

DEADLIEST LOVE BOOK TWO

deadly
SEDUCTION

HOLLY BLOOM

DEADLY SEDUCTION

DEADLIEST LOVE SERIES

BOOK 2

HOLLY BLOOM

DARK BLOOM PUBLISHING

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

If you've ever dreamed about being the filling of a man meat sandwich, this one is for you...

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

THAT NIGHT...

Opening one eye drains the little energy I have. The world rushes by. Fuzzy orange balls blur in and out of focus, streaking across my vision like shooting meteors, leaving a trail of fire behind. Have aliens abducted me, or are they streetlights? My eyelids are heavy, weighed down by the horror and impact of Spencer's fists.

"Hang on." A male voice I don't recognise comes from nowhere. It's deep, warm, reassuring... safe. "You're going to be okay." The man keeps talking, but his syllables merge into a long sentence I can't understand. "Just a little longer..."

Everything aches. I can't tell where the pain is coming from. It consumes me. I try moving my neck, but I groan from the effort.

"You have to stay awake," my mysterious saviour urges.

I see him now. He turns to look at me over his shoulder. I can't make out his features, but a halo of light surrounds him. Am I dead? We jolt abruptly. Nope, the afterlife won't be plagued by potholes and speed bumps. *We're in a car.* I'm sprawled across the backseat at an awkward angle. Where are the sirens and blue flashing lights? Where is...

"Daisy," I croak. "Where's Daisy?"

An overpowering foul odour assaults my nostrils, and I retch. Dirt, sweat, blood, and... something else. Aftershave. *His aftershave.* It oozes from my pores, making me want to scrub and claw my skin. Better still, I want to shed it like an unwanted outfit and leave it behind like a clingy dress that makes breathing difficult. But I can't. I'm trapped in a body with no escape.

The man ignores my question. His faraway voice says, "We're almost there."

My hair falls over my face. It's matted with brown leaves, twigs, and soil. I move my arm an inch, stroking a soft blanket laying over me, now damp from my weeping wounds. Underneath it, I'm naked.

Consciousness comes and goes. There isn't a film of my life's highlights or a long, dark tunnel with my dead relatives waiting at the end of it. It's never-ending, like an open ocean at night. Violent images appear like snapshots.

I'm kicked to the ground.

Leaves scratch my tongue and silence my screams.

I'm suffocating.

His weight bearing down on top of me crushes my rib cage.

My lungs are about to burst.

Darkness closes in, smothering me with its inky cloak and forcing its way down my throat until it grabs my heart in its fist.

Panic should be taking over, but I have no fight left. My body is already shutting down.

This can't be real...

It can't...

The car stops abruptly, almost throwing me into the footwell.

The man opens the door and gently lifts me out of the car. He scoops me into his arms, and then I'm floating. Would he snap my neck if I asked him to? Anything would be better than this. The pain pulsating through my body burns hotter than fire, but that's not the worst of it...

I see her now.

Daisy's naked, lifeless body.

You have to save her!

I try sending mental signals into the universe, hoping someone will hear them. I've never prayed before, but God, if you're listening, hear me now. *Take me, not her. I'm the one you want!* No one answers my desperate plight, but I hear Spencer. His callous voice makes me want to pour acid into my ears.

His feet smashed into my sides. My head. His belt unbuckled, and...

He didn't stop when I begged.

"If I can't have you, no one can."

His laugh was more terrifying than his words. The laughter of someone so twisted they'd rather I died than live without him.

Another voice speaks now, "She's dying."

I hope so. Death is better than a life without Daisy.

Everything fades away...

I wake up to a stark, white light. Maybe I'm really dead this time. The pain

has lessened, but my limbs no longer feel like they belong to me. I'm in a hospital bed, only it doesn't look like any other hospital I've been to before. No nurses, doctors, or loud patients are complaining in the corridor.

I lift my arm to get a better look at the tubes going into my veins.

"It's okay." A stranger leans over me. Her brow is etched in concern. "You're going to be okay."

I try turning my head, but a brace locks my neck in place. Terror sets in as I realise I'm restricted.

"Try not to move," the woman says, stroking the bandage wrapped around my forehead. "It'll only hurt you more."

She's beautiful with blonde hair and kind, blue eyes. She's the kind of woman you'd see flicking their bouncy mane to advertise shampoo.

"Am I..."

"Here." She holds a plastic cup to my cracked lips and tips it for me to drink. Half of it sloshes down my chin, even as I do what I can. Swallowing hurts like a bitch. I manage to take a few sips before wanting to fall asleep again. "Better?"

I don't reply. Words are too hard, too tiring.

A man speaks from the other side of the room, "Is she awake?"

My senses are back on hyper-alert again. I can't see him from my position, but the woman nods in response.

"She's too weak," she says. "She won't understand what you're saying."

"She's a fighter," the man insists. "Let me try."

The woman's lips purse in disapproval, though she nods and steps aside. A man covered head to toe in tattoos appears at the foot of my bed. He's not a doctor—there's no stethoscope or gown in sight.

"Don't be afraid." His voice has a deep, soothing quality. Maybe he's a hypnotist. "You're safe with us."

Safe? I'd roll my eyes if I could. How can I be safe? I can't remember how I got here—wherever here is—or who these people are. Girls are taught to never accept a lift from a stranger; we're told to carry keys in our knuckles when walking alone in the dark and to text our friends to make sure they get home okay. None of those lessons covers what to do in this situation!

"My name is Alaric," he says, "and this is Stephanie." He gestures at the blonde, who wrings her hands nervously. "How much do you remember about what happened?"

We were on the road, then we weren't. Moonlight bounced off the metal,

shards of glass, and the blood... So much blood. My knees sting as I crawl through the undergrowth. I can hear their laughter. Hands grab my ankles. That laugh... Spencer. It was him. He did this.

“It’s too soon, Ric,” Stephanie intervenes. “You need to give her more time. Just look at her.”

My only consolation is that there is no mirror around.

“We need to give her a choice,” Alaric says firmly. He sits in the chair at my bedside and takes my hand. His tenderness takes me by surprise, and I freeze like a mannequin. “You died, Ivy.”

How does he know my name? I must be dead. Gone. Over. This must be purgatory for women who’ve lied about how many men they’ve slept with, bought gym memberships they never use, and accidentally-on-purpose forgot to scan items at the self-checkout. Surely, that’s not enough to go to hell for, right?

“Well, at least that’s what the rest of the world will think,” Alaric continues. A grin plays on his lips. “We’re part of an elite operation, a network of trained killers.”

I don’t understand. Killers? I might have preferred purgatory.

“Our agents are ghosts,” he explains. “They’re all dead in the traditional sense, but I will give you a choice now. Squeeze my hand if you understand.”

I squeeze. He stares into my eyes, searching for something, except I’m not sure what. Why do I feel like he’s testing me?

“You have two options,” he says. “Option one, you go back to your old life as Ivy Penrose. No one will ever know you’ve been here, or option two...” He drops his voice. “You stay dead and join us. We will train you to kill. We can give you more power than you could ever imagine.”

“Daisy...” I murmur. Stephanie rushes to my side and tries to give me more water, but I jerk my chin away and ask, “Where’s Daisy?”

Her face falls. She doesn’t need to say anything. Her expression speaks more than words ever could, confirming what I already know. I felt it from the moment I woke up like a part of my soul had been wrenched away.

“She’s dead,” Alaric answers. He bows his head. “I’m sorry.”

Since our parents died, it’s been me and Daisy against the world. Without her, I have no one. A single tear slides down my cheek, stinging my open cuts.

“Spencer Bexley.” My voice is hoarse and faint, but Alaric can hear me. “I want him dead.”

“We can help you kill him,” Alaric says. “However, it has to be your choice. After this, there’s no going back to your old life. Everyone you’ve ever known will think you’re dead. Do you understand?”

I muster all my energy and squeeze his fingers as hard as possible.

“Welcome to the Killers Club, Ivy.” Alaric smiles. “You’re one of us now.”

The old Ivy Penrose died that night.

I lost a part of myself that I'll never get back and swore my unwavering loyalty to a club that gave me a second chance at life, but nothing prepared me for the test that was coming...

CHAPTER 1

FREDDIE

PRESENT DAY...

“**M**y real name is Daisy Penrose, and...” Her sparkling eyes meet mine. “I’m in witness protection.”

My head spins. Witness protection? We’ll have to find out why she faked her death, but that’s not my first instinct. I need to know who she’s running from and who needs to die for hurting her so that I can tear them apart with my bare hands.

“And no one calls me Daisy anymore,” she continues, wincing when she says her name. There are painful memories attached to it. “I’m Rose now. That’s what you should call me.”

She’s changed her name, but what else is different since I last saw her?

“Before we go any further,” Callen says, leaning to snatch her bag from her lap and hurling it out of the window, “you won’t be needing that.”

“What the fuck! My phone and purse were in there,” she objects. An elderly woman hobbling along the pavement narrowly avoids getting knocked out by the flying bag. “You almost killed her!”

“I’d be putting her out of her misery.” Callen shrugs casually, then smirks. “And don’t worry, princess. I’m sure one of your boyfriends can fight over who buys you a new bag.”

Seb grits his teeth while I hiss, “What’s wrong with you, Callen?”

“Stuff is replaceable,” Callen says. “How can we trust her when we don’t know who she really is?”

“You don’t know who I am?” She laughs dryly and turns on us. “Are you forgetting that I was having an innocent drink, then dragged into the middle of a shoot-out? Who are *you*?”

“We should be asking you the same question,” Callen flips her question around, treating her like a mass murderer on trial. “Why are you in witness protection?”

“Enough, Callen,” I growl.

My fists clench, resisting every urge not to throw him out of the moving car.

Daisy—Rose—sniffs beside me. I want to hold her in my arms to block out the world and slay every fucker who ever hurt her.

“I know you’ll have questions,” she murmurs. Her earlier confidence vanishes as she hangs her head. Her mind is transported elsewhere, a dark place where I can’t reach her. “It’s a... long story.”

A tear slides down her cheek. I wipe it away and see Seb’s eyes narrow in the rearview mirror like he wants to tear someone’s throat out. I can’t decide whether his anger is directed at me, or whoever caused her pain. Probably both.

“You don’t have to tell us now,” I say, wrapping my arm around her shoulder to pull her close. She doesn’t resist and snuggles into my chest. She fits perfectly. “But you don’t have to worry. No one will hurt you when you’re with us. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

Seb’s cheeks redden. Having the dead woman of your dreams come back to life is as shocking as finding out she’s the mysterious redhead who’s been driving him crazy for the past few weeks. Right now, that doesn’t matter. She’s alive, and I won’t let anything happen to her again.

“I don’t want to piss on your parade,” Callen says, “but aren’t you forgetting about Bram? We were supposed to be leaving there with him, not a piece of resurrected pussy. Those bastards still have him.”

“Those bastards you shot at,” Seb corrects. “You broke the rules.”

“Rules are meant to be broken.” Callen rolls his eyes in his usual infuriating way. Sometimes I question why I employed him at all. “Rose knows all about breaking the rules, don’t you?”

“Go to hell,” she snarls viciously. There’s a glimpse of the fiery woman I met at the bar five years ago. The woman I fell in love with at first sight.

Seb snorts, and Callen opens his mouth to retaliate, but I shoot him a menacing glare to silence him. He needs to be careful, or I’ll break my own rules and plant a bullet in his chest.

“You know they’re going to be looking for us now,” Seb says, taking a sharp turn onto our street.

“Who are *they*?” Rose asks. Her face pales as reality sinks in. “Are you guys in the mafia, or something? What the hell have you got me into?”

“Something I hoped you’d never find out about,” Seb replies. “We’re nearly there now.”

Rose straightens, nervously peering out of the back window to check whether we’re being followed. We’re not. Seb will have made sure of that.

We pull up outside the nondescript grey brick building behind a uniform

hedge that's become our home and base.

She cranes her neck to get a better look. "Where are we?"

"Our house," Seb answers. "The Dukes' house."

"The Dukes?" Her eyebrows dip in confusion. "But you don't have a royal title."

"We may not be royal," I say. Seb coughs, and I add, "Well, not all of us. Still, we do have a title. I'll tell you everything when we're inside."

"Yeah, because that's a great fucking idea," Callen mutters.

I ignore him.

We haven't got Bram back, although one positive has come from today's fiasco: history is repeating itself. A chance encounter at a bar five years ago changed everything. When we met, she drew me in like a magnet. For the longest time, I tried to convince myself I imagined it. People told me I was crazy for thinking one kiss altered the course of my entire life, but I knew she was the one then, and I feel it now, too. I won't let our second chance slip away.

CHAPTER 2

SEB

She's nestled in Freddie's arms. I've never wanted to fight my best friend and the man who gave my life a true purpose... until now.

I check that no one is following us before turning. We're all clear. I drive down the slope into our underground garage. We've installed a system that recognises our vehicles, and a giant sliding door automatically opens to reveal a line of them. Some are rotating on plates built into the floor. It's some serious Batman-level shit. What can I say? We like cars. There's also a soundproof torture chamber hidden behind a wall that used to be a wine cellar, but Rose doesn't need to know about that.

Her voice shifts a few octaves higher than usual as she looks around and asks, "This is where you live? All of you?"

She's nervous—panicked, even—though she tries to hide it. This is why we don't get emotionally involved with anyone outside of the Dukes. It's too dangerous, but it's too late to worry about that now. The Killers Club has already seen us with Rose. We've put a target on her back and have no choice but to let her into the dark part of our double lives.

"Let me show you around," Freddie says. His reassuring and level-headed tone calms her, showing a different side to him. The man who always has a plan has thrown out our rulebook. He gets out and holds the door open for her, offering her his hand. "You're going to be safe here."

She takes it and glides after him, entranced under his spell. What bad dream have I found myself in? My jaw clenches. I can't hear what they're saying up ahead and rush to follow them with Callen. We're the third and fourth wheels. Callen doesn't care. He hums and twirls his gun around like it's a toy.

I catch his wrist with enough strength to narrowly avoid breaking it and say, “Put it away. Haven’t you done enough damage already?”

It’s his fault we’re in this mess. He shoots first and asks questions later. His medical expertise is the only reason he’s still here. He’s a liability, and his actions have put us all at risk. Put *her* at risk.

“Fine,” Callen grumbles and tucks the gun away. “But don’t blame me for him stealing your lass.”

“He’s not stealing her,” I hiss under my breath.

Except why do I suddenly feel like the kid being picked last to join a sports team? Rose gazes up at Freddie like he’s a superhero who has swept her off her feet. Granted, he looks like one, but they don’t even know each other! Why doesn’t she act like that with me? *Because you’re second best*, my insecurity reminds me like a devil on my shoulder. I’m familiar with that feeling. Second best to Freddie. Second best to my perfect fucking family, who want me to attend charity galas, go hunting, and marry a climbing socialite. Whatever I do, I’m not good enough. Maybe Rose thinks I’m a disappointment too.

We all pile into the lift. It’s a squeeze with the four of us pressed together in the cramped space, but no one speaks. I attune my hearing to listen to her breathing. It quickens. The lift beeps as we reach the ground floor, cutting through the building tension.

Our house has three more floors for her to explore. This one is our kitchen and living space. The other, our bedrooms, and finally, on the top floor, our entertainment area with a bar, games room, and secret weapons arsenal. It’s the first time anyone other than a Duke has been inside our base.

“This way,” Freddie says, never letting go of her hand. He leads her into the living room. As they walk, he explains more about the building, like they’re taking a casual stroll through a museum. He’s acting like he owns the place. Technically, he does, but it’s still mine. Well, it was, until I signed over the deeds.

Freddie treats the Dukes like family, only he has a ruthless edge too. He never stops thinking about ways we can take the Dukes to the next level, but Rose has his undivided attention. He looks at her with an intense, obsessive passion, like he’s getting ready to throw himself in front of a bullet for her. My girl.

I unclench my fists. I’m not letting her go. Rose reuniting with Freddie changes nothing. She doesn’t date, and we made a deal. A deal for me to be

there if she fucks anyone else.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Freddie offers. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Rose sits on the sofa, and he sits next to her, while I slump down in the chair opposite them. I may as well be on another fucking planet.

“I don’t know about any of you,” Callen says, sauntering to the mini-bar we installed earlier this year, “but I could do with a stiff drink.”

“Rose?” Freddie prompts.

“It can’t hurt,” she replies.

It’ll help with the shock. She’s a strong woman who can handle herself. However being pulled into a gunfight isn’t how she expected her night to end.

Callen generously pours the best Russian vodka and passes glasses around. Rose downs it in one.

Callen raises his eyebrows. “Another?”

Freddie begins, “I don’t think that’s a—”

“Yes,” Rose interrupts, thrusting her glass forward for a refill. She swills the liquid around her mouth, swallows, and exhales deeply. “So, are you going to tell me why you lied to me?” She narrows her eyes in my direction. “You’re supposed to be royalty.” Then her lips curl at Callen. “You said you were some kind of businessman.” She shakes her head and looks to Freddie for answers. “And you...”

“We are the Dukes,” Freddie says.

“You already said that,” she snaps. Her earlier fear vanishes and gives way to a rush of something else. Anger. “What does that even mean? Who are the Dukes? Are you a gang?”

“We run a security firm,” Freddie replies. “We offer specialist services.”

“What kind of services?” She’s a journalist. She won’t stop until she gets answers. “Do they normally involve killing people?”

“Killing people isn’t all we do,” Callen counters, “but they’re my favourite jobs.”

“Jesus,” she mutters, downing her drink. Can she understand now why I didn’t want to leave them alone together? “You are a monster.”

“We protect people too,” I intervene, trying to make us sound at least somewhat redeemable.

“Is that supposed to make killing people okay?” she hisses. “Most businesses handle confrontation in a board room, not with bullets!”

She thinks we’re the bad guys, and I don’t blame her.

“I didn’t want you to find out like this,” I mumble. “I wanted to protect you.”

She scoffs. “Protecting me would have been staying away.”

Ouch. Her words sting, but they’re true. The truth is, I’ve been selfish. I pushed aside the violence surrounding us because I wanted to spend time with her. Maybe I was naïve to think my two lives could have stayed separate, but I never expected them to collide like this.

“It’s not Seb’s fault,” Freddie says. “It’s mine.”

Her eyes narrow. “Keep talking.”

“I shouldn’t have approached you at the bar.” Freddie hangs his head, unable to meet her gaze. “I pulled you into the middle of something bad. In our world, people hold grudges. Bad people.”

“And who are they? These people?” she asks sharply. “Are they like you?”

I shake my head at Freddie. The less she knows, the better. For her own safety.

“A group of assassins based in London,” he says, ignoring me. Fucking great. If she wasn’t freaking out before, she will be now. Maybe a part of him wants to keep her here, tethered to us, right by his side where he can’t let her out of his sight. He’s already lost her once. “We don’t have a lot of information on them yet, so we don’t know how big their organisation is.”

“Brilliant,” Rose mutters sarcastically, managing to keep her cool. “This keeps getting better and better. And they have your friend?”

“We’ll find him,” I say with more confidence than I feel.

After Callen’s actions, Bram is likely already dead. We all know that. I swallow the lump in my throat. I can’t think like that, not until we’re certain. We need to bring him home, even if it’s in a body bag.

“We’re not the only ones keeping secrets, princess,” Callen points out.

She shifts on the spot. “That’s not fair.”

“What happened to you?” Callen presses. He’s like a dog with a bone when he wants something. He won’t stop until he gets it. “Why did you change your name?”

“How can I trust you?” she hisses.

“We need to know,” Freddie says gently. “You’re a target now. After someone—” he glares at Callen “—shot one of their people, they won’t let it go lightly. If you have any other enemies, we have to know.”

“We need to keep you safe,” I say.

I cross the invisible border and join them on the sofa, sitting on Rose's other side, unable to keep my distance from her any longer. I'm close enough that our knees touch. Freddie's jaw clenches. He better get used to it.

Rose will be first in line to tell him she's not his property. They met first, but he doesn't know her yet, not like I do. When he finds out what happened when Callen and I went to her house, he's going to lose his shit. If the Killers Club doesn't kill Callen first, maybe he will.

"I've stayed dead for a reason," Rose says. She sniffs, swallowing hard like she's fending off tears. She doesn't want to show weakness. "I had no other choice. If I tell you..."

"We'll keep your secret, Rose," I say fiercely, overcome by my protective instincts. "We won't let anyone hurt you."

"Speak for yourself," Callen mutters. He raises his arms in defeat when he sees the look on my and Freddie's faces. "Fine! I'll hear what the princess has to say."

I gently take the glass from her shaking fingers. Her hands fall to her lap, and she clasps them tightly. What happened to her, and who needs to die for it?

A long silence stretches out until she says, "Okay, I'll tell you..."

CHAPTER 3

I take a deep breath to compose myself while they wait to hear my story.

From my first impressions, the Dukes are running a more extensive operation than the Killers Club initially suspected. They must be good at what they do, not just anyone can slip under our radar for so long. I paid attention to the floor plan as we moved through the building. They have a selection of vehicles in the basement, everything from vans to sports cars. Typical boys and their toys. The interior of the Dukes' house is more like a New York loft than somewhere in the middle of London. It's minimal with few personal items, which is probably no accident. They have to be hiding weapons and files somewhere. When I get a chance, I'll go snooping.

Alaric gave me explicit orders. I have three days to find out everything I can about the Dukes. After that, they're dead. It doesn't matter what I think I know about them or that they have an impeccable history of delivering mind-blowing orgasms... *No, stop those delicious thoughts right fucking now!*

What happened between us doesn't matter. Emotions don't govern me or define my actions anymore. They can't. I have to play my part. I'm a killer. Alaric's my boss, and I have instructions to follow. All that matters is that the Dukes pose a threat to the Killers Club. Threats must be eliminated.

I also have a personal agenda. Item number one on my list is discovering everything the Dukes know about Spencer. From their bullshit explanation about them protecting people, I assume Spencer hired them, hence why Bram was sniffing around the Bexley mansion. But what exactly do their services entail, and how can I use their knowledge about Spencer to my advantage? Until I have those answers, I'll push aside how their lives are ticking down.

But, before I can probe into their business, I have to make them buy my

cover story. Cue an Oscar-winning performance. I sniffle, giving the illusion of wrestling with my composure, and let a rogue tear roll down my cheek. Making yourself cry is easy with enough practice.

Under their scrutiny, I control my every move, only letting them see what I want them to. Their eyes don't look away from me. Their connection to the woman they think I am blinds Freddie and Seb to my true nature, which I can exploit. They both claim to want to protect me, yet they've overlooked how I've been close to every crime scene. They mustn't be as good as they think they are—well, except for Callen. That fucker is putting me on edge with his questions. I'll have to watch out for him. If he crosses me, I'll string him up by his Prince Albert.

Jesus, Ivy! How can a murderous thought make your inner thighs tingle? Pull yourself together!

"Take your time," Freddie encourages me, but he's not pushy. He's gentle and patient. His eyes soften like he'd wait all night if that's what it took. "We're listening."

I avoid looking in Callen's direction. His beard has grown longer since I last saw him, giving him an even more rugged appearance. His shirt and dirty blonde hair are flecked with my colleague's blood, reminding me of what he's capable of. I have to be careful. If I stare at him too long, I'll launch across the room to finish him off. Callen sees the darkest parts of me. He made that clear when he forced his way into my house, and we fucked like wild animals. He's unpredictable and breaks the rules. His recklessness makes him a threat.

I take a deep breath, readying myself for the performance I've prepared for.

"Five years ago, me and my sister were in a car crash," I begin.

Freddie already knows this part of my story. Remember my motto about lies? The closer you keep to the truth, the easier it is.

"But you said you were an only child," Seb says.

I'll have to talk my way out of this. For once, it'd be good if he was like other men who never paid attention and only cared about getting into my knickers.

"I am...now." I pull the sympathy card. "My sister, Ivy, died that night, and it's easier to say I'm an only child than to remember what happened."

Seb's gaze softens. He and Freddie are eating out of the palm of my hand.

"Her death wasn't an accident," I say. "We were pushed off the road."

My voice breaks. This time, I don't have to act as my memories flood back. I don't talk about what happened that night. Not to Alaric. Not to Stephanie. Not to anyone. "He wanted her dead."

Freddie's large hand squeezes my knee. Electricity fizzles between us, just like it did when we first met, but I'm not the same girl anymore. The girl who believed in true love and happy endings is gone. I numb myself to the fireworks. I block them out. The men surrounding me are a group of predators who wouldn't hesitate to turn on me if they learned the truth.

"Who did it?" Seb growls. His whole body tenses on my other side.

"Ivy's ex," I say. "He was the possessive type. She was an artist, and they met at a gallery opening. He promised he'd help her. Their whole romance was a whirlwind. It only lasted a few months, and she left him when she found out what kind of person he was." I blink away tears. "But he didn't want her to leave."

"Who is he?" Seb asks. His protectiveness is almost cute. "We'll kill him!"

"Matteo Santiago," I reply, and here comes the kicker... "He's already dead."

Matteo was the first man I killed on a solo Killers Club mission. There's poetic justice to threading him into my cover story, even if it's reckless. Matteo reminded me of Spencer. He was a nasty bastard who presented himself to the world as an esteemed art dealer, yet art wasn't all he dealt. He trafficked many women who ended up dead. I unleashed my anger on him. His acting as a surrogate for Spencer was therapeutic, but nothing would compare to the real thing.

"His name sounds familiar," Freddie murmurs, scratching his chin and drawing attention to his impeccable jawline that I shouldn't be concentrating on right now. "His killer delivered his head to an art gallery in a cardboard box."

I bite my lip to stop myself from correcting him. A cardboard box doesn't do it justice—it was a beautifully wrapped package tied with a pretty purple bow. Purple was Daisy's favourite colour.

I'm not surprised Freddie heard about his death. The newspapers loved the story and lapped up all the gruesome details. Usually, the Killers Club flies under the radar, but our client wanted to make an impact and splash Matteo's face over the front pages. After killing him, Alaric sent me to work overseas.

“On the night we left London...” I hesitate. This is when it gets painful. I shudder, despite trying to keep my shit together. “Matteo and his friends—I don’t know who they were, the details are a blur—dragged the two of us from the wreckage...”

I see Spencer’s and the other monster’s faces. Their features twist and contort like demons. Shadowy figures loom in the moonlight, peering through the tree branches splayed like witches’ fingers. I hear their voices. Their laughter. Her screams.

Freddie senses my discomfort. “You don’t have to go on.”

But I do. I have to make it convincing. *Give them what they want.* A cold sweat breaks over my skin as I continue, “When they were...done...with her, they left me to die. It was a stroke of luck that someone found me hours later and called an ambulance.”

Thankfully, Bram never told them about me. If he had, I wouldn’t be sitting here now. I have to make sure I get the details of the next part right. All the dots must line up. The Dukes aren’t stupid. They’ll research and fact-check my story as soon as they can. This is the part where I have some creative freedom.

“When I told the police what happened, they told me that Matteo was already under investigation,” I say. It’s not a lie. Killing him when he was being watched around the clock was not a straightforward task. “They were trying to track him down because he was connected to a string of disappearances. They asked me to testify against him as a character witness, so they created a new identity for me and covered up how Daisy really died. That’s when I went into witness protection.”

The guys nod along. They believe me.

Being part of the Killers Club is better than any witness protection. The ability to defend yourself beats being a sitting duck. I don’t need to wait to be saved.

“As part of the deal, I had to cut all ties with my old life,” I say. “A year later, the case fell apart when Matteo was murdered. After that, I left the country to start over.”

“If he wasn’t already dead, I’d kill the fucker myself,” Seb growls.

He’s serious. His shoulders shake in bloodthirsty fury. The charming guy who is in line for the throne is long gone. I press my thighs together. I think I like the murderous version of him better.

“I never wanted to lie about who I was or my past,” I say to Seb. Another

lie. What's another to add to the long list? Lying is part of my job. It's how I survive and gets me closer to delivering Spencer the punishment he deserves. "But I made a new life. I even changed my appearance." I pause to take out my blue contact lenses and make the point. "No one can find out who I am. What if one of Matteo's friends found out I worked with the police? He's dead, but his connections aren't..."

A dog barks from another room, and I turn my head toward it. "You have a dog?"

"She's not normally this loud." Freddie smiles apologetically. "She must be excited. Let me bring her through."

I expect him to return with a vicious guard dog. Instead, my mouth falls open.

All the air is kicked from my chest.

No, it can't be...

CHAPTER 4

IVY

gasp. “Pippy?”

