

DEADLIEST LOVE BOOK FOUR

deadly
PASSION

With Love,
K.O.

HOLLY BLOOM

DEADLY PASSION

DEADLIEST LOVE

BOOK 4

HOLLY BLOOM

DARK BLOOM PUBLISHING

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*To all the readers who would gladly put their morally grey
book boyfriends in their rightful place...
on their knees.*

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

Please note, I'm a UK-based author.

*This book is written in **British English**.*

Spelling and word choice vary from US English—less z's, more s's, and all that jazz.

There will be some fun Brit slang too—hey, you may learn something about our quirky ways!

Be warned...

This book contains mature themes that may be distressing for some readers.

To see the full list of content warnings before reading, please visit [Holly Bloom's website](#) for more details.

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PROLOGUE

IVY

FIVE YEARS EARLIER...

A *ll you have to do is stay quiet, Ivy.*

If you tiptoe around, avoid the creaky floorboard that sounds like a cawing bird, and make a break for the bedroom, he might think you're asleep.

“Where do you think you're going?” Spencer's slurs send a shiver of dread scuttling down my spine; shattering my hopes of not facing him tonight.

He's been spending more evenings out lately, and I can't stand him when he drinks. He turns into a raging asshole who takes his frustration out on whoever—and whatever—stands in his way. His simpering friends follow him around like loyal cultists, overlooking his crazy mood swings, but I refuse to. What happened to the charming man I used to know?

“I'm heading to bed,” I call nervously, hoping he accepts it and doesn't follow me, quickening my pace through the library.

I check my phone and see a text from Daisy. She's sent her third funny dog meme of the day, along with a text.

I miss you. You need to come and visit soon. How are things?

It's been a month since I saw her, but it feels like forever—especially now that I'm cooped up in a mansion that's becoming a prison. Now I know how Rapunzel felt. The last time we spoke on the phone, I confided in her about Spencer and I going through a rough patch, but I don't want her to think badly of him, so I type out a quick reply to avoid raising alarm bells:

Just dandy - really busy! Fun, fun, fun! We'll get something in the diary soon.

Suddenly, the library door swings open. It smacks into the opposing wall with a bang and punches a hole through the plaster. Spencer follows, hurtling towards me before I can move. He snatches my phone from my hands and launches it across the room, causing the screen to crack when it hits the hardwood floor. That'll be the third one he's broken over the last few weeks, but Spencer always buys me a new one. Money means nothing to him. He dishes it out like Santa gives presents.

“Hey!” I yell, turning to face him. I may be small, but I can be scrappy. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

“Texting another guy, are you?” he accuses, pointing a shaky finger in my direction. “You little slut! I've only been gone for a few hours, and you're already spreading your legs!”

Now isn't the time to remind him he's been on a six-hour binge-drinking sesh with his rowing club buddies.

“I was texting my sister,” I say, hurrying across the room to pick up my phone. Despite the smashed screen, it still looks to be in working order, and I stash it in my pocket before he has the chance to take it again.

Behind Spencer, Maria—his dutiful housekeeper—pokes her head around the door to check on us. Concern is etched over her wrinkled face as she studies us. She's been giving me that same look more and more recently. She doesn't always

stay overnight, but I've noticed her lingering whenever Spencer has evening plans.

"Mr Bexley," Maria greets him, shuffling inside. "I heard you were home. Do you want me to bring you something to eat or drink? A coffee? Water, perhaps?"

"Water?" Spencer scoffs, his spit spraying over her cheeks as he towers over the small woman. "We're going to carry on the party—aren't we, I've?"

I hate him using my sister's nickname for me. It sounds mocking rolling off his sharp tongue when he's in this state.

"Water sounds great, Maria," I say firmly, shooting her a grateful smile.

She's worked for the Bexley family for years. No matter how badly he talks down to her, she weathers it with a friendly face and never-ending gratitude, making me question how badly Spencer's father must have treated her before him.

"Don't listen to her, Maria," Spencer orders, putting her in the difficult position of being stuck in the middle. "She doesn't know what I want."

"I'll come back soon in case you change your mind," she says, then bows her head to Spencer before hurrying away.

I have a sneaky suspicion she isn't coming back to check if Spencer wants refreshments but to see that I'm okay. Sickness stirs in my stomach at the realisation of how relieved I am to know someone else is in the house and the thought that it may not always be that way...

Thankfully, Maria's interruption seems to have made Spencer forget about my phone and the affair with an imaginary man.

Instead, he waltzes over and grabs my wrist roughly to pull me closer.

"Dance with me," he commands.

The smell of stale cigar smoke clings to his clothes, making me want to gag. It's past midnight, and I've been watching a new series to stay awake. Before he left, Spencer

promised he'd take me to dinner, but that went out of the window fast.

"I'm pretty tired," I say, stifling a yawn and trying to pull away. "I think I'm going to call it a—"

His eyes blaze in vicious fury as his grip on me tightens. His fingers dig into my hips possessively. "No!"

Spencer has grown up with all of life's privileges, and no one has ever refused him. I guess that's to be expected when you're the sole heir to a mammoth family fortune. I've tried to ignore some of his bratty and entitled tendencies, choosing to focus on how he could be sweet and caring. But I was over his petulant temper tantrum tonight.

"No, Spencer," I insist, tugging myself out of his grasp with force. "I'm going to bed. Really."

His cheeks redden. I'll leave him to drown his sorrows, then he can grovel over the breakfast table like he always does. I turn to leave, but he doesn't want to let me go. He grabs my shoulders and forces me to face him.

"I want you to come to the Collingsbrook Ball with me," he says. "You can meet my friends and family. I want to show you off to everyone."

The ball is an esteemed social event I'd love to attend, but this isn't how I envisioned him asking me to be his plus one.

"Let go of me," I say, struggling to free myself from him. "You're hurting me."

"Say you'll come to the ball with me."

"Ask me again tomorrow," I say.

"I've given you everything!" he yells. "I moved you out of the slum you were living in. I gave you a new home, bought you a new wardrobe, took you to the best restaurants, and this is how you're going to repay me? You're an ungrateful bitch, Ivy!"

"We'll talk about it in the morning," I say. If I don't stand up to him now, I never will. What started as a fairytale whirlwind romance was turning sour. "When you're sober."

With that, he grabs my hair, wraps it around his fist and uses it to propel me across the room. I fall to the ground with a thud, whimpering as I raise my hand to my scalp, not believing what just happened. I knew he had a vicious streak when he drank, but I never thought he'd be violent.

I expect him to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness, but he doesn't. He cackles and advances. He picks up a heavy oil lamp and throws it in my direction like a child throwing a Lego block. I manage to dodge it, but he keeps picking up more items. A paperweight, books, and a vase fly across the room while I crawl to safety behind the sofa.

“Spencer!” I screech. “Stop!”

He doesn't. His shoes crunch on the broken fragments under his feet as he continues his pursuit. I clamber to my feet and use the sofa arm to balance me.

“This isn't you,” I say, trying to reason with him, but he can detect the fear in my voice, which only makes him laugh.

“You can't hide from me,” he warns.

I try backing away, but he has me cornered. My body trembles as he pins me against the wall. His hands clasp around my throat.

“Spencer, stop!” I wail, hating how pathetic my voice sounds as he raises his hand to strike me across the face. “I'll come to the ball with you, okay?”

He freezes as if time stands still, and his face breaks into a dazzling smile. He drops his hold instantly and leans to brush his lips against mine like nothing's happened.

“I knew you'd make the right decision,” he purrs. “I'm going to show the world that you're mine, Ivy Penrose. All mine. Now that I've got you, I won't let you go.”

I knew I had to leave him after that night.

That decision changed the course of my entire life.

Years later, Spencer Bexley still hasn't paid for what he did to me, but his time will come... if I can live long enough to make sure justice is served.

CHAPTER 1

CALLEN

PRESENT DAY...

Great job, dipshit.

Why did Bram have to act like a gentleman?

Ivy Penrose deserved to bleed for her lies, but he decided to be her knight in shining armour and jump in front of a bullet. What happened to feminism? Equal rights, equal fights —am I right?

Freddie's gun still points at where the shooter stood a few seconds before. The sound of it firing reverberates through the lower floor, making my brain rattle and eardrums ring.

“Bram!” Freddie lowers his weapon and spins to see Seb dropping to the floor.

Ivy's already crouched next to Bram, holding his head in her lap and mumbling like she's never seen a dying man before. You'd think she'd be used to it in her profession, or maybe she's pretending to care about him.

Does she think we're that gullible? Her tears are fake, just like the story she's fed us. Even though her pussy may have drawn the Dukes in like an irresistible flytrap, holding Bram close to her panties won't heal his bullet wound.

Bram's eyelids flutter closed.

“Stay with us,” Seb says, slapping Bram’s cheek.

“We’re here, Bram,” Ivy purrs, stroking his head like he’s her pet.

Seb directs a venomous look her way. His jaw tenses, wrestling the urge to scream at her to let him go. Then he looks at the blood spilling from Bram’s wound, and his anger turns to anguish. He and Bram are close.

A bullet isn’t the only injury the big man has. He has another gnarly mark on his chest, likely from a branding iron, and has an infected cut on his calf. The Killers Club has done a number on him.

Ivy attempts to stem the bleeding. His blood is well and truly on her hands.

“Come on,” Seb murmurs, putting his large hands over Ivy’s. Bram’s blood slips through their fingers, staining the cuffs of Seb’s white shirt. “Stay awake!”

“We need to get out of here,” Freddie barks. He’s trying to hold it together, but panic lurks behind his words. He turns to me in accusation. “Callen, why are you just standing there?”

Should I let Bram die as a punishment for allowing himself to be kidnapped? I’ve rejoined the Dukes but won’t forget how easily they cast me aside. I know what my brother would do in this situation; Torean would use this opportunity to teach them a lesson, allowing Bram to die to prove a point.

“He’s losing consciousness,” Ivy yells. “Callen! You need to help him!”

Her freckles look more pronounced against her pale skin than usual, accentuating the dark bags under her eyes. She looks almost as shit as Bram does. Still, seeing her again sends blood rushing to my cock. I shouldn’t be thinking about fucking her at a time like this, except damn... I can’t help myself.

“We need to move him,” I say, making a snap decision and going into autopilot. I’m not my twin. “We’re going to need more space.”

And if we don't leave now, we're all going to die when more Killers Club agents arrive to find another dead body we're responsible for.

Freddie and Seb grunt from exertion as they haul Bram onto his feet. They put his arms over their shoulders and drag his swaying figure over to a nearby van. The same one the Killers Club bundled Bram into when they kidnapped him at the Conservatory. Karmic justice, or what?

Ivy scurries ahead, throwing open the doors for Seb and Freddie to stash him inside.

"Can you drive?" Seb asks Freddie. He's normally our designated driver, but his hands are shaking more than a chihuahua trying to take a shit on a snowy day. "I-I-I—"

"On it," Freddie says, not needing to hear anymore.

We already have one life-threatening injury to handle.

"The system recognises the registration plates," Ivy explains, pointing at a device on the wall. "The keys are waiting in the ignition, and the doors will open automatically, so you can drive straight out."

She climbs into the back of the van as Freddie gets out.

"We need to go somewhere safe." I grab Freddie's arm. "Torean can help us if you'll let him."

Freddie's jaw clenches, even as he nods curtly in resigned reluctance.

"You know where to go," I say.

We're out of options.

"Callen!" Ivy yells. "Are you going to get in and do something or let him bleed to death?"

Who does she think she is giving *me* orders?

"If you don't want us to leave you here with your dead friend, I'd think carefully before you open your mouth again," I snarl, but follow her and slam the door shut behind me while Freddie starts the engine.

Bram's laid on his back with Seb and Ivy kneeling on either side to hold him in place. A dim, orange glow from the lights above illuminates the shackles attached to the van's sides and a locked black box in the corner.

Ivy nudges her head at the box. "There's a first aid kit in there. The code is 2322."

I tap it in, hesitating before pressing confirm. "There better not be a bomb in here..."

"I'm not you. Just open it," she snaps in her usual demanding tone.

I press the button, and the lid springs open. "Well, what do you know..." I let out a low whistle. "It looks like Ivy knows how to tell the truth after all, Seb."

"Do you have everything you need?" Seb asks, watching me pull out the kit and check its contents. I should have all the supplies I need. As well as the kit, there's a set of keys in the box for what I assume are the van's chains.

"Lock her up before we start," I order, throwing Seb the keys. He fumbles but catches them.

Ivy's jaw drops, and then she tries to make excuses. "You don't need to—"

"You're lucky we let you live," Seb interrupts coldly, grabbing the chain nearest to him and snatching her wrist roughly.

She's too weak to object as he forces her hand into the cuff and winces like he slapped her. The cuffs click as he fastens them without looking at her, which makes me smirk. Did she expect to skip off into the sunshine with Prince Charming? Her gallant knights—the men who desperately tried to impress her before—are gone. She's going to meet the real Dukes and see our dark side.

The engine growls to life as we pull away.

"Try to keep him steady," I say, not acknowledging her.

Bram's eyes keep flickering as he fights to stay awake. With Seb and Ivy—even tied—on either side of him, it should

stop Bram from jostling around too much. I have a task to do. I've always performed under pressure, hence why I made such a good doctor.

I hum while I put on my rubber gloves and inspect Bram's injury. He's losing a lot of blood, but I've pulled people back from the brink of death before. Like the Grim Reaper, I can choose to save lives or take them.

Seb pales while I take a deep breath and clean the wound. He's squeamish around blood when he's not the one doing the damage.

Seb's voice trembles. "He'll be okay, won't he?"

I ignore him and address Bram, "It's your lucky day, Bram. After this, you can never complain when I steal your custard creams again..."

CHAPTER 2

IVY

I shake the cuffs and chain. Yep, I'm definitely tied down alright. Seb avoids looking in my direction. He chews on his lip, too scared to blink in case he misses Bram's dying breath. I should say something, but what good would that do? He hates me. They all do.

I lied and betrayed them.

Now, they've bound me like an animal, and they're going to make me pay. Maybe it's what I deserve. Maybe I'd even happily accept whatever they did to me next if Callen saved Bram's life.

Callen's already hard at work, sweat dripping down his forehead in concentration as he approaches the task with laser focus. He's entered a trance-like state, withdrawing into his own world and letting everything else disappear. He hums under his breath to the tune of *'Staying Alive'* as he busies himself.

"Do you have to hum?" Seb snaps.

"Do you want me to save your boy or not?" Callen raises his eyebrows. Suddenly, the van swerves to the right, causing us all to be thrown to the side and making Bram's body skid into mine. "Hold him still, for fuck's sake!"

Seb grips Bram's other shoulder while I reach for Bram's hand. His arm is outstretched, hiding it from the view of Callen and Seb. I should say something to Bram—anything—to let him know that it'll be okay, but nothing comes. My

fingers stroke his, hoping this says more than words could. He should understand that better than anyone.

“This is going to hurt like a bitch.” Callen frowns at Bram’s wound as he finishes cleaning it. “I’ll need your tie.”

Seb’s nose scrunches in confusion, thinking Callen’s really gone insane. “My tie?”

“Now!” Callen roars.

Seb undoes it hastily with shaking hands and puts it into Callen’s waiting palm. Bram’s skin is turning grey fast as his life drains away. He battles to keep his eyes open. I’ve seen men die before and, as soon as their eyes close, they’re gone.

Callen bundles Seb’s pale blue tie into a ball, then hovers it over Bram’s lips. Bram’s eyes flicker open, giving me renewed hope. He’ll make it through this, won’t he?

“Open wide,” Callen instructs.

He knows he has to do this.

Bram opens his mouth, but Callen doesn’t wait. He’s forceful, shoving the fabric inside like he’s trying to stuff a duvet into a sheet as quickly as possible.

“You’re going to suffocate him!” I wail.

Callen tilts his head to the side. “Can you hear anything, Sebastian?”

So that’s how he’s going to play it...

“You’re going to hurt him,” I say, unable to keep the terror from creeping into my voice.

“Do you want me to silence you too, princess?” Callen’s chilling gaze sends a shiver down my spine, making me recoil. He’s evil. “Unless you’re choking on my cock, I don’t want to hear it.”

“You sick fuck,” I snarl. How could I have had sex with a monster like him? Let alone, do it more than once...

Callen ignores me, then addresses Bram in a softer voice, “Now bite down hard. You know what I’m going to do.” An

apologetic smile crosses Callen's lips, but I can't be sure I'm not seeing things because it vanishes a second later. "This will hurt like a bitch."

I wince but refuse to look away as Callen makes an incision and digs around under Bram's skin to retrieve the bullet trapped inside him. Bram writhes around in pain; his face contorts in a muffled scream, but Seb holds him still. He's still holding my hand, and his grip tightens, but he doesn't squeeze too tightly—even at this moment, he's trying not to hurt me.

The colour from Seb's cheeks drains until he's paler than Bram, so I poise myself, ready to take over in case he passes out.

Callen's brow creases in concentration. "Almost there...."

"Come on, Cal," Seb encourages.

"Yeah, like that asshole needs any encouragement," I grumble sarcastically under my breath, despite secretly cheering him on.

Blood spurts from Bram's wound like a jacuzzi jet. I'm not sure how Callen can even see what he's doing, but his movements are precise and calculated, unblinking as he continues in determination.

"Got it," Callen declares, holding the bullet up in triumph between his fingers like it's an Oscar. The only thing he'll be winning is the 'managing to remain a dick while saving someone's life' award.

Suddenly, Bram's body stops moving and twitching. His grip on me slackens. He's been fighting for so long. He can't do it anymore...

"Bram!" Seb shouts, sensing the instant shift. "Stay with us!"

CHAPTER 3

BRAM

The whirring of the outside streets reverberates around my mind, both distant and deafening at the same time: cars honking, sirens, and the distant buzz of conversations. I try to hold on and make sense of them, but the harder I try, the further away they get.

Darkness shrouds me, trapping me with no escape. It whisks me under its shadowy cloak and pulls me in another direction. I'm sucked into a vast vortex, tumbling into the blackness... then I see them.

Relentless flames.

Anguished faces with unblinking eyes.

The people I killed.

I hurtle towards them. Death closes in. It breathes down my neck like a biting breeze despite the burning fire filling my vision. When I try to shake the image, I'm catapulted into another scene.

It's night-time. I'm in a grimy alleyway, surrounded by a heckling crowd, watching over myself from above like I'm in a scene in a film. Behind me is the pub I just stumbled out of. After leaving the army, I spent my days drinking. Alcohol helped me forget and separate myself from the man I'd become. It dulled my senses, but it didn't provide respite for long. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't escape the monster that had made itself at home inside me. It was me, and I was it.

I deserve to die. Slowly. Painfully. As soon as the Killers Club took me, it was only a matter of time. My misdeeds weighed down on my consciousness heavier than any mound of soil could.

I can't run from what I've done. Saving Ivy was supposed to be an act of redemption, but that only led to a bigger curse. It's fitting that she's part of my undoing. A cruel twist of fate, laughing at me for believing I could be capable of something good.

I hear her voice. I can't be sure if it's real or a figment of my imagination. I threw myself in the bullets path to give her the second chance she never got with the Killers Club. Maybe there was hope for her this time...

My final act of redemption.

Like me, Ivy is lost. With the Dukes, she may have a chance.

Freddie turned my life around once. He could do the same for her. Years ago, he found me passed out in a doorway after consuming my body weight in the cheapest spirit I could find. He showed me that I could be useful, and being part of the Dukes gave me a real family for the first time... and Ivy could have that, too.

She hasn't realised it yet, but she has more to give. She deserves to have a life that revolves around more than death and murder. Ivy isn't like other women. She can't be broken because her soul has already been smashed to smithereens. She needs to heal, and the Dukes can help put her back together.

When we were together in the dungeon, she made me feel something I hadn't felt in a long time. As much as I've been content with my life, using my tech skills to support the Dukes, she made me realise that I've not allowed myself to feel true emotions for years. When I wanted to give up and accept my death, she was my reason to keep fighting.

"Bram!" Seb calls my name. "You have to stay with us! Keep listening to my voice."

“We’re losing him...” a gruff Scottish voice growls.

If I could groan, I would. Maybe dying would be better than giving Callen the satisfaction of knowing he saved my life. He doesn’t need any help to boost his enormous ego.

“Bram...” Ivy whispers.

Her breath caresses my cheek, and then everything fades to black.

CHAPTER 4

FREDDIE

I grind my teeth as Torean Campbell smirks. He leans casually against the gate to a building site surrounded by ‘Keep Out’ signs.

I lower the window and sneer, “I didn’t expect a welcome committee.”

“Anything for my brother,” he replies, opening the gate for me to pass.

I make the sharp turn and speed through, kicking up a dust cloud over his black suit. I’m furious that we had to ask him for help, but we’re out of options with the Killers Club on our tail. It’s too risky to return to any building we’re familiar with. Doing something I wouldn’t usually consider is our best plan of action. We can’t be predictable at a time like this, no matter how much I distrust Torean.

Seb thumps on the bulkhead and yells, “Put your foot down!”

No one is dying on my watch. I floor it through the site, weaving through the skips, half-built structures, and rubbish strewn over the concrete. Up ahead, another car waits outside a warehouse to transport us. Although Torean is based close to Edinburgh, he still has influence in London. We’re lucky he’s in the city this month.

I come to a stop at the warehouse entrance, where Torean’s cronies guard the door. I recognise them as Torean’s right hand men, Ovi McManus and Marshall Price.

Ovi inclines his shaven, tattooed head in greeting. He's an ex-street fighter, and his muscles bulge in a t-shirt that's a few sizes too small. We've met a few times, and I've never seen him with a jacket, even in the peak of winter. Next to him, Marshall—the shorter of the pair—glowers at me from underneath a grey beanie hat that he rarely takes off. He's of lean build with multiple facial piercings and his blue eyes have a crazy look that match his infamous unpredictable actions. Callen told me he escaped from a psychiatric institution years ago, which doesn't surprise me.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Marshall says, sniffing as I exit the van. The last time we met, I couldn't get hold of a gun he wanted, and now he's acting like a little bitch.

“Cut the bullshit, Marshall,” I snap. “I've spoken to Torean.”

He shakes his head, eyeing the van. “You know these plates will be hot, don't you?”

“Good thing this is just a meeting location then,” I say, knowing Torean would never put his men at risk. He's a twisted motherfucker, but he's loyal to those guys.

“Lucky for you,” Ovi mutters in his gravelly Scottish accent.

Ovi moves around the back of the van and swings open the door. Inside, Callen is crouched next to Bram. He's covered in Bram's blood, while Bram lies motionless on the floor. At Bram's side, Seb looks torn between vomiting and fainting, and Ivy clutches onto Bram's limp hand.

Marshall's gaze darts straight to Ivy. He smirks, a greedy expression crossing his lips that I want to wipe off. “Did you bring us a present?”

My gut twists. Before I can reply, Ivy's eyes narrow, and she snaps, “I'm nobody's fucking present, asshole.”

Marshall tenses, his hands curling into tight fists. Can't she keep her mouth shut for once? I take a deep breath. Maybe we should hand her over to Torean's thugs as a punishment, but

no matter how furious I am, I can't bring myself to do it. Well, not until we get answers first.

"She's with us," I growl. Ivy's eyes find mine for a split second, searching for something, but I stare back in cold indifference. I'm not doing this for her. "She's our prisoner."

Marshall licks his lips. "Pity."

The sparkle in her eyes dulls as she looks away. I won't be deceived by her again. Since uncovering the truth, my heart has hardened. I don't know how much of the woman I met five years ago still exists in the shell of her body or whether she was ever real at all.

"We need to get Bram to a safe location," I say, knowing that Torean will have medical supplies wherever we're heading.

"We don't have a lot of time," Callen says.

Seb and Callen put Bram's arms around their shoulders and heave him upright. Bram's unconscious, but his chest is still moving, so I push my worries aside. I need to take control of the situation. That's what my men expect of me.

"Hey! What about me?" Ivy demands as they leave her behind. "Are you going to leave me chained up?"

Seb pauses in front of me. "The keys to her cuffs are in my front pocket."

I take them from him as he and Callen pass.

"You can leave her with us," Marshall cuts in, muscling into the conversation and grinning down at the keys in my hand. "We'll take good care of her."

"If you come near me, I'll stuff your balls down your windpipe," she sneers.

Callen snorts. "I'd love to hear her say that to Torean."

"I already told you," I snarl at Marshall, giving him a final warning. "She's with us."

"Fine!" He holds up his hands in defeat and heads around to the driver's seat.

Meanwhile, Ovi disappears into the warehouse and returns seconds later with a wheelchair. Callen and Seb pant as they drag Bram's feet across the ground and put him in it. We won't be staying long. Above us, helicopter blades whir into life, whipping up the air around us. That's our ticket to freedom. But, before we leave, Callen needs to ensure Bram is stable enough to fly.

"Hello?" Ivy calls. "I'm still here!"

I step into the back of the van to join her. She's thinner than the last time I saw her, her skin dirty and flecked with blood, and her eyes surrounded by dark circles.

"Freddie, I..."

I hold up my hand to silence her before she starts to make any excuses.

"I don't want to hear it," I snap. She raises her eyebrows in surprise as I reach into my suit pocket for an injection. I always carry a sedative as a backup option. "You're going to sleep."

"You don't have to do that," Ivy argues. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

"You're a trained assassin," I say. "You're lucky this is only enough tranquilliser to knock you out."

I step closer, and she shuffles away, but there's nowhere to go.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

"You can't drug me forever," she says, meeting my stony gaze with a chilly storm of her own. "You may as well kill me."

"Maybe we will," I say.

Because of her size and the fact she presumably hasn't eaten for a while, this should knock her out for twelve hours at least.

She shivers involuntarily as I kneel in front of her. Despite my threats, I'd never hurt a woman, but Ivy isn't a helpless

damsel in distress. She's a murderer who has to face the consequences of her actions. No one screws over the Dukes and gets away with it—even if they're a pretty redhead who I saw a future with.

“Fre—”

I sink the needle into her neck to silence her. “Sweet dreams, Ivy Penrose.”

Her lips part in surprise at my speed. They make the perfect o-shape, reminding me of how good it sounded when she moaned my name while I buried my cock inside her. I can't think about that. Not now.

Seconds later, her eyelids close. Her limbs go limp, and she slumps backwards. I give it another minute before moving her. She pretended to be her sister before faking her death, so she's not above pretending to be unconscious.

When I'm content enough time has passed, I release her from the restraints and scoop her sleeping body into my arms. Her head lulls, and her red tresses trail over the side of my arm. I try not to look down, ignoring every instinct telling me to hold her tighter to protect her.

She makes a cute, gentle snore, and I curse myself, remembering what she's done. We're not characters in a love story. I'm not saving a princess from an evil monster who has kept her locked in a tower. Ivy is the villain we need to tame.

She's met Freddie Montgomery before, but Ivy is about to meet the Duke's leader for the first time.

CHAPTER 5

SEB

I stare into the fireplace, watching the jumping flames taunt me. If I focus hard enough, I can almost see the orange flickers morph into faces: Bram, Callen, Freddie... *Ivy*.

I shuffle on the spot. The armchair is less comfortable than it looks, but I can't complain when I have Skeller Rock whiskey. I swill the amber liquid around the sides of the crystal glass. It's the best way to unwind after breaking into an assassin's lair and suffering through a helicopter ride from hell. It's a miracle no one died on our journey to Torean's secret Scottish hideaway.

Although I showered, I'm still wearing my dirty clothes. They're stained with Bram's blood, but being far from my regular dry cleaners is the least of our concerns. Exhaustion threatens to take over my body, but my mind is too active to contemplate sleeping.

Opposite me, Freddie sits on a well-worn navy sofa. He's hunched over, nursing his glass, lost in his thoughts. I jump as the door hits the wall behind us, signalling Callen's arrival. He saunters in, wearing a tartan dressing gown, and shakes his head to toss his wet hair around like a dog.

"Well?" I jump up, almost spilling the rare whiskey. "How is he?"

"Your boyfriend is going to be just fine. He has the best doctor." Callen raises his eyebrows. "What did you expect?"

I'm too relieved to reply with a sarcastic comment. We were lucky Callen was around. Without him, Bram would have bled to death. For all his shortcomings, and no matter how crazy he drives me, Callen belongs in the Dukes.

"Good," Freddie replies, although his words are empty. He's in the room, but his mind is elsewhere.

Callen plops himself down on the shag rug in front of the fire, lying out and stretching, proudly displaying his hairy legs poking out from underneath his robe. "So, what now?"

"A change of clothes would be nice," I mutter.

I don't like unfamiliar surroundings, especially when it's a remote castle a few hours outside of Edinburgh with Callen's psychopathic twin roaming the halls. Torean Campbell is bad fucking news, and his reputation almost makes his brother look like a saint.

"You can borrow some of mine," Callen replies, "but I thought you didn't like my style."

"Beggars can't be choosers," I say, then frown. "Does this place even have central heating?"

"You Southerners are too delicate," Callen says.

"I'll take that as a no," I grumble.

The castle is Torean's most secure location. We're on private land in the middle of nowhere, with an impressive security system rigged up to monitor its borders, making it akin to Broadmoor. We can stay for as long as we need, as long as we stick to the East Wing. He and his cronies have free rein of the rest of the place.

Callen turns his attention to Freddie. "What's the plan, boss?"

Freddie doesn't respond. Maybe he's finally run out of answers. We all have.

"When can I see him?" I ask Callen, changing the subject to give Freddie more time to answer. Or maybe because I know he doesn't have a plan, and I'm not ready to face that either.

“He’s healing,” Callen says. “The last thing we need is a puppy dog clambering all over him.”

“Hey!” I object. “You—”

“Stop!” Freddie commands. His thunderous expression makes us freeze. “That’s enough.”

I take a gulp of whiskey and check my phone to see a text from Ralph confirming that he’s collected Pippy. Since when has ‘asking brothers for help’ day become a thing? Begrudgingly, I owe him one. Staying with them would be the doggy equivalent of a luxury spa retreat for Pippy. Ralph’s wife is obsessed with dogs and has six of her own, likely to distract her from her miserable existence with Ralph.

“What are we going to do with Ivy?” I ask. My voice catches in my throat as I say her name. Freddie’s shoulders tense, and Callen’s jaw sets, making me feel like a wizard saying ‘Voldemort’.

“She Who Must Not Be Named is locked up for now,” Callen says, catching my train of thought. “Where she belongs.”

On the helicopter ride, her unconscious body was propped against mine. I spent the entire time avoiding looking at her, but I couldn’t ignore the warmth of her body pressed against mine.

“Should I go and check if she’s okay?” I ask.

I’m still angry at her, but we arrived hours ago, and I haven’t seen her since Torean and Freddie whisked her away into the dungeon. She may be a compulsive liar who betrayed us, but the Dukes are supposed to protect people. Or, maybe a part of me is still clinging to the unlikely possibility that I’ve seen the real Ivy Penrose, that maybe the connection we shared was more than a ruse to get close to us.

“Why do you keep bringing her up?” Freddie blasts. He hurls his glass into the fire. Callen leans out of the way in time to avoid being hit. The alcohol causes the flames to go wild and lick up the chimney.

“Torean won’t be happy if you burn down his castle,” Callen says.

“Leave me to deal with Ivy,” Freddie says in a voice that says this is the end of our discussion. “Neither of you are to see her without my permission. Until we decide what to do with her, she stays where she is. Do you understand?”

I lower my head. “Yes, boss.”

“Callen?” Freddie prompts. “I said, do you understand?”

Callen makes an ‘okay’ signal by pressing his thumb and index finger together.

“Good,” Freddie says before standing, turning on his heel and storming away.

For the past five years, his connection to the woman he met at the bar has been tethered to his last shred of humanity. Now that he’s learned the truth, I’m not sure what he’s capable of...

CHAPTER 6

IVY

“**W**hat do we have here?” A man’s voice echoes around the darkened room. “Sleeping Beauty has finally woken up.”

His words make goosebumps stand to attention on my arms. His accent is like Callen’s, but there’s something off about him... something twisted and unnatural that sets my mental alarm bells ringing. A predator can sense when they’re in the midst of another, and this man makes me want to run.

I try to refocus my vision. I’m groggy, and my head feels too heavy for my neck to support it properly. The world seems to be shaking like stuttering camera footage at a few frames per second.

Where am I?

The last thing I remember was being in the back of the van when... *Motherfucker!* My hand flies to my neck and the spot where Freddie plunged a needle into my skin. Someone should give him lessons on how to be a gentleman.

From my seated position, I look around to familiarise myself with my new surroundings. My arse is numb from the freezing cement beneath me, made worse by my short skirt. Overhead, a strip of light flickers, making my head throb and my windowless, grey brick prison appear more ominous. A leaky pipe protrudes from the wall, dripping into a pooling puddle near my feet. There’s also a rusty bucket a short shuffle away, presumably for me to use as a toilet.

The room is L-shaped. While I can't see the man lurking around the corner, his unnerving presence fills the space. My skin prickles under his scrutiny, but I can't move. My wrists are bound in cuffs in front of me, and a chain around my ankle shackles me to a concrete column that looks to support the uneven, low ceiling. From the look of it, tugging too hard would cause the entire building to collapse and bury me in rubble. Maybe that's what the Dukes want.

A tall figure steps out from his hiding spot. I blink hard to make sure I'm not imagining it. Nope, he's really there.

He looks like Callen, only he doesn't have shoulder-length hair or a beard. He's clean-shaven with short, slicked-back hair. His rolled-up shirt sleeves expose blank, tattoo-less skin. Have I died and gone to hell? Is this alternative version of Callen the devil? Finding out he's a permanent resident there wouldn't be a surprise.

The man smirks, making my stomach knot with uneasiness. I recognise that look. I squeeze my eyes shut once more, hoping that when I open them again, I'll find myself sprawled on a sun lounger on a tropical island with a Piña Colada adorned with a tiny umbrella—no such luck. I open my eyes to find myself in the same godforsaken place.

“What're you looking for, sweetheart?” the man asks. “There's no way out.”

“Where's Bram?” I question. I'm willing to overlook his patronising pet names if I get answers. “Is he okay?”

“That doesn't concern you,” he replies coldly.

I hold in a deep breath to maintain my composure. Losing my shit won't help. I have to play it smart and get to know the man who stands a few feet away, studying me like I'm his twisted science experiment.

I've never been held captive before. My Killers Club marks never got close to working out my true motives, until it was too late. I prefer to be in control, but that didn't mean I was going to fall victim to him. I'll fight and keep on fighting

because I'm a survivor. It's what I do. Facing death makes you come back stronger.

