kill me won't anticipate that. They'll expect me to show up at my father's treatment facility.

I've always hated disappointing people, so off I go.

The ground is blanketed in a heaping sheet of snow, thanks to a storm that rolled through yesterday. It adds a chilling backdrop to the death trap I'm trudging toward. The slush-slogged roads are slippery, but the all-wheel-drive Porsche Cayenne Turbo I bought has both speed and traction, so there's that.

Slowing to a crawl near Shady Pines, I scope out the vehicles and immediately identify three in question—a beefy SUV, a crossover utility car, and a scraggly coupe, which has clearly seen better days. It isn't so much the makes or models roiling my nerves; it's the abhorrent horror show lurking within them.

All at once, their bloodthirsty eyes land on me—the coveted guest of honor.

A sacrificial lamb.

In a bizarre out-of-body experience, I flash a caustic megawatt grin and offer an audacious, full-finger wave.

This is the fuzziness I was referring to—the exploits my brain isn't weighing in on.

Goaded taunts hurled at a firing squad.

The black SUV is the first to rally the resolve. A brief rotation of chunky tires.

Quickly jerking to a zealous charge.

And I'm gone, bulldozing through the goopy brown snow, the treads of my tires working overtime to procure the needed traction, windows sprayed and splattered with sludge.

Three rabid hunters are blazing a snow-laden trail in my wake.

But they don't know these roads like I do.

I swerve around a parked car, narrowly avoiding another charging at me as I white-knuckle the steering wheel for a sharp turn. After a short stint on the main road, zipping between a minivan and a sedan, one of my shadows—the battered coupe—fishtails into a snowbank. I glance in my rearview mirror and tsk.

We've barely gone two miles, dumbass.

One down.

Buckle up, motherfuckers.

Daddy didn't only train me to loot people's secrets. He taught me how to handle a damn car. My rear wheels sputter, showers of muck raining down like a fuck-off shield.

The SUV revs in aggression and impatiently weaves to edge out the pickup truck beside me, but that's not where I'm going. I jump the median, yank the emergency brake, and spin to face the opposite direction with a judder. Then, I flip that cocksucker off, wrench the gearshift, hammer the gas pedal, and veer right toward the highway. I'd prefer to lead them onto a country road with less innocents, but the snowplows decided the back roads weren't a priority, so I'm opting not to sacrifice speed and strand myself like a sitting snowman.

Shifting with a jerk, I trek up the on-ramp, sirens blaring in the distance and a chorus of horns fading. My little stunt, switching directions, left the dickwads quite a ways back in the slush. Whizzing in and out of rush-hour traffic, I put as much distance as possible between us while assuring they don't lose me.

That's not the goal.

I bolt in between several more cars before sliding smoothly into the right lane and careening down the exit ramp to the next town over—less people here, and like the west end of Royal Oaks, where my mom is being held, there are some abandoned buildings.

My tires squeal while shifting roughly on a turn, filling me with confidence that even my moronic shadows will estimate my location. There's an old school here, used for a haunted fair in the fall, but eerily empty now. The icy oaks reach their fingered branches out in warning, but I'm in too deep to heed it.

I tuck the car in tight behind an area of the building that juts out but leave it running in case I need to flee. The red and white taillights serve as a beacon, ricocheting off the sparkling trees to reflect onto the windows of the school in an optical illusion of my positioning.

Taking out the 6.5 Creedmoor sniper rifle with incendiary rounds, I perch it on my rolled-down window, look through the scope, and wait. The crisp air stings my eyes, cheeks, and nose as my breath imparts a daunting puff of white. My angle will grant me a glimpse of their approach before they have a grasp on my precise placement.

Suspended in a tinderbox of ticking seconds.

The SUV is first on the scene. The crunch of its tires through the wet, crinkly snow reaches my ears seconds prior to the sighting. The waning sunlight bounces off the icy landscape, shimmering a stream of white illumination onto the windshield.

Two tatted monsters. Guns drawn. Mean mugs.

Gas tank on the driver's side.

I aim and fire.

And rocket to the other side of the car from the blast.

Fuck me. My ribs. My head.

Bonked and bloody.

Dazed.

Shaking myself free from the fog descending upon me, I shove the passenger door open, climb out in an ungraceful flop to my knees, and conceal my body behind the Porsche. The crossover utility vehicle pulls in, and I lift my rifle again, bracing it on the trunk.

I'm thrust backward with a stabbing jolt before I fire.

Leveled to the crunchy snow.

Shot.

Fuck.

My lungs burn.

I frantically check myself. Frozen fingers swiping and patting over my trembling body.

The vest. Shot on top of the vest.

Jesus, Dad, you saved my life again.

Clambering my way back to a stooping stance, I ignore the fiery sting licking at my chest and ribs, peek around the bumper, raise my gun, and aim at the gas tank on the crossover, which is still inching toward me.

Another monster. On foot. In pursuit.

I shoot the bastard, then the gas tank.

The explosion thrusts me backward into the building and bushes, my rifle flying in a separate direction.

Wrecked.

The sky topples, crystal branches pulsing in anger, icicles plummeting like daggers.

Crushed.

My blood chills in my veins. Shivers cascade down my spine, racking

through my limbs. Fingers aching.

Beaten.

And the monstrous beast?

Ferocity drips off him like the melting snow.

Vicious and indomitable.

He's still coming for me.

Hunted.

His blurred silhouette dashes toward me as the clouds dance. The dirty white ground, glimmering trees, and wavy air all quiver around me.

I'm prey.

I pluck out the pistol stowed in my waistband. My hand trembles as I flip the safety off and lift it from my slumped and flattened frame.

My eyes play tricks on me. The snow-capped trees and blazing fires and haunted schoolyard whirl around him.

I can't shoot that man.

His resolute gaze shackles me.

Captured.

Harsh, jagged breaths. Sharp and heavy.

Warm, roaring waves break over me—no, that can't be. I'm confused.

It's winter. Freezing. Ohio.

A whistling breeze and blood flow assault my hearing.

His lips move, but my ears won't cooperate. I don't know what he's saying. He gently lowers my gun, and the brush of his fingertips burns like acid against my frigid skin. My head shakes vehemently in protest.

"I've got you, baby." His gritty, sandpaper rasp curls around me like a ripple in a pond.

"No," I mutter. The scents of sulfur and winter, blood and death choke me so my objection swirls in with the smoke.

He ignores me, scooping me into his arms and saddling me around him like he's strapping on one of those front-wearing infant papooses. His lips caper against my matted hair. "You're okay, Little Storm. Hold tight while I get you out of here."

Little Storm. Wells?

"You came," I cry into the warmth of his neck, my eyes vibrating beneath the lids as he hoists and jostles my limp form—a hunk of flesh and bones and wonky muscles spurning proper function.

My vision may be hazy, but I'm drunk on the husk of his voice and the

cushion of his arms.

The scent of his sugar and scotch—an aroma infused into my marrow.

“Of course I did, Ives,” he croons while ducking behind a tree, melding my bulky, battle-clad form to his.

The chilled bark scratches my scalp, and blood trickles down my icy cheek, the copper taste coating my chafed lips as he fires several shots.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

They're still coming for me.

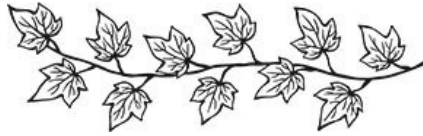
“To the ends of the earth, remember?” he asks.

I remember.

To the ends of the earth.

Maybe even to the depths of Hell.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



WELLS

“I’ve got her,” I say into my comm, informing the guys Ivy is in my arms.

I would’ve had her sooner, but we had to take out a van barreling toward her, along with two bastards who jumped out of it while she was blowing up the crossover.

Two more vehicles full of assassins swarm the eerie schoolyard. My crew waits patiently at their posts for them to unload. With three cars set ablaze, our marks are more inclined to ditch theirs and attempt to overrun Ivy on foot. Although I’m grateful she shared her plans with Ryker so we could get to her faster, I’m livid that she threw herself into this before confirming we had arrived. When we realized she was leading her pursuers here, we entered through a back way, which means as far as they’re concerned, she’s still alone.

A sitting duck.

That misconception will render them bold enough to take foolhardy initiatives, which is precisely what we want.

It’s evident by the carpooling that several of these assholes are working together, but they aren’t the kumbaya, sharing types. No doubt they’re planning to kill Ivy and then fight to the death to be the last man standing to claim their millions.

That egocentric greed enhances our advantage. We’re battling individuals, and they’re warring against a team.

“Eyes on nine tangos,” Ty reports. He has overwatch from an abandoned office building across the street. Perched on the roof, he’s our sniper—in position to eliminate the majority of our marks.

“Nine tangos confirmed,” Gage says, lying prone on a two-foot snow

mound at the corner of the D side of the school.

With limited time to map out the schoolyard, we've reverted to ABCD nomenclature for the sides of the building—the front being A and traveling clockwise around the facility for B, C, D. Ty's overwatch position affords him a clear view of A while Liam, Gage, and I man the other three sides.

"Announce your kills," I order while the wind whistles a haunting tune and Ivy's frozen lips nestle into my neck.

Ty's sitreps pipe through the comm. "Tango one down. Tango two down."

"Tango three down," Gage grinds out.

A cacophonous din follows. Screams and curses and gunfire.

"Tango four down," Ty continues. "Tango five down."

Entwined around me, Ivy's chilled body is slack as I await the *all clear*. Listless. She's suffered a concussion, probably severe bruising to her ribs and chest as well. I'm hoping that's the extent of it. The vest she's wearing is level-three body armor—a gift from Tom, I assume. But even that isn't enough to prevent damage to her tiny frame. I slit the fucker's throat after he blindly fired at her from behind a tree. The gurgles from him choking on his own blood were only a small consolation.

Ivy's eyes are glazed, breathing shallow, hair matted and bloody from a head wound. There's a deceptive dusting of white powder coating her limbs, as though she were making snow angels in this deserted schoolyard. But the mix of crimson and rust swirling in that snowy powder decimates the wistful first glance and lends a haunting horror-house vibe to the angel in my arms. She took a beating, but my fierce Little Storm raged like an unforgiving cyclone, slaughtering about a quarter of the fuckers on her own.

"Tango six down," Liam chimes from the C side, where our truck is parked.

The strength with which I have Ivy pressed against this massive oak is surely uncomfortable, but it's necessary to ensure there's no shot on her while I fire at anyone approaching.

"Tango seven down," Ty trills, the raucous clamoring in the background finally diminishing.

Gage's gruff tenor follows seconds later. "Tango eight down."

Ty's tone deepens an octave, peppered with concern. "Tango nine unaccounted."

"Tango nine unaccounted on Delta side," Gage confirms.

“You smell like a memory,” Ivy warbles in a sleepy drawl, her nose nuzzling my jaw, apparently oblivious to the bloodbath encircling her.

“Not a memory, Ives. I’ve got you. Stay awake.” As the words fall from my lips, Liam’s voice announces in my ear, “Tango nine unaccounted on Charlie side,” and my gut wrenches.

The snow crunches as a scraggly figure emerges from the shadows, mere feet from my position. My pulse ratchets higher as I smash Ivy into the tree and fire at his face—a kill shot between the eyes. A shower of gore and bone, flesh and brain matter, rains down on us both.

“Tango nine down,” I say, clutching Ivy’s trembling body more securely.

She isn’t screaming, not externally anyway. But she saw it, and she’s in shock, somewhat aware that she’s blanketed with the insides of another human. Nothing prepares a soul for that. A string of bleats and whines stutter out of her.

Fuck, I never wanted this for her. But it’s where we are, and there’s no way out, except straight through the carnage.

“Alpha side clear, Chief,” Ty reports.

Gage’s voice resounds through the comm next. “Delta side clear, Chief.”

“Charlie side clear, Chief,” Liam finishes.

I scrutinize the area with a final once-over. “Bravo side clear. Move out.”

With that, I dash to Ivy’s Porsche, snatch her go bag, pluck her rifle out of a bush, and sprint toward the C side. Stationing Ivy and myself behind the coverage of the school, I coil around to launch a grenade at the Porsche, demolishing any evidence of her presence here in a blast that bellows with a tumult of clanging metal and shattered glass. The whoosh of flames sunders the smoky air.

When I climb in the back seat of the truck with Ivy straddling my lap, no one speaks a word. She’s a harrowing sight—cloaked in the remnants of life and death and her journey through Hell. Ty sits beside me in the back, Gage shotgun with Liam behind the wheel. He peels out of the parking lot with a jolt, sirens blaring in the near distance.

While I’m whispering soothing words into Ivy’s ear, Ty reaches a hand over, squeezing reassurance into her thigh. I’m sure he simply needs to feel her, to know we really have her, but she pays him no mind. Racking sobs rumble from her chest as she clasps her hands into the hair at the nape of my neck. She’s stuck, suspended in the terror that ensued around her.

We drive straight to our safe house—one we’ve had in this area for years

because of her. She needs medical attention, but we can't take her to a hospital when she's doused in blood and brains. I cart her straight to the bathroom attached to a bedroom. She clings to me as I shimmy our vests off. Her hand never abandons the grip on me, even as I shuck our clothes, tossing them beyond the door for the guys to burn.

Flipping the nozzle to hot, I enfold her quivering frame into mine. My fierce girl seems so small here, so fragile. The tremors in her limbs and her chattering teeth scream how rattled and flustered she is, but her sapphire beauties are glossy and vacant. Like her mind ventured on one of her vacations.

Split between two worlds.

I lift her into the shower, and she sags against me, sluggish, while I scrub over her bruised and battered skin, a crimson stream puddling around our feet. Her ribs are tender and already varnished with purple-and-black contusions that extend to her back, and her left breast is an angry, mottled red. She winces as my fingers peruse the marks, but still, her gaze is absent.

There are blood-encrusted scrapes and cuts mantling her scalp, so I gingerly work my fingers through the tangles, sifting bits of my kill from her knots.

"You're okay, Little Storm. It's all over, baby."

She doesn't respond, her empty eyes fastened to something out of reach, some unattainable destination of peace.

I keep talking, hoping my voice will penetrate her haze and bring her back to me. "You did so good. My strong, brilliant girl."

And here, in the heavy steam of the shower, after a month and a half of anguish and days of trepidation, I permit myself a brief breakdown because, *Christ*, she's here. Traumatized but here. And so damn breathtaking.

I brace my hand on the dewy tiles behind her, a shuddering breath billowing out as still-vivid fears prick my eyes and drip to blend with the shower drizzle. "*Fuck*, I missed you so much, Ives."

Her ocean blues, spilling like a sea at high tide, snap to mine, loosening the knot in my chest a smidgen. "My mother?"

"Safe," I assure her, skimming my thumb over her bloodstained cheekbone. "Your dad too. They're at the hospital. We'll go there soon."

"My dad. Good. I thought ..." She scans my face, then my hair, unkempt and still saturated with particles of her assailant, before she locks eyes with me again, her pupils blown and as wild as her matted strands. "I ... killed

people. Lots of people.”

“Five,” I tell her honestly. She killed four inside the vehicles and one on foot. Glossing over our reality won’t stabilize her shock. Owning it is the only way through the fog.

She slumps against me with a whimper. That brittle facade she’s been wearing shatters into a flimsy and feeble humanness. It’s what makes Ivy so unstoppable, so awe-inspiringly formidable. She recognizes value in life, her own and others, and crusades for it. That’s why she lured me to chase her—to prove my humanity, to convince herself of the authenticity of our marriage in the face of duplicity. It’s why she risked her life for a woman she believes betrayed her—because it didn’t erase the love, sacrifice, or worth that same woman had bestowed upon her. And it’s why she’s grieving the deaths of these monsters—because there’s no room left for their redemption.

Her fingers crawl up my chest, trembling as they pluck something out of my hair. She leers at it, turning it over, much like she inspects her Skittles. So innocent and childlike, bleary eyes brimming with both torment and wonder.

“The guy you shot,” she says. It’s not phrased like a question, more like an astonished observation, but I confirm her suspicions anyway.

“Yes.” My hands return to her hair, sudsing the shampoo. “We need to get ourselves clean. Can you help me?”

She nods, wordlessly cupping her hand for me to squirt a dollop of shampoo into it. Slathering it between her palms, she massages her fingers into my hair, nails scraping along my scalp, picking out the bits of gore and flesh as I do the same for her until the remnants of our kills swirl into the drain.

Dragging her against me as the water drips down her splotchy face, I cradle her chin. “Your trial—you passed. It’s all over. I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t,” she says, shaking her head. “We don’t do that. You showed up for me, saved my parents, and I see it all in your eyes. Like you said, it’s over.”

My lips brush against hers with the contrite apology she won’t let me voice. She opens for me, her tongue tangling with mine in a desperate plea.

“I love you so much,” I rasp into her fervid mouth. “So goddamn much, Little Storm.”