Daisy’s puppy—well, not so little now—bounds over. She jumps onto my lap, licking my hands and knees. She recognises me.

How many sleepless nights have I spent worrying about what happened to her? My sister loved Pippy more than anything. Daisy’s belongings, including our house, got sold at auction, but I never found out what happened to Pippy. Tears blur my vision as I stroke her soft fur. She’s bigger now, clambering all over me and nuzzling my cheek.

“She remembers you,” Freddie says.

“How did you find her?”

“You may think I’m crazy,” he replies, “but I went looking for answers...”

Pippy licks my face in reply. I hug her, remembering how she enjoyed curling up at Daisy’s feet and chewing her slippers to shreds. Daisy used to rant about it, even though she could never stay mad at her for long. She was a mischievous puppy who’d already been rehomed twice before Daisy took her in. Few people could tame Pippy’s wild energy, but Daisy never gave up on her... and neither did Freddie.

“When I found her,” he says, “I had to take her.”

Guilt stabs at my chest like a machete plunging into my heart. He cared enough about a random woman he met at a bar to take in her sister’s dog.

“Hey, Pip,” I coo, stroking her in that sweet spot behind her ears. “You’re not so small anymore.”

Pippy tilts her head to the side. Her big brown eyes look at me inquisitively, like she’s asking a question. *Where’s Daisy? Is she coming*

back too? I think back to our cosy nights at the cottage and walks on the beach. The lovely few weeks we should have had before Spencer took it all away.

“You should call Bethany,” Seb says, cutting through my chaotic mash of emotions. “Tell her you won’t be home tonight. You don’t want her to worry.”

He scratches Pippy’s head fondly. Her tongue hangs out excitedly, and she rubs herself against his palm, loving his attention. They’ve taken good care of her. How is this fair? The Dukes are supposed to be criminals, not doggy babysitters with perfect muscles.

“It’s fine. She’s staying with friends for a week,” I say, pulling myself together and remembering why I’m here. This is a job, just like all the others.

“I think we’ve talked enough for one night,” Freddie says. He stands and smooths down the crinkles in his trousers. “You can stay in our spare room while you’re here. I’ll show you around.”

Seb opens his mouth to speak but says nothing as I stand. I follow Freddie out of the living room, and Pippy trots along behind us. We reach a winding staircase. It’s industrial steel—very cosmopolitan. Pippy whimpers, patting her paw on the bottom step.

“She normally sleeps in my room,” he explains, scooping her into his arms like a baby. “Although I’m sure she’ll prefer staying with you tonight.”

Pippy barks in agreement. Fuck, I’m in trouble. My ice-cold logic thaws at the thought of Pippy snuggling up in Freddie’s bed. He’s kept her all this time, meaning he’s been thinking about me.

My life is split into two parts. Life before and life after *that* night. When I left the country, Ivy Penrose stayed behind, but being in London again blurs those boundaries. Over the years, my thoughts have sometimes strayed to the handsome stranger from the bar, only I convinced myself that instant connection didn’t exist outside of films. Horror overshadowed our initial spark, but now I’m questioning whether I misremembered at all...

I climb the stairs and admire the tasteful paintings on the walls.

“Do you like them?” Freddie asks, his lips curl into a half-smile.

“Yes,” I reply. They’re of nothing in particular—patterns, abstract shapes and splodges, but there’s a beauty in the way they are layered. “But what do I know? I don’t claim to be an expert on art.”

“Neither am I, but Bram is. They’re all done by a mysterious artist who goes by the nickname Raptor. Their work is hard to find.” His grin fades, his

jaw setting in determination. “You can ask him more about it when we find him.”

“Why did they take him?” I ask.

“Revenge,” he replies darkly. “Let’s just say we got in their way.” Yeah, that’s one way to explain killing our client, wrecking two cars, and shooting an agent. “That’s why it’s safer for you to stay with us, where we can protect you.”

He doesn’t know that I could snap his neck with a flick of my wrist. We don’t stop on the first-floor landing and ascend to the next floor.

“This is what Seb calls our man cave,” he says, as my jaw drops open.

There are no walls—just one huge room. It has high ceilings, which is understandable considering the house is occupied by giants. There is a bar with comfy sofas and chairs alongside a pool table, gigantic TV, and a dart board.

I scan the area. Most people would overlook the slight size difference in the floor plan, but I pay attention to the details. There’s something else up here. What are they hiding? A secret door? Another room? Freddie gives nothing away.

“What do you think?” Freddie asks.

“That you never need to leave this house,” I say.

“You can come up here anytime,” he says. Pippy barks excitedly in his arms in agreement. I’m not sure whether she’s happier to be allowed in a room that’s usually off-limits or because she’s nestled in his muscular biceps that are perfectly framed under his shirt. He chuckles fondly. “Not you, Pip. The last time she came up here, she gnawed Seb’s pool cue.”

We head back downstairs. He places Pippy down, and she trots along the first-floor corridor. Six doors lead off it. A bedroom for each of the guys and a shared bathroom. Freddie explains they all have an ensuite too.

“Here we are.” Freddie opens the door to my new room. It’s tastefully decorated—minimal, like a luxury hotel—with a beautiful four-poster bed that has plush white sheets. “I hope you’ll be comfortable here. There are spare towels in the bathroom.”

“You barely know me,” I blurt out, unable to stop myself. He’s being nice. Too nice. “Why are you doing all of this?”

The burning look in his eyes sets my skin alight as he replies in a seductive rumble, “You know why.”

Pippy breaks the moment by scooting past our ankles into the room like

the crazy little monster she is. My heart pangs. What the hell is wrong with me? I need to get a handle on my emotions. I clear my throat. “Thank you for looking after her.”

“You told me she was part of your family,” he replies. “I know it sounds crazy, but when we met, I felt...”

“A connection,” I finish his sentence.

His gaze lingers on my lips. I shouldn’t want him. He’s a mark, for crying out loud! But damn, my body has other ideas. I imagine running my hands through his thick hair, biting his bottom lip, and letting him explore every inch of my body. His sizzling stare moves back up my face. He wants the same.

I hold in a breath as he steps forward. He smells like fresh laundry, although there’s a sexy undertone of something oaky with a citrus twist, hinting of a bad boy hiding beneath his perfectly waved hair and pressed suit.

“It’s been a long day,” he says in a gravelly voice. “You should rest.”

He leans in. At first, I think—hope—he’s going to kiss me. A kiss that’ll make me see fireworks as he throws me down and disrupts the perfectly pressed linens, but he doesn’t. He plants a tender kiss on my forehead.

“Goodnight, Rose.”

My chest sinks as I close the door and listen to his footsteps grow further away. Am I disappointed?

“Snap out of it!” I mutter to myself, pulling myself together. “You have work to do.”

First, I have to make sure the room is clean. I launch into action, hunting for any hidden devices; checking under the bed, searching the bedside table, and peering into the empty wardrobe. I even lift a painting off the wall to check behind it. Nothing. Some bugs are so small they’re virtually impossible to detect. I should know; I’ve installed them in countless places before.

Pippy watches from the foot of my bed in silent judgement.

“What are you staring at?” I demand. She tilts her head as if to say she knows exactly what I’m doing and doesn’t approve. I cross my arms. “I know he’s kept you alive, but still! You should be on my side, Pip.”

She rests her snout on her paws in a huff. Understandably, she’s grown attached to the Dukes. She’s not making it easy for me, and neither are they.

Why am I drawn to men who are Killers Club targets? I can’t like them when I have to kill after finding the information I need. The Dukes have stumbled into a world they don’t understand. They’re small fry compared to

Alaric's global organisation. Shooting Tweedledum has started a war they won't be able to finish.

Pippy whimpers. I stroke her head, but she turns away.

"Come on, don't be like that," I say. "Everything I'm doing is for her."

It is, isn't it?

A smashing noise from the floor below makes me roll my eyes. With Callen around, property damage must be a regular occurrence. He's unhinged. My pussy tingles at the memory of him fucking me from behind. Nope, I tell the cock-obsessed demon hiding in my knickers, no more pierced dicks attached to psychopaths for you.

This is a job. Nothing more.

CHAPTER 5

CALLEN

They devoured her sob story like a tramp snaffling a poke of chips, but I don't buy it. I can sense when I'm not being told the truth, but I'll bite my tongue while Seb and Freddie stay oblivious to her web of lies. They'll believe anything the princess says.

She can't be trusted. No one can. That's why I break the rules. I'm a Duke and follow Freddie's orders when they suit me, but I answer to my gut first. A gut that tells me Rose Hathaway is hiding something.

Seb hasn't moved since Freddie led Rose upstairs. The floorboards creak above our heads.

"Are you ready to share your girlfriend with someone else?" I break the silence. "It seems like they're serious."

Seb's head jerks around to face me. His eyes blaze with fury. It must be hard to be second best all the time. He was second best to his brother. Second best to Freddie. Second best to me in the bedroom.

"Fuck off, Callen," Seb snarls. He gets up and strides to the bar to swig vodka straight from the bottle. He's only angry because I'm right. "They've only just met."

"But you see it, don't you?" I goad him. Pent-up adrenaline races through my body from the fight, and pushing Seb to breaking point is a hobby of mine. "You must have noticed how they look into each other's eyes like lovesick teenagers. You can't compete with that."

Watching Freddie and Rose gaze into each other's eyes turned my stomach. They share something deeper than what she and Seb have. Seb had to beg her to go on a date, but Freddie swooped in to steal his girl with zero effort. That's bound to sting.

“I bet he’s fucking her right now, burying his cock deep in her tight little pussy.” I smirk. “We all know how good she feels. Can you imagine how hard she’ll come after spending years thinking about him? Maybe she was thinking about him when we were fucking her?”

Seb roars and throws the bottle against the wall. It shatters and sends glass flying everywhere. Someone’s touchy.

I shake my head. “What a waste of vodka.”

He flies at me like a rampant bull. He grabs my shirt in his fist and yanks me from the chair to pin me against the wall.

“Why are you still here, Callen?” Seb’s spit sprays my face. “You say you’re one of us, but you’re not. Not really. You don’t care.”

“I’m here because you need me,” I point out. “Have you forgotten our silent friend is still missing, or are you and Freddie too busy tripping over your boners to notice we’re one man down?”

Out of the three of us, I never thought I’d be the one bothered about Bram. I don’t even like the fucker. Seb drops his hold. I’m disappointed he didn’t throw a punch, at least.

“We have to find him,” Seb says, redirecting his anger to a worthier opponent.

“And I know where to start,” I say, straightening my shirt. “Do you think I shot the bastard just to break the rules?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Seb retaliates, but I’ve got him.

“You underestimate me,” I say. “I shot him with a tracker bullet.”

Seb grins. “You son of a bitch.”

Maybe now he’ll see why they should keep me around. Stealing his woman isn’t all I’m good for.

“I’m glad you’re finally seeing my usefulness,” I reply. “Are you ready to catch a rat? Because I feel like hunting tonight.”

“No one is hunting without me.” Freddie’s voice comes sharply from the doorway. “Callen, we’re going. Seb, you’re staying here.”

Seb begins to argue. “But—”

“That’s right, Seb,” I tease. “You stay here and let the big boys finish the job.”

CHAPTER 6

SEB

“ I’d ask what happened here, but we have more pressing issues to deal with,” Freddie says coldly, looking at the smashed glass. “Clean it up, Seb.”

I clench my fists to contain my simmering anger. First, I’m not allowed to come with them to track the bullet. Now, I’m being treated like Freddie’s bitch.

Callen taps away on his phone and declares, “I have the coordinates.”

Freddie nods. “Grab your coat.” He turns to me. “Make sure nothing happens to her.”

“What do you think I’m going to do? Invite the Killers Club over for a tea party?” I mutter sarcastically. “I’m not letting her out of my sight until this is over.”

“Do you two need to book a couples therapy session?” Callen mocks. “Or is someone going to piss on her to claim their territory?”

We don’t talk about our feelings. We never have. Freddie is an emotional brick wall, keeping his cards close to his chest. The only genuine affection he shows is to Pippy.

“We have to find Bram,” Freddie brushes off Callen’s remarks. “We can discuss everything else later.”

“If Rose is going to be a problem,” I step in, “we need to talk about it, boss.”

Freddie’s expression remains deadpan. “There’s nothing to say.”

“Really?” I press. “Because I like her, Freddie. I really fucking like her.”

Would I stop seeing Rose if he asked me to? Usually, I follow his orders without question, but I’m drawn to her. Even knowing she’s upstairs is

making my cock twitch with longing, desperate to feel her again.

“Rose has started a new life. She doesn’t owe me—*us*—anything,” Freddie says with an air of finality that signals the conversation is over, for now at least. “Look after her.”

“Yeah,” Callen smirks, “I’m sure he will.”

“Fuck you,” I snap.

The two of them head out, and I return to the sofa to watch TV, but I can’t concentrate. My mind is racing. What’s Rose thinking? Screw it. I can’t resist anymore. We need to talk.

I head upstairs and am about to knock on her door when I freeze. Second thoughts kick in. What am I going to say? She’s pissed at me for lying. Maybe I should wait until morning? She’ll be in shock.

I start backing away when the door flies open.

Rose’s head pokes around the corner to catch me tiptoeing away. She arches an eyebrow in bemusement. “Still sneaking around, huh?”

“I can explain..”

“Explain what?” She plants her hands on her hips in defiance. “How you failed to mention you were living a double life on our dates?”

“I’m not the only one who’s been lying,” I say. Her eyes narrow, and I immediately start trying to dig myself out of the grave I’ve fallen into. “Look, I didn’t know you’d be at the bar today or that you knew Freddie. I would have told you. It’s just...”

She sighs and changes the subject abruptly. “Do you have any spare clothes I can borrow? I need something else to wear now that I’m being kept prisoner here.”

“You’re not a prisoner.”

After discovering who we are, I expected her to be afraid, but Rose isn’t helpless. She’s strong and has been through more than most people have in their lives. I wanted to shield her from our world, but if anyone can handle it, she can.

Rose snorts. “Yeah, sure, I’m not.”

“You can leave whenever you want.”

“I could,” she counters, “but then I’d have to worry about crazy assassins coming after me because Callen shot someone. Right now, I’m trying to figure out who I should be most afraid of. You, or them.”

“We’d never hurt you,” I reassure her. “And no one else is going to hurt you either.”

“You can’t know that.”

“You’re right, I can’t,” I say, edging closer until we’re inches away from each other. I prop a finger under her chin and tip her face upwards. “But we’ll—I’ll—do anything to protect you.”

She clears her throat and steps back. “What about the clothes?” She gestures down at her gorgeous black dress that shows off her round tits and arse. “I can’t sleep in this.”

I resist the urge to say she doesn’t need to wear any clothes at all.

“I can find you something to wear,” I say. “I’ll bring—”

“I’ll pick something out myself,” she says in her usual no-bullshit tone that makes my cock harden. “Where’s your room?”

“It’s the last one down the corridor,” I say.

She barges past me, then pauses as her hand closes around the door handle. “This one?”

I nod as she charges inside and heads straight for my wardrobe. I watch her yank the door open with enough force that she could tear it from its hinges. She starts flicking through the rail.

“Here I was thinking you’d have costumes inside,” she says.

“You almost sound disappointed. We’re not supervillains,” I joke. While her back is turned, I pull at the corner of the duvet to neaten it. It’s been a long time since a woman’s been here. “You’ve been watching too many films.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, then?” she asks. “Tell me more about what you do.”

“The less you know, the better.”

Rose turns around and crosses her arms. “Don’t you think it’s fair that I know a little more about the guys who kidnapped me?”

Her tone is jokey, but there’s something else hidden behind her words. Is she trying to mask her fear?

“We’re not total strangers,” I say. “I didn’t tell you about the Dukes, but everything else we’ve spoken about is true.”

She returns to the wardrobe and pulls my most worn t-shirt off a hanger. “This will do.”

“I can get you more clothes tomorrow?” I offer. She doesn’t answer but wrings the fabric in her hands. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“What do you think?” she retaliates. “How would you feel if you were having a drink, pulled into a gunfight, and found out the first guy you slept

with in years is part of a gang that thinks it's okay to kill people?"

I know I should be focused on trying to reassure her, but my mind is caught up on how I'm the first guy she's slept with in years. I like that. It makes her mine.

"I know I lied, but that's only because I wanted to protect you." My blonde hair flops into my eyes, and I toss it away in exasperation. "Being a Duke is dangerous. I didn't want you to get hurt. You're special, Rose. I... I didn't want to scare you away."

I close the gap between our bodies. I never thought she'd be able to visit my house, but now she's in my room; I don't want her to leave. The full-length mirror on the wall behind her gives me an amazing view. The way her waist tucks in, her shapely hips, and her bulging arse.

"After what Matteo and his men did, I swore to never trust a man again," she murmurs. Her gaze drops, unable to look me in the eye, and she winces like it's painful to even utter the words. "I was just starting to feel safe in London, and then this happens." Her voice lowers to a whisper. "I don't want to live in fear, Seb."

I stroke along her collarbone, and she doesn't move away. If he wasn't already dead, I'd split him in two with a chainsaw for what he did to Rose and her sister.

"You don't have to," I promise, inhaling the sweet scent of her vanilla shampoo. It smells like home. "We'll fix this."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Callen and Freddie are handling it," I say. "They're following a lead. They're going to find them and make sure they'll never hurt you."

"But how do they know where to go?" She runs her small hand over my chest and rests it on my racing heart. "Callen's not psychic, from what I can tell. The only thing he can predict is how to piss people off."

"Trust me." I lean in, and my mouth brushes against her plump lips for a second. "We're good at what we do. We keep people safe, and you're our number one priority."

CHAPTER 7

How are Freddie and Callen tracking the Killers Club? I can't decide whether Seb is trying to reassure a helpless damsel in distress, or if he's telling the truth. I wrap my arms around his neck to draw him in. I have to find out what he means.

"But how can they know?" I ask breathlessly, slipping my hand under his shirt and over his abs. Holy shit, they're carved out of stone. "I need to feel safe, Seb."

I don't expect him to fall for my bullshit, but he does. Seb's gaze softens like a doleful puppy. I'm overcome with that horrible feeling again. Guilt. What's wrong with me? This is a mission. I have to get a grip. My insides can't melt every time he looks in my direction. Zero emotion is one of our rules.

"Callen puts trackers in his bullets," Seb's voice comes out in a husky growl, deep with desire. "They'll find them."

It's unlikely Tweedledum survived a gunshot to the chest. He's the first agent fatality I've known under Alaric's watch, which won't be taken lightly. Following normal processes isn't possible when you're supposed to be dead already, so they'll have taken his body straight to the crematorium and be long gone by now. But what will Freddie and Callen find when they get there?

Suddenly, Seb's lips crash against mine with the force of a tsunami, almost knocking me off my feet and putting a stop to my musings.

I kiss him back, not only because I can't blow my cover but because my entire body sizzles with excitement. His fingers expertly find the zip on my dress until I force myself to pull away.

You need to focus on business, Ivy!

“It’s Freddie, isn’t it?” Seb’s shoulders slump, noticing my distraction and jumping to conclusions. “You’re worried about him.”

“I...”

Is Seb right? I don’t care about what happens to Callen. They can turn him into a block of Emmental for all I care, but Freddie...

“It’s okay,” Seb murmurs. “You like him.”

“I hardly know him,” I stammer.

“But it’s different with him, isn’t it? I see how you look at each other,” he says. “I’ll make it easy for you. If you want out of our deal, if you want to pick him, then I won’t stand in your way.”

The mischievous sparkle in Seb’s eyes vanishes. He’s hurting. I should let him pull away. Keeping my distance from him is better for everyone. It’ll make what I have to do easier, but my subconscious desires override my logic, and I reach for his hand.

“Seeing Freddie again doesn’t change anything,” I say. *Why are you letting these words come out? Control yourself, woman!* “I’m not picking anyone.”

Seb’s eyebrows raise in surprise. “But I thought that—”

“A deal’s a deal,” I say, stepping closer. If I kill him in a few days, I won’t have to break it.

Seb’s body language changes instantly. His green eyes glitter as his pupils dilate, and he grabs my hips possessively.

“Freddie will be okay,” Seb reassures. “You don’t have to worry about him. He’s good at his job.”

I hope so, a little voice answers in my head, while another argues that he’s just another stranger I have to kill. Conflicting thoughts rattle around my head like dodgems bouncing off each other.

“It’s been a long day. I should go to bed,” I say, but don’t move.

“Yes, you should,” he agrees with a grin. His hard cock rubbing against me erases all of my intentions to find more information about the Dukes tonight. I have plenty of time to get what I need. “Or you can stay here, and I can make you feel good.”

My breathing quickens as he slowly unzips my dress. I drop his t-shirt on the floor. Who in their right mind would say no to a guy like him? He’s sex on legs!

Seb’s not the person I thought he was, but I can be the Rose he wants me

to be for a little longer. I shrug off the straps and let my dress fall to my feet.

“Fuck,” he groans. His voice is full of heady lust as he looks up and down my body appreciatively. “You’re beautiful.”

The bright overhead light illuminates a few faint scars on my torso. It’s the first time he’s seen them properly, and I suddenly feel like I’m bearing more than my body. I try to cover them with my hands, but he catches my wrists to stop me.

“Don’t,” he says firmly. His fingertips stroke the raised white slash marks as fury stirs behind his eyes. “Did Matteo do this to you?”

All I can do is nod as my throat constricts. No one has touched my scars before.

“You don’t have to hide them from me,” Seb says. “They tell me your story. They show me how strong you are, how strong you’ve had to be. Your scars only make you more beautiful.”

My insides melt like ice cream under the sweltering sun. Being around the Dukes is fucking with my head. What happened to the cold, merciless killer whose sole purpose for living is her work?

The Dukes have found a box hidden in my chest. They’ve punctured a small hole in it, and my emotions are pouring out. Emotions I haven’t felt for years.

“You don’t have to lie,” I mutter.

Seb takes off his shirt and grabs my hand. He guides one of my fingers over his inked chest. “Feel here?” I touch a raised mark over his pecks. “And here.” He moves my hand further down to his ribcage, across a long scar that leads to his hip, hidden underneath his tattoos. “You’re not the only one with scars, Rose. We all have them. That’s how the Dukes were formed. We all have a story.”

“What’s yours?” I ask.

“That’s a tale for another time,” he says, dropping my hand and drawing my body closer, causing my tits to squash against him and bulge over the edges of my bra.

He walks us backwards until I fall onto his bed. The sheets smell of his aftershave and fresh washing powder. He rests his elbows on either side of my head, and his weight bears down on top of me.

“We’re done talking,” Seb growls. “I’m going to show you how fucking beautiful I think you are.”

His kisses trail down my neck, over my collarbones, and down my body.

Sexy ink covers every inch of his skin like a sprawling black and grey painting. How many hours did he have to sit in a tattoo chair? I'm so entranced by the design over his shoulders and back that I gasp in surprise when his fingers slip into my bra to pinch my nipple. He tries—hopelessly—to tug the cup down.

“Give me a second,” I say, sitting to unhook my bra at world-record speed and hurling it away.

His hands are straight on me again, kneading my tits as he takes my nipple into his mouth. His tongue swirls over the hardened pink peak and sucks hard, drawing a moan from my parted lips.

My damp panties rub against his trousers, desperately craving more of him. He pauses to kneel and undo his belt. I shuffle up the bed, closer to the pillows, but his hands grab my thighs and pull me back with such vigour that my tits jump.

“Where do you think you're going?” he purrs. “I'm only getting started. The only thing you need to do is scream my name when I make you come. Can you do that for me?”

We shouldn't be doing this. He's in the gang I'm supposed to be spying on, but what other choice do I have? It'd be suspicious if I stopped screwing him now.

“Yes,” I moan in agreement.

He bites my nipple in response. My back arches, and I thrust my hips. I need more.

“You're so wet for me, baby.” Seb's fingers slide over the front of my knickers as my slit swallows the thin fabric. “I'm going to make you feel so good you forget about everything else, okay?”

Forgetting sounds good. Right now, we can be two normal people. Rose and Sebastian. Not part of the Killers Club or the Dukes. Nothing else matters aside from how fucking good his body feels on mine.

“Okay,” I say, bucking my hips again impatiently, but he doesn't give me what I want. Not yet. “Make me forget.”

His blonde hair tickles my stomach as he kisses my scars. He doesn't rush, wanting to prove he meant what he said about obliterating my earlier self-consciousness.

“Seb,” I whine. My tone is urgent now. “I need you.”

My clit tingles, dying for his touch. He reaches for the scalloped hem of my lace thong and pulls it off, throwing it off the bed. I let my thighs fall

open.

“You have the prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen,” he says, running a finger down my wet lips. “Do you want me, Rose?”

“Can’t you feel how wet I am?” I rebut, grinding against his palm to prove my point.

“Yes,” he purrs, “but I want to hear you say it.”

I curl my finger to beckon him upwards. Then I hook my leg around him, rotating to push him into the mattress to straddle him.

“You’re not the only one who can tease,” I say.

It’s my turn to explore his body. I lick down his chest, tasting his salty skin and kissing his scars. I keep going. My tongue dances down his V-lines until his soft hair tickles my nose.

I look up at him through thick eyelashes and don’t break my stare as I flick my tongue over the head of his throbbing shaft. A bead of pre-cum seeps out, and I lick it away. Mmm.

“Rose,” he murmurs. “Fuck, you’re too good.”

I grin slyly. “Do you want me, Seb?”

“Fuck yes,” he groans.

His toned inner thighs clench as I swirl my tongue over the head of his cock again, then smirk. “I want to hear you say it.”

He’s not the only one who can play games.

“I want you, Rose,” he says as I climb on top of him.

I slide my pussy over his cock, relishing the power I have. He thinks he’s saving me, but he doesn’t know that I’m standing between him and imminent death. We shouldn’t do this, but... *Fuck it.*

I mount him and slide down his shaft slowly, slathering him in my juices. He grasps my arse as my hair falls around his face like curtains, making us feel like we’re the only two people in the world. His breathing grows short and ragged as I ride him. My tits bounce as I throw my head back and quicken my pace, closing my eyes to shed my inhibitions. I focus on how amazing it feels to be filled by him, and my motions are driven by my primal instinct for pleasure.

“Yes!” I scream. My voice shakes as I take him as deep as he can go. I rock my hips, bringing myself to an orgasm that makes the room fade to black. “Seb!”

How is it fair that something so wrong feels so right?

CHAPTER 8

CALLEN

“Really?” Freddie scowls, and his grip tightens on the steering wheel. “You’re watching porn now?”

Seb doesn’t know I installed a secret camera in his room precisely for this purpose. Why watch porn when I can record my own?

I shrug and glance at the sat nav. “We’re ten minutes away. It’ll pass the time.”

Damn, I have the perfect view of her tight cunt eating his cock. She’s gobbling him up and dousing his shaft. When she bends forward, seeing her smooth, puckered asshole makes me growl. I need to claim her again. It’s been too long.

I turn up my phone’s volume to hear her moan through the tinny speakers and listen to the slap of Seb’s hand striking her perfect arse that has my name on it. I should mute it, but I don’t.

“Seb!” Rose’s lusty voice moans calls. “Fuck, yes!”

Freddie swerves dangerously to the left, almost crashing into a set of traffic lights. He knows exactly who it is. His cheeks flush red as he abruptly stops and sends me slamming back into my seat. I could sue him for whiplash.

“Do you want to watch it too?” I ask, turning my screen to show him the woman he’s obsessed with bouncing on his best friend’s cock.

Freddie takes a deep breath and bats the phone from my hands, knocking it to the floor and ending the live feed.

“Kill-joy,” I grumble. “It was just getting to the good part.”

He grabs me by the collar with a shaking arm. Freddie is ruthless and menacing—maybe not as twisted as me—but he’s still a lethal murdering

machine. I'm reminded of that now. Maybe I've gone too far.

"I don't know what you're playing at, Callen," he snarls. My smile diminishes. Yep, I've pushed my luck. We both know it. "This isn't a game. The next time you pull a trick like this or touch a single hair on Rose's head, you're out of the Dukes. Do you understand me?"

He grabs my balls in an iron fist, making my cock wilt faster than a deflated balloon. I whimper as he squeezes tightly, so tight I'm worried he's about to rip them from my body and turn them into bagpipes.

"Do you understand?" he sneers. Frederick James acts like a civilised gentleman, but he's not. Far fucking from it.

"Yes," I gasp in a squeaky voice like a teenage boy. "I understand."