"Do you think I look familiar?" the man asks, cocking his head to the side. "We've not been formally introduced, but I know you've met my brother. I'm Torean, the better-looking twin."

Twins? Holy shit. As if one Scottish psychopath wasn't bad enough. They're identical, but the closer I look, the more differences I spot. Torean has a rigid posture, and where Callen has a playful glint in his eyes, Torean's are a malicious pit of nothingness. I hope I never meet their parents because something dark must run in their genes.

"What do you want?" I demand.

I unsteadily get to my feet and press my back against the column to keep me upright. Adrenaline is all that's keeping me standing.

Torean rubs his chin and looks me over. I keep my head held high. He's treating me like a zoo animal. His sleazy gaze lands on my tits, and he licks his lips at the sight of my pointed nipples poking through the fabric of my blood-stained t-shirt.

"Why don't you take a picture?" I retort, refusing to show that I'm affected by his presence. Men like him live off fear. They depend on it more than the oxygen they need to breathe. "Go on. What're you waiting for? Add it to your wank bank. It'll last longer."

Torean's lips stretch back over his teeth, forming a smile. "I've always had a thing for redheads."

"I assume that's never been reciprocated?" I reply sarcastically.

A thunderous expression takes over his features, giving me no doubt that I'm staring at a brutal killer.

He steps closer. His shoes squeak as he walks, and I resist the urge to make a joke about him farting. He's inches away now, so close that I can feel the heat emanating from him. My spine digs into the column, while I will the chain around my ankle to miraculously spring free.

“This is my home,” Torean says. “I’m letting you stay here for free. You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you?” I splutter in disbelief. He’s out of his fucking mind. “Even if you tied me up in a five-star hotel, I’d never thank you.”

“I knew you would be feisty, but I didn’t expect this.” Torean tuts, shaking his head. “My brother told me who you are and what you do. I’m intrigued as to why the Dukes would want to keep you alive. If I was handed a bomb, I’d defuse it. Or better yet, let it explode.”

Suddenly, he lurches and grabs my chin. I try turning away, but he yanks my face around.

“Go to hell,” I rasp. My mouth is dry, but I’ll be damned if I let him get away with talking to me like that. I hack up a spitball and launch it at his face. The glob of spit lands on his cheek, and I smirk in victory.

“You bitch,” he retaliates, jumping back and raising his hand. I brace myself for impact as he strikes me across the face hard. “You need to be taught a lesson.”

I laugh. My stinging cheek gives me something else to focus on. His expression turns explosive now, making me laugh harder. I shouldn’t taunt my captor, but if he’s already decided to kill me, it’ll change nothing. Maybe that’s why they brought me here. The Dukes are too cowardly to kill me themselves, so Callen could have asked his brother to do it for them.

Torean’s expensive cologne catches in the back of my throat as he reaches into his pocket and retrieves a knife. He twists the blade, letting it catch the light in a pathetic attempt to intimidate me, and then he holds it to my throat.

“Go on, do it,” I hiss. “I’m not going to beg, so you may as well get it over with.”

His eyes narrow into slits. “Did you think it’d be that easy?”

I try not to flinch as he grabs the hem of my t-shirt, pulling the fabric taut, then slicing through it with his knife. It falls

apart, forming a frayed waistcoat to give him a better view. He rests the sharp point on the sensitive spot between my collarbones.

“Scared now?” he asks.

I don’t flinch. “What do you think, tough guy?”

He trails the blade between my tits and keeps going all the way down to the top of my skirt, leaving a scratch behind. I swallow hard, fighting the dark memories that are coming back.

Spencer... his hands holding me down... my cold skin... the way he...

“If you move, I’ll cut your throat and leave you here to die.” Torean’s breath on my neck makes my knees want to buckle, but I don’t. “No one would miss you. After all, you’re already dead.”

I consider kneeling him in the balls, but Torean reads my mind. He grabs my handcuffs and forces my hands above my head, holding them there. I’m too weak to resist. With his other hand, he presses the tip of his knife into the jumping pulse on my neck. One wrong move, and I’ll be showering in my blood.

Callen is a sadist, but he has feelings—well, I think he does, somewhere deep down. He had a daughter, so he’s shown he’s capable of caring for someone. Torean is different. There’s only evil behind his blank, dead eyes.

“I can think of a few ways you could show me your appreciation for my hospitality,” he purrs.

“And I can think of a few ways to tell you to go fuck yourself,” I snap, but my voice shakes.

“Why don’t we start with you on your—”

Suddenly, another figure steps from the shadows and asks, “What’s going on here?”

CHAPTER 7

CalLEN

Freddie ordered us to stay away from Ivy, but he doesn't know my brother. To Torean, knowing the Dukes are holding a prisoner in his castle is like telling a child that they can't touch a pile of wrapped presents. He always breaks the rules, so I've been observing him.

When Seb and Freddie returned to their rooms, I lurked near the dungeon door. It's not that I was guarding her—not at all—but I won't let him hurt her. She belongs to us.

Torean turns when he hears my voice and steps away from Ivy. "You arrived at the perfect time, Callen."

I see a flash of panic on Ivy's face, and then it disappears, hidden behind an impassive expression. I take in the pink handprint on her pale cheek and how her ripped shirt reveals her perfect round tits, barely covering her nipples.

"What are you doing, Torean?" I ask, keeping my tone measured and friendly without looking away from the knife in his hand.

"You know me, brother," he says, "I wanted to make my new guest feel at home."

"She's not your guest," I remind him. "She's our prisoner."

Torean's eyes light up at the prospect of a challenge. He turns everything into a competition. It's something we have in common and developed growing up with nothing, being forced to forge our own way in the world.

“This is my castle,” Torean declares, gesturing at the walls with his knife. “She may be your prisoner, but you are all my guests. You’d do well to remember that.”

Ivy opens her mouth to argue, but I shoot her a ‘don’t say a fucking word’ look. For once, she pays attention. Maybe she senses we’re in the room with the equivalent of a hungry shark who strikes on the first scent of blood. If I hadn’t intervened, Ivy wouldn’t be alive by tomorrow morning.

Torean doesn’t discriminate in who he kills. He kills for fun. He enjoys the chase and gets consumed by bloodlust. That need is something else we have in common, but he lacks my self-control. While I try to avoid hurting women, Torean, like our father, who used to beat our mother, doesn’t care. He raises his hand to anyone who dares to defy him.

“Lighten up, Cal,” he says, changing his tone. “I helped the Dukes. Now it’s your turn to repay the favour.”

Ivy bites her lip so hard that it bleeds. Good girl. She’s doing well to keep her mouth shut for a change. This must be killing her.

“Not like this,” I say firmly. “You don’t touch a hair on her head, understand?”

“But look at her,” Torean says, reaching out and twisting a strand of Ivy’s long hair around his finger. “How can you expect me to hold back?”

“Fuck you,” Ivy hisses, jerking her head away.

“You know how much I love it when they try to fight,” he breathes. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about fucking her.”

“Been there, done that,” I say casually. “She’s just another loose gash. Nothing special.”

He doesn’t need to know the lingering effect her pussy has had on me. She’s fucking addictive, and I’m not letting him find that out for himself.

“Maybe I should see for myself,” he says.

“She’s off limits,” I warn, lowering my voice. I don’t want to fight him, but I will if I have to.

“Fine,” Torean relents, tucking his knife away. “But you owe me. My favours don’t come for free. I’m not a fucking Salvation Army.”

“What do you want?”

He smiles. A smile that’s filled with searing rage. “I want Bette Miller.”

“Bette Miller?” Her name rings a bell, but I can’t remember why. “Who is she?”

Torean marches over, forgetting all about Ivy, and shoves his phone in my face. A photograph of a woman fills the screen. As soon as I see her, I remember. I kick myself for forgetting her name, even though everything happened so many years ago. Bette was Torean’s first love—the girl who broke his heart and got away.

“You’re still looking for her?” I ask in disbelief. “After all this time?”

“No one can hide from me forever.” Why does she still have a hold on him? On second thought, it’s probably best that I don’t know the details. “She has something that belongs to me.”

In the photograph, Bette can’t be older than sixteen. She’s sitting on a grassy verge, holding up a cheap bottle of beer. Her shoulder-length, ginger hair flowing in the breeze as she smiles innocently at the camera. A smile that Torean put an end to.

As teenagers, we lived close to the Miller’s. While we lived in a rundown council estate, Bette’s parents owned one of the big, posh houses that we aspired to own one day. From what I remember, he and Bette were a modern Romeo and Juliet, until she disappeared. Torean lost his shit when she left town without saying a word, and he started looking for her. I assumed he’d given up, but apparently not.

“Hang on a minute,” I say, taking his phone from him for a closer look. “Something about her looks familiar...”

I recall the last job I did for him. On the night I killed Jacob, I saw a woman on the street. A woman with a blonde, curly bob who shouted Jacob's name. I didn't recognise her then, but seeing the photograph again confirms it. She's aged, but there's no doubt in my mind that it was her. It also explains why she looked at me like she'd seen a ghost.

"What?" Torean's shoulders stiffen. "You better not be fucking around. If you are, I'll kill you and the whore."

"I've seen her. Her hair was different. She's dyed it blonde, but it was definitely her," I confirm, signing the death warrant of an innocent woman to protect Ivy—not that she deserved my protection. "She was with Jacob."

"Liar!"

Torean dives toward me, slamming me back into the wall and pushing his elbow against my throat.

"Why would I lie?" I wheeze. He releases his grip enough to allow me to talk. "She was looking for Jacob. When I drove past her, she saw me."

"She saw you?" Torean screams in frustration and releases me. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Bette makes him crazy. She's his drug, and he needs his next fix. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Until you showed me the photo, I thought nothing of it. I haven't thought about Bette for years," I reply. "I killed Jacob and left. That was the job."

"I need to re-trace her steps," he plots. "We're close."

"So we're even?" I ask.

"Nice try," he says, narrowing his eyes. "I want weapons and money."

"Text me a list, and Freddie will sort it out," I say, relieved that he's lost interest in getting his dick wet.

Now that he's caught a lead on Bette; hunting her will consume him.

He turns on his heel and calls over his shoulder, "You and the Dukes can stay here for a week, then you're out."

His footsteps disappear up the steps, and he slams the door shut behind him, leaving me and Ivy alone.

She crosses her arms. “You handed her over to that sick monster.”

“Would you rather it was you?” I counter.

She presses her lips tightly together, then replies, “Don’t expect me to say thank you.”

CHAPTER 8

IVY

“I’d never expect you to say thank you, princess,” Callen says. “That’s not who you are.”

Even if he held a gun to my head, I’d never admit that seeing Torean scurry away made my racing heart slow.

“How long are you going to keep me here?” I demand, changing the subject until enough time has passed to be sure Torean has left the dungeon. “Or did you send your evil twin away because you want to put me out of my misery yourself?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Callen shrugs, then winks. “But you do look good in chains.”

I ignore him and ask, “Why did you step in? You didn’t have to.”

He chuckles, running his hand through his wavy hair and making the muscles in his forearms flex like he’s showing off. “I don’t want my brother having my sloppy seconds.”

I glower at him. “How’s Bram?”

His smile vanishes. “You put on a good act earlier, but you don’t have to keep pretending. We all know you don’t care.”

“Is he alive?” I press.

“Yes,” he says. “Thanks to me.”

Good. During our imprisonment, I got to know Bram. He’s sacrificed a lot for me—going back when Spencer left me for dead, giving me intel on Alaric working with Trout, and jumping in front of a bullet like a human fucking shield. I

already have Daisy's blood on my hands; I don't want Bram's, too.

Callen walks away, disappearing around the corner out of view.

I hear rattling, followed by the sounds of objects being moved around.

"Hey! What are you—" My words trail away as he returns seconds later, brandishing a hose like a sexy fireman.

"It's time for a wash."

Before I can say anything, he blasts icy water in my direction. I struggle to catch my breath, but he keeps going. He hoses me down until I'm gasping for air and completely drenched from head to toe. It can't go on for more than a minute, but his water attack seems to last hours.

"Much better," he says finally, turning the stream off.

"You b-b-b-bastard," I stammer, unable to stop my teeth from chattering.

My clothes cling to my skin, and my wet, tangled hair sticks to my face. Resembling a drowned rat is not my best look, but at least it helped wash away the smell of Torean's chemical aftershave.

He drops the hose and steps forward. I try to move around the column to escape him, but there's nowhere to hide. He stands opposite me. I refuse to make eye contact as he strokes my cheek. The scorching temperature of his fingers is heavenly against my icy skin.

"Look at me," he demands.

Despite my better instincts, I don't pull away and look up, hoping he'll let me cosy up to his fiery palms once more. It's fucking freezing down here! What's a girl to do? His pupils dilate as he admires my body.

"You have nowhere to go," he murmurs, leaning closer. His breath smells of hot whiskey and danger. "You're ours now."

I snap myself out of whatever trance he's putting me under.

"I belong to no one," I breathe.

He laughs, putting one arm above my head to box me in. His other hand moves from my cheek, stroking the spot where his brother hit, then moves further down. His fingers caress my shoulder blade, tickling along its gentle curve, then glide to my collarbone until he reaches my fresh cut.

He edges closer, close enough that the hard bulge in his trousers presses against my bound hands. Eugh, why do cocks feel like radiators? If I closed my eyes and he kept his mouth shut, I might be able to forget that the appendage was attached to him. I could do with something warm to snuggle against. Perhaps that was his plan—get me to freeze to death and offer his dick as the only way to avoid hypothermia.

He sweeps a wet curl out of my eye and ducks down to whisper, "You don't exist. We're the only thing standing between you and death."

His lips graze my ear lobe, and he catches it between his teeth, nibbling slightly. I can't tell whether I'm imagining it because of the cold-induced numbness taking over my body until his tongue licks the side of my neck. He keeps going until his face rests between my tits, and the point of his tongue laps up the droplets of blood pooling from my cut.

I'm too stunned to speak as he stands again. We stare at each other, unblinking. Neither one of us wants to be the first to break eye contact. We're sucked into the vortex of chaos that swirls around us whenever we're together.

"Did you know that Freddie kicked me out of the Dukes after the Collingsbrook Ball?" he asks. "They thought I put you in danger."

"They should have thrown you out long ago," I mutter.

"You did something for me that night," he says. "Something I've been waiting years for, and I want to repay you for that."

I gasp as his hand finds the edge of my wet skirt. His scorching palms slide underneath the fabric. I hate him for

putting me in this position, but I'm not stupid. Surrendering to his touch and sharing his body heat is the only thing that'll help me survive the night in these conditions.

His fingers probe higher, stroking my inner thighs before reaching the hem of my knickers and tugging them down without breaking our stare.

I stand firm, trying my hardest not to show how good his touch feels and how much I don't want him to stop.

His hand cups my pussy in his palm as I bite my lip to stop myself from moaning at the heat. Then he slides his fingers between my lips to find the wetness waiting there.

"You're like me, Ivy," Callen says as he pushes a finger inside me effortlessly.

"I'm nothing like you," I pant, pushing my hips against him.

Hey, I'm in a life-or-death situation! No one can judge me for this.

"We'll see about that," he says, withdrawing his finger and dropping to his knees.

He yanks my skirt down and grabs my waist possessively to hold me in place. His broad shoulders force my legs to spread wider. I groan as his breath warms and teases me, then he presses his lips to my wetness. I yelp, grabbing his hair in encouragement. That's all he needs.

Callen doesn't eat me out gently. No, he ravages me with his tongue. He probes and circles, making me cry out into the darkness. I relinquish myself to the feeling, shut my eyes, and imagine the man feasting on my cunt isn't one of the monsters who locked me up here.

He latches onto my clit, sucking hard to draw intense pleasure from me. He doesn't stop when I yank his hair and keeps going. The sensation is so overwhelming that it's almost painful.

"Yes," I moan as he reaches to squeeze my tits. "Fuck, yes!"

My legs shake uncontrollably, but not from the cold this time, from the desperate urge to come all over his face.

“That’s it, princess,” he murmurs, pulling away for a brief second to look up at me. My wetness soaks his beard. “I’ve always known exactly who you are.”

CHAPTER 9

CALLEN

Her sweet juices spill over my tongue. She can't hide her desire for me, no matter how much she'd like to resist. I pinch her pebbled nipples, and my cock strains in my pants, desperate to feel her pussy clamp around me again.

Freddie would be furious if he knew I was here, but he couldn't blame me for my actions. Seeing every inch of her sexy curves made it impossible not to act. I've had blue balls for weeks, and it's not my fault she's the only one who can make me hard. I thought I could fuck anyone, anytime, but Ivy's broken me. Smart arse serial killers are the only thing that gets my blood pumping, and I can't miss an opportunity to have her to myself.

Goosebumps cover her skin, and her cold thighs clench around my head as I lick her slippery clit to tease another breathy moan from her lips. She's what I've been craving. Being around her is intoxicating, and I'm driven by the urge to make her mine.

All. Fucking. Mine.

I plunge my tongue into her, caressing her from the inside. Her tensing muscles show she's getting close, and I want to suspend on the edge. I won't give her what she wants so easily, not after what she's done.

Suddenly, I pull away, leaving her panting for more.

"What the fuck?" she gasps, her words filled with horny-fuelled fury. "You can't stop now!"

For a prisoner, she's pretty fucking needy.

"Why?" I tease, wanting to make her beg. "Tell me how much you want me, princess."

"I..." She pauses, realising what game I'm playing, and her lips curl into a sexy snarl. "Fuck you."

Of course, she wouldn't make it easy for me.

"Is this what Bram did to you?" I ask, stopping myself from returning to devour her pussy instantly. Instead, I circle her entrance with two fingers. She twitches under my touch. She loves it, but she'll never admit it.

"You bastard," she seethes while her hips gyrate.

"Do you let any man fuck you, or is it just the Dukes?" I ask as her wetness coats the tips of my fingers. "Was fucking us part of the Killers Club's big plan?"

She doesn't answer.

"If you're not going to tell me that, why don't you tell me how good I'm making you feel?" Her legs tremble as I stroke her G-spot, but she doesn't make a sound. "If you do, I'll give you what you really want."

"I hate you." Her voice is heavy with lust. "You're a monster!"

I can't wait any longer. I need to have her. When I stand, I make sure her handcuff chains hook around the back of my neck as I rise, raising her arms to minimise the distance between us. She doesn't try to move away when I undo my belt and let my trousers fall to the floor.

She stays silent when I bend my face to meet hers. Our lips touch, then she bites me. Hard. This seems to be a recurring theme, and my cock throbs expectantly as the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth.

"You're going to pay for that," I promise, grabbing her by the throat with one hand while pulling out my cock with the other.

"You're going straight to hell," she hisses.

Her venom-filled voice is the best aphrodisiac. Despite her ankle being shackled, there's enough of a chain for me to grab her arse with both hands and lift her into the air. She wraps her legs around my hips. The remains of her t-shirt fully fall open, allowing her tits to spill out as I push her back into the column.

Fuck, yes...

She's fire and ice. Her hateful words and freezing skin contrast her hot, wet pussy rubbing against my shaft. A drop of pre-cum seeps out of me in anticipation as she groans, unable to hide how much she wants me as I slide against her entrance.

With one thrust, I enter her with a grunt.

"You hate me, don't you?" I pant. "Hate that I can make you feel like this?"

I grip her arse to guide myself in and out of her, using her like my personal fuck puppet.

"Yes," she groans, then sinks her teeth into my shoulder.

I buck harder. She holds me in a grip so tight, trying to stop herself from unravelling. There's only so long she can hold back. I keep thrusting, riding out the wave of her sweet, gushing hole.

"I hate you," she whines as I continue to take from her, enjoying how her tits bounce against me with every jut of my hips. "I hate you so fucking much."

"I know you do, princess," I purr. "But your pussy loves taking me."

She claws my neck as I keep going. Her scratching only riles me up, making me pound into her mercilessly.

"You know you want this," I mock.

"Fuck you," she says, even as her complaints fade into a moan that makes my entire body tingle.

"That's it," I say, trying my best not to spill my cum inside her already. "Don't hold back."

She sinks her nails into me, drawing blood as she releases. Her pussy pulses on my shaft like she's playing a song on my cock. She has no idea how good she feels. After having her, no one else can compare. If Torean felt like this with Bette, I can understand his obsession...

I keep fucking her until I can't stop myself. Suddenly, I roar, a primal sound from the back of my throat that I didn't think I could make. Then I push my cock deep inside her and empty myself.

When I've fucked other women, I rarely had the urge to do it again, but Ivy makes me crave her more every single time. I'll never get enough of her. After I'm done, I gently place her down. She's wobbling on her feet, and her flushed cheeks and chest are a lasting symbol of the pleasure I gave her.

I turn away from her and get dressed quickly, zipping up my trousers to stash the goods away.

When I face her again, she's managed to put her knickers on somehow. Her cuffed hands are clasped in front of her, pushing her tits together to make her cleavage look even more impressive than usual. If I thought we had more time, I'd fuck her again, but I'm already pushing my luck.

"Now we're even," I say. "You did something for me, and now I've done something for you. I told you I'd repay the favour."

"That doesn't count," she argues. "I killed someone for you. Can't you at least undo my fucking chains?"

"I don't make the rules, princess." I head out, feeling three stone lighter with each step. "We all know how dangerous you are. Besides..." I wink at her over my shoulder, knowing it'll piss her off. "I like you better when you're chained up."

"You bastard!"

I don't look back, but I know I'm going to sleep like a baby.

CHAPTER 10

SEB

I stare at the clock on the wall, watching the minutes tick by, then throw my head back with a huff to spend more time tracing the patterns of the Artex-swirled ceiling. I should return to my room, but I'd rather be here.

Across from me, Bram is fast asleep. I have to give the Campbell twins some credit. Callen's medical expertise saved Bram's life, and Torean's helicopter got us out of there quicker than asking my family for help would have, not that I'd have dared to. I stifle a snort, imagining how that conversation would have went. *Sorry, Mother, I have to borrow the royal jet because I'm on the run from a group of assassins after breaking into their lair.* I'm already enough of a disappointment.

Bram's condition is stable, although he looks like a shadow of his former self. He's lost weight and has fresh scars, including a brand on his chest and an infected wound on his thigh. It'll take weeks for him to heal properly, but he'll pull through. That's the most important thing. That, and making the Killers Club pay for what they did to him.

My thoughts inevitably stray to below ground, where the woman I thought I was falling for is being held prisoner. The woman who betrayed us, and who I was stupid enough to trust. Freddie hasn't decided what will happen to Ivy yet, and while I'm conflicted, I still need answers of my own.

I don't know whether it's the whiskey talking or the lack of sleep, but a nagging voice in the back of my head keeps

pushing me. What if Freddie takes her somewhere and you never see her again? This could be your only chance to get answers. You won't sleep anyway. What's the harm in going on a midnight stroll?

Fuck it.

I grab a spare bottle of water from Bram's bedside table. Even though I'm angry, I can't let her die of dehydration. Torean's hardly the hospitable type. Freddie ordered us to stay away from her, but there'll be no one to stay away from if she dies under our care.

Bram will be safe alone for a few minutes. Freddie's bedroom is on the floor above us, and Callen will have made himself at home, probably busy bashing one out to some obscure porno.

I peer around the door to check whether the coast is clear. No one is around, so I set off. Torean's castle is creepy as shit. Grey flagstone floors, sconces, and oil paintings of graphic battle scenes make it seem like we've stepped back into medieval times. I've been to my fair share of old buildings, but this place makes me feel permanently watched. Callen once told me Torean bought the castle because of its grisly history, and I don't doubt it.

"Going somewhere?" a voice calls from behind me.

I turn to see Marshall approaching. I know all about Torean and his band of followers. He, Ovi, and Marshall are inseparable. Just as I'm about to open my mouth to tell him to mind his own business and return to blowing bagpipes, Torean storms forward, appearing out of nowhere with a face like thunder.

"We're leaving," Torean declares.

Marshall's jaw drops, clearly oblivious to the cause of Torean's change in mood. "What do you—"

"Where have you been?" Torean blasts, cutting him off. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"I've been..." Marshall's eyes narrow in my direction. "Checking to make sure our guests feel welcome."

I raise my eyebrows. Yeah, about as welcome as an outbreak of crabs or a toothy blowjob from Beatrice.

“Pack your bags,” Torean says. “We’re going to London.”

“Now?” Marshall frowns. “But we just got here.”

“We have a lead,” Torean says.

Marshall’s demeanour changes instantly. He nods in grim understanding, not needing any more explanation. Without giving me a second look, the two of them march past. Well, thank you, welcome distraction. This is a sign I’m doing the right thing by seeing her, right?

I continue along the corridor to a large wooden door that I saw Freddie and Torean carry Ivy’s unconscious body through earlier. As I reach for the door handle, a low whistle comes from behind a nearby statue. “Going somewhere, Sebastian?”

I spin to see Callen, who has one hand buried in a giant share bag of crisps, grinning like the Cheshire cat. My mind races to find an excuse, but I’m not quick enough.

“Don’t worry, your secrets are safe with me.” He winks. “Enjoy your midnight snack.”

Maybe I’m not the only person who has broken Freddie’s rule tonight...

Callen saunters back to his grand suite a few doors down before I can argue. Torean allocated Freddie and me small box rooms on the floor above, while Callen has a massive suite with a four-poster bed from the Tudor era.

I pause for a few minutes, making sure there are no more footsteps. Freddie won’t have heard anything. The stone walls are ridiculously thick, and he’ll be too busy pacing, weighing up all our options.

The door creaks as I push it open and step inside. I’m greeted by the smell of dampness and the sound of gentle sobbing that stops abruptly as soon as I click the door closed.

I grip the steel handrail and take the steep staircase down the shadowy steps, unsure what I’m going to find.

CHAPTER 11

IVY

I've traded one prison for another. Now I'm at the Duke's mercy, which apparently includes late-night visits from Callen, who can make my body crave everything it shouldn't.

Tears of frustration fall down my cheeks. *Stupid fucking Callen*. I'm not crying because I'm upset. No, I'm crying because I'm furious that I can't kick his arse! Being rescued by a gang who hates me was bad enough, but I'm not *his* personal cum rag, too.

I push aside how incredible my orgasm was and focus on how my spine and shoulders ache from being fucked against the concrete. Although I'm cleaner after the brutal hose down, my upper thighs are a sticky mess, and the temperature has plummeted.

How long will they leave me here? My ears prick up at a sound, and I freeze on the spot like I'm trying to win a game of musical statues. Footsteps grow louder, and my stomach churns. Has Torean returned to finish what he started before Callen interrupted? He seemed set on finding his girl, but maybe he's changed his mind...

After what Spencer did, I vowed never to put myself in a vulnerable position again. Except look at me! I'm jumping at any sound and acting like a pathetic deer caught in the headlights.

Woman up, Ive.

I sniff, hurriedly wiping my eyes and drawing my knees up to my chest to try to keep what remains of my modesty. I won't give whoever it is the satisfaction of seeing me like this. I'm a killer, and I need to remember that.

When I see Seb's white-blond hair, I breathe a silent sigh of relief. The usual cheeky sparkle in his eyes has been extinguished, and his shirt is still flecked with Bram's dried blood. Another expression flits over his face as he looks down at me.

"Save your pity for someone who wants it," I snap.

I'd rather deal with Callen's taunts than have someone feel sorry for me.

He frowns. "Why are you all wet?"

If he still thought I was Rose, I'd have made a joke, but everything is different now.

I laugh bitterly. "Don't pretend that you care."

His fists clench as he studies me. Is he going to hurt me? Punish me for lying to him? I'm not sure what the men I'd started getting to know are capable of.

"What happened to your clothes?" he asks, noticing my tattered top. "Tell me, Ivy."

Hearing my real name come out of his mouth is surreal. I'm unsure how they found out about my past, and I'm beyond caring now. I knew our bubble would burst eventually. No one can lie and pretend forever. Since I found out Seb was a Duke, we were doomed for failure, but I never imagined a future where he'd be alive and know the truth about me.

"Ask Callen," I retort.

Seb's nostrils flare like he wants to charge away and pin his friend against the wall, just like he did when he walked in on me and Callen fucking. Then indifference replaces his angry look, and a tightness grows in my chest. That's even worse.

"You can't play us off against each other anymore," Seb says. "We know the truth. You've been lying to us all from the

start.”

“If you think you know everything, why are you here?” I counter. “I assume that Freddie doesn’t want you to speak to me, otherwise you wouldn’t be sneaking around at night.”

He shifts his weight from one foot to another, avoiding answering my question. He doesn’t need to say anything when I can read his expression and know I’m right.

I stand up. My top falls open a little, and his gaze strays to the cut on my chest.

He tenses, then points at my tits. “Did Callen do that?”

I ignore him and ask again, “Why are you here?”

Usually, Seb is the guy who has his shit together. He’s the man every woman drools over, never seen without a hair out of place. But he looks exhausted now. His mum would have an aneurysm if she saw him like this.

He throws a bottle of water at me like I’m a dog. “I came to give you this.”

“There’s a leaky pipe,” I say defiantly. “I’m already covered. Why don’t you tell me the real reason, huh?”

He straps on his big boy panties and decides to be honest. “I want to know the truth.”

Our eyes meet. As much as there is anger behind his baby blues, there’s something else too. Hurt. I swallow down my feelings of guilt and remember he’s one of the reasons I’m chained here.

“The truth?” I scoff. “Can we reschedule the interrogation until I have proper clothes?”

“Did you know who I was when we met at the launch party?”

Really? That’s what he came here to ask? I expected to be quizzed about the Killers Club operations: when I joined them, how many people I’ve killed, who their clients are... but not this.

“Why does that matter?” I ask. “You know who I really am now.”

“Answer the question,” he commands.

“Fine.” I sigh. “No, okay? I didn’t know who you were when we first met.”

His brows furrow as he studies me. I’m not sure what he’s expecting to see. A flashing light above my head to confirm I’m telling the truth? A buzz on an invisible lie detector machine only he can hear?

“Why did you go on a date with me?”

“Seriously?” My eyes bulge. “Out of all the questions you could ask, this is what you choose to go with?”

He buries his hands in his navy trouser pockets and shrugs. “Freddie will ask you the real questions tomorrow. These are for my own personal curiosity.”

Why not tell him the truth? I have nothing left to lose, and I doubt he’ll believe a word I say, anyway.

“I went on a date with you because my friend—ex-friend—thought it would be good for me to...” I cringe as I continue, “Have fun.”

The corners of his lips twitch in a half-smile, and then it vanishes.

“I didn’t know you were a Duke until the shoot-out at the bar when Freddie went to negotiate Bram’s ransom,” I explain. “But none of that matters now. You and the Dukes have what you want. An ex Killers Club agent. Congratu-fucking-lations!”

Seb paces back and forth. Minutes pass, and neither of us speaks, but I see his thoughts whirring in his mind. He stops walking abruptly and says, “I can get you something to clean up your cuts.”

“I don’t need a fucking plaster,” I say. “I’d rather you untie me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Well, why don’t you stop acting like a gentleman?” My anger floods out. Although I’m not sure who I’m more angry at: the Dukes for holding me here, the Killers Club for feeding me lies, or Bram, who dove in front of a bullet that had my name on it. “If you have nothing else to say, then fucking leave!”

He steps closer, and his scent engulfs me, reminding me of our time together. What I had with Seb and Freddie was different from the connection I shared with Callen and Bram. Callen knew I was a monster, like him, from the start. Bram was damaged and broken, like me. But my connection with Freddie and Seb was pure. Them learning the truth about me polluted it.

“I cared about you, Ivy,” Seb admits. “I thought what we had was special.” He laughs while I refuse to look up from my feet. “I want to know if anything we shared was real or if it was all a lie. Call me an idiot, but I need to know whether the girl I was falling for ever existed.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I mumble.

“The truth,” he says. “I want to know if any of it was real.”

The truth is complicated. Messy. Realities and identities have blurred. How will admitting I felt something change the outcome?

“I only stayed with you because of the club,” I lie. “I was going to kill you. That was my job. That’s all I cared about.”

Seb’s face falls. His disappointment almost makes me want to take back what I said and confess how I genuinely feel, but I won’t. The end was inevitable, and I was stupid to cling to a stupid fantasy for as long as I had.

“What about Freddie?” he asks. “You didn’t know who he was at first, either. Did you care about him?”

“Freddie was obsessed with me,” I say. “We met once years ago. He’s been mourning a stranger. It’s pathetic.”

This is for the best. It has to be.

Seb nods in sad, reluctant understanding. “So, we meant nothing to you?”

“I’m a killer,” I remind him. “My job was all that mattered. I worked for the Killers Club because I liked it. I enjoy making people hurt and suffer. It’s what I live for.”

He shakes his head and whispers, “I don’t believe you.”

A sizzle of electricity jumps between us as his eyes meet mine, looking at me like he’s trying to see into the depths of my soul. I tear my eyes away, afraid he’ll see the truth. I did care about them, but people like me don’t get happy endings.

“I know you better than you know yourself,” he continues. “I can read your body language.” The psychoanalysing fucker. “You’re trying to hide it, but I think you cared about us, otherwise you’d never have got into the van. I saw how you reacted when Bram got shot. You can’t fake a reaction like that.”

“I was in shock,” I dismiss, then channel my inner bitch to navigate our conversation into less stormy, painful waters. “Why don’t you stop wasting time and kill me already? We all know that’s what you’ll do sooner or later.”

He steps back like I slapped him. “The Dukes protect people.”

“You’re killers, too,” I say. “If this situation was reversed, I’d kill you. You know I would.”

“I’ll see you soon, Ivy,” he replies sadly.

He pauses before he rounds the corner, turning back like he wants to say more, but changes his mind and disappears.

CHAPTER 12

BRAM

My retinas burn from the bright light, and it's a real strain to open my eyelids. After being held in a gloomy cell for weeks, natural light is kind of a novelty. It's strange to be lying on a mattress with comfortable sheets after becoming accustomed to a concrete floor.

Snoring comes from the chair next to me, and I crack a smile at seeing Seb's sleeping figure. The Dukes came to get me like I hoped they would.

I don't recognise the room we're in. The deep green wallpaper is faded and old-fashioned, and mismatched chairs are dotted around the bed. Perhaps Seb owns another house that I wasn't aware of.

I wince as I use all my strength to sit upright, being careful not to tug on the drip feeding into my arm. My shoulder aches, making every breath painful.

My ruffling sheets cause Seb to stir, and he mumbles something incomprehensible before one of his eyes opens. When he sees me staring back at him, he jumps up like he's been struck by lightning. I've lost count of how many times he's made me late by sleeping through his alarm, so maybe I should lose consciousness more often to get him out of bed on time.