“I love you too, Chief,” she whispers, and my cock twitches against her stomach at her gravelly use of my title.

Turning off the water, I wrap her delicately in a towel and carry her out to

the bed. She grimaces while I warily comb through her hair, flinching from the pain every now and then.

I sift through her bag and find some comfortable clothes, but when I remove her towel, she seizes my wrist.

“Fuck me,” she begs.

My knuckles sweep over her cheek, relishing the silky heat of her skin. “You’re hurt, Ivanna. You need to go to the hospital.”

Her heavy sapphires stare up at me from beneath the fringe of her dark lashes. “I need my husband more, Wells. I need you to take it away—the nightmares, his blown-off face, the terror and emptiness and loneliness. *Please*. Remind me what I’m fighting for. Remind me of us.”

Fucking hell, the power this woman has over me is terrifying. It’s not even sexual—my concern for her has drowned my libido a bit. But I can’t deny her anything. Not when she’s pleading like that.

I whisk her sticky, damp hair off her forehead. “I’ll make you come now, and after you’re thoroughly examined and the doctor assures me you’re fit for any and all exploits, I’ll fuck you.” Planting a kiss on her button nose, I add, “Slow and gentle though. I’ll make love to my wife.”

My girl prefers it rough, but it might be a stint before I can tie her up and rail her.

She nods in agreement, stretching out on the comforter, so I lie on the bed and draw the nipple of her uninjured breast into my mouth, scraping my teeth over the pebbled pink beauty while gliding my fingers through her folds. She isn’t wet, but that’s to be expected. I circle my finger over her clit. Her eyes are chained to mine in a deferral of time, reality, and circumstance so we can simply live in one another’s arms without the shrouding of death for this transient spell.

After a few moments, she’s drenched, thighs spread wide in avid invitation.

“Such a greedy girl. This pretty pussy is sopping for me. Whose are you, Ivanna?”

She hums. “Yours.”

Christ, I’ve waited so long to hear that again.

“Mine,” I agree.

My cock stiffens with the claiming, jabbing at her hip bone as I continue massaging her clit. Her bruised, battered, and pliant body awakens. Writhing. Moaning. The urge to taste her grows to a ravenous craving, so I slither down

to the ground, plant myself between her thighs, and wield my tongue and fingers to bring her home.

“Come for me, baby,” I order.

She falls apart, panting my name and shattering before me in the most stunning bow of ecstasy I’ve ever witnessed.

“That’s my good girl,” I praise, lapping up her climax with a growl. “Such a good fucking girl. So goddamn sweet.”

She whimpers, afterglow highlighting her rosy complexion, eyes swirling with both bliss and hunger as I crawl back up and slide my fingers, glistening and coated with her arousal, into her mouth.

She sucks feverishly, her feral blues rollicking between mine. “I want your cum, Chief. Dripping out of me or in my mouth. I need to taste you.”

Jesus Christ, she’s trying to fucking kill me. My title on her lips, her begging for my cum, to taste me—I can barely contain myself from blowing all over her stomach. Libido restored.

“You want my cum, Little Storm? My filthy slut needs to taste me?”

She nods emphatically. “Please.”

I guide her hand along my cock. With as little strain to her as possible, we work together to bring me to my peak, which only takes a few beats. Her other hand kneads my balls, a zing aching within them until I hover above her, my dick sliding into the rapture of her lips and tongue.

“Jesus, you’re a goddamn fantasy, Ives. So beautiful,” I trill.

She swirls and licks and sucks me deep into her throat, gagging and slurping with a prideful gleam as I shoot over a month’s worth of yearning into her warmth.

“Fuck, baby. My perfect girl. Swallow me down. Every drop.”

She obeys with a sultry purr, and I flop to the bed beside her, smashing my mouth to hers in a kiss that is less gentle than it should be, but this woman owns my soul, and I can’t restrain myself from showing her. The cocktail of our mixed arousals glazes my tongue in a sweet and salty tang of sedate possessiveness.

I mold her body to mine, basking in a too-fleeting cuddle before eventually peeling away to dress. Once we’re both presentable, she climbs up my body, hanging on to me like a needy spider monkey.

“All the guys are anxious to see you,” I tell her.

She doesn’t let go, so I carry her out to them, hooked on to me. When she spots Liam, she gasps and cries, trembling in my arms once again, and like a

parent handing over a sick child, I have no choice but to pass her into his embrace. She sobs into his neck as he holds her, and I let my jealousy thaw into the tenderness of what this is. Ivy is mine, but her huge heart loves these men. They're part of her as much as they're part of me.

And she's engraved on their makeup, like she's engraved on mine.

After our release from the SEALs, we were so wounded, so callous and brittle. From the moment we found her, Ivy was a symbol of hope for all of us at a time when we had nothing but each other. First, she represented a life of aspirations and fortune. But soon, we fell for her smile and antics and vivacity. Her sharp wit and feisty spirit. Captivating even from afar. She meant something different to each of us over the years, but she flourished before our eyes until she wasn't merely a symbol of a better life; she was the embodiment of dreams. Of more. Especially once she was standing among us.

They might not realize it, but Ivy is the healing balm, opening us all up to a life with love. Because of her, they may finally be ready to let someone penetrate the armor they've carefully constructed after years of unfathomable loss so they can each enjoy a connection, like Ivy and I share.

Liam palms her head, his eyes closing as he breathes her in. His lips nuzzle her temple with calming words that don't boil my blood because I know she needs to hear them as much as he needs to voice them. "I'm okay. I'm so sorry, Ivy. You did so good. So strong and smart, baby girl."

"I thought you were ... *unalived*," she whimpers against him, seemingly unwilling to validate the grief she's endured with the word *dead*.

"I know." He strings his fingers through her wet hair, gingerly, aware of her abrasions. "Fuck, I'm so proud of you. The way you funneled money from our accounts, strung us along, and found your parents. You're brutal."

She hooks her arms snuggler behind his neck with a wince and a sniff. "I love you, Liam. You're my family, forever and always."

His eyes flit to mine as he says, "Right back at ya, High Society. You're worth so much more."

And suddenly, his nickname for her makes sense. It isn't that she was raised with money; it's because, like the highest denomination of chips at a casino—a high society—she's worth more than anyone. Not monetarily, but simply because she's better than all of us. He doesn't love her like I do, but he does love her. After a lifetime of him never being welcomed into a family, Ivy adopted Liam to be part of hers. That's a gift, a bond they'll always

share. And while the thought of his lips on hers still evokes visions of me slowly dismembering him, I can accept that they're family. *My family.*

Ty swoops in, and again like a parent passing a child, Liam places her into his arms as tears cascade over her flushed cheeks.

Ty hugs her snugly against him. "Fuck, Freckles. I missed you so much. You went all Lara Croft on me."

She giggles against his shoulder. "Low-hanging fruit, as always. But I heard you had overwatch, like Dane from *Navy Seals*. We could start calling you God." He laughs and kisses her hair as she continues, "I missed you too, Ty. Thanks for showing up for me."

He tightens his hold, one arm snaked around her waist, the other squeezing her neck. "That's not a reason to thank me, Ivy. You're ours. We'll always be here for you. Always show up. In fact, I doubt you'll ever be out of our sight again."

She puffs a breath of relief with that astute promise, no longer caged by the idea of us hovering, but comforted by the bond.

Gage is gruff and irritated, awaiting his turn, peeling her away from Ty with an impatient grumble. Her *pint-sized* fingers latch on to his shirt.

"That shit was fucked up, Ivy, but legendary. You're my hero, girl."

"Look at you, *pussy-worshipping*, Big Guy," she teases with a wry grin.

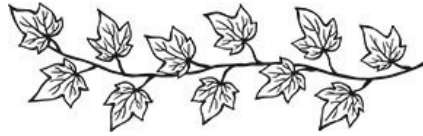
Gage chuckles. "Let's just say, you've renewed my faith, angel. You won't ever run from us again. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," she quips.

My cock jerks angrily at the attention and honorific she pays him, but he promptly passes her back, and she doesn't hesitate to lock her limbs around me.

"I'm yours, Wells," she whispers, as though she understands how difficult it was for me to release her to them. "Always yours," she coos, falling limp in my embrace.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



IVY

While others have often viewed my mind—the way it slips away and swallows time—as my greatest disadvantage, I’ve always appreciated how intrinsically *me* it was.

A glitch hiding greatness.

My father helped me identify the beauty in the very part of me the world labeled broken.

That alone is a gift everyone should be so fortunate to experience. Someone who drags their finger across the craggiest edges of who we are, and instead of wincing at the jaggedness, they marvel at the spectacular sharpness.

The happenstance of being raised by a neuroscientist who could circumvent my brain’s misfiring and mold it into a strength—a weapon that literally saved my life—is a blessing I’m still trying to wrap my head around.

I never grasped the darkness in my mind because he tinted it with so much light.

Those little getaways my brain took were cottony, wispy dreams on the breeze.

Dandelion wishes.

Shooting stars.

Grains of sand.

Butterfly kisses.

Elusive and breathtaking gems pocketed away, replacing that which couldn’t be held.

Not in the same way others hold it anyway.

But right now, my mind—my *misfiring*—is a prison.

A black hole hauling me under.

I'm not sure how the world expects me to react to the past few hours, or days, or weeks.

Months.

Lifetime.

To being stolen and given away as a baby.

To being raised in the warmth of a loving home that also served as a training ground for who I truly am.

To falling in love with the man hired to hunt me for a cabal I'm the heir to run, in exchange for millions. To marrying that same man and discovering he is like a son to my father—a father who is a hostage to his malfunctioning body.

To being gaslighted into believing none of it was real by the very people I love most in this world, all in the name of testing my strengths.

To being hunted and chased and shot at.

To being rescued by the men I cherish, men I feared had betrayed me. One whom I'm madly in love with. Another whom I watched *die* after he confessed feelings for me. All four are chained to my soul like limbs I can't walk without.

It's all still such a mindfuck.

As I swirl around the edges of this black hole—the blown-to-bits face of a hired assassin intent on ending me, the monster surging toward me while I prepared my rifle to take him out, the loneliness that etched itself on my abandoned heart—it's these four men who are anchoring me so I don't fall into the abyss.

But I'm still fucking pissed. And I'm not sure what to do with that.

The safe house is forty-five minutes from the hospital, so the guys are currently briefing me on the finer points of my trial while we drive. It's such an info dump that I know I'm not soaking it all in. Some of the details float off into nothingness. Maybe I'll catch them later.

What I do snare, is a cognizance of the day Liam was shot. KORT had sent men to retrieve me, but due to the leak in the O'Reilly family with Deidre and Maureen, a couple of hit men were there for me too. That was the scuffling I heard in the woods after *Mordred's* guy shot Liam. KORT apprehended me by knocking me out, but Wells helped deliver me to the hospital, where I was drugged. He was pissed off but resigned that it was the least of all the evils awaiting me. I didn't imagine his voice or the fact that he

was my masked man from so long ago.

I'm glad to know that the shot on Liam had nothing to do with the trial. While Wells was out with Ty and Gage, he'd gotten the call from KORT, alerting him that they'd be taking me when I returned to the house with Liam. Wells, Ty, Gage, and the men from KORT had unexpectedly walked into the ambush Deidre and Maureen set up. Thankfully, they had arrived in time to save Liam's life.

I hear the regret in their arguments as they rationalize all the reasons this trial was what they deemed safest for me, all the reasons my mother agreed, and all the anguish it caused them despite knowing I was physically guarded. My heart felt so forgiving when I gripped on to each of them at the safe house, so grateful that they had shown up and their arms were snug around me again.

It's still there, but the ache is too. The remembrance of begging for my husband and being told he didn't exist. The grief, believing Liam was dead. The devastation of feeling betrayed and forsaken. I may know how to erase myself, but I'm not sure how to erase that pang.

While I silently lament in Wells's lap, they continue cataloging events, including today's rescue. O'Reilly was the one responsible for organizing a team to save my parents, so Wells was free to come for me. Neither of them was hurt beyond bumps and bruises from rough handling, although I'm sure my mother is traumatized.

When we pull into the hospital parking lot, I freeze, refusing to move until my clarity is restored. Their gazes are all trained on me, waiting. I bite my lip, tears welling in my eyes, oscillating between an irresolute anger and beholden love.

"I'm all mixed up. I know I did some shitty things, considering you were all essentially doing as I asked. I wanted this seat, told you I could face the trial, begged you all to believe in me." The first tears of contrition fall. "And I burned our fucking home to the ground, but then again, *you* had sold my life. My most beloved memories." My gaze flits to Wells. "You would've walked into a town you could be killed for returning to, *for me*, though. I wouldn't have asked you to do that had I known."

I whisk the anguish from my cheek as my face heats, my eyes scanning the men gaping at me. "I love you all so much. I have no right to hate you, too, but I do hate what KORT did to me. They may have pitted us against each other, and you all may have suffered, too, but you did it *together*. You

had each other. I was alone. So *fucking* alone.”

It’s evident they aren’t sure how to respond when a jumble of croaked apologies and empathetic murmurs fill the cab of the truck. Wells clutches me against his chest, nose nuzzling my hair with a coarse, remorseful exhale.

I shake my head. “I’m not asking for apologies. I’m asking you to understand that I’m not quite the same. I have no idea how this shaped me, or what I’m feeling, or how to act. Just don’t give up on me.”

“To the ends of the earth,” Wells whispers, his raspy tenor eliciting goose bumps along my neck. “I love you exactly as you are, Little Storm. Always.”

The other three all straighten, mouths slack to counter, but it’s Ty who speaks first, his hand gripping my forearm with a compassionate squeeze. “Fuck no, Freckles. We’d never give up on you, no matter what. You never gave up on us.”

“You *felt* alone,” Gage adds, plainly affronted. “But we *were* fucking there with you for every agonizing minute. Forced to fucking watch with our damn hands tied.”

That response makes me chuckle. Empathy isn’t Gage’s strong suit, but his devotion is clear all the same.

Liam’s brows reach for the heavens, his hazels twinkling beneath. “I’m gonna have to play the I-took-a-fucking-bullet-for-you card, High Society. There’s no walking away for me. Ever.” He tilts his head, arm hooked over the seat while his face scrunches in rumination. “We were all shaped by this, but that which doesn’t kill us ...”

“Makes us stronger,” I finish.

It’s that sentiment propelling me forward as we trek into the hospital. In spite of the fiery sting in my chest and ribs, and the gnawing headache making everything teeter unsteadily, I refuse to be examined until I visit my parents.

My mother bursts into violent sobs the second I cruise through the door. All that anger I was harboring for her dissipates at the display of her pain and relief. *Her love for me.*

I croon a quiet, “It’s okay, Mom. I forgive you,” in her ear, which evokes a more dramatic wailing and a tighter hug.

On the ride here, Wells casually tagged my mother a victim. That candid judgment unraveled my rage toward her. She’s been at the mercy of KORT since I was first cradled in her arms, long before she understood any of this. Her entire motherhood journey has been tainted by wariness and fear and

impossible choices. I can't fault her for agreeing to disconcerting measures to keep me safe and close. It's what my father would have asked of her, which is why she trusted Wells.

Surprisingly, as my father exchanges a sentimental hug with Wells, he seems to comprehend the powerful reunion between my mother and me, his eyes tracking our every movement. The sight of his awareness is so overwhelmingly heartening that when Wells steps away, I launch myself into my father's arms, folding into him like I did when I was a little girl. *His little girl*. His right index finger curls into my sweatshirt, his arm tugging me closer, a gesture requiring vigorous exertion for him—one that has tears flooding my eyes.

He's really here with me.

I don't waste the opportunity, my lips quivering through my deference. "Thank you, Dad. For it all. For everything you taught me, for all the tools you gave me, for the way you and Mom have loved me. I love you both so much. I'm safe, and I passed my trial because you believed in me and because you believed in Wells." My gaze lands on my husband, who's staring back at me with utter adoration. "Thank you for trusting him with me."

My father's glassy eyes flit between Wells and me, and he drones a melodic murmur in approval, the right corner of his mouth twitching with joy. The room—busting at the seams with my mom, the nurses, and my guys—erupts in a cheer, a symphony of rejoicing laughter and applause. I lay my head on his shoulder, snug in my father's lap, spilling the happiest, most grateful tears I've ever shed.

When Dr. Barret arrives—the demented cocksucker who tried to convince me I was stuck in a coma hallucination—insisting I be examined, I snarl. Yep, like a savage beast. I don't give a fuck that he works for The Order and was simply complying with a directive. I hate him.

But Wells and my mother poke and prod until I begrudgingly agree to be checked. Sliding off my father with a kiss on his cheek, I hug my mother and step into the hall, my gaze parking on Daniel O'Reilly.

Ignoring the grumbling doctor, I strut over to O'Reilly, meeting him toe to toe. "You saved my parents."