"Good," he says, still holding on. "Because if you do anything to hurt her—and I mean anything—it's not the Killers Club who'll hunt you down, it'll be me."

"Okay, okay!" I whimper. "You've made your fucking point!"

"That's what I thought," Freddie says. "Consider this your final warning."

He lets go, and I exhale in relief, cupping my balls to check they're still there. It's a shame we don't have any ice. Let's hope Seb emptied his in Rose because they're on borrowed time, judging by Freddie's reaction.

I'm launched backwards as Freddie hits the accelerator. We continue following the coordinates to the last place the bullet put out a signal. The road is deserted as we pull up outside the gates of an old cemetery. From the look of the place, I'm not expecting the Killers Club to still be here, but we might find clues.

"If you're going to cause any more trouble, you can wait in the car," Freddie threatens.

"I promise that I'll be on my best behaviour," I swear, struggling against the urge to reassure him that his cock is probably bigger than Seb's.

"Good," he replies. "If you don't, we're in the perfect spot to dispose of a body."

"Understood," I grumble. "I'll get the gate."

The gothic iron gate is bound shut with chains, but that won't keep us out. I hop from the car to grab supplies from the boot and cut through the chains while Freddie stays in the warmth.

When I'm done, Freddie steps out and puts on a pair of gloves. I limp after him, struggling to keep up with his rapid pace as we enter and follow what remains of a path. We're both carrying enough weapons to deal with

any situation we might stumble upon, but Freddie's mind is elsewhere. He'll be thinking about Seb's weapon and how it's screwing his girl.

"Spooky, huh?" I comment. "Maybe they buried the body here?"

Mist hangs between the centuries-old crumbling gravestones. It's a site where the Victorians dumped plague victims' bodies in pits. It's unkempt with overgrown weeds and littered with discarded bottles and needles from users who've snuck in. Most would think it's completely abandoned, if not for the smoke coming from a small building on the perimeter. The crematorium.

Bingo. That's where our bullet will be. Let's hope Bram's body hasn't been incinerated alongside it.

"Ready?" Freddie asks as we approach. He draws his gun and holds it in front of him to lead the way.

"Let's do this," I say, following behind as we surround the door. I check over my shoulder. There's no one else around, only eerie silence and the sense of being watched by hundreds of ghosts.

"Get behind me," Freddie orders.

I roll my eyes. Despite his earlier threats, he takes his role as a leader and protector seriously. He pushes the door to the crematorium ajar. No voices come from inside, although I wouldn't expect to hear anything if we're heading into a surprise ambush.

The door creaks open further. Freddie's gun barrel enters first, and he follows. It's dark inside, and he grapples to find a light switch on the wall. When it flickers to life, we see the pool of red covering the floor.

"I shouldn't have worn my new shoes," I joke.

Aside from the glow of the burning furnace that's turning a body to ash, there's no movement. Two other bodies lay on the floor, suspended in a state of shock with glassy eyes. Their mouths are frozen in a permanent scream. They were not expecting to have their brains blown out by two bullets. This was an execution.

"We're too late," Freddie says. Whoever came here wanted to get rid of any witnesses. "Another dead end."

"We'll find them, boss," I say. "They can't stay hidden forever."

No one can evade us for long.

CHAPTER 9

BRAM

A door clangs in the distance.

I haven't seen anyone for hours. After the confrontation at The Conservatory, they bundled me back into the van. Being trapped in a moving vehicle with a corpse and the twin of the man your friend killed is not an experience I want to live through again. Callen has a perfect shot.

We didn't return to the Killers Club base of operations straightaway. While I slipped in and out of consciousness, they stopped to dispose of the body. After they dumped it, the bloodthirsty twin took out his frustrations on a human punching bag. Me. Even when he's not around, Callen manages to get me into deep shit.

Now I'm locked in a dungeon. Heavy metal shackles around my ankles secure me to the wall like an animal. The sterile torture chamber they held me in before was bad, but this is much worse.

The damp air smells like stagnant water. The concrete floor and brick walls are icy cold—the type of coldness that seeps into your skin to make you feel permanently wet. There's no window or light source, besides a slim crack around the doorframe. The door reminds me of a prison cell with a small window where they can push scraps through if they decide not to let me starve to death. A hole in the floor serves as a toilet on the far side of the room. Luckily, I'm not used to five-star hotels.

If the walls could speak, they'd whisper about death. Buildings hang onto energy, and I sense it here. It's sucking the life from me. Give me pliers and a branding iron any day. Torture makes you feel something, but this? It's an empty void that traps me with my thoughts.

A dinging sounds again, but I can't tell whether it's in my head. I hear

distant screams and sink to the floor to cradle my head and cover my ears, hoping it'll keep the memory away. It doesn't. It never does.

Men, women, and children scream. Fathers desperately try to save their families from the burning building. When they do, they're thrown around like Catherine Wheels. Smoke fills the already dust-filled air and snakes through the streets, stealing people's breath. Everything burns.

Flames lick at the remains of houses, destroying and smouldering school books. It chars clothes fluttering in the breeze like meat roasting on a barbeque. A community pours from their homes, terrified they will be next, collapsing to their knees when they discover what's happened. What I've done.

My comrades slap my back, complimenting my aim, telling me how it couldn't have gone better. They laugh at a woman crying as her friends hold her back to stop her from dashing in to save what could be her only child. Their anguish carries through the wind and taints the land, cursing it. It'll be an act they won't forget, and I did it. War takes casualties and innocent lives. We understand that, but in what world is this okay?

Back in the dungeon, two voices pull me back to reality. I blink to push away the images and focus on their conversation. They're fighting. Soundproofing the cells is pointless when their prisoners won't leave alive.

"We should kill him!" the man argues. "He killed my brother!"

"I know you're upset about Aaron," she replies with cold indifference. She's acting like he's lost his favourite jacket, not someone who shares his DNA. "But Ivy is with them. We'll get our revenge, but we need to wait."

"But we haven't heard from her!" he blasts. "Why hasn't she been in contact?"

The woman's voice turns aggressive. "Ivy's our best agent. She will be in contact when she can. Alaric gave her three days. If we don't hear from her by then, we'll extract her."

"Precious fucking Ivy," he scoffs. "You all think the sun shines out of her arse, but don't you think it's weird how the guy knew her? She's been dead for five years, yet he sacrificed a Duke for her. What's their connection?" He's met with silence. "You don't know, do you? She never told you about him during our tests! How can you trust her?"

The reminder stings, but I don't blame Freddie for picking her. He's driven by his motivation to protect people. He balances risk. On paper, she appears to be the most vulnerable. Unfortunately, he's missing half the facts

and has inadvertently welcomed a murderer into their lives.

“Don’t question her loyalty, Tom,” she says. “Aaron died because of his carelessness. If you’re going to be irrational, we’ll take you off-duty. We had to kill everyone at the crematorium after finding the bullet was sending out a signal. Do you know how difficult it is to find a crematorium in London to do business discreetly? Everyone died because Aaron walked into a fucking bullet.”

If the guy hadn’t beat the shit out of me earlier, I might feel sorry for him. A phone rings, cutting through their frosty silence.

“What did you find, Penelope?” the woman snaps. “Uh-huh. Yes. Okay.”

“What is it?” Tom asks. “Have we found out who they are yet?”

“They tracked the bullet to the crematorium, as we suspected,” she says calmly. My heart sinks. The Dukes walked into a trap. “And now we can follow them. Penelope’s got a plate and an address. We know exactly where they are.”

“Who?” Tom asks.

“We have an ID on two of them,” she says. “Frederick James and Callen Campbell. An ex-cop turned weapons dealer and a disgraced doctor. They’re an unusual team.”

“There’s at least one more,” Tom says. “The driver of the car.”

“We haven’t traced the driver yet,” she says. “The house and car belong to Frederick.”

Seb is safe... for now.

“We should patrol the area!” Tom explodes. “We should be there around the clock. What if they get away?”

“Ivy’s on the inside,” she says. “If they have sophisticated security, they’ll be onto us the moment we get near the house. Why cause a scene when we don’t have to? Ivy has taken out mafia kingpins before. She can deal with a small gang from London.”

“But—”

“No arguments,” she interrupts. “That’s an order. Ivy is handling it. This is her mission, not yours.”

“What if they work out who she is?” he probes. “She was at the launch party when Danny died. They could make a connection.”

“They won’t,” she replies. “Let’s just say, they’re going to be getting a distraction. The Lotus is back in town.”

“She is?” He sounds surprised. “Where is she?”

“That’s none of your business,” she says dismissively. “You know not all agents stay at HQ.”

Their footsteps grow closer. The hatch opens, and a rectangle of light blinds me. I shield my face, shrinking away from the door.

“Did you hear that, Bram?” the woman taunts. “Your friends are going to die soon, but we’ll keep you alive for long enough to see it. We keep our word.”

“I want to speak to him,” Tom insists.

“Suit yourself. I’ve got a spa appointment to get to,” she replies, yawning. A killer who maintains a beauty regime. Impressive.

Tom’s murderous eyes appear and glare at me through the gap.

I clench my fists. *What do you want?*

“The Dukes are going to pay,” Tom sneers. Here comes the standard macho bullshit. He waits until Stephanie disappears and leans in to whisper, “I’m not waiting for Ivy. I’m going to kill them tomorrow, and when I’m done, I’m coming back here to kill you.”

He cackles as the hatch snaps shut.

There’s nothing I can do to warn them that he’s coming.

CHAPTER 10

SEB

We collapse in a heap on the covers. Whenever I think sex can't get any better, Rose proves me wrong. My hair sticks to my forehead as I roll over to watch her breasts rise and fall with her heavy breathing.

I prop my head on one hand and trail my finger up her stomach to the pink flush over her chest. "Did I help you forget?"

She rolls her eyes and grins. Her face is no longer etched with the deep concern of someone who is terrified. I like having her in my bed. In the past, when I picked up random women for one-night stands, they never stayed over. We went to hotels, and I always left before they woke up. It's different with Rose. She belongs here.

"I guess," she replies, "but I'm sure you can help me forget again."

My cock is already hardening. She's a witch who can enchant my dick to do her bidding, giving me a magic boner that doesn't fade.

I put my arm around her shoulder and pull her into my chest, cradling her warm body. She fits perfectly, and her soft hair tickles my chin.

"This still doesn't mean you're my boyfriend," she mumbles.

She must be feeling better if she's making smart-arse remarks again.

I grin. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Suddenly, a knock on the door makes us both freeze.

"Just a sec!" I call, then whisper to Rose, "Go to the bathroom." I shove her. "Quickly!"

"Are you serious?" she hisses under her breath, stumbling to her feet and standing naked with crossed arms. "Really?"

"Yes," I mime, making a shooing motion with my hands. "Go."

She disappears into the ensuite, giving me a great view of her arse as she swaggers away. I don't have to see her face to know she's scowling.

"Come in," I say, trying to sound casual as I grab a pillow to cover the mountain propping up the duvet like a tent pole.

Freddie enters, looming in the doorway and casting a dark shadow over the bed. He sniffs. Shit, does the air smell of sex?

"You're on the first shift tomorrow," he says. His voice is devoid of emotion, and his gaze flicks to the bathroom. He knows. Did he check Rose's empty room first?

I don't know why I was so quick to hide her. Even though I've done nothing wrong, I can't help feeling bad about it. I'm hiding the woman he's mourned for years in my bathroom after fucking her brains out. What kind of bastard does that make me?

Freddie and I have always been on the same side. Nothing has come between us since we first met at a summer school in France, a place where affluent families send their kids. Freddie's older than me, and he stopped an American entitled prick called Zander Briarly from kicking my face in. We have been friends ever since.

I clear my throat and reply in a business-like fashion, "Of course."

He nods. "Callen and I tracked the bullet, but it led to nothing." His eyes stray to the closed door again. "Oh, and one more thing..."

Freddie marches over to my full-length mirror with ornate edging.

"What're you doing?" I ask nervously, questioning whether he will take it down to smash it over my head.

"Taking this," he says, pulling a tiny camera out. It's no bigger than my smallest fingernail and is hidden behind the frame, poking through a gap.

My jaw drops. "What the...?"

"You can thank Callen in the morning," he says gruffly. "Goodnight, Seb."

He storms away and slams the door behind him. Fuck. If Freddie knew about the hidden camera, that means he saw us.

Rose pokes her head around the door, wrapped in a towel. "Is it just me, or was that awkward?" She steps back inside and plops herself on the bed. "What was he talking about removing?"

"Nothing," I lie. Her knowing about Callen's homemade porno won't make her feel any more comfortable about staying here, and we need to keep her safe.

“Do you think he’s angry?” she asks, biting her lip. “About us?”

“He’ll get over it,” I say with confidence I don’t feel. “It’s not like you’re my girlfriend.”

I want to rewind the clock to when she was coming all over my cock and soaking me in her wetness. When I next see Callen, I’ll castrate him if he doesn’t delete the recording.

She tilts her head to the side and asks, “What did he mean by your shift tomorrow?”

“Why?” I ask. “Are you going to miss me?”

“Something like that.” She smiles. It lights up her entire face, and my heart skips a beat. “But I’m curious. What does a shift look like for a Duke?”

I wrap my arms around her to draw her back to bed. Everything feels better with her under the covers next to me.

“We protect people,” I say. “Right now, we’re watching over a rich asshole who is convinced a serial killer is coming after him.”

“And are they?”

“I hope not,” I say, “because it’s my job to keep him safe.”

“But how can you guarantee his safety?” she asks. “You can’t watch someone twenty-four-seven.”

“No,” I say, “but we have security stationed outside his mansion all the time.”

“A mansion.” She trails her finger down my bare chest. “I’ve never been inside a mansion before.”

“Maybe I’ll take you one day,” I say. “I’m a royal, remember? There are lots of opportunities to go to parties in big houses.”

“I’d like that,” she says. “You owe me another date.”

CHAPTER 11

FREDDIE

I sip my morning black coffee, staring out the window at the grey clouds looming above the London skyline. Rain patters on the glass.

After returning from the crematorium and seeing Seb's blatant deception first-hand, I struggled to sleep. How could I when the woman I thought was dead spent the night with my best friend?

My rational side knows I have no right to be angry. He and Rose met a few weeks ago when he didn't know who she was. But logical reasoning and what my heart wants are two different beasts.

I place the mug down before I accidentally shatter the handle. Whenever I close my eyes, I can't get the image of her fucking him out of my brain. The woman I've fantasised about riding his cock.

Gentle footsteps pad down the stairs. It's her. The others have left already. Seb went to Bexley's mansion in the early hours to check everything was in order, and Callen is following up on another lead about where to buy thallium in hopes it could lead back to the Killers Club.

She stops walking. Does she know I'm here alone? Is she avoiding me?

"Good morning," I say, giving her no choice but to face me.

"Morning," she replies, emerging from her hiding spot around the corner.

My chest constricts when I see her. She's wearing Seb's t-shirt, and it drowns her. I jerk my gaze up from her shapely thighs and her smooth skin that I'm dying to touch. Her hair is messy, piled up on her head, and she's not wearing make-up. I've never noticed the freckles over her nose and under her eyes before, like flecks of paint. She's perfect.

I keep my tone even. "Did you sleep well?"

"Uh-huh," she replies cautiously, biting her lip.

Is she trying to torture me on purpose?

“Are you hungry?” I ask. The chair legs screech along the wooden floor as I stand and walk into the adjoining kitchen. It’s sleek and minimal, with black cupboards and a white granite worktop. “I can make you breakfast.”

Her stomach rumbles, answering my question for her.

“What would you like?”

“Toast is fine,” she mumbles.

“Coffee?” I prompt. “I grind the beans fresh for every cup. It’s better than any instant shit.”

“Sounds great,” she replies half-heartedly.

The strained atmosphere makes my skin crawl, and unsaid words hang in the air, but I continue to go about the motions like a robot while she watches.

“Freddie?”

I spin around. The sunlight slipping through the blinds renders her white t-shirt transparent, and I gulp at the vision of her pink areolas peeking through the fabric.

I avert my eyes. “Yes?”

“Are you mad at me?”

I freeze. My hands grip the side, and popping toast breaks the silence.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I growl.

“Because of me and Seb...”

I don’t turn around but watch her reflection in the window. She plays with the hem of Seb’s t-shirt with a pained expression.

“Do you like him?” I ask sharply.

“Yes,” she murmurs. Her voice is soft, but her brown eyes look up in silent defiance. “Why do I still feel like I’ve done something wrong?”

“You haven’t,” I say, snatching a knife from the drawer to butter her toast. My violent scraping almost tears a hole right through the bread. “Who you sleep with is none of my business.”

She joins me and rests her hand on top of mine. “If you’re not mad, why are you murdering my toast?”

I don’t answer.

“I never asked you to wait for me, Freddie,” she says gently. “You should have moved on.”

I drop the knife with a bang and send crumbs flying over the tidy kitchen. She jumps back, startled by my reaction.

How can she say that so casually? Have I got it all wrong? Are my

feelings something I've made up in my head? Something I've fictionalised? Moving on wasn't even an option!

"Moved on?" My anger rises, but I take a deep breath to regain my composure. "I didn't want to move on."

"Why?" she pushes.

Most women would run if they discovered a stranger has been obsessing over them since a fleeting kiss that happened years ago. She should leave. I refuse to look at her, refuse to speak, refuse to let her see how broken I am.

Am I the problem? I've wept for a girl and a future I thought was lost. Maybe I don't deserve to find happiness. Everyone I love dies because of me. It's a curse.

"Look at me," Rose demands. "Freddie, look at me." Her voice wavers. "Please."

I sigh, and my eyes meet hers. Does she feel it too? A spark that makes everything else pale into insignificance.

"You shouldn't be here," I say. I shouldn't have dragged her into that fight. When I saw her, I should have kept walking. Granted, Seb might have drawn her into our lives, but he was doing well to keep their relationship separate. But I brought her into the Duke's world because I was too selfish to let her go. "I made a mistake."

She flinches. I want to smash everything in sight, but I clear up instead. I tip the toast into the bin and wipe down the crumbs, but my breathing is heavy. A beast ravages my heart from the inside, tearing it to pieces.

"Why didn't you move on, Freddie?" She's not letting it go. "Why did you take Pippy? You didn't have to do any of that. Why would you do that for a girl you just met?"

"Do you genuinely want the truth?" I ask, approaching her. She shrinks back as I advance, pressing her back into the worktop with nowhere to escape.

It's now or never. I've rehearsed this speech multiple times, speaking to a ghostly apparition in my dreams, going over what I'd say if I ever saw her again, but this isn't how I imagined it.

"Yes," Rose says. "I want you to tell me."

"Because I thought you were the one," I say, realising how ridiculous I sound. "And I was wrong, wasn't I? I spent five years reading into a connection that only I felt. Five years lost to a woman I'd never have again, and now you're here. It's all wrong."

The colour drains from her face. She thinks I'm insane. Maybe I am. Maybe we all are. Callen is crazy, but at least he doesn't hide it.

"Because of Seb?" she asks.

"It should have been me," I murmur, more to myself than to her. I was meant to attend the launch party the night she met Seb, but he took my place at the last second. If I was there, I'd have met her before him. All of this would have been different. "You felt the connection when we met, didn't you?"

"Five years is a long time," she says like that's the end of the conversation, but we've only just started. "I'm not the same person I was when we met."

"But you still feel it," I say.

I need to hear it and validate it's not something I've made up. An invisible string ties us together, and it's still holding as strong as the night we met, but she's resisting it. She's holding back. She's wearing armour now.

"What I feel doesn't matter," Rose mutters. "Everything changed that night. I'm not the person you think I am. I'm not the girl you've been waiting for."

"You're lying," I say. "You might like Seb, but you can't deny how right it feels when you're with me. You know it matters."

Her dilating pupils and hard nipples give her away as I put my hand on her chest. She doesn't move as I feel her heart pumping blood around her body through her skin. She's alive. So very alive.

"I've been yours from the moment we met," I say as her heartbeat jumps erratically. "I've never been more sure of anything. My instincts are never wrong."

"Freddie..."

"People thought I lost my mind when I grieved for a woman I just met," I say, "but I couldn't bring myself to accept that you were gone. The woman I was so sure I'd spend the rest of my life with."

"How can you be so sure?" she whispers, barely moving her lips.

"Because of this." I stroke her soft cheek. She trembles at my touch and whimpers. "Because I know that no matter how long I live, I will never experience this feeling again. Some people call it soul mates. Others call it love at first sight. You've been mine since that night five years ago, and you're still mine now." I tip her chin up to face me. Flashbacks race through my mind of that night on the street when we kissed, and she took my breath

away. I've never got it back since, not until now. "You're trying to fight it, except I know you feel it too because I'm as much yours as you are mine. It doesn't matter whether you fuck other men or what happened in the time we've been apart. We're meant to be."

Fear crosses her face, and she says, "You can't know that. You don't know me, not properly."

"Maybe not," I reply, "but I know how I feel. You are mine. You always will be."

A rare ray of sunshine hits the side of my face.

"Heterochromia," she murmurs.

Time stands still.

"You didn't forget."

"No," she answers, putting her hands over mine. "I never forgot."

CHAPTER 12

IVY

I try to hold onto the years of training, ruthless logic, and calculating reasoning that allowed me to become one of the best assassins, but Freddie's words transcend that. He speaks to another part of me. Part of me that I thought died with Daisy. He speaks to Ivy Penrose before she became a killer.

When I'm around Freddie, I become the woman who was excited about meeting a man who intrigued her. A man she felt an instant connection to and who, despite her instincts screaming that this is a bad idea, understands exactly what Freddie is saying.

When I swore my loyalty to the Killers Club, I underwent an initiation process and a series of tests. A process where you tell them everything about your life before. This includes the basic facts: where you grew up, went to school, where your parents used to work, and your relationship history, but it also goes into more detail, delving and picking apart everything that makes you who you are. Before becoming an agent, you take an oath. An oath to contact no one from your old life. An oath I'd not broken because I never mentioned Freddie's name.

"Have you ever been in love?" Alaric had asked, following a string of intimate questions about my sex life that made me blush.

"No," I replied, but a part of me hesitated.

I couldn't have been in love with Freddie, right? We only met once. I figured I misremembered the feeling and chose to say nothing. I never planned to contact Freddie again, but a small part of me liked how he was my secret.

If I hadn't trained to be a killer, he would have given me a chance at a

normal life. He was my fantasy man. The real Freddie, a Duke, is not the person I'd built up in my head over the years.

Yet, despite that, my skin still tingles when he touches me. I never forgot about him. He was my shred of hope that I clutched onto, and he's right here.

"You found your way back to me for a reason," Freddie says, transporting me back to the kitchen.

Yes, but not for the reason he thinks...

The shattering realisation that I have to kill him hits me as our lips collide. He kisses me like we're the only two people left on earth, and I'm grounding him to reality. It's a kiss that makes me forget why I'm here, and what my name is. He takes me back to a cold February night...

I respond with equal hunger and passion, picking up where we left off. He runs his hands through my hair as my fingers stumble on his shirt buttons. I lose my patience, tearing at them and sending them flying. He growls as I tug his jacket off.

I want him. Fuck, I want him more than I've ever wanted anything. My body acts on its own accord as if I've finally come home. If this was never supposed to happen, why does it feel so inevitable?

I undo his belt and slide my hand into his trousers. His cock is warm and silky in my hands. He's thick and long, big enough that I'm scared he'll destroy me. But I need him. I need to *feel* him.

He groans into my mouth as I stroke him. Then, just as fast, he grabs my wrist to stop me.

"Not like this," he murmurs into my mouth, his soft stubble tickling my cheeks.

"What?" I gasp. "But—"

He puts his finger on my lips. Men get blue balls, but what is the equivalent word for women? Lips in the lurch? Whatever it is, that's exactly how I'm feeling right now.

"I've waited for five years," he says. "When I fuck you for the first time, it won't be a quickie in the kitchen."

But he can't resist sliding his hand up my inner thigh, making me moan as he strokes my delicate skin in swirling patterns.

"When I have you, we're not leaving bed for a day," he continues. "We're not going to rush."

"But..." I argue. "I... want you."

"Want me?" He raises one eyebrow with a sly smile. "Or need me?"

His fingers slide over the top of my slippery knickers. My legs wobble like they're about to give way.

"Need you," I reply desperately.

"Then you can wait," he purrs.

Before I can tell him that waiting is overrated, a door in another room flies open with a bang.

"Boss!" Callen calls. Why is he intent on ruining everything? This is another reason to add to my list of why I hate him. "We need to talk."

"Don't forget what I said, Rose," Freddie whispers in my ear, sending shivers down the side of my neck. "You're all mine, and it's only a matter of time before I have you."

I swallow, unsure whether that's a threat or a promise, hoping it's both as Callen rushes into the kitchen.

"What is it?" Freddie snaps at him. Callen looks at me pointedly, unsure whether to continue. Freddie taps his foot impatiently. "Well? Spit it out."

"It's Bexley," Callen says. "Another one of his men has been found dead. This time, it wasn't someone patrolling the mansion. It was his accountant."

My ears prick up. I remember Doyle Jackson. He wasn't there the night Daisy died, but he's been part of Spencer's inner circle for years.

"Did anyone see anything?" Freddie asks.

"The last thing they saw was him going home with a woman," he says. "There was something left on top of his body. A lotus."

Freddie's eyebrows scrunch together. "The flower?"

Callen nods.

Interesting. One of our best agents must be back in London. Although I've never met her, I've heard others talk about the woman who leaves a lotus close to her killings. It's her personal signature. Alaric and Stephanie must have tasked her to kill Doyle to distract the Dukes for what comes next.

When I kill them, they won't see it coming...

CHAPTER 13

FREDDIE

I hesitate at the door. My feet keep moving, but my brain screams at me to stay. How can I leave her under Callen's protection while assassins are targeting us and holding Bram hostage? But I have no choice. Spencer requested a meeting. Fast. He's a big client, and we still have to find the serial killer targeting his men.

When I arrive at Bexley's mansion, Seb is already waiting. He leans against the car. His wavy blonde hair ripples in the breeze like he's posing for a photo shoot. I can see why Rose likes him. He has a sharp jawline, a mischievous smile, and an easy-going attitude that makes women fall at his feet. It's hard not to be resentful when the man who has half of London lusting over him is infatuated with the woman I love.

"Boss." Seb straightens as soon as he sees me. "Any news?"

"Not yet." I shake my head. "Callen's thallium leads have drawn a blank, and none of his medical contacts knows a man with a scar like the one we saw. Most people don't survive getting their throat cut."

Finding information is taking longer without Bram. We all have some technical ability—Bram trained us in case something like this were to happen, but it's not the same.

"Spencer will lose his shit if we don't speak to him soon," Seb says, tipping his head toward the building. "He's waiting inside with more details."

We stride to the door, and it flies open before we can use the grand lion head knocker. Seb swerves quickly enough to avoid the wood hitting him in the face. After knowing what he and Rose got up to last night, I find myself disappointed that it doesn't—even though I have no right to be jealous.

In the doorway, Spencer is wearing nothing but flannel pyjama bottoms,

exposing his hairy chest and the start of a beer belly that'll only grow with age. Partying catches up with everyone eventually. Black rings circle his eyes, and his dilated pupils dart around wildly from whatever drugs he's taken. Paranoia has kicked in.

"Look who it is," Spencer mocks, stepping aside to let us pass. "You finally showed up."

His housekeeper approaches, carrying a silky robe. Spencer doesn't thank her. He snatches it from the elderly woman's fingers, making her squeak and scurry away.

Before we can speak, he launches into a tirade. "I thought I hired the best when I recruited you." We won't be getting an invitation to sample any whisky this time. "But another man is dead! This isn't what I expected. For the money I'm paying, you should have found the party responsible by now."

I grit my teeth, trying to stay professional despite wanting to tell him to stick his demands where the sun doesn't shine. Spencer is an influential figure. If he's unhappy with our services, it'll affect our business if word gets around.

"We're working on it," Seb says. "We—"

Spencer shuts him down by waving his hands like he's trying to shoo a bird out of the room.

"I want to talk to the organ grinder, not the monkey," Spencer says, waggling his finger at Seb, "especially one who is playing at being a protector. Don't think I don't recognise you, Sebastian Montgomery. What would your family think if they knew what you're doing?"

Seb comes from a privileged background and has more connections than anyone I know. His network is invaluable to the Dukes, and his anonymity is paramount.

I step in. "Do you remember our contract? You are bound to protect the Dukes' identities." I narrow my eyes venomously, and the colour drains from Spencer's face, instantly sobering him up. "Do you want to know what would happen if you broke our contract?"