"You're awake," Seb says, stating the obvious. "Can you hear me?"

I tilt my head in a micro-nod. That's the best he'll get, but Seb understands me.

"I need to tell the others." His face lights up as he picks up a phone and sends a quick message. "You scared us, man."

My expression stays neutral. My memories of being rescued are hazy. I remember being happy to see them, running, and the gun firing.

"Freddie and Cal will be here soon," Seb says, then holds his phone out for me to take. "Do you want to say anything?"

I nod, and he puts it into my hands with the text-to-speech app already waiting. I fumble as I type. Stupid tiny buttons. Why can't phones have keys big enough for my fingers? That's why I prefer keyboards.

"Where is she?" I make the female robot voice ask in an Australian accent. Seb likes to mess around with the machine voices, but now isn't the time for comedy.

"She's..."

Before he finishes his sentence, Freddie bursts through the door. "How is he?"

I grunt, indicating that I'm here and capable of answering questions myself, which makes Freddie grin. His eyes are bloodshot, like he's been awake for hours.

Seb cracks a relieved smile, a tightness leaving his shoulders. "He's good."

A few minutes later, Callen saunters in wearing a silky robe. I grimace at the outline of his swaying cock from beneath the flowing fabric. That's not a sight I wanted to wake up to.

"Hey!" Callen notices me staring. "Eyes up top. I saved your life, but it doesn't come with additional extras."

My eyes narrow. *You could have covered your junk, at least.*

Callen busies himself, checking my drip and looking over my wound. It's freshly dressed, so he must have come by

earlier to change it.

“It’s good to have you back, Bram,” Freddie says.

“We’ve missed you,” Seb says.

The longer I was held hostage by the Killers Club, the more hope slipped away of ever seeing them again... until Ivy joined me.

Seb’s phone is still in my hand, and I hit the replay button to repeat my earlier question that was left unanswered. “Where is she?”

Freddie purses his lips, Seb fiddles with his collar nervously, and Callen hums, ‘*She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain*’ like the weirdo he is.

Frustration builds, and I continue typing.

“I want to see her.”

“That’s not possible,” Freddie says bluntly.

My eyes widen in horror. Seb reads my expression and quickly adds, “She’s not dead, but we’re holding her somewhere.”

The app speaks for me, “I need to see her.”

“She’s dangerous,” Freddie says. “We don’t know what she’s capable of or where her loyalty lies. As soon as we take off her cuffs, she could kill us all. We can get you help for Stockholm syndrome. I’ve found a specialist therapist that can ___”

I use all my energy to shake my head. They don’t understand what me and Ivy went through together. Being confronted by death binds people, and our connection runs deep. I saved her life five years ago to give her a second chance, and I stepped in front of the bullet because I failed the first time and wanted to do it again. I won’t let that be in vain. History can’t repeat itself.

“She won’t hurt us,” I make the app say. “The Killers Club has renounced her. She’s not with them anymore.”

“How do we know it’s not all another act?” Callen asks. “It’s not the first time Little Miss Innocent lied to all of us, remember? We know who she really is now.”

Freddie’s cheeks flush in anger. He’ll have taken the news of Ivy’s betrayal the hardest.

“I need to see her,” I insist.

“No!” Freddie explodes. “No one is seeing her. We’re keeping her alive until we decide what to do with her.”

If I was stronger, I’d push back, yet a tiredness washes over me. How am I feeling so drowsy after just waking up? Callen smirks as he taps my drip bag cocktail. The fucker is knocking me out!

“You need to rest,” Callen says firmly, enjoying every second of this.

He’s the only person who could save my life and still make breaking his nose seem like the best idea I’ve ever had.

I look at Seb for help, but he avoids looking in my direction. He knows I can read him. I sense that he shares my pain, even though he’s trying to hide his feelings from me. He’s hurting. He cared about her, too.

I try typing one more message:

“We need to give her a...”

Then everything drifts further and further away...

CHAPTER 13

FREDDIE

“He’ll be out for another few hours,” Callen says.

“Good,” I reply, but Bram’s question still hangs in the air, along with all the others I know Seb and Callen want to ask.

“What are we going to—” Seb begins, but I wave my hand to silence him.

The truth is, I don’t know what we’re going to do with Ivy, but we can’t have her starving to death before we get answers.

“I need to feed our prisoner,” I say, then storm away before either of them can hound me.

I head to the kitchenette at the end of the corridor. The cupboards are stashed with stale bread and plenty of tinned goods. I find a can of baked beans and empty the contents into a plastic bowl that would be best suited for a child, then pick a few spots of green mould from the bread before tossing that in too. She can eat it cold with her hands. I’m not risking getting scolded or sliced by real crockery.

Once her breakfast is prepared, I head to the dungeon. I push the door open as quietly as possible and tip-toe down the stairs. In an ideal world, she’ll be asleep, and I won’t have to speak to her at all. I’m not ready for that yet.

I turn the corner to see Ivy sleeping against the pillar. Her hands are still cuffed, and her ankle is still secured. However, a few things are out of place: an empty plastic bottle that wasn’t here yesterday lies at her side, her cheek is bruised, and

her t-shirt has been turned into a party streamer that shows off a fresh cut on her chest. She didn't have any of these injuries when she arrived.

Someone's been here. Nausea makes my stomach roll. Has Torean and his men visited her? What did they do? I try to stay calm, but that's easier said than done...

I place the morsels within reach, but far enough away that she won't risk spilling them if she turns around.

"So, that's it?" her croaky voice rasps as I go to leave. "You're just going to keep me tethered up?"

I spin slowly.

"How do you expect me to eat when my hands are tied?" she asks. She's right. "Or are you planning to starve me?"

"You have food," I reply coldly. "I'm sure you're smart enough to figure something out after all your time in the Killers Club."

"Can I use the bathroom?" she asks.

"You have a bathroom," I say, pointing at the bucket nearby that I was planning to task Callen with emptying later.

"A real bathroom," she says.

"I can't let you do that."

"Why?" she demands. "Do you think I'm going to smother you with toilet paper or turn the toilet brush into a shiv? You can sit and watch if you want."

"I said, *no*."

"All I want to do is have a proper wash and use an actual toilet," she says. Her voice cracks. "Bram wasn't the only prisoner the Killers Club kept."

Fuck. Her pleading tone makes my heart constrict. Looking at her, I can't help seeing the woman I thought I loved, but my mind is filled with contradictions.

"You're not a monster, Freddie," she says. "Please."

“Fine,” I relent against my better judgement. There’s a bathroom at the top of the stairs she can use. “But I’m not leaving you alone, and I’m tying your ankles.”

“Do whatever makes you feel good about yourself,” she mutters sarcastically.

How did we come to this?

I approach her, taking out the spare pair of cuffs stashed in my pocket.

“Stand up,” I order. “And don’t think about doing anything stupid, or you’ll never leave this place again.”

She struggles to her feet. I don’t offer to help, and she doesn’t ask.

When she’s upright, I hand her the cuffs. “Put these on your ankles.”

She sighs, doing as I ask. With them on, she can move, but there’s not a lot of give in the chain, meaning she can only take half a step at a time. It’ll reduce the risk of her running. She won’t get far without the use of her hands and legs. I kneel down, twisting the key in the lock to release her from the chain binding her to the column.

“This way,” I bark, grabbing her arm and pulling her along with me.

I try to ignore the soft warmth of her skin as she stumbles along. She is a killer. Our enemy. If she didn’t leave with the Killers Club after the Collingsbrook Ball, we’d all be dead.

Ivy says nothing while we climb the stairs.

“What happened to your cheek?” I ask.

She ignores me as we emerge from the dungeons. No one is around—Seb and Callen are still watching over Bram, and I’m grateful for the privacy. They can’t think I’m showing her sympathy. I need to maintain a tough stance, although that doesn’t mean we have to treat her like an animal. We’re better than the Killers Club.

“Nice place,” she says, looking down the windowless corridor and narrowing her eyes at the Campbell coat of arms mounted on the brick wall.

“We’re not here for a tour,” I hiss, tugging her along.

I misjudge my strength and yank her too hard. With her ankles bound, she loses balance and topples over. She uses her forearms to break the fall, but her knees land with a crack. All thoughts of her being our prisoner vanish as I duck at her side.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

“How far have we got to go?”

“The next door on our right,” I reply.

I put my arm around her shoulder to help her up, but she shrugs me off, choosing to do it herself. Her grazed knees are bleeding from the sharp flagstone.

Fuck...

We walk a few more feet, and I hold the door open.

She pauses. “Are you going to wait outside?”

“No,” I insist. “I’m coming with you.”

CHAPTER 14

IVY

For someone used to walking in ridiculous heels, I thought walking in shackles would be a breeze, but it's more complicated than it looks. It turns out that I haven't mastered the half-naked duck waddle dance at all. When I fell, I made sure not to give Freddie a reaction. If I complain about grazed knees, he might never let me upstairs again.

He holds the bathroom door ajar for me to pass through. Inside, a giant bronze bath and matching sink take up most of the space. They look strange paired with the black-and-white chequered floor. The toilet's flush cord dangles from the ceiling—unfortunately, it's not quite long enough to strangle someone with, if the need arose.

Freddie turns on the bath taps. The water pings off the giant tub like rain hitting a caravan roof. There mustn't be a shower in a building this old.

“I need to use the toilet.” My cheeks heat as I can't ignore the burning need in my bladder anymore. “Can you give me some privacy?”

He looks torn, then sighs, and taps his watch. “One minute.”

He steps outside but leaves the door open ajar, keeping one foot inside. I'm grateful for the moment alone, but it's short-lived. He returns as soon as he hears the flush.

The bath fills fast, and Freddie rummages through various bottles in a cupboard above the sink. He tips a purple liquid

into the water, and the heady scent of lavender fills the room.

“Are you going to untie me?” I ask.

“Are you going to keep pushing your luck?” he snaps.

“How will I get into the bath then?” I question. “Do you expect me to bunny hop and break my legs on this monstrosity?”

A vein twitches in his forehead. “I’ll carry you.”

“Fine,” I agree. “Put me in then!”

He approaches carefully as if he’s afraid of what I’ll do.

“You want to bathe... like this?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“These clothes need a wash, anyway,” I say, refusing to remove them.

He doesn’t reply, but his jaw clenches as he scoops me into his arms. I half-expect to be dropped, but he gently lowers me into the water with an unexpected tenderness. I don’t want to read into it, but I can’t help wondering whether any of the feelings he had for me are still there.

“Hold your arms out. I’ll free one hand while you’re in the bath,” Freddie says, and then his expression hardens. “But I swear to fucking God, Ivy, I’ll drown you if you put a toe out of line. Do you understand?”

“Got it,” I reply, feigning a sweet smile.

He unlocks one cuff, leaving the other dangling off my wrist. I could whirl it around like a flail and slam his head against the tub to knock him out, but I decide against it. Instead, I stick my toes under the running tap to warm them. It’s lukewarm, but after spending the night in a damp dungeon, it’s basically a jacuzzi. My limbs relax in the water, and I wait until the bubbles cover my breasts before pulling off what’s left of my t-shirt and shuffling out of my skirt and dirty knickers.

Freddie leans against the wall, watching me. I pretend he’s not there, choosing to enjoy the experience instead. A dry bar

of soap rests on the side of the tub, and I take my time to lather it up. I start with my feet, cleaning between my toes, then move further up my body, washing away the blood from my grazes and scrubbing off Callen's dried cum from my inner thighs until they're red.

I exhale deeply when Freddie barks, "You're not in a spa. Two more minutes."

"Is there any shampoo around?" I ask, fluttering my eyelashes.

He grumbles under his breath but reluctantly returns to the cupboard to look. He returns victorious, begrudgingly thrusting a bottle into my waiting hand. I flip the lid and am met with the sweet smell of honeysuckle. Torean's a psychopath, but he has good taste in shampoo. I don't push my luck and ask for conditioner, though.

I massage it into my roots, whipping up thick suds, and let out a small moan of pleasure. It's amazing to scrub out the dirt, although I wish I could erase the last few weeks—or years—along with it.

When finished, I slide down into the bath, submerging my head underwater. I hold my breath for as long as I can. Under the surface, I could be anywhere in the world. I wonder whether Freddie will take his chance and hold me under—it'd be preferable to leaving me to die at Callen's or, worse, Torean's hands.

When I emerge, Freddie looms, casting a dark shadow over my peaceful paradise. Without me realising, the bubbles have dissipated, giving him the perfect view of my naked body. I try to ignore how my tits are bobbing above the water and how my nipples have hardened into pink peaks.

He clears his throat and warns in a husky tone, "One more minute."

I keep my thighs pressed tightly together and dunk myself under for the last time. When I come up for air with a gasp, I push my hair out of my face, tucking the loose strands behind

my ears and try to channel my newfound optimism. I can do this. Whatever's coming next, I can face it.

“Wrists,” he instructs.

I hold them out for him to re-secure my cuffs. He double-checks to make sure they're correctly fastened.

“Scared I'll break free?” I tease.

He ignores me and holds out a fresh towel. “Here.”

I rise while he does a great job keeping his eyes on my face.

“Thanks,” I say as he shoves the towel into my hands.

His gaze strays lower for the briefest moment, and he grimaces like he finds me repulsive before turning away. I hurry, wrapping the towel around myself as quickly as possible. His reaction shouldn't bother me, but somehow, I can't help feeling disappointed...

CHAPTER 15

FREDDIE

Water droplets glisten against her skin. I only catch a quick glimpse, and I can't hide my disgust at seeing what they've done to her. Her beautiful body is broken, covered in bruises and scratches.

"You can lift me out now," she mutters.

I approach the task like I'm hauling any other package. I throw her towel-wrapped body over my shoulder, willing myself not to get hard at knowing there's only one thin layer separating us.

When she's standing on the floor, I pull out the plug, remove her soaking clothes, and hang them on the icy radiator.

A white dressing gown hangs on a hook on the back of the bathroom door.

"You can wear this until I find you some clothes," I say, throwing it at her feet, then I turn away to give her time to dry off. I should be watching her every move, but I don't want to see her injuries. My natural desire to protect her will be too hard to overcome.

While she dries, I remove the first aid kit that I spotted in the bathroom cabinet earlier.

"Are you done yet?" I snap, keeping my tone harsh and strict.

"Yes," she replies.

When I look at her again, she steals my breath away. Her wet, red hair trails down to her waist. The tied gown nips in her waist, accentuating her ample hips, and revealing more of her big breasts than is a good idea for me to see.

“Sit down,” I say, gesturing at a small chair in the corner of the room. I’ve never understood why people have chairs in bathrooms, but it’ll come in handy for once.

She frowns in confusion but shuffles over, dripping water across the floor.

I hold up the first aid kit. “May I?” I ask, then kick myself for requesting permission when I’m the one in control. I continue gruffly, “Let me clean your knees.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. “You don’t have to.”

I shoot her a venomous glare, letting her know she has no choice. “Sit.”

She does, accepting her fate, and moves the dressing gown out of the way as I kneel before her.

“Don’t move,” I warn.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she mutters.

True to her word, she doesn’t make an immediate lunge to snap my neck while I tear open a packet of antiseptic wipes, clean her wounds, and put a plaster with a smiley face on her kneecaps.

“There,” I say as we both stand. “Aren’t you going to thank me?”

“Thanks. A kids plaster is really going to save me from a raging infection when I’m locked in a filthy dungeon,” she replies.

Before I think of a clever response, I notice the bruise on her cheek. Now that she’s clean, it’s even more obvious. I grab her chin, moving her face and tilting it for closer inspection. “Who hurt you?”

She tries to jerk away, but I hold on tight.

“Tell me,” I command. “Who hurt you?”

“Torean,” she whispers. “But I’m sure you already knew that.”

A fierce fury rises in my core. If Callen didn’t tell me that his twin had already left for London, I’d throw the bastard in the dungeon and see how he likes being beaten.

“Did he...” My voice trails off. “Did he...” I don’t want to say it, but she knows what I’m asking. “Did he do anything else to hurt you?”

Torean’s not like us. Callen’s twisted, but Torean lives in the darkness permanently. Torean’s brutality levels are like Callen’s on steroids. He’s ruthless and acts with no remorse.

“No, but he would have if...” She stops, realising she’s said too much.

“If, what?” I push. “You can’t lie to us anymore. Every word you say needs to be the truth, understood?”

“Callen stopped him,” she confesses.

My anger reignites. Callen defied my orders again. He can’t get away with it. I act fast, unlocking one of her ankle shackles and binding her to the nearby radiator.

“Stay here.”

“Where do you think I can go?” she says. “I’m stuck!”

I march from the room with one person on my mind and roar, “Callen!”

He has some explaining to do.

CHAPTER 16

CALLEN

I hear Freddie before I see him. His yelling like a battle cry can't be a sign of something good coming my way...

"Callen!" he bellows again.

His stomps approach Bram's room, echoing through the corridor.

What did Ivy tell him?

He throws the door open so hard that it hits the wall. I jump from my seat, readying to defend myself, but he's quicker. His dark features contort, showing he's lost all logical reason. He grabs my robe and throws me backwards against the wall with Hulk-like strength.

"Easy on the spinach, Popeye," I say. "Why don't you let go so we can talk?"

"What happened?" Seb asks.

He doesn't move from his chair beside Bram, who continues sleeping and staying oblivious to the chaos around him. Seb confronted me earlier about what happened last night between me and Ivy. I told him the truth—omitting the part about me fucking her, of course—and he seemed to believe me.

"Ivy," Freddie spits. His hands close around my throat. "You let Torean hurt her!"

"If you're going to come in with the accusations," I wheeze, "you need to get your facts straight."

Freddie's nostrils flare, but he loosens his grip enough so my trachea doesn't feel like it's about to snap. "Explain yourself."

"I stopped Torean from hurting her," I say. "She was lucky I showed up."

"I gave you strict orders to stay away from her!" Freddie rages. "You shouldn't have been anywhere near the dungeon!"

"I know my brother," I say. "I was watching him, and she'd be dead if I hadn't stepped in. Would you rather we be burying her? I thought you weren't supposed to care about what happened to her. She's our prisoner, remember?"

Freddie lets go of me, and I massage my neck.

"Fuck!" Freddie swears.

Seb chews his lip, not sure of the right thing to say to calm our boss. He's in a volatile and unpredictable mood. No one wants to stand in the path of a hurricane when it's ready to tear through the castle.

"We need a plan," Seb says. "We can't keep going on like this."

"You're right," Freddie sighs in exasperation, his waning anger making way for contemplation. "We need her to tell us everything. We need answers."

"I can help," I offer. "Interrogation is one of my specialties." Freddie bares his teeth like a guard dog. "Okay, got it!" I raise my hands. "It looks like you've got this covered."

"We should all be there to hear what she has to say," Seb says.

"Fine," Freddie says. "I'll take her back downstairs, and we can start."

"Take her back?" I question. "Where is she now?"

"I left her in the bathroom."

I raise my eyebrows. "You left a Killers Club agent unattended?"

“She’s attached to the radiator,” he snaps, although his forehead wrinkles in concern. “She can’t go anywhere.”

“The pipes in this castle are flimsier than—”

Freddie doesn’t wait to hear the end of my sentence, which was shaping up to be a witty joke about Seb’s flaccid cock, and sprints out. Seb follows while I double-check that Bram has everything he needs before going after them. Maybe Bram’s the lucky one...

CHAPTER 17

IVY

Great. While Freddie's off being overruled by testosterone-fuelled caveman urges, I'm tied up like a puppy on a lead outside a supermarket.

I move my ankle that's attached to the radiator, hoping to make a noise to remind him I still exist when... *Holy fuck!* The pipe moves, and something comes loose. I drop to all fours, using my entire body strength to wrench my leg and yank the pipe as hard as I can. The metal digs into my skin, but I keep going.

Despite my efforts and years of training, I'm not stupid enough to think that I stand a real chance of escaping. Even in the unlikely scenario that I can overpower three guys, they won't be holding me somewhere that would be easy to free myself from. I have no idea how long I've been here, and we could be in another country for all I know.

Freddie's flippant attitude and the disgust on his face ignited my rebellious streak. I might come to regret my decision, but I have to try. Not trying would be like surrendering; I don't back down easily. I needed to teach them a lesson for locking me up.

I keep pulling, feeling the resistance lessen as I do. All I have to do is keep going. There's a tinny ping, and then... *Bingo!*

The pipe comes away with a crack, detaching from the radiator. Water gushes everywhere, soaking the floor, but I slide the cuff off the pipe to free myself. With one foot, I can

run with the chain trailing behind me, but I won't have long until Freddie returns.

My adrenaline surges as I cautiously push open the bathroom and peer around its edge. There's no sign of anyone, so I slip away and hurry down the medieval-themed corridor, trying to ignore the sound of the metal chain dragging behind me like cans strapped to a noisy wedding car.

Raised voices come from behind me. I won't be able to put a lot of distance between us moving at my speed, but if I hide, I'll buy myself more time. I can hide in plain sight.

A door slams. I act fast, darting behind a giant horse-shaped statue and crouching like a hunting tiger. I watch Freddie rush into the bathroom, with Callen and Seb in pursuit. They won't be happy to learn I'm not there.

"She's gone!" Freddie yells in fury.

I smirk. Okay, hearing his reaction is totally worth whatever consequences I'll have to face.

"I told you the pipes aren't great," Callen replies.

"Ivy!" Freddie's shouts echo around the walls. "Ivy!"

"I've always liked a game of hide and seek," Callen says. "She won't be able to get far. Torean's security is stationed outside, and they've been ordered to shoot on sight."

Freddie spits orders at the others, splitting them up. They race past my hiding spot while I hold my breath. They fan out in different directions to cover more ground. While the others are looking for me, I decide to use my newfound freedom to pay someone a visit.

I press my back against the wall. All the crashing and smashing they're doing on the floor above easily masks the sound of my running as I head into the room where they fled from.

I open the door, mentally preparing myself for what I might see and find Bram sleeping in bed. Surprisingly, he looks... good. Well, as good as someone can look after what he's been through. He's shirtless; his muscular arms rest on top

of the pale blue duvet, his shoulder is bandaged, and a drip feeds into his arm.

This is the man who jumped in front of a bullet for me. The same man I tortured. I push away the pang of guilt at the sight of the brand in the centre of his chest. None of my targets ever lived past a torture session with me before, but Bram was strong, or maybe fate stepped in because it knew he was never really my enemy.

I shuffle to the chair next to him and take a seat. While the others run around the castle like they're playing Supermarket Sweep, I take Bram's hand and gently stroke his calloused palm. Our time in the Killers Club dungeon feels like a dream now.

"Thank you," I whisper. "I'm glad you're alive."

Thankfully, he doesn't stir at my mumblings, but I feel a little lighter to have said it. I'd be dead if he hadn't stepped in, just like Jonathon. Although I thought Jonathon was a friend, I can't bring myself to feel bad about what happened. If he really cared about me, he'd have let us go. He had to make a choice, and he chose to blindly follow the Killers Club.

Meeting Bram changed my life. He flipped my loyalty to the Killers Club on its head, leaving me questioning everything. He anchored me to reality; whatever came next, I wanted to be here for him now. I owed him that much.

"She's in here!" Seb's yell shatters my peace, almost rupturing my eardrums. "Get away from him!"

He runs in. He's wearing clean clothes, a simple white tee and jeans. He clutches his stomach, panting as he conducts a visual check to see if Bram's chest is still moving.

"What did you expect me to do?" I arch one eyebrow. "Kill him?"

"I-I-I—" he stammers, then shakes his head, still catching his breath.

The others must be out of shouting range as he sends them a text to let them know I've been found.

“Don’t sign up for a marathon anytime soon,” I say, rolling my eyes. “What’s your prize for finding me?”

He puffs out his chest as if to prove how masculine he is and places his hands on his hips in a power stance. “If you’re not going to hurt him, why are you here?”

“I wanted to make sure Bram was okay with my own eyes,” I say. “You’re not the only one with trust issues.”

“I’ve never given you a reason not to trust me,” Seb mumbles, turning his back on me to make a call after his text must have gone unanswered.

“I don’t trust anyone,” I snap. “Not anymore...”

If the Killers Club could get away with deceiving me for years, I don’t think I’d ever be able to trust anyone again.

CHAPTER 18

FREDDIE

I get a good view of the grounds from the tower window. It'd be impossible to miss a woman in a dressing gown racing across the dull, bleak landscape. Apart from the dirt road, there's nothing around for miles, and Ivy would die from the elements if she managed to sneak past Torean's gunmen.

"Fuck!" I take out my frustration on a nearby coat rack, kicking it and knocking it over. If Torean expects me to cover any damages, he can go to hell after what he did to Ivy.

We've been searching for fifteen minutes, and there's no sign of her. She can't have gone far. I never should have let her out of my sight. Why did I think plastering her knees and letting her take a bath was a good idea? She already thinks we're gullible idiots, and yet again, she's found a way to throw an act of kindness back in my face. I don't know why I'd expect anything less.

My buzzing phone draws me out of my frenzy, and I pause, leaving the coat rack splintered in two.

"What?" I snap down the line.

"I've found her," Seb replies breathlessly. "She's with Bram."

How did she get past us? I break into a run, taking three stairs at a time. Callen's up ahead, his hair flowing behind him as he does the same.

We both storm into Bram's room to find Ivy sitting next to him and holding his fucking hand!

I point at her in accusation. “You said you wouldn’t run!”

“And I didn’t,” she replies smugly. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Now might be a good time for that interrogation, boss,” Callen says.

“Are you going to throw me back into the dungeon like a naughty child?” Ivy asks. She crosses her legs and makes circular motions with her ankles, causing the chain to twirl. “Or can I stay up with the big boys a little longer?”

I grab a chair and pull it across the room to sit opposite her. It’s the first time we’ve all been in the same room since we were reunited.

“That depends on whether you answer our questions,” I reply, trying to stay levelheaded. “We want you to tell us about the Killers Club.”

“What do you want to know?” She yawns, but I don’t miss how her hand squeezes Bram’s a little tighter. “You’re going to have to be more specific, Freddie.”

Seb perches at the end of Bram’s bed while Callen stands in front of the door, guarding the exit. None of us will take our eyes off her from now on. There’s nowhere she can hide.

“What happened when you and Bram were locked up together?” Callen asks.

I glare at him. “I’m asking the questions.”

“They gave us a challenge,” Ivy answers him. “The last person left alive wins.”

“And you’re both still breathing?” Callen scratches his chin. “Interesting. From how you’re holding his hand, it looks like you unsheathed Bram’s cock instead of a knife.”

“You’re disgusting,” she hisses. “You sick fu—”

“Enough!” I interrupt, although the information was more interesting than I expected, leaving me curious about what else happened between them when they were alone. I return my

attention to important matters and ask, “How long have you been a Killers Club agent?”

“Five years,” she replies, her expression darkening. “And I already told you, I’m not one of them anymore. They kicked me out, and I’ll never go back.”

“Why?”

“The reason is irrelevant,” she says coolly.

She’s testing my patience, so I try another question, “Why did you join them?”

“You already know why,” she replies. “I assume you have your theories. For you to have worked out who I really am, you must know about my past. I’ve already told you some of the story.”

“We want to hear it from you,” I insist.

“So, you want all the dirty details...” She drops Bram’s hand and turns her attention to me. She sits straighter. Despite being weak and malnourished, she presents strength. “Do you want to hear all about how Spencer Bexley raped me? Or how about how he left me there to die by the side of the road? Or even better, do you want to know all about how I watched his men kill my little sister in front of me, and how there was nothing I could do to stop it?”

I switch off my emotions, reminding myself that this is the woman who was going to kill us.

“The Killers Club gave me a choice. I could leave or join them. If I stayed, they’d give me a new identity. They promised they could make me strong, teach me to fight, and make sure I never felt weak again,” Ivy continues. “I didn’t hesitate. With Daisy dead, I had nothing else left. She deserved justice.”

“How many people have you killed?”

“I don’t keep count,” she replies.

That says more than any number could.

Seb pipes up, “When were you planning to kill us?”

A tension-filled silence fills the room while we wait for the words we know she'll say but don't want to hear.

“Alaric—my boss, who you had the pleasure of meeting at the Conservatory—gave me three days, but things didn't go as planned...”

“I guess you must have been upset when Callen killed your friend,” I scoff. “I bet that ruined your plans.”

She doesn't reply, and her gaze strays to Callen, who has suddenly taken a keen interest in a spot of flaking paint on the wall.

“What is it, Callen?” I ask sharply.

“Callen didn't kill Tom,” Ivy answers for him. “I killed him.”

Seb's jaw drops as I question, “Is she telling the truth?”

“I wouldn't give her all the credit.” Callen shrugs. “I mean, I helped...”

“Unbelievable,” I mutter. I'll deal with him later. I turn back to Ivy. “Why did you kill him? Surely, it'd have been easier to have a buddy around to help you when you were going to massacre all of us, anyway.”

“It was my mission, not his,” Ivy says. “And I needed to get more information. I needed... more time.”

“More time to do what?” I can't keep the bitterness from creeping into my voice. “More time to fuck with our heads? Trick us into bed? Let us think you were someone you're not?”

“It's complicated,” she says, wringing her hands in her lap. “I... I didn't know any of you were the Dukes until that day we met again at the bar.”

“You can't expect us to believe that,” I sneer.

“Believe what you want, but I have no reason to lie anymore,” she says, locking her determined stare on mine. “And you should try to remember that you'd all be dead if it

wasn't for me, so maybe you should start showing me a little gratitude."

Anger spreads through me like wildfire and makes my entire body shake.

"Gratitude?" I spit. "Why would we show the assassin who wanted to kill us any gratitude?"

"Last time I checked, you're not dead!" Ivy stands. It's hard for her to be intimidating when she looks like the Abominable Snowman's Scottish cousin in an oversized white dressing gown. "Have you ever stopped to think about why the Killers Club locked me in the dungeon? They did it because I failed my mission, and they thought I was compromised."

"Compromised?" I pause. "Why?"

Her cheeks flush, but not from anger, and she looks away.

"Why did they think you were compromised, Ivy?" Seb probes gently.

"Because I didn't kill you." Her eyes glaze over, looking from me to Seb. "Because they thought I'd started to care about you both, and maybe a small part of me thought they were right. I did start to care, or at least I thought did..."

My heart drops to my stomach. How could she care about us when she continued to lie? If she told us the truth, we could have tried to work things out, but she kept pretending to be the woman of my dreams. She kept lying.

She stands and shoves me out of her way, heading for the door.

"What about me, princess?" Callen asks, trying to stroke her shoulder as she tries to charge past him. "Did you care about me, too?"

"Fuck off," she hisses, pushing him square in the chest and causing him to stagger backwards.

He grins smugly. "That's not what you were saying last night."

My head whips around to see him wearing an arrogant smirk like he's won a gold medal. I want to wipe that expression straight off his face, and I see red.

Everything happens in a blur. I dive across the room, thinking with my fists. I throw a punch, using the power of my entire body to hit Callen's jaw with a thwack. He topples to the floor like a tumbling Jenga block tower.

Callen tries to scramble to his feet, attempting to make excuses. "Boss, I can explain!"

I jump on top of him and pin him between my thighs before he can get away. I land another hit, sending his head slamming to the right. Seb grabs me, trying to haul me off him. With effort, Seb heaves me back long enough to give Callen an opening to roll away and get up.

"I guess I deserved that," he mumbles.

He rubs his jaw, wincing from the pain, and readjusts his robe.

"You need to calm down," Seb hisses in my ear. "Pull it together."

Ivy leans against the wall, staying away from the action.

"Was it consensual?" I ask her.

"Jesus, Freddie!" Callen exclaims. It's his turn to be angry, and he advances for round two. "Who do you think I am?"

I square up to him, and our noses almost touch. "After seeing what your brother did to her, I'm questioning whether I know you at all."

"That's enough!" Ivy intervenes, stepping in and putting herself between us. "Callen didn't hurt me, okay? I told you he helped me."

"See?" Callen spits at my feet in disgust. "That's what I said."

"And I said *you* had to stay away from her," I growl.

"You're bickering like a pair of schoolboys," Ivy says. "I'm not a toy you can play tug of war with. I'm a real fucking

person with feelings!”

“Did you mean what you said, Ivy?” Seb asks. “That you’d started to care about us?”

“I was stupid, right?” She laughs bitterly and gestures down at herself. “This is where caring gets you: locked up in a dungeon with a monster who could have done anything to me.”

Seb’s gaze softens. He wants to believe her. Being in her company is stealing his reason away, and I recognise it because I can’t help wanting to feel it, too. But we can’t.

“We can’t trust her,” I bark, snapping him out of her trance.

“I don’t expect you to,” Ivy says. “If you don’t kill me, the Killers Club will. Alaric and Stephanie—his psycho blonde girlfriend who goes by the name Bethany—have made that perfectly clear. Whichever way you look at it, I’m a dead girl walking, so you can take me back to the dungeon until you decide to put me out of my misery.”

“You’re not going back to the dungeon,” I say. “After your stunt today, you’re staying with me. Where I can keep my eyes on you.”

My decision has nothing to do with knowing what Torean almost did to her on our watch, right?

“Fine,” she huffs, returning to sit next to Bram. “I guess you’re stuck with me.”

And we are. For now, at least...

CHAPTER 19

SEB

Watching Ivy and Freddie's altercation was like having a front-row seat at a high-speed tennis match with insults hurling back and forth. Neither of them are winners at the end of the rally, but I'm pleased she isn't returning underground. Like Freddie, I'm furious at Torean for hurting her, and Callen for keeping more secrets. When will he learn that we're a team who works together?

My phone rings, cutting through the frosty silence that hangs in the air. All eyes in the room swivel to face me.

"Well?" Callen asks after the third ring. "Are you going to get that?"

I check the screen and send my brother straight to voicemail. "Ralph can wait."

My phone rings again instantly. Can't he take a fucking hint? Now's not a good time for an invitation to afternoon tea or to go Rolex shopping. I reject the call.

"It could be important," Callen says. "Maybe the country needs you."

"Shut up," I snap. "Unless you want another fight."

Next, my mother rings.

Freddie's eyebrows lower in frustration. "Take it," he orders.

Ivy watches with bemusement from Bram's bedside.

I answer it, "I can't talk now. I'm—"

My mother's shrill cry explodes down the line, and I hold the phone at arm's length. It's no wonder my father has a hearing aid. Although, on second thoughts, being able to take it out could be a blessing in disguise.