"Of course I did," he says, emotion swimming in the blues mirroring mine.

"Not of course." I dab at the corner of my eye, collecting the drippings of

my gratitude. I've had so many twisted-up thoughts about him these past couple of months, but that one simple *of course* unkinks them. "I know them taking me, raising me, hiding me is unforgivable in a way, no matter their intent. I've thought a lot about it. You have every right to hate those two people in there for what they stole. A lesser person may have believed they got what they deserved when they were captured and left them there."

Wells hovers to my right. Even in my peripheral vision, it's indisputable that he's antsy, his feet shifting in an eagerness to swoop in and shield me from the hurt here, but I think we both know this is one more swamp I need to trudge through.

I drink in a harsh breath, my lungs burning with the effort. "But seeing their value, knowing how important they are to me, that was the selfless act of a father. So, thank you. I'm honored you're mine." With that, I throw my arms around the man who gave me life and spent his searching for me—never giving up.

He squeezes me back, his tone thick and murky. "Your father did a spectacular job preparing you, Ivy. Your abilities are astounding. The honor is all mine."

Your father. Like his simple *of course*, that speaks volumes.

I release him, and my eyes frolic over his face with a wistful gape, noting his kindhearted vulnerability. "He did," I agree, glancing between the hospital room housing the man who gave me everything he was and the man who wants to hand me all he's built. "He taught me so much more than I ever realized. But there's something to be said about nature. I think you've given me more than I realized too. I look forward to learning from you, Daniel."

He nods, a reverent smile coasting up his ruddy cheeks as I cross over to Wells, who immediately laces his fingers with mine, ushering me to my own hospital room—with *Dr. Evil*.

My injuries aren't serious. My ribs, while severely bruised, aren't broken. It will still be several weeks until they and my sternum are healed, but in an odd turn of events, the good doctor redeems himself by assuring Wells I can resume sexual activity once my headache is gone, according to my own pain threshold. So, that's a go light.

There's not much they can do for the concussion, aside from observation, so once I'm discharged, the guys escort me to an apartment they've been residing in. It's luxurious, as expected from four millionaires, but sterile and devoid of the coziness of our gothic mansion, which has my stomach flip-

flopping like a hooked fish.

They all insist home is wherever the five of us are, and I can't deny how that plucks my heartstrings. In the spirit of old times, they blatantly refuse to answer my questions about what will happen to Deidre and Maureen, about whether I'm still in danger, about where we'll live, and about when Wells and I will be inducted into KORT.

They claim the vagueness is because I need rest, but I'd guess it's due to so much still dangling in the unknown. I don't push it.

Wells orders us Chinese food. We eat and laugh and squeal over hilarious fortunes through a meal that shuns the grim days still saturating us.

Eventually, Wells dims the lights and carries me to the couch to cuddle me on his lap. The other three huddle up around us, on the couch and floor, showering me with smiles and snacks and my choice of rom-coms. I'm not sure life will ever feel settled or stable, but here, in the shelter of my husband's embrace, surrounded by men who provide me with the deepest sense of family, and appeased by the knowledge that my parents are safe and well, my tattered soul is emboldened. It might have been hellfire to get here, but I wouldn't want to be torched with anyone else.



It's been three weeks since Wells scooped me out of the carnage. Three weeks since I reunited with the guys, forgave my mother, and bridged the gorge separating me from the man who shares my blood, Daniel O'Reilly.

Three weeks since I curled up on my father's lap and told him how grateful I was for all he gave me.

And three weeks since he passed away.

The call came in the dark of night. Nightmares played behind my closed lids when the phone rang to extend another. He had suffered another stroke around three a.m. This one claimed his life immediately. The doctors surmised that the stress—of being taken, of my mother being held captive, and of not knowing what my fate was—all mounted to more than his already-strained nervous system could handle.

But my mother insists it was his final heroic act of bravery for our family—letting go because he knew I was safe and where I belonged. Like Eleanor Healy, my birth mother, did. I think she's right. My father had been enduring

his bodily prison from that stroke since last April because he couldn't leave us until he knew we were okay. He's finally free.

My mother shared with me the letter he'd left her in his living will—the one that explained his plans for me and what her role was to be in his absence. He'd been so thorough with the inheritance documents and various other details on how she should go about addressing it in order to push me toward Wells. Some of it had pissed her off, which made me chuckle. We might not share DNA, but my mother unwittingly transferred a spark to me.

The most heartwarming part of his words, though, were the ones reserved for my husband. He'd told my mom that he loved Wells like a son, trusted him, and was rooting for the two of us to find our way to each other because he couldn't imagine any man loving and caring for me better. He'd gone on to say that even if that didn't happen, Wells, Liam, Ty, and Gage were always to be respected for the way they protected me.

My mother admitted there were moments she wasn't Wells's biggest fan simply because he was the face of all she was losing, whether that was fair or not. But in spite of their jagged beginnings, she asked Wells to deliver the eulogy at my father's funeral. To say Wells was honored would be an understatement. He'd been as broken as me the morning of my father's passing, but true his stoic nature, he held himself together, catering to every need my mom and I had. Until that request was extended.

The second my mother shared my father's words, his love, and her hope that Wells would speak on behalf of that relationship, my husband dropped into the chair beside me. A ragged breath shuddered out of him as he buried his face in his hands. Moments later, he dragged me onto his lap, holding me through what I knew was a vanquishing grief for us both.

My father's funeral was unlike anything I'd ever witnessed. People came from all over the world to honor him. I always knew my father was a man who had impacted others in a soul-stirring way, but the stories from patients, from members of The Order, and from neighbors and colleagues were humbling, to say the least. The vocal crowd—which included Rena, Ryker, and Axel showing up for Wells and me—served as a salve on a day that was fraught with ache. It was a standing-room-only, not-a-dry-eye-in-the-place kind of event.

And my husband eulogized the fuck out of him.

Wells was on point, charismatic, and authentic, noting traits about my father and sharing stories that tinged my version of him in a deeper shading.

It was the most beautiful brokenness.

Celeste, Ty, Liam, and Gage shrouded my mother and me in a protective cocoon while we both awed at Wells gifting us with another piece of the great Dr. Thomas Kingston.

His ending words still ring in my head. *“Some might say the measure of a man is by the lives he changes. Some would argue it’s by the mark he leaves on those closest to him—his family, friends, colleagues. And still, others would insist that the truest measure of a man is by his ability to stare into the face of impossible situations, consider every angle, and selflessly lead those under his care through the carnage. Tom was many things to me—my dear friend, my mentor, and my father-in-law—so I can attest to his superiority in all of those areas. And as I peer out at his beautiful wife and daughter and the bursting crowd of patients and friends, colleagues and proteges, I’m in awe. It’s staggering, the impact one man’s life had on so many. No matter how we measure a man, Dr. Thomas Kingston was the gold standard.”*

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but I fell more in love with Wells as he towered over that podium, honoring the man who had loved us both.

In light of our loss, KORT postponed both our induction and the sentencing of Deidre and Maureen. This isn’t the United States judicial system. There will be no trial. They’ll both be executed, along with all the people involved. The sentencing is simply the method I choose and who does it. Apparently, as both a seat-holder and the one whose life they targeted, that’s my right—or privilege, if you will. I’ve chosen to compartmentalize the gruesomeness of that honor and not dwell on it until necessary.

Which is today.

Moseying out to the living room, I plop onto the couch with my laptop for the family meeting I’ve been summoned to. Wells scooches next to me, smirking at my scowl and kissing my temple. The other three encircle us, intense divots lurking between their eyes.

“Are you ready for tonight, Freckles?” Ty asks.

Flapping my hand in the air, I swat that irritating inquiry away like a pesky fly. “I don’t want to talk about that yet. Let’s discuss where we’re going to live instead.”

Wells chuckles, keen on my avoidance, but Liam and Gage both widen their eyes with excitement. I wink, knowing they’ll help me distract Wells and Ty from fussing over my mental state about cabal inductions and execution orders. Opening my computer, I pull up the home I’ve been

obsessed with for the last twelve hours.

“You’re all sure you have no opinions about where we move?” I ask for the five hundredth time because I still can’t believe they’re leaving this up to me.

A myriad of grunts and murmurs, telling me they have *not* changed their minds, follows.

“Fine,” I say, biting my lip with the first sense of genuine hope I’ve felt in a while. “I found a gorgeous French chateau on a hundred sixty acres. It’s twenty-seven thousand square feet, sixteen bedrooms, nineteen bathrooms. The layout of the kitchen is a dream. There are twenty-two fireplaces. Room for all of us, even separate wings.”

I notice their eagerness to ask questions and see pictures, but I don’t permit any reactions. “So, here’s what I’m thinking: It needs a little work, updating and such, but there’s privacy for each of you if you choose to entertain ladies. There’s a home gym, a movie room, a twenty-car garage, space for Liam’s immense computer setup. Offices. The acreage will offer plenty of space for an obstacle course and shooting range. There’s already a pool and pool house, a hot tub, basketball and tennis courts. It has flowering shade trees and a forty-acre pond. But here’s the best part.”

Wells laughs, tickling my hip while carefully avoiding my still-sore ribs. His lips graze against the shell of my ear. “So well-rehearsed, Little Storm. You’ve practiced since I heard this at four a.m. Far more polished. Less *breathy*.”

I spewed this all to Wells before the crack of dawn, assuring he was on board first. He insisted on planting his mouth between my thighs for the recitation, so the cadence was *different*. We’ll each receive a sign-on bonus of two hundred fifty million upon induction into KORT. It’s obscene, but I intend to put it to good use.

I drink in a deep breath, fretting over whether I can sell this. “There will come a time when you three will each meet someone, get married, and have a family. This property provides options. There’s enough room that you and your families could stay in the main house, but there’s also enough land that we could build other residences and share the outdoor facilities if you or your wives preferred that. Whatever you want. I just want us to be together. Always. It’s an absurd amount of space, so I’d also like to build a facility dedicated to the abuse victims Ty is helping.”

My spiel seems to have rendered them speechless, which is a first and

knots me up until Ty's voice untangles it. "Freckles, *fuck*, that's ... perfect."

Liam swallows, visibly choked up, dragging his hand down his face while Gage jacks him with a punch to the bicep, hissing, "Fucking pussy. *Jesus*." Wells and Ty laugh as Gage turns his grumpy gaze on me. "It is perfect, Ivy. Where the fuck is this place?"

Before I answer, I lock eyes with Liam, knowing how crucial being chosen is to him. Wells filled me in on both the loyalty test and the authenticity of what Liam had said to me that day at the park. I don't think Liam ever felt as romantically connected to me as he believed though. It's not that there weren't some tiny sparks between us, but neither of us was ever ignited with an unbridled heat. And he deserves fireworks and passion. To all-out lose his damn mind, like Wells and I did before we ultimately caved to each other. Liam fell in love with the fact that I wanted him forever—that, no matter what, I'd still claim him as my family. He's convinced himself his upbringing wasn't as harsh or shaping as Ty's and Wells's, but he's wrong. It's irrefutable in the glossy eyes hitched to mine.

Wells and I are sending a message that he belongs with us, that he always will.

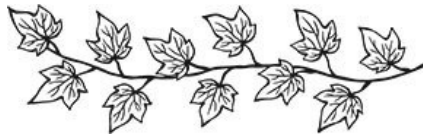
They all do.

Liam and I exchange a subtle grin of understanding as Wells squeezes my thigh in gratitude. As jealous as my husband can get, he loves Liam and knows how paramount this is to us all moving forward. It's vital to liberate not only Liam, but each of us—from our past and our demons—so we can forge a new vision for our future.

I clear the sappiness from my throat before Gage scoffs at me, too, and share the icing on this several-layered cake. "It's about thirty minutes from New Orleans."

They said location didn't matter, that I could choose anywhere in the world, and they'd be there for it, but the whooping men flattening me to the couch screams something else entirely.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



WELLS

The elation resonating throughout the sprawling apartment and the man-child pileup on Ivy are endearing, but my wife needs to breathe, for Christ’s sake. And we’ve got other topics to discuss, whether she wants to or not.

“All right, all right. Off!” I bark, shoving them all away while they howl and Ivy spurs them on with her giggles.

House-hunting has become a coping mechanism for my grieving wife. I’ve appreciated the distraction as well actually. Losing the man who was more than a father to both of us is a constant ache. But Ivy, she’s been lost to herself. Tossing and turning all night. Barely eating. Indulging in uncharacteristic day drinking. And disappearing into wherever it is she ventures. It’s new. That much I know. Her mind vacations used to drip with contentment, but lately, her face contorts into that of a tortured inmate.

So, this—her giggles and joy engulfing me—is a tactile gift I want to bathe in, but there isn’t time today. There’s never been enough time.

It takes a beat for them all to settle down—mutterings of La Lune Noire and the house, plans for the land and more cars floating through the air—but the guys are aware of the purpose of this meeting and the intensity it will hold, so my leer eventually snaps them to attention.

Ty glances at me with a reluctant jerk of his chin, so I launch us into what is sure to be a heated debate.

Twisting toward Ivy, I sweep her hair behind her shoulder, tucking her—thankfully red again—wisps behind her ear. “We need to discuss some things —”

“I know,” she breaks in, her hands flying into the air. “But I’ve told you, Wells, I need to look them in their eyes and do it my way.”

My knuckles dust over her cheek, and I note the heat already rising to the surface. “That’s not all we want to talk about and not where we want to begin.” Although we’ll be circling back to it.

“Oh, what then?” Her tone is instantly placid, her big blue doe eyes scanning all of us.

Ty averts his gaze, but I don’t think she notices. Her distracted mind has sullied her observational skills, which is favorable at the moment because ...

Fucker.

I massage her neck, kneading a kink as I anticipate the tensing of her other muscles with the conversation. “Your induction into KORT tonight will elevate you to one of the most powerful women in the world, Ives. The danger that’s been lingering around you, but always kept at bay, won’t dissipate. It will intensify. We want to prepare for that.”

She nods with a pensive scrunch of her forehead. “So, what? Are you banning me to our massive pad in Louisiana, giving up your lives to babysit me, or vetting soldiers to guard me twenty-four/seven?” Her scenarios drip sarcasm, but she isn’t far off from the life she’s about to encounter.

I throw a handful of Sour Skittles in my mouth, needing the tart sugar rush to sustain me. “We’d like to avoid such extremes and explore a different route.”

She waves her hand around, mouth agape, in a hurry-it-up-jackass gesture. *Fantastic.* This should land famously since she’s so amenable. Liam chokes on a laugh, saluting me with the bottleneck of a beer he just opened. Gage backhands him in the chest for me, so I’m spared flipping him off. It all makes Ty more anxious and Ivy more annoyed, so I rip off the Band-Aid.

“We’d like you to get a tracking chip.”

She cackles and claps her hands, like it’s the funniest joke she’s heard in years. “Like a dog, right? Or one of those dancing penguins?”

“Dancing penguins?” I ask, utterly bemused.

“*Happy Feet*,” Ty supplies, which explains nothing, but Ivy shoots her index finger toward him in validation. Their weird movie game. Whatever.

I shake my head, fingers digging into that knot in her neck until she arches in search of more. “Not quite like that.”

Her eyes trail over each of us, alarm seizing her when she notes the gravity in our expressions. “Fuck me, you’re serious. You’ve all lost your damn minds.”

She straightens her spine with a disgust that rolls off her in waves as she

pings Ty with a pointed glower. My brilliant girl can always spot the chink in armor.

“You cannot be on board with this. It’s insane, a complete violation. Please reason with him.” She throws a hitchhiker thumb in my direction.

I wasn’t alone in this idea. Thanks.

Ty’s eyes close on a heavy breath before locking on to Ivy with the kindhearted empathy only he can deliver. “I do agree with that—or I did. But everything has changed. This is the only way we can give you any sort of freedom. Otherwise ... someone could take you in seconds, Freckles. I just —”

“You’ll be able to hang out with Celeste and Rena.” Liam swigs his beer with a leisure the rest of us haven’t attained. “Shop with your mom. Go to a salon. Visit galleries.”

“So, if you put a chip in me—” She scoffs, her lips pursing bitterly, like she’s gulping down her own vomit. “I can’t believe I’m even humoring you all right now.” Her eyes flutter in an adorable bratty indignation. “Anyway, the chip means I don’t have to be guarded?”

“Nope,” Gage snipes with all the finesse of a rhinoceros at a goddamn tea party. “Not what it means. We’ll still be with you all the time because people will be trying to fucking. Kill! You!”

“Jesus Christ,” I hiss, palming Ivy’s head so she peers at me. “Look, baby, this is the best way we can protect you. Your phone and car aren’t enough because, as you know, those can be easily ditched.”

She cackles again, maniacally. “Yeah. Exactly. Let’s not forget, *I* outran you. I’m capable of taking care of myself.”