"Is that a threat?" Spencer demands, trying to sound brave when he's nothing more than a stuttering schoolboy throwing a tantrum.

"I'm no one's fucking monkey." Seb cracks his knuckles to make a point. "I could destroy everything you've built with one phone call."

"We're the best at what we do," I say smoothly. "You hired us to keep you alive, and, from what I can see, you're still breathing." Unfortunately.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and tell us more about Doyle Jackson?”

“Follow me,” Spencer mutters, inclining his head. He continues mumbling to himself as he staggers along the corridor, but none of his sentences makes sense. We follow his swaying figure into the parlour. The room’s sole purpose is to show off his wealth. Statues are positioned around the edge of the room like a ghastly museum, lights illuminate original paintings, and there are a few sofas for guests. Despite the decadence, the room is in disarray.

“I fired my cleaners,” Spencer says. “All I have left is my housekeeper. She’s been with me for years, but she’s not as good as she used to be.”

“No shit,” Seb mumbles, quiet enough so Spencer can’t hear.

Empty glasses, remnants of cocaine on the coffee table, and brimming ashtrays cover most surfaces. Half-eaten food precariously balances on expensive furniture and discarded cigarettes have burned holes in chair arms. Stacks of paper are everywhere, and we have to pick our way across the floor with caution. His drug addiction or hoarding will kill him before the killer at this rate.

“Are you ready to talk about your accountant now?” I ask, checking my watch. “What happened?”

“Doyle’s wife found his body. She was away for the weekend, and he was face down in their hot tub with flowers floating in the water when she returned.” Spencer kneels to rummage through a stack of files. “They’re doing a post-mortem. I know the coroner, and he’s going to report back to me.”

“He was last seen with a woman, correct?” I prompt. “Where was he last seen?”

“A restaurant not far from here,” Spencer says. “But the CCTV was broken that night. Some kind of technical fault.”

I exchange a look with Seb. Is he thinking what I am? This can’t be a coincidence. Whoever is killing Spencer’s men is exhibiting high levels of training, with experience and resources. That sounds like some other people we know...

“Ah-ha!” Spencer declares, pulling a file from a stack like a Jenga block and knocking the tower over. He thrusts the papers into my hands and grimaces. “Here are pictures from the scene.”

Seb peers over my shoulder as I open it to see a bloated face staring back.

Spencer leans over and points at the decking. “You’ll want to see that.”
I keep flicking through the photographs, and my stomach sinks like a lead balloon when I read the pink lipstick scrawl over the white bathroom floor:

With love, the K.C.

Pieces of the puzzle slot into place. We’re not hunting for two separate people. The Killers Club is behind it all. The sophistication, multiple descriptions of offenders, and why Bram was snatched from outside Spencer’s mansion all make sense.

“Everyone knew Doyle screwed around,” Spencer says. “He liked his women, and his wife didn’t care as long as the money was coming in. Does the note help?” He studies my face. “Do you know who we’re dealing with?”

I keep my expression neutral. “We have our theories.”

It won’t help his mood to know that a group of the best assassins I’ve ever seen are coming after him. We can use it to our advantage.

“Theories? What am I supposed to do with theories?” Spencer explodes. He moves to a bureau and opens it to reveal bottles of pills and packets of powder. He’s holding more products than a pharmacy. “What do you want me to do? Wait around for someone to kill me?”

“You’re under our protection,” I remind him in my calmest voice. A client like Spencer needs to be handled delicately. “In the meantime, you need to carry on as normal. The Dukes will ensure nothing happens to you.”

“If one more man dies, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Seb snarls. “Hire someone else? Because, without us, you might already be dead.”

“You paid for us to keep you alive,” I say to soften the blow, “and that’s what we’ll do.”

Spencer tips white powder onto the back of his hand and snorts it.

“You better,” he replies, wiping the remnants from his nostrils. “Keep me updated.”

I stand. “We’ll show ourselves out.”

The Killers Club is hunting him, and we are hunting them. Spencer is our bait. When they come for him, we’ll be ready.

CHAPTER 14

SEB

ball my hands, struggling against my better instincts to pummel them into his leering face. Spencer Bexley represents everything I hate about the life I was born into. If we weren't intent on finding Bram, I'd vote to let the Killers Club have him.

I grew up in a grand house, like Spencer's mansion, with my parents and older brother. A brother who is diligently following the path my parents laid out. He's married with one child and another on the way.

"What's our plan?" I ask Freddie as soon as we're outside, shrugging off the energy of the place. Those old buildings are suffocating. They're mausoleums to tradition and to the people who want to keep the ruling class in power.

His eyebrows crease, deep in thought.

"We've been going about this wrong," he says. "We've been hunting for the Killers Club. Instead of looking for them, we should focus on their clients. If we find the person who wants Spencer dead, maybe we can track them. If not, all we have to do is wait. Spencer's a sitting duck. They'll come for him eventually."

My phone rings, and I scowl at the screen when I see it's my mother.

"You should take that," Freddie says. "You can't avoid her forever."

"I can try," I grumble.

She never calls for a casual catch-up. She only rings when she wants something or has an invitation to an event I don't want to attend.

"You still have to keep up appearances," Freddie reminds me. "It's part of the job."

The other Dukes have created fake businesses, but not me. I must

carefully curate my image and juggle my public and private life. It's hard to strike a balance when my family likes to traipse me around like a show pony, hoping I'll change my mind and accept my destiny.

"Fine," I relent, accepting the call.

"Sebastian, have you been avoiding me?" Mum's shrill tone makes me hold the phone away from my ear. Her greetings are always an accusation. "I haven't been able to reach you lately."

"Work's been busy," I say. "There have been some significant developments in the companies I've invested in. You know how it is."

"I heard all about the deaths of the co-founders of that computer company. What a tragedy," she says, but there's no sympathy in her voice, only excitement about the prospect of having gossip to share with her book club. "You invested in them, didn't you? It must be terrible for business."

She fills her days with charity galas and functions but still manages to keep tabs on what I'm doing. The palace press focuses on the 'major royals', but they still monitor what the wider family is up to. They'll do anything to avoid a scandal.

"If anything, their deaths have helped raise awareness," I say. "Their new successor is well-placed to take them to the next level."

"I'm glad to hear it," she replies, although she couldn't give any less of a shit and sounds deflated that there's not more to report. "I'm calling for another reason. I'm sure you remember that the Collingsbrook Ball is coming up."

The Collingsbrooks are an old aristocratic family. Each year, they hold a ball at their country manor and anyone who is anyone in high society attends. With everything else happening—tracking the Killers Club, Bram's kidnapping, and Rose falling under our protection—it's slipped my mind.

"Sebastian? Hello?" Mum squawks. "Are you still there?"

Would now be a good time to blow my brains out with the gun hidden in my waistband? I roll my eyes. Every time I speak to her, I digress to acting like a sulky teenager. "Yeah, I'm still here."

"So, you're coming this weekend, aren't you?" she says. "It's a masquerade this year, remember?"

As much as I hate the occasion, I have to go. These big events help me nurture all the connections I've been building.

"Yes," I reply through gritted teeth, "I'll be there."

"I have someone there I want you to meet," she says excitedly.

“Actually, I’m bringing a date,” I blurt out.

I’m met with deadly silence, and Freddie’s gaze burns into me. Shit. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

“You are?” she asks sharply. “Who? Is it someone I know?”

“No, you don’t know her,” I say hastily. “You can meet her then.”

“What’s her name?” Mum asks, likely already drafting a text to the disappointed mother of the unlucky lady she’s tried to sell me off to.

“Rose,” I say before I change my mind. Freddie slams the car door closed behind him. “Look, I have to go. I have a meeting. I’ll speak to you soon, okay?”

“You shouldn’t have promised she’d go,” Freddie says bluntly as I get into the car.

A member of our security team strolls by on the other side of the street and nods in our direction. Cameras are watching Spencer’s house, and Callen is monitoring the footage from home. We can’t miss anything.

“She doesn’t have to go. I just said it to get my mum off my back,” I reply, trying to act like it’s nothing when we both know it isn’t. “But we can’t keep Rose locked inside forever. You’re the one who thought it was a good idea for me to start dating and stop my parents from playing matchmaker.”

Freddie’s fists clench. That was before he knew who I was dating. All bets are off now.

“It’s too dangerous for Rose,” he says. “What if the Killers Club sees her there?”

“At the Collingsbrook Ball?” I laugh wryly. “I know everyone who goes to those parties. She’ll be safe. They have more security than we can offer, and the paparazzi aren’t allowed on the grounds. It’s a masquerade ball, so no one will even see her face.”

“But you’ll be working,” Freddie says, clutching at straws. “Spencer will be going, won’t he? You need to watch him.”

“I can do both,” I insist. I soften my voice, “Rose isn’t a Duke. She’s got a life, friends, and a job. You can’t expect her to drop everything for us. She’s not a prisoner. She can make her own choices.”

We both know he’s annoyed about more than her attending a party.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Freddie says. “In the meantime, I want at least one of us with Spencer at all times on top of our standard security. You’re on watch today. Callen will do it tomorrow. I’ll join you at night to double down on patrols. That’s when the Killers Club is more likely to act.”

Having a private security firm helping us is great, but they're not the Dukes. When the Killers Club returns to finish what they've started, we must be ready.

"Where are you going now?" I ask. "Back to the house?"

"Shopping," he replies. "Rose can't live in your clothes forever."

I get out, and the car roars past. Rose might not want to come to the ball, but we can't keep her locked away. If we do, she'll end up hating us. No man can clip her wings. A woman like Rose needs to fly.

CHAPTER 15

IVY

The canned American laughter from Friends re-runs will haunt my dreams. Callen's beady eyes watch me from the other side of the living room, glancing up from his laptop screen at regular intervals. He's been my shadow today. He even followed me when I went to the toilet. I tested the theory by making a farting noise with my hands and quickly poking my head around the door to find him chuckling. He doesn't trust me.

My skin prickles as his gaze scorches into the back of my head. He can stare all he likes, but he won't find answers in my ponytail.

I turn to catch him in the act and ask for the third time, "What are you working on?"

He grins and returns to tap away on his keyboard. "None of your business."

"Maybe I can help?" I suggest. "I'm a journalist."

"And I'm a lone wolf," he replies, reclining in the armchair and stretching. His biceps ripple, and he smirks. He looks good, and fucking knows it. "Why don't you go back to watching TV and not worrying your little head about anything important? Freddie and Seb will be back to play with you soon. If you're bored, you can make me a cuppa."

"Go to hell."

I cross my arms in a sulk. A few minutes later, the door rattles, and Freddie returns. His arms are laden with different-sized shopping bags. You can tell whatever he bought is from designer boutiques because they're made from thick paper, not the usual plastic shit.

"Someone's been splashing the cash," Callen remarks, running his hand through his shoulder-length hair to flex his muscles more. "What's the

occasion?”

Freddie scowls and ignores him, then places them at my feet. “These are for you.”

My jaw drops. “What are they?”

“Clothes,” Freddie replies. “I didn’t know your size and wasn’t sure about your style, but the shop assistants were helpful.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I say, unwrapping a gorgeous dress from a mountain of tissue paper. It’s beautifully made, yet impractical for binge-watching TV. Seeing the zeros on the price tags, my eyes almost pop out of their sockets. “Holy shit.”

“What is it?” Freddie asks. “Don’t you like it?”

“It’s not that. They’re gorgeous,” I insist. “But all of this must have cost a fortune.”

Freddie shrugs nonchalantly. “If I can’t spend money on the people I care about, what’s the point in having it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with a man wanting to spoil you, princess,” Callen chips in, tainting Freddie’s gesture with his mocking tone. “Why don’t you dress up for us?”

“I can’t accept this,” I say, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice. Callen words burrow under my skin. “I have a wardrobe full of clothes at home. I could have gone to pack a bag.”

“It’s too dangerous for you to go home right now.” Freddie’s face falls. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

Callen’s sly blue eyes sparkle. Mission accomplished.

“I mean, they’re gorgeous,” I say, spotting a stunning lingerie set stashed among the goodies. “But you shouldn’t have.” I ruffle in another bag and take out a masquerade mask and a ball gown. I raise my eyebrows. “I’m not sure what you see women wearing in London, but I don’t know when I’ll get the chance to wear this.”

“Seb thinks you’ll have an occasion,” Freddie replies. His lips press into a thin, disapproving line.

Callen lets out a low whistle. “He wants to take Rose *there*?”

“Take me, where?” I ask.

“Nothing is decided yet,” Freddie snaps. From the intense look in his eyes, it’s clear he doesn’t want me to go to this mysterious place.

“Who wouldn’t want to dress like a real princess?” Callen taunts.

I take a deep breath, appeasing my murderous instincts by imagining how

satisfying it would be to punch him in the jaw.

“I hope the clothes will make you more comfortable,” Freddie says, putting an end to the conversation. He turns to glare at Callen. “Have you been behaving yourself while I’ve been gone?”

“I’m always on my best behaviour,” Callen replies. “Aren’t I, Rose?”

Yeah, fucking right. My cheeks heat. How can I still possibly find Callen attractive? My vagina has serious problems and needs therapy. From now on, I need my brain to act like a bodyguard. I’ll get a ‘No entry to pierced Scots’ sign tattooed down there if it’ll help.

“I need to leave again. Seb and I will be gone until tomorrow morning,” Freddie says apologetically. “Will you be okay here, Rose?”

“Don’t worry,” Callen says. “She’s safe with me.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I grumble.

“Aw, princess.” Callen pouts. “Do you want to get rid of me?”

Yes, I do—preferably down a ten-foot-deep hole that he can’t claw his way out of.

“It’s not going to be like this forever, Rose,” Freddie says. If he were a little less worried about my safety and more concerned about solving their cases, leaving me alone would be the least of his concerns.

“Don’t expect me to cook for her,” Callen says.

“I wouldn’t eat anything that you’ve made, anyway,” I retort. Well, unless you count swallowing his cum. Callen snorts. Clearly, he’s having the same thought.

Freddie looks between us. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Oh yeah,” I reply sarcastically, “I’ll be just fine.”

Although Callen won’t be if he keeps pushing my buttons...

CHAPTER 16

Hours pass. Someone needs to give me an award for successfully ignoring Callen when he slurps endless mugs of tea like the Hoover from the Teletubbies. If I cut him, he'll bleed enough tea to fill a hundred teapots.

When my stomach stops gurgling for attention, I'll figure out how to shake him off long enough to snoop around. It's day two, and I still have no valuable information for the club. I make a humphing noise and head into the kitchen to search for ingredients. I'm not cooking for him. He can starve for all I care.

I stand on my tiptoes and peer inside the cupboards. Callen's voice creeping up behind me makes me jump. "Looking for something?"

"Jesus!" I scold. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Do you have to follow me everywhere? What do you think I'm going to do?" I point to sugar and flour with questionable best-before dates. "Steal your baking ingredients?"

"We don't cook," he says.

"No shit," I mutter. Apart from bread, chocolate spread, crisps, and biscuits, there's no proper food at all. "What about a takeaway?"

"We don't order takeaways," he replies, looking at me like I've suggested we make a cyanide-filled cake. "We can't have strangers knocking on our door."

"So, what do you eat then?" I snap. Their muscles have to come from somewhere. Abs like theirs don't just sprout out of thin air! "Other people's misery?"

Callen laughs. "We go out."

“Well, I’m not allowed to leave.” I cross my arms. “What do you think Freddie will say if I starve to death?”

He checks his watch. It’s only eight o’clock, but it’s already dark outside, so it seems later.

“There’s a pizza place at the end of the street,” he muses aloud. “I can call ahead to place an order.”

“Fine.” I slam the cupboard door shut. “But you better hurry, because you won’t like me when I’m hungry.”

“Is that a threat, princess?” he asks. “How badly do you want a deep-filled, stuffed crust?”

“Just call the fucking number,” I hiss. Hangry is an understatement. “Or I could take a walk to get it myself?” I play his bluff. There’s no way he’ll let me leave. “You said it’s not far…”

“Not a chance,” he says. Bingo. He’s buying it. He picks up the phone and dials, then swears down the phone. “Their phone line is down.”

“I can—”

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re staying here under our lock and key,” he growls. “I can walk there, but it’ll be twenty minutes. They cook them fresh.”

I scowl, feigning annoyance, but I’m already planning where I’m going to explore first. Callen grabs a leather jacket and pulls a beanie over his head, keeping his long hair under wraps.

“I’d tell you not to come back,” I say, returning to my spot on the sofa, “but I want my pizza.”

He calls over his shoulder, “Don’t cause any trouble when I’m gone.”

The door closes, but I don’t move straight away. If Callen is the suspicious person I think he is, he’ll test me. I’m right. A few minutes later, as predicted, he returns to check I’m still there.

“What?” I look up with wide, innocent eyes and bat my eyelashes. “Disappointed that I’m not flicking my bean?”

He grins and licks his lips. “Definitely.”

“Fuck you, Callen.”

The door closes for a second time. I cautiously move to the window and watch him disappear down the street until he vanishes from view. The search is on. My twenty-minute timer starts now. I reach for my ruby ring, spinning the stone clockwise twice to activate the micro camera jammer. It’s a hidden device that Penelope designed to disable all cameras within a twenty-foot

radius. It's real spy shit.

I go to his laptop. Password protected, of course. He's precariously balanced a stack of papers underneath it, and a folder with 'Bexley' written on the cover is at the top. It makes sense that a spineless coward like Spencer hired protection. But do the Dukes know they're protecting a monster?

I peer inside the folder to see a photograph of Doyle's body filling the hot tub like a lilo. There's a nice message written on the floor, too. Real subtle. I ruffle through the pages to see more pictures and freeze when I see him. *Spencer*. His leering smile haunts my nightmares. I want to take a potato peeler to his lips and tear them off... a possibility that's edging closer, mainly because the Dukes can give me access.

What's more important? Killing Spencer or following Alaric's orders?

I put the papers back carefully. I don't have long until Callen returns and my next stop is the top floor. They're hiding something up there, and I need to discover what it is.

I climb the stairs two at a time. Freddie gave me free rein of the house, so, technically, I'm doing nothing wrong. When I enter, nothing looks unusual from the outset. It's just your average bachelor pad. I run my fingers over the bar top. Shelves line the black walls. Maybe they have the same setup as HQ with a hidden door. I try moving books on the shelves, but nothing.

Behind the sofa? A few crumpled fivers and dust bunnies. Behind the bar? Enough booze to live through a pandemic but no criminal activity. Under a shag rug? No trap door. There's nothing! I'm about to drown my sorrows in frustration when I spot it. *There*. Logs stacked in the fireplace on the other side of the room don't look like they've been burned. There's no chimney on the outside of the house. *Come to Mumma!*

Ten minutes to go.

I slide my hand over the mantelpiece and kneel down. No one recommends sticking your hand up a chimney, but I do it anyway. I reach into the blackness to grope the walls. There's no soot, which proves it's a decorative piece or an entranceway.

My fingers explore the smooth walls, then stumble across something. A lever? A button? Something that shouldn't be there. I flick it, then pull back. When I do, the back panel of the fireplace moves. It slides and disappears into the floor to reveal another door with a click. There's no way any of the guys could squeeze through that gap when a hobbit would struggle to fit. I stand up, scanning the fireplace again, and notice tiny hinges disguised by a

trailing plant on its left side.

The entire fireplace is the same height as my shoulder, and I use all of my strength to swing it away from the wall to reveal the rest of the door. It's smaller than a standard door but usable. I've stumbled on the jackpot. This is what I've been searching for.

Inside, the adjoining room has many computer screens, resembling Penelope's office at HQ. The pungent smell of gunpowder hits me instantly. From the supplies on a workbench, it looks like someone has been experimenting with explosives. A large desk and filing cabinet sit in the corner, but the key items that catch my eye are mounted on the walls. Weapons.

Guns of all sizes. Rows and rows of them. Windowed cabinets create aisles down the middle of the room, holding knives and other devices. Most women get excited about seeing displays in jewellery shops, but the Duke's collection is impressive.

I open a drawer to see rows of bullets. They have more ammunition than I expected. I don't know how anyone got away with smuggling so many weapons into the city without Alaric knowing. He's aware of all the key players, so the Dukes must have connections he doesn't know about.

There's also a steel lift shaft to my left. I've not seen an opening anywhere else in the house, so there must be another hidden room in the basement. Knowing about their weapons stash is useful, but I need more than that.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath as I try to force open the filing cabinet. It's locked and requires a combination. Isn't a moving fireplace enough of a security measure? "There has to be something..."

I head to the desk to check the unlocked drawers. The first three are filled with boring stationery items lined up neatly. I pull open the bottom drawer and freeze.

A brown manilla folder reads:

Daisy Penrose.

My heart sinks as I flick through the reams of paper. There are some photographs of our cottage—what remains of it, anyway. It was sold at auction and bought by a developer who changed its appearance dramatically. There's another photograph too. A grainy image of me and Freddie on the night we met. It's too blurry to make out any of our features, but he must have pulled it from a CCTV camera. Something Penelope missed. There's a

coroner's report with hastily written notes in the margins—scraps of paper with roughly drawn timelines trying to map out my life but drawing blanks. If the Dukes didn't find out my secret, no one can.

I look again at the hazy image of the couple holding hands under the street lights. The woman in the photo is oblivious to what's coming next and how her entire life will change. I squint at the black cab driving past. A detail I forgot about until now. On another page, Freddie has blown up the registration plates of the vehicle, and a name is written next to it:

Vincent.

There's an arrow pointing to another name:

Callen.

“Shit,” I mutter.

A clock on the wall chimes to let me know my time is almost up. I haven't learned much about the Dukes' clients, but I have my own questions. Who is Vincent, what is his connection to Callen, and why was Freddie tracking the black cab that saw us the night I disappeared?

I hurriedly put everything back where I found it and scamper through the opening. As soon as I swing the fireplace door closed, the panel slides from the floor into its normal position. Neat, but I can't stick around to admire their architecture. I fly down the sets of stairs. As I approach the living room, a floorboard creaks. It's not the sound an old house makes in the wind. There's weight behind it.

“Callen?” I call. He's the type of man who stomps and declares his presence. No response. “Pippy?”

I don't have any weapons on me, but I move cautiously. Pippy whines from another room, and her collar jingles as she runs away. When I turn the corner, a familiar figure confronts me.

“Tweedledee?” I look him up and down. He's panting. His entire face is beet red, and he scans the room for signs of life. “What're you doing here?”

“Where are they?” he grunts.

His eyes are wild. From a glance, I can tell he's lost control of his

emotions. His grief has compromised his judgement.

I stay calm. “How did you find me?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he snarls. “Where are they, Ivy?”

From the way his jeans crease and his jacket pockets bulge, he’s armed. Guns, knives, and likely enough firepower to take down the entire street. Has he forgotten we’re supposed to be inconspicuous or that he’s breaking another crucial principle? Nothing can jeopardise the mission of another agent.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I remind him. “I still have twenty-four hours.”

“I don’t care about the fucking club!” His throat is hoarse from desperate anguish. I recognise it. It’s how I felt after Daisy died. I was too weak to leave my hospital bed, but my thirst for revenge was stronger than anything I’d experienced before.

I see now why Alaric made me wait to start ticking names off my hit list and sent me overseas. Tweedledee is blind to reason. When your feelings run rampant, your other senses dull. Alaric tasked me with completing this job. A loose cannon like him threatens everything.

“You need to leave, Tom.” I use his real name for the first time—well, what I assume is his real name. You can never be sure. “If the club finds out you’re here, there will be consequences.”

I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt, but it’s his last chance. If he has slipped out of HQ undetected and returned quickly, he stands a chance at keeping his job. I’ve only heard about one other agent who broke their oath. He revealed his identity and went rogue. He met his end in a furnace.

“I understand how you’re feeling,” I say, daring to step closer. “But this isn’t how we do things. You need to leave this to me.”

“Leave this to you?” He draws his gun and levels it at me. “I don’t think so.”

No way, Josephine! Nobody points a gun barrel at me, agent or not. Now I’m pissed. We circle each other.

“How do you know Frederick James?” he demands. “Why did he want to protect you?”

They’ve identified Freddie. Do they know about Seb and Callen, too? Did Bram break his silence, or did Penelope’s sleuthing unveil their identities?

“If Stephanie and Alaric trust me, that should be enough.” My eyes narrow. “Put down your fucking weapon, or we’ll have a real problem.”

“Where are they?” Tom doesn’t lower his weapon. The fucker raises it at

my head instead. “Are they here?”

“They’re not here.”

“I don’t believe you,” he sneers. “You’re protecting them.”

“Why would I do that?” He’s getting on my last nerve. “This is my mission. Killing them now is not part of the plan. I need more information first.”

“I don’t care about information!” He clicks the safety off. “I care about putting bullets in them. They killed Aaron! Don’t you get that? If you stand in my way, I’ll shoot you.”

His eyes dart around, presumably searching for a massive man crouched behind the sofa or hiding behind a curtain, and I take my split-second chance. I hurtle across the room and knock him to the ground. The element of surprise catches him off-guard. I don’t want to kill him—maim him perhaps—but I will if I have to.

Our bodies skid and tumble onto a glass coffee table with a crash. We smash right through it. He breaks the fall, and shards fly in different directions.

Callen told me not to cause trouble, but I can’t help it if trouble finds me.

CHAPTER 17

CALLEN

The pizza boxes warm my hands. I ordered two larges because I'm not willing to share. Let's hope Rose likes extra hot sauce because I'll enjoy watching her pant, just like she did over my cock.

I check the time. I've been gone longer than I'd hoped. Since my last attempt at in-house surveillance, Freddie disabled all my other hidden cameras. He doesn't want his princess being watched or put at risk if anyone else finds the footage.

It's bullshit. If I had my way, I'd make her wear a collar to track her every move. I see through her act. I've seen her lose control before, and she's hiding something, but I don't know what... yet.

I approach the house and see a vehicle I don't recognise parked outside. I know all the other resident's cars and their plates. I step closer to the vehicle to inspect it. Bulletproof glass. Something's wrong.

The front gate isn't closed properly, and I know I shut it when I left. My instincts kick in. Instead of entering the house through the front door, I detour through the garage. There's one vacant parking spot, ruling out my theory that Seb and Freddie returned early.

I close the door quietly behind me and creep up the stairs. Like always, I'm armed. I go nowhere without a knife, gun, and more tricks up my sleeve. I carefully place the pizzas down. Fuck it. I grab a slice of goodness, shoving half of it into my mouth for good measure. If I'm walking into an ambush, I need my energy. These pizzas are too good to be reheated.

A giant smash comes from the living room. Voices. A male and female. There's a struggle, but I hang back. I'm not Freddie or Seb, who would charge in like gallant knights brandishing swords to save a fair maiden.

I wait and tiptoe around, pressing my back against the wall to hear snatches of their conversation.

“You’re standing in my way!” the man blasts. He’s out of breath. “Out of everyone, I thought you’d get it. You should understand why I need to do this.”

“This isn’t the way,” Rose hisses. Her voice is firm and authoritative. “I won’t let you ruin what I’ve been working towards.”

“Do you know what I think?” he spits. My hands jump to my gun at the bitterness of his tone. “I think you like Frederick James. He clearly likes you. How can we trust a word you say?”

Oomph!

I dare to poke my head around the corner. Rose pins the man between her thighs, while he lies among the shattered remains of our coffee table. A gun lies a few inches away from his hand. The force of falling must have knocked it from his grasp.

Thwack! She punches him hard in the face, spraying blood all over our lovely rug. *Well done, princess.* Poor Freddie will be upset. He cares about his precious furniture too much.

“Never question my loyalty.” Her icy tone sends an electric shock down to my cock. “This is my fucking job, not yours.”

He lurches for his gun, but she’s quicker. She grabs it in a slick motion and holds it under his chin.

“Don’t make me shoot you,” she warns. “I don’t want to do this, but I will if I have to. You need to walk away. This is your last chance.”

A surge of adrenaline races through him. He’s bigger and uses his physical strength to push her backwards. She stumbles, then stands.

“You’re going to regret standing between me and them,” he threatens, staggering to his feet.

Most people would fall to their knees and beg for their lives, but not Rose. She simply laughs. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I knew she was special, but this woman is something else.

His face pales. He knows things about her I don’t. Bad things. Things that make him tense his arse cheeks to avoid shitting himself.

“You can try to kill me.” Rose shrugs. “But not if I kill you first.”