"We've been trying to get hold of you, Sebastian!" she exclaims. "This is an emergency!"

I take her words with a pinch of salt. The last emergency she called me about was a missing flower delivery, and the one before that involved a delivery mix-up with her book club's catering order. She acts like any minor inconvenience is the impending apocalypse.

"I'm in a meeting," I murmur under my breath. "I'll call you back later."

"Call the meeting off!" she declares. "Where are you? I'll get Ralph to send a car to fetch you immediately."

"Actually, I'm in..." Where the hell are we? I settle on the least suspicious answer. "Edinburgh."

"Edinburgh?" Her screech rattles through me. "What are you doing there at a time like this?"

"London isn't the only city I do business in," I say, hoping I don't set her off on a long-winded rant. Mum thinks she's good at many things, but her biggest talent is pretending she's the best at everything.

"Fine!" She sighs dramatically, like an actor from a Shakespearean play in a scene where everyone dies. "I didn't want you to hear the news over the phone, but I have to tell you before you hear it from someone else. The papers are running the story tomorrow."

"What scandal is it this time?" I ask. "Have they caught the prince with another hooker?"

"She was a high-class escort," she corrects, jumping to his defence like always. Thanks to a sizable pay-out, the media never published any of the incriminating shots. God save the future King, right? "But this... this is a tragedy!"

I hear Ralph speaking in the background. Whenever there's a crisis, he runs home like a doting lapdog.

"Are you going to tell me what it is, or not?"

"Oh, Sebastian! It's simply awful," she says. "Maybe it's best you are out of town right now." She sniffs loudly. "I'll let your brother break the news."

Seconds later, Ralph's snotty voice drips down the line, "Why didn't you answer my call?"

"How many times do I have to say it? I was in a meeting," I say through gritted teeth. Are we living in a hellish version of Groundhog Day? "A meeting I really should get back to, unless someone tells me what's happening."

"It's Beatrice," Ralph says.

I haven't seen her since she ran out of the restaurant on our date with a nasty case of diarrhoea. I had a narrow escape that night and haven't heard from her since.

"I swear to God, if this is about the fake engagement, I'm going to stay in Scotland and never come back," I hiss. "I'm not marrying her!"

Callen snickers. "But you'd make such a great couple."

I glare at him and make a slicing gesture across my neck while Freddie gestures for me to put the call on loudspeaker.

"It's not that," Ralph continues. "I don't know how to say this, but..." He takes a deep breath, then announces, "She's dead."

"What?" This isn't what I expected. "Dead?"

"Darling!" Mother snatches the phone from him. "Isn't it dreadful?" She sobs, but there's a hint of glee behind her crocodile tears. She thrives on this shit. "It's devastating, and so soon after the fire! Can you believe it?"

"What happened?" I ask. "How did she die?"

"We don't know exactly," she says, then drops her voice to a scathing whisper to add, "but there are rumours that she was murdered by a secret lover!"

“I highly doubt that,” I mutter.

“Don’t be bitter, Sebastian,” she replies, misinterpreting my tone for jealousy. “I thought she was a good, well-bred girl, but you seem to have been right about her. She was never royal match material. In any case, your father pulled some strings to get more information.”

“What did Dad find out?”

“They found her holding a note in her hand,” Mum says. “It said, ‘With Love’ with some initials... K.M... K.L...”

“No, it was K.C.,” Ralph chips in.

My grip tightens on my phone as I look around the room and see my own suspicions reflected on the other’s faces. The note is no coincidence. We’ve seen a similar message before, scrawled next to Doyle’s dead body. This is the work of the Killers Club.

“Keep me updated if you hear anything else,” I say before hanging up.

Ivy wrings her hands, avoiding looking in my direction, but all our eyes are on her.

“What do you think?” I ask her. “Was it them?”

“You killed one of their agents and raided their HQ,” Ivy replies. “They’re out for blood, and they’ll go after every person they think you care about.”

“What about my family?” I ask.

“They should be safe, for now at least.” She shrugs. “Royals are off-limits, but Beatrice was an easy target.”

“But I didn’t care about her,” I say. “She was just a ruse.”

“They will have seen you both splashed all over the papers together. They don’t care about whether she was a ruse or not,” Ivy says. “They took her life to send a message.”

It’s ironic that Beatrice’s desire to be with me sealed her horrible fate. While her simpering nature had driven me insane, we’d known each other for years. We’d never have worked out but, one day, she might have got over her

schoolgirl crush and found real happiness. That'd never happen now. She was gone, and her death was my fault.

“They can't get away with this,” I seethe. “We need to take them down.”

“Then let me help you,” Ivy offers.

“Why would you help us?” Freddie asks. He laughs coldly. “You used to be a double agent.”

“Because the Killers Club have shown me their true colours,” she says. Her freckled nose scrunches in determination, leaving no doubt that she means every word. “They betrayed my trust and left me to rot in a cell. I want to make them pay.”

“The Dukes need to talk,” Freddie says, nudging his head to direct me and Callen to leave with him. “Alone.”

“But—” Ivy begins.

“No arguments,” he snaps. “Now, hold out your hands.”

“Are you finally going to take these cuffs off?” she asks hopefully.

He unlocks her left hand, then attaches the cuff to Bram's wrist instead, binding them together.

Ivy pouts. “Is this necessary?”

“I thought you two were good friends now,” Callen says, making her scowl.

“If you hurt him,” Freddie warns, “we won't show you the same level of mercy again, Ivy.”

CHAPTER 20

FREDDIE

Seb and Callen file out of the room first. I cast a lingering glance at Ivy over my shoulder before leaving. I don't trust her, but if she cares enough about Bram to see him over making an escape, I'm confident she won't saw off his hand to free herself... hopefully.

The three of us go into a grand dining room with floor-to-ceiling oak panelling across the hall, keeping the door open so I can keep an eye on her. A table and eight accompanying chairs are covered in a layer of dust, leaving a musty smell hanging in the air.

"I can't believe she's dead," Seb mumbles. He's in a state of shock. The Killers Club are out for blood, and they're making it personal.

"At least you don't have to worry about being forced to marry her anymore," Callen jokes, nudging Seb playfully in the ribs. Seb shoves him back three times harder. "What? Too soon?"

I slam my fist down on the table, making a dust cloud. "We need to stop the Killers Club."

"It won't be easy to take down a network of assassins we know little about," Seb says glumly, his shoulders slumped. "They're not going to stop until they've taken all we have. How long will it be until they decide to go after the rest of my family, or yours?"

I say nothing. I don't have any family, so I have nothing left to lose. Seb, Callen, and Bram are all I have.

Callen chuckles. "I'd like to see them go after Torean."

"So would I," Seb agrees, only he's not joking.

"No one else is going to die. We'll make sure of it," I say. We've worked too hard to make a name for ourselves and protect our clients for it to be taken from us now. "You're forgetting we have a secret weapon. Someone who knows everything about them."

As much as it pains me to admit it, Ivy is the best chance we have at defeating them.

"Do we want to wage a war against them, boss?" Seb says, shuffling around on his feet. "We don't know how many of them there are. There's only four of us, and Bram's bed-bound."

"Wake up, pretty boy. We're already in a war," Callen says with the ferocity of a Highlander readying to defend his land. "What's the alternative? Hide away forever? We need to spill ___"

"Maybe we don't have to fight." I have a vague idea forming. "We could give them something they want for our immunity."

Callen's face falls in disappointment as I extinguish his dreams of a murderous rampage. "You want to make a deal with them?"

"We have to be realistic," I say. "They have the numbers. If we stand against them, we'll lose. We need to negotiate."

The word 'negotiate' leaves a bitter taste in my mouth as I swallow my pride, but I'm not stupid. I've been assessing all our options since we arrived. I don't like it, but this is the only way that we can make it out of this. I can't let my men die on my watch.

"What deal do you want to make?" Seb asks, although the kicked puppy dog look in his eyes tells me he already knows the answer.

“We give them Ivy. It’s the only way,” I say, unsure whether I’m trying to justify my decision more to Seb or myself. “She’s a rogue agent. Her being alive is a liability for them with everything she knows. We give her up, and they let bygones be bygones.”

“Do you really want to do this, Freddie?” Seb asks.

We have no choice. I have to protect my family at all costs. Ivy Penrose has come between me and my men once before. I won’t give her another opportunity to do it again.

“Yes, but we can’t tell Bram,” I say. “He seems to have developed an attachment to her. Ivy lulled us into a false sense of security, and now we’ll play her at her own game. Give me your phone, Seb.”

He sighs, looking like he wants to cling onto it, but he hands it over. He still has ‘Rose’s’ number saved from when the Killers Club lured him to the Royal Duchess for a meeting. It’s a long shot. They could have ditched the burner already, but it’s our best chance of contacting them.

I copy the number onto my phone and check that my VPN is enabled first—the last thing we need is the castle being stormed down. Once confirmed, I send a text:

The Dukes have something of yours. Let’s talk.

“Done,” I say as Seb and Callen watch over my shoulder. “All we have to do is wait.”

Ivy is a means to an end. She’s a trade item. A payment method. Nothing more.

CHAPTER 21

BRAM

I dream about the place I'm always running from. I try to wake up, but I can't. Instead, I fixate on the flames ripping the roof off the building in front of me. I try looking away, but it's impossible, no matter how hard I try. It feels so real that my cheeks heat from the scorching fire.

Next, the ground is pulled from underneath me, and the scene phases out.

I'm in the alleyway outside the pub again. Why do I keep returning here? I watch from above as my staggering figure stumbles out at closing time. Onlookers heckle, shoving me in the direction of my latest fighting opponent, who is equally hammered. He's a local wrestler who has never lost a match. Until now.

Before the fight even begins, I dive at him. My fists act of their own accord. Even though I know this is happening in my head, I recall the crunch of his nose breaking and his heavy panting in my ear as he takes a beating.

"You're going to kill him!" someone shouts, but I don't stop.

The scene blurs again. All the colours twist, and I'm suddenly behind the wheel of a car, driving along a narrow country road. Overgrown tree branches hit the windshield. I'm calmer. I've been sober for a week, although my desire to drink hasn't lessened. I desperately crave it more than anything.

The shining moon illuminates the car in front of me as it forces another car off the road. The Ford Focus tumbles, and I turn up the radio to drown out the crunching metal as it somersaults. Darkness closes in, whisking me somewhere else.

Some time has passed. It's later that same evening. I wipe sweat from my brow as I carry a naked woman from the spot where they discarded her. She clings to life, and all I can do is hope for the best...

Snapshots come. I can't make sense of them. They move too fast. Then they stop. I hear a scream. My scream. A hot, metallic liquid fills my mouth. Blood. My blood. It trickles down my chin while Alaric towers over me, laughing. When I open my mouth, no noise comes. My silence for her life. A fair trade.

“Bram!” A woman’s voice pulls me back to reality. “Can you hear me?”

My eyelids open. A bedside lamp casts a warm glow over her hair, making her tresses resemble a setting sun. I flex my fingers, to confirm I’m awake, and realise that she’s holding my hand.

“It’s good to see you,” Ivy says. “I’ve been waiting two days for you to wake up.”

I squeeze her hand. It’s weak, but the best I can manage,

It's good to see you, too. You have no idea...

“You know, most people try to jump out of the way of a moving bullet,” she says, squeezing back. “Maybe you should remember that next time. I thought a soldier would know better.”

I can’t help grinning. I’d do it again. We made it out alive. That’s all that matters.

At the end of my bed, someone else clears their throat to interrupt our moment. Seb stares at our interlocked fingers. The hurt in his eyes strikes me with guilt. I slip my hand out of Ivy’s grasp, tucking it under the covers until I can find out more about what’s happened while I’ve been asleep. The last conversation I had with the Dukes involved an argument

because they were holding her somewhere, and Freddie was going to find me a therapist. What's changed since then?

“Since you first came around, you've been in and out. Callen's been treating a nasty infection on your leg, but you're through the worst of it now. The medication was pretty strong,” Seb says. “Are you thirsty?”

I nod. Ivy jumps into action, tipping a glass of water into my mouth. When she places the glass down, I spot a packet of custard creams next to it and crack a half-smile. They didn't forget.

Seb notices me clocking them and says, “I couldn't have you gaining consciousness without getting your fix.”

He knows me too well, but his joke doesn't lighten the atmosphere. During our last conversation, I made it pretty clear where I stood on Ivy, and how we needed to talk.

Freddie enters the room, making Ivy's shoulders tense.

“It's time for you to leave, Ivy,” Freddie addresses her firmly. I want her to stay, but I'm too tired to start another argument. “Seb will escort you out.”

To my surprise, Ivy jumps up in compliance. Since when has she been a woman who follows orders?

“I'll see you soon, Bram,” she promises before she and Seb leave together.

Our time in the dungeon made me feel like we could get through anything. Now we're back to reality, I sense that everything is about to change.

Freddie takes Ivy's empty seat.

“Are you ready to answer some questions?” he asks.

I groan and allow my head to sink into the plush pillow, hoping that it'll let me melt into it and disappear.

“You've been asleep for days,” he says. “I—we—need answers. Do you think you can do that?”

Slowly, I nod. The longer I put it off, the worse it'll be.

“Good,” he says, taking the tone of a police officer. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

He hands me a phone with the text-to-speech app ready on the screen. I hesitate as I take it from him. I’ve kept Ivy’s secret for years, but the time has come for me to tell the truth...

“I need you to tell me what happened, Bram,” Freddie prompts softly. “You can take as long as you need, but I’m not going anywhere.”

Where do I start? Freddie wants to hear about my time in captivity, but my history with Alaric and Ivy goes back beyond that. For him to truly understand what happened, I need to go back to the beginning, or he’ll never understand why I risked my life for her.

I type, and the phone speaks in a robotic voice, “I knew Ivy before I joined the Dukes.”

Although it doesn’t resemble what my real voice used to sound like, it’s better than some of the alternatives. Callen favoured the Cookie Monster option a while back, which drove everyone insane.

Freddie sighs. “Maybe we should do this later after you’ve rested more.”

Naturally, he doesn’t believe me. But I need to make him listen. He has to know what I did and why I’m the reason she became a killer, otherwise, he’ll never accept her or give her a second chance. Even if that means admitting that I’ve been keeping a secret from him all this time.

It takes effort for me to type. “I used to work for Spencer Bexley.”

Freddie’s jaw clenches, but he says nothing, nodding at me to keep going.

“I never told you because of what happened the night I quit.”

“Go on...” Freddie says.

He's trying to act casual while leaning forward, hanging onto my every word.

"When I left the army, I got a job as one of Spencer's drivers. I was there the night he ran Ivy and her sister off the road."

I take a deep breath before sharing the rest because it means truly admitting the mistake I made. Sharing the pain and guilt I've been carrying for years.

"After Spencer and his men left, I returned to the crash site to see what happened. It was too late for her sister, but Ivy was still alive."

The vein in Freddie's forehead throbs wildly like he's trying to keep his cool.

"When I found Ivy alive, I rescued her. I took her to someone I thought would keep her safe, a man I knew from my army days."

"The Killers Club?" Freddie can't contain himself any longer. The words burst from his mouth in an explosion of disbelief. "You knew about them?"

I shake my head.

"I worked with Alaric in the army and thought he ran a witness protection programme. I thought he could help her."

"Fuck!" Freddie swears.

"That's the night I lost my tongue," I confess.

"Spencer did that to you?" Freddie questions, jumping to conclusions. "After he found out what you did?"

"No, Spencer never found out what I did. I quit working for him the next day and never saw him again until the Dukes took on his protection detail."

"Then, who..." Freddie's voice trails off as he works it out.

"Alaric made a deal with me," I confirm. "He wanted my silence for her protection."

“That twisted bastard,” Freddie mutters.

“I would do it all over again.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?” Freddie presses. “You said you lost your tongue in a drunken fight. You watched me visit the Penrose sisters’ graves for years! Why didn’t you tell me she was still alive?”

“I wanted to tell you. Many times. But you thought it was Daisy Penrose you met at the bar. There was nothing I could do to save her. If I’d known it was Ivy, I...” I stop typing. The truth is, I don’t know whether I would have told him. Spencer wanted her dead, and I vowed to do anything to protect her. I opt to change the subject. “I kept this secret for her. I thought I was protecting her new identity. I wanted to give her a second chance, just like the one you gave me.”

“This doesn’t change who she is now,” he says gruffly. “She’s a liar and a murderer!”

“Ivy is a victim, too. Alaric brainwashed and manipulated her. He made her a monster.”

“That’s enough questions for today,” he cuts me off. “Rest.”

He doesn’t look back as he storms out and slams the door, making it rattle on its hinges. We’re supposed to be a family, but I don’t think we’ve ever felt further apart...

CHAPTER 22

FREDDIE

Callen's waiting outside Bram's room when I march out.
"What did he say?" he asks.

"Watch him," I bark, pointing at the door, successfully ignoring his question. "And when are you going to put some real fucking clothes on?"

"I didn't know my robe offended you so much," he mutters.

I'll strangle him with that silky kimono thing he insists on wearing. It's a Scottish castle, not the fucking Bahamas.

I leave Callen sulking while Bram's revelations whirl around my brain. Why did he hide the truth about his history with Spencer? Keeping a secret for a stranger's protection is admirable, but he could have trusted me. My shoulders slouch. I thought we were a team.

Since leaving the army, Bram's sought redemption, but his saving her doesn't change where we are now. Ivy's still a killer, albeit also a pet project for his conscience. She's undeserving of his loyalty. The woman she used to be is gone, and returning her to the Killers Club will save the Dukes. That's all that matters.

I steady my breathing before entering the living room down the corridor to see Ivy and Seb. They're sitting on opposite ends of the room. Seb looks uncharacteristically casual in a tight black t-shirt with torn jeans, while Ivy wears an oversized button-down with woollen socks that are pulled

halfway up her calves. We've all had to make do with clothes from Callen's limited wardrobe, and I was lucky to claim his few garments of formal attire.

My footsteps make them look up from their activities. Seb's sprawled across the red sofa, watching a football match on the miniature TV, even though he hates the sport. Ivy is curled up in an emerald green armchair, knees tucked underneath her, reading a battered copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that she must have found in the bookcase next to her.

This is how we've spent the last few days, constantly tiptoeing around each other. Ivy hasn't said more than a few sentences to any of us. Whenever we've tried asking her questions, she only gives us brief answers, and we haven't pushed her. She could be afraid that saying the wrong thing would result in her being banished to the dungeon.

Earlier, Callen told me that Bram should be strong enough to travel soon as he's over the worst of the infection, so I've started planning our return to London. Between taking turns watching Ivy around the clock, I've also been working out where would be a suitable location to meet the Killers Club, if they ever reply to our message.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew Bram before the dungeon?" I ask coldly.

"It wasn't my place to say anything," Ivy replies curtly. "If Bram wanted you to know, he'd have told you."

Seb sits up and mutes the television. "Wait, what?"

"Give us the room, Seb," I instruct.

"But—"

"No arguments," I yell. "Now."

His cheeks redden. "Since when do we have secrets?"

"We don't have time for this," I growl. "Now, leave. That's an order!"

Seb looks torn, but he obeys, marching off and slamming the door hard enough that a painting falls off the wall. We really need to stop slamming the doors.

“You should apologise to him,” she says. “You can be a grade-A asshole sometimes.”

“Don’t forget you’re only here because I’ve allowed you to be,” I say, crossing my arms.

She laughs. It’s the first time I’ve heard her laugh in days, and it tinkles through the air, reminding me of how fucking good it sounds. Then my walls come slamming down again, reminding me of her deception.

“Are you trying to intimidate me?” she asks. “Or was there a point to this temper tantrum? If you want to say something, then say it.”

“You clearly manipulated Bram when you were in the dungeon,” I say. “You had a history, and you exploited him.”

“I didn’t ask him to jump in front of a bullet,” she says. “I never expected him to do that.”

“Bram’s a soldier,” I say. “He’d have done it for anyone.”

That’s not true, but I won’t give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

She folds down the corner of the page to keep her place and puts the book down. That’s another strike to add to my list of why Ivy Penrose is not the right girl for me. I keep my books pristine and take great care not to crack the spines. Sometimes, I even kept them in special packaging.

“How long are you going to keep this act up?” she asks.

Her question takes me by surprise.

“What act?” I demand.

“This ‘holier than thou’ act,” she says. “You’re acting like the Dukes are angels, yet we both know that’s not true.”

“You were going to kill us,” I remind her. “What did you expect? Us to throw a murderer a welcome party?”

“I never expected you to whip out balloons or party hats,” she says wryly, “but I expected more than this. I thought you were a man of honour, but I was wrong.”

“You’re judging me?” I splutter in disbelief. “After everything you’ve done?”

She shrugs nonchalantly. “I’m not an idiot. I get why you’re angry. But you’ve been so focused on everything I’ve done wrong that you haven’t even tried to understand my point of view.”

There’s a reason for that. I refuse to give her another reason to make me weak. She’s torn my barriers down once, and it can’t happen again. Not when she’s our bargaining chip.

“You’re a psychopath and compulsive liar,” I snarl. “That’s all I need to know.”

“Tell me something, Freddie.” She stands and stares me down, not backing away in the face of confrontation. She’s not afraid. “How am I any different from the Dukes? You favour loyalty. I did what the Killers Club asked without question. I killed people, so fucking what? Sue me! You can’t tell me that’s something you don’t do, too. I know what you did to Adam Brentwood. You’re no better than the Killers Club. You are worse.”

She steps closer, so close that there’s only a few inches between us. Her warmth makes my skin tingle. Blood races to my cock as my body betrays me. I need to pull myself together. Fast.

“We could have let you die at the Killers Club HQ,” I say, refusing to show the effect she has on me. “But we didn’t.”

“Only because you knew I was your only chance of getting out alive,” she hisses. “At least the Killers Club don’t pretend to be people they’re not. They’re cold-blooded, ruthless killers. You like to pretend the Dukes protect people and make a difference, but you help to keep monsters alive.”

“You know nothing.”

“You worked with Spencer Bexley!” Her voice rises a few octaves, bordering on hysterical. She isn’t trying to rile me now. She’s hurt. Really hurt. “You protected him, and you know what he did to me!”

“Instead of bringing you here, maybe we should have given you back to him and let him finish what he started.”

As the words come out of my mouth, I regret them instantly.

Ivy's demeanour changes in a flash.

Her shoulders slump, and her entire body seems to concave in on itself as if I'm watching her resolve shatter into a thousand pieces. Fuck. My steely determination to keep the feelings I had for her under wraps vanishes. I see the only woman I've had true feelings for in pain, and I want to make it stop. I want to wrap my arms around her, tell her to close her eyes, and kiss her eyelids to stop her tears from falling. Instead, I do nothing.

Then, just when I'm sure I've broken her, a furious fire ignites in her irises. She lunges and strikes me hard across the face.

CHAPTER 23

IVY

I step away, watching Freddie's head jerk to the right in slow-motion with a grin of satisfaction. He staggers backwards. Good fucking riddance. He should be grateful I didn't snap his neck, too.

Since we've met, it's the first time that I've ever had the urge to kill him. I could make his death fast. Fast enough that Seb wouldn't hear a thing. My red handprint blooms over his cheek, and his eyes widen. Instead of being mad, he's stunned.

"What's wrong, Freddie?" I narrow my eyes. "Not used to being hit by a girl?"

Despite our history, I never expected Freddie to stoop so low. He crossed a fucking line.

His stare locks on mine. "Ivy—"

"You should not have said that," I say, turning away from him so fast that I whip him with my hair.

He grabs my shoulder firmly and spins me around. *Stay calm, Ive*. When I look back again, his eyes are filled with pity. A look I hate more than anything else.

"I know," he says. "I'm s—"

It's too late to apologise. He's already said it. He can't take it back now. The damage is done.

"Fuck you," I sneer.

Freddie's nostrils flare as he internally battles about what to do next. He wants to keep his macho bravado to assert his

dominance, especially if there's a likelihood his men are prowling around. Yet, he knows he's gone too far.

My knuckles turn a stark white as I clench my fists. My fingernails dig into my palms so hard that they almost draw blood. Controlling murderous urges is hard work when slitting throats has been my answer to everything for the last five years.

"I thought you wanted to ask me real questions," I continue. "Or maybe you should save yourself the bother of interrogating me and deliver me to Spencer. At least that way, *I* can finish what *I* started."

"What do you mean? Finish what you started?" he asks sharply.

"I joined the Killers Club to make Spencer and his men pay for what they did," I explain. There's no point in hiding it now; it changes nothing. He's probably already worked it out, anyway. "Alaric promised that he'd make me strong and that if I worked for him, I could work through my hit list. When I first joined the club, I killed random marks. I learned the best torture methods and ways to make people scream. They gave me names, and I killed them. No questions asked."

Freddie stays rooted to the spot, hanging onto my every word.

"For years, I waited for Alaric's permission to kill the men who did this to me," I say. "I wanted to kill all the men who hurt my sister and save Spencer for the end. I was so close to completing my list. If you and the Dukes hadn't distracted me, they'd all be dead by now."

"Anthony Steel and Graham Baldwin," Freddie murmurs, putting the pieces together. Hearing their names makes me want to gag. "But what about Doyle? He died when you were with us."

"His death was a distraction to keep my cover." I wave my hand dismissively. "Doyle wasn't on my list. He wasn't there the night Daisy died, but he's done shady shit over the years, so it's no loss."

“How many more names were on your list?” Freddie asks.

“Spencer, obviously. And Christopher Trout,” I say, my entire face hardens as I recall the Killers Club’s bitter betrayal. “When they held Bram and me prisoner, I discovered that Alaric had been working with Trout for years. It turns out I even killed for him, without knowing it. They worked with him, even though they knew what he did to Daisy.”

“How did you find out?” Freddie asks.

“Bram helped me hack into their system to prove a point,” I reply. “He’s some kind of computer genius.”

Freddie rubs his chin, forgetting he’s supposed to hate me. “That explains a lot.”

“So, you can see why I won’t go back to them,” I say. “They’ve been manipulating me for years, treating me like a killer fucking puppet! Alaric kept telling me it wasn’t the right time to work through my hit list when really, he didn’t want me to kill any of his precious clients.”

“Spencer was at the Collingsbrook Ball. Why didn’t you kill him when you had the chance?” he asks. “For someone so highly trained, it shouldn’t have been difficult.”

I huff. If I was a dragon, I’d be breathing fire and burning him to a crisp. Sure, I could have killed him, but I’m no fucking amateur.

“I already had my hands full with Baldwin that night,” I say. “And besides, when I kill him, I’m going to take my time. It won’t be a rush job at a party. I want Spencer to know who brought him to his knees. I’ll make him beg for his life, and when he pleads for death, I’ll keep him alive until I drain every drop of blood from his body.”

Our eyes meet, and we share a look of understanding. He knows what losing the people you love the most is like. It changes you forever. You get used to carrying the heavy weight of grief and being perpetually caught in a dark fog that never lifts. Killing Spencer is my only glimmer of light.

Freddie clears his throat and asks, “How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“You don’t,” I reply bluntly. “But you can ask Bram, and he’ll tell you the same story. Although you should know better than to trust anyone, Freddie. Trusting people only leads to someone getting hurt.”

“The Dukes trust each other,” he says.

“And you’ll all be dead as soon as the Killers Club find you,” I say. “Do you want them to die? Seb and Callen? You’ve already lost your family.”

“Don’t talk about them,” he spits through gritted teeth.

“So it’s fine for you to bring up my past trauma, but I can’t do the same?” I snipe.

“I’m sorry for saying what I did,” he murmurs, having the decency to look apologetic. “I shouldn’t have—”

I wave my hand to silence him. “How about we make a deal? I’ll help you take down the Killers Club and keep the people you love alive if you help me kill Trout and Spencer.”

Freddie arches one eyebrow. “We don’t negotiate with our prisoners.”

“You’re a businessman, and this ‘prisoner’ is your best chance of surviving,” I say. “We share a common enemy now. I’d have done anything if someone gave me a chance to save Daisy that night. If I listened to Daisy when she told me Spencer was bad news, she might still be alive. Don’t make the same mistake I did. You might hate me, but I’m the Dukes best chance at getting through this. Now, do we have a deal?”

He thinks on it for a few seconds, then holds out his hand like we’re concluding a board meeting. “We have a deal.”

I shake it.

My skin tingles as his fingers clasp mine. His gaze involuntarily strays to my lips, and his pupils dilate as they linger for a little too long. Then he steps back, pulling us out of the moment. I thought whatever connection we shared was over, but now, I’m not so sure...

CHAPTER 24

SEB

I press my ear against the door to listen for any signs of trouble. They haven't thrown any furniture so far, which is promising.

“Shit!” I jump as my phone vibrates in my pocket, drawing me away from eavesdropping.

I take a few steps down the corridor to take the call, reluctant to leave Freddie and Ivy unsupervised, but Ralph may have information that could be useful.

“What do you want?” I ask as I pick up, skipping past any pleasantries. We have to keep up appearances for the rest of the world, but, between us, we could be as blunt as we liked.

“Have you seen the papers?” he asks.

“I've been trying to avoid them,” I say. That's usually best whenever there's a new scandal, especially one involving me. “Why?”

“Father has managed to get a copy of Beatrice's autopsy results,” he says grimly.

“And?” I probe.

“They found track marks on her arms,” he says. From his disapproving drawl, I imagine that he's shaking his head in his predictably judgemental way. “It confirms her death was an accidental overdose.”

“So, no vengeful lover or murder then?” I joke, despite knowing full well that the Killers Club staged the scene.

“No, much to Mother’s disappointment,” he says unironically. “She’s just another woman who came into too much money and took the wrong path. This is why men are the head of the household.”

Misogynistic prick. I feel a wave of sympathy for his wife—although she’s vapid enough that his saying something like that wouldn’t bother her. It’s why he married her.

“Thanks for keeping me updated,” I say. “I better go.”

“One more thing,” he jumps in before I can hang up, “you’re expected to attend her funeral.”

“Surely it won’t be for another week or two?”

“It’s in two days. The McGowan family want this whole nasty business wrapped up quickly,” he says. “We’re all invited. And, considering the rumours that she was soon to be your betrothed, you have to be there.”

“What if I’m too grief-stricken to attend?” I ask hopefully, trying to find an excuse to escape the dismal affair. Attending high-profile weddings is torturous, but funerals are even worse.

“The family requests your presence, so you need to get back to London,” he says, pulling the royal card. “The time for gallivanting is over. I’ll text you the details.”

He hangs up, and I sigh, running my hand through my hair in exasperation. Callen’s stupidly tight shirt makes the movement difficult. At least if we return to the city, I’ll be able to find better clothes.

“Was that anything important?” Freddie asks from behind me, coming from out of nowhere. He has a habit of appearing when you least expect him to.

I want to ask him the same question about his conversation with Ivy but keep my mouth shut. He seems less angry than when he went inside, which must mean progress.

“Beatrice’s autopsy came through.” I grimace. “It showed that she died of an overdose.”

There's a sad irony to Beatrice's reputation being dragged through the mud. She wasn't a party girl—in fact, I once remember her telling me she only drank champagne on special occasions because she was worried about alcohol giving her premature wrinkles.

“An overdose is easy enough to orchestrate,” Freddie says.

The light hitting his hair highlights the silver strands running through his dark mane. He has more greys around his temple and ears than before.

“The funeral is in two days, and I need to be there.”

“We can't postpone returning to London any longer,” Freddie says. “It's time.”

We knew we couldn't stay here forever. Even though Torean and his motley crew were gone, I didn't want to stick around for long enough to see him again after hearing about how he threatened Ivy.

“Where are we going to stay?” I ask. “Everywhere is compromised now that they know who we are.”

“There is one place left,” Freddie says mysteriously.

While we're chatting, Ivy peers around the living room door. “Did I hear you say we're leaving?”

“Yes,” Freddie says. “We're heading home.”

“Are you sure Bram will be okay to travel?” she asks, biting her lip in worry. “It's a long drive...”

A surge of jealousy rushes through me. She seems to care about Bram, but where's her concern for me? I've known Beatrice my whole life—okay, I didn't like her very much—but the Killers Club still killed her.

“Are you his babysitter now?” I growl.

She gives me a funny look, but I'm already turning and heading back to my bedroom.

We need to get ready to go.

CHAPTER 25

IVY

After spending the rest of our day preparing and persuading Torean to let us use two of the cars in his fleet, we're finally on the move. We've been on the road for hours and have traded beautiful Scottish landscapes for dull stretches of motorway.

We're travelling in a convoy—Freddie and I up front in the Jag, while Seb drives Callen and Bram in the Land Rover behind us. Bram's still recovering but has repeatedly reassured everyone that he's well enough to travel, not that he has much choice.

Apart from stopping a few times for toilet breaks and grunting a few words at each other, Freddie and I haven't spoken. In fact, I haven't seen much of him since we made our deal. Reading and trying to avoid eye contact with the Dukes has been the best way to pass time.

Signs to London are starting to appear more regularly, but the miles don't seem to be going down. I huff in frustration, crossing my arms over my chest as we get caught in yet another traffic jam.

I lower the window to feel the breeze on my face.

"What are you doing?" Freddie snaps. "Close it!"

"Jesus, I'm only getting some air," I reply. "Or did you expect me to vault out of the window and cause a pile-up that'll kill us all? I'm good at what I do, but I'm not that good."

Freddie smirks but keeps his eyes on the road ahead. He's rocking a sunglasses-black suit combo that makes him look like he's on his way to a modelling shoot. Eurgh, why does he have to have such perfectly chiselled cheekbones too? Some people get all the luck.

"I've been thinking about our deal..." I say, daring to broach the subject again.

It's not like he can run. Besides, discussing business matters will take my mind off his annoyingly flawless features. Freddie agreed to work through my hit list in exchange for my help, but how do I know he won't use me like Alaric did? He could use me and cut me loose. I need to take care of myself.

"We've already made the deal," he replies, ending the conversation. "There's nothing left to say."

A car horn beeps to our right, and Seb starts overtaking us. As they speed past, Callen sticks up his middle finger and makes the 'wanker' hand motion. I roll my eyes. He's a fucking child.

"You want me to help you take down a group of assassins. How do I know you're not going to screw me over?" I ask. "I waited years for Alaric to give me permission to start ticking names off my list. I want to kill them first."

"If I give you what you want, you'll have no incentive to help us," he points out.

"How about we strike a compromise?" I say, putting the window up as we start to gain speed before my hair resembles Hagrid's. "Let me kill Trout as an act of good faith, then I'll help you."

Freddie raises his eyebrows. "You're getting awfully good at forgetting you're our prisoner."