Ty hands me a glass of scotch, which I gladly take, chugging a hefty swill before rebutting. “We are well aware of how fierce you are, but ... *Jesus*, Little Storm, I won’t be able to rest.”

“No.” She crosses her arms with an obstinate huff. So damn petulant.

“I’m not really asking,” I growl through my clenched jaw, to which Ty shoots me an admonishing glare.

Wait till I haul her into the dentist and put it in her goddamn tooth, motherfucker. Then, you can glare.

The room falls silent, aside from the incessant thumping of Ivy’s swinging foot against the couch, legs and arms crossed, completely closed off, like she’s envisioning slamming that heel into my nose.

She springs up, pours herself a shot of Ty’s spiced rum, downs it

smoothly, and tilts her head with a wicked grin. “Okay, I’ll do it, under one condition.”

“Name it,” Ty says far too quickly.

Liam, Gage, and I share a dubious eye roll. *Pushover*. Rookie mistake with the Little Storm because in two seconds, she’s going to pummel him through that open door.

“You all have to get one,” she says.

And there it is. Decimation at its finest. He never saw it coming.

“The fuck?” Gage spits, choking on his bourbon.

Fucking hell. Fuel on the fire and providing the damn kindling. *Morons*.

“Oh,” she shrieks, eyes wild and tempestuous, hands flailing, “let me get this straight. It’s okay to put a tracking device inside *my* body, but in my husband, who holds the same position, or in the men who have the coveted roles of our most essential counsel, it’s a what-the-fuck kind of idea? Well, there’s your damn answer, Big Guy.”

She struts into the kitchen, violently uncorking a bottle of wine and pouring herself a glass, the deep merlot complementing her flushed scarlet complexion. Her face is alight in satisfaction though; she’s always content to dominate an argument. That is, until she freezes at the bomb Liam drops on us all.

“I’ll do it,” he says so breezily that it’s as though he were volunteering to pick up groceries.

Her brows knit in an odd marriage of skepticism and wonderment. She sets the wineglass on the counter with a swish. “You will?”

“Would it help you sleep better, knowing if something bad happened, you could find me?” he asks, maintaining his nonchalant stance, feet outstretched and crossed at the ankles, beer dangling between his index finger and thumb. I’m not certain he’s resolved to get himself the tracker, although the offer appears to be in earnest. But either way, the gesture drives our desperate need home, especially with the mention of sleeping better. This isn’t how we planned it, but if it works, I’ll be forever indebted to him.

She swallows and nods, so he shrugs, saying, “Then, yeah. Of course I would.”

I see it swarm her—the grief from losing her father. It knocks her down like a tsunami when she least expects it. Jumping up, I hustle over to her, scooping her into my arms with a kiss on her button nose.

She tangles her arms behind my neck in a pretzel weave, so leveled by

her inner torment of placing blame on herself for her parents' kidnapping that she sags against me, whispering, "I get it. I do, but ..."

Her pain and Liam's question illuminate what should have been glaring me in the face. She fears losing me—*any of us*—as much as I do her.

I glance back at Liam with an appreciative grin. We exchange a brief nod before my lips brush over Ivy's ear. "I'll get one too."

Her eyes flit to mine, a single note of her grief splashing her cheek with a hitched inhale. "Really?"

"Really." My arms are still coiled around her, fingers skating over the nape of her neck and exposed skin on her hip. "I should have suggested it at the beginning. I love you, Ives. I need to know you're safe, and I'm happy to give you that same peace of mind."

I carry her back to the couch to finish our discussion. Her breathing finally evens out as I snuggle her against me.

Ty sighs. "I'm in."

And Ivy bites back a smile, aware of the huge concession that is for him, for all of us.

"Fucking dumbass shit idea," Gage snarls. "What if the tracking falls into the wrong person's hands or we need to fucking disappear? You know, like we've all done a time or two?"

Valid points.

Ivy shrugs, lips curling into a contemplative frown. "So, we won't put it anywhere deep. Just below the skin, somewhere like behind our ears, so if we had to, we could easily cut it out."

She's flipped sides, it seems, now a staunch advocate—a genius one, of course. Whichever way her wind blows is the winning argument.

The Little Storm has already won this battle, and Gage knows it. He's simply too prideful to concede. But the faster he does, the easier it will be to win the war of protecting her. What we all want.

He hedges, so Ivy leans forward, elbows braced on her knees, fingers clasped, eyes on the Big Guy.

"I'll bake you whatever you want for a full month. No limit on requests, although I do have some new recipes stored up here." She taps her index finger on her temple.

"Every day? Anything I want?" His intrigue is comical. She's not gifting him anything. She's been baking up a storm in the wee hours of the night since Tom died, but this is *for him*, I guess.

“Yep,” she says. “Any pastry, pie, cookie, or cake you can dream up. I’ll give it a go.”

And just like that, his face softens into the putty her sweets-offering molded.

He raises his glass in agreement, so Liam decks him in the shoulder, barking, “Now, who’s the fucking pussy? You sold your anonymity for goddamn pastries!”

Gage guzzles the last of his bourbon. “Doesn’t make me a pussy. It makes me shrewd. I’m the only one here who got something in return, *dipshit*. You gave it up for nothing.”

We all know that’s not true. We caved for Ivy—her peace of mind and the consent to shroud her in an extra provision of protection—which is the opposite of nothing. But we’ll let the Big Guy have his win.



There’s a crackling tension in the truck, like the static crinkling the air before a strike of lightning. It’s all so palpable that none of us speak.

It isn’t due to the tracking issue. The doctor stopped by before we left, and in fifteen minutes, we were all linked to one another.

But the rest of our meeting was fruitless. Ivy and I are at a crossroads over this execution nonsense. I’m irate KORT laid this on her. It isn’t the privilege they see it as—not for her. It’s a shackling. She hesitantly revealed that she believes they want to see her in action as further proof of her competency. I assured her I can work around that, but it didn’t matter.

She refuses to share her plans. *Unacceptable*. The guys backed me up, which pissed her off more, so all of us are quietly seething, releasing jagged breaths to the cadence of the windshield wipers scattering the freezing rain.

Ivy’s been bestowed the honor of killing, in any manner she chooses, the women responsible for hunting her, women who masterminded years of terror. My team and I may have thwarted them, but they robbed her of freedom all the same—freedom she’ll never have. And most recently, they nearly stole her life, which makes this my prize too. Maybe even more so.

They tried to take my wife from me.

My fingers cramp at the thought, molars grinding the enamel off.

This woman is my everything, my existence—the reason for every breath

I take.

My Little Storm.

Mine.

Personally, I want to see them suffer through a gory and excruciating disembowelment, but even staring down the barrel of my pistol while they sniveled and pissed themselves would be satisfying.

As long as *I'm* doing it. Ivy is built for many things, stronger than most, but it's her benevolence, her humanity, that makes her so much better than the rest of us.

For the virtuous, every kill chips away at their essence.

She's a little like Ty in that way. It's why he prefers the position of sniper—so he can remove himself. Disassociate. He isn't weak. In fact, his ability to analyze all the angles from his perch in the sky is much like how he handles his fragile abuse victims. Scrupulous. Never overlooking a scar. But that meticulous nature can be a detriment when ripping out someone's tongue. Sometimes, it has him tunneling rabbit holes—wondering who first wronged the asshole before him.

That viewpoint is rooted in his own inner war.

He told me once that he had been one decision away from becoming a monster after his mom and sisters were murdered. He could either burn the fucking world, breathing the tormenting fire eating him from the inside on anyone in his path, or join the Navy and let his kills mean something.

Freedom for others.

There have been times when we had to torture some scumbag to obtain life-saving information, that I've witnessed Ty wrestling—tamping down the demon who so wants to gain purchase over the compassion he fights to preserve. Every close encounter inflames his inner beast, so I try to keep him in roles that encourage his gentler side to shine.

Ivy has a similar inner battle. I won't allow her to make choices that will permit her demons to procure a part of her soul.

Me, on the other hand? I'll stare those bitches in the eye and lodge a bullet in their brains without a second thought for what they did to my wife. And I'll sleep all the better because of it. No one will ever look at my girl cross-eyed and live to tell the tale. Maybe that makes me soulless. Maybe that makes me a villain in her story instead of a hero. I can live with that.

A hero sacrifices for the greater good, saving the world before the girl. But the villain? That woman he craves, who lights up the sinful, blood-

lusting, Hell-damned embers of his fractured soul—he'll sprinkle the forests and mountains and fields with gasoline, strike a thousand matches, and dance with her amid the flames.

That's why Ivy is perfect for me. She's not afraid of fires.

She sets her own.

But I'll gladly burn in Hell before I let my stormy angel become a devil too.

Gage and I went round and round with her over it, but she insisted she had her own idea, one she wasn't sharing. After two hours of fucking the brat out of her, she had the audacity to stick with that answer.

My dick was so sated that I'd lost my edge by then, which is precisely when I realized that the Little Storm had played me.

Again.

When we load onto our plane, bound for the induction ceremony in Chicago, Ivy yanks my tie and hauls me into the bedroom. I quirk my eyebrow, curious if the tension in the truck convinced her to share her plans, but my cock twitches in the hopes she'll play me once more.

She hangs her purse on the bathroom door hook and turns back to me, her face twisting as though she's nervous. But then she smiles, biting her lip in that impish way that unhinges me. As she sits on the bed, she smooths out her royal-blue dress—a seamless mannerism, full of her natural elegance. She's still my obsession, still the vision I can't peel my eyes from.

"You like it when I'm submissive," she says, her gaze luring me toward her. The color of her dress casts her eyes in this enchanting glow, a piercing cobalt. "And I love being that for you. It's oddly liberating. All those weeks without you—clicking the pieces together, clawing my way through the fog—made me realize how capable I am. That was empowering, to be steps ahead of you—the best erasers and identity miners in the world—to coax you to chase me. But you know what I wanted more than that?"

"What?" I ask in a low rasp that has her chest heaving, a tantalizing peek of cleavage teasing me as I tower over her.

"For you to hold it all, to be in charge." A puff of air falls from her lips as her focus drops to her shoes—or mine right before them. "I may be about to seize a powerful position, but you are the only destination where I don't have to feel *on*, Wells. With you, I'm free. Everywhere else is like a shadowy prison, especially now."

My chest tightens with both pride and concern at that confession. I cradle

her chin in my palm, lifting her misty eyes to mine. “Do you want to postpone? I’ll tell them we’re not ready.”

“No.” Her dark, fanning lashes flutter with a subtle headshake. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

She rises off the bed, strokes her fingers over my lapels, and walks away. Pacing. Until she turns on her heel so gracefully that it’s like she’s floating. “I can’t relinquish the execution to you. I know you want to handle it, to take it from me, slaughter them. Gage outlined some terrifyingly graphic methods for consideration. I get it. It’s a tangible way to save me, and I love you for it. But I need to do this my way. For myself ... and for my father.”

She says *father* so tentatively, as though it transports her to another place. There’s something more behind it, but I don’t want to push her when I can sense the fragility.

I already thought I’d lost this battle. Rankling her two hours before the ceremony isn’t worth it. “Okay.”

Relief washes over her petite frame, her shoulders dropping, head lolling back a bit. “I bought something for us.” Her eyebrows waggle with a coyness that has my balls tightening. “Remember that battle we had over you guarding me, when I said you should buy me a leash?”

Fuck me. Where the hell is she going with this?

“At La Lune Noire,” I confirm, shoving my hands in my pockets in an effort to mask my feverish titillation.

“Right.” She struts back toward me, the alluring sashay of her hips making me salivate. The oval mirror hanging above the bed supplies a glorious backside view. “You said that was exactly what I wanted—to be on your leash.”

My head bobs as I attempt to mask my enthusiasm regarding this topic and remain composed. “I remember.”

It’s one of my favorite memories with her, before we became us, because I could tell she felt the same intense, magnetic pull for me that I’d been a slave to for years. And the notion of a fucking collar kept my hand sheathed around my dick several times a day until I finally thrust inside her.

“You were right.” She pins me with an impassioned gaze, heat rocketing up my spine.

Goddamn. My wife’s got me panting like an eager teenage boy without laying a finger on me.

“I don’t know about you,” she continues, voice a sultry warble, “but all I

could envision after that was a collar matching my ring.”

Jesus Christ. I should throw her down and fuck her until she feels me in her throat, but I can't bear to break this enrapturing spell. I have to see where she's headed.

I hum, hands still stowed in my pockets while rocking on my heels. “Is that so?”

“Mmhmm,” she muses, rounding me before unhooking her purse and sauntering into the bathroom. “It was weird,” she calls out, “the hold it had on me. The image of ... I mean, I've read about collars in books. Never a leash, but ...”

“Ivanna,” I growl, cock full-mast and patience nonexistent.

She spins, looming in the doorway, a diamond-and-sapphire-studded collar adorning her delicate neck. “Do you like it?”

“Jesus, fuck, Little Storm.” I scratch my chin, fully entranced by the way her dainty throat bobs below the gems. “So gorgeous,” I murmur before I regain myself and plant my prowling ogle on her face. “I need to fuck you—*now*—before we land.”

She laughs, a sexy, under-the-breath simper tugging at her luscious rose-painted lips, which should already be wrapped around my cock. “That's the plan.”

She shimmies past me toward the bed, whirling around with a flare of her gown, and holds up a finger. “But there's one thing I need, Chief.” Her hand rises to the jeweled collar as a haze coasts over her features. “I'm hoping it will help me stay present. Sometimes, textures ground me.” Those blue beauties snap up to me, imploring. “And it's a link to you, so that might ... I don't know if you've noticed because I'm not sure if it's worse or not, but I've been slipping away.” Her lower lip quivers. “KORT, they'll see it as a weakness, so if I start to ...”

Fuck, baby.

I rush toward her, snaking my arm around her waist and cupping her chin even though her focus is somewhere beyond me. “I've got you. Look at me, Ivanna.” I wait until she obeys with a timid bat of her lashes. “I've always got you. But nothing about you is weak. Those men were blown away by your genius, so there's nothing to prove. You've been through so much. We just buried your father, Ives. Cut yourself a break.”

“I don't need a break,” she whispers. “I need you. To feel the weight of this around my neck tonight and know that even when you're across the

room, you're holding me. You'll carry me through—”

I press my mouth to hers, tender nips at her bottom lip, unhurried, savoring. When I tilt my head to deepen it, she opens for me, her inviting whimper licking into me with the velvety stroke of her tongue against mine. It's wholly dissimilar from our typical frantic passion. This is a promise. A promise I've made before, but one I'll continue to make until my dying breath. She'll always come first.

She severs our connection, her fingers skimming her swollen lips, like the first time we kissed at our wedding. “I also have a leash, for good measure.” Her eyes crinkle with a mischievous smile as she opens her fist, revealing a balled-up leash. “Fuck me, Chief. I need your cum leaking out of me—a reminder of who owns me.”

Fuck slow and gentle. “A goddamn fantasy.” I flip her around, soaking in her shocked squeals. “My perfect pet.” Unzip her dress and ruck it, her bra, and panties down her body in a single desperate sweep. “My filthy slut. My good girl.” Flatten her perky tits to the bed. And grit out, “My motherfucking queen. Mine.”

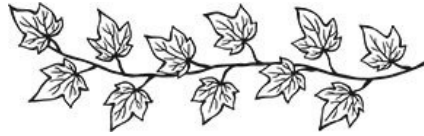
She glances over her shoulder. “Yours, Wells. Make me yours.”

Heeding her pleas, I glide into her pretty, wet cunt with a fervor. I clip the leash onto the studded collar beneath her hair—it's more of a visual than anything else—and piston my hips, one hand tugging her possessively, the other swirling and smacking her clit in rhythm. She moans, crying for me to pump harder as our eyes lock in the mirror, entranced by the symphony of our tandem euphoria and the beauty of our mutual unraveling.

It's the epitome of who we are, who we'll be as leaders, as a couple. Ivy may be mine, on my leash, handing me control, but there's no mistaking who holds all the power.

It's always been her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



IVY

A bouquet of aromas—chocolate and caramel, fish and sulfur—pervades the chilly gust of wind as my stiletto heel probes the icy sidewalk for anchorage. Cities have a way of assailing, leaving their mark so there’s no concealing who they’ve claimed.

Like a domineering man.

Once-slushy snow, refrozen in jagged peaks, fringes the path scraped clean for us. Crystallized ice sparkles atop the muck. Glistening filth. Bile rises to the back of my throat, burning and bitter, at the sight. Snow will never be the same.

Snow is carnage and blood.

Winter is death and mothballs.

Black leather gloves and too many lilies.

Goodbyes.

One of the many reasons New Orleans was my choice for a new beginning. No snow.

Maybe in the humid sunshine, the black hole will lose its power.