CHAPTER 18

Tom roars like a starving lion being released from a cage. I swerve to narrowly miss him, and he thuds into a hanging painting. The frame cracks from the force. Oops.

He uses the wall to propel himself like he's on the ropes of a boxing ring, but I dodge and avoid an incoming punch. He's acting clumsy, fighting like we're in a pub brawl, forgetting all of his training. I rebut by smacking him in the face with the gun. That should have knocked him out, but he only staggers. Sheer willpower keeps him standing. Loss consumes your entire being and allows you to do things you never thought possible.

"You fucker!" I yelp as he takes me by surprise and grabs my ponytail. No one touches my hair without permission.

He wrestles, trying to grab the gun, but I raise my knee to slam dunk his balls. He falls, clutching his crown jewels. Now it's on. His glare tells me he'll do anything to kill the Dukes tonight, including removing me from the equation.

Killing another agent is against the Killers Club code, but Tom's gone rogue. He's beyond saving. Even if he left the house now, his loyalty would be questioned. He's jeopardised a mission and is a dead man walking.

Tom's eyes stray to a photograph, and he mutters, "Sebastian Montgomery..." He's surprised. "He's the third Duke?"

They don't know about Seb. Relief rushes through me. That means I have more time to learn about Spencer. If they had found out about Seb, Stephanie would have pulled me out already.

"Figures that you're fucking him," Tom scoffs. "This keeps getting better and better. My loyalty won't be questioned, but yours will."

“If you want to kill them,” I spit through gritted teeth, “you’ll have to go through me.”

I’ll kill the Dukes on my terms. They’re not dying yet. Tonight, I’m saving them. Glass crunches under my feet. Thank fuck I’m breaking in a new pair of trainers, otherwise, the soles of my feet would be shredded.

Tom runs at me. I don’t move quickly enough, and his fist clips the side of my face, sending me reeling. He pulls a knife from up his sleeve. I pirouette like a graceful ballerina to avoid a jab to my ribs, but his arm keeps going, lodging the blade into the wall. This place will need redecorating.

“It’s over, Tom,” I say, pointing the gun at him. “Say hi to your brother from me.”

I squeeze the trigger and land a perfect shot between his eyes. Despite his lack of judgement, he’s already in enough pain. I don’t need to make him suffer. His dead body falls to the floor and lands with a thud, leaving a blood spray behind him.

Suddenly, the front door opens. Seb and Freddie’s voices float towards me. How am I going to explain this? Then, out of nowhere, a figure approaches from behind me.

Callen grabs my wrist, snatches the gun from my hand, and murmurs, “I’ll take it from here, princess.”

He thrusts me behind him so when Seb and Freddie walk in, they see Callen pointing the gun at the wall.

What did Callen hear? How long was he standing there? And why the fuck is he protecting me?

CHAPTER 19

CALLEN

Freddie's eyes narrow in suspicion, looking from the gun in my hand to our newest furniture addition. "Why is there a dead body in our living room?"

Thankfully, thinking under pressure is what I do best.

"Don't you think he adds to the aesthetic?" I reply. "The addition of brains gives the room an extra pop."

"Skip the bullshit, Callen," Seb growls. "Start talking."

"What can I say? I'm a hero." I shrug casually, while Rose keeps her sweet, sassy-talking mouth shut for a change. "I saved Rose from an intruder."

"Rose!" Seb hurries over and wraps his arm around Little Miss Innocent's shaking shoulders. She's giving an Oscar-winning performance with a trembling bottom lip. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," she stammers. Damn, she's good. "It all happened so fast..."

"What happened, Callen?" Freddie growls, snatching the gun from my hand and inspecting it. "This isn't one of ours."

"It's his." I point at the corpse. "He burst in here shouting about revenge for his brother and grabbed Rose in a chokehold. I tackled him to the ground to free her."

Why not make myself sound like a hero?

"Is that what happened, Rose?" Freddie asks.

I stifle a laugh at the irony. He's trusting her word over mine. Doesn't he know it's the quiet ones you need to watch out for? Rose is a cold-blooded, ruthless killer hiding in plain sight, but I won't spill her secret yet. First, I'll find out what game she's playing and who she is, without Seb or Freddie

muscling in. In the meantime, I'll carry more weapons.

"Yes," Rose affirms my story. She has to unless she wants to admit that she pulled the trigger herself. "He got inside somehow. Callen..."

"Saved you from the big scary man," I prompt her. "Didn't I, Rose?"

Her jaw tenses and she replies coolly, "Yes, you did."

The others don't notice. They're too busy flapping around and wanting to kiss her boo-boos better. Seb puts his fingers under her chin and turns her face to examine the cut on her face from a shard of glass. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine," she dismisses. "It's just a scratch."

"He'd have torn her pretty head off if I wasn't around," I say to infuriate her more. "She's lucky I was here."

"Our location is compromised," Seb says. Where did Freddie find this chump? The only thing private education taught him was to state the fucking obvious. "If they know where we live, it's not safe here."

Freddie nods and turns to me. "You made the mess. Now you need to clear it up." My smug grin vanishes, and Rose coughs to disguise a laugh behind her hand. She owes me. Cleaning is no fun. "We will meet you at the safe house."

"A safe house?" Rose squeaks. "You have one of those?"

Buckle up, buttercup. Her friends won't be able to track her down where we're going and when I get her alone, she'll give me the answers I want... or I'll have to force them out of her.

CHAPTER 20

FREDDIE

Seb and I returned home because our security system alerted us to an unfamiliar registration plate in the area. Even without him around, Bram is still watching out for us. He's alive, I can feel it. If he wasn't, they would have left him for us to find, just like Spencer's men.

"Isn't it your turn to do the hard work?" Callen asks, crossing his arms in defiance. "I killed an intruder and saved Rose. How is it fair that I have to clean up too?"

Chunks of brain cover our walls, yet Callen looks like his birthday has come early. He wears a shit-eating smirk while Rose shakes in terror. Seb strokes her hair while she snuggles into his chest, staining his white shirt with blood. Guilt twists in the pit of my stomach. What have I done by bringing her here?

"Because you're just that capable, Callen," I reply sarcastically and nudge my head at the mess. "Dispose of the body, then meet us there." I turn to Rose. "You need to get clothes together because we need to hit the road."

We're on borrowed time until the Killers Club discovers an agent is missing, but Rose doesn't move.

"Rose," I say more sharply to get her attention. "We need to go. You have five minutes."

"I'll help her," Seb says.

The two of them disappear upstairs, leaving Callen and me alone. His smug demeanour puts me on edge. The Dukes should trust each other, but Callen is used to working alone.

"Are you sure you've told me everything?"

"Positive," he replies.

Even if my gut is telling me something is wrong, I have to take his word for it. “Did he say anything when he came in?”

Callen shakes his head. “Just the usual bullshit you’d expect after I killed his twin.”

“But how did he find us?”

“It wasn’t exactly the right time to give him an interrogation,” Callen says. “I was too busy trying to stop him from choking Jessica Rabbit.”

Moments later, Rose and Seb return. They’re carrying the shopping bags filled with the new clothes I bought her earlier.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t unpack,” she murmurs, managing to keep her composure despite the trauma of the evening.

Seb carries two pizza boxes in his arms.

“Where did you get those?” I ask.

“We went out to get them right before the man came in,” Rose interjects. “I’m sure Callen won’t mind if we take them with us.”

Callen’s lip curls.

“Clean-up and pizza don’t mix,” I say before he can argue. “Oh, and there’s one more thing...” I loosen my tie and pull it off.

Callen raises his eyebrows. “It’s a little early for bondage, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry, Rose,” I say, approaching her with the tie, “but we need to blindfold you for the drive.”

“What?” she stammers. “But I—”

“Trust me,” I say, “it’s better that you don’t know where we’re heading.”

She crosses her arms. “Are you sure that’s necessary?”

“I’m afraid so.” I can’t be too careful after what happened tonight. “We’ll put it on in the car.”

“What about your job? Protecting the rich asshole?” Rose asks. “I thought you were meant to be watching him all day.”

“Some things are more important than work,” I say.

“A road trip will be fun,” Seb says to lighten the mood. Pippy runs across the room to greet him, skipping past the corpse with half his head missing. She paws at Seb’s feet. “See? At least someone’s excited.”

“Drive safely,” Callen says. “And watch your back. We don’t know where the Killers Club is or what they want...”

CHAPTER 21

I run my finger over the windowsill to disturb a thick layer of dust and gaze at the uninterrupted starry view. They mustn't come to their safe house often. Out of the bedroom window, a dense forest stretches as far as I can see. We're in the middle of nowhere, nestled between hills, surrounded by woodlands and overgrown fields. No one will find us here.

Annoyingly, Freddie kept his word. I wore a blindfold for the entire journey. I tried to memorise the route and the road turns, but I lost track as the hours passed. This is not a routine mission. I'm stuck at an unknown location with the Dukes, the Killers Club doesn't know where I am, and Callen is toying with me. When he returns, I'll try to work out his next move. In the meantime, I can't let Seb or Freddie suspect anything is wrong.

My thoughts stray to HQ and what's happening there. Alaric and Stephanie will understand why I haven't killed them yet, right? Tweedledee threw my plans off course, but he's given me more time to collect information about the Dukes—as long as I can keep my secret and survive.

“Rose?” Seb calls from downstairs. “Are you okay up there?”

“I'll be down in a sec,” I reply.

I bite down on my back teeth to stop them from chattering. An icy shower isn't my favourite way to spend an evening, but I had to wash the blood away. Finding a jumper among the clothes Freddie bought, I pull it tighter around my body to try to warm up. The house hasn't been heated for months, and there's no electricity either. Freddie's trying to rouse the dormant boiler, and Seb's found candles to guide us around.

The safe house might be considered cozy if we hadn't returned to medieval times. Daisy would have liked it. It's a stone cottage and the

opposite of the Dukes' minimalist London home. It's more like a family holiday rental than a gang hide-out. Each room has a fireplace, chintzy furniture, and trinkets everywhere. When we arrived, I spied a collection of teapots balanced atop the kitchen cupboards in the darkness.

It's showtime, I've.

The old floorboards wheeze under my feet as I grab the candle holder and use the flickering flame to illuminate the small landing. Three other bedrooms and a shared bathroom lead from it. I grimace at the unsightly emerald, green carpet with a diamond pattern. The seventies called and want it back.

I follow the wooden staircase toward Seb and Freddie's voices. They're talking in hushed, urgent tones. They've managed to find a torch, and Seb is shining it into a cupboard under the stairs.

"Sorry." Seb grins apologetically when he sees me. The candlelight illuminates the sides of his face, bouncing off his perfect cheekbones.

"Fuck," Freddie swears as Seb moves the torch. "Keep shining the light here!"

I peer inside. "Any luck?"

"Not yet," Freddie groans, withdrawing from the cupboard and rubbing his hands together. "I'll have to take a proper look in the morning. It'll be candles for us tonight."

"We've got blankets, too," Seb says, noticing me shiver. "Come through to the living room. It'll be warmer there."

I follow him through. There are two sofas, a television that's a metre wide at the back, and a funky cuckoo clock above the fireplace that stopped working long ago.

"Interesting decor," I comment. I hold the candle up to the framed photographs on the wall. There are a few landscape shots and others of the same group of children grinning at the camera.

"Recognise me?" Seb points at a cheeky kid sticking his tongue out. "It's me and some of my cousins."

I kick myself for not seeing it sooner. I've seen the smiling faces of the young royals splashed across newspapers all my life. This house must be under royal protection somehow. The Killers Club crosses many lines. I've killed mafia bosses, sultans, and the mistresses of all the above, but we don't touch the monarchy—well, we try not to, anyway. It's too dangerous, and some of them are rumoured to be our clients.

“You’re the troublemaker of the group,” I comment, noticing how all the other kids have picture-perfect poses.

“That’s Seb for you,” Freddie says, kneeling by the fireplace. Thankfully, there’s a pile of wood ready to go.

“Here.” Seb grabs a blanket from the sofa and wraps it around my shoulders. “That’ll help.”

I waddle to the sofa in my blanket shroud and collapse onto it. It sags under my weight, letting me sink into the cushions. Damn, it’s more comfortable than it looks.

“Done,” Freddie declares proudly as the fire catches. He comes to sit next to me. The burning smell and crackles fill the room, but the heat emanating from his body will warm me faster.

Seb’s ringing phone makes me jump.

“You still have a signal out here?” I ask.

“It’s a little patchy, but it’s better on the first floor,” he replies, then groans as he looks at the screen. “It’s Callen. I better take it.”

Seb leaves. Freddie doesn’t talk, and neither do I. We watch the flames jump around in the grate, hypnotised by their dance.

“I never meant for any of this to happen, Rose,” Freddie murmurs. The strands of silver through his hair look almost golden in the light as he pushes it out of his face. “This is all my fault.”

My stomach lurches. There it is again. Guilt. Is part of me pleased we escaped the city because it means I get to pretend to be Rose for a little longer? Or am I just avoiding the inevitable? We’re not meant to be, no matter what Freddie says. We come from opposing worlds.

Freddie’s hand slides under my blanket and finds my hand. His skin is icy cold.

I squeeze his hand. “You’re freezing.”

“I’m fine,” he insists. I unhook some of the blanket stuck under my arse and drape it over his lap. I gave their house the worst makeover, so it’s the least I can do. “Thanks. You know, you’re acting very calm for someone who watched a man die...”

“Would you prefer I be a crying mess?” I rebuff, hoping that my strong boss bitch vibes will help make the bullshit I’m about to say more convincing. “The truth is, he was standing there one minute and on the floor the next. I was looking away when Callen shot him. All I heard was the noise and... It happened so fast.”

“I shouldn’t have taken you to our place,” Freddie says. “I didn’t think they’d be able to trace us. I put you in harm’s way.”

I stare into his piercing eyes and hold his gaze. Suddenly, I’m very aware of how close our bodies are. In another life, this is a moment I’d have dreamed about. He looks at me like I’m the only woman in the world that matters.

My mind races with words I can’t speak. *You don’t know who I am, Freddie. You don’t understand how much danger you’re in now the Killers Club knows who you are. I am here to kill you. All of you.* Instead, I only manage to say, “You didn’t know what would happen.”

“I won’t let any of them hurt you,” Freddie says. “I’d die to protect you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Freddie...”

“We lost the first chance we had,” he says. “I won’t lose the second one.”

CHAPTER 22

FREDDIE

Time slows. Everything has been building up to this moment. During the war, the royals used this cottage to hide out. They rarely use the place anymore, so it's a perfect spot for us to avoid a group of deadly assassins... but even that doesn't seem to matter when her eyes meet mine.

"Freddie..." Rose resists, holding back a part of herself that I desperately want to set free. "This is crazy. All of this... it's..."

"You don't have to be scared."

"But I am," she says. "Everything is changing so fast."

Her pupils dilate. She's fighting her desire, hiding what she truly wants when we can both feel it.

"Darling," I murmur, "you're a part of our lives now, whether you like it or not."

She lowers her head, breaking our trance. "What if I don't belong here?"

"But you do," I insist, "because you belong with me."

The fire crackles loudly as I lean in as if it can sense the mounting chemistry between us. Her gaze lingers on my lips while she bites hers. She's scared, and it's my job to give her security. I brush a loose red hair from her cheek and tuck it behind her ear.

Seb stomps back into the room and makes her spring away from me. Fuck. He looks questioningly between us, and his hands curl into fists.

Rose's voice is a few pitches higher than usual. "Seb, we..."

He doesn't lunge at me.

"Callen is done," Seb reports. "No sign of the Killers Club. He'll be heading here soon."

I cough to clear my throat. "Good."

Can Seb sense the simmering tension between us? Is he jealous? Angry? Finally, he breaks the silence. "I'm going to have an early night."

"You mean, you're happy to leave us down here?" Rose asks. "Alone?"

Seb grunts in response, "Yes."

"But our deal..."

"What deal?" I ask sharply.

There's something I'm missing, but both of them ignore me.

Seb takes a deep breath and says, "You need this." His eyes soften. "Both of you do."

I turn to Rose as he leaves the room. "What the hell was that?"

"That," she says, "was him giving us permission to do this."

Before I can argue that no one needs permission to do anything, her lips are on mine and years melt away because nothing else matters but how good her mouth feels on mine.

CHAPTER 23

IVY

Kissing Freddie is bittersweet, like stepping back in time. A kiss brimming with promises I'll never be able to keep. A life I'll never be able to have. The phantom of a dream is within touching distance, yet it's an impossibility. I can't keep the delusion going forever, but I cling onto it for a little longer... my last shred of humanity... the last of Ivy Penrose.

Freddie will find out who I am soon. His hopes will be butchered, just like mine were. The Killers Club will learn about Tom's disappearance and track us down. I'll be able to hold Callen responsible and explain his death away when Alaric and Stephanie search for an explanation. Until then, I'll be Rose.

I'm not stupid. I know I shouldn't be kissing Freddie. I should kill him, and I'm falling into dangerous territory. A place that threatens my credibility as an agent and years of hard work. But none of that matters when Freddie draws me closer.

I climb onto his lap. The fire warms the room, but his calloused fingers chill my skin as they slide under my jumper and over my back. His touch is charged with desire. A lust more potent than anything I've experienced before. His hands explore me, stroke my spine, and ignite a buried need deep inside me.

My reservations vanish as I wrap my hands around his neck and tumble head-first into a moment I shouldn't have but can't resist. A moment Spencer stole from me. Spencer didn't only take my sister. He took my life and everything I should have had... including Freddie.

Freddie murmurs into my mouth, "You're beautiful."

He pulls my jumper over my head. It's a blur of hands, mouths, and heat.

A chain reaction that we are powerless to stop now that it's started. Our bodies fit together like the pieces of a puzzle slotting in place. I unbutton his shirt and tug it off his shoulders. Dark hair covers his carved, muscled chest, and I run my fingers through it.

Like Callen and Seb, Freddie is covered in scars, but one is especially gnarly. It spans across his right rib and would have torn him open. I pause to stroke his golden skin. "Where did you get this?"

Freddie freezes, pausing the sizzling sensation for a second. "Do you remember what I told you about my family being in an accident?"

Something about that sounds familiar, but the memory hides behind a veil like I'm remembering a scene from a film I haven't watched since childhood. I nod, anyway. Darkness stirs behind Freddie's eyes. Is it regret? Sadness?

"It was my fault." His words are barely audible. He's not just talking to me now, but to himself. "It's my fault they're dead."

My heart skips a beat—not because of Freddie's omission, but because it's something I understand. Better than anyone.

"What happened?"

I expect him to dismiss my question and tell me it's a story for another time, but he doesn't. He sighs and looks at his scar, wincing in invisible pain. My tits are practically falling out of my bra, but he doesn't look at them as his gaze moves back to my face. His past mistakes haunt his amber eyes, and their sparkle dulls.

"I used to be in the police force," he explains. That doesn't surprise me. From what I've seen, Freddie makes the rules. He likes routine and giving orders. "But I quit the force and moved overseas to Italy. My mother is Italian, hence the slight accent."

"You hadn't been back in the UK long when I first met you," I recall.

Freddie nods while I stroke his shoulder, encouraging him to continue.

"I moved my parents and sister out there to be with me," he explains. "They were all the family I had, and I bought a beautiful Italian vineyard. It was small, yes, but it was our slice of heaven. It was the most beautiful place on earth..." A small smile dances over his lips as he replays the memory, and then they set into a grim line. "But I got mixed up in the wrong crowd. I started dealing weapons and upset the wrong person."

My stomach churns. I'm too familiar with the sickening dread that comes from knowing your actions wiped the person you loved the most from this world. You live in a vortex of what-ifs and maybes. Forever sentenced to a

purgatory of regret and self-torture. Confined to a prison in your head with a life sentence and no prospect of escape.

What if I saw through Spencer's bullshit? Daisy had warned me. I ignored the red flags because he wooed me with grand gestures and false charm. She wanted me to leave him, but I wanted to see the best in him.

What if I never got into the car with her that night? I could have got the train early the following day after staying in the hotel with Freddie. Would Daisy have survived? Would Spencer have found another way to get to me that didn't involve her, or would Freddie's bones be turning to dust in a cemetery instead?

"I got home from work one night, and I'll never forget the silence," Freddie says. "It was eerie. The house was a hive of activity usually. My mum liked to cook, and my sister always found something to argue with my father about. But when I got back that day, there was nothing. Stillness. Then I found all of them. Dead. Gunned down. They had no way of defending themselves. They didn't even know what I did for a living. They thought I was doing something for the British police, but I stepped on someone else's turf and paid for it. They paid for it."

"It wasn't your fault," I whisper, even though it'll change nothing. He'll always blame himself. That's what we do.

"I didn't protect them," he says fiercely. "And I'll never forgive myself for it. That's why I started the Dukes. I couldn't protect my family, but I could protect other people."

Even murderers and rapists like Spencer?

Would Freddie kill me to protect him?

His mission is noble, but it's misguided. You can't protect everyone. It's a fool's errand. I prefer to take out the problem. The fewer evil men walking the streets, the less pain and suffering there is. I want to remove the source of people's fear. Nothing is better than knowing you've eliminated a threat.

"My scar," he continues, "is a reminder of what happens when you make mistakes."

There it is. Freddie and I are alike, even if we are working for opposing sides. He caresses my cheek, running his rough hands across my smooth complexion.

"I will protect you with my life," he promises. "I mean that. I'm not losing you. I've let the people I care about down before, and I'll never do that again."

“I know you won’t,” I say because I know it’ll be me letting *him* down.
Sooner or later, when Freddie finds out who I am, he’ll want to protect his men from me.

CHAPTER 24

FREDDIE

I've not spoken about my family for years. I push it away, seal it in a box in the back of my mind and fasten it with chains. Forgetting is easy. Detachment is what my years of experience have trained me for.

"I know what it's like to lose someone you love and be left alone." Rose's voice trembles with emotion, layered with a deep pain that only someone who has gone through the same can detect.

I see her pain. I understand it, and I want to fucking erase it. She's safe when she's with me. I'll make sure she wants for nothing because that's what she deserves. A home. Maybe that's what I want too...

The Dukes are a family. My family. Seb is my best friend, Bram is a brooding figure I can't imagine life without, and Callen... well, he's just an asshole, but all families have one of those. But I've been missing something, and reuniting with Rose makes me realise what that is. It's her. She fills the empty void.

"You won't ever feel that pain again," I promise. I cup her face in my hands, gazing into her brown eyes and getting lost, hoping she senses how serious I am and what lengths I will go to for her. "Because, while I'm around, you'll never be alone."

She shuffles on my lap, and my cock hardens, unable to control my urges. What's a man to do when a gorgeous girl is on top of him? Her breath fans over my face as her full breasts press into my chest, closing the gap between us. Our lips brush and mine part for her tongue to slip into my mouth. Then, I'm lost...

A fiery urgency hits us like a lightning bolt. We have to grasp the moment, and I seize it. I kiss her like she's the only woman who matters

because she is. A moan escapes her as she pulls away, and her cheeks flush with a rosy glow.

I intended for the first night we spent together to be somewhere special. I wanted to pull out all the stops, no expense spared. Flower petals, champagne, and chocolate-dipped strawberries—I'd do it all for her, but nothing feels more right than being here, right now.

I hook my arms under her thighs to grasp her arse and lift her effortlessly. The blanket, still wrapped around her shoulders, falls away.

“Don't drop me!” she squeals.

“Never,” I reply in a deep, husky tone laced with promises. “Now that I've found you, I'll never let you go.”

I put her down gently onto her feet, lay a blanket over the shag rug by the fire, and turn to the gorgeous woman of my dreams before me. Her fiery hair is still damp from the shower, catching the light like licking flames. My gaze trails over her silky bra and curvy hips.

I swallow hard, struggling to contain myself. “You're perfect.”

A mischievous grin makes Rose's freckles dance as she unhooks her bra. The straps slip from her shoulders seductively as it falls to the floor, while her eyes stay fixed on mine. She undresses, taking off her clothing one item at a time until she's naked. She's baring her body for me like I bared my soul to her.

She steals oxygen from my lungs with a single look. I'll never tire of her body. Glorious curves, grabbable fleshy thighs, and breasts I can't fit into my palms.

“Lie down,” I order. My voice is firmer than I expect.

Rose does as I ask, settling on the blanket. The fire illuminates her satin-smooth skin like sunbeams over uninterrupted snow. I fall to my knees, bowing down to her like she's royalty. I crawl up her body and go to kiss her again.

My cock begs to be freed, enjoying her laid beneath me, but I won't rush. I'll worship every inch of her. I begin with her neck, scattering kisses down the length of her skin and enjoying how her hips writhe in response. *Baby, I'm taking my time—I'll get to you.* The tip of my tongue licks along her collarbone and then travels further down.

“I love how your tits feel in my hands. How big and soft they are,” I praise, then tweak her nipples. “Look how they're begging for my attention.” My tongue slides along their peaked surface and her hips jut upwards. “Mm,

they like that.”

I knead her skin, licking and kissing her breasts. I sink my teeth into one of them, needing to claim her and leave my mark. She yelps but wriggles against me, showing she wants this. She smells of gently perfumed soap, but underneath that, her natural scent drives me wild. Being around her is the equivalent of waving a red flag under the nose of a bull.

I continue my exploration. Her legs fall open to greet me, and I run my tongue over her thighs. She has the most perfect pussy I’ve ever seen.

CHAPTER 25

Nervous insecurity creeps in as Freddie stares between my legs. “What’s wrong?” I stammer.

He breaks out in a grin that makes him look five years younger and adds glitter to his amber eyes, setting them alight.

“How could anything be wrong?” he asks. “You’re even more beautiful than I could have imagined.” His finger runs down the length of my slit, swirling in the wetness at my entrance. “I’ve spent years thinking about how good you’ll taste, how good I’ll make you feel, how I’ll spend hours making you scream, and now you’re here...” He slides his fingers inside me, then withdraws. He pops his shiny tipped index finger into his mouth and licks it clean. “Fuck, you’re delicious. You taste incredible on my tongue. I could eat your pussy all day.”

His words of affirmation send a fuzzy burst of longing racing through my core. I buck my hips impatiently, desire building, desperate to feel him again and let him know what I need.

“Please, Freddie...”

“What do you want?” he asks, nibbling my inner thigh. The sensation tickles and turns me on more. “Tell me exactly what you want.”

“I want you to taste me,” I say breathily.

He drapes my legs over his shoulders and pulls me close, drawing my pulsating pussy into his face. His tongue slides between my lips, taunting me with teasing long strokes as he laps up to my clit.

“Mmm,” he moans, sending vibrations through me. “You’re already so wet. I want to see how much wetter I can make you.”

God rest my soul and this blanket. I grab his hair to hold him in place. His

brown hair is the perfect length to lose my fingers into, but my hold doesn't increase his speed. If anything, he slows down. Taunting me with his mouth in a way that makes my toes curl.

"Freddie!" I demand, unable to take it anymore. "Give me what I want."

He needs to feast on me like I'm his favourite meal. I want crazy wild abandon. I want him to lose control, but he doesn't. No, he's driven by other impulses.

"You're not in control here," Freddie purrs. "I am. I'm going to make you feel a pleasure so intense that you won't want it to end. When you think you've had enough, I'll keep going."

"But—"

"Do you hear that?" he interrupts, stopping to watch as two of his fingers pump in and out of me in a slippery squelch. "Listen to how wet and dripping you are. Do you know how crazy you make me? Don't you understand that finger-fucking you makes me so hard that I could come already?"

He curls his fingers to caress my G-spot. My hands close around the blanket beneath me and clench into fists as his mouth turns to my clit that's begging to be licked. I moan as his mouth closes over me to create a seal and sucks gently.

I gyrate against his face. His well-groomed beard tickles as I rock against him, chasing pleasure. Freddie thinks he's the boss, but I'm in control of my body. He senses my need and pulls away, bringing my impending orgasm to a crashing halt.

"You take my fingers well," he comments. He brings them up to my mouth. "Open wide." He pushes them inside and forces me to taste my juices. "How do you taste?"

"Fine," I reply.

He tuts and shakes his head. "You taste amazing." He parts my pussy lips to coat himself in my wetness, then pulls out again. "Try it again. Savour it." He pops his hot fingers into my mouth, and I suck them, imagining they're his cock. His pupils dilate, and I smirk, knowing what he's thinking about. "Taste your sweet pussy and how wet you are." He pulls his fingers out with a pop. "Now tell me how you taste."

"I taste..." I pause, licking my lips. "Good."