"I'm your colleague," I correct, admiring my nails. It's strange to see them without polish; I'll need to change that. I do my best work when I'm dressed to kill. "We're working together, remember?"

"I'll think about your offer."

“And one more thing...” I say, knowing we’ll soon be passing a giant shopping centre. “I need you to buy me new clothes.”

His eyes bulge. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously!” I reply mockingly. “Don’t you think I’ll draw attention wearing guy’s shirts wherever I go?”

“Unbelievable,” Freddie mutters.

I point at a sign. “We can go there.” I flick my hair over my shoulder. “It’ll be safer than waiting until we’re back in the capital.”

He scowls, then taps a few buttons on the screen built into the dashboard.

Seb’s voice fills the car. “Is everything okay back there?”

“See you later, losers!” Callen chips in, closely followed by, “Ouch!”

Hopefully, Bram punched him in the shoulder. I’m relieved to have avoided being stuck in the car with that arsehole for hours. I’d take an awkward silence over Callen’s theatrics any day.

“We’re taking a detour,” Freddie says.

“We’re going shopping,” I add in an enthusiastic sing-song voice.

“We won’t be long,” Freddie says. His rigid posture suggests he would rather gouge out his eyeballs with a cocktail stick. “Stay in touch.”

Freddie ends the call before Callen can think of a snarky remark. His jaw tenses as he bites down on his back teeth hard.

“Come on,” I joke. “It’ll be fun.”

“Not as fun as slitting Alaric’s throat.”

The low, threatening edge to his voice sends a shiver down my spine, making me squeeze my thighs tightly together.

“You know what, I think you might be more fun when you’re not trying to act like a saint all the time,” I say.

“You have no idea,” he growls, throwing a sharp right and sending me thudding into the side of the car.

Motherfucker did that on purpose.

I still can’t believe Freddie agreed to a shopping trip, but I’m going to enjoy my short taste of freedom. It made sense for the others to continue the journey. It’s best for Seb to avoid being seen in public places, and Bram can only put on a brave face for so long—if his injuries don’t kill him, sitting next to Callen will.

He speeds through the car park and reverses straight into a vacant spot, ignoring another car that had been patiently waiting for the space. You snooze, you lose, sucker.

“If you try anything when we’re in there...”

His trailing sentence leaves a threat hanging in the air, but he has nothing to worry about. Where else would I go?

“Come on,” I say, trying to open the locked door, then pouting. “I promise I’ll be on my best behaviour.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he murmurs, unlocking it. “We’re in and out, understood?”

I roll my eyes as he unlocks it and mutters sarcastically, “Whatever you say, boss.”

We walk to the entrance, where a group of young women are checking out Freddie. I glare at them as they look me up and down, judging my odd outfit ensemble. A woman points at the bruising around my ankles and whispers to her friend.

“What?” I stop to challenge their ogling stares. “We’re into bondage, okay?”

They gasp in outrage as I stomp past, while the tips of Freddie’s ears turn pink. The outing will be even more fun if I can embarrass him.

He takes my arm and steers me inside. “We need to get you new shoes and something that covers your legs pronto.”

“Why?” I tease, fluttering my eyelashes. “Aren’t shackle bruises the latest fashion statement?”

He can’t cause a scene in a public place, and he knows it. Except he’s right. A run-in with the police is the last thing we need. The Killers Club have connections everywhere.

“It’s not a joking matter,” he warns, leading me to look over the shopping centre map. He scans it quickly and sets off again, dragging me along with him like a pull-along case.

“Hey!” I object as we weave through the flow of people to the most expensive row of shops. “I can walk on my own. Do you want people to think you’re kidnapping me?”

“Fine,” he sighs, taking my hand and sliding his giant fingers through mine. “Happy now?”

At least this way people would think we were a couple, even though his hold is tighter than a Boa’s.

“Can you ease up?” I say. “How am I supposed to try on clothes if you cut off the blood flow to my hand?”

He loosens his grip as we stop in front of a shoe shop. The window display is classy and sleek, with only a few pairs of shoes out. It’s empty inside because normal people can’t afford to buy shoes in a high budget range. Who wants to take out a mortgage to pay for six-inch heels?

“We can go somewhere else,” I say. “We—”

He ignores me and tugs me through the door after him. A shop assistant scampers over to introduce herself immediately. You know you’re in an expensive store when someone comes over to help. I’ve always preferred the places where they leave you alone to browse. If I wanted help, I’d ask for it.

“Do let me know if you want to try anything on,” she gushes, addressing me but keeping her gaze fixed on Freddie as she unbuttons the top of her blouse.

“Let’s go somewhere cheaper,” I whisper as soon as Tits McGee leaves us alone. “It’s too fancy.”

He points at the price tag next to a three-figure pair of shoes and frowns. “I thought this was cheap?”

Fine. I guess that means I have no budget then. We circle the shop floor, and I stop to admire a pretty pink pair of cowboy boots with white stitching up the sides. “They’re gorgeous.”

Freddie waves over the assistant, and she’s there in a flash.

“How can I help you?” she asks eagerly, undoing yet another button. If she keeps going at this rate, we’ll be able to see her bra soon.

Freddie seems oblivious to the strip show happening in front of him and declares, “We’ll take these in a size five.”

I don’t ask how he knows my size, but he’s correct. I can’t tell whether it’s creepy or impressive.

“Unfortunately, sir, these are for display only,” she says, giving me an evil side-eye as if she believes I should be punished for having a hot boyfriend. If only she knew the truth...

“We want these shoes,” he says firmly. “Check in the back.”

Her cheeks flush as she stammers something in response.

“She said she doesn’t have them,” I step in to save her, even though she doesn’t deserve it. “I’ll just pick another pair of boots. No biggie.”

“My girl says she wants *these* boots,” Freddie insists. The way he says ‘my girl’ makes my stomach flip like I’m a teenager with a high school crush. “If you look in the back, I’m sure you’ll find what we’re looking for. And while you’re at it, why don’t you bring out all the shoes on that shelf there in a size five?”

He gestures to the most expensive row, illuminated with lights. There’s a gorgeous pair of black stilettos, red pumps, white trainers, and another pair of pink heels.

The woman bows her head like she’s serving the King. “Yes, sir.”

“I don’t need that many shoes,” I murmur.

“I thought we were going shopping,” Freddie growls.

If this is what shopping with him was like, then sign me the fuck up to come again...

CHAPTER 26

FREDDIE

After carrying ten boxes of gift-wrapped shoes to the car, we trudge back inside to buy Ivy a new wardrobe. She was right about needing new clothes. After seeing the way the women were watching her when we first arrived, she had to blend in if we didn't want to attract unwanted attention. Until I make contact with the Killers Club to begin negotiations, we have to watch our backs.

"They're perfect," Ivy says, pausing mid-walk to admire her new pink boots.

It turned out there were pairs in her size lurking in the back, after all. Sometimes, all it takes is some healthy persuasion.

"They're fine," I say dismissively, avoiding looking at the curve of her calves as she swivels her ankle. "Let's get this over with."

I take her hand again, reminding myself that the only reason I'm doing this is to keep up appearances, not because of how good it feels to touch her again.

We pass a shop, and Ivy halts to look at the window. Her mouth falls open as she stares in wonder at a black dress on the mannequin. It's a form-fitting cut with off-the-shoulder sleeves and cinches in at the waist.

"Let's look inside," I suggest.

"No." She shakes her head. "We can look at something more practical."

“I said, let’s look inside,” I repeat, giving her no choice but to follow unless she wants a dislocated shoulder.

There are four racks of garments, and Ivy darts straight for the clearance rail with me in tow. I watch her flick through the hangers. Her eyes light up like a kid let loose in a toy store near Christmas.

“Holy shit...” Ivy gasps. “These dresses are stunning.”

“Just buy whatever you want so we can get out of here,” I grumble, checking my watch.

The pencil-thin shop assistant sashays over and asks disapprovingly, “Can I help you with anything?”

I dislike her instantly. There’s something about the way her lip curls when she looks down her nose at Ivy that puts me on edge.

“We’re just browsing,” Ivy replies politely, continuing to look, then pauses. “Actually, I was wondering whether I could look at the dress in the window?”

Ivy quickly glances back at me for my approval, and I shrug with a ‘let’s get this over with’ look in reply.

The shop assistant smirks and scoffs, “Actually, I don’t think we do that in your size.”

Ivy’s shoulders slump as the sparkle in her eyes vanishes. “Oh, okay...”

“We have a plus size range over there.” The assistant points at a smaller rack filled with garments that resemble bin bags. “I think you might find those more appropriate for your figure.”

“I’d like to speak to your manager,” I say, stepping in, unable to contain my bubbling anger.

Ivy is a lot of things—a liar, an assassin, a traitor—but no woman deserves to be spoken to like that. Her body is perfect. She’s got big breasts, full curves, and a whole load of extra flesh that makes her delicious thighs and hips grabbable in the best way. Her shape is my personal kryptonite.

“It’s fine,” Ivy hisses, grabbing my hand and trying to tug me away, shame burning across her cheeks. I’ve never seen her look anything but confident, but this has got to her, making me even more determined to stay. “We can just leave, okay?”

I stand my ground. “No.”

I’m not moving unless she shoots me and drags me out in one of those ugly, shapeless dresses.

The assistant’s jaw drops as she stutters, “I-I-I-I am the manager.”

“In that case, we will take our business elsewhere,” I say. “The woman next to me has the most beautiful figure I’ve ever seen. Just because she doesn’t fit into your low numbers does not make her any less fucking perfect. If this is how you treat all your customers, then I’m shocked you’re still trading.”

Her face turns a deep beetroot red, but I don’t care that she feels uncomfortable. I want her to. I want her to squirm like she made Ivy.

“I didn’t...” The woman tries hopelessly to find the right words. “I didn’t mean to cause offence. I was only trying to be helpful.”

I laugh scornfully. “You knew exactly what you were trying to do.” I narrow my eyes. “And for the record, no one wants to fuck a bag of coat hangers.”

I pull Ivy, who is in a daze and gazing up at me open-mouthed, away from that horrible place.

“You didn’t have to cause a scene,” Ivy says. “I said it was fine. That’s why I don’t usually shop in places like that. They don’t always stock my size. I’m used to it.”

“You should never be used to that,” I say, taking a mental picture of the dress in the window and imagining how beautiful she’d look in it.

“Thanks,” she mumbles, averting her eyes and reminding me of the woman I met at a bar. “Maybe we can try somewhere else?”

I nod, leading her into the next store. While she shops and piles as many items as possible into a basket, I lean against the wall, flicking through my phone. As I do, a text comes through.

Let's meet. Tonight. 11pm. The Auditorium. Come alone.

My stomach twists as I read it and look across at an oblivious Ivy. This isn't an innocent shopping trip, I remind myself. Ivy isn't my girlfriend. I'm letting her believe that we're working together while I'm secretly planning to destroy her.

CHAPTER 27

IVY

My heart thuds a million miles per hour. It's funny how I can stand up to men in the mafia, dismember bodies without a second glance, and castrate men with a potato peeler, yet mean girls making digs about my size make me feel like I'm fifteen again.

When I was younger, I got bullied because of my weight. A gang of skinny blondes blessed with perfect skin, who lived off nothing but roll-ups and Diet Coke, used to pick on me. Daisy always said they were jealous because I had the biggest boobs in school, which helped make me feel better. Spencer made comments about my figure too, constantly pressuring me into dieting to lose a few pounds, but Freddie...

No man has ever stood up for me like he did, even if they were empty compliments. In fact, the only thing making me feel worse than being fat-shamed is the bitter realisation that nothing more will ever happen between me and the man who rushed to my defence. Like my time pretending to be Rose, this is just another act.

Deflated after our last encounter, the next shop we enter has friendlier staff. They help me pick outfits and stock everything in my size. By the time I'm pushed into a changing room to try on my haul, my basket is full.

I change into the first dress. It's made from soft green stretchy fabric that clings to my curves. I rotate on the spot, checking out my arse in the mirror. Is it too much? I bite my lip and peer around the curtain to see where Freddie is. He's

leaning against the wall, absorbed in whatever he's doing on his phone.

Before I speak, I try to commit this moment to memory. While working for the Killers Club, my mind strayed to what my life could have been like if Spencer hadn't cursed it. This is something I'd have imagined: a perfect guy—hot, generous, and kind—waiting for me.

“Freddie?” I call, stepping out and twirling around for him. “What do you think?”

When he looks up from the screen, he swallows hard, making his Adam's apple bob. The plunging neckline emphasises my bulging cleavage. It's backless and fastens at the back of my neck.

“Well?” I ask when he doesn't speak.

“No,” he replies in a gravelly rumble.

“Doesn't she look great?” another shopper comments. “You're a lucky man!”

He smiles, but it doesn't meet his eyes. I turn around and yank the curtain closed behind me, nearly pulling it off the rail in my haste. Maybe Freddie's sick of pretending. If we'd met in another life, things could have worked out. Now though, we weren't meant to be.

I swallow my disappointment and shove all the other potential outfits back into the basket, deciding not to try anything else on.

“Are you done already?” Freddie asks when I come out.

I turn to the assistant. “I can return anything that doesn't fit, right?”

“Of course,” they answer.

I carry my mountain of clothes over to the till and knock the arm off a mannequin in the process—it's better than removing a limb from an actual human, I suppose.

I half-expect Freddie to tell me to put stuff back, knowing this will cost a bomb, but he doesn't blink an eye as the

clothes are beeped through and it comes to an eye-watering total. He swipes his platinum card to pay like it's nothing.

“Have you got everything you need?” Freddie asks coldly.

I nod curtly. All the earlier warmth between us has vanished like an open window, allowing a gust of air into the house on a snowy day.

We trudge silently back to the car, each of us lost in our own thoughts. It's time we face reality.

I'm their prisoner.

They hate me.

Our future, if we survive it, has never been more uncertain...

CHAPTER 28

BRAM

I flinch as Seb takes a corner too sharply, shoving me onto Callen's lap.

"If you wanted to cuddle, all you had to do was ask," Callen teases, batting his eyelashes at me.

I push him away with a grunt. I wish he had sat in the front with Seb. Damn Freddie for tasking him with being at my side in case of a medical emergency. The only emergency we're facing is me wiping the smirk off his face by dislocating his jaw.

"So," Callen begins, slapping his phone into my hand, "why don't you tell us what happened when you were locked in the dungeon with the firecracker, huh?"

I make the app say, "Fuck you."

It comes out in the voice of the Cookie Monster, and Callen pisses himself laughing. My eyebrows lower, and I glare at him while Seb tightens his grip on the wheel. I'm not answering any questions. I'm not a guy who'll kiss and tell. Besides, during my recovery, I've not had the chance to speak to Ivy properly about what happened between us without the guys around.

What did our time together mean to her? Did she think we only fucked because we thought we were dying, or was it more than that? It meant more to me. Maybe not at the beginning, but I was able to open up to her, telling her about my past and my art.

“Stop bugging him, Cal,” Seb orders. “He’s healing, remember?”

“Fine!” Callen flaps his arms up in defeat. “But no one jumps in front of a bullet for a lass unless there is some seriously good pussy at stake, and we all know how irresistible Ivy is.”

I take a deep breath, trying to control myself, and get the app to say, “Go to hell.”

Somehow, a Sesame Street character doesn’t have the threatening tone I’m aiming for, and I throw the phone back at him in anger.

“I keep thinking about fucking her,” Callen brags. “You should have heard her whimpering all over my cock.”

Seb swerves the car dramatically into a layby, throwing us forward as he slams on the brake.

“Fuck me!” Callen lurches back in his seat. “Are you trying to kill us?”

Seb turns and smiles apologetically in my direction. “Sorry, Bram.” Then his expression turns murderous as he addresses Callen, “If you speak about Ivy like that one more time, you’ll be flying through the windshield, and I’ll use your balls as fuzzy dice.”

“Since when is talking about her a crime?” Callen huffs. “We’ve all fucked her. It’s the first time we’ve liked the same woman. Who knows? Sword crossing might be fun...” He wiggles his eyebrows at Seb. “Again.”

I look between the two of them, and my eyes almost pop out of their sockets.

They shared her?

I can understand Seb and Freddie making a pairing, but Seb and Callen? They can’t stand each other!

“It was a one-off,” Seb blasts. “And there was no dick touching!”

“Come on, maybe there was a little bit,” Callen taunts. “And she loved it. We gave her the ride of her life. Don’t tell me you don’t think about it.”

“Are you forgetting that she was plotting to kill us the whole time?” Seb says, putting an end to the conversation.

Despite his words and conviction, I see the hurt in his eyes. Until Ivy, he never cared about dating, preferring one-night casual flings. Finding out the woman you were falling for had planned to murder you is enough to make anyone question whether love exists.

My friend deserves to find love, and so does Ivy. It won’t be easy, but I think if he gave her another chance... there could be hope. I know the real Ivy Penrose is still in there somewhere because I’ve seen her.

“Are you going to keep driving or not?” Callen yawns. “I could hitchhike all the way back to London, but that would mean giving my brother a call to tell him we’ve stolen his cars.”

I knew he was lying when he said Torean gave us permission to use them. Fuck. Freddie will be furious when he finds out.

“I don’t want to hear another word about Ivy,” Seb says. “Deal?”

“Fine, no swapping notes to pass the time,” Callen agrees. “Got it.”

During my time in captivity, all I wanted was for the Dukes to be back together again, but it doesn’t feel the same anymore.

Ivy has divided us and, although the others don’t see it yet, she’s the only one who can fix us...

CHAPTER 29

IVY

While Freddie drives, I change in the back of the car into an oversized t-shirt dress, pop on new sunglasses and tuck my hair into a cap. Disguising my identity from CCTV cameras is my top priority the closer we get to the capital.

The two of us are silent for the rest of the painstaking journey. Finally, Freddie comes to a stop close to a tube station on the outskirts of London. We ditch Torean's car and hop straight inside a black cab laden with bags to take us the rest of the way.

"Where are we going?" I ask Freddie, being the first to break our no-talking rule. Someone had to.

We're far from the beautiful streets where the Killers Club HQ and the Duke's base were situated.

"We're staying at a place that belongs to a family friend," he replies cryptically. "They're out of the country, and I have a spare key." He leans to speak to the driver. "Here is fine. We'll walk the rest of the way."

We pull up alongside a normal-looking residential road. The terraced houses are close together, creating a maze of tightly packed streets.

"How far is it?" I ask Freddie, stacking bags up my arms like bracelets, enough that I'm worried I'll topple over.

"Far enough that we'll have to leave some of your new shoes behind," he grumbles.

“Fine,” I sigh, picking out my favourites. “You should have listened when I said I didn’t need so many.”

“It’s nothing.” Freddie shrugs. “Call it a tip.”

The driver’s eyes light up when he realises how much they’re worth. That’ll be the best tip he’ll have ever received.

With full arms, we set off through narrow alleys lined with graffiti that smell like piss. Kids kick footballs up and down, while teenagers hang around smoking and giving us dirty looks. A glare from Freddie sends them scuttling away. Men who wear suits in these parts aren’t people you mess with. There are no cameras around at all, which makes it a good choice for a hideaway.

“This way,” he beckons after we’ve been walking for ten minutes.

He looks over his shoulder before opening a garden gate to a depressing patch of concrete. I trail behind him, feeling like I’ve done a round of strength training lugging around shopping bags, and he knocks on the backdoor of the nondescript red brick house.

“Who is it?” Seb calls from inside.

“The Killers Club,” I reply sarcastically.

He opens the door and scowls. “You shouldn’t say that.”

I roll my eyes and shove past him into a small kitchen, where the others are waiting. The room is only big enough to fit a table with four chairs around it. With the Dukes squeezed inside, alongside enough bags to fill a boutique, it’d be most women’s idea of paradise.

“Seb, I have a question for you. Is this the first time you’ve been in a house where the only throne room is the shitter?” Callen jokes.

Seb’s nostrils flare, but he bites his tongue and rises above it.

I look at the four men I’m trapped in the house with. Freddie’s by my side. He’s shrewd, calculating, and makes tough decisions. His multi-colour eyes mirror his personality;

the amber signifies warmth, contrasted by the dazzling blue that has a hard edge. He has a softer side hidden under his harsh exterior—or at least I thought he did.

Seb puts distance between himself and Callen. He leans against the door frame to the next room, which shows off his inked, muscular arms. His blonde hair flops over his face, and it's the first time I've seen him with stubble. Even without trying, he looks effortlessly cool. However, from the tenseness in his shoulders that hasn't left since hearing about Beatrice's death, I sense he's blaming himself for what happened.

In front of him, Bram takes up two dining chairs, sitting on one with his feet propped on the other. A half-eaten packet of custard creams is nearby, and crumbs are strewn over the tabletop. We're in a time of crisis, but he seems relaxed. He's comfortable here and considers the Dukes to be his family. Although he deals with a constant mental battle with his past, they bring out the best in him.

Finally, there's the Scottish knobhead. Callen perches on the kitchen counter, nursing a giant mug of tea that must have required at least three tea bags to get it that deep brown colour. He has a mischievous glint in his eyes, likely plotting his next prank on Seb. But he has a vulnerable and caring side. I felt his pain when he talked about losing Tilly, and he showed he was capable of kindness when he saved the injured deer. He's a walking contradiction. A murderer with feelings when it suited him. In some ways, looking at Callen is like staring into a mirror, which is why we clash and are drawn together in equal measure.

At the moment, I'm an extra. Someone they don't want around. Is there a chance I'll ever fit in with them?

“What's in the bags?” Callen asks, taking one from Freddie and pulling a lace bra from it. Typical. Of course, he grabbed the one with the underwear. “I'm not sure it's your size, Freddie.”

“Give that back.” I snatch it from him and stash it away as Freddie heads into the adjoining living room to dump my new

clothes on the floor like they're rubbish. "How long will we be staying here?"

"That depends on how long things take," he replies.

"Why don't you tell everyone about our deal?" I say, wanting to make sure he can't back out or pretend he doesn't know what I'm talking about later. "It's only fair they know."

From the blank looks on the other's faces, it's clear this is the first they've heard about it.

"A deal?" Callen scratches his chin. "If it involves tying you up again, princess, then sign me up."

"Do you have to be such a perv all the time?" Seb groans, then asks more seriously, "What's she talking about, Freddie?"

"*She* has a name," I remind him, crossing my arms.

"Ivy agreed to help us take down the Killers Club," Freddie declares. "But she wants a gesture of goodwill in return."

Callen snorts. "Isn't her heart still beating goodwill enough?"

"I want you to help me kill a man called Christopher Trout," I announce.

"The name sounds familiar," Callen says.

"He worked for Spencer Bexley," Seb says. "Someone must have done their homework when sticking his nose into my past. What else did he find?"

Bram sits up straighter, dropping his feet to the ground. His gaze meets mine, making everyone else fall away.

Are you sure? I read his expression. *Do you really want to do this?*

I nod briskly and continue, "Trout is one of the men who killed my sister. I've been working through a hit list, killing everyone who hurt her. Trout is the penultimate name on my list. I'll help you take the Killers Club down if you help me cross the last names off. Simple."

“Why would we help you do that?” Seb counters, his business instinct surfacing.

“Because I’m the best chance you have at defeating the club,” I say. “I’ve explained to Freddie that all I want is to tick every name off my list, and the Killers Club have screwed me over, too. If you still want to kill me after we’ve done that, then fine, but I can’t die without making them pay.”

I need this and, with the Duke’s help, I’ll get justice for Daisy.

“We’ll kill Trout first,” Freddie says, “then we’ll take out the Killers Club, and Ivy will get Spencer after that. It’s a compromise.”

Uneasiness hangs in the air. I can’t have Freddie questioning his decision now, so I speak up, “Look, I know you don’t trust me, but I want you to think about Daisy. My grave may be empty, but hers isn’t. She didn’t deserve to die, and it’s up to us to avenge her. I’m not going to try to run or stab you in the back. I have nowhere else to go; revenge is all I ever wanted. It’s why I joined the Killers Club in the first place.”

“Are you sure about this, Freddie?” Seb asks.

“The deal is done,” Freddie says, clapping his hands. “Why don’t you show Ivy to her room? She can stay there until dinner. I’ve got other business to attend to.”

“Want some company?” Callen asks.

“No,” Freddie snaps. “I need to do this alone.”

The three of them look like they want to argue but stay quiet as he storms out of the house like a hurricane.

Seb nods reluctantly. “Fine.”

“Aren’t you going to help with my bags?” I ask as he walks straight past the spot where Freddie ditched them.

“Did you need to buy a whole new wardrobe?” he mutters sarcastically.

“What’s the matter? Too heavy for you?” I tease, fluttering my eyelashes as Callen cackles. “Can’t you handle it?”

Seb’s expression darkens as he gathers the bags into his arms to prove a point. “I can handle more than you think.”

CHAPTER 30

IVY

“This is pretty different to your last place,” I say, trying to make light conversation as I follow Seb through the living room, which boasts two worn sofas and an ancient TV, and up a narrow flight of stairs.

“We have no choice,” he snaps, “considering the Killers Club knows our identities and all our usual places are compromised.”

So much for trying to be friendly. My nose wrinkles at the distinct powdery old people smell hanging in the air. The carpet is thin underfoot, and the light doesn’t come on when I flick the switch, but the space is bigger than it looks and five doors lead off the landing.

“You’ll be in here,” Seb says, opening the door to a room that can only be described as a glorified cupboard.

There are no windows to break up the yellowing walls. A single bed, which shockingly looks like it has clean sheets, takes up most of the space. Next to it, there’s a chest of drawers with a cracked mirror balanced on top.

“It’s not the Ritz,” I mutter sarcastically.

“Would you rather share a bunk bed with Callen?” Seb counters. Touché. “The bathroom is opposite if you want to freshen up before we eat.”

“Thanks,” I mumble as he leaves me alone to stack my shopping bags on top of each other.

Before any of the guys have a chance to hog the bathroom, I hop straight in. The bathroom suite is a retro pink colour, and I climb into the bath which has a shower overhead. The water is lukewarm, but it beats the creepy Scottish castle we left behind. Thankfully, I snuck toiletries and cosmetics into my bags during our earlier shopping spree.

After washing, I'm starting to feel more like myself again. I change into a new navy dress with three-quarter length sleeves and a scoop neckline. The soft fabric clings to my skin like a warm hug. I sit on the edge of my bed, taking time to tease out the knots in my hair using my fingers, then leave it to dry naturally in loose waves. With time to kill, I put on a little make-up: a slick of concealer under my eyes, a smudge of red lip gloss, a sweep of mascara, and a dusting of blush to make me look less like a zombie.

There. I inspect my reflection when I'm finished. *Much better.*

Suddenly, a bang comes from downstairs. I poke my head around the door, instantly on edge, until I hear Seb calling Callen a clumsy fucker. I breathe a sigh of relief. Standard. The two of them bicker like children.

Before closing the door to drown out their argument, I hear the tapping of a keyboard from another room. Unless Freddie has already returned, Bram must have come upstairs when I was in the bathroom. I tip-toe across the landing, trying not to make a noise when the floorboards creak under my weight. I wince as the typing stops abruptly. I opt to knock. Better that than have him thinking I'm lurking around like a stalker or snooping around their things.

After waiting a few seconds for a response and not getting one, I push the door open gingerly. This bedroom is three times the size of mine. Bram is spawled out on a queen-size bed in the middle of the room and takes up most of the mattress. He's balancing a laptop on top of a pillow on his lap, and his giant hands freeze above the keyboard like he's been caught doing something wrong. At least he's not bashing one out—now that would have been awkward.

I close the door behind me and tut. “You should be resting.”

He raises one eyebrow, and his jaw drops as he admires my curves. From his reaction, I guess I’ve scrubbed up okay.

“What are the others doing?” I ask.

There’s another crash from the floor below that sounds like plates being smashed.

Bram shakes his head. *Don’t ask.*

He gestures at me to sit down.

I hesitate, then perch on the edge of his bed on the opposite side to his wound. He must have had a quick shower before me and Freddie arrived because he smells of fresh soap. He’s paired a clean, black t-shirt with grey tracksuit bottoms. I try to avoid looking below his waistline, but it’s hard to ignore his perfectly defined bulge directly in my eyeline.

Keep your shit together, Ive. What happened in the dungeon, stays in the dungeon, right?

Bram types and turns the screen around to show me a typed message:

SEB AND CALLEN ARE TRYING TO MAKE
DINNER.

“What about Freddie?”

HE’S STILL OUT.

With Freddie gone, maybe I can stick around for a little longer.

“Can Seb and Callen cook?”

Bram grimaces, giving me my answer. I guess there’s a reason why all the cupboards in their old place used to be empty.

I point at the screen and the multiple windows he has open in the background. “What are you working on?”

He tries to shuffle closer, but I stop him. “No, I’ll come to you.”

I slide up next to him, trying to ignore the warmth of his body as he opens many tabs at once. I squint at the information filling the screen. It’s hard to decipher what I’m looking at. There’s a mixture of articles, census data, and bills... then I see a photo amongst the chaos. It’s him. Christopher Trout.

Seeing his smarmy smile makes my fingers tingle with the desire to tear his teeth from his gums. His beady, piggy eyes sparkle as if he’s laughing at me. He thinks he’s got away with his crimes, but I’ll see that he gets his punishment.

He snaps the laptop screen closed, pulling me out of my memories, and then puts his hand on my knee. He squeezes in what I imagine is a comforting way—it’s been a long time since anyone’s tried to comfort me.

His gaze softens. *He can’t hurt you anymore.*

I smile meekly in reply, and he raises his other hand to point at an ornate gold frame mounted on the wall.

No, it can’t be...

“What the...” My voice trails off, and I jump up to inspect it.

I look more closely at the frame to see an embellished sketched cock staring back through the glass. The drawing that Bram and I did together in captivity. The paper has visible crease marks from where it must have been crumpled in his pocket.

“You kept it?” I whisper, turning back to him.

It’s a reminder of what we went through. A reminder that we’re still here.

He tilts his head. *What did you expect?*

“I...” My chest constricts as I pace back and forth. My footsteps are muffled by the dropping of pots and pans from the worst chefs in existence. “I didn’t think...”

My thoughts race. What does this mean? Although we shared a bond, I thought what happened between us would never happen again now that we've returned to reality. Is this Bram's way of saying he wants *us* to continue?

Two huge hands catch my hips from behind to stop me from moving. While I was busy trying to make sense of things in my head, I didn't notice that he'd stood up. How can an injured giant move so deftly?

I freeze, not only because his sexy body is pressed against mine, but because I don't want to accidentally hurt him.

He sweeps my damp hair to one side. His breath on the nape of my neck makes happy goosebumps spread over my arms. He doesn't have to say anything to let me know what his intentions are. But has he really thought it through? Freddie and I have made a deal, but it's evident what he and the other Dukes think of me.

Bram's lips graze the side of my neck, making me tremble under his touch. Yet again, he's stopping me from spiralling out of control and anchors me to reality. I bite my lip as he leaves small kisses, and a small moan escapes my lips before I come to my senses.

I don't want him to do something he'll regret. Something that might threaten his place in the Dukes. He's already lost enough because of me.

I step away from him and spin slowly.

"Bram..." My words come out choked. "What happened between us... it shouldn't have... we were locked up... we..."

My excuses turn to ash in my mouth as his intense stare tells me that I can't hide from him. He doesn't believe a word I'm saying. He looks straight into my soul and pushes past my bullshit to see the truth. Bram has a gift for making my walls crumble down around him.

"Everything's a mess," I whisper, daring to confess my feelings aloud. "Freddie may have made a deal with me, but I can tell he and the others don't trust me. I don't belong

here..." I bite my bottom lip to stop it from quivering. "I don't belong anywhere."

He puts his fingers under my chin and tips my face up to look at him, then trails his thumb over the outline of my lips and rests it on my Cupid's bow. Time slows as he leans in. I daren't breathe as his lips brush against mine.

His hands rest on my shoulders, then move down, running down my arms until he's holding my wrists. He softly strokes my pulse points before taking my hands in his. He's looking at me like I'm the only woman in the world. I struggle to stay standing as I hear what he's trying to say without him needing to say the words.

You belong here.

"We shouldn't—"

He presses a finger to my lips to silence me.

"What if the others—"

Bram acts fast, his kiss sealing our fate before I can argue.

We should stop. We're supposed to be hunting the Killers Club and using all our resources to find Trout, except seeing the mountain growing in his pants is too hard to resist.

I want him, and Bram's made it clear he wants me too...

CHAPTER 31

FREDDIE

Am I doing the right thing meeting the Killers Club?

The decision was easy when I sent the text, but going shopping with Ivy brought back emotions I'd rather pretend didn't exist. Spending time with her this afternoon was like participating in a reality game show where you get to see the prize you could have won before your chance of winning gets snatched away.

But Ivy's a killer. I keep repeating it over and over. She's a killer. It becomes a mantra. She's a killer. She's not the girl I fell for. The girl I saw a future with died along with Daisy five years ago.

Going to the Auditorium is still a risk, though. I should have told the others where I was heading, but I wanted to protect them. If I'm walking into a trap, I'm not going to take them down with me. I'm their leader. A leader who will do anything to protect them.

Of course I'm armed. I'm not an idiot. I'm ready with a gun and knife that I retrieved from the house's secret stash. The Dukes don't know it, but our new hide-out belongs to an old buddy of mine, Zane O'Shea. We worked together when I started my arms business. The last I heard, he was on the run, living somewhere abroad, but he kept the house in case he ever needed somewhere to return to... and made the mistake of telling me where to find the spare key.

It's just past ten, and the queue is still short, so I'm not waiting long to be admitted. The Auditorium's interior is sleek

and modern with white leather booths, a black marble bar top, and illuminated contemporary art hanging on the walls. I recognise a Raptor piece and make a mental note to bring Bram to see it another time. He'll appreciate seeing a new painting from his favourite artist.

Around me, over-eager party-goers sip pricey cocktails while a DJ tests the sound system. When he takes to the decks, there's a flurry of excited squeals followed by a rush to the dance floor. Scantly clad bodies writhe to the bass-filled beat that'll give me a headache if I stay for too long.

I check my watch. One hour to go. Arriving ahead of schedule gives me the chance to scope out the venue, but as I turn to do a loop, I see her. A leggy blonde sitting at the bar, swishing her hair and flirting with the bartender.

Stephanie.

Fuck, she's already here. My jaw tenses. Her eyes sparkle as they meet mine from across the room. Her inflated lips stretch into a clown-like smile as she curls her finger to beckon me closer. I don't move straight away, resisting being treated like a sailor summoned into crashing rocks. She winks, showing she knows exactly what I'm thinking, and pats the stool next to her.