Gage winks at me as he flanks the elbow Wells isn’t linked to. The guys taunted and cheered as we left the bedroom on the plane, which infuriated Wells, goading him into a slew of hissing expletives. No doubt he’ll be soundproofing the plane’s suite soon. The knowledge that they heard or suspected our collective *unleashing* should embarrass me, I suppose, but those jeers are woven with a genuine happiness that bundles me up, blocking the chill.

And I can’t find it in me to be ruffled by the moments I am wholly riveted in the present.

There's too much shame in lost time.

Liam zigzags around us, opening the huge, peaked wooden door to the old cathedral while Ty cages me from behind, a hand on the small of my back. In the inky night, you'd think the dingy antique-white would shine. Pearlized. It doesn't. It's just an ancient, forgotten house of prayer, transformed into a meeting ground for supreme, clandestine puppeteers.

And execution chambers.

The thump of my pulse whirs in my ears.

We should light a candle. Make amends to the spirits.

Other than the click-clack of our shoes, tapping like a beratement from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," the steps to the ceremonial space elude me.

The black hole begs to pull me under.

Nev-er-more. Nev-er-more.

Stone and wood and mortar. Steeples piercing the night sky.

Altars and secrets.

We enter the sanctuary, a room resolved to upend its allegiance, paying homage to devilry. There was a time that would have slayed me—to serve my soul to wickedness.

But even blankets of white are dotted in crimson and gloom.

I can be the light—not quite as brilliant as the sun, but a glow in the night.

Like the moon. Or the glint in my sword.

Little Storm. Be the storm, Ivanna.

Lightning. Crashing into sin and shadows, illuminating, while still belonging in the dark.

Two leather chairs face a round oak table. There's ten feet between them, separating Wells and me. My fingers drag over the jewels at my neck, thighs tightening over the stickiness between my legs. I stand before the chair and lower my hands to an elegant clasp at my waist. Ty stations himself behind my chair, Liam behind Wells, Gage at an even distance between our posts. All four are gleaming in their three-piece suits, pistols tucked into their waistbands, faces stony. My wall of armor.

The men—the knights and their security—pile into the drafty space. Streaming in as one entity, like a meandering river, they take their seats in a half-moon arrangement and nod for us to do the same. Will that be me? Fluid and flexible and connected?

There are official introductions, although not in the way of the social

decorum I've been taught. This reads more like one of those hearings—my representatives and me on the side who's yet to provide adequate testimony.

Don't slip away.

You have nothing to prove.

Daniel grins at me, a dimple piercing his cheek. His eyes are kind—another strike in the darkness. I let that settle into my bones, relaxing me some, but my brain is still pulsing with “The Raven” drumbeat.

Click. Clack. Never. More.

The Balzano leader—Johnathan Balzano, the hospitality mogul, known as Johnny to his closest friends and family—finally bites into the meat of the proceedings, dour gaze lasered on me. “Did you feel your trial was harsh, Ivy?”

That's a loaded question if I've ever heard one. The truth? What they did was so beyond fucked up that harsh doesn't cover it. I don't see how that nugget will aid me though. His high chin, flinty eyes, tempered breaths—he wants me to rebuke them, to show weakness.

Irritation flares in my veins, bubbling up in my chest, but I know how to maintain a simmer. I will my chin to rise, like his. “No harsher than a jigsaw puzzle, Johnathan. Psychological warfare is sharper than a sword if wielded at an unshielded psyche. But the difference between that and a blade is that mind games only penetrate if one allows them to. I did not.”

You didn't fucking break me.

His mouth crimps into a grimace, but The Order's leader, Jared Austen, lifts his palm, silencing dear Johnny. “You were certainly a formidable opponent, Ivanna. Although, you should know, opposition was not the intent. Dealing with politicians and infiltrating government agencies—it's no small feat. Secrets, leverage, and unveiled lies are the currency in your new position. You've proven yourself adept at mining them.”

His eyes squint, like he's extracting a thought from somewhere far away. Reaching. Plucking. “Thomas Kingston was one of my most respected members. He ...” He rubs his hand over his mouth, masking emotion. My father had that effect on people, bending even the steeliest of men. “It all makes sense now—the way things often do in retrospect. We had our doubts about you, but you decimated those with a staggering display of not only tactics to conquer the trial, but also with the mettle and valor to leave deserving scars on those who crossed you.”

“While also somehow bathing those scars in a balm of loyalty,” Payne

Logan—the financial institution tycoon—interjects. “Astounding.”

My turbulent pulse and breathing abate with the praise. It seems they are impressed. “Thank you, Mr. Austen, Mr. Logan.”

“You blew my grandson away,” Luca Cabrini adds with a jabbing chuckle and pointed glance at Wells—a grandson he barely knows, but I suppose it’s all about the bloodline, not the relationship. He steeples his hands. “The initial impression about this marriage was not favorable. There is no rule against it, simply because we never anticipated such a matter.”

Makes sense since women weren’t permitted to have a seat, and I don’t suspect their minds are open beyond that.

“It convolutes boundaries, muddies the waters of power.” He sighs. “But what’s done is done. We linked your trials to test loyalty and see how well you could fare, separate from your husband.”

It does not go unnoticed that the one in need of proving was *me* even though *I* had entered the marriage with no knowledge of any of this.

He clears his throat, stroking his neatly trimmed gray beard. “What we found is, you both excelled apart, but also managed to unite when it all came crashing down, despite the devastation between you. We couldn’t have asked for more.”

I nod and smile, but before my appreciation sounds, Johnathan Balzano purses his lips with a groan. It’s not hard to pinpoint him as one of the votes against me.

Fucking patriarchy.

“This position is a key to a kingdom,” he scorns. “Two hundred fifty million for passing the trial and accepting the seat, riches and privileges, power, and a yearly salary matching the bonus. But it comes at a cost, like that of the trial. A life of constant stress and danger. Eyes never shutting. Suffering and daunting challenges.” His censuring leer dips to my stomach. “Family time interrupted, no matter how *expecting* that life becomes. Are you prepared for that, *Ivy*?” He may be meeting my eyes again, but he spits my name like he’s scolding an unwed teen who’s decided to keep a baby.

Prick.

My womb isn’t even filled, and he’s cursing it. This is exactly the crap that led me to choose a gown over a suit. I won’t hide who I am. Not having a dick is one of my best attributes.

A contemptuous grin tugs at my tight lips. “I am. I have a keen sense of balance—so capable that a little weight around the middle won’t throw me

off.” I glance at his beer belly with a plastic frown before locking on to his cold, dark eyes. “You raise valid points, the very elements I find so empowering.” My hands slice through the dank, musty air to gesture at my guys. “I have the best protection in the country. Unmatched. Eyes-never-shutting stress is nothing new—nothing I haven’t stared down the barrel of and fired at *myself*. And that *expectant* life, the weighty interruption, will someday be the knitting of KORT’s heirs apparent.” I swing my gaze to Wells as I add, “Two of them. I’m not afraid to be a woman at that table. I won’t shrink from all it means. Will you, *Johnny?*”

Ty’s quiet chuckle reaches my ears seconds before Daniel bellows with a cutting wave to Johnny, “Clearly, she’s ready and not to be questioned. Let’s move on.”

They shift to Wells, commending his strides in the trial, his years as a SEAL, and his erasing business. Since the Cabrini chair handles data mining, my husband’s expertise is well suited. He fields their inquiries with the resolute poise he always conveys as I look on with pride.

He’s mine.

Gradually, their voices whir to a muffled din. I feel myself slipping. Drifting. Unable to hold on. There’s nothing to grip. The edges are black and smoky. It’s cold. So cold that my limbs don’t work.

Frozen. Limp. Indolent.

I have to get out of here.

The air tastes like gray clouds and rusty snow and loss.

It’s slippery and ...

My neck is heavy. Why is it so heavy?

I’m not there. I’m not there.

My father. *No*. He’s gone. *Gone*. I was too late.

They killed him. The stress killed him.

That monster.

His face explodes. Brains and bone and flesh.

Gore.

In my hair.

Skin stained. Crimson and purple.

My breaths are so loud, so drowning.

Click. Clack.

The shower and incessant squeak of windshield wipers.

I’m supposed to choose. To prove myself. To kill them.

They hunted me.
I can't hear Wells or find him.
Four of them hold me down. Biting and kicking and spitting. But they win.

No. They don't. They're wrong.
Wells should be here. Why isn't he here? Or real?
My ring hurts, pinches.
The collar. My fingers scrape against it, the jewels and iciness and *skin*.
And the voice, *a ripple in a pond*.
Wells.

"... have to forgive me. Ivanna may be your impressive O'Reilly chair, but she's my queen, and I can't seem to hide my obsession." His chair is beside me now, fingers clasping mine as another hand subtly pinches the back of my neck.

How long have I been gone? Lost to the skulking abyss of trauma and shame.

Liam passes something to Ty, and seconds later, I'm handed a bottle of water, cap off. As I'm sipping, Jared Austen's eyes ping between the five of us.

"You obviously have a beautiful marriage and a close-knit team as well," he says with covetous approval. "Let's move this forward, shall we?"

Daniel rises, buttons his suit jacket, and strides to a side table, where he selects a sword. Luca Cabrini follows behind and does the same. Wells's grandfather stands before me, Daniel before Wells.

"Kneel here," Cabrini instructs, so we both drop to our knees.

Wells shoots me a flirty wink before his eyes trail down to the collar on my neck, his lips parting on an inhale. My throat bobs with hunger. We're in the midst of being inducted into a cabal, and my husband is envisioning our romp on the plane. It's so reminiscent of our wedding—his hitched breath when his eager emeralds landed on me, his impatience with the ceremony, his fervent kiss that suffused every cell of my being. He was in my marrow even then, like I sensed who we'd become. Who he'd be for me.

My fingers graze over my lip, his eyes flicking to the movement with understanding. He's always done that—read me so easily. He used me to acquire this position, even if it was with my father's blessing, but I can't help feeling grateful he did. I wouldn't be kneeling here without him. I have O'Reilly blood, and I was weaponized and trained by the brilliant Dr.

Kingston, but it's Gavin Wells who awakened me. My dark knight.

Daniel launches the induction speech, pulling me from my trance. "Ours is a knighthood that serves without a king, who answers only to KORT, and who orchestrates for the good of both empire and kingdom—citizens of The Order and the empires of Balzano, Cabrini, Logan, and O'Reilly. While a seat is responsible to his—or *her*—own dominion, the welfare of KORT must always be foremost."

Cabrini lifts the sword. "Do you, Ivanna Kingston Wells O'Reilly, vow to uphold the honor of KORT with both fortitude and equanimity?"

"I do," I confirm.

He lowers the sword to my right shoulder. "We hereby knight thee as an honorable member of KORT for the O'Reilly empire." And up over my head to the other.

Daniel parrots the process on Wells. "Do you, Gavin Wells Cabrini, vow to uphold the honor of KORT with both fortitude and equanimity?"

My husband's deep, husky tenor slices into the room, sharper than the blade at his shoulder. "I do."

I watch with awe and reverence for this surreal moment as my birth father knights my husband. Daniel taps the sword on each of Wells's shoulders. "We hereby knight thee as an honorable member of KORT for the Cabrini empire."

When we stand, Luca Cabrini drags me into an unexpected hug. "Keep gripping that Balzano prick by the balls, young lady." He chuckles in my ear as he pats my back. "Welcome to KORT and, more importantly, to the family. My wife and I look forward to getting to know you and my grandson."

The exchange lodges in my throat in a startling realization. Wells has family. Has he let that sink in? This extension of his mother standing before me?

"It will be my honor, Mr. Cabrini."

He balks. "None of that. You'll call me Luca now."

Before I can respond, Daniel snatches me away and tugs me into a hug. "I know I have no right to be, but I am overwhelmingly proud of you, Ivy. Truly. You earned this."

I don't have to look to know what I'll find in his eyes. It's evident in the thick timbre of his voice, the warmth of his embrace, the cadence of his breaths. He's not congratulating an heir; he's clutching his daughter. A

daughter he spent over two decades combing the earth for.

I squeeze him back. “You have every right, and I am so grateful, Daniel. Thank you for never giving up on me.”

He pulls back on a breath, scanning my face with the tenderness of an adoring father. The gesture makes me miss my dad, but also fills me with gratitude at the realization that I have two. Two amazing men who yearned to claim me as their child.

Jared Austen interrupts the moment, still seated at the center of the half-moon with an open laptop. “Before we bring in the traitors, let’s get a few things on the books. Second-in-command?”

Slipping back into my leather chair, I answer, “Tytan Reynolds for the O’Reilly’s.”

All eyes flit to me, and Balzano barks a laugh. “You won’t be keeping Robert O’Reilly on?”

Robert is Daniel’s cousin and right-hand man. He’s currently hovering near him as security and nodding at me with reassurance. I informed them both of my plans when we met in South Carolina and, again, in a phone call last week. Robert was more than gracious. We might be related, but I don’t know him yet.

Staring Johnny in his smug face, I explain, “I will, but Mr. Reynolds will be my second-in-command.”

Luca glances between Daniel and me, eyebrows crouched low, because Wells did not offer him the same advance courtesy, so his mind is surely racing. “That’s generally reserved for family.”

I smile as serenely as possible, aware this may be as challenging to accept as their tolerance of a woman at the table. “And Ty is mine. I think we can all agree that blood isn’t always as thick as we’d like. Robert will have his place to shine. I am honored to work with him, but this is a new regime.”

Jared measures the tension in the room with a quick sweep before settling on Wells. “And for the Cabrini camp?”

“Liam Graves,” Wells says, much to Luca’s dismay. Wells intended to blindside him, not out of malice, but because his grandfather would’ve fought this tooth and nail. It had to be after the power shifted. “You won’t find anyone more adept at data mining than Mr. Graves, but my wife covered all other objections beautifully,” he adds, lacing our fingers, his thumb dusting over my wedding ring.

“Good enough,” Jared replies, ignoring Luca’s glower. “Both are vetted

and tried, so that's an easy transfer. Anyone else we need to log?"

"Yes. Gage Porter will work for us both as lead enforcer," I supply. "Actually, all three will have dual access."

Payne Logan rubs at his clean-shaven jaw. "We don't advise that."

We anticipated the skepticism and warning, but that won't deter Wells or me from having these three men as the most trusted resources in both factions.

Wells peers back at him without hesitation. "Noted."

"Fine." Jared grins, studying Wells and me. It's full of mirth. I bet my father liked him. "Are you prepared to sentence?"

I pump assurance into Wells's hand as I rise with conviction. "I am."

My words enact a magical spell of sorts. Double doors swing open with a whoosh, a damp and moldy stench gushing forth. The disheveled ladies are dragged into the room and hooked on to the altar twenty feet from us—hands and feet both cloaked in manacles, voices silenced with ball gags, and a deathlike pallor to their dry skin.

My tongue sinks heavy with the taste of baking soda and cinnamon.

Bitter and choking.

A confection lacking sweetener.

That's what stands before me, trembling, beseeching.

When I note the terror flickering in their red-rimmed eyes, my bones ache. These weren't women destitute and struggling, wrangling their reluctant conscience because they were crushed by impossibly harrowing circumstances. These women had it all—money and security.

Family.

What level of greed darkens a soul enough to murder an innocent?

Their crimes are stated, too many for me to collect. They swirl around the rim of the black hole, but I catch the essence.

Other names are rattled off, those involved whose demise has already been met. I don't recognize most. Only two. Kent, Maureen's husband. And Declan, Deidre's son.

Daniel's family.

With Kent involved, Maureen's children will be orphans, like my men. My stomach knots.

And yet what kind of parents must they be, willing to kill her brother's daughter for a slim chance at power?

It wasn't a fleeting lapse in judgment either. It was years of perseverance.

It's all so jumbled in my head.

But one detail keeps circling.

The pride emanating off Daniel that day in Charleston, when he showed me their pictures. "*Family is family,*" he said.

This must be breaking him. Not only as a leader who had a leak in his organization, but also as a man who's been betrayed by the people who were his home.

Chafed by those who rubbed closest.

Their bloodshot pleas land on me with a spark of hope. What are they hoping for? Something quick? Or in their gloomy world, do I gleam like a paragon of virtue?

I may be, but that virtue won't be championing them.

The click-clack of my heels spurs me forward, no longer a haunting, but a bolstering. "I'm not much for speeches. I won't catalog all you stole from me because you already know, and honestly, I'm not all that bothered. Despite your best efforts, I had a beautiful life—as beautiful as yours could've been if you hadn't been jonesing for power that wasn't yours to hold. And yet it *was* yours to enjoy. It's so foolish." My voice echoes against the rafters and marble and stained-glass windows.

There's an old pipe organ in the far corner, surely once a bearer of transforming hymnals, feeding whiffs of cleansing frankincense to the parishioners. The vibration of daunting notes would set the mood now, accompanying scents of lilies and myrrh. Wells would probably appreciate the symphonic backdrop.