"You taste delicious," he corrects, reaching between my legs to retrieve more slippery wetness, then licking his fingers this time. He bends to kiss me. I taste my desire on his tongue, and the fact he loves it drives me crazy. He

leans back. “How do you taste, Rose?”

“Delicious.” My cheeks heat. I’m not used to thinking about myself that way. “I taste delicious.”

He grins smugly. “That’s better.”

His cock twitches against my stomach, and I stroke him over his trousers. He’s big and thick, straining against the fabric as I undo his belt and zipper. That’s all the encouragement he needs to pull them off in a hurry.

His naked body takes my breath away. His body is a masterpiece of sculpted muscles and delicious lines. I’ll have to use both hands to hold his throbbing cock, but something else catches my attention...

A tattoo over his heart that was hiding behind his shirt.

A lump catches in my throat, and I gasp, “Your tattoo...”

My voice trails off as I stroke the flower inked into his skin—the white and yellow petals of a daisy.

“It looks like I’ll need to get a matching rose,” he says.

He marked me onto his skin forever. That’s how serious he was about me. About us. Fuck... I need him now more than I need air.

I wrap my legs around his torso to force his cock to rub against me. His pulsing heat gets slathered in my wetness as I kiss him with a desperate yearning and try to forget everything else apart from what’s happening at this moment. My hands move down his muscled back and over his round arse, then squeeze hard. *Mine*.

My brain screams, *Take the fucking hint and fuck me already, Freddie.*

“I need you,” I murmur in his ear as his cock teases me, playing with my entrance. “I really fucking need you.”

I expect him to tease me more, but he answers my demands with a single thrust. He sinks himself inside me, so deep that I catch my breath, and I’m scared to let it go.

“Yeah, just like that,” he groans. “Your pussy feels incredible. Are you ready for the rest of it?”

The rest of it? I thought that was all of him! But his reassurance makes me feel ready for the challenge. In response, I dig my nails into his back and rock my hips against him.

“Yes,” I pant as my upper thighs tighten. “Fuck yes, I can take it.”

I think...

“Yes, you can, angel.” He thrusts deeper, making my inner walls stretch. “Your wetness makes it so easy for me to slip inside. I’ve never felt a pussy

this good.”

The fire’s warmth seems to have magnified. We’re lost in a world of heat and passion, a place far from my worries and reality.

“You’re the one,” Freddie whispers in my ear. When he’s turned on, a hint of an Italian accent comes out more, which only makes him hotter. “You’re *my* one.”

His words should make me want to push his head into the fire or crack him over the head with the candlestick, but they don’t. They sound right. My stomach flutters. He’s the first person to see *me*. The me that exists without being a killer... and he wants that.

But I can’t reply properly, not when his cock is filling me so deeply, and his pace quickens. I moan and call his name, not caring that Seb is trying to sleep upstairs. This is more than fucking, my subconscious tells me, but I dismiss the thought quickly to pursue my body’s desires. The building friction against my clit, and his cock sliding against my pulsing walls makes me cry out.

My tits bounce as he thrusts hard, and then he stops suddenly to hold himself there. I circle my hips, chasing a pleasure so raw that I’m afraid I’ll blow out the fire from my moans. Our breath merges, becoming one like we’re part of something bigger. Each rise of our chests is a tantric dance of give and take.

“You were made for me,” Freddie murmurs. I can’t argue as my eyes flicker closed, consumed by the building sensation inside me that’s close to exploding. “You’ve never looked more beautiful than when you’re gushing all over my cock. Do you know how hard it is not to come inside you right now?”

His words make my pussy tighten, and I’m about to...

“No!” I wail as Freddie pulls out. “Please!”

“Don’t worry, angel,” he purrs. “I’ll give you what you need. I’ll make you scream loud enough that it’ll scare away all the birds in the trees nearby because I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

He moves to his knees, grabs my legs to rest my ankles on his shoulders, and then thrusts into me again. He’s filling me so completely that I can feel every inch of his throbbing veins.

“Look at you.” His hungry eyes drink me in. “You know how to take my cock.” He edges deeper, and I moan as my pussy takes him completely. “Yeah, just like that. Your pussy fits me perfectly. It’s made for me.”

His words of affirmation make me wetter. I'm not a woman who needs compliments, but I'll be damned. Freddie's adorations make my pussy want to perform and drench him, eager to impress.

I can feel my wetness dripping over his shaft. It seeps out of me and coats his balls. I sigh, "I'm so wet for you."

"Yes, angel," Freddie agrees. "You gushing all over me is going to make me come so hard that I won't be able to control myself. That's how fucking good you feel."

My orgasm is close. I don't want him to stop. He can't. My pussy tightens, holding onto him so tightly that he can't slip away, and then my pleasure takes hold.

"Yes, Rose!" Freddie speeds up and slams into me. "Now open your eyes and let me see how beautiful you are when you're coming all over me and saying my name."

"Freddie!" My eyes snap open as I cry out. "Yes, oh yes! Yes!"

My whole body implodes as he keeps going. He won't stop. He's focusing on my pleasure and wants to make me scream because it gets him off.

"Rose," he grunts. "You feel so good. I can't control myself."

"Come inside me," I beg. "I want it. Fuck, I need it."

And he does. A burst of warmth from him takes me to new dizzying heights. I've done this to him. It's all for me. We moan into each other's mouths, and the lines of our bodies blur as we move against each other.

Freddie props his chin up on his hands, but he doesn't withdraw yet. His cum continues to fill me, having found its home, and I want him to fill me for as long as he can.

"You're perfect, Rose," he compliments. "So fucking perfect for me."

Over Freddie's shoulder, I catch sight of another figure lurking in the shadows. Seb. His watchful gaze meets mine, letting me know he's seen everything. He doesn't look angry. No, his expression is more resigned, like we've made a deal, and this is him sticking it. He slinks away into the darkness, and I'm too breathless to make a noise.

"I can't believe I'm here," I sigh, not realising I'm speaking aloud as Freddie rolls off me.

As much as I've tried to deny it, these men have got under my skin.

"You better believe it, angel," Freddie says. "Because you're not going anywhere... and I'm not done with you yet."

CHAPTER 26

FREDDIE

Her body is a road map to my undoing. A body I'll never tire of, and just when I think I've found all the hidden treasures, there'll be more. I smile in satisfaction as I pull out and lean back. I'm soaked in the evidence of how hard she came. I start sliding down her body.

She hesitates. "What are you doing?"

Rose is an enigma. She projects strength, but there's vulnerability hiding behind that. Something I want to blast away until she sees herself how I do.

"I already told you," I say. "When I got to have you for the first time, I wanted to savour every second. That's what I'm going to do."

Behind us, a floorboard creaks. I turn my head to see Seb standing there. When our eyes meet, he doesn't move. I watched him fuck Rose on Callen's video. Now it's been his turn. Rose's thighs tense as she realises, expecting us to fight over her like animals rowing over a mate. A part of me wants to, but another doesn't want to lose her by making her choose between us.

"You don't have to hide in the shadows anymore, Sebastian," I say. He's not kidding anyone. His cover is blown. "You can come out now."

Rose's legs are spread wide. His gaze strays to my cum spilling out of her and coating the tops of her thighs. A strained silence stretches on. What do you say when your best friend has watched you rail the girl he likes?

As hard as it is for me to accept, Seb and Rose are going to happen. They already have. He didn't know who she was when they met. How can I blame him for his desires when I feel the same way? Rose is an addictive drug, and we all want our fix.

Seb approaches cautiously, but Rose doesn't close her legs. Seb's fists clench. He's jealous, of course, but his eyes are heavy with lust at seeing her

body stretched out.

Rose's breathing quickens under his scrutiny, and her nipples harden like they know he's watching. She wants him.

"Have you been watching us the whole time?" she demands.

"Yes," he replies matter-of-factly.

She starts closing her legs, but I stop her.

"Don't cover yourself, angel," I say. "Seb wants to see your pretty pussy as much as I do."

"Boss, are you sure about this?" Seb growls, seeing it as the invitation I intended.

I'll share her with him if it means keeping her. No other woman will be enough for me after experiencing her taste and being buried inside her. I'd rather share her attention with him than sentence myself to a lifetime of emptiness.

"Yes," I reply.

We've never shared a woman, but we've seen each other naked many times. It's natural when we've shared a bathroom or hotel room before.

I stroke Rose's slit as Seb watches, mesmerised. Her pink pussy is swollen from our encounter. I scoop a blob of dripping cum and push it back inside her, wanting to keep her full.

"I love seeing your pussy filled with my cum," I say as a moan escapes her lips. "Doesn't she look perfect, Seb?"

"Yes," Seb murmurs in agreement.

Rose's pupils dilate, and she wriggles as my fingers find her clit. I rub in teasing, slow circles, making her legs part even wider as Seb joins us. I want her to feel incredible, the best she's ever felt.

Seb doesn't intervene. He watches me touch her. More of my cum tries to escape, but I stuff it back inside her because I want her to take every drop.

Suddenly, Rose sits up. She's between us—me, completely naked, and Seb, wearing only a thin pair of pyjama shorts that frame his hard member. She leans over and kisses me. Her tongue is probing, questioning whether I'm okay with this and looking for reassurance. I respond hungrily. I am. I'll do anything for her.

She pulls away breathlessly. Then it's Seb's turn. I watch them kiss. Seeing his tongue slipping into her mouth is hotter than I expected. I reach for her breasts, playing with her nipples and making her moan into Seb's mouth.

Next, I slip behind her. She leans back onto my chest as I continue to play with her, and Seb's mouth licks along the length of her neck. There is no longer me or Seb. There are just the two of us working to serve her. I pinch her nipples between my fingers and roll them, while Seb moves lower to rest his head between her legs.

"Are you going to make her feel good, Seb?" I encourage. "She needs someone to clean her up."

I expect him to argue and tell me to clean up my own fucking mess, but he doesn't. Seb yanks her hips, pushing her onto his face, giving me the perfect view.

"See?" I whisper in her ear. "Your pussy is just so fucking perfect that we have to share you."

Seb's tongue applies pressure to her throbbing clit, then slides lower. He sinks into her pussy, jabbing his tongue inside her to lick up the silky elixir of my cum and her juices while she gasps. He doesn't wince. He's focused on nothing but her pleasure.

He passed my test. Rose isn't a casual fling for Seb. She is more than that. He cares about her as much as I do. A pink flush creeps up Rose's chest as she writhes against him.

"You have to hold still, angel," I say. "How else will Seb eat up that pretty pussy and all of my cum?"

She grabs Seb's head and grinds herself against him. I love seeing her take what she needs, and my cock hardens again.

"That's it," I say, watching her legs squeeze around Seb's face. "Let Seb pleasure you while I rub on your perfect tits."

CHAPTER 27

This isn't like being fucked by Seb and Callen. That was a dirty, sordid affair grounded in pure lust and caught up in my hatred for the Scottish prick. There's no competition between Seb and Freddie. They're working as a team.

My thighs shake as Seb's tongue dips and dives, lapping at my clit and devouring my pussy so good that I don't want him to stop. Some guys would shy away from cleaning up another guy's cum, but it doesn't bother Seb. He approaches eating pussy like a sport he wants to win.

"Seb," I gasp as two fingers slide into me. "Fuck, yes!"

"Why don't you fill her with more than your fingers?" Freddie suggests.

Seb's eyes flick upward to check his boss isn't joking around. Seriously? Fucking me in front of Freddie is not the same as feasting on me like his favourite pudding.

"Yes," Freddie confirms.

I'd point out that I should have a say in this if I wasn't overcome by the physical sensation of being the filling of a delicious man-meat sandwich. I want them too much to care. Seb rises to his knees and pulls off his shorts to reveal his gorgeous cock. I'm on the edge of orgasm, ready to unravel and let the waves of pleasure ripple through me. I need a release... and I need it now.

"Don't worry, angel," Freddie instructs me. "We're going to take care of you."

He rolls me over and lies down next to me, so I'm staring into his eyes, while Seb sidles up from behind. He fits snugly against me in the big spoon position. I'm nestled between them and push my arse back in encouragement as Seb's cock brushes against my opening.

I hear Seb spit onto his hand. Freddie fixes his gaze on me as Seb's cock enters me with a jolt. Seb's plunging strokes are slow but deliberate. Freddie watches my tits jiggle as Seb quickens his pace.

"Freddie..." I whine. "I want you too."

Seb pulls out and orders gruffly, "Get on all fours for me, Rose. You can suck Freddie's cock at the same time."

I look at Freddie for approval.

"Do as he says, angel," Freddie says, rolling onto his back.

I fumble on shaky legs but still manage to get myself into position. I move down Freddie's body to face his cock, while arching my back to give Seb full access.

Seb parts my arse cheeks and lets out a low, appreciative whistle. "You're missing out on the best view here, Freddie."

Before I can tell him to hurry up and fuck me already, Seb thrusts into me hard and deep. I reach for Freddie's cock and stretch my mouth around him. My jaw will ache afterwards, but I love the taste of myself on him. I match the pace of my bobbing to Seb smacking into me from behind.

"Yes, just like that," Freddie groans. I look up at him, taking it slow so he can see his shaft disappear into my mouth. I want to give him a show. "You're so fucking good at sucking cock."

"And taking it," Seb adds, thrusting deeply.

Freddie's smooth cock pulses against my tongue in deep longing. The first time I met Freddie, I hinted at my blow job technique by demonstrating it with a straw. I never thought I'd be sucking his dick years later while his friend pounds me from behind.

"You're taking two cocks at once, angel," Freddie says, "and you're doing such a good job of it."

His words make my pussy clench. Seb's breathing grows more ragged, and I moan onto Freddie's shaft, making his body twitch from my voice. He likes it.

"She likes you telling her how much of a good girl she is," Seb says. What kind of sorcery is this? How can Freddie's words have this effect on me? A praise kink wasn't what I expected to uncover on this mission, but I'm here for it. "Damn, Rose, your pussy is squeezing me so fucking tight. I won't be able to hang on for much longer."

Neither can I. My orgasm will erupt like a volcano. The pressure bubbles over and is ready to...

“Did you hear that, angel?” Freddie purrs. “You’re doing such a good job of taking him and sucking my cock. Your mouth feels like it’s made for me.”

I moan all over him in response and push him to the back of my throat. I gag a little but battle through, coating him in my spit. I suck hard, despite my head feeling fuzzy because all I want is to please him.

“Yes,” Freddie groans. “Deeper.”

Why am I trying so hard to please a man I’m going to kill? It makes no sense, yet I can’t help myself. It feels too good not to.

“Fuck,” Seb growls. His body slapping against mine is a turn-on. Any of the earlier awkwardness disappears as he’s about to tip me over...

“You’re going to come with me, aren’t you, Rose?” Freddie says. “Be our angel and soak Seb’s cock.”

His words catapult me into oblivion. I come hard and fast as Seb fucks my contracting hole. His bucking drives me crazy as Freddie’s salty cum spurts down my throat. I struggle to swallow it all, and my cheeks bulge with his cum like a squirrel storing nuts.

I come up for air and gasp as I swallow his cum down, but Freddie’s not finished. His cum trickles down his shaft like icing dripping over the side of a cake. I lick it all up, making sure he can see it coating my tongue, which makes him grunt.

My orgasm still rattles through me. It’s unlike any I’ve had before. It’s like playing a penny slot game in an amusement arcade. When you keep flooding the machine with coins on a winning streak, and the winnings keep filling the basket, wave after wave. My pussy constricts tightly around Seb, holding him like a python would squeeze his prey.

Seb’s body bouncing off mine fills the room. He grasps my hips hard and comes with a roar, plunging into me so deeply that I can feel his soft hair against my arse. I gyrate against him, wanting to draw every drop of pleasure from his body until he has nothing left to give.

“You’re fucking perfect, Rose,” Seb pants.

My vision blurs and when Seb pulls out, he collapses beside Freddie. The three of us lie in a sweaty mess. I’ve never felt so comfortable in my skin before.

“That was...” Freddie trails a finger down my chest between my breasts. “Amazing.”

All I can do is sigh in response.

It *was* amazing. Undoubtedly the best sex of my life, but a dark storm of

emotions starts to swirl around me. It whips through the air like a hurricane and claws at my skin, down my throat, descending me into darkness and reminding me that I'm living a lie.

This is nothing more than a fairytale, I've.

I can't stay here.

I jump up, struggling to my feet, and squeak, "I have to clean up."

I grab my jumper and dart upstairs before either of them has time to stop me. My euphoric joy has vanished and hardened to stone.

Tonight changed nothing. The Killers Club wants the Dukes dead... and I'm their enemy.

CHAPTER 28

BRAM

A gust of wind hits my face as the cell door flies open. Alaric's giant figure steps from the shadows and snarls, "You're coming with us."

I raise one eyebrow. *Does it look like I have a choice?*

His lip curls in disapproval. My sarcasm isn't lost on him. He storms in and roughly forces my wrists into cuffs, taking way too much pleasure in punishing me for my mocking expression. His powerful inked arms haul me out by the shoulders. The blonde Barbie lookalike waits for us further along the corridor, leaning against the wall and admiring her nails.

"What're you waiting for?" she asks.

"Hurry up!" Alaric drags me along, and I fall into step with them.

Where are we going? I quiz them with a probing gaze, but they ignore me. They always do. Even if I could talk, they wouldn't listen. Maybe they're escorting me to my final resting place. It'd beat sitting around waiting to die.

"I can't believe he's been so fucking stupid," Stephanie hisses. What did the crazy twin do? Maybe his threat to visit the Dukes wasn't empty. "What was he thinking? It was Ivy's mission, and he crashed it!"

We continue along the windowless corridor, and lights turn on above us with each step. I was clinging to consciousness when I first arrived, and the walls whooshed by in a blur, but I get a better look now. We pass four holding cells. They're all empty. Some would see that as a positive sign, but I know better. It tells me they don't keep prisoners alive for long.

"Remember what I said, Stephanie," Alaric replies, unfazed. "She knows what she's doing."

"We don't know what happened," Stephanie snaps, then turns to me,

“We’re taking you to see your friends.”

Alaric shoves me into the waiting elevator. There’s a panel with buttons, but they aren’t labelled with floor numbers. Clever. You’ll never know where you’re positioned in the building. The doors close. Before the elevator stops, Alaric takes a black fabric bag from his pocket. He roughly pulls it over my head, plunging me into darkness. “We can’t have you seeing where we are, can we?”

Stephanie grabs my arm to escort me, tutting me when I slow them down. We’re walking on wooden floors. Another door opens, and I’m hit with fresh air. The bag stops me from feeling the breeze on my cheeks, but I’m grateful to be free from the dank-smelling prison. If they’re moving me above ground, they must either live in a remote location, or it’s nighttime. Judging by the road noise, I’d guess the latter.

“Get in.” Alaric holds my head, and I duck to get into a car.

“He could have blown everything,” Stephanie rages as they get into the front seats. “What about Ivy? He could have blown her cover!”

That wouldn’t be bad. Hopefully, the Dukes saw through her ruse. She couldn’t fool them forever.

“Ivy will be fine,” Alaric reassures, switching on the engine. “She’s our best and most loyal agent.”

“But we haven’t heard from her,” Stephanie points out. She’s worried. Maybe she’s capable of feeling something more than the joy of torturing someone after all. “It’s not like her to go off-grid after something like this. Maybe Tom was right. We should have surveilled the house the whole time.”

“We made the right call,” Alaric says. “We trusted her to do her job, and she’ll do it. She always finds a way out. I don’t doubt her.”

Stephanie huffs. I imagine she’s pouting and crossing her arms.

Alaric’s voice softens. “She’ll be okay, baby.”

So, they’re a couple. No wonder he wasn’t happy when Callen had his girl in a headlock.

“Don’t baby me,” Stephanie snaps. “I don’t like this, Ric. I don’t like it at all.”

“If Ivy is in danger, we brought a bargaining chip.”

By bargaining chip, they mean me.

“They didn’t pick him before,” she says. “Maybe there’s something we’re missing about Ivy and Frederick James. She never mentioned him to us.”

“If she didn’t mention him, he mustn’t have been important,” Alaric says.

“She told us about all of her past relationships. He’s a no-one. A guy who met her once and remembers her. We know what men are like. Just think about how many stalkers you’ve had.”

“True.” She sighs. If anyone knew what Stephanie was capable of, they’d be hiding from her—not trying to track her down. “That way.”

The car swerves dramatically, sending my elbow smashing into the side. They turn on the radio to drown out the rest of their conversation. I keep counting in my head, tracking the seconds. We drive for around twenty minutes until we come to a stop. Their HQ isn’t far from the Dukes’ base. We’ve been close, yet so fucking far.

“I’ll stay in the car to watch him,” Stephanie says, referring to me. “Come back if you need us.”

The car door slams as Alaric gets out. The glove compartment clicks open, and Stephanie says, “I really need to paint my nails. Shame you can’t see, I could do with a second opinion on the colour.”

Unbelievable. I assume the car has tinted windows, otherwise, I’d attract unwanted attention. The Dukes will get an alert of a new plate in the area as per my security measures. Will they be able to track me from that?

My hopes of being found evaporate when the car door opens minutes later. Alaric tears the bag off my head, and the frosty temperature hits me like a powerful punch.

“Get out,” Alaric commands. He turns to Stephanie, who has decided on a metallic silver colour and is humming as she applies it. “Nice nails.”

“Thanks,” she replies, then nods at the house. “Do you need me?”

“We’ve got it covered,” he says.

Alaric frogmarches me up the stairs to the front door and into the house. Inside, the stark light makes me squint. I take in the scene. The smell of bleach and disinfectant stings my nostrils. Clean-up has happened, alright. Our coffee table is gone, and shards of glass have skidded across the room. They glint at me from under the sofa. Someone tidied in a rush.

“Someone died here,” Alaric says. “But everyone’s gone.” He jabs his finger into my chest. “Do you notice anything different?”

I arch an eyebrow. He has himself to thank for my inability to reply.

The real question is, who died?

My eyes narrow at a discarded custard cream wrapper stashed down the side of Callen’s armchair. The fucker has been eating my stash.

Alaric moves through to the kitchen and flicks through a stack of papers

on the side. It's mainly bills, but a thick, black envelope nestles among the pile. "What do we have here?" He tears it open and reads it. His face contorts in anger. "We're leaving."

Back inside the car, Stephanie is busy blowing her nails to dry them.

He thrusts the envelope into her hands. "Look at this."

Her lip curls as she reads aloud, "An invitation to the Collingsbrook Ball for Sebastian Montgomery." She launches the envelope across the car. "Fuck!"

My heart sinks. They've worked it out. It was bound to happen, eventually.

"He's the final Duke," Alaric declares. "But that doesn't change anything."

"If she's alive, she's perfectly placed to kill him," Stephanie agrees. "But we need to find her."

He grins. "It looks like we're crashing a party."

In the meantime, all I can do is hope that the Dukes are alive and that they've worked out Ivy's secret.

CHAPTER 29

CALLEN

Through the grimy window, I watch the embers smoulder in the fireplace. The cottage is still. Everyone is sleeping, just how I like it. I loved this time of day as a kid. The time when monsters came alive. Maybe a part of me knew I'd grow up to join them. Darkness never scared me, either. Nor spiders, heights, or clowns. Fear is pointless. You have to lean into it. Embrace it. Become the one they fear instead.

There are a few hours until sunrise. I take care when opening the door, pushing it slowly to keep the hinges quiet. My muscles ache from exertion. Moving a body single-handedly isn't easy, but I've dumped it somewhere no one will find it. Adrenaline is still racing through my veins, and my stomach grumbles. If Seb and Freddie weren't so eager to get their dicks wet with a murderer's cunt, maybe they'd have lent a hand.

I head to the kitchen, ready to raid whatever's in the cupboard. If I'm lucky, there might be a can of beans that hasn't expired. But, when I turn the corner, I see her.

Her ghostly white face is illuminated by the moonlight slipping through the windowpanes. She's shrouded in a blanket that's wrapped around her shoulders and draped down her back like a cape. Her hand lurches for a kitchen knife. She points it in my direction. "I've been waiting for you."

There she is. The real princess. She's not the innocent woman they think she is, but a bloodthirsty queen.

"What a greeting." I look at the blade in bemusement. "Where's Seb and Freddie?"

"Upstairs," she snaps. "Sleeping."

I sniff the air. It reeks of sex. I can smell it on her.

“Did they fuck you so hard they can’t see who you truly are?” I tease, noticing her messy bedhead.

I step closer. She won’t stab me. Not here. It would blow her cover in an instant. I keep walking until the tip of the knife presses into the centre of my chest.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she hisses.

But I do, and she knows it.

“Are you supposed to fuck your targets?” I question. “Or do they employ whores as well as killers?”

She twists the knife, leaving a small hole in the fabric of my t-shirt. “You know nothing about me or the club.”

“What’re you going to do, princess? I know you’re one of them.” I study her reaction, and her blazing eyes fill with hatred. “Are you going to kill me, too?”

“I should.”

“But you won’t,” I say. I slide a hidden knife out from under my sleeve and hold it to her throat. We’re in a standoff. “You don’t have to hide from me. I saw the darkness in you from the moment we met. I can help you.”

“Help?” She laughs coldly. “I don’t need any help, especially not from an asshole like you.”

My cock hardens at her words. Her resistance will only make fucking her again more satisfying.

“You might not need my help, but you need me to play along,” I say. I graze the blade along her skin to make a small nick—tiny enough that her snoring guard dogs won’t question it. She doesn’t flinch as the blood pools and drips down her skin. “We need to talk, but not now.”

Her words come like white-hot lightning bolts. “What do you want?”

She lowers her weapon. I win. I tuck my knife back into my jacket, then slide my thumb along the fresh cut on her neck. The blood smears, and I put it to my mouth to lick clean. Her pupils dilate. She’s a dirty fucking bitch. A woman who’ll be able to take what other women can’t. A woman who I can explore my deepest fantasies with, and she won’t run.

“What do I want?” I repeat. Our bodies almost touch as I step closer, my cock leading the way. A sly grin spreads over my lips. “Don’t you know already? I want you.”

“You can’t have me.”

“Oh, princess...” I grab her hips and yank her close, sniffing her sweet-

smelling hair. After hours of riding a bike through the windy drizzle, her voluptuous curves are the warmth I need. “But I think I can. If you want me to keep your secret, you’ll do exactly what I say.”

“Do you think they’ll believe you over me?” she rebuts. “They don’t trust you. They’ll think it’s just more of your usual bullshit.”

“Maybe not,” I say, “but do you want to take that risk?”

Her breathing quickens as I run my fingers playfully over the top of her jeans. Being close to her is intoxicating. I want more. I *need* more.

“If you want me to keep my mouth shut...” She gasps as I slip into her knickers, running my hand over her smooth mound. “Then you’re going to give me exactly what I want.”

She doesn’t move as I slide along her slippery slit and part her lips. I slip one finger into her teasingly—up to my first finger joint—then pull out again. I put it to my mouth, tasting her sweet juices with a salty hint of cum. “Who was the lucky guy?”

Her hands slam into my chest to push me away. “Go to hell, Callen.”

“Haven’t you noticed yet?” I smirk. “We’re already there.”

“Freddie and Seb are upstairs.”

Yeah, like those oblivious losers will stop me from taking what I want.

“Do you think they’re going to stop me?” I ask. “You don’t have to pretend around me. I’ve seen who you are, and I want to set you free.”

“You don’t know me.”

“But I will...” I lunge and grab her hair, using it to draw her face closer, so I can stare into those sparkling brown infernos. “And you’re going to do exactly as I say.”

She glares back in defiance, making my cock throb even more than it already is. I’ll relish giving her what she needs, even if she doesn’t know it yet. “I hate you.”

“I know you do, princess,” I say, releasing my hold on her. “Now run along to bed. We’ll talk again soon.”

“I’ll be sleeping with this under my pillow.” She clutches the knife tighter. “If you slip into my room, I won’t hesitate to cut your dick off.”

I laugh. Yep, that’s my girl.

CHAPTER 30

IVY

I made excuses earlier to spend the night alone because I couldn't pick between Seb and Freddie, but I regret it now that Callen is on the loose. I toss and turn. One leg out. One leg in. On my back. On my front. How can I sleep with Callen roaming the halls? He hasn't shared my secret, but at what cost? I usually have the upper hand, and I fucking hate being at his mercy.

When morning comes, I slink out of bed to be met with the rich smell of freshly ground coffee and buttery toast wafting up the stairs, making my stomach gurgle as I approach it. Someone must have fixed the electricity.

Seb and Freddie are already up. They're hunched over a laptop at the kitchen table, discussing something in hushed, serious tones. They spring apart when they see me.