I grit my teeth and march over.

"Good evening," Stephanie says, standing to greet me. Her black, strappy satin dress barely covers her arse, giving her no opportunity to hide weapons. However, she holds her clutch bag tightly to her body. She notices me looking and leans to plant a kiss on both of my cheeks like we're old friends, then whispers in my ear, "Don't worry, babe. If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead."

"Where's your boyfriend?" I ask.

Alaric, her tattooed boss, would stand out in a place like this.

"Why don't you sit down?" she suggests, waving over the bartender who can't disguise his disappointment at my arrival. "My friend would like a drink."

“I’m good,” I reply stiffly, reluctantly taking a seat at her side.

Dying of dehydration would be preferable to accepting a drink from a monster.

“You’re not going to let a lady drink alone, are you?” Stephanie titters, then orders another for herself. “I’ll get a dirty Martini with extra olives.”

“Absolutely!” He scurries away to prepare it for her. From his determined expression, I expect he’ll return with a whole jar of olives to please her.

“I’m here to talk,” I say.

“You still have a lot to learn. Didn’t anyone teach you it’s bad manners to get straight down to business?” she replies. I see why she’d make a great asset to the Killers Club, using her charm to seduce men before carrying out gut-wrenching acts. “You haven’t even thanked me for our latest gift. I thought Sebastian would have been particularly grateful.”

She’s pushing for a reaction, but I won’t give her one.

“He liked your note,” I reply bluntly.

“I always like to add a personal touch to my presents,” she says, opening her clutch bag. My hands jump to my pocket, but she only giggles and takes out a lipstick. “So, Mr James...” Stephanie applies a generous coat of red and smacks her lips together. “I believe you have something of ours.”

“Something that’ll come at a high price,” I say.

Her eyes narrow. She pretends to be an airhead, but she has brains too. “What price do you have in mind?”

“Immunity. A truce, of sorts,” I say. “You leave us to continue running our security operations, and we’ll return Ivy.”

“Why would we agree to those terms? We’re an unstoppable machine with endless resources and a bank balance that you can only dream about. I think you’ve overestimated the value of your item and how much we’d be willing to pay,” she says, disregarding Ivy like she’s nothing.

“But I have an alternative offer. You and the Dukes can work for us. You provide us with weapons, and we let you all live.”

“We will never work for anyone else,” I spit. “Especially not you.”

Over my dead body will I let the Dukes become the Killers Club’s bitches. It goes against everything we stand for.

“I’d urge you to reconsider.” She shrugs, flashing me a dazzling smile. “You’ve stepped on our toes for too long. This offer is generous.”

“And what about Ivy?” I press. “She could blow the lid on your entire operation.”

“We all know Ivy will keep her mouth shut until she gets what she really wants: Spencer Bexley’s head,” Stephanie says. “Besides, Ivy’s already proved where her loyalty lies. We have no use for traitors. If she returned to us, we’d be taking her head. But you had to know that when you made me an offer, didn’t you?”

My gut clenches. “Yes.”

“You’re colder than I thought,” Stephanie says, looking at me with a newfound respect. “I never thought you’d let her die. I got the impression that the Dukes had grown fond of her.”

“She’s our prisoner,” I snap. “Nothing more.”

“How about I make my previous offer a little more interesting?” Stephanie bargains. “If you agree to work for us, we’ll also let you keep Ivy alive until you get bored with her.”

Stephanie rises from her chair before I can answer.

The bartender returns at the exact moment with a Martini overflowing with olives and places it in front of her. “I got the extra olives!”

She ignores him and addresses me, “I’ll give you a week to think it over, Freddie. That’s our best and final.” She drops the phone she must have used to contact me into her drink. “We’ll see each other again soon.”

Her hips sway as she heads onto the dancefloor, leaving me reeling. The negotiation hadn't gone as I'd hoped. I thought Ivy meant more to them, but I was wrong. She was right about them using and manipulating her. She was nothing more than a disposable pawn in their game.

Now, I have to choose, and I only see one way out. It's a near-impossible feat. One that will likely kill us all, but it's our only hope. We'll never work with the Killers Club, so I'll have to honour the deal I made with Ivy and work with the woman who broke my heart to take them down...

CHAPTER 32

BRAM

My lips tingle against hers, like static electricity fizzles between us. It's different from the frenzied urgency that devoured us before when we were prisoners.

She pulls away again and asks, "Are you sure this is the right—"

When will she understand? How many times do we have to kiss for her to realise that I'm not going anywhere? When will she accept that I see her—the real her—and I'll do whatever it takes to pull her out of the darkness?

I crush my mouth against hers to steal her breath, while I rest my hand over her beating heart. She inhales sharply, ending our kiss to look up while I listen to the thudding rhythm beneath my hand.

"You're still injured," she murmurs feebly, eyeing up my wound with a guilty look. "I don't want to hurt you."

I grin. Does she think that's going to stop me? What's the point of surviving if I'm not prepared to live my life to the fullest?

I shove her backwards onto my bed to prove my point. I drop to my knees and push her legs apart, but her dress is too tight. She helps me roll it up to her hips, and her thighs fall open to reveal a pink thong underneath.

I caress the zebra stripe patterns over the tops of her thighs. I love those marks. They are the marks of a woman whose flesh drives me insane, and I stroke them, wanting to

show her how much I adore every inch of her. I ignore the nagging pain from my movements. Nothing is going to ruin our moment together. Besides, pain is good. It's a reminder that we're still here.

Her pussy taunts me as I stroke her delicate upper thighs. They clench under my fingers, and I can see how turned on she is through the patch of wet fabric. I smirk with satisfaction and slide a finger down her slit to make her squirm.

For the last few days, Freddie has tried to keep us apart. He thinks she has influence over me. He believes I've developed Stockholm Syndrome and am incapable of making my own decisions, but he's underestimating me. I know what I want, and that's the woman who is lying in front of me right now. A woman who is as fucked up as I am, who can truly understand my pain, and who I don't have to hide from.

"Bram," Ivy says, propping herself up on her elbows.

From my angle, I struggle to see her face over the top of her massive tits, which makes my cock harden more. It throbs against my boxers, begging for release. This room may not be the perfect surroundings she deserves, but it's better than a dungeon.

"Are you really sure..." Her sentence merges into a long moan as I push her knickers to the side.

Does that answer your question?

Her inner thigh muscles continue to twitch as I stroke between her pussy lips, letting her slippery juices coat me without entering her. She spreads her legs wider in encouragement, jutting her hips impatiently.

I withdraw to pull her panties down carefully, then lean in, breathing in her delicious scent. I tease her entrance, stroking her with a light touch, teasing her like a tongue would do. This is the only time I've really missed having my tongue intact. What I wouldn't give to lap at her cunt and drink her down...

Ivy wriggles, fisting the covers to try to stay still as I pay attention to her clit. I rub her pink nub, applying pressure, then use two fingers to part her lips and see her glistening insides

before I fill her. She whimpers as I push two fingers into her. Her tight walls stretch to make room while she arches her back, flips her long hair back over her shoulder, and surrenders to the sensation by closing her eyes.

I keep going, plunging two fingers in and out of her. I find her G-spot and caress it, drawing out more of her breathy moans. She's trying not to move for fear of hurting me, but I only care about her pleasure, and I want her to let go. I keep finger-fucking her, revelling in the way her hips roll with my motions.

Her pussy tightens and hugs my fingers, an indicator of her imminent undoing. I slide out. Her eyes snap open and lock on me, burning with passion.

I stand and drop my joggers to unleash my cock. She runs her tongue over her lips seductively and wastes no time scrambling off the bed and sinking to her knees before me.

Unlike me, she doesn't draw it out. She takes me whole, pushing my cock right down her throat. I bury my hands in her hair to hold her in place, enjoying how incredible her mouth feels around my shaft as she slathers me in her spit. While she works with her mouth, she takes the base of my cock in her fist. She uses two hands to fully embrace my girth and moves them at a slow pace while sucking with her mouth.

I groan, trying to stop myself from spraying cum down her throat immediately. Ivy knows what she's doing. Reluctantly, she pulls away, spit trailing from the tip of my dick to her wet chin. Pre-cum glistens on my tip, and she licks it away like I'm her favourite ice cream.

"You're not the only one who can tease," she jokes, looking up through her thick eyelashes.

I grab her hair in a loose ponytail and use it to yank her to her feet, then turn her around and bend her over the bed. Her round arse taunts me, and I grab her hips, ready to take her.

"Bram," she gasps.

Hearing her say my name drives me wild. My throbbing cock rubs against her parted pussy, and I enter her, enjoying

the wet noise it makes as I sink deeper.

Ivy twerks against me, encouraging me to go further, but I take my time. I enjoy moving slowly, watching every inch of my cock disappear. When I get to the final inch, I thrust hard, making her arse jolt and wobble in the most irresistible way.

Now I can't hold back. I pound into her like a man possessed. I fuck her hard, not caring about the slapping noises that will carry through the entire house. Her moans vibrate through my entire body, and she grabs a pillow to muffle the noise.

She's so wet that fucking her is effortless. Her pussy clenches, holding onto my cock like she wants to keep me prisoner. I quicken my thrusts to tip her over the edge.

Yes, that's it... keep going...

A warm gush coats my shaft as she comes. She screams into the pillow, and her pussy grabs my cock in a chokehold. I grunt and keep thrusting, lost in the sensation of her tight squeezes. For a few moments, my head goes fuzzy, fully absorbed in a state of bliss. Her gyrating hips heighten the sensation, making me see stars.

Suddenly, I explode and fill her with a groan. She moans my name, while her tight hole squeezes every drop from me, and I shudder from the pleasure.

When I'm done, Ivy collapses onto her front. I withdraw, and she rolls over to give me the perfect view of her pussy. What a sight. My cum drips from her swollen cunt, and her thighs are still shaking from the intensity of her orgasm.

"That was..." she breathes, having to clutch onto the sheets to brace herself. "Incredible."

I hold up my hands to signal for her to stay where she is, while I hurriedly pull on my boxers and go to the bathroom to find a wet flannel. Thankfully, the others are still downstairs.

When I return, I bow down and take my time to clean her up as best I can, wiping my stickiness away. After I'm finished, she sits up and crosses her legs. To my dismay, her eyes are glistening with tears.

My face falls. *What have I done?*

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. Her gaze strays to my scars and the marks she’s permanently etched on my body like tattoos. “I’m sorry for hurting you.”

I sit next to her and take her hand, squeezing hard. She did what she had to. She was a soldier, just like me, who fought a war without knowing the full facts. I won’t hold her actions against her. I couldn’t, not after everything I’ve done.

I stroke her rosy, pleasure-flushed cheeks. She tries to look away, but I won’t let her. She needs to know she’s not alone. That she belongs. I put my arm around her shoulders to pull her in to rest on my good side. Her hair tickles my chin as she relaxes. She doesn’t speak as the minutes tick on, but her breathing slows.

“Thank you,” she murmurs after a while. “I better go before the others come looking for you.”

She stands, then pats down her hair and smooths down her dress. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

I point at the framed dick on the wall before she goes.

We’re in this together.

CHAPTER 33

CalLEN

“It sounds like they’re done,” I declare triumphantly as the noise stops abruptly.

A few minutes ago, it sounded like an army of flip-flop wearers were running over wet tiles above us. Bram better not expect sympathy or for me to fix any split stitches caused by fast pumping action.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Seb lies, returning to his cooking. He peers into a pan and uses a fork to stir the mixture, making a horrible scratching noise. “Is this done?” he asks, changing the subject. He spears a piece of pasta and holds it up for my inspection. The penne’s edges look like he’s held a lighter to it. He nibbles on the edge suspiciously. “It’s crunchy.”

“That’ll explain the burning smell,” I say, looking at the gloopy monstrosity he’s spent the last half an hour fawning over. The tomato sauce has burned to the bottom of the pan. While some of the pasta is brown, other pieces have turned mushy. How did he manage that? “I told you that you had to keep moving it around after adding the sauce to stop it from sticking.”

The high heat probably didn’t help either. You can tell he’s rarely had to cook for himself—a classic Montgomery.

“Fucking pasta!” Seb blasts.

He picks up the saucepan and throws the entire thing into the bin with a clang. I’m surprised he doesn’t throw it against the wall and give it a much-needed coat of paint. Although, I

suspect his anger isn't directed at the food but from what we heard happening above our heads.

At that moment, the backdoor opens. Freddie has returned from his mysterious outing. He sniffs the air and looks between the two of us in accusation.

"Has there been a fire?" he asks.

"I'm going to order Chinese," Seb grumbles, stomping into the living room. Probably a good idea—even he can't fuck up placing an order.

"Where are Ivy and Bram?" Freddie demands, looking around for them.

"They've just finished getting reacquainted," I reply with a shrug. "No biggie."

Freddie's jaw locks, but he doesn't respond. He claims he wants to use Ivy as leverage, but he and Seb still care about her. They're just too stubborn to admit it to themselves. Ivy planned to kill us, but why don't we let bygones be bygones? Or, at least, make the most of her being around before we hand her back to the Killers Club wrapped in a pretty bow.

"Where did you go?" I ask.

"I need to speak to you and Seb," he whispers. "Outside."

"Seb!" I call, knowing what to say to rile him. "Do you think your mum would appreciate a snap of my cock?"

Seb charges in within two seconds flat, wearing a murderous expression. He's too easy to wind up.

Freddie nudges his head. "Outside. Now."

I clap Seb on the shoulder. "Looks like your mum's going to have to wait to meet a real Prince Albert."

The three of us head out to huddle in the garden—well, it's a patch of concrete, but for London it's akin to having a small park. Freddie looks up to check no windows are open, but he needn't worry. Wailing sirens and kids playing nearby will mask our conversation.

"What is it?" Seb asks, sensing something's wrong.

Freddie goes on to tell us about his encounter with Stephanie at the Auditorium. Trading Ivy was a bust and, although that should be bad news, I notice Seb's shoulders sag in relief. Like him, I can't help feeling glad that she'll be sticking around a little longer. It's best she stays with us, at least until I get over my annoying issue of only being able to get hard for her.

"I met Stephanie, and she countered," Freddie relays. "They want us to work for them as arms dealers. We have a week to think about it."

Well, fuck... I didn't see that one coming.

Silence falls over us as we take in the news.

"You shouldn't have gone alone," Seb says like the loyal puppy he is. "We're supposed to be a team."

"It was my decision," Freddie rebuts. "I'm the boss."

"So, *boss...*" I say, also sharing Seb's annoyance that Freddie's been keeping secrets. Although, after we broke his rules and snuck down to see Ivy in the castle, I'd say we're square. "Are we going to work for the Killers Cunt Club, or not?"

"Never," Freddie says venomously.

I raise an imaginary pint in solidarity. "Here, here!"

"But that leaves us with one option," Freddie says. "We've got to take the Killers Club down. It's the only way."

I wink. "I've always been a sucker for a suicide mission."

"We have to end this," Seb agrees. "The Killers Club, I mean... not us..." He sighs in exasperation as I snicker. "Forget it, okay? So what will you say in a week when they come looking for answers?"

"We have to assume they're already watching us," Freddie says. "In the meantime, we need to get ahead of them. We need Ivy's help to do that."

"Which means we have to kill Trout," I say, rubbing my hands in glee at the thought. He deserves to be force-fed his

testicles after what he did to Ivy's sister.

"Does Bram have any leads yet?" Freddie asks.

"He's been looking," Seb says, "but I think I might have found something in the meantime."

"Why don't you save the sleuthing for the pro?" I suggest.

"Shut up, Callen," Seb hisses. "I'm being serious. I'll show you."

He leads us back to the living room. As we enter, Ivy makes her way down the stairs. My cock twitches at the sight of her round tits and her cheeks that are flushed in a just-been-fucked kind of way.

"Have you been trying to cook something?" She scrunches her nose. "It smells awful."

Seb avoids eye contact, not wanting to admit to his terrible culinary skills. "We've ordered a takeaway."

Seconds later, Bram's heavy footsteps thud down the stairs. Their attempts at being inconspicuous aren't fooling anyone. I can smell the sex wafting off them. Dirty fuckers.

"Seb," Freddie barks, getting back to the matter at hand. "What's your lead on Trout?"

"I heard from my brother," Seb explains. "He sent me the guest list for Beatrice's funeral. It turns out Trout is an old friend of the McGowan family, and he's going to be there."

Ivy's face lights up in excitement. "That could work! We could—"

"I give the orders," Freddie interrupts.

She puts her hands on her hips, accentuating her delicious proportions. "But this is *my* kill. He's mine!"

Freddie edges forward. His lips curl, leaving her staring into the surly face of a monster in a suit. I'm not sure what's making him madder: her questioning his authority or the prospect of Bram's cum leaking into her panties. Either way, I wish I had some popcorn to watch their showdown.

Bram steps between them, jumping to her aid.

I roll my eyes and mutter, “Take off your shining armour already.”

Unless he’s wearing a bulletproof vest, he should never stand in the middle of a fight. Freddie must agree as he shoots Bram a warning glare that makes him bow his head and step back. Ivy’s got a sweet pussy, but Freddie is still the boss. We’re a family, and the Dukes come first. Bram needs to remember that before giving Ivy another cum shot.

“You’re not in the Killers Club anymore, Ivy,” Freddie hisses. She doesn’t blink when most men would be begging for mercy already. “The Dukes do things differently.”

“I’m not a Duke,” she says, feigning a yawn. Damn, it’s sexy to be around a woman with no regard for authority. “Who says I have to follow your rules?”

“As long as we have a deal, you *will* follow my rules.”

“Or, what? Will you get Callen to kill me?” Ivy taunts. I’m honoured to be the first name to roll off her tongue. “You need me.”

Unfortunately, she doesn’t know how right she is now that the Killers Club rejected our offer.

“Maybe I’ll kill you myself if you don’t fall in line,” Freddie threatens.

Her eyes widen in shock for a split second. She’s had it her way for too long. Her days of having everyone wrapped around her little finger are gone. She’s at our mercy; the sooner she realises it, the better.

“We’ll honour our deal,” Freddie says, “but don’t think that it changes anything. You’re not one of us, Ivy. You never will be.”

“Understood,” she replies in a cold, business-like manner. “I’m going to go back to my room. Save me a plate when the food arrives.” She narrows her eyes. “I wouldn’t want to intrude on your boys’ club.”

All our eyes are drawn to her arse like it's a hypnotic pendulum as her hips sway and she marches away. Sweet Jesus. That girl will be the death of us...

CHAPTER 34

IVY

My stomach gurgles as I hear the delivery driver zip away on his bike. The smell of Chinese food wafts through the house, and I collapse on my lumpy mattress with a huff.

Frederick James is a wanker. A handsome, swoon-worthy, muscular wanker with unreasonably dreamy eyes! Why does he have to act like such an arsehole all the time? When we went shopping, I thought we'd made progress, but then he threatened to kill me again. He wasn't lying, either. I could see a darkness stirring behind his eyes when he said it.

I slip into my old persona and reflect on some of my past bloody escapades to cheer me up, remembering how powerful taking their lives made me feel. Living as a killer agent was easier than trying to be my authentic self. It was more comfortable. Letting anger consume me dulled my pain and gave me a purpose.

Suddenly, a knock on my door brings me out of a vivid daydream where I was using Spencer's balls as a dartboard. I already had a fun points system worked out. It'd be a good game.

"What?" I snap.

The door opens ajar. I expect to see Bram, or possibly Seb—when Freddie isn't around, he hasn't been acting like a total bellend.

“Oh,” I say flatly, seeing Freddie holding a plate out. “It’s you.”

“I brought you this,” he says gruffly.

“Leave it on the floor.” I lie down again without looking in his direction. He can go to hell. “I’ll pick it up later.”

He does as I ask. I expect him to leave straight away, but he lingers. His gaze makes my skin prickle.

“What?” I sit up when it becomes clear he isn’t going anywhere. “Come to gawp at your prisoner like I’m in a zoo?”

He steps inside fully and closes the door.

“I don’t know what you want from me, Ivy,” he says. “You came into our life and tricked us all. What did you expect would happen when we learned the truth, or didn’t you consider it because you thought we’d all be dead?”

“This has nothing to do with the Killers Club,” I say, jumping to my feet. The room is so small that we’re close enough for me to jab my finger into his chest to emphasise my words as I continue on my tirade. “You’re only angry because I’m not the woman you wanted me to be. I’m not the perfect angel you met at the bar. I was that girl once, but my life changed forever the night we met. Spencer made me watch as his friends raped and killed my sister, while he hurt me and said he’d rather I die than be with anyone else. He even found your number in the suit jacket you gave me! Back then, I couldn’t fight back. I won’t apologise for not being helpless anymore. I’m not looking for a strong man to save me, and I’m sorry that makes me such a fucking disappointment to you.”

“Ivy, I never...”

I grab his wrist as he reaches for me. Without thinking, I twist it into a position that means I could easily break it with another motion. Now I’ve started, I can’t stop. Words flow out of me like an unstoppable tsunami, leaving destruction in its wake.

“The girl you wanted to fall in love with doesn’t exist,” I say. “You built me up in your head to be perfect. To be

someone I'm not. Even if nothing happened that night five years ago, I'd never have lived up to your expectations. You've been living in a fantasy world, and you can't keep punishing me for your own fucking delusions!"

Somehow, he twists out of my grasp. He moves quickly, grabbing me by the throat and slamming me back into the wall.

I laugh in his face.

"See?" I pant. "A few weeks ago, you'd never have done this. You make out like you're so fucking perfect, spouting bullshit about how you're a protector and all you want to do is save people, but you're a monster. This is the real you, Freddie."

His eyes burn into mine as his grip tightens on my throat, making me gasp for air. The amber in them blazes like an inferno that wants to destroy and burn me to the ground while the blue part seeks to drown me.

He speaks through gritted teeth, "You don't know what you're talking about."

He lets go, and I fall to my knees, clutching my neck.

"I lied to you," I rasp, "but at least I'm not lying to myself. Maybe it's time you looked in the mirror."

Guilt is written all over his face, and the hard look in his eyes softens.

"I..." He begins, only he can't even say the words or vocalise an apology.

Fucking coward.

"I'm not the only one who's been pretending, Freddie," I say. "Unless you want to talk to me about how we're going to kill Trout, I want you to get the fuck out of my room."

"We'll let you know the plan tomorrow morning," he says curtly. "We'll bring you Trout, and you can take it from there."

"Fine," I snap in agreement.

Usually, I'd argue and insist I want to be involved in the planning stages, but I can't bear to be around him right now without wanting to wring his neck.

He turns and walks out without saying another word, leaving me with a plate of cold food that I no longer have an appetite for. Freddie may be disappointed about his perfect woman being an assassin, but I'm equally disappointed in him. He's not the Prince Charming I built him up to be.

CHAPTER 35

FREDDIE

I storm out of Ivy's room before she can see my hands shaking. My heart thuds hard enough that I feel it beating at the back of my throat. Maybe Ivy's right. I am a monster, and I've been fooling myself all along.

Bram waits on the landing. He crosses his arms over his chest, and his eyes narrow in silent judgement. It's easy for him to act self-righteous when he knew the truth about her from the start. She didn't deceive him or lift his hopes only to rip them away.

"What?" I demand.

He scowls. He must have heard everything, which makes me feel worse, but I don't let it show.

"Get out of my way," I hiss.

He raises his eyebrows. *Or, what? Are you going to hit me too?*

"Move," I snap, hiding my shame under a furious expression. "That's an order."

He doesn't move, blocking my path.

"Bram," I lower my voice in warning. "I know you're injured, but I won't hesitate if you—"

He lurches forward. I brace myself. Instead of punching me, he opens his arms and pulls me into an embrace. Shock roots me to the spot, and he tightens his hold. Do I look like

I've lost my shit enough that I want a fucking hug? If so, I have to pull myself together fast.

We stand for what feels like ten minutes but only seconds have passed. He squeezes my shoulders to let me know he's here, that he understands my pain, that he knows how awful I feel about what I did... and that he's still here, despite everything.

Would he act like this if he knew about the deal I tried to make with the Killers Club? I planned to hand Ivy to the people who made her a murderer. I let my hurt overshadow how the Dukes stand for protection. I don't deserve his kindness. Taking a punch would have been easier. Ivy's assessment of me was correct. Yes, she hurt me, but it didn't justify my actions.

"Freddie," Seb calls. Bram loosens his hold, and I step backwards, brushing myself down and pretending this didn't happen. "Food's going cold!"

I clear my throat and adjust my shirt collar. It's my job to look after my men, not the other way around. I shouldn't have let my mask slip, but Bram draws emotions out of people, even when they least want him to. It's an uncanny ability.

"We need to eat," I tell him gruffly.

Bram nudges his head towards Ivy's door in reply, questioning whether she'll be joining us.

"I brought her a plate," I say.

Bram's gaze lingers on her door, still not content.

"She'll be fine," I insist. "Look, I know I shouldn't have..." I give up on trying to make excuses. "She wants to be alone."

He smiles sadly, then nods his head. Although he's torn about leaving her behind, he's still following my instructions, which means something.

Back in the living room, discarded takeaway boxes cover the carpet. Callen and Seb sit on the sofa, shovelling food into their mouths like they haven't eaten for weeks.

“I left your food in the kitchen,” Seb says, then narrows his eyes in Callen’s direction, “before someone tried to eat it all.”

“Thanks,” I reply, but I’m not hungry.

Seeing my men makes my stomach sink. They show no fear, but I can’t help wondering whether they’re considering our chances against the Killers Club. After my family’s death, I vowed to never lose the people I love again. But they might die soon. If they did, it’d be my fault, and history would repeat itself.

“You need to eat, Freddie,” Seb prompts.

“Maybe later.”

“How’s Ivy?” Callen asks between bites.

Bram’s stare burns into me knowingly.

“She’s fine,” I dismiss. I can’t change what happened, but I can try to make it right. “We need a plan for the funeral tomorrow. How are we going to get Trout?”

Callen wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and grins. “We already have that covered. There’s a large underground crypt at Greywood Cemetery. We break into it first, then take Trout there. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.”

Bram puts his hands on his hips, unconvinced by Callen’s confidence.

“What is it, big man?” Callen taunts. “Do you think you’re the only one who can find useful intel? I can research, too.”

Bram huffs and disappears into the kitchen to grab his plate of food.

“Do you think killing him there is actually the best way?” I ask.

“For once, I have to agree with Cal,” Seb admits. “Taking him to a secondary location is a bigger risk. There’ll be lots of people at the funeral, so it’ll be easier for Trout to disappear there. Besides, it’s not like we’ve got plenty of other options. We can’t bring him here.”

“Fine,” I grumble, seeing their logic, even though I don’t like it. I prefer to have control over our environment. “We’ll have to get there ahead of time.”

Bram returns and clears his throat like he wants to volunteer.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I say. “You’re still recovering.”

His face crumples. He won’t be happy with my decision, but I’m looking out for him. We need him to return to full strength. Besides, he must know that he’d only be putting everyone else at greater risk by being there.

“If we need to get there early, why are you all still standing around?” Ivy’s cold voice cuts through the room. “We should go tonight.”

I spin to see her standing on the stairs. She’s wearing a black trench coat over jeans with a tartan scarf wrapped around her neck, presumably to hide any marks I left behind during my judgement lapse.

“Callen, Ivy, and I will go tonight,” I say. “Seb, can you get him to us tomorrow?”

Seb’s jaw sets in determination. “I can handle Trout.”

“A sleepover in a cemetery,” Callen ponders, scratching his beard, then winks. “Kinky.”

“We need to gather supplies,” I say. “We—”

“It’s already covered,” Callen interrupts. “Torean has kill bags in the back of every car he owns. We switched the plates on our drive down earlier and hid the car. We have everything we need.”

“The Killers Club might know where we are,” Seb says.

“If they do, we’re sitting ducks, anyway.” Callen shrugs. “If they want to walk into the crypt after us, I’m happy to add a few more bodies to our list.”

Ivy clicks her tongue impatiently to catch our attention. Silence falls over the room.

“Do you have something to say?” I ask.

“I’m just wondering whether you always have a mother’s meeting before a mission. I thought we were leaving.” She taps her wrist, and I check the clock on the wall. It’s past midnight. “If journalists want to gatecrash the funeral, they’ll arrive early. We need to move.”

I point at the large bag on her shoulder. “What are you carrying?”

She rolls her eyes and opens it to reveal make-up, fresh clothes, toilet roll and sexy lingerie.

“What did you expect?” She arches one eyebrow. “We may not be heading to the Royal Duchess, but we don’t have to look like animals.”

“We leave in five minutes,” I say. “Grab what you need, Callen.”

He jumps up and hurries to the kitchen to gather the bags of remaining food. “Killing drums up an appetite.”

“You’ll need this,” Seb says, grappling in his trouser pocket for something. He finds a tiny earpiece and holds it out for me. Typically, each Duke wears one whenever we go on a mission, but after recent events, we only have two remaining. “It should be fully charged. I’ve got the other one, and I’ll turn mine on as soon as I arrive tomorrow. Bram can link them to his laptop, so he can hear everything.”

“It looks like we’re spending the night with ghosts, boys,” Ivy says, striding past me. “I’ll be waiting outside.”

Bram grabs her wrist as she passes him. Their eyes meet. They look at each other with an intensity that makes me feel like I’m intruding on a special moment, but I can’t look away.

Ivy’s shoulders tense, like she’s aware I’m staring, but I’m not the only one watching. Seb’s lips purse and Callen smirks as Ivy rises on her tip-toes to kiss him. When their lips meet, Bram strokes her cheek tenderly. We know they built a connection during their time in captivity, but maybe there’s something more lasting to it.

Seb's hands grip the sides of the armchair hard enough that it looks like the stuffing will pop through the strained fabric, while Callen retches dramatically and heckles, "Get a room!"

They break apart, but their eyes stay fixed on each other, communicating in a silent, secret language. I have no right to be jealous—especially after how I acted earlier—but I can't help it. A part of me wants more than anything to see her look at me like that again. But I've blown my chances. Work comes first.

"See you tomorrow, Bram," she murmurs, then stomps from the house.

"Grab some blankets," I order Callen, returning to business. None of us will sleep tonight, but I don't want Ivy catching hypothermia. "We've got a fish to catch."

CHAPTER 36

IVY

I tap my foot impatiently and huff to blow a loose hair tendril out of my face. What's taking them so long?

"Finally!" I declare, rolling my eyes as Freddie and Callen join me.

They ignore my remark and march past, ignoring how I've been freezing my tits off waiting in the cold.

Callen leads the way. "Follow me."

We weave through the streets, heading past a row of garages and abandoned sofas, where squirrels and rats appear to have made themselves at home.

The car is up ahead.

"I'm driving," Freddie says, holding his hand out for the keys that Callen's spinning around his finger. I was hoping they'd fly off and slice his face, but no such luck.

"Shotgun!" I call, darting around to the passenger seat before Callen gets a chance.

Surprisingly, he doesn't try to race me for it. Who knew the psycho Scot would honour shotgun? Maybe he has hidden morals, after all. It doesn't stop him from pouting, though.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit on my lap, princess?" Callen teases. "You might want to warm up in the back."

I glare at him. "Keep it up, and I might be tempted to test Torean's tools before tomorrow."

I'm not opposed to practising for Trout if we have time. Callen cackles, unaware that I wasn't joking, and sets to work on switching the registration plate. At least they're making some attempts to hide our location from the Killers Club.

"How far away is the cemetery?" I ask when we're all inside.

"Not far," Freddie says. He places his phone in a holder on the dash that's already programmed with the route. "Bram hacked into the cameras around the perimeter and found us the best place to park."

Despite Freddie's earlier outburst and the prospect of spending a night with him underground, I'm excited that the Dukes are honouring their part of our bargain. I feel like a kid on Christmas Eve, getting ready for the best day of the year—well, one of them. Killing Spencer will be the best of all.

We drive through shadowy London streets. Teenagers with pulled-up hoods and bandanas covering half their faces gather in alleyways. This is the kind of estate where kids are drawn into gang life. Freddie doesn't turn on any music as we drive, staying fully alert. The only noise comes from Callen noisily scoffing Chow Mein in the back.

I spin. "Can you chew quieter?"

His mushy, sloppy sounds are driving me insane. He pauses, then slurps the noodles hanging from his mouth even louder.

"You pig," I say. "Those chopsticks are the perfect shape to shove down your throat and stab your tonsils."

He licks his soy sauce-covered lips and grins. "Promises, promises."

"Why do we all have to go tonight, anyway?" I sigh, turning away to snub him. "I don't need any help killing Trout. All Seb needs to do is bring him to me, and I'll take care of the rest."

"And give you time to escape?" Callen asks. "I don't think so."

Freddie ignores my question and indicates right, entering another road that backs onto the cemetery. We're not using the main entrance to fly under the radar.

"We're here," Freddie says, parallel parking effortlessly.

I get out first, waiting impatiently while the others grab our bags. Surprisingly, Freddie doesn't complain when he slings mine over his shoulder. His suit, shirt, and long coat are all black, making him look like a spy. Callen dons his trusty leather jacket and ripped jeans with a grey beanie to keep his long hair in check.

Freddie talks in hushed tones on his phone to inform Bram and Seb that we've arrived. We're parked behind a row of houses with drawn curtains. Overhead, a red, blinking CCTV light mounted atop a lamp post draws my attention. Just as I look at it, the light goes out. *Nice work, Bram.* I see why Alaric wanted to recruit him. He's good.

"Are you ready to go, princess?" Callen asks.

He takes what I assume is Torean's kill kit and hooks the extra plastic food bag on his elbow, which swings while he walks. If he started whistling, he'd look like a badass version of one of the Seven Dwarves heading to work.

"Do we really need those?" I turn to see Freddie holding a bundle of blankets in his arms. "You know this isn't a fucking picnic, right?"

"We're taking them," he insists.

"Fine." I don't offer to carry anything. "We wouldn't want you to get chilly and your cock to shrivel up and fall off."

Callen hoots with laughter, making Freddie's frown lines deepen.

"Keep it down," Freddie hisses. "We need to stay quiet. Come on."

"He needs to lighten up," I mumble under my breath.

Further down the street, we reach a seven-foot brick wall that stands in our way.

“Here we are.” Freddie stops in his tracks and glances down the street to make sure the coast is clear. He interlaces his fingers to give me a leg up. “Ivy, you’re first.”

“The kill bag goes first,” I say, pointing at Callen. “Throw it over.”