Another time maybe. *Some future execution?*

"If that was all," I continue, "this would be harder. But my father, Thomas Kingston, and my mother, Natasha Kingston—when you touched them, you tarnished any mercy I might have offered. I've thought about all the ways I could approach this."

I throw my hand out to the Big Guy, whose cruel grin could easily make a grown man piss himself. "Gage here enjoys severing digits and choking people on them. That's probably especially entertaining with a dick, which neither of you has. That's not a slight, simply an obstacle."

Gage smiles, kicking his chin up in agreement.

I halt my pacing, ruminating on one of the many vivid suggestions he supplied, and fix my eyes on our guests. "The local zoo, however, is willing to donate an alligator's time. That feels the most fitting—to make it slow and

agonizing. Maybe even keep you shackled, but let you try to run. Familiar?”

Muffled shrieks fill the cathedral behind their gags, terror gripping them. A modicum of that terror rushes through me every time I close my eyes, seeing the faces of the monsters who chased me. Monsters they commissioned. That petrified gape seizing them, drenched in panic and horror, is enough justice for me.

Haunting torment is a damnation far worse than death.

Resolved with a peacefulness, I proceed. “Your greatest crime will determine your death though. You looked my father in the eye while attempting to steal and kill the one thing he held hope for, the treasure he wouldn’t stop hunting. The man who called you family. Wife. Sister.” My eyes flit to Daniel’s heavy blues as he realizes my *father* reference was regarding him. I hope he sees he still has family. “There is no greater crime than what you did to him. So, as head of the O’Reilly empire and member of KORT, I grant the execution to Daniel O’Reilly. He should have the privilege of watching the life drain from your traitorous eyes.”

He nods at me. You wouldn’t think gifting an execution could evoke the affection lining his features, but like all the men in my life, Daniel O’Reilly finds solace in crimson-stained loyalty. He stalks forward, lifts his pistol, and with two rapid, resounding cracks, he lodges a bullet between their eyes.

A blood-soaked altar of spoiled sacrifice.

And a brisk act of compassion for them and me.

I proved myself to KORT while somehow managing to swiftly escape authoring this horrendous act.

Daniel’s hand slides over my back as his shining eyes latch on to mine. “Heavy is the head that wears the crown. But you, my dear, are a pillar of grace and strength.”

“That she is,” Wells chimes from my other side, emeralds glinting with a veneration that stills me. The two exchange something unspoken, but it bathes me in family and purpose and devotion.

It wasn’t long ago that I sat in the parking lot at La Lune Noire and wondered what marks a life if not people and love and purpose. In that hollow shrouding, I feared I possessed none of those. And here I stand, halfway to billionaire status, dripping with power, but still cognizant of my life’s worth stemming from the men surrounding me, the love of my husband and family, and a newfound, emboldened resolution.

A resolution that rang out in Wells’s eulogy of my father.

“Some might say the measure of a man is by the lives he changes. Some would argue it’s by the mark he leaves on those closest to him—his family, friends, colleagues. And still others would insist that the truest measure of a man is by his ability to stare into the face of impossible situations, consider every angle, and selflessly lead those under his care through the carnage.”

I’ll be swapping man for woman in that mantra, but either way, I’d like to walk in the footsteps of Thomas Kingston, earn the prestige of being daughter to Daniel O’Reilly, heed the honor of working alongside Tytan Reynolds, Liam Graves, Gage Porter, and the members of KORT, Johnny excluded.

And revel in the thrill and deliverance of belonging to Gavin Wells.

I won’t fear this darkness I’m akin to or even the black hole threatening to suffocate me. I’ll revere it, recognizing every inky speck for the gift it is. The privilege and opportunity.

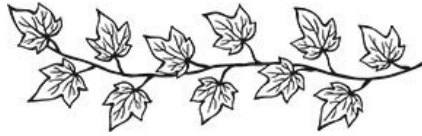
To rise and become.

For these men, I’ll flare as their midnight bonfire.

Set ablaze to rule the toxic shadows.

Their Burning Ivy.

EPILOGUE



FIVE MONTHS LATER

WELLS

The tinkling gurgles of the splashing water would be hypnotic if not for the supple softness entrapping my gaze. Ivy shimmies out of her black lace panties, a seductive wiggle as she obeys my order to bare herself. Watching her, touching her, hearing her sultry voice—those are my daily brushes with Heaven.

Her ribs and hips have filled out some, cloaking the starkness of the bones and sallowness she withered into. After staring death in the face, her father dying, and her strong performance at the induction, my girl lost herself to her PTSD. Not completely, but in small, measured blocks of time when she was sucked back in as a breathless prisoner. Some days were more disheartening than others. Appetite nonexistent. Sleep restless. A bleakness to her gaze. Desolate.

It was agonizing to watch, but all four of us had been inside that dark abyss. Witnessing our fellow men blow up yards away, killing nameless soldiers who had fought for the wrong cause, enduring torture as prisoners of war—our souls didn't abandon those experiences unscathed.

And none of us are strangers to the care nursing someone through it requires. We've been doing it for each other for years.

But I know I can speak for the guys when I say, tending to Ivy's wounds has been the most harmonious weaving among us. The restorative cocoon we've enwrapped her in has fused us all tighter.

She's been aware of her rickety grip on reality. Petrified of it. Even through the move to New Orleans, as excited and hopeful as she was, she

clung to me—to all of us—like we were a tethering, preventing a nosedive over a craggy cliff.

Two months ago, we held an intervention of sorts. She had been slipping away, no longer able to see the forest for the trees, so we broke it down branch by branch. Her weary blues looked us all over as she launched into a fascinating peek into her brilliant mind—a peek only Tom had ever been granted.

Grains of sand, shooting stars, dandelion wishes, and butterfly kisses.

Tears she'd been harboring for months finally sought freedom, splashing onto her cheeks with boldness as she unveiled that her father had gifted her those escapes into the light, but those pockets of whimsy had morphed into a black hole in his absence.

“No matter how many dandelions I try to gather, I still smell dead things,” she whispered.

To an outsider, it may have all sounded like gibberish, the ramblings of brokenness—whether of spirit or mind. But it made perfect sense to the four of us. This language of metaphors she's always hidden from others spoke to the scars we all wear. It was that idyllic blend of artistic nonsense and emotional intelligence.

That was what Tom had seen in his little girl—Ivy doesn't understand less than others. She sees more, just in ways most can't grasp.

She added that the four of us were the reason she hadn't been swallowed by the dark, but that was little consolation. Her agony wrecked me. It wrecked all of us.

Thankfully, she agreed to hand us oversight, trudging through the motions of healing whether she felt it or not. *For us.*

Ty keeps her on task with KORT business. They've concocted a movie-character rating system for their prospective politicians. It's ridiculous, but also profoundly ingenious because no one could ever crack it. Liam busies her mind with hacking and home improvement projects and the occasional reckless spin in one of our sports cars. Gage wakes at three a.m. every morning to bake with her or sample her creations.

I do what I've always done. I watch her—assuring she's hydrated, consuming enough protein and nutrients and sunshine, and maintaining physical activity—not that she's made any of that easy. She develops a new food aversion weekly.

After studying her sleep patterns, I noted her nightmares ensue

approximately forty-five minutes after her eyes shut, so I'm always alert to hold her through it. I soothe her with massages during movie nights, reading her favorite books aloud, and hot baths. And I fuck her into mind-altering orgasms. While we've all trekked this hike and know how rough it can be, I'm currently ogling the fuller curves of fruition dancing before me. It's confirmation we're venturing on the right path.

We're outside in our entertainment area, seeking the tranquility of the hot tub in search of some unwinding. The guys were instructed to stay inside. Tomorrow is the Fourth of July and our first large gathering, so my wife is keyed up with equal parts excitement and overwhelm.

She glances at me once she's bare, her smile lighting up the inky night as she awaits instructions.

"Climb in, beautiful." I've already shed my clothing and dipped into the warmth. My eager cock isn't shy about divulging my intent for this little outing.

Her thirsty appraisal, full of both lust and pride, scans my new tattoo—a phoenix rising in a storm, inked over my heart and extending the width of my chest, in honor of my girl. She rakes her teeth across her lip as she sashays up the stairs and slides into the water. There's a geyser in the center, so she carefully avoids it as she wades to meet me on the other side.

But that's our main event.

I drag her toward me, salivating as the swell of her breasts and perky nipples bob above the bubbling surface. Her peaches-and-cream skin is so silky against my fingertips that it nearly hurts. My tongue sweeps out slow and sweet, licking a promise of hopes and dreams into the seam of her lips—an extension of everything this woman has ignited in me from the moment I saw those fiery tresses and sapphire doe eyes.

She covers the depths of my blackened soul. Because that's what it takes. Dark can't snuff out darkness or chase away demons and ghosts. Only light can do that. And while every bit of light inside me stems from her, I can still offer it in return, letting it bleed into her black hole to streak it with who we've become together—a blinding brightness of all that's right in the earth and seas, Heaven and Hell.

She melts against me with a velvety purr as my fingers dive into her hair with the need for deeper, closer. More.

"Kneel on top of the geyser, Little Storm." My voice is husky with the command, throat scratchy with a parched desire.

One eyebrow quirks above those sexy blues. “On top?”

I wink, a boastful smirk conquering my lips. “Trust me.”

She debates internally, weighing the pros and cons of compliance, like always, before her conflict diminishes and she obeys. It takes only seconds for the flash of appreciation to dress her features. An epiphany of rapture. That powerful torrent is bathing her clit in what I assume is ecstasy. Her breath hitches on a moan that has me chuckling.

“That’s what I thought,” I say, gloating.

Ordinarily, she’d attempt a bratty retort, but she’s already succumbing to a blissed-out state. I step in front of her, the precum on the head of my rock-hard cock glistening.

Without hesitation, her tongue darts out to catch it. “So good, Chief,” she croons with a coy bat of her thick lashes, knowing full well her hunger for me has my balls throbbing with a zinging ache.

I pet her hair, awed by how striking she is here—the moonlight capering off her misty blues like the dusty-white gleam on a midnight ocean. So radiant. Always. “That’s my good girl. So beautiful, Ivy.”

She grins, taking me into her mouth with decadent, calculated swipes of her tongue. Her nails dig crescent moons into my ass while the other hand kneads my balls. That climb to the summit she’s seeking has her warbling a melody of knee-shaking vibrations over my length—cheeks hollowed out with both a fervent determination and a carnal craving. And much like her explanation of her mind, it’s all so poetically telling of our journey. Her once-tentative instincts and innocent need for instruction have morphed into a confident navigation of our joint cravings.

Fucking perfect.

Her fingers rise to my hips, gripping, tugging me closer, and thrusting me deeper as her orgasm blares into the balmy air. Her cheeks are tinged a ravishing scarlet. Her features twist in the ache of climactic rhapsodies. And her muscles tense, rigid and exhilarated. So goddamn gorgeous. The stars marring my vision—the ones surrounding her face from the euphoria of her throat contracting on a moan—are more dazzling than the dotted canopy above, but I don’t allow myself release. Not yet. I need more. I always need more of her.

When she’s nothing but boneless limbs and labored breaths, I hoist her up, curl her around me, and perch her on the side of the spa. My cock glides easily through the slick heat of her folds. And here and now, with my starved

touches and desperation to consume the entirety of all she encompasses, I fuck her with the brutality of all we've suffered and the love that's blossomed within the wreckage. We crash together like thunder, rapture radiating with the static electricity in a burst of lightning. The squall that was always destined to own us. Another set of stars sprinkles my vision as my Little Storm unravels again with me.

We sink beneath the bubbles then, Ivy in my lap, back to my chest as I massage her sore muscles. The pads of my fingers sail over her, soaking in her skin and strength. Her fragile and satin balancing my ragged and demanding. Her vanilla-raspberry overpowering the chlorine and salty breeze. She permeates every nook and cranny of everything I am.

"The void is filling," she says, her voice barely audible over the crashing burble of the jets. "I painted."

I knew she locked herself in her studio a couple of days ago, which showered me in hope, but I haven't pried. Other than the portrait of the guys and me, she hasn't painted since before our first run-in back in September. Her past artwork graces the walls of our new home, every piece marking a part of our story, before we even began—her moods and inspiration and my admiration from afar. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss the delight of viewing a new piece and all it unveils about the deepest parts of my girl. It's not a step that can be forced though.

"What did you paint? Portrait of someone or a place you dreamed of?"

She waves her hands through the water, eyes tracking the ripples. "People are too personal. I've only ever painted you guys. Practiced on nameless people, but never committed it to anyone else real. I brushed away the carnage, gave it a home that isn't my head."

So cryptic, like after Tom got sick when all her work depicted either the jagged edge of death or life imprisoned. Progress. It's not merely going through the motions of working, exercising, and gaining weight. My brave girl is pushing through.

"Tell me," I encourage.

"I had a moment ... a shooting star. The spark decimating the darkness." She cranes her neck to me, eyes roving over my features, probably to gauge whether I'm comprehending what she's sharing. "Maybe telling you all what my head's been like sullied the black-hole power. The way my father did."

My throat constricts like a vise is clamping it, choked by all that's been gripping her. I cinch my arms around Ivy's waist, molding her body to mine

and tucking her head beneath my cheek. *Closer*. “Maybe. I hope so, baby.”

She hums as her head lolls back, gaze drifting up to the freckled night. “Something fresh is blooming. Even staring at the filth and ruins of the bloody desecration I stroked, I felt it. The vestiges of affliction burrowing into the cold soil and planting petals.”



Ivy’s words have been spinning in my head all night, even in my dreams. I know my wife inside and out. Better than she knows herself. Her gut is always tuned in. Even when she’s slow to connect the dots, she senses things.

At three thirty in the morning, I drag myself out of bed, throw on jeans and a T-shirt, and leave my Little Storm asleep beneath the covers. When I breeze through the expansive kitchen, Gage is perched on a stool at the breakfast bar island. His eyes land on me with disappointment. Not who he was hoping to see.

I chuckle, uttering, “She’s sleeping,” as I pin him with a challenging gape.

He slouches his shoulders, even as his mouth wrenches up at the corner, conceding that Ivy sleeping *is* the goal. After he sulks through a sip of coffee, he collects himself enough to regard me. “Where the hell are you going?”

“I’ve got an errand,” I say, grabbing my keys from the recessed wall cabinet near the garage entrance.

His eyebrows hike up his forehead. “At three in the morning? Need assistance?”

I don’t miss the conflicted swing of his gaze to the back staircase, so I set him at ease. “No, man. Stay in case she wakes up.”

He nods, and I rush out the door. I’m not sure how I’d accomplish anything without the three of them. There would be a constant knot in my chest. I’d never be able to leave her.

We’re out a ways from civilization, so all-night stores are a thirty-minute drive. Still, I’m in and out, and back to the house by a quarter to five. The scents of cinnamon and yeast waft over me as I saunter into the kitchen.

Ivy beams when she spots me, hair up in a messy bun, apron on, and icing a sweet roll. “Morning, Chief. Where’d you run off to?”

“Morning, Little Storm.” I lift the brown paper bag in my hand. “Got us

something.”

Gage crows beside her with a headshake, and Ivy smacks his chest.

“Why is that where your mind goes? You think he ventured out at three a.m. to get something sexy for us?” Her eyes flit to mine in a silent, chiding query.

I wink.

So fucking sexy, baby. Just you wait.

She giggles.

He shrugs, peels the outer layer off a cinnamon roll, and hip-checks my wispy little ginger. “With the way you two barricade yourselves in various areas of the house at all hours of the day and night, who knows?”

Ivy scrunches her lips into a rueful frown, but he wipes it away with a kiss on the cheek.

“Best fucking cinnamon rolls I’ve ever had, Ivy. I’ll guard them *with my life* while you tend to Chief.”

She laughs, leaning into his affection before pushing off toward me and discarding her apron. “They’re only that good because you’re a stellar baking partner.” Whirling back around, she wags a finger at him, adding with a stern set of her jaw, “Leave some for Liam and Ty. They’re taking a cheat day, so they’ll want their fill.”

He stuffs one in his mouth with a muffled, “Yes, ma’am.”

She threads her fingers into my outstretched hand with an impish grin and follows me up the back staircase to our master, not even waiting for us to cross the threshold to coast her hand over my back with a seductive purr. “*God*, you know what it does to me to see you dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Bare feet. *Seriously, Wells*, we have a houseful of people to prepare for.”

I pull her into the room and close the door with a smirk. “Not now, Ives. Always so damn greedy.”

Her eyes squint with a suspicious glint, which is fair. I’m not sure I’ve ever told her we don’t have time to mess around. I might be showing my hand too early, but all logic and sound thinking are drowning in last night’s hot tub.