I arch my eyebrow. "Am I interrupting something?"

Seb changes the subject. "How did you sleep?"

"Good," I lie.

Sleep deprivation is nothing new when nightmares haunt you.

Seb clears his throat and shifts around nervously in his seat. "There's something I want to ask you."

Sounds ominous. Freddie's jaw tenses, and he shoots Seb a *this is a bad idea* look. Whatever it is, he's not happy about it.

"Okay," I say, using the teapot to pour stiff Yorkshire Tea into a chintzy mug that looks like something a grandma would own. "What is it?"

"The Collingsbrook Ball is happening tonight," Seb says. "I was wondering whether you'd like to be my date."

Freddie drops his spoon into the porridge bowl and sends blobs of oats

flying. “You don’t have to go.”

Collingsbrook... Why does that sound familiar? My stomach sinks as I realise where I’ve heard it before. Spencer attends every year. Before I broke up with him, he asked me to be his date. A rejection that tipped him over the edge and preceded our break-up.

From what I understand, the Collingsbrook annual event is an excuse for society’s most affluent to rub shoulders with each other and brag about their bank balances. As someone who thinks a polo is a minty sweet with a hole in the middle, it’s not a place I’ll fit in.

“It’s a masquerade ball,” Seb explains. “We’ll only need to make a quick appearance and leave.”

“What’ve I missed?” Callen strides in. His hair is wet, and he shakes it, spraying me like a wet dog. That fucker needs to be put down.

“The Collingsbrook ball,” Seb replies. “Tonight.”

“Is everyone invited?” Callen asks. Two slices of toast pop up, and he swipes them from the toaster. They should have been mine. He almost drops them because of the heat. Good, I hope they burn him. “Or is it a date?”

“You know what my parents are like,” Seb mumbles, then smiles apologetically. “It’ll be boring as hell, but if my parents don’t see me on a date soon, they’ll try to marry me off to someone called Beatrice.” Pippy is curled at Seb’s feet, growling at the mention of Beatrice’s name. “See? Even Pippy isn’t a fan.”

“I don’t know.” I shrug, opting to play it cool, despite my fingers tingling with excitement. Even if Seb’s hopeful gaze wasn’t impossible to say no to, heading to a country manor in a mask is too perfect a chance to miss. Spencer’s men will be there, and I could cross another name off my list. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Don’t worry, princess.” Callen’s eyes glint maliciously like sapphires. “No one will hurt you, although I’m not sure they let peasants inside.”

“I won’t leave your side all night,” Seb insists earnestly.

“What about your parents?” I ask. “Are they expecting me?”

“I may have told them already,” Seb says, beaming. No one can turn down a guy with dimples like that. “But I’ll make it worth your while.”

“What will I wear?” I ask.

“You have an outfit,” Freddie mumbles through gritted teeth. “Remember?”

Shit, how could I forget? Now his impractical purchase makes sense.

“Okay,” I say. “I guess I’m in.”

Seb jumps from his seat to kiss me and steals my breath away.

“Before you two ruin my breakfast...” Callen grimaces and breaks our moment. “Can we talk about work? Because while you two were slacking off yesterday, I was getting rid of our dead weight.”

“Seb and I are returning to London to tie up loose ends today,” Freddie says, studying Callen’s reaction closely. Does he sense it’s a bad idea to leave us alone, or is he torn about leaving me after what happened last time? “But we’ll be back before the party. The Collingsbrook manor is half an hour’s drive from here.”

Callen snorts. “So, I’m on babysitting duty again.”

I scowl. “I don’t know how many times I have to say that I don’t need a babysitter.”

Seb’s gaze shifts between us. Judging from his concerned expression, he still hasn’t told Freddie about my night with him and Callen. If he did, I doubt Freddie would leave us alone in a cottage in the middle of nowhere.

Freddie drains his cup of coffee and stands. “We have to go.”

“We’ll see you later, Rose,” Seb says, following Freddie, who is already halfway out of the room. “We leave at eight, okay?”

Freddie pauses at the door. “Remember, this won’t be forever, Rose.” His voice lowers as his eyebrows pinch together in concern. “It’ll be over soon.”

I feign a half-smile, but it makes my cheeks ache. He’s wrong.

Seb narrows his eyes at Callen. “Play nice.”

“Me?” Callen tears through his toast with his teeth, talking while chewing. “I’m a gentleman!”

I watch from the window as they hop into the car and drive away, leaving me alone with a psychopath.

“So...” Callen wiggles his eyebrows. “Do you want to have some fun?”

“I’m going to be spending my day in my room,” I say. “Away from you.”

“Actually,” Callen says, his tone interlaced with an underlying threat, “if you want me to keep your secret, you’ll meet me outside in ten minutes because I have something to show you.”

CHAPTER 31

CALLEN

I need to test her before making a deal. A deal I'm not sure she'll take, but she'll have to if she knows what's good for her.

Seb would never invite a ragamuffin like me to the Collingsbrook Ball, but Rose has a free ticket. Finally, I'll have someone on the inside. Someone who can kill a man I want dead. A kill that Freddie and Seb won't approve of.

I wait for her outside the cottage, lounging against my motorbike. The breeze runs through my hair, and the sun cracks over the sky, peering over the top of the clouds to melt the morning frost. We're the only people around for miles. This cottage was purpose-built to be as remote as possible—a place where the royals fled for safety. No one uses it now.

I stroke the handlebars. My Harley has been with me since day one. Some men are obsessed with cars, but I've never understood the appeal. Where's the fun in driving around in a metal box? Riding across the open road keeps my heart beating.

The door opens. Rose heeded my threat, after all. The wind ruffles her long, red hair, and she's changed into a denim skirt with knee-length boots. Her hips swing when she walks, oozing sex appeal. Her deadliness only heightens my attraction towards her.

She plants her hands on her hips and snarls, "What do you want?"

I hold out a helmet and nod at the extra jacket draped over the seat. "I'm taking you for a ride."

She hesitates, biting her bottom lip. A bottom lip I'd like to suck on and tease to make her gasp. "It's safer here."

Maybe she's thinking I'll bury her body along with her friend. Her

selective memory is forgetting the part about her being the one who killed him.

“You don’t strike me as a woman who follows the rules. What’s wrong?”
I cock my head to the side. “Are you scared?”

She snatches the helmet from me and snaps the visor down. The leather jacket doesn’t fully zip over her big tits, but I’ll take it slow.

She stomps over to the Harley. “What are you waiting for?”

I grin, swing my leg over, and rev the engine. “You better hold on tight.”

She huffs and mounts the bike. Her strong thighs clench as she wraps her arms around me.

“Bet you didn’t think you’d have your thighs squeezed around me again so soon,” I tease.

“I swear to fucking God, I’ll—”

I rev again to drown out her objections.

“Don’t fall,” I say, then kick away.

We hurtle down the dirt road away from the cottage, and she clings on for dear life. It’s not the first time we’ve stayed here. I know the roads well. There’s somewhere I’d like to take her. Somewhere we won’t be disturbed.

CHAPTER 32

Callen bends forward. We're not in a MotoGP race! I live on the edge, but hot damn! He's driving fast to prove he's a tough guy. My heart drops to the pit of my stomach, but I force myself to keep my eyes open. It's terrifying but exhilarating. We hurtle along the bumpy terrain, swerving to avoid tree branches as the path narrows.

I cling to Callen, annoyed he's reduced me to be a glorified spider monkey, but I have no choice because of his speed. Mud sprays up the sides of my new boots, something else Callen has destroyed.

Callen leans from left to right, making specific twisty turns and veering off the track. His long hair ripples from underneath the helmet. He knows the area well. Despite being daytime, the trees close in, shutting out the sunlight. Nature has encroached on the landscape, clawing it back and it's run wild. It's my first time on a motorbike, and I love it—not that I'll tell him that.

We can't talk over the engine's roar, but we're not riding for longer than fifteen minutes when we come to a halt at a clearing in the middle of the woods beside a crumbling structure with an old well next to it.

As soon as we stop, I jump off, stepping into a pool of mud with a squelch. Callen laughs as I rip the helmet off my head, making my hair frizz from the static.

"What's wrong, princess?" he taunts, taking off his helmet to reveal a smirk. "Scared of getting dirty?"

"I'm used to clearing up blood and entrails," I snap. "This is nothing."

He laughs off my attempt at being menacing and runs a hand through his hair. I don't scare him yet, but I should.

"Why are we here?" I glare at the well suspiciously, deciding to keep my

distance. “Are you going to throw me down there?”

“I didn’t plan on it, but that depends on how you behave,” he says. “I chose this place so that we wouldn’t be interrupted.”

“Just spit it out, Callen.” I cross my arms over my chest. He can save his theatrics for someone who gives a shit. “What do you want?”

He steers the bike out of the mud and rocks it onto the central stand. The bike is a monster, but his muscled arms move it effortlessly. Eurgh, why does he have to look sexy doing it? It’s unfair!

“I want to know more about you.” His voice is a deep rumble. “Why don’t you tell me about the Killers Club?”

I glare at him. A glare that’s often the last thing men see before they die.

“If I told you,” I say, “I’d have to kill you.”

“Loyal too,” he murmurs, scratching his chin. “Interesting. I want to see what you’re made of.”

I’m not stupid enough to come out here alone without a weapon. I’m carrying a knife, a sharp knitting needle, and a pair of nail scissors—whatever I could find in my quick sweep of the cottage. One is up my sleeve, another in my waistband, and the scissors are nestled in my bra. If he tries anything, I’ll skewer his balls with zero hesitation.

“You brought me here to fight?” I scoff. “Don’t you think that’ll draw the wrong kind of attention at the ball if Seb’s date turns up with bruises?”

His eyes burn with sadistic excitement. “If you’re as good as I think you are, it won’t be a problem.”

He’s playing games. He’s brought me here for more than a scuffle and heart-to-heart. There’s an eager buzz in the air. I recognise his excited anticipation because it’s similar to my own.

“Tell me what you want, Callen,” I demand. “Cut the bullshit.”

Crow’s wings flap above. They flee from their hiding spots, startling me, and Callen cackles. Leaves and branches snap under his weight as he approaches. I fight back the urge to wince. That noise. I know that noise... Daisy... the car wreckage... I blink to erase the scene from my mind. *Pull it together, Ive.* Anything can happen around a crazy fucker like Callen.

“There’s something I want you to do for me at the party,” Callen says.

“Why don’t you ask Seb?”

“Because your pretty boy would have other ideas,” he says. I refuse to look away from his unblinking stare. “Seb follows Freddie’s rules. This isn’t a task Freddie would approve of.”

“And you think I would?” I laugh. “Why should I help you?”

“You do this for me, and I won’t call Freddie right now to tell him who you really are,” he threatens, pulling a small box from his jacket pocket. “I need you to hand-deliver a present to a guest.”

“Do I look like I’m Royal fucking Mail?”

“Would you rather I tasked you with something more difficult?”

“Who is it for?” I question.

“Lord McGowan.” His expression darkens as a hurricane sweeps over his features. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find him with your special skills.”

“What’s inside the package?”

He taps his nose. “It’s on a need-to-know basis.”

I reach to grab the parcel from his hands, but Callen holds it away at arm’s length and tuts.

“What’s in it for me?” I ask.

“You mean, apart from keeping your secret from the two men you’re fucking?”

What a snarky son of a bitch.

“If you were going to tell them, you’d have done it already,” I say. “I thought the Dukes were supposed to be loyal.”

I don’t trust him. This is part of something bigger. Something so important that he’ll risk everything for it.

“Oh, we are,” he replies, “but you had three days to kill us, and you haven’t. If you were going to do it, you’d have done it already.”

He’s using my logic against me. Fucker. But is he right? Tom’s stunt bought me more time, but I can’t avoid reality forever. The Killers Club is expecting me to make contact and get a job done. If I don’t, they’ll find me.

“You don’t know that,” I snarl. “I could kill you right now.”

“Or I could kill you.”

“But you won’t because you need me to make a delivery.”

“Don’t underestimate me, princess,” Callen says. His eyes narrow. “Do you think that’s all I want from you?”

My heart quickens.

“If all I wanted was for you to deliver a parcel, we could have spoken at the cottage,” he says. “There’s something else I want...” My throat constricts as he licks his lips. “You.”

CHAPTER 33

CALLEN

She hides it well, but she wants me... and fucking despises herself for it. She swallows hard.

“You can’t have me.” She tilts her chin upward in defiance. “I’ll deliver your package, but that’s it.”

“Come on,” I tease. With each step I take, she takes one cautiously back. “You want to play. I know you do. I see how you look at me.”

Her beautiful, hate-filled gaze makes my cock harder than I’ve ever been. I’ve finally met my match in a trained killer.

“Don’t move,” she growls. “Stay the fuck away from me.”

“You want me, princess.” I take another step. “I can see it in those beautiful eyes of yours. You need me.”

“I don’t need anyone.”

She pulls a knife from her waistband and lurches forward. It happens fast, and the tip of the blade rests under my chin. I knew bringing her here would be fun.

I put my hand over hers on the hilt and whisper, “Did you think I didn’t know you had weapons?”

The wind blows and her silky hair tickles my cheek. A sizzle of electricity passes between us. We’re caught in a battle of wills. I use my strength to force the knife away from my throat and against hers. Her cheeks flush as she tries to fight back, but it’s no use. She’s skilled, but I’m stronger.

“Don’t toy with me,” I warn. “I could snap your pretty little neck and leave you for the animals to eat.”

“Not if I slit your throat, throw you down the well, and leave you to rot first,” she rebuts.

“Can you see the effect your words have on me?” I murmur.

Her eyes flicker down to my crotch area, then tear themselves away.

“You’re sick.”

“Maybe I am,” I reply, but she’s not fighting against me anymore. She’s had the opportunity to twist herself out of my grasp, but she hasn’t taken it, because she wants this as much as I do. “I think your pussy is dripping wet just thinking about what I’ll do to you.”

Building tension hangs in the air like a thunderstorm rolling in, ready to destroy everything in its path.

Her spit sprays my face with venomous words. “I hate you.”

I twist her wrist, making her drop the knife.

Time speeds up. She acts fast. I expect her to grab the knife, but she barrels forward, knocking me to the ground, and pins me in place with her thighs, just like she did the whack job twin. I tug her hair and pull her down, drawing her face to mine, but she delivers a perfect right hook to my cheek. I drop my grip, and she stands. I grab her ankle, but she kicks me in the ribs with her other foot. She’s standing again and dashing towards my bike. She won’t get far when the keys are in my pocket.

She ducks and slides a hand into her t-shirt to retrieve another weapon. Scissors. She’s resourceful.

“Stay the fuck away from me,” she snarls, pointing them in my direction.

She wants me. I can tell.

CHAPTER 34

IVY

I *'ll fucking kill him!*

Adrenaline scorches my veins like lava as Callen climbs to his feet, brushing away the dirt. He twirls the keys around his finger. I want to hook my scissors into the corner of his smirking mouth and drag it across his face. He won't look so smug after that.

"I've seen you for who you are from the moment we met," Callen continues. "You don't have to pretend with me."

"You don't know me."

He wants to get inside my head and twist things with his words. He saunters forward, casting me under a giant shadow. The old Ivy would run from the scary, psychopathic biker, but the new me sees him as a challenge. Callen pushes my boundaries, and there's something intriguing about that. Humans gravitate towards horrific things. Why else would true crime be so popular? Callen's my version. A horrific train wreck I want to tear my eyes away from, but I can't.

I back away until my arse presses against his Harley. Even though I want to kill him, I'm also thinking rationally enough to know that it's a bad idea. That, or the tingling between my legs, is clouding my judgement.

"Drop your weapon," Callen says. "I don't want to hurt you. Not really." Getting hurt doesn't worry me. "All I want is something extra in exchange for my silence. You'll give me what I want, won't you?"

Blackmailing me into fucking him is a low blow, but it gives me a reason to justify doing it. Shit, why am I looking for a reason? His hands rest on either side of me, and I press the point of the scissors into his throat. Both of us know it's pointless. He was right. If I wanted to maim him, I'd have done

it already.

I forget to breathe as his lips brush against mine. Fuck that. I bite down on his bottom lip so hard that his blood fills my mouth. I spit the coppery liquid at his feet to make my point.

“Does that answer your question?” I snarl.

“Yes, it does.” His face lights up in a maniacal grin. “My princess likes it rough.” He takes a fistful of my hair and pulls hard. “Now you’re going to let me bend you over and fuck your brains out if you want to keep your secret. I want to feel the pussy that Seb and Freddie are fighting over squeezing my cock.”

I hate him. I fucking hate him, but his hands are on my hips, and he’s turning me around. *Ivy! What are you thinking?*

“I hate you,” I repeat, as if that makes my submission any better.

Seb and Freddie don’t know who I am. They don’t see the person I’ve become. They like the part of me I choose to show them. The old me before Spencer destroyed my world, but Callen doesn’t care. He sees me for what I am now... and his cock wants to make me pay for it.

“I want you to climb onto my bike,” he says.

I do as he asks. Maybe because a part of me wants to be punished.

“Don’t worry, baby,” he purrs. “I won’t hurt you.”

My head turns sharply, alarmed by his sudden tenderness. “What?”

“I was talking to my bike,” he says, stroking the seat. He arches one eyebrow. “Did you think I was going to be gentle with you, princess?”

I hope not. I balance myself on the motorbike, putting my legs on either side. He circles, checking me out from all angles, then pushes me forward. I’m stretched out. My arse hangs over the back of the bike while my tits are pushed against the seat.

He yanks my skirt up. My tights don’t slow him down. He tears through the hosiery, splitting the fabric, and the chilly breeze against my pussy makes me shiver.

“Oh, yeah...” He spans my arse, making it burn. The noise echoes through the trees. “I can see why the Dukes are fighting over who gets to fuck you.”

“Screw you.”

“It’s a good thing you brought scissors,” he says, taking them from my hand and using them to snip away the strings of my thong. The black fabric whizzes past, thrown into the undergrowth.

His fingers roughly part my pussy lips and lather themselves in my slickness. I hate him for making me feel this way. “You can’t pretend that you don’t want me when your pussy is this wet.”

“Fuck you, Callen.”

I gasp as he spits on me. His warm spit drips down my arse, mixing with my pussy juice and spilling over the seat. Goosebumps ripple over my skin while a Callen-shaped handprint still stings in the breeze.

“The other Dukes worship your body. They take their time to pleasure you, but me?” He drops his voice menacingly. “I’m going to keep taking from you until you can’t stand straight.”

I hear a zipper. The clang of a metal belt buckle. Seconds later, his thick cock rubs against my entrance. He grasps my hips and slides me back. The cool metal of his Prince Albert contrasts my wet heat, and he slams into me with one thrust, making me cry out.

“Your pussy feels even better than I remember,” he grunts.

I hate him. I fucking hate him! All that hate builds, whipping me into a wild frenzy. He fucks me hard and fast in violent, merciless thrusts. He spanks my arse hard, right on the sweet spot of the curve. I arch my back, the front of my body soaking up the residual warmth of the engine.

“I’ll make you gush over my seat,” he says. “Every time I ride this bike, I want to remember me fucking you over it.”

“I’ll...” My voice trails off until he buries himself deep inside me and pauses for a second. “I’ll never get on a fucking bike with you again!”

“Turn over, princess,” he says. “I’m going to spread you wide.”

He withdraws. There’s plenty of space for me to lie on my back. I don’t look at his face, but I can’t help being drawn to his throbbing cock. He thinks he’s using me, but I’m using him too.

He stands astride the motorbike and strips, throwing his leather jacket to the ground. He doesn’t care that it’s cold or that anyone could stumble upon us. I hope he freezes to death... after making me come. He parts my legs and spits on my pussy, coating it. His fingers circle my clit, smearing himself over me. I chew my lip, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’s making my toes curl, but my tensing inner thighs give me away. He smirks as he rests my ankles on his shoulders and enters me again with vigour.

“Don’t worry, princess,” he coos. “You’re not going to fall off... not until I’m done with you, anyway.”

There's nowhere for me to hang onto as my tits jump around like we're riding the bike. He pounds into me brutally. I watch his cock plunge in and out with purpose. Again and again. I can't speak. He's stealing my words, and all I can do is moan.

"What would Freddie say if he saw this?" Callen taunts.

He doesn't wait for an answer, but it spurs him on. He won't stop. His left-hand reaches down to stroke my clit. The sensation is intense, borderline painful, and then he slaps it hard, making my pussy jolt and clamp around him.

"That's it, princess," Callen pants. "Keep taking my cock like the dirty whore you are."

"Fuck you," I groan as our bodies collide with a smash, and he bounces me off of him like my sole purpose is to be used by him. "I'll fucking kill you."

"You can try." Callen thrusts deeply and holds himself there. "But you're not going to kill me until you've come all over my cock."

I'm close. I hate myself for how fucking close I am. A wave of pleasure ripples through me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, biting my lip to contain it, but I can't. It's so intense that it makes me scream and almost blinds me. My pussy grips him so hard that I'm afraid he won't be able to get out.

"I'm going to fill you right up, princess," Callen groans. "You're going to drench my seat."

He roars, and I dare to look at his face. His gaze is filled with wild abandon. His hips judder as he explodes and shoots his load like a bullet firing. My chest heaves, and my upper thighs ache like I've finished an intense weight-lifting session. How could I have let this happen again? His cock slides out of me, glistening with proof of my desire.

I broke my deal with Seb, but that's Callen's fault. He breaks all the rules.

"Are we done?" I demand, shutting my legs. "You've got what you wanted."

"What we wanted," he corrects. "Now I've given you my package, you can deliver mine..."

CHAPTER 35

SEB

The drive to London seems to take forever. We zip along the motorway, talking about mindless shit, but I know we're both thinking about what happened last night. Where do we start? Freddie taps his fingers on the steering wheel while I comment on people's impaired driving. A fucker cuts us up. Unlike Callen, who would insist on getting right up their arse and trying to shove them off the road, Freddie hangs back. He's always cautious, planning three steps ahead. He grins as an undercover police car's sirens come on, watching them speed after the offending vehicle and flash to pull them over. Karma's a bitch.

"So, what's the situation?" I ask him, turning to work. Our safety net. It's easier to talk about that than sharing the woman we both want for ourselves.

"Spencer wants to meet for a briefing ahead of tonight," Freddie explains. "He's on edge after Doyle's death. He doesn't need to know about our leads yet. His involvement will complicate matters. We should handle the Killers Club ourselves. We can be discreet."

"You're right," I agree. "We know who is behind the deaths, but not who paid for them. We must dig into his past to determine why he's being targeted. We find that, and we find a way to get to the club."

Freddie nods. His eyebrows lower. I recognise that look. He's plotting.

"What are you thinking?" I press.

"He's going to be at the Collingsbrook Ball tonight," Freddie muses, "which means his mansion will be empty..."

"You're going to break in?"

Freddie follows the rules. Sure, we do anything to get results for our clients, but we never cross their privacy. We maintain boundaries.

“This is bigger than a job and a client,” Freddie says. “We can’t trust anything Spencer says, so we need to find evidence for ourselves. They have Bram, and Spencer is our link.”

Before Callen left for the safe house, he reinstated all of our security cameras. We saw that the Killers Club broke into our house with Bram, so we know he’s still alive, and time is of the essence.

“Spencer is the best chance we have to find Bram,” Freddie continues. “We need to get to him before...” He clears his throat, not wanting to speculate the worst-case scenario. “While I’m at Spencer’s mansion, you can watch over him and Rose at the ball.”

“So you’re really letting her go?” I say. Freddie’s grip tightens on the wheel. I sigh. “We can’t avoid talking about her forever, you know.”

Sharing Rose with Callen was driven by lust, but it was more than that with Freddie. It meant something. We both care about her.

He clears his throat. “There’s nothing to say.”

“We both like her, boss.”

“It’s up to Rose what she wants,” Freddie says. “I’m not going to make her choose.”

“Neither am I,” I say.

“It looks like we’ve reached an understanding, then,” he says. “As long as it’s what Rose wants, we won’t force her to choose.”

CHAPTER 36

“Take me to the cottage.” I try to sound assertive while my legs tremble. “Right fucking now.”

“Why are you in such a hurry, princess?”

Callen puts his clothes back on at a painfully slow speed. He’s dragging the process out on purpose, and I refuse to look at his gorgeous body out of spite. I perch on the bike, shuffling as his cum leaks out of me. Hopefully, it stains his precious Harley.

“Finally,” I grumble as he mounts the bike, and I wrap my arms around his torso begrudgingly.

“Hold on tight.”

We set off again, manoeuvring through the undergrowth. Suddenly, a howl echoes through the forest. It’s not a threatening sound, more like the desperate yelp of an animal in pain.

“Callen!” I screech.

I’m almost thrown off as he swerves to the right, turning off the dirt track without warning. He ignores me, racing through the grass towards the noise. He has a death wish.

“What are you…” My sentence trails off as we come to a stop.

Up ahead, an injured deer lies on her side, and her cries for help reverberate through my core. Her brown eyes look up at us, wide and desperate, pleading for help. Glass is wedged into her blood-stained fur.

“Get off the bike!” Callen demands, making the deer howl even louder, amplifying her terror.

I hop off, and he opens the seat. He ruffles around inside it, throwing various objects out until he finds a medical kit. He races over and kneels by

the deer. She freezes in hesitation, but he strokes her head, instantly putting her at ease.

“It’ll be okay,” he murmurs. He opens the kit to retrieve gloves and waves me over. “Come here. I need you to help hold her still.”

I approach gingerly, eyeing the suspect-looking injections in his kit. “You’re not going to kill her, are you?”

He scowls. “I need to remove the foreign object and stitch her back up, but she’ll struggle. You need to hold her in place. Can you do that?”

I nod shakily, confused as to how he knows all of this. I sit down next to her and stroke her back. It’s my first time being close to a deer, and I want to help take her pain away. Callen takes tweezers from the kit. She wriggles, but I hold her in place. She’s weak after lying here and doesn’t have the energy to struggle.

Callen carefully pulls the glass from the animal’s wound, one shard at a time, with expert precision.

“I’m going to do everything I can to save you, little miss,” he tells the deer in a soft voice. The giant brash scary killer is gone. His caring manner is so shocking that it almost brings tears to my eyes. What other secrets is Callen hiding underneath his biker jacket?

She tries to kick out as Callen cleans her wounds. As well as the glass, she has nasty cuts from where it looks like she got caught in a barbed wire fence.

“Will she be okay?” I ask as Callen works his magic, stitching her wounds together in neat stitches with a steady hand.

He doesn’t answer, concentrating fully on his work and getting the desired results.

“There,” he declares, gently scratching the deer’s head as a reward. “You’ll be okay now. You better be more careful next time.”

He and the deer share a look of understanding as if she knows exactly what he’s saying. With that, he stands and offers me his hand. Still reeling from shock, I take it and let him pull me up. We stand back and watch as she rises unsteadily. She’s still weak but manages a few wobbly steps in the other direction.

“Are you sure she’ll be okay?” I ask.

The deer pauses in the clearing and looks back over her shoulder to thank him.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, looking away. “She’ll be fine.”

He stalks back to the bike.

“How did you know how to do that?” I ask. “Are you a vet or something?”

“I used to be a surgeon,” he replies, putting on his helmet to end the conversation.

My jaw drops. “A surgeon?”

Medical professionals swear to protect their patients. The only thing I imagine Callen being good for is killing them!

“It’s time to go,” he says gruffly.

Something happened for him to become a Duke. Something he doesn’t want to talk about. Something I want to find out.

CHAPTER 37

CALLEN

I don't plan on speaking to her when we return to the cottage, but she grabs my shoulder as I try to turn away to go inside. I shouldn't have stopped to help the deer. She saw too much.

"Callen—"

"What?" I snarl.

"What happened to you?"

"None of your fucking business," I say, pushing past her and storming into the kitchen.

She follows me, slamming the door closed behind her, not caring that her muddy boots are leaving footprints over the wooden floors. "How did you go from being a surgeon to a killer?"

"We're protectors, remember?"

She snorts. "I know what you really are."

I narrow my eyes. "Why don't you save your questions for when you're pretending to be a journalist?"

"You saved that deer's life," she says. Yep, I should have left the deer to die. It'd be better than answering her questions and seeing her looking at me like that. It leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I don't need her pity. "You pretend you're tough and that you don't care, but you do. I can see it."

"You don't know anything." I draw myself up to full height, towering over her. "All you need to know is that I could lobotomise you on the kitchen table. That should scare you. I should scare you."