Callen and Freddie exchange a look that says there’s no way in hell they trust me to be in possession of it for even a few seconds.

“I’m not going over without weapons,” I say. They don’t need to know that I stashed scissors and a kitchen knife inside my coat while waiting for them to get ready to leave. “Bag first. Me second.”

“How about I go first?” Callen volunteers.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you trust me?” I narrow my eyes. “But fine! Go ahead! I’d rather you fall on your arse first.”

He does a running jump at the wall. His feet find natural holes in the bricks, and he scales it with no problem, even with the bulky bag on his back. He hauls himself over the top and drops down, followed by a rustling bush and a flow of swear words.

“Move a few meters to the right,” Callen complains from the other side. “Fucking brambles.”

I smirk. Well, I guess it wasn’t a bad thing to go after him.

“You’re next,” Freddie says, beckoning for me to follow and lacing his fingers together to give me a leg up.

I don’t want his help, but the wall is high and challenging to climb when you’re not a six-foot-plus muscled monster. Reluctantly, I put my foot into Freddie’s hands. He pushes up from beneath, launching me like a rocket over the top of the wall. I sling my arm over and haul myself up to sit on the top.

Callen waits with outstretched arms on the other side. “Come to Papa!”

“I don’t need your help,” I snarl.

I hold onto the bricks with my hands, spin around, dangle to reduce the distance, and then drop. I almost lose my balance, but a clumsy landing is better than letting Callen catch me. Freddie follows close behind. He moves stealthily enough that I hardly notice the figure in black landing at my side.

I dust myself off. “Where’s the crypt?”

The graveyard is vast, and rows of crumbling ancient stones stretch out before us. The area needs serious upkeep. Wild trees and overgrown grass have taken over, and the frozen eyes of aging angel statues hiding behind branches trace our every move.

“Over here,” Freddie says, making his way through the undergrowth.

It’s a clear night, and even though we’re on the outer edge of the city, there’s too much pollution to see any stars. Bushes rustle as we walk, as if spirits are whispering to each other, knowing we’re planning to bring another soul to join them soon. Whoever is listening, I hope they’re ready to drag Trout down to hell, where he belongs.

Twigs crack under our feet. Callen and Freddie’s phones illuminate our path ahead. Eventually, we arrive at a grey brick building with a domed roof. It’s smaller than I expected, with just enough room for the three of us to fit inside. A rusty chain and lock keep the entrance sealed, but Callen manages to pick it in seconds.

“Are you sure this is the place?” I ask skeptically.

“Trust me,” Callen says. I answer, ‘never’ in my mind. “This is the place.”

The door creaks when he pushes it open and steps inside, shining his phone torch around the bleak, grey stone structure. I wait at the entrance, watching as he and Freddie move into its centre, standing shoulder to shoulder where the ceiling is highest, before following them.

The light illuminates decades’ worth of cobwebs and bronze plaques on the walls that display names and dates. The

crypt must belong to an old family whose gene pool died out long ago.

While I look around, fingers pinch my hip playfully, making me jump out of my skin.

“Shit,” I squeal, staggering back.

“Gotcha!” Callen says triumphantly.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, trying to steady my breathing. “How are we going to kill Trout in here? There’s no space!”

Freddie kneels to inspect the floor. He brushes dirt away to reveal an indent in a stone.

“This is it,” he says, gesturing for us to step out of the way.

We move while Freddie heaves, gripping the groove in the slab and pulling with a grunt. Despite my lack of faith that it’d do anything, he drags the slab away to reveal a hidden entrance.

“You can hold my hand if you get scared,” Callen jokes, peering into the open hole in the floor. Where the dust has cleared, steep stone steps lead into the unknown. “Ladies first.”

I take a step, determined to prove I’m not scared after Callen’s prank, but Freddie puts his arm out to stop me.

“No,” he says. “I’ll go first. We don’t know if the stairs will collapse.”

I roll my eyes sarcastically. “So now you want to be a gentleman...”

CHAPTER 37

BRAM

“**T**hey made it to the crypt,” Seb declares after receiving Freddie’s most recent update.

I shuffle in my seat, wishing I was with them. Although I trust they’ll get the job done, knowing that Ivy is alone with Freddie and Callen is unsettling. Everyone knows a cemetery is one of the best places to hide a dead body. Ivy pushed Freddie into losing control earlier—what if things went wrong again, and no one was around to stop him from taking it too far?

I turn on the television to distract myself. I flick through the channels, unable to find anything worth watching, then throw the bulky remote at Seb, who continues until he settles on an old comedy show. It’s something we’d usually enjoy, but I’m not up for hearing jokes tonight. He doesn’t react to any of the comedian’s gags, either.

A weird atmosphere lingers between us. Seb and I have always been close. He’s the brother I never had, and it’s easy to tell when something is bothering him. After seeing his face when Ivy kissed me, I think I understand why.

He disappears into the kitchen and returns with a can of beer and a Coke for me. I listen to the fizz as his can opens. Although I can be around alcohol, it doesn’t mean I don’t miss it. The satisfying bubbles... the foam on top of the beer glass... the fuzzy feeling it gives you...

I watch Seb glug it down. He drains it in one, exhales deeply, and crushes the can in his hands.

I arch an eyebrow. *Someone's thirsty.*

“What?” He notices me watching. “It’s been a long day.”

I grab the control from the coffee table and turn off the TV.

“Hey!” His irritation rises. “I was watching that!”

We both know he wasn’t.

I sigh, pick up the phone to voice my words, and ask, “What’s wrong?”

“Aside from Beatrice’s death being my fault and the Killers Club coming after us?” He laughs drily. “I’m peachy.”

“We both know that’s not what’s really bothering you.”

He goes to grab another beer. It’s the cheap shit, so I know we’re in dire straits. He gulps it without stopping to take a breath. Anything to avoid answering my question.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he lies.

“We’ve always talked to each other, Seb.”

Freddie prefers to bottle up his feelings and let work consume him, while Callen channels what little feelings he has into destruction, but Seb has always communicated well... until now.

“We need to talk about Ivy.”

He flinches upon hearing her name.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he says. His nose wrinkles, and he looks down at the empty can. “This tastes like cat piss.” He’s changing the subject, but I won’t drop it. “Don’t give me that look.” He points at my face in accusation. “There’s nothing to talk about. We’re working with Ivy, that’s all.”

“You still have feelings for her.” The phone speaks as I type. “You might hide it from Freddie, but you can’t hide it from me.”

He throws the can onto the floor to join a growing pile of rubbish. The place is a dump, so it doesn’t make a difference.

“I’m not hiding anything,” he replies, like a sulky teenager who has come home reeking of weed and denies smoking.

“She cares about you,” I respond.

“She doesn’t care about anyone,” he replies, then adds scathingly under his breath, “except you.”

That confirms it. He’s jealous.

I pause for a few minutes before typing again. “Have you told her how you feel?”

“There’s nothing to tell,” he replies. “She stayed with us at the safehouse because it was a job. I... I finally thought I met someone who really liked me, and then it all went wrong. How did you...” His voice trails off. “How could you forgive her?”

I don’t answer.

“She tortured you,” he keeps talking. “She held you prisoner and lied to us about it, but now you’re acting like that never happened. You let her kiss you! You fucked her! How can you just forget about it?”

We sit in silence while I draft a message. I start with a lengthy explanation, then delete it all and start over. It all boils down to one thing.

“I forgave her,” I admit.

“But how?” he whispers. His eyes meet mine. “No matter how you feel, how could you forgive her after what she did?”

We’re not talking about me and her now. This is what Seb’s battling with.

“People make mistakes. I thought I was going to die in that dungeon. She gave me hope.” I sigh, hovering my fingers over the keypad before daring to go on. “We can’t help who we fall for.”

Seb gasps. “You love her?”

I don’t answer. Do I love her? I’ve never been in love before, so I can’t be sure, but I know I want to protect her and help her find the happiness that was stolen from her. Is that what love is?

I shrug, not committing to an answer.

“We’re not talking about me,” I insist. “This is about you.”

“Freddie wanted to...” He shakes his head like he’s already said too much. “I don’t hate her, Bram. No matter how much I try to, I can’t. But I feel like I should.”

“Then stop trying to hate her,” I suggest. “She cares about you, too.”

“She won’t admit it,” he says. “The only person she gives puppy-dog eyes to is you.”

“You’re still alive because she didn’t kill you, after years of brainwashing,” I point out. The words flow easily. “That has to mean something.”

Seb hangs his head. “Killing was all that mattered to her. That’s what she said to me.”

“She’s lying to herself as much as you are.” I look up to meet his gaze as I hit play for my next sentence. “You should tell her how you feel.”

“What about Freddie?” he asks, averting his eyes. “He’s made it clear. He—”

“Freddie’s our boss, and we follow his orders,” I continue. “But he doesn’t control your life. You’ve had your family trying to do that for years, and you broke free of them. If you want Ivy, then you should tell her. You need to prove to her that you still care, that you still want her, that you’re willing to fight for her despite everything.”

He nods solemnly, picks up the remote, and turns on the TV again. We may not have fully resolved our issues, but we’re a step closer...

CHAPTER 38

CALLEN

I sniff the air. “It smells like death in here.”

“No shit,” Ivy mutters sarcastically.

Snarky bitch.

I push cobwebs out of my face as we descend underground into what looks like a scene from a horror film. Somewhere in the distance, tiny rat’s feet scuttle. The room at the foot of the stairs is at least four times the size of the small space above. I hold my torch to illuminate a looming statue of a woman holding a balancing scale in front of me; symbols carved into the floor make a circle around her.

“It looks like a good place to sacrifice someone,” I comment.

More plaques cover the walls, marking where bodies are positioned behind the stone. I zip up my jacket tighter. The temperature has dropped by five degrees, so Freddie’s blankets may come in handy if Ivy doesn’t volunteer to keep me warm.

Freddie locates a switch on the wall. “That’s better.”

A lone bulb flickers ominously to life above us, shrouding the room in a ghostly glow and casting shadows over the walls.

“I didn’t expect this place to have power,” I say.

“It’ll do,” Ivy says. She surveys the space, then grins like a shark baring its teeth before an attack. “There’s plenty of room to skin a fish.”

Her eyes don't have the same empty quality they did in the castle. They burn with an inner fire now. My cock tingles with excitement, despite the cold, knowing what I'll see tomorrow. I want to see her in action. The deadly woman people fear in her element.

Ivy's footsteps echo as she explores. Behind the statue, a corridor leads off from the circular room we're standing in. Ivy heads in that direction. She's not afraid to go down a dark tunnel when most would shrink away in fear.

"Hey!" Freddie calls after her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm making myself at home," she replies. She finds another light switch on the wall that brightens the tunnel. "I need to be sure there's nowhere for Trout to escape."

Her red hair swishes around her waist as she walks away. I check out her round arse and wolf-whistle. She flips me off over her shoulder.

"I'm going back upstairs," Freddie says after dropping off our supplies. "We need eyes everywhere. We can both take turns keeping watch, but Ivy stays here."

I salute as he heads away. A thud echoes through the crypt as he seals the entrance behind him. With it closed, the crypt is soundproof.

"Ivy," I call. "Wait for me!"

She doesn't reply, but I follow the sound of her footsteps. With each step, the tunnel ceiling gets progressively lower, and I have to stoop. How far does it go? Seb explained that an underground network was hidden under the cemetery, but if I knew it spanned this distance, I'd have stayed here when the Dukes threw me out.

Ivy stops abruptly and breathes, "Holy shit."

I quicken my pace, taking big strides until I'm at her side. Thankfully, I'm able to stand at full height when the tunnel ends. It leads to another room that is much larger than the entryway. It comprises of twelve chairs, lined up in three rows, with an aisle down the middle, not dissimilar to a church. The rock walls have sections carved out where dusty melted

candles sit. All the chairs face a large pentagram painting and an altar, where three stone steps are covered with strange artifacts: dried flowers, trinkets, and dolls.

“What’s wrong, princess?” I ask. The left side of my mouth twitches into a grin. “Are you superstitious?”

“No,” She replies. “But I didn’t realise we were entering a Satan worshipper’s crypt.”

She points at the large brown blood stain at the base of the altar.

“Hey, look on the bright side! At least there’s no exit,” I say. “Trout won’t know what’s hit him.”

“No, he won’t.”

“What are you going to do to him?” I ask, picking up items next to the altar for examination. Ivy wrinkles her nose at the one-eyed Victorian creepy doll in my hands. “What?” I smirk, raising the doll’s hand and making it wave. “Isn’t this inspiring?”

“I need to see what I have to work with first.”

I pull Torean’s kill bag off my shoulder. “Do you want to check?”

Doing a weapons inventory with a hot woman isn’t something I thought I’d ever do in an underground crypt, but here we are...

She snatches the bag from me and places it on the ground. She takes her time, removing each weapon and inspecting it like she’s considering exactly how she’ll use it. There’s a lot packed in there: an assortment of knives, a small hacksaw, speculums, and a few black pouches and boxes.

I kneel next to her and reach for a box.

She slaps my hand away. “No touching.”

“But—”

“You can look,” she says. “But don’t touch.”

“Does the same apply to you?”

“Obviously.” She picks up a Wartenberg Wheel and sighs. “Is this his kill kit, or does he moonlight as a dungeon master at the weekends?”

Living with my brother for a short time had given me an insight into his sex life that I’d rather forget.

“Probably both,” I admit.

“We won’t be needing this,” she says, stashing the wheel away. Next, she unrolls a pouch containing syringes. To Torean’s credit, at least he bothered to label them. She scans the drug names. “What do they do?”

I point at them in turn. “A paralytic, heroin, painkiller, and this one...” Okay, I guess he didn’t label everything. I turn the clear liquid up to the light and shake my head. “Fuck knows what this one does, but knowing Torean, it’s probably a mixture of all three, and he’ll call it a lethal cocktail.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” she says.

“So...” I watch as she returns to the knives, turning the blades over in her hands. There are different sizes and shapes, perfect for slicing and dicing. “Have you got everything you need?”

“It’ll do.”

“Where do you want to do it?” I ask.

Helping her with preparation feels like foreplay. Hurting people doesn’t get me off—I enjoy it, sure—but watching her kill people is a turn-on. Knowing she can handle herself and is prepared to take the lives of people who wronged her is sexy as fuck.

“We’re not playing twenty questions,” she snaps. “This is my kill, not yours. Remember?”

“You’re going to need our help to get him in and out of here,” I say. “All I’m doing is volunteering to help with anything else you need.”

“You can clean up the mess if you genuinely want to help.”

“I’m not the clean-up type,” I say. “I’d rather get down and dirty.”

Her eyes drop to the tent forming in my trousers, and my cock stirs under her gaze, enjoying her attention.

Her jaw tenses. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Come on, princess,” I say as she starts quickly packing everything away. “We have to pass the time somehow.”

“Well, you can have fun with your ghost pals and your hand,” she replies, standing and slinging the kill bag over her shoulder. “Leave me out of it.”

She turns to leave, and I grab her wrist to pull her back. “Do you really want to be left alone down here?”

CHAPTER 39

IVY

Callen's touch scorches my skin.

"If you knew what was good for you, you'd think twice about touching me," I snarl.

"Why?" Instead of letting go, his grip tightens. "What are you going to do?"

His eyes glitter darkly at the prospect of a challenge.

I wrench my wrist from his grasp. "You'll be the next altar sacrifice, if you're not careful."

Judging by the blood stains, it won't be the first time a living creature died here. Nor will it be the last.

The overhead bulb flickers, and I sigh, recalling seeing a lighter in Torean's bag.

"I'll light some candles," I say. "While you're busy thinking with your dick, someone needs to think about what will happen if the power goes out."

I hunt around in the bag for the lighter. Once retrieved, Callen follows me around like a shadow as I light the many stacked candles. Thick pillars are balanced in well-placed holes in the walls, along with others in mounted rusty sconces. After lighting the last candle in the corner, I turn and almost walk straight into Callen's muscled chest.

"Move," I command.

He stays where he is, putting his arms on the walls behind my head to close the gap between us. Being alone together

feels dangerous. Anything could happen, and the building tension in the room makes the candles flicker.

Callen's eyes trail down my body, devouring me with his gaze. My breathing quickens. The clammy bricks against my spine only amplify Callen's radiating heat.

He speaks in a menacing rumble, "I'd like to see you on your knees bowed down at the altar before me."

"You can't blackmail me anymore," I say. My words come out breathier than expected, and I clear my throat before continuing. "We're not at the safe house anymore, and I'm not chained up. Do you really think I'd fuck you again?"

His blue eyes darken to a stormy grey, and I shiver at his chilling laugh.

"I know you will," he says smugly, without missing a beat. He bends to whisper in my ear, his breath tickling my skin. "Don't you remember how good it feels?"

Not as good as destroying one of his prized possessions will feel. I flick the lighter on and hold it against the edge of his leather jacket.

"What the..." He sniffs and jumps back. His mouth falls open in shock as he pats himself down, and I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing. If only I had a camera. "Were you trying to set me on fire?"

He grabs my wrist and applies pressure to force me to drop the lighter.

"Freddie won't be happy if you break my wrist," I say.

"Won't he?" He slackens the scarf around my neck with his other hand to eye the marks Freddie's fingers left behind. It must have loosened without me noticing. "It doesn't look like he's giving you special treatment anymore."

"Screw you."

"What's wrong?" he mocks. He trails his forefinger along the marks on my neck that'll bruise by morning. "Are you sad about not being the boss's favourite anymore?"

“I don’t need to be anyone’s favourite.”

“Really?” He brushes a rogue strand of hair off my cheek. “Because I think you’d like to be my favourite.”

I scowl. “This may come as a shock, but not every woman finds you irresistible.”

Even though he does have sexy eyes and a bad-boy biker look that makes most women melt. Callen smirks. Clearly, he’s having the same train of thought as me. His never-ending confidence is infuriating.

“Are you sure about that, princess?” he purrs.

“You’re so full of yourself.”

His eyes lock on mine like they’re sealing a promise. “You’ll be full of me soon.”

“Puh-lease!” I snort and break his hypnotic trance. “You need to work on your dirty talk. Using a line like that won’t seduce anyone.”

In a quick manoeuvre, I duck underneath his arms to make a break for it, but Callen doesn’t let me go. He grabs my arm to yank me back. I raise my knee to hit him in the balls, but he’s quicker, pushing me against the wall.

His hard cock presses against my jeans. I can’t will myself to move. A shiver of desire travels down my spine. People say they’ll dance on the graves of people they hate, but I’ve never heard anyone say anything about fucking in a crypt before.

“I’m not trying to seduce you,” Callen says. Why does his Scottish accent have to be so growly? “I *need* to have you.”

My logical reasoning takes over. “You *need* to get off me.”

Before I change my mind, I shove him square in the chest with both hands, sending him flying.

“You want me as much as I want you,” Callen says, regaining his balance. “You can’t resist me, even though you don’t want to admit it.”

“Find someone else who wants to screw you,” I say. “I’ve got work to do.”

His face falls for a split second, and then his features harden. “I don’t want anyone else.”

“Is that the best you’ve got?” I tilt my head to the side. “Your charm won’t work on me. You’ve said it yourself, we’re similar. I don’t buy your bullshit.”

“Fine, if that’s how you want to play it,” he says. “Why don’t we be honest with each other?”

“Honest?” I scoff. “You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“Give me your hand.”

I cross my arms, refusing to obey. “Why should I?”

“Because I’m going to be honest with you.”

I sigh and relent, holding out my hand. Callen’s a stubborn prick. The sooner we get this charade over with, the quicker I can return to plotting Trout’s imminent murder.

He takes my hand and steps closer, towering above me. He places my palm over his chest. My blood rushes to my cheeks as he moves my hand down his body, letting me feel the outline of his chiselled abs and well-carved six-pack. He keeps going until my fingers rest on the waistband of his jeans, and his hard bulge twitches underneath the straining denim.

“Can you feel how hard I am?” he asks as my hand touches the top of his cock for a split second.

“Well done, Callen,” I declare, tearing my hand away like I’ve touched an oven top. “You got me to touch you. Mission accomplished. Can I get back to work now?”

“You don’t get it, Ivy,” he says. His use of my real name makes me pay attention. “Ever since we fucked, it’s been different.”

“Are you blaming me for breaking your dick?” I ask. “Do I need to go to a clinic to get checked? If this was your attempt to get me to do an examination, you can go swivel.” I shoot his tent a pointed glare. “It looks like it’s working fine.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my cock,” he replies defensively.

I put my hands on my hips. “So, what are you trying to say?”

“You’re a crazy bitch who tried to kill us all. But, since having you, you’re the only woman I want to fuck,” he says. “Being with you is explosive, maybe better than detonating a bomb, and I know you feel it too. The chemistry we have together. The way we’re drawn together in a room. I meant it when I said I don’t want you. I fucking *need* you, and I think you need me too.”

Callen loves to play games and cause torment. I don’t believe his mindfuckery, no matter how genuine he sounds.

I roll my eyes. “Save it for a girl who you actually stand a chance with.”

“You know, I didn’t just return to the Dukes to work,” he continues. When I look into his eyes this time, I don’t see a psychotic killer staring back. I see the man who helped a deer, the father who talked about missing his daughter, and the friend who saved Bram’s life. “I came back to find you.”

He leans in, and his lips graze mine, sending tingles down to my toes. He holds my waist, drawing my body to his and kisses me harder. His mouth is forceful, filled with need, his tongue diving into my mouth to take from me, and I don’t stop him.

This isn’t like before. There’s depth, emotion, darkness... and something else I can’t put my finger on. The world doesn’t shake, but my body reacts like the floor is quaking. He ties me to the present, making everything around us vanish.

When we’re together, it’s like pouring petrol onto a fire. We’re powerless to stop the reaction. Our kiss becomes an urgent frenzy. I run my fingers through his hair while his hands move down my back to cup and squeeze my arse hard.

He groans, “I—”

“Shh,” I order, tugging his jacket off.

I throw it to the floor and slip my hand under his t-shirt. He catches my bottom lip between his teeth and sucks on it as I dig my nails into his back, drawing blood.

I need to feel his skin against mine. I pull at the hem of his t-shirt, craving closeness. He obliges, throwing it over his head and starts to undress me. He hurls my scarf to the side and tears my coat open with enough force to send the buttons flying. They roll across the floor, finding homes in dusty corners. I wrestle with my crop top, quickly taking it off before that ends up in shreds.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he admires.

“Don’t speak,” I urge, raising my leg and hooking my knee around him to draw him in.

My tits bulge out of my pretty purple bra, crushed against his chest. He grabs a handful of my arse to steady me and leans my back against the wall for balance.

Suddenly, I stand on two legs and push him away.

“What—”

“Your clothes.” I scan his body. “Take them off.”

His pupils dilate with excitement. Usually, he enjoys giving orders, but he doesn’t seem to mind getting them. He obeys eagerly, stripping and standing naked, proudly displaying the massive throbbing member between his legs like it’s a prize-winning trophy. It kind of is.

“On your knees,” I order. “In front of the altar.”

He drops to the ground without hesitation and watches as I move towards him, swinging my hips. I take my time, removing clothes as I go. First, I shrug off my shoes and then slip out of my jeans until I’m standing in my underwear. Finally, I unclip my bra and let it fall.

A gust of wind whistles through the crypt, as if the spirits want to punish me for getting hot and heavy in their resting place. My nipples harden in response, and goosebumps erupt over my skin.

I grab Callen's leather jacket and put it on. He swallows in longing as he checks me out from head to toe.

"Holy shit," he mumbles. "You look hot in my jacket."

I use the dominant tone I usually reserve for killing. "Tell me what you want to do to me."

"I need to taste you."

I remove my silky knickers, dropping them to my ankles and stepping out of them.

"Fuck," he murmurs, now face-to-face with my bare pussy.

I grab a fistful of his hair and make him look up, then I spread my legs wide and force his head between my thighs.

He doesn't disappoint. He responds with the ferocious hunger of a starved beast. His tongue licks along my slit, savouring my dripping sweetness. He laps and sucks my clit, making it pulsate with pleasure. My eyes close, and I widen my stance while he grips my thighs to keep me upright. My knees tremble as he probes between my lips and fucks my insides with his tongue.

I need more.

I jerk his head back, making him yelp. Below me, his beard shines from my wetness coating his chin. Who wouldn't want a wild biker man on his knees, ready to do anything you tell him?

"Sit," I say, pointing at the step leading up to the altar.

The warmth from nearby candles takes the edge off the icy temperature. When he's in position, I turn away. He yowls, showing his need when he thinks I'm leaving. I look back over my shoulder and grin before lowering myself down on top of him.

He gasps as I climb onto his lap, reverse cowgirl style. "Fuck..."

He snakes his hands around my body to squeeze my tits. He plays with them, kneading my flesh and taking my nipples

between his fingers. He rolls my pink peaks and pinches hard, while his cock slides between my pussy lips.

“Tell me what you want, Callen.”

The metal balls from his piercing tease me, but I’m not letting him inside me. Not yet. His palms glide down my front, past my stomach, and straight to my clit. He massages me, circling and applying pressure to build the orgasm that’s already growing inside my core until I can’t take it anymore.

“I want to be buried in your tight little cunt,” he groans. “I want you to fuck my cock like you own it.”

I use his knees for balance and lean forward, then guide his cock to my entrance. I let him circle my opening. “Like this?”

“Princess, you have no idea how fucking hot you look right now,” he groans. “If I’m not inside you soon, then I’m going to have to bend you over and take you myself.”

I take his shaft, slowly edging down onto him one inch at a time.

“Fuck, I need to be deeper,” he groans as I keep slipping down. “Yeah, baby. Just like that.”

I stretch to accommodate his girth and slather him in my wetness. His fingers speed up, continuing to stroke my clit while I start riding him. We moan and move together, and I gyrate my hips to embrace how full he makes me.

“Your arse looks so good from this angle,” he compliments, moving the leather jacket to get a better look. “There’s nothing better than seeing you taking me.”

To punish him, I rise until his cock is about to fall out, then sink down again, taking him deep in a swift motion.

“Yes,” I moan, closing my eyes to shed any inhibitions and surrender myself to the feeling, riding his cock like my life depends on it. “Fuck, yes!”

Suddenly, someone clears their throat.

I open my eyes to see Freddie glowering at us from the doorway, watching our every move.

CHAPTER 40

FREDDIE

When I returned to grab a bottle of water, there was no sign of Ivy and Callen anywhere, so I reasoned they must have fallen asleep. Until I continued down the tunnel to search for them and heard their bodies slapping against each other. I should have turned back then, but I didn't...

I followed the noise, battling to keep my jealousy under control with each step and every breathy moan that made my teeth clench. I waited in the shadows, watching her writhe in pleasure as she rode him.

She's facing me, but her eyes are closed. Her tits bounce, falling out of Callen's jacket. He slides effortlessly in and out of her pink pussy. My jaw grits at seeing his cock shining with her wetness.

I should say something straightaway, but I don't.

I keep watching, caught between my conflicting instincts to tear Callen's head off, which I have no right to do, or stroke my growing erection in time with the motion of her hips.

A flush creeps over her chest as she throws her head back. Callen squeezes her tits hard as she speeds up. She's getting close...

This is my moment.

I step out and clear my throat. Her eyes widen in shock as she lets out a trailing moan that's cut short when she sees me.

"Sorry to interrupt," I say coldly.

Callen immediately drops his hands to his sides. She purses her lips but doesn't jump off him like I expected. She stays where she is, mounted on Callen's cock, and all I can think about is how I'd kill to be in his place right now.

Her eyes narrow, neither of us wanting to be the first to look away.

"If you're sorry, why are you still here?" she asks, starting to circle her hips.

"Holy shit," Callen groans, realising she doesn't plan on stopping because I've crashed their party.

I can't tell whether she's craving a release or wants to punish me for what happened earlier. Her fucking another man shouldn't bother me. The Ivy Penrose I love never existed, yet seeing the sexy assassin screwing Callen makes me see red.

"Are you just going to stand and watch, Freddie?" she teases, wearing a cocky grin.

Yep, she's doing this to get to me. On the one hand, I respect her for standing—well, squatting—her ground. On the other, it only fuels my resentment. My cock reacts involuntarily though, hardening at seeing her naked body before me.

She grinds on Callen's lap. However, her gaze doesn't leave mine as she pops her finger into her mouth, licks it until it glistens, and uses it to touch herself.

"This isn't what your dream girl would do, is it, Freddie? I must be..." Her words are broken up by her bouncing. "Such." Her arse slaps against Callen's thighs. "A." She throws her head back. "Fucking." She gasps. "Disappointment."

She rides him harder, throwing her hair over her shoulder to give me the perfect view of her breasts.

I can't take it anymore.

"Stop," I command.

"Not now, boss," Callen moans. "I'm so fucking close."

"I said, stop!"

Ivy moans louder.

“This is your final warning, Ivy,” I say. “I’m the boss. As long as we have a deal, you follow my rules.”

She halts and flutters her thick eyelashes. “Or, what?”

I launch forward and grab her by the hair, using it to pull her onto her feet. Callen grunts. The sudden motion makes him explode as I force her pussy off him, and his cum drips down his cock, coating his balls. Oops.

“You owe me, boss,” he mumbles.

I don’t care about ruining their moment. I’ve set my sights on her, and nothing else matters. When I let her go, she whirls around to face me, her brown eyes blazing with ferocity. Her hard nipples point at me like guns ready to fire.

“Maybe you were right about what you said earlier,” I say. “Maybe I’m not the man I pretend to be.”

“Show me,” she orders in a sultry voice that makes me want to come instantly.

I spin her and bend her over. She uses the altar steps to balance as I unleash my cock and slam into her pussy from behind. I don’t care that Callen’s in the room or that he’s watching. I must have her. Right here, right now.

Her moans vibrate through my shaft, overwhelming my senses as I drive into her. She feels incredible. I plunge into her mercilessly, taking out all my frustrations and anger on her pussy. I’m blinded by my desire to claim her.

Callen quickly cleans himself using her discarded underwear. Already on the floor, he crawls until his head rests between her legs. While I fuck her from behind, he pleasures her from the front. The tip of his tongue touching my balls only amplifies my angry need to fuck her until she’s raw and screaming my name.

CHAPTER 41

IVY

Who is this man? I don't recognise this version of Freddie. At least when he lost his shit earlier, he looked guilty afterwards. Seeing the dead look in his eyes when he watched Callen fucking me was terrifying, yet unbelievably hot at the same time.

His hips brutally slam into me with purposeful strokes and push my clit onto Callen's waiting tongue. My pussy clamps down on his shaft, teetering on the end of no return.

Freddie raises his hand and spanks my arse. His palm hits the curve of my cheek and echoes through the crypt. This will be the most action the spirits have seen for years. He spanks me again, even harder, making my tits jolt. I shove my arse back against him in encouragement, enjoying the sting of sharp pain, while Callen plays with my nipples.

"Just like that," I cry. "Don't stop."

He has no intention of stopping. My words act as a catalyst, and he pounds into me as Callen's tongue coaxes indescribable pleasure from me. My vision blurs, overwhelmed by the sensations. Having them at once is addictively good, making my body forget about emotions and our messy situation.

My thighs tremble as Freddie forces me over the edge with his thrusts. I come undone, and my warm gush of wetness makes him go crazy. Callen shuffles back, playing with my tits while letting Freddie rail me into oblivion. He pinches my

nipples, sending an electric shock from them down to my core to intensify my orgasm.

“Yes!” I moan as Freddie fucks the waves of orgasm out of me until he’s soaked. “Fuck yes!”

“She’s dripping,” Callen groans. “But she’s not done yet.”

Freddie’s bucking hips slow, while Callen returns to eat me out like I’m his last meal. He sucks my clit, making my world spin, and a new climax grow. Just as I think I’ll never recover from the dizzying heights, another toe-curling tornado rattles through my core, and I surrender to the pleasure and come again.

Callen pulls away triumphantly as my legs are about to give way, but Freddie’s firm hands don’t let me go. He keeps fucking me and using my body in the best possible way.

“Is this the man you want me to be?” Freddie demands breathily. “The man you want to fuck?”

It’s hard to talk, but I moan in reply.

That’s all the agreement he needs. My arse throbs as he rails into me hard enough that I know I’ll be aching in the morning. Finally, he roars. A spurt of hot warmth fills me as he explodes, coating my insides.

“That’s it,” Freddie groans. “Take every drop of my cum.”

He doesn’t move right away, staying buried inside me to ensure I’m filled. When he’s satisfied, he pulls out quickly.

“That was…” Callen begins.

I can’t find the words, still suspended in a state of post-orgasm bliss.

When I turn around, Freddie’s already stashed his cock away and is pacing off in the opposite direction.

“I’m going to keep watch again,” Freddie says, not bothering to look back.

His rejection shouldn’t bother me, but it hurts. I blink back tears as I watch him go.

“Fucking incredible,” Callen finishes his earlier sentence.

I ignore him, treating him with the same coldness Freddie showed me and hurriedly put my clothes on.

“I need to get some rest,” I say with zero emotion. “It’s a big day tomorrow.”

For years, killing has been my form of therapy. My alter-ego persona has helped me avoid dealing with my emotions. Since Daisy died, I’ve been more comfortable living as an agent than as myself, but stepping into that role doesn’t feel the same anymore. How could a moody boss, three flawed guys, and multiple orgasms have changed that?

CHAPTER 42

FREDDIE

My pent-up emotions make me want to scream. Instead, I spend the next hour patrolling the cemetery grounds to ensure I know the layout. It distracts me from my confusing thoughts and reliving over and over how good it felt to be inside her again.

I should have walked out when I saw her and Callen together, but I couldn't help myself. Fucking her tonight was the opposite of our first time at the safe house. Bitter fury ruled every one of my movements, but I found her impossible to resist. Ivy Penrose isn't the woman I thought she was, but the truth hasn't changed our connection. I'm still as drawn to her as the first day I met her. What kind of person does that make me?

"Boss," Callen calls from the crypt through the darkness. "I'm here to take over the next shift."

I stalk through the undergrowth towards him.

"Do you want to talk about—"

"No," I cut him off. "I'll see you in a few hours."

I barge past, knocking into his shoulder and heading to the first underground chamber, where Ivy's sitting against the wall, wrapped in a blanket. Her eyes are closed, although, judging by her uncanny stillness, I'm sure she isn't sleeping.

"I know you're not asleep," I say, sitting opposite her.

I expect her to ignore me. Instead, she opens her eyes. "And?"

“You should try to rest,” I say. “It won’t be long until sunrise.”

“Thanks for your concern, but I’ve waited years for this moment. I know what I’m doing. Maybe you should sleep,” she replies. “I promise not to kill you.”