She smacks me on my chest—pausing in appreciation of my sculpted pecs, which brings a proud smile to my face—before drilling her nail into my muscle with a quizzical, “What’s going on?”

“You were right last night.” I hand her the bag, swallowing my eagerness. “Something is blooming.”

She glances inside, then back at me, mouth agape. “No. I’m on ...” The protest dies on her now-slack tongue. Truth swirling. Gut confirming.

I snake my arm around her waist, erasing the space between us. “We’ve had so much going on, and your cycles are never regular. It makes sense that we missed it. I checked your calendar. You were due for a shot in February. You’ve missed two.”

“Shit,” she hisses, avoiding my gaze. “I don’t even know when my last period was. I’m sor—”

“Don’t even think about it.” I lift her chin and wait for those ocean eyes to see the honesty in mine as her heart thuds erratically against me. “I’m ecstatic. I probably would’ve tampered with your birth control if you hadn’t been struggling.”

“What?” she shrieks with an expression I’ve seen on a handful of occasions, all escorted by the verdict that I’m losing my mind. “Why are you so insane, Wells?”

And there it is.

I shove that away with a subtle headshake. “Don’t focus on that. The *point* is, I’m happy.” Understatement. The thought of her swollen with my child is intoxicating. I’ve always known it would be, but after hearing her fierce rebuttal against Balzano about knitting heirs apparent, I’ve been obsessed with the vision. Despite my fingers scratching the flat plane of her belly, I don’t want to be too enthusiastic in case I’m wrong, so I tack on, “But take those before we celebrate.”

“Eight of them?” She rolls her bratty blues.

“Ivanna,” I growl. “Do I look like a man willing to wait through your obstinacy? Pee in a damn cup. Dip the sticks.” I take her hand with an insistent, “C’mon,” and tow her toward the bathroom.

She scoffs and fists her hair. “You’re not coming in for the urinating part of this. Stand down. I’ll call you once it’s your time to participate.”

With that, she shuts herself inside the bathroom while I pace outside the door for *eternity*.

After my fifth pounding knock, she emerges with her teeth notched firmly in her lip and a timid nod. “Something’s blooming.”

I swoop her into my arms, nestling her against me with a whoop that surely transcends this twenty-seven-thousand-square-foot home. “Jesus Christ, baby. *A baby*. Fuck, I love you so much, Little Storm.” When I pull back to catch her gaze, her eyes are glossy, stilling me. “Oh, Ives. Are you

happy? Unhappy?”

“No. Yes,” she stammers. “So happy and so sad.”

I relax my hold and settle us both in our tufted velvet love seat, cradling her on my lap. She’s probably sad about Tom, but I wait, not wanting to put words in her mouth.

She sighs a couple of beats later. “I love you, and I want this baby. So much.” She wraps her arms over her stomach. “I just wish my dad were here. He would’ve ...”

“Yeah,” I agree, tugging her closer. “He would’ve been an amazing grandpa. In a way, he still will be. So much of who he was is in both of us. He’ll leave his mark on this child too.”

Her eyes sweep up to me, relief sharpening into a smile. “He *is* in both of us. And he’d be livid if he knew I was lamenting instead of celebrating, so no more tears.” She straightens with a resolute swipe of her grief. “We’re having a baby. Holy smokes.” Burying her face in my neck, she adds, “Fuck that Balzano prick.”

That has us both laughing until our lips collide in tender rejoicing. *Christ*, I love this woman.

An hour later, Liam texts me.

Graves: Why the fuck is Landry here?
He’s tight-lipped and not invited in until
you respond.

I jaunt down to the front porch to find Liam smoking a cigarette and pinning Dr. Landry with a skeptical glare, who doesn’t seem offended in the least.

Liam turns that glare on me. “What the hell is going on?”

“I asked him to come,” I say, not bothering to expound.

Liam scans me and then drops his cigarette to the ground, extinguishing it with his shoe. “What’s wrong with her?”

I consider blowing him off, but the panic etched into his features is too thick. “Not wrong. She’s”—my mouth splits with an idiotic smile—“pregnant.”

He scrubs a hand over his dazed face. “Pregnant. Thank fuck.” As he hauls me into a hug, he continues muttering, “I thought ... I was so scared.” His voice rises with increasing excitement. “Congratulations, Chief. *Jesus*, I’m so happy for you guys. For *us*.” He pats me on the back and as he steps

away with a firm grip on my shoulder, his jaw falls lax, as though he's been handed the answers to all life's mysteries. "I'm gonna be a goddamn uncle."

And with that epiphany, I'm forgotten. Liam sprints into the house, shouting expletives, while I guide Landry up to Ivy.

The clamor of the chaos currently unfolding in my bedroom reverberates throughout the house, reaching us before we're even on the second-floor landing. Liam must have gathered up Gage and Ty on the way in because all three are fussing over the mama-to-be.

"Freckles! Holy shit! A miniature Freckles," Ty bellows.

Ivy's voice is fainter, but filled with so much joy that it causes a crest of emotion to swell inside my chest. "Or a miniature Chief," she counters.

"Fuck, that could be fun too," Liam says. "We get to boss this one around."

Ivy laughs. "That's an angle I haven't—"

"Fuck that. I want a girl," Gage barks in his gruff tenor.

The room falls silent, and even though Landry and I are about to enter, I motion to him to pause, eager to hear how this plays out.

Ivy is the first to speak, her tone a sweet warble. "Really?"

"Yeah. Really?" Ty parrots.

Gage grunts, and I can hear Liam quietly snickering at his discomfort, but he finally answers, "If anyone should be raising a woman, it's Ivy. One branch without spoiled fruit." There is no higher praise from Gage Porter.

I don't have to see or hear the tears to know they're there. Landry and I walk in to witness Ivy enfolded by the three men who've stood by me through everything. Our beginning was rotted with so much sourness; it's a wonder any of us made it here.

Tasting hope.

Ivy catches sight of me before the guys do. Our eyes lock, and in some unspoken way, I know we're thinking the same thing. Tom is here with us. The twisted roots of all his labor have flourished into vines twining around my girl right now. We might be bringing our child into a precarious world, fraught with threats and deception and far more risks than we'd like, but there will be no baby loved like this one. No family more diligent or protective. That's all he ever wanted for his little girl—for her to seize what was hers. And that she has.

After I shoo the guys away, Landry performs an ultrasound on Ivy with his portable machine, revealing she's eleven weeks along. Everything looks

good. Relief floods us both, as well as a gratefulness that she's been eating better lately and consuming limited alcohol.

With so many people visiting today, Ivy was excited to share our news, but I nixed that quickly. We won't be able to divulge this pregnancy until we thoroughly ascertain the threat level. She's annoyed but compliant—I hope.

The party takes off smoothly. Many of our guests flew in, so people traipse in at various hours in the afternoon, which provides us with an easiness to greet and mingle. Of course, the guys won't let Ivy lift a finger. If the four of us were less doting under ordinary circumstances, I'd say that was a dead giveaway, but those who've been around us don't tend to notice a difference.

It's Celeste who tracks the guys' movements with a scrutinizing eye. She watches as they amble by, kissing Ivy's hair or asking if she needs anything while she's tucked inside my arms. I'm sure, to others, it begs a myriad of questions, but to the men who spent years merely existing, she's the one who stoked the spark of life back into their lives. She's the one who's growing a new one now.

At the moment, Ivy is on my lap, resting for a beat. Celeste is seated next to us, drooling over the Noire brothers while also decidedly gauging her best friend's new environment.

Liam drops into the empty chair beside Celeste, parking an equally scrutinizing gaze on her. "What's your problem, Carver? No one here to fuck you into a coma?" That's nearly a direct quote from the fraudulent text he sent from Celeste to Ivy. Always stirring shit.

"Jesus Christ," I hiss as Ivy quietly groans.

She must be waiting to see what Celeste's response is because it's unlike my Little Storm to hold her tongue.

Celeste rolls her whiskey eyes, a sardonic smirk lifting one corner of her mouth. "I knew it was you. Nothing better to do with your time than study me, huh? Trying to be someone you're not—*again*. Does it sting, *Graves*? Knowing you're always playing a part and never the one getting your *fill*?"

Ouch. What the fuck is happening here?

Ivy squeezes my hand, as if asking the same question.

Liam raises his beer bottle to his mouth, his eyes swirling with both mirth and irritation as they slowly, deliberately, rake over Celeste's curves. "Don't flatter yourself, dollface. I had you figured out in less than a minute. You aren't that deep. Horny, desperate, and hiding behind your pearls. Case

solved.” He sputters when Ivy stabs him with a reproachful glare. “But,” he continues, “even if it had taken days, it would’ve been worth it. Hearing from you made our girl happy.” He digs into his jeans for his cigarettes, but as he looks at them, his eyes snap to Ivy, so he shoves them back down and stands. “Taking care of Ivy is what matters.”

Noticing his hesitation, Ivy shimmies off my lap to stand, too, pointing for Liam to sit. “Keep Wells company. Celeste and I are supposed to rescue Rena.”

At first, I’m assuming that’s completely fabricated, but Axel and Ryker are laying into an exasperated Rena about God knows what. That poor girl will never find a guy with those two hovering and the other three close behind, even with Ivy in her corner.

“Don’t be long. It’s getting dark.” I rise up to kiss her cheek, my hand sliding possessively over her lower back. “Fireworks.”

Although the Noire brothers are coming and going in shifts because of their duties at the resort, they’re setting the fireworks off for us. Jax, in particular, enjoys explosions, so he’s experienced. Ivy even smooth-talked him into coordinating it to classical music for my benefit.

“I’ll be back. Fifteen-ish minutes.” She shrugs at Liam for confirmation, and he winks, letting her know that’s adequate.

As soon as she and Celeste wander away, I resume my seat and glance at him as he lights a cigarette and pulls a lengthy drag, plunking into the chair Celeste was occupying.

“Thanks,” I tell him, impressed he thought of the precaution himself.

He blows a plume of smoke up to the sky. “Don’t thank me until I quit.”

“Quit?” The question wheezes out of me in shock. He called me a cocksucker when I quit, insisting the *brain doctor* psycho-manipulated me into it. He loved Tom, but I think it bugged him that I was influenced by someone outside the four of us. Little did he know, it was the brain doctor’s daughter.

“That’s the plan. Can’t have this shit around them.” He flicks the glowing cherry, and my lungs tighten. I’m awed by that level of commitment from him for my wife and child—his family too. The Little Storm strikes again. Liam doesn’t change for people.

“Listen.” His inflection shifts deeper, business mode. “I’m not sure what I’ve got, but something fucked up is happening with Carver Homes.”

That’s Frank Carver’s company, Celeste’s father. He isn’t clean by any

stretch. He's a member of The Order, but his dirt and indiscretions are generally well covered in his construction sites.

"Elaborate."

"I can't." He pauses for a hit, releasing it with his clarification. "Looked like a steep contract out against him. Not sure for what. Dark web chatter. Parts missing. It was a shadow, taken down, but from what I can tell, it involves the Skulls."

"Fuck," I hiss.

The Skulls are an underground group. They operate by no one's rules—ugly and rabid. You do what they want, or you pay in blood. That's their mantra. But they never mess with KORT. That's asking for war—a war that would end them, although not without catastrophic loss to our organization. They aren't to be taken lightly.

"Get security on the Carver family," I order. "Eyes on them twenty-four/seven. I'll contact Frank. Keep digging. Do you have tracking on Celeste's phone?"

"Got it."

"What's with you two?" I ask, noticing the vexed cut of his jaw. "Is this because she accused you of faking your death or keeps rubbing the misconception of Ivy's rejection in your face?"

That's all behind us. We've come to an understanding, and he's content with how things are between him and Ivy, between all of us.

"No." He sighs. "Not that specifically. I've never felt rejected by Ivy. The opposite actually. So, the jab doesn't bother me. But Celeste bugs the shit out of me—so goddamn pompous." His face twists in aggravation.

"She's important to Ivy," I remind him.

"I know," he says, the ashes of his cigarette growing longer as he stews. "That's why I held my tongue."

"Right," I roar before barely coughing out the words, "Well done, brother," and shoving a handful of Sour Skittles into my mouth. No scotch today. I'm suffering alongside my bride.



IVY

On our way to rescue Rena, Celeste and I run into Ty. Although a more accurate depiction would be that Ty accosts me. He beelines for me from across the yard, where he was playing bartender, abandoning a conversation with Luca and Rosaline—Wells’s grandparents.

“Hey, girls,” he chirps, addressing us both before cutting our brief greetings off by pulling me close, planting a cold, miniature water bottle in my hand, and launching into an interrogation about what I’ve eaten.

I set an irked gaze on him while pointedly gulping the entire contents of said bottle and passing the empty back to him with a contrived smile. It goes without saying that my husband will be neurotic about, well, *anything* concerning me or his baby. But it’s plain that all of these men are going to be intolerable for the next six months, and once he or she arrives, they’ll probably make my parents’ helicopter parenting look like neglect. Frustrating, but I love it. It’s exactly what my father would have wanted.

Leaning into Ty’s embrace, I keep my voice low so only he can hear. “I’m good. Promise. But you all need to chill out. I’m terrified you’re all going to croon ‘Goodnite, Sweetheart, Goodnite’ at my stomach. Won’t be much of a secret then.”

He chuckles. “Right. *Four* men,” he quips, confirming he picked up the *Three Men and a Baby* reference. “Sorry, Freckles. It’s been a big day.” He pecks my temple and straightens, the taut strain of his voice and expression surrendering to a feigned casualness. “What are you girls up to?”

“Rescuing Rena,” Celeste supplies, her eyes devouring the handsome Noire brothers, who are heatedly conducting their own interrogation.

Ty scans the scene, but his gaze lingers on a softer, spunkier Noire. “Yeah, you should. They’ve been fighting all day. She was supposed to bring a date, but he—”

“Was unexpectedly delayed,” I finish. “We’ve heard the rant. Give us some girl time, okay? Distract Rena’s *guards* and my husband until fireworks.”

Ty’s the easiest with my pleas, although the guys have been chastising him for it lately, so it’s more challenging than it used to be.

His eyes fling between Celeste and me, Wells and Liam, to Rena, and back. “I’ll run interference, but be good.”

I howl incredulously, eyebrows pinched tight. “We’re at home, hosting a party. What the hell would I do?” Before he can think about it, I kiss his cheek with a chaste, “Thanks,” and scurry off, arm in arm with Celeste.

“Oh, we need some fucking girl talk all right.” She balks. “I’ve got questions, bestie.”

“Hold them until we grab Rena,” I say out of the side of my mouth, right as I plant myself before Ryker and Axel with petitioning eyes. “Can we steal her?” I link my free arm with Rena’s. United we stand.

Axel flashes his customary pearly grin. It’s all charisma and charm for the reigning debauchery king of New Orleans. “You ladies look lovely tonight. Great party, Ivy.”

“Thanks, Axel. I’m glad you all made it for at least a bit.” My eyes set on Ryker. “So?”

He and I have struck both a respect for one another and a friendship since we moved here.

“Sure.” His glacial blues swirl with a tender warmth. He’s been privy to some of my struggles, and much like my guys, he’s harbored some uncharacteristic guilt and worry. “You good?”

I nod. He’s nearly as sweet as my four guys these days too. “Better,” I assure him.

His smile is wistful and pensive as he shoves his hands in his pockets on an exhale. “Good.” He kicks his chin toward Rena. “See if you can stamp out the defiance in my little pest here.”

“Might be easier if you come up with a new term of endearment,” I gibe.

“It fits,” he deadpans. “You and Wells are coming on Monday, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I call out as we drag Rena away before he can change his mind.

Wells and I have been lunching with Ryker and Axel on Mondays since the move. I hang with Rena afterward while they discuss guy stuff and gruesome subjects I prefer to claim plausible deniability on.

As I haul the girls to the house so we can have some privacy, I commend Rena. “You are getting so much better. You didn’t interrupt once to get a jab in, and see, I got you outta there lickety-split.”

“It isn’t in my nature, but I can’t deny it’s more efficient.” She bleats a humorous laugh. “I’m at my wits’ end. I know they fucking did something. Nick was all set to come, and now, he’s ghosting me. Makes no sense. I’m piercing my clit. And then I’m going to describe it to them until their ears bleed.”

“Ouch.” I shiver at the thought and briefly consider it. *No.* “Do not pierce *anything* down there. I’m working on them. You have to give me time.” I’m

sure that's little consolation, but Rena's proclivity for poking holes in her body is dizzying.

"So, what?" Celeste chimes. "They expect you to never date anyone? How does that make sense?"

"Apparently, they'll be fine with her dating when *they* find someone suitable," I explain, repeating the essence of the lengthy excuse Axel and Ryker provided when I last chastised them about it.