"What happened to you?" she asks again.

I turn my back on her, unwilling to let her see my face fall, as I head to the sink to wash my hands. I take my time, lathering the soap the way I was

trained to do at medical school. When I'm done, she's standing opposite me with crossed arms. I dry my hands carefully. No one but Freddie knows about my past. A past that haunts me so much I'll never get over it.

"I'm not going to stop asking until you tell me."

"Why?" I sneer. "More ammunition to give to your club friends?"

"I—"

"We're the same, Rose," I say. "Your sister died, and you wanted revenge. That's why you kill people, isn't it?"

She doesn't reply, but her face says it all.

"You lost someone too," she says, understanding now.

"I had a daughter."

I don't know why I told her, but I couldn't stop the words from coming. Rose's face falls.

I picture Tilly now, forever three years old. Her beautiful chubby face, her big trusting eyes, her contagious giggle. I should have saved her. Everyone said it was a mistake for me to operate on her, but I didn't trust anyone else to do the job properly. My ex-wife, Margot, didn't want me to do it either. But I was the best. If anyone was going to save her life, it was me. I spent hours on the operating table, using every technique I had, but my little girl couldn't fight anymore...

Rose steps forward. The fiery look in her eyes fades as she puts her hand on my arm. I don't shrug her off, not yet.

"I killed her," I say, making Rose recoil away. She has to know what kind of monster I am. "She died on the operating table because of me."

After that, my career collapsed. I couldn't face it. My marriage fell apart, and Margot left. We never loved each other. We were a marriage of convenience. She wanted a husband to provide for her and my being a surgeon gave her status. She happily overlooked my lack of faithfulness. Tilly was the only person who tethered me to reality and who made me believe life could get better. The only person I ever loved... and my love is a fucking curse.

I pull my wallet out of my pocket and thrust a tattered photograph of Tilly under Rose's nose. Nothing compares to the pain of losing a child. Someone who is so intrinsically part of you. Tilly smiles up at Rose. Her ginger curls and dimpled face. So innocent. My baby. I'd have given my life for hers in an instant.

"That wasn't your fault," Rose murmurs, looking at the photograph.

“She’s beautiful.”

“She was, but she’s gone,” I say, snatching the photograph back and stashing it away. I can’t look at it without seeing her on the operating table, attached to tubes and beeping machines. Her short life was unfairly cut to an end, and she took me with it. “You asked why I became who I am. I couldn’t save Tilly, but her death wasn’t an accident. Her nursery was on a day trip when a car ploughed into the pavement. Tilly got caught in the impact.” My blood boils with a wave of anger that’s ruled me since that day. A fury I’ll never shake. “They let the drunk driver off with a warning because of who he was. A powerful man in Edinburgh with enough connections to sweep her death under the carpet.”

The colour drains from Rose’s cheeks.

“My ex-wife took his money in exchange for not pressing charges.” I scowl. “That’s all she wanted me for, anyway. They paid for her silence, but my daughter’s life was about more than money.”

I run my hand through my hair, forcing it through a knot and stinging my scalp as I think about how Tilly used to totter over and call out for her daddy. I used to pick her up and twirl her around while she laughed so hard she nearly peed. When the car hit her, was she calling out for me in her last moments? Was she thinking her daddy would save her? That was my only fucking job, and I failed her.

“Lord McGowan...” Rose mumbles. “He was the driver of the car, wasn’t he?”

I don’t need to answer. She can tell from my murderous expression. I’ve been tracking him for years, biding my time. Freddie promised me an outlet with the Dukes, a way to make a difference, but I’m done protecting people like him. Rose entering our lives has reignited my fury and reminded me of what matters. I’ve finally found someone who understands how I feel. Someone who isn’t afraid to embrace their anger.

“What’s in the package, Callen?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Do you need to ask?”

“I’ll make sure he pays for what he’s done,” she promises.

I nod sharply, then push past her, leaving the cottage and jumping onto my bike. I need some fucking air...

CHAPTER 38

SEB

After speaking to our security team and dropping Freddie back at the house to tighten up our measures, I drive back to the safe house, swapping cars a few times—just in case. The clock on the dash taunts me, and I put my foot down. Mum will kill me if we're late. Thankfully, I'm already wearing my black tux and Rose should be ready to go.

I pull into the driveway and notice Callen's Harley is gone. There's one light on upstairs. I fly from the car, leaving my keys in the ignition and throw the door wide open.

"Rose?" I yell. "Rose?"

Footsteps come from behind me. I spin, ready to fight, but stop when I see her standing there.

She raises her eyebrows in bemusement. "Are you okay?"

"I... I saw Callen's bike was gone," I reply, making a mental note to kick his arse later. Why would he leave her alone after what happened last time? It's reckless, but holy shit...

My heightened heart rate doesn't slow as my eyes take in the sight of the gorgeous woman before me. She's stunning.

"I guess Callen had other things to do," Rose replies. "But I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Her black ballgown's sculpted bodice shows just the right amount of cleavage, and the skirt—well, I'm not sure what the cut's called—resembles a sequined waterfall. She could have stepped straight out of Cinderella. I must have done something right to deserve to take this woman on a date.

"Seb? Are you listening?" Rose waves a hand in front of my face as I stand, gawping at her like a moron. "Are you sure this is okay?" She lifts and

drops her skirt. "It's not too much, is it?"

"No!" My voice is huskier than normal. Do we have to go out? I'd prefer to stay here and tear that dress off her irresistible curves. "You are... it looks... beautiful. You look beautiful. You'll fit right in."

A nervous smile flickers over her lips.

"There," she says, straightening my tie. "Much better."

"We should go," I say, despite wrestling with my better judgement and hardening cock. "We don't want to be late."

The Collingsbrook Ball is a grand occasion. A social event that most people prepare for weeks ahead. I know my mother plans her outfit a full year in advance.

I offer her my arm. "My lady."

She rolls her eyes and steps past me, holding the front door open for me instead. She sways on her heels as we walk across the gravel but bats away my attempts to help steady her.

"What can I expect from tonight?" she asks. "A load of posh people boasting about how amazing their life is?"

I chuckle. "Pretty much."

I dash around the car quickly enough to ensure I can hold the door open for her. She may think chivalry is dead, but I want to prove her wrong.

"Do you often take a date to these things?" she asks as we pull away.

"Actually," I admit, "you're the first woman I've introduced to my family."

She keeps her mouth shut. Maybe she sees that as a red flag. I wouldn't blame her. We drive through the tight country lanes, and Rose keeps changing the radio, hopping from station to station.

"You've got nothing to be nervous about," I reassure her. "I'll be with you all night. We can just pretend that no one else is around."

She smiles, but it doesn't meet her eyes.

"We can turn around?" I offer. "We don't have to go."

"No," she says quickly. "I want to."

If we didn't, my mum would think I made her up. It wouldn't be the first time I fabricated a girlfriend to stop her from playing matchmaker. Introducing her to them is a big deal, but I can't show my nerves to Rose. My family is hard to please. Scratch that, impossible to please. They'll act polite on the surface, but bringing in a "commoner" won't go down well.

The Collingsbrook's country manor is situated among rolling hills over

many acres. Over the summer, they open the grounds for exorbitantly priced public tours. There's a grand waterfall, a hedge maze, and a stunning rose garden, but the effect is different on a bleak February evening. The foreboding gothic manor has ivy creeping up its crumbling walls, suffocating the old bricks and walls steeped in dark history.

We join a queue of cars at the gate, waiting for security to let us in. They have an entire team patrolling the perimeter because of the high-profile guests attending. Freddie worried about Rose being unsafe here, but I don't know anywhere else she would be safer.

We reach the front, and a security guard shines a torch on my face. "Name?"

"Sebastian Montgomery," I reply. "And Rose Hathaway."

"We have to do a check of your plus one," the man says gruffly. "Can you get out of the car, Miss?"

They waved everyone else straight through. This will be my mother's doing, trying to make Rose feel like she doesn't belong before she arrives. Rose tenses, and I place a reassuring hand over her knee. She's not moving.

I wanted to give her a magical evening, not a strip search by a sixty-year-old guy who would use the opportunity to cop a feel. What does he think she's hiding under her skirt? A bomb?

"That won't be necessary," I command. "If you have a problem, take it up with Margaret Montgomery."

I wind up the window and speed forward. He doesn't object or try to stop me. My expression was warning enough.

Rose gapes at the sheer size of the manor as we approach. "This place is..."

"A bastard to keep warm?" I joke.

Rose snorts and puts her mask on. It's black with silver stitching around the edges and matches her dress perfectly. The gravel crunches under the wheels as we come to a stop. I fasten my mask—it's simple, all black to match my tux with no frills.

I turn to Rose. "Are you ready?"

She nods.

I get out first and hold open her door. For once, she doesn't object. I pass my car keys to a waiting staff member who will park it for us. Rose grabs her bag and takes my hand with the other. She's wearing white satin gloves that come up to her elbows. Ugly sandstone gargoyles peer down at us from

above as we walk into the courtyard. An illuminated fountain is positioned in front of the entrance, where people are circling.

I slide my fingers between hers and squeeze.

Let the games begin...

CHAPTER 39

IVY

I try my best not to trip over my giant skirt as I climb out of the car. It's more complicated than it looks to stay graceful in a dress that barely fits inside the footwell. Lord McGowan's special gift weighs my clutch bag down, reminding me of what I have to do. I haven't seen Callen since our conversation, but Tilly's gap-toothed smile flashes through my mind. I'm not doing this for him; I'm doing this for her.

This isn't the only high-society event I've attended over the years. Seb, oblivious to how this isn't my first rodeo, is acting extra sweet to put me at ease. When I killed a mafia kingpin, I went to similar parties in Italy. This is more old-fashioned, though. Entering the British upper class is like stepping back in time. The world has moved on, but they're still trapped in the past, desperately clinging to their relevance and accumulated family wealth.

Seb's hand warms mine through my gloves, perfect for concealing fingerprints. Freddie knows how to accessorise with murder in mind. I tie my red hair in a graceful knot at the back of my head as I scan the crowd, pleased to be concealed under a mask, but also annoyed that it makes my job identifying people more difficult.

There's one entrance, and the borders are under constant patrol, but a manor this size has plenty of places to hide.

An older woman in a plum ball gown sashays over to greet us. Her dyed blonde hair is a shade lighter than suits her and adds five years to her overall appearance, even though she probably thinks it makes her look more youthful.

"Sebastian!" she croons. Seb kisses her on both cheeks. She steps back to look at me and sniffs. She thinks her shit doesn't stink. Her smile doesn't

drop, but it doesn't meet her glacial stare. "And you must be Rose. What a pretty name."

She says it like it's as pretty as a steaming dump on top of a cake.

"Thank you," I reply as Seb squeezes my hand. I shouldn't care what she thinks, but a small part of insecurity stirs, transporting me back to the playground where I always felt like the odd one out. "You must be Seb's mum."

"You can call me Lady Montgomery. We're so glad you could make it," she lies. "Sebastian tries to avoid his family as much as possible."

Seb sighs. "Work keeps me busy."

"You work too hard." She tuts. "And you're not getting any younger."

"I'm in my thirties," he replies. "I'm not dead yet."

"Just look at Ralph and how well he's doing. You should be more like your brother."

"Is Dad here?" Seb asks, looking around.

She sniffs. "Your father couldn't make it this evening."

The poor chump probably wanted to stay at home to get time away from her.

A waitress carrying a tray of champagne flutes stops to offer us a glass. I take one, resisting the urge to throw it over Seb's mum and wipe the *you're a disappointment* look off her face.

"Seb's doing a great job," I say, stroking his arm. "Not everyone can run a successful business."

She scowls. "Not everyone has the same standards."

Snarky bitch. It's no wonder Seb can't stand being around her.

"We're going to take a walk, and I'll show Rose around," Seb intervenes smoothly. "You're always telling me I should get out more and socialise."

"Is she always like that?" I whisper as he steers me away.

Seb snorts. "That's her on her best behaviour."

We make our way through the crowd into the warmth of the building. The attendees are a mix of different ages, but they have one thing in common. Nasal laughter echoes around the halls of the building like a drunk hive of bees.

As we enter, the conversation lulls. A group of jabbering women gasp at the sight of me at Seb's side. Their faces twist, whispering behind their hands, but I can still hear their gossiping.

"Who is she?"

“Who does she think she is?”

“Ignore them,” Seb says. “They’re jealous that you have the attention of every man in the room.”

“I don’t think it’s every man’s attention they’re concerned about,” I say. If their judgemental side-eyes were bullets, I’d be dead. “They seem to have their eyes on one man in particular.”

“I don’t usually bring a date, that’s all,” Seb purrs, “and there’s no one else I’d rather have here with me than you.”

He whisks me past the gaggle of women into the middle of the grand foyer. The walls are wood-panelled, and a sweeping staircase in the middle splits in two directions with a family coat of arms proudly displayed on the wall. I hate it. It reminds me of the Bexley mansion with its stuffed animal heads and pompous art.

A woman hurries over to us. She’s wearing a mermaid-cut red dress that makes her waddle. Her hair is styled into a ridiculous updo on top of her head, with more extensions than natural hair.

Seb groans. “Incoming.”

“Sebastian!” the woman drawls from underneath her red-beaked mask. She dive-bombs his face like a sparrowhawk with more air kisses than necessary. Aren’t four air kisses something the French do? I should have brushed up on etiquette before attending. “It’s simply delightful to see you!”

She acts like I don’t exist.

“Beatrice,” he says. “It’s been too long.”

“Not long enough,” I mutter under my breath.

Thankfully, a nearby harpist drowns out my remark from Beatrice, but Seb splutters in amusement.

“We simply must get together soon for a proper catch-up.” She pauses, and her frosty glare looks me up and down. “I see you’ve brought a prop.”

A prop? If I didn’t have a mission, I’d claw out her eyeballs and feed them to the horse I’m sure she owns.

“I’m Rose. It’s lovely to meet you,” I reply, opting to kill her with kindness instead. She makes a harumphing noise. Fine, if she wants to act petty, then so can I. “Have you known Seb for a while? He’s never mentioned you to me.”

Her nostrils flare. Good, I’ve rattled her. She turns back to Seb, ignoring me altogether. “Daddy would like to speak to you this evening,” she says. “He has a fantastic business proposition.”

When she says proposition, it sounds like ‘prop-ah-si-shunnnn’. It must take her twice as long to say sentences as most people. Listening to her talk for any length of time would be enough to drive anyone insane. It’s more torturous than getting your fingernails ripped off.

“I’m sure I’ll catch him tonight,” Seb says.

“I’ll introduce you now, darling,” Beatrice insists, “but it’s sensitive, so perhaps you can talk to him alone?”

She looks at me pointedly to make it clear I’m not wanted.

“Rose is staying with me tonight,” he says, gripping my hand so tightly I’m afraid he’ll crush my fingers.

“But you can’t keep Lord McGowan waiting.” She pouts. *Lord McGowan is her father?* Producing devil spawn is another reason to hate him. “Daddy won’t be here for long as he has to catch a flight in the early hours.”

She pronounces hour like ‘are’ as if a dentist has asked her to open wide to get a look at her tonsils.

“It’s okay,” I tell Seb, “I’ll be fine here.”

His jaw tenses. He doesn’t want to leave me, but he has to blend in. This is his world and livelihood. “Rose—”

“Don’t worry, Sebastian,” Beatrice cuts him off. “You’ll still be getting your money’s worth. She can’t have been expensive.”

I’ll mount her head on the wall if she’s not careful.

“I’ll be fine,” I insist, extracting my fingers from his. If she thinks I’m a hooker, she definitely won’t expect me to cause any mayhem. “I’ll wait for you here. What’s the worst that can happen?”

A smug smile spreads over Beatrice’s face, thinking she’s won. She shoots a smug *I told you so* glance at a group of her friends watching nearby as she latches herself onto Seb’s arm.

“I’ll be right back,” Seb promises.

I stand in the corner and watch her lead Seb to a portly man who resembles Henry VIII—not the sexy version you see on TV, but the one with a red face and enormous belly. A young woman hangs off of the Lord’s arm, laughing at everything he says when we all know it’s not funny. She’s paid to be there. How can he live like this after what he’s done? He hasn’t faced the consequences of his actions, but he will tonight. I don’t know what’s in the package, but I know Callen enough to be sure justice will be served, but I also have another mission tonight.

While Seb is busy, I begin my checks. I meander through throngs of

people, pretending to admire the art. I find two doors leading off the foyer: one is locked, and the other opens to a grand parlour that resembles a set from Downton Abbey.

“Oh, it’s him!” A nearby group squeaks. “Look!”

Seeing the Prince of England with an entourage of security doesn’t excite me, but someone else catches my eye behind him.

Graham Baldwin. Another name on my hit list.

Graham lifts a glass to his lips, giving me the perfect view of the scar stretched over his knuckles. I cast a look over my shoulder. Seb’s head turns in the opposite direction. I have to move. Time is ticking...

CHAPTER 40

FREDDIE

Breaking into a client's house is against my rules, but we're running out of options. Spencer is the best lead we have at finding the Killers Club, and his mansion is deserted. Spencer sent his staff away out of paranoia, and the Dukes have access to his security system. I disable all the building alarms and let myself inside. I'll erase and loop any outside CCTV footage later.

The corridors are still and eerie. The painting's eyes follow my every move as I make my way to Spencer's library—the ideal place to start my search. The old floorboards creak under my feet. I pause, thinking I heard something moving around upstairs, but the noise has stopped. I dismiss it as the wind howling outside.

I flick on the light. The smell of cigars and whisky lingers in the air. I check the bookcases first, sweeping my fingers over the top of the dust-layered pages. He hasn't moved them in a while. Next, I examine a filing cabinet filled with financial documentation. Aside from bank statements with too many zeros for someone with such little sense, nothing appears to be remiss. Spencer isn't stupid enough to leave records of shady deals lying around for any Tom, Dick, and Harry to find.

I take a seat at his desk. *You need to think like Spencer.* What would he do? Three small drawers are built into the desk. Their contents are what I'd expect: an emergency stash of cocaine, pills, and sex chat line cards.

I drum my fingers on the wood impatiently. Maybe I've wasted a trip. Maybe someone wants Spencer and his men dead simply because he's a bastard. It could be a weapons dealer he crossed or a pompous arse he screwed over, but the way his men were killed feels more personal. You

don't pay for someone to be chopped into tiny pieces unless you hold a serious grudge.

It's time I go.

When I stand, my knee hits something on the underside of the desk. I duck and knock on it. It's hollow. I run my fingers over it to find a hidden drawer and undo the small latch.

A photograph flutters onto the floor.

A photograph of Spencer and a woman.

"What the..." I murmur under my breath.

His arms are wrapped around her. He's holding on tight, too tight. His fingers grip her arms to force her to smile. She beams at the camera, but her smile is strained.

The colour drains from my face the longer I stare at it.

She isn't a stranger.

How does Rose know Spencer Bexley?

CHAPTER 41

IVY

I move through the crowds, weaving through the sea of sashaying ballgowns. I watch, then take my chance to strike. Oops. I clumsily bump into a man's shoulder. *Graham*. The bastard who was second in line to rape her. My stomach churns as I recall his desperate panting while he waited for his turn.

"Sorry," I say in a girly, high-pitched tone. "I'm so clumsy."

"Don't worry, darling," he says as he checks out my tits, making my skin crawl. "Nice dress. You look like Cinderella."

I simper and giggle. "That must make you my Prince Charming."

The only thing me and Cinders have in common is that we'll be gone by midnight. I'd prefer to take my time with him, but my position is precarious. From my previous research, I learned that Graham stopped working for Spencer years ago. He's wheedled his way into working for British aristocrats now. If he does for them what he did for Spencer, more people will have suffered at his hands. His work involves travelling overseas, and I can't miss an opportunity when it's laid on a plate.

Graham extends his clammy hand for me to shake. I take it, and he holds on for a few seconds too long, coating my palm with his sweat. I fight the urge to vomit. "It's my pleasure."

I look around. "It's an impressive-looking building."

"I can give you a tour if you like." He takes my bait and winks. "I'll pay you more than Montgomery."

So he noticed me entering with Seb and also thinks I'm a prostitute. How many women are actually dating these men?

"I'd love a tour." I flutter my eyelashes. "Somewhere private."

His greedy eyes light up like I've touched his cock. "I know a place."

Graham leads me to the locked door on the opposite side of the foyer and takes a key from his pocket.

"I have friends in high places," he declares.

"Really?" I pretend to be impressed. "Wow! That must make you a very important man."

Thankfully, the closest security guard is distracted by an intoxicated guest staggering next to a valuable painting. I haven't lost sight of Seb either. He's deep in conversation with Lord McGowan and Beatrice but intermittently scans the crowds. Other guests obscure me from his view. The place is filling up fast.

We slip through into a long corridor.

"This way." He beckons to a door at the end. A set of stairs lies beyond it. "After you."

Usually, I refuse to turn my back on a mark, but I have to play his game... for now.

"Where are we going?"

"I work for the Collingsbrook family from time to time," he brags. "There's an observatory at the top tower where you can see the stars." He shatters the romantic picture by grabbing my arse from behind when I take my first step. "No one will interrupt us there."

"Sounds perfect," I reply through gritted teeth.

I have to keep my composure. We need to be far enough from the party that they won't hear him squealing like a pig. We continue up the winding staircase. It's a tight space made from grey brick and the steps get gradually steeper.

"You never told me your name," he says.

"Does it matter?" I reply, knowing this is what a man like him wants to hear. He doesn't see a woman as human.

His snotty chuckle makes me wince. "I like you already."

"How much higher?" I ask as we continue.

"Not far now." The buzz of the music gets further and further away. "This spot used to be a lookout to see when enemies were coming."

It isn't so helpful when enemies have already breached the walls.

We reach a door at the top, and I push it open. The observatory is beautiful. It has a glass ceiling and rows of books line the walls with a chaise lounge in its centre. If the walls could talk, they'd whisper about battles and

secrets. A telescope is pointed at a circular window that looks across the gardens to where guests are still arriving.

I gesture at the seat. “Why don’t you get comfortable?”

Graham clambers on there eagerly, raring to go. I spy a set of steps used to locate books on the top shelves and drag them across the dusty floor.

I prop the steps underneath the door handle and smile sweetly. “We don’t want anyone disturbing us.”

“No, we don’t,” he agrees.

His tiny pickle creates a dull point in his trousers—a crinkle, more than a tent—as he removes his mask. I sashay over, swaying my hips seductively like I’m about to start doing the tango. Before my life turned upside down, I used to love to dance, but I’ve not danced properly for years.

Graham watches my motions, fucking me with his eyes. I fight my instinct to kill him instantly. Seb will turn the manor over to look for me soon, but I can toy with my prey for a little longer.

“I have a fun idea,” I say, grudging how close to him I’ll have to get to pull this off. I can’t leave any mess behind. Seb’s mum will hate me even more if I return to the party leaving a blood trail. I move behind him and rub his shoulders while he unbuttons his shirt to release a hairy beer belly. The tip of his shrivelled cock with questionable-looking scabs peeks over his waistline, and I reach for his tie. “It’d be fun to tie you up.”

I undo the knot and slide it from underneath his collar.

His breathing quickens like a pug out for a long walk. “You’re a dirty girl, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.” I run my tongue over my lips and wrap the tie around his eyes. “I could teach you a lot of things, Graham.”

“Hang on…” He freezes. “I didn’t tell you my name.”

He may be a sex-starved, desperate piece of shit, but he pays attention. My slip of the tongue was no accident.

I jump into action, moving the tie down and pulling it tightly around his neck.

“Your reputation precedes you,” I hiss. “Do you remember the two girls you killed while working for Spencer Bexley? Do you remember what you did to them?”

His eyeballs engorge in terror as I yank on the fabric. It cuts into his gammon-like neck.

“Who are you?” he gasps.

“Think of me as a ghost who has returned to haunt you.”

He claws at his neck in a pathetic attempt to free himself, but there’s no escape. I twist the fabric more.

“Do you remember what you did to her?” I whisper. “How you kept going even though she was gasping for air? Even though she cried and begged for you to stop?”

I pull harder, cutting off his airway. His face turns purple.

“You’re all going to pay for what you did to her,” I say. “You should count yourself lucky. If I had more time, I’d cut you into pieces like I did Anthony Steel.”

He thrashes around like a fish out of water, but it’s pointless. I won’t stop. I ease my hold for a second. He heaves and chokes.

“Please don’t do this,” he splutters.

I want to give him hope. A tiny shred of hope that he might survive, only to yank it from under him. Just like the hope I felt when I saw him and the others coming over the top of the hill that night. The hope that we were going to be saved that he—*they*—shattered.

I laugh and pull the tie taut. Strangling is hard work. Harder than most people think. It’s a good thing I’m wearing a long-stay foundation, otherwise, it would’ve melted all over my face.

“My name is Ivy Penrose,” I breathe in his ear. “Begging didn’t help my sister, and it won’t help you. You’re going straight to hell. Say hi to Anthony for me.”

His body seizes. Blood rushes to the whites of his eyes and the veins break. All I can think of is Daisy’s life draining away. His struggling stops, but I don’t. I keep squeezing long past his last breath, caught up in the moment.

Finally, I let go. His body slumps onto the sofa, laying slack-mouthed with glassy eyes and a bruised neck. No one will suspect a woman of being strong enough to kill a man. I wrinkle my nose and button up his shirt. I don’t have the time to hang him to stage a suicide, but I push him off the sofa. There’s a perfect body-sized hiding space directly underneath it to stash him in. It won’t be long until the smell of death permeates the place and someone goes looking for its source, but it’ll hide him from any party guests tonight.

I check my reflection in the window and adjust my hair. *Perfect*. I lean to look through the telescope and position it to view the gardens, where guests are milling around to see if Lord McGowan is in sight.

My mouth goes dry.

Fuck. It's them...

Two figures prowling around away from the main crowd catch my attention. Even in masks and smart attire, I recognise them. If they know where I am, it means they've worked out who the final Duke is.

Stephanie and Alaric have come to take me home.

CHAPTER 42

CalLEN

send Freddie's call straight to voicemail. He'll ring again if it's important. A few minutes later, my phone vibrates.

I answer mid-yawn. "What?"

"You need to find Seb." Freddie's words come in a breathless rush. Mr Perfect is rattled. "I found something at Spencer's. Something about Rose."

Now I'm paying attention.

"What about her?" I ask sharply.

He selects his next words carefully. "I'm not sure yet." The bitter edge to his tone tells me he suspects something. "But I want to find out."

"So you're giving me permission to crash a party?"

"Yes," he growls. "Don't get used to it."

"I'll just grab some food and then—"

"Now, Callen," Freddie orders. "Right fucking now!"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, boss," I say. "I'm on my way."

I hang up. The princess's secret may be unearthed soon, but not before she completes my job. Freddie can believe I'm racing across the countryside to pluck Seb from the cesspool of twats, but he doesn't know I'm already at the scene...

I have the perfect vantage point at the top of a nearby hill where I can watch over the manor grounds from my bike. Collingsbrook's security is positioned around the borders, but driving a Rolls Royce isn't the only way in.

I check my watch. If Rose is efficient enough to cut a body into tiny pieces, then she's capable of slipping a package into Lord McGowan's hands. I already know he's at the party. He was among the first to arrive with his

insufferable daughter, who always tries to bury her nose in Seb's scrotum.

Lord McGowan hasn't changed since I last saw him. He's lucky there's some distance between us. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than pulverising his face until it doesn't look human.

How is it fair he gets to live an ordinary life after wiping my baby from existence? Tilly had her whole life ahead of her. He stripped her of everything. Her first day at school, her first boyfriend—whose arse I would have kicked—going to university, getting a job... That despicable monster stole her life and faced zero consequences. To him, she was roadkill.

I take out my wallet and stroke the torn edges of her photograph.

"Daddy will look after you, sweetheart," I promise her, kissing it.

I'll get her the vengeance she deserves. Rose understands why I need this. She hates me, but we're alike. No one turns into a killing machine without experiencing trauma. Our similarities have drawn us together, and we've been building to this moment.

I scan the crowds with my binoculars. There she is. Rose sweeps across the gardens in her black ball gown. The sight of her takes my breath away. She must have shaken Seb off. *Nice move*. My heartbeat quickens as she approaches him.

"Go on," I encourage. She speaks to Lord McGowan. I'm not sure what she's saying, but he appears to be laughing. She's charming him. I watch as she pulls my package from the bag and hands it to him. He won't believe his luck. "Well done