“How generous,” I mutter sarcastically.

The light casts half of her face in shadows, making her expression hard to read. She fights back a shiver, pulling the blanket up higher around her neck.

My gaze lingers on her throat, and my stomach sinks from the guilt.

“You were right about what you said. Maybe I’m not the man I want to be...” I gesture at her throat. “I shouldn’t have hurt you.”

She arches one eyebrow. “Is that your attempt at an apology?”

“Yes,” I say.

“I’ve lived through worse.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” I say. “It will never happen again.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” She shrugs. After a long pause, she says, “No one’s perfect, Freddie. And no one expects you to be, either.”

The crushing expectations I put on myself would argue otherwise, but I don’t reply. Instead, I address the massive sex-smelling elephant in the room. “What happened... with me and Callen...”

“We’re all adults,” she says. “It’s just sex. That’s it. No big deal.”

How do I explain to her that it meant more to me? Every time I’m inside her, it cements our bond. Even after everything she’s done, I can’t break it... and I don’t know if I want to anymore.

“I shouldn’t have barged in like that,” I say. The lack of light makes it easier for me to express myself openly when I can’t see her reaction properly. “But you’re the woman I thought I loved. The woman I’ve been thinking about for years. Seeing you together made me...”

Ivy looks at a spot on the wall to the side of my head, refusing to look me in the eye. Maybe she’s afraid of what she’ll see if she does.

“None of this matters.” She opens her mouth to say more, and then presses her lips together like she had second thoughts. A blank mask falls over her features, and she sits up straighter. “Let’s focus on the plan. Trout, the Killers Club, and Spencer. Orgasms are great and all, but we don’t need any more distractions.”

I nod in agreement. No more distractions. Focus on work. I could do that. Even though the matter is unresolved, the atmosphere between us has lightened. For the first time since reuniting, we’re working towards the same goal, and I need this chance to make it up to her. Usually, women like flowers and chocolates, but Ivy wants to kill a man, and the Dukes won’t let her down.

CHAPTER 43

SEB

After an unsettled night spent playing out worst case scenarios in my mind, I'm finally here. Ivy wants to tick a name off her list, and the first part of our plan relies on me getting Trout alone. Usually, I don't like my family affairs and business crossing over, but this time I have no choice.

I quickly check my reflection in the car window, turning my head. Yep, my blonde hair has grown long enough to disguise my tiny earpiece. I informed Freddie when I left, and they're already in position. *We can do this*. I mentally psych myself up. This is step one to taking down the Killers Club.

Behind me, I hear Ralph ask his wife, "Does this tie match my suit?"

He doesn't give her a chance to reply before launching into a rant about the best silks and where to buy them. I'm glad I insisted on sitting in the front with his driver.

I would have preferred to meet them at the funeral, but Ralph insisted we travel together. After getting a taxi over to his house this morning, I checked that Pippy was okay. The crazy pup went wild as soon as she saw me, jumping up and licking my face. She seemed happy, despite the new diamante collar around her neck that must have been bought as a gift and would be burned as soon as we got her home.

"We're here," I announce.

My hand's poised on the door handle, ready to fly out as soon as we come to a stop.

The car passes through wrought iron gates and crawls up the gravel path to the small church where the service is happening. A group of mourners wait by the doors. I'd guess there are around one hundred people gathered, which sounds like a lot, but is far smaller than other funerals I've attended. Usually, funerals in old-money families are huge, grand affairs, but Beatrice's premature death caused enough of a scandal to make them organise a simpler do.

"There's no press," my sister-in-law says, her nose pressed against the glass. She sounds almost disappointed.

"Good," I say, jumping out before the driver pulls the handbrake.

The crowd spins to face me as soon as my foot hits the ground.

The last time I saw most of them was at Collingsbrook Manor. Their judgemental gazes show I'm not welcome. I didn't expect to be greeted with open arms. Since the fire, many companies I worked with have removed me from their boards. Nobody wants to be associated with a crazy person whose alleged fiancée had a drug problem. I adjust my sleeves and keep my head held high. Fickle fuckers.

My mother, noticing the silence following my arrival, totters over to greet us. Her hat wobbles as she walks. The precariously balanced monstrosity on her head resembles a black swan laying an egg.

"Sebastian," she croons. "Come and stand with us."

My father loiters behind her and nods sullenly in my direction. It's unusual for him to attend these events, and it's been months since I've seen him. In his old age, he's balding and gained weight around his middle. Thankfully, I've inherited my mother's thick hair, but Ralph isn't so lucky. He's a mini version of Father and has had to slick his hair back to disguise the thinning patch around his crown.

"I'm surprised you came, Father," I say.

He purses his lips, barely bothering to acknowledge me. All he cares about is his handicap in golf. Thankfully, he

married a climbing socialite who handles social obligations on his behalf—perhaps their similarities are why my mother had been so fond of Beatrice.

“It’s a tragedy, isn’t it? Drugs! I can’t believe it!” Mother says, loud enough to make sure everyone’s listening. “Did you know about her problems, Sebastian? Did she open up to you?”

“No,” I reply, knowing her performance is for the audience’s benefit. “She didn’t seem like the type, but I guess you can never tell.”

I can’t exactly declare that assassins staged Beatrice’s death to make a point.

“I suppose you can’t,” she says, seemingly content that I’ve given the correct answer. She drops her voice so only I can hear, “If you ever need to go to rehab, I’ve done my research and have found a very discreet place.”

She isn’t saying it because she cares about my welfare. No, she’s more concerned about avoiding the enormous scandal it would bring to the family.

“I’m fine,” I insist.

“Did you see them over there?” she hisses. “Lord and Lady Deveraux didn’t even acknowledge us. Can you believe it? We’re true royalty, and they’re looking down their noses at us when they paid for their titles.”

“I know we’ve not had great publicity lately,” Ralph chips in. “But I have plans to change things, Father.”

Daddy Dearest is too preoccupied checking out the younger wife of a man standing nearby to pay attention to Ralph’s peacocking, and I resist the urge to laugh.

“Very good, Ralph,” Mother says, brimming with pride. “At least one of our sons keeps the family in mind.”

“This is Beatrice’s funeral,” I remind them. “Can we not talk about the family or publicity for one day?”

Her eyes narrow coldly, but she pats my arm to present the illusion of being supportive. “Of course, dear.”

Over her shoulder, my gaze locks on the man I've been waiting for.

"I need a minute," I say, heading away from the group.

"Take as long as you need," Mother says in a tone that implies she means the exact opposite.

While everyone waits for the service to start, Callen and Freddie are stationed behind a giant tombstone, ready to inject Christopher Trout with a paralytic agent as soon as I can get him away from the party.

I put up my hand to cover my mouth and use the other to adjust the button on my jacket. The button doubles as a tiny camera that's live-streaming to Bram. Even though he stayed behind, he isn't missing any action and will be seeing everything that happens.

"Target in sight," I say, adjusting my camera to focus on Christopher Trout.

He's wearing a black suit, and the edge of his faded eagle tattoo peeks out above his collar. He's five foot six and stout in stature, which will make him easy to overpower.

"We have the dosage ready," Freddie's voice crackles in my ear.

"Everyone should take their seats," someone announces. "The service will begin soon."

In a flash, Ralph's at my side, putting his hand on my arm, ready to escort me. "We need to go inside."

I shake him off. "I don't need you to hold my hand."

"Don't cause another scene," Ralph hisses. The tips of his ears turn red. "Or I won't be there to get you out of it again."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" I rebuff. "We all know you'd help get me out of any situation if it protects our precious reputation."

He battles to keep his composure as we rejoin our parents. Snatches of conversation are easy to overhear in the crowd.

“She went down a dark path, but we all know who is to blame,” Beatrice’s airhead friend gossips. “Sebastian was a bad influence on her!”

My mother’s posture stiffens. She halts like she’s readying for a confrontation, but my father steps in to steer her away.

“You saw what he was like at the ball,” another woman agrees scathingly while dabbing her crocodile tears away with a frilly handkerchief. “He’s unstable! It must be drugs. Maybe he’s the one who gave them to her.”

“They should have gone to rehab together,” a third chips in. “How can he even show his face here? The audacity!”

Ralph bristles. If rumours are being aired at a funeral, he’s likely calculating how far they’ve got around their social circles and what steps he’ll have to take to control the damage.

“How long will this take?” I ask Ralph.

“It’ll be a quick service,” he says.

He wants this over with as quickly as I do.

We file into the pews, and I keep Trout in my sights. He laughs loudly at something the man next to him says, making me hate him even more. Seemingly, he’s using this as an opportunity to network and gain connections.

The few remaining members of Beatrice’s family sit in the front row. Despite appearances, I sense they’re overjoyed to be here. They never thought they’d see a whiff of the McGowan fortune, but they’ll get it all now that Beatrice—her father’s sole heir—is gone.

“We’re in position,” Freddie says in my ear.

Is it bad to think about how much you want to kill someone in the house of God? My knuckles clench. No, Trout killed an innocent woman. He deserves to die. A-fucking-men.

“Get off your phone, Ralph,” my mother snaps.

His cheeks flush. “But I was—”

“Off!” she hisses, with a fake smile painted over her face. “It’s bad enough that we have to be here.”

“Darling,” Father warns, putting his hand on her knee. “Everyone knows the truth.”

She huffs and crosses her arms like a petulant child, seething on the inside. Thankfully, we’re spared one of her tirades as piano music plays. Everyone stands for a group of men carrying Beatrice’s coffin down the aisle. I bow my head and swallow down my guilt. She’d hoped to walk down the aisle in a white dress one day soon, not in a wooden box.

Beatrice was never my favourite person, but she didn’t deserve what happened to her. At least I could take some solace in knowing that we were working towards taking down the people responsible for her death.

When the coffin is in position, a clergyman stands in the pulpit and begins. “We’re gathered to celebrate the life of Beatrice McGowan.”

The service passes quickly. We sing a hymn, a few people get up to read poems and say a few words about Beatrice, and then it’s over. The next part requires us to walk to the burial site. From Bram’s earlier investigations, we already know it’s nowhere near the crypt. This will be my best opportunity to sneak out from under my family’s watchful eyes and get Trout alone.

Everyone puts on their coats and starts to leave the church in orderly rows. Even in times of grief, British people know how to form an organised line.

“The car is waiting out front,” Ralph says. “It’ll take us straight to the wake.”

“The wake?” I frown. “Do we really have to go?”

“Yes, we do,” he says definitively.

“I don’t think I’ll be welcome,” I say. “Everyone already thinks I’m a drug addict, responsible for Beatrice’s death, or both.”

“Don’t be silly, Sebastian,” Mum brushes over it. “It’s an intimate gathering. There’s nothing for you to worry about. I think I know the mother of one of the girls who was spreading false gossip, and I can—”

“I already made note of their names,” Ralph says. “I’ll pass them to the palace. They can monitor their online activity and make sure nothing unpleasant is shared widely.”

Mother’s approving smile makes Ralph beam. He’s still recovering from getting chastised for having his phone out earlier, so this has helped to restore his golden boy status. His constant need for approval is pathetic.

“Who knew your private education would have prepared you to go into MI5?” I murmur.

Ralph claps me on the shoulder. “At least one of us does right by the crown, Seb.”

“I’d...” I hesitate as we leave. “I’d like to pay my final respects.”

“Why? Have you finally decided you want to spend time with the girl now that she’s dead?” Mother shakes her head. “I don’t understand you sometimes, Sebastian.”

“Calm down, sweetheart,” Father says. “The boy wants to pay his respects at the burial. He can meet us at the car when he’s done.”

She and Ralph scowl in response but grudgingly nod in agreement and head off. If my father knew my actual plans, I’m sure he wouldn’t be as amenable. Like them, half of the funeral party has also chosen to exit hastily, while the rest mill around, waiting for the coffin to be taken to the graveside. I join the remaining mourners and lean against the church wall alone, keeping Trout in my view until I get my chance.

He parts from the group to light a cigarette, and I swoop in to make my move.

This is it.

“Sebastian Montgomery!” Trout’s eyes light up as I approach. He holds out his packet of Marlboros, which I politely decline. “What a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s Christopher Trout, isn’t it? I’m sure Beatrice mentioned you in one of our conversations,” I say.

“Sweet girl,” he says wistfully. His pupils dilate at the mention of her name, making my stomach churn. “What a shame.”

I try to keep my tone light-hearted. “I understand you’ve been a friend of the McGowan family for a long time.”

“That’s right.” He takes a long drag of his cigarette. “Lord McGowan and I went way back to our university days.”

“I thought so. You know, it’s good timing that we ran into each other.” I step closer and lower my voice. “There’s a delicate matter I need to discuss with the McGowan family. But on a day like today, it doesn’t seem appropriate. I thought you might—”

“Relay the message?” he interrupts enthusiastically, taking the bait.

He’s on the edge of my line, and I’m reeling him in.

“Exactly,” I say. “I wouldn’t usually ask, but I’ll be leaving the city for a while on business. It’s something I’d rather discuss in person.”

“Absolutely,” he says, crushing what’s left of his cigarette underfoot. “I understand your need for discretion at a time like this.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch the group who remained for the burial begin to shuffle in the opposite direction in dribs and drabs. I nudge my head back towards the church, planning to lure him around the other side, away from everyone else. A distraught mourner’s melodramatic sobs provide us with the perfect distraction to slink away.

“You’ve come to the right person,” Trout says. He doesn’t know how right he is. “You’ll have to introduce me to your father next time he’s around. I’ve always wanted to meet him.”

“Of course,” I lie. “I’m sure he’d love to make your acquaintance.”

Although, not as much as a killer redhead would.

“We could go inside?” he suggests, pausing at the door.

“I want to be sure we’re not overheard,” I insist. “The information I have is... compromising. After my recent publicity, we can’t be too careful.”

He rubs his hands together in glee. Information is power, and he knows it.

“I completely understand,” he replies. “Lead the way.”

He follows me beyond the church, meandering through the gravestones. We pass through a thicket of trees which offers little visibility at a distance. No one else is around. We’ve been lucky to avoid an onslaught of journalists, so I assume the McGowan family hired security or paid for the cemetery to be locked down for the occasion.

I pay attention to the names on the stones as per Bram’s instructions, like I’m ticking off stops on a treasure trail.

“You’re getting close now,” Freddie says in my ear. “Head left, behind the trees. You’ll see the stone. Callen’s ready.”

“I hope you know that I don’t believe what people are saying about you,” Trout gushes. “Rumours are just rumours! I know you and your family are people of honour.”

“Yes,” I reply with a deadpan expression. “We are.”

Trout steps forward, and Callen flies at him from behind the headstone without warning. My lips stretch into a smile. Trout’s piggy eyes bulge in shock as Callen tackles him to the ground and pins him between his thighs.

A strangled noise comes from Trout’s throat as Callen plunges a needle into his neck. Suddenly, Trout’s survival instincts kick in. He thrashes around, attempting to break free. Whatever drug Callen injected him with is taking longer than expected to have an effect. Trout opens his mouth to scream, but Callen’s ready with a backup plan. He grabs a chloroform-soaked rag with his gloved hand and holds the fabric to Trout’s mouth until he stops struggling.

When he’s unconscious, Callen stands and wipes his jacket. Behind him, Freddie makes his way to join us from his vantage point in the undergrowth, carrying a bungee cord that

they'll use to hog-tie Trout and carry him to his final resting place.

“We'll take it from here,” Callen says.

I nod and kick Trout in the ribs for good measure. “They're moving to the graveside. Everyone will be gone soon.”

The two of them get to work. They roll Trout onto his front and bind his wrists and ankles.

“I'll see you at the house later,” I say, reluctant to leave but knowing I must go. “Have fun.”

Callen winks. “Ivy will.”

No one will even notice Christopher Trout has disappeared...

CHAPTER 44

BRAM

That's him.

Shit, I need to move.

I slide lower in my seat to make sure I'm concealed from view when I see Seb's icy blonde hair bob past. I watch in the wing mirror as he strolls casually through the cemetery gates and into a waiting car. From his calm composure, no one would guess that he's returning from delivering a man into the arms of his killers.

The Dukes would be furious when they learned I hired a car and followed them here, but I couldn't stay behind knowing that my friends were putting themselves at risk. I could monitor the CCTV from anywhere, but someone had to be nearby if anything happened.

Rested on the passenger seat, my laptop streams all the nearby camera feeds and continually monitors their communications over the air. I'm tracking their phones to keep tabs on their movements, and I've also tapped into their earpieces, so even when they're not talking to each other, I can hear everything—not that they need to know.

I switch off my link to Seb's button camera and earpiece as the car whisks him to the wake. His part of the mission is complete, and I'll check in on him again later. When he was at the funeral, I heard what people were saying whenever they got close to him and how they blamed him for what happened to Beatrice. Although he doesn't care about false rumours, he's

got a sensitive side. He'll always carry guilt over her death, despite it not being his fault.

I hit the button to increase the volume and listen to Freddie and Callen. They're whispering as they drag Trout to the crypt where Ivy's waiting. I wonder what's going through her mind.

She's about to reunite with the man who killed her sister...

CHAPTER 45

IVY

After applying the final touches to my make-up, I admire the result—a sultry smokey eye with layers of mascara and perfectly applied red lipstick. My tight black crop top fits snugly over my tits and pairs well with my high-waisted jeans. By some miracle, they hug my thick thighs but don't hang loose around my waist. Men will never understand how hard it is for women to find good-fitting jeans. They're a holy grail product, like a condom that makes men feel like they're riding bareback.

I pace in front of the creepy altar. Freddie and Callen insisted I stay behind, but they're taking forever. How many nice things did people have to say about Beatrice at the funeral?

Bang!

They're back.

I wait at the bottom of the staircase, looking up at the growing shred of light while the guys move the slab. Callen swears loudly, followed by a dragging noise, heavy breathing, and a knock, which I assume is Trout hitting the wall. From the kerfuffle, you'd think the two of them are moving a thousand-tonne sack of spuds—not a good-for-nothing piece of shit like Trout.

“Don't hit him too hard,” I yell. “I want him conscious!”

Callen's head appears, peering down at me from the entrance. “It's too late for that, sweetheart.”

I scowl and step aside as they begin their descent, biting my tongue to stop myself from pointing out that I'm anything but a sweetheart. Watching them is almost comical. They're like characters in a sketch show moving Trout in his bound position. Trout's short, but he's much heavier than he was five years ago. I spot the tattoo on his neck to confirm it's him.

They drop him at my feet. He stirs but isn't fully conscious yet.

"You need to take him through there." I point at the tunnel. "To the altar."

Freddie wipes away the sweat dripping down his forehead. "Can't you kill him here?"

"Aren't you strong enough to carry him?" I tease.

"I don't know about Freddie, but I'm built for endurance," Callen says.

I snort. Despite avoiding talking about how we had some of the best sex of my life, we're on better terms. Who knew that it would take an incredible threesome to break the tension?

Freddie grits his jaw and grabs Trout's ankles, refusing to be overshadowed by Callen. Although they're holding him above the floor, Trout's sagging pot belly will hit every bump in the stone. As they pass me, I grab Trout's head by his last tuft of hair and jerk it upward to look at him. Red, scaly patches of skin surround his mouth and nose.

"Chloroform?" I tut, dropping his head. "Really?"

"I had no choice. Torean's meds must have expired," Callen says. "He'll come around soon."

I follow from behind. In the adjoining room, I've already cleared space and picked my weapons of choice. I'll start by removing his toes, then his fingers, one digit at a time. After that, I'll freestyle it. Bram's creative with a paintbrush, but I express my artistic side in other messier ways.

"Happy now?" Freddie snaps as they drop him in my preferred spot.

“For now,” I reply with a sweet smile. “Are you both sticking around for the show?”

Freddie nods, retreating to the shadows, while Callen rubs his hands together gleefully. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

I circle Trout. His head moves, and his eyes snap open. Chloroform doesn’t knock someone out for long. He looks at his new surroundings in confusion and blinks wildly, hoping he will wake up elsewhere when he opens his eyes.

“It’s good to see you again, Christopher,” I say.

“Wh-where am I?” he stammers.

He wriggles, but his bound ankles and wrists keep him locked in place. Callen steps forward and kicks him in the side, making him groan like a deflating balloon.

I shoot him daggers. Freddie steps in to pull Callen back in line and hisses, “This is her kill.”

I kneel next to Trout’s shaking frame.

“Do you recognise me?” I ask.

“What do you want?” Trout whimpers. “Let me go. Please. I have money!”

My lip curls in disgust. “I don’t want your money.”

“I’ll do anything!” he pleads. “Sebastian Montgomery saw you! He’ll make sure I’m found.”

Callen and Freddie snicker.

“You’re never going to be found,” I say. I head to the altar and my neat row of knives organised by blade size, then turn to Callen. “Remove his shoes.”

Callen wrinkles his nose and arches one eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t want my help.”

I bat my eyelashes at him. “I’ll let you cut off a toe for your trouble.”

“Promises, promises,” he purrs, eagerly rushing to untie Trout’s shoes. He tears them and his socks off in a flash.

“Help!” Trout shouts. “Somebody help me!”

“No one can hear you,” I say. “I’ve been waiting a long time to see you again.”

“Who are you?” Trout asks as tears fall down his chubby cheeks. “There must be a mistake. I don’t know you.”

I sigh, clicking my tongue impatiently. None of the others recognised me either. It proves how little we meant to them. How can they not remember my face after they ruined my life? It’s my job to make sure they never forget it.

“Let me remind you,” I say. “Five years ago, you worked for Spencer Bexley. It was a dark night. You and Spencer’s cronies forced a car off the road. When you went to the wreckage, you found two girls...”

His bottom lip quivers. He looks up in horror, seeing me properly.

“You’re still alive,” he whispers.

“And so are you, unfortunately,” I say. “But my sister isn’t. Do you remember her? The girl you raped and killed. The girl you left to die like she was nothing.”

I’m shaking with fury and grab a knife.

I address Freddie and Callen. “Hold him still.”

They don’t need to be told twice. Trout thrashes while Freddie crushes his neck underfoot to keep him in position, and Callen seizes his ankles.

“Are you ticklish, Christopher?” I ask, running the blade over the soles of his flaky feet. “Do you want me to sing you one of my favourite nursery rhymes?” He begs me to stop, but I’ve entered the zone. Nothing will stop me, and I sing, “*This little piggy went to market. This little piggy stayed at home, and this little piggy...*” I grab his toe with my spare hand and whack it off with the knife.

He wails in pain as blood spouts from his stump. I pick up the toe and hold it up to his face.

“Do you like sucking toes?” I ask, ramming it into his mouth and smiling. He looks like a pig biting down on an apple. “Don’t worry, we’re just getting started.”

Suddenly, a ringing phone interrupts the mood.

“Turn it off,” I order, but Freddie and Callen’s blank faces tell me it’s not theirs. I don’t believe it. Fucking amateurs. “You didn’t search him before bringing him here?”

“In our defence, I didn’t think you could get a signal down here,” Callen mumbles.

Trout spits out his toe, hoping to make another desperate plea for help, but Freddie stops him instantly. His foot presses harder on the back of his neck until he’s gasping for air and unable to talk.

I reach into Trout’s trouser pocket and remove his phone. The screen is smashed, but it’s still working.

My mouth goes dry as I read the caller’s name:

ALARIC.

I answer the call without thinking. “Hello.”

“What are you doing?” Freddie asks.

I turn away so they can’t see my face.

“Ivy, I thought it would be you,” Alaric says. There’s an amusement to his tone, like he knows what I’m doing. “I don’t want to ruin your party, but I have information for you.”

“Christopher can’t come to the phone right now,” I say. “Can I take a message?”

“I’ll make it quick then,” Alaric says. “You should know that Frederick James met with Stephanie last night. He wanted to strike a deal to trade their immunity for your life.”

I don’t reply, keeping my expression neutral.

It can’t be true... can it? Alaric’s deceived me before. He’s the king of manipulation, but a nagging doubt creeps in. Freddie did leave the house yesterday without saying where he was going, and I know he’d do anything to protect his men.

“If you don’t believe me, listen to him yourself,” Alaric says, reading my mind. He hits play on what must be a

recording, and I hear a snippet of a conversation. Stephanie's talking, but it's Freddie's words that cut deep as I listen to his bargaining, "You leave us to continue running our security operations, and we'll return Ivy...she's our prisoner...nothing more."

"I see," I say in a clipped tone when the recording comes to an end.

"And Ivy?" Alaric says. His voice tells me that he's smiling and enjoying every second. "I don't take kindly when my clients turn up dead."

It's a good thing that Trout won't be found then.

I hang up and stash the phone in my pocket, reeling from his revelation. All my excitement over killing Trout has been dashed. I planned to prolong his death and make him suffer, but I'm done toying with him. I need to see blood.

"Who was it?" Freddie questions.

"His dry cleaner," I lie, trying to keep my cool while calculating my next move. "Move your foot."

Freddie does as I ask, stepping back and giving me room to work.

I channel my anger into forcing Trout's chin upwards. I use the knife to slit his throat cleanly and step back to watch his blood gush down his front like a pretty, red waterfall. Who needs to visit Niagara Falls? I grin as he takes his final squelchy breaths.

"Are you sure you're okay, Ivy?" Freddie asks, cautiously approaching me now that the deed is done.

"I'm fine," I say, heading to the far corner of the room to wipe the knife on a blanket. "Check he's dead."

While Freddie and Callen check Trout's pulse, I use Trout's phone to dial 999.

"Police!" I put on a Cockney accent and speak in a high-pitched, panicked voice that causes the others to spin around in disbelief as it echoes through the crypt. "You need to come to

Greywood Cemetery. I've seen two men drag a man into the woods. There was so much blood. I think they stabbed him!"

Before the operator can ask questions, I throw the phone against the wall to smash it into little pieces.

"What did you do?" Callen asks in horror.

My heart thumps in my throat as I turn my attention to Freddie, ignoring Trout bleeding out at our feet.

"Did you meet with Stephanie to make a deal?" I accuse, already knowing the answer but needing to see whether he'll be honest.

Sadness lurks behind his eyes. "Ivy—"

"Yes or no," I yell. "Just answer the question!"

"Yes," he admits, holding his hands up in the air. "But I can explain."

He's a hypocrite. He was furious when he found out I'd planned to kill them, but he'd done the same thing. His deal with me was his backup option, and I was stupid enough to believe it was genuine. I believed we could have had a chance at being a real team, but I was wrong. Wrong about him. Wrong about everything.

"You don't have time to explain." I point the knife in his direction. "I'm leaving, and you're going to let me walk out of here because you need to make a choice. You can clean up your mess before the police arrive or come after me."

CHAPTER 46

IVY

I race out of the crypt and don't look back. The wind stings my cheeks as I pick a direction and sprint, unsure where I'm going but knowing I have to leave. The Dukes can't stop me. Not if they stand a chance of getting away before the police arrive. Hopefully, they'll get caught. I'd like to see how they enjoy being locked up in a cell.

I try to push away my thoughts and keep a lid on my emotions, but it's hard. Freddie betrayed me. Even though I thought we were making progress, he's proved that he's no better than Spencer. As soon as he realised I wasn't the imaginary woman of his dreams; I became disposable. He used me and had the audacity to fuck me after his betrayal.

My hair trails behind me, getting carried in the breeze. Somehow, I avoid tumbling over twisted tree roots poking out from the uneven ground. A crumbling wall looms ahead. It's not the same wall we climbed over on our way in, but I don't have time to find another exit. I run and leap, clambering up the side of it. My arms burn from exertion as they cling to the brick edge, and it takes all my strength to heave up the rest of my body.

I hesitate at the top. On the other side of the wall, a group of young boys are in the middle of a football game and are using it as a makeshift goal. I drop to the ground. Their ball bounces off my shin as I save one of their shots.

"Hey!" the bravest one shouts in annoyance. "You ruined my winning streak!"

“Now you’ve got a better story to tell,” I reply, loving how he’s more concerned about their game than a blood-covered woman falling off a wall. “You can tell everyone you’ve seen a ghost.”

They give me a strange look as I run down the street. Adrenaline keeps me moving. I half-expect Stephanie or Alaric to jump out and pull me into the back of a van. If they’re not watching now, Penelope will find me on CCTV later. I can’t escape them. No matter how hard I try. But I can’t give up while he’s still alive.

I have to kill Spencer.

At my side, car wheels screech to a dramatic halt.

I brace myself.

This must be it.

The Killers Club have found me.

I take a deep inhale, preparing for the fight of my life, when the car door flies open to reveal Bram sitting behind the wheel. My jaw drops.

“What are you doing here?” I ask in disbelief. “How did you—”

Bram nudges his head at the laptop on the seat next to him. Although I can’t see what’s on it, I hear Freddie and Callen freaking out through the speakers. Has he been listening the entire time? Bram slams the lid shut to silence them to confirm he has.

“I’m not getting in,” I say. “The Dukes... Freddie... he betrayed me... he was...”

How do I know this isn’t part of their plan? The last time the Dukes saved me, I ended up chained in a damp basement, trying to fend off Callen’s psycho twin.

I whisper, “Did you know?”

His jaw tenses, and he shakes his head fiercely. His fists clutching the wheel turn a stark white, and he pats the seat next to him.

“I don’t want you to save me again, Bram,” I say. “If I get in this car, you can’t go back for Freddie and Callen. You need to take me to Spencer. Can you do that?”

CHAPTER 47

SEB

The harpist's expert plucking lulls me into a sleepy haze. While my family works the room, I stand alone, counting down the minutes until I can leave. Beatrice's distant cousin is hosting the wake at their London home, and around fifty people have stayed for the occasion. They're huddled in groups, avoiding looking in my direction. Not that it bothers me. In fact, my new social reject status will make functions more bearable going forward.

I don't understand why we had to attend, but the family thought it would look worse if we weren't there. Rumours spread like wildfire, but no one is interested in the truth. Judging by how they're treating me like a leper, they've already reached their verdict. I'm the bad influence who drove Beatrice to drugs. Case closed.

I sigh and text Bram again:

Is everything okay?

Still nothing. My previous messages remain unread. It's hard to think about anything but what's happening in the crypt. I removed my earpiece before arriving, and I've been checking my phone every few minutes. Bram doesn't usually go quiet. He must still be sulking about being left behind.

A waiter thrusts a silver tray under my nose. "Champagne?"

“Don’t you listen?” I explode, losing my patience. “I said no to champagne three fucking times already.”

The poor guy pales, and we attract raised eyebrows from bystanders. He’s only doing his job, but how many times do I need to repeat myself? He stammers an apology and rushes off.

“Darling, you need to calm down.” Mother waltzes over to intervene. “Maybe you need to go easy on the fizz, hm?”

“I’m not drinking,” I snap.

Her smile is strained. It’s the same look she used to give me as a child when I asked her who Father’s female friends were at dinner parties. That was always a conversation killer.

“There’s a friend of Beatrice’s that I want to introduce you to,” she says, linking her arm through mine. It’s not a sign of affection, more like a dog being put on a lead and forced to follow. “She’s recently moved to London from Paris. I think you’ll get on.”

Even for her, this is a new low.

“Do I need to remind you why we’re here?” I hiss, glancing at the giant portrait of Beatrice hanging on the wall. “This isn’t the time for you to play matchmaker.”

She laughs. “Oh, come now. I’m not trying to set you up with anyone.” Yeah, like that’s not her life’s mission and purpose. “She’s a lovely girl. You could be friends. If that biker friend of yours that Ralph told me about is anything to go by, then I think it’s about time you meet new people.”

I’ll have to relay to Callen that my mother disapproves of him. It’ll make his day.

She leads me to the dining room, where a long table is laden with a vast selection of canapés. No one is eating. A fashion show is taking place next week, and women are watching their weight, while the men have already made plans to go to a steak house after they’ve stayed at the wake for an appropriate length of time. Needless to say, no one extended the invitation to me.

“Oh, here she is!” Mother says, taking me to the corner of the room while I check my phone. Still no reply from Bram. What’s taking him so long? “Florence, dear! I want you to meet my son.”

A tall brunette wearing an off-the-shoulder dress spins to face us, and my mouth falls open. Looking at her is like staring at a younger Ivy. They have the same facial features, even down to their freckles. Except the woman is taller with a slender figure, obviously dyed hair that doesn’t match her complexion, and has cat-like blue eyes instead of brown.

I shut my gaping mouth, trying to reason that their striking similarities must be a coincidence. Most people have a doppelganger somewhere in the world. Ivy’s sister is dead. This can’t be her.

“You must be Sebastian,” the woman says with a sweet smile that hides a darker side. I recognise that smile, and it sends a shiver down my spine. “Your mother has told me all about you. I’d love to reminisce about Beatrice. My friend, Stephanie, introduced me to Beatrice shortly before her death, and we became really close towards the end. Her death was such a terrible tragedy.”

My head spins, struggling to keep up as the jigsaw pieces fall into place. If she knows Stephanie, that means Daisy is... *No!*

“I’ll leave you two to get to know each other better,” Mother says, nudging me in the ribs and taking my silence as a good sign. “Why don’t you greet Florence properly, Seb?”

Mother hurries away as the woman closes the gap between us. When she moves to kiss me on each cheek, a sharp knife point jabs into my stomach, and she whispers, “Why don’t we find somewhere we can be alone?”

The story concludes in *Deadly Devotion...*

[Read *Deadly Devotion* \(Book 5\)](#)

Buckle up, it’s going to be a wild ride.

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AUTHORS NOTE

What I'd originally planned to be a trilogy has grown into a five book series filled with twists and turns that even I didn't see coming in places.

Writing the Deadliest Love series has been such a rewarding process. I hope you've been enjoying Ivy's story, and I can't wait to bring you the conclusion that these characters deserve.

Thank you to Ben, Ria, Alexandra, and Kyla for all your support. Without you, this book (and series) wouldn't be what it is. You're amazing!

Finally, thank YOU for picking up this book. Knowing people read my words will never cease to blow my mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Bloom has a degree in English Literature, but don't let that fool you... she would pick a steamy romance over a Shakespeare play any day!

Holly writes contemporary romance - the dark, gritty and twisty kind. She loves creating badass babe characters, who aren't afraid to speak their minds, and writing about the men who can handle them - often, there is more than one! Why choose, right?

When she isn't working on her next project, Holly spends an unhealthy amount of time watching true crime and roaming around the woods near her home in the UK.

As well as gooey chocolate brownies, Holly's favourite thing in the world is hearing from her readers - her characters may bite, but she doesn't! Promise!

Find out more and sign up to Holly Bloom's newsletter to receive a free book at:

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