"There will *never* be anyone suitable." Rena throws a dejected hand into the air as we meander around some empty lounge chairs on the flagstone patio and enter the morning room through the sliding glass doors. The scent of seared meat and vegetables wafts inside with us from the grill Gage is manning. Rena's shoulders slump with a grumbled, "I'll be an old hag with a houseful of hissing brothers instead of cats."

"No way we're letting that happen," I promise. I've been easing them into granting Rena more freedom. It's much like feeding a baby with the airplane method. Sometimes, they spit out everything I offer. Good practice. "Kitchen or library?" I ask.

"Kitchen has alcohol," Celeste reasons to which Rena whoops.

To the kitchen we go.

Aside from the stunning two-story library Wells crafted me—fit with French doors, a rolling ladder, a Juliet balcony, and all the coziness a massive, country-chic reading room should embody—the kitchen is my favorite room in the house. Liam and I worked tirelessly with a decorator to create the same vibe as we had in Ohio but with two large islands—one with a bar top for eating and one for prep work; it's far more functional and capable of being home to many.

While we still have a chef who preps a lot of freezer meals for us, the guys and I do quite a bit of cooking. Our time has been so special in this home, even amid the difficult days. They've come through for me, shining brighter than the glint on the stainless steel fridge in a time that's been as dark as the black siding on the island. The kitchen is a beautiful representation of who our family is and who we will grow to become.

I hold up a bottle of Grey Goose vodka, and the girls both murmur approval, so I snatch the pitcher of lemonade from the fridge and grab three glasses. I've already gone to battle with Celeste about alcohol today, using Wells not wanting us to be intoxicated at our own party as an excuse. A fraying thread of truth. His penance for making me lie was to join me in

sobriety. Liam ran to the store this morning and stocked him a pantry full of Skittles and Tootsie Pops. We'll have to see how long that holds.

"I could work on persuading Axel if you'd like." Celeste indulges in a hefty swig of her drink while waggling her dark brows, ready and willing to sink her teeth into a juicy Noire.

"Off-limits," Rena snaps, finger pointed in warning, fiery green-hazel eyes aghast.

I cackle with a clap of my hands. "Look who's cockblocking now."

"Different," Rena spits defensively. "Axel is the closest thing I have to a father." She turns toward Celeste, her eyes more pleading than angry now. "You wouldn't want me seducing your dad, would you?"

"Fair point," Celeste concedes with a shiver. "My parents are happily married, but the thought is enough to drive the point home. Nauseating." Her eyes crease with a cautious tease. "What about the younger ones?"

Always on the prowl. It's her way of hiding from all that scares her, but I'm not sure she's conscious of that.

I slide a vegetable tray onto the counter, along with some other munchies that are prepped for later. The main food tables are outside and in the morning room, but Celeste might need something to curb her *hunger* while the alcohol flows.

Rena mellows, propping her temple against her fist while lazily hunched over the island beside Celeste. "Ryker is off-limits too, for countless reasons. *And* he's a gigantic pain in the ass. It wouldn't matter about the rest. None of them do relationships. Only sex. Phenomenal role models and probably the reason I'm not allowed to date." She flaps a hand while raising her glass to her mouth. "Anyway, what I don't know won't ruffle me."

Celeste twirls a strand of her long, dark hair, but it's her nefarious expression that catches me. No doubt her mind is in salacious places. "I don't do serious either. Not like our girl here, who seems to be *nailing* down four cocks."

I choke on my lemonade, coughing and sputtering and wishing the burn in my chest were from a sip of Wells's scotch. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ivy," Celeste scoffs, "you're clearly holding out. This is some why-choose shit if I've ever seen one."

"You're fucking high, Lettie," I snipe, lobbing a dish towel across the island at her. "Have you *met* my husband? He'd shoot them for even

imagining it.” The weight of how that would even work crashes into me with an agonizing throb between my thighs. “And I have no idea how any woman manages that in real life. Four men? Wells is on top of me constantly, day and night. I can *always* feel him, like a phantom limb, and that’s when he’s holding back, concerned I need rest.”

Rena returns my earlier favor and comes to my rescue. “It’s true,” she says, plunging a carrot into some ranch dip. “They’re always fucking. She’d be incapacitated attempting to satiate one more, let alone three. And Wells is too tightly wound around Ivy for that to ever work. He scowled a death stare at Ryker for an entire meal because he thought Ryker’s hug with Ivy lingered too long. *Ryker*, who is utterly *obsessed* with his best friend.” *Crunch*. She holds up a ring-adorned index finger for us to wait while she chews, her bracelets jangling with the command. “These guys do all orbit around her, but that’s Ivy. She’s got some bewitching voodoo spell she refuses to share. My brothers think the sun rises and sets with her too.”

Celeste laughs, scooting her stool closer to skim a hand over my outstretched arm while addressing Rena. “I get it. I’ve been hooked on the captivating Ivanna Kingston since the second grade, but Wells doesn’t seem to care when Ty hugs or kisses her hair. No scowling when Liam calls her *our girl* or when Gage carries her off, feet dangling, to sample a cookie he wants to bake *with* her.” She casts a dubious stare at me. “Those guys worship you.”

I guess I knew this was coming. There’s probably some underlying hurt there too. Celeste has always been my ride or die, the center of my tiny world, but that world has expanded beyond anything we could have comprehended. Shaded in deeper, darker hues.

My teeth notch into my lip with a shred of nervousness. “And I worship them, but my husband is the *only* man who I’ve ever had sex with, and that is the way it will always be.” It’s not that I can’t see the beauty in a polyamorous relationship. I’m sure that can be amazing. It’s just not who we are. And I love who we are.

With a deep breath, I paint her a fuller picture. “Ty, Liam, and Gage are a huge part of me though. My family and *more*. My heart. It’s difficult to explain, but knowing you’d die for someone, wading through carnage together, and being a life preserver when they’re drowning in that bloodbath—it’s a bond that surpasses the traditional sense of family. We’re forever linked.”

Celeste chugs the last of her cocktail, and I see the questions coasting over her flawless face, the proprietorial resentment. “And they’d *all* die for you?”

“Absolutely,” I reply with confidence. “And I would for them. *Any* of them.”

It wouldn’t even be a consideration, but maybe that’s not a conviction until your heart is thudding with the bleakness of a loved one’s demise. I would have died to save my parents. I didn’t want to, but I was willing to risk my life. And all four of my guys risked theirs for mine. In this cutthroat reality engulfing us, that’s what you do for family.

I grab her hand, clasping our fingers and glancing between her and Rena. “Like I would for both of you. Although I appreciate the lack of death threats you and Rena bring to my life.” A bemused chuckle puffs out of my heavy lungs. “Who would’ve thought wild Lettie Carver and the Noire princess would be my taste of normalcy?”

A mist of melancholic tears coats Celeste’s gorgeous brown eyes. “In spite of all the pain you’ve endured, especially after losing your dad, you look happy, Ivy. Glowing even. But ... you’re different.”

I squeeze her hand with a sigh, realizing there will be some growing pains here. “My mom keeps saying that too. I *am* different. My life is weird. But it’s a different and weird that I’m proud of. A transformation my father would’ve been proud of. You heard how much Wells loved and respected him in that eulogy, and it’s clear my father felt the same about him. It wasn’t only Wells though. My father loved all of them. I have no doubt he knew who they’d become to me. In this whole mess of my fucked-up life, those four men are my greatest gift. My beauty in the broken.”

She dabs at a tear attempting to escape. Celeste is no stranger to pain, and I’m guessing it’s her absence in both my hardships and healing this past year that hurts. We’ve always weathered those together. Hopefully, in time, she’ll view the guys as an extension of our bond rather than a replacement.

“It’s a lot to wrap my head around,” she admits, “and I can’t stand Liam, but I’m happy for you.”

That makes me laugh, remembering how trying Liam can be at first, although I always found his taunting to be the rugged edge of charming. “He’s a dick sometimes, but we all have our demons. That’s how Liam masks his.”

“Ty doesn’t seem to have any demons,” Rena muses, and I don’t miss the

wistful flutter of her lashes.

Ty's demons are stashed away so deep behind his sweetness; I fear, one day, they'll come roaring to life with a vengeance, but I don't share that.

Instead, I keep it vague. "None of us are unscathed. It's the scars that bind us."

Celeste's shoulders pull back rigidly in some sort of resolution. "I can't promise I'll continue my civility with him. He rankles me."

Great. Still stuck on Liam.

"Go for it. Serve him up all the sass you've got." I grin. "There's nothing you can throw at Liam Graves that he can't volley. That's the best part about him."

"Good," she says, pouring herself another drink—three parts vodka, one part lemonade. "I'll stop holding back."

"Is that what we're calling it?" I balk, suddenly sickened by the idea of them hating each other. "Don't be cruel. You can school him if he's a dick, but don't be needlessly mean. And it's best if you steer clear of jabs that involve the guys or me. Liam is fiercely loyal. Fucking with his inner circle will give him a raging hard-on full of venom."

She doesn't respond, probably sensing my panic. Both girls are quiet, busy chugging their drinks and snacking on munchies. It gives my mind the space to roam, ruminating on how they're my family, too, and I don't want to hide this baby from them. This child needs a village. I haven't been able to tell my mom yet either. It's important I do that in person, and she won't be here until next week because she organizes a Fourth of July community event. It was also a relief for her to avoid Daniel, who she knew would be here too. She's not quite ready to socialize with him, still swarming with mixed feelings about his presence in my life.

Wells won't let me tell Daniel for obvious reasons involving KORT and an extended O'Reilly family we don't fully trust. Daniel took custody of his niece and nephews, though, which solidified the bond forming between us. They visit us every Tuesday afternoon. Daniel meets with Ty and me to help us navigate the ins and outs of KORT business, and then we all eat dinner and swim with the kids. It's been good, but right now, I need to squeal with the girls who ground me.

Swatting away the apprehension over Celeste and Liam sparring, I linger on the vow Celeste and I have always exchanged. *If you're going nowhere, I'm coming with you.* This life and this baby certainly aren't a representation

of going nowhere—quite the opposite—but Celeste and I will be travel companions, no matter what life throws at us. My gut says the same is true of Rena.

I smile a megawatt grin and lean in close. “Moving on, girlies. I have a secret.”

After they both swear not to breathe a word, I unveil my news, which reduces us all to sloppy tears. I sense Wells lingering near us before I see him. He creeps in, shooting me an admonishing glower, but it diminishes when my wet eyes meet his.

I needed this.

Swooping in once our joyful sobbing morphs to quiet laughter, he flicks his eyes to Rena, who is familiar with silent orders from domineering men. She promptly carts Celeste away under the guise of letting her flirt with her brother Cash.

Wells dusts his thumb over my cheekbone, catching the jubilant stains of grateful sorrow—this baby will be woven with a spectrum of colors and shadows and emotions. His conflict is clear by the worrying divot between his eyes. “We agreed not to tell anyone yet. I need time to assess what we’ll be dealing with. It’s not safe, Ivanna.”

“And it never will be,” I counter as another tear spills—this one full of anger for the secrets and threats and hiding. For the losses and the inability to simply bask in the gains. “It’s Celeste and Rena, for God’s sake. There’s no danger there.”

He barks a morose chuckle, laced with some thread of doubt. “There’s danger *everywhere*, Ives, *even with your girlfriends*.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not doing this with you right now. I won’t shut them out.” At his leer, I huff. “I heard a firework. We should get out there.”

He coils around me until I’m enveloped in a cocoon composed of pulsing biceps, chiseled pecs, wandering hands, ragged breaths, and tandem heartbeats. “I know you need them, but I won’t apologize for protecting you and our baby. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

My lips move against the sticky skin on his neck, effusing sugar and his manly cologne—leather, citrus, and spice. But no scotch. Breathing him in, I think maybe releasing his ban on drinking would be preferable. Expensive scotch is so Wells.

“I’m not asking you to apologize,” I whisper. “But you have to let me love the people closest to me even if they’re outside of this house. Otherwise,

it's not really living. Not really celebrating.”

A colorless existence, void of dandelion dreams.

Pressing his lips to mine, he extends a tentative answer, cushioning his disapproval with delicate caresses of his tongue. That's how Wells apologizes. “We'll talk about this later.” A gentle nip on my lower lip. “I love you, Ivy.”

My eyes latch on to his—emeralds that still make my stomach flutter with a thousand butterfly kisses. A gaze that holds me hostage to a world of shooting-star possibilities.

“I love you, Wells. Thank you for protecting us, and thank you for this beautiful family.”

We mosey outside as vibrant sparkles of red, white, and blue reach their fingers into the inky sky with startling shrieks and rumbles. But my eyes crawl over the gathering of spirits. Some would awe at the supreme authority looming in one space. Others would recognize it for the terrifying anarchy it is. But all I see are souls that are mine.

Gritty and unfaltering. *My sticky grains of sand.*

I went from a family of three who hid among the masses to a family of more than a dozen who rules over the shadows.

We curl up in a chair the guys left open for us—Liam and Gage on one side, Ty on the other. I wrap my arm around Wells's neck, my cheek gliding against his bristly scruff as we gape at the show. The pond reflects every romping explosion of patriotic color as a thunderous symphony of Wells's favorite composers conducts the performance.

“Do you think Balzano was right?” I ask him.

He scoffs, popping out his raspberry sucker. “Doubtful, but be more specific.”

My fingers rake through his thick black hair, nudging some fallen strands off his forehead. “Do you think he was right when he said this life was full of suffering?”

His arms cinch around me possessively on a jagged breath. “I won't let anything happen to you or this baby if that's what you're worried about.”

“No.” My eyes peruse the royal-blue star above, speckled with glittery-white pinpricks. “I'm not scared, just wondering how on point it was.”

Suffering is such a palpable sentiment. Is that what's in store, no matter how hard we try?

Wells rasps in an easygoing tenor, obviously attempting to allay my

concerns. “I’m sure we’ll have our share of troubling times, but doesn’t everyone?”

I hum, cognizant of the truth in that statement—all my guys endured unfathomable loss before this life. “I suppose. What about ... do you think it will ever get easier?” I’m not sure what I’m asking—whether it be the PTSD, the grief, my work with KORT, or facing the fact that death is always knocking. Bringing a child into any of it is daunting.

My birth mother’s decision and my father’s sentiment from the letter he wrote me make perfect sense even though I wouldn’t leave this all behind.

Sometimes, running is the bravest thing in this world.

Wells grips my chin, so I look at him instead of the sky. “I think you were built for ironclad trials, Ives. Designed for the fire. It’s in your makeup. We have that in common, so easy won’t ever define our life together. No path we took would have.”

“You think I’m dark?” I ask, wondering if that’s what he means by being made for fire. “Is that another reason you call me a storm?”

“Not dark, baby.” His lips break into a wolfish grin, aglow by the explosive glitter falling through the night. “Blustery with the most shockingly beautiful light. Like those booming fireworks. So much oomph and fight.”

Fight. I am always fighting him, which must be draining for someone who’s used to commanding.

“I’m sorry. You’ve been on the receiving end of that a lot.” My arm drapes across my middle with a creeping insecurity. “Will you ever tire of it?”

“Ivanna,” he growls, eyes fierce. “What do I always tell you?”

I groan, evidently not relinquishing that fight anytime soon. “Not to apologize, which, for the record, will be a *terrible* lesson to pass on to our child, so you need to come up with something else.”

“Noted.” He chuckles, offering me a suggestive lick of his Tootsie Pop. “Don’t apologize for being you though. You’re everything I ever wanted. Everything I never believed I’d have. Loving you, having you in my arms, makes me feel invincible.”

“Invincible?” That word intrigues me because he’s never voiced it before.

My attention floats over the celebratory explosions, the idle chatter surrounding us, and back to this gorgeous, extraordinary man who has my whole heart. *Mine.*

He wraps up the candy, setting it on the arm of our chair, and cradles my

face with the expression that always stills me, seeping into my veins and cells and marrow. The one that assures me this is an epic love, far surpassing my comprehension or insecurities or penchant for fiery resistance. His lips press to mine for a pillowy, sugar-coated union that steals my breath before his emeralds brighten, more dazzling than the glistening sky.

“I never wanted a doe, baby. Anyone can command the weak or steer the docile. It takes a god to conquer the storm.”

THE END

Want more Wells and Ivy? Click [here](#) to snatch a Bonus Chapter.

THANKS FOR READING!

Did you enjoy *Burning Ivy*? Please consider taking a moment to leave a review so others can meet Ivy and Wells.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandy Hynes is the author of steamy, suspenseful dark romance stories. Her specialty is irresistible, morally gray men and the sassy heroines who make them melt. No matter what chaos ensues, her antiheroes and their fierce leading ladies claw their way through rubble to reach a happily ever after.

Brandy lives where the sun is always shining with her family, who is the light of her life, and marvels at how the most beautiful treasures often bloom in the dark. Other than writing, her ideal destination is either lost in a book or poolside with her favorite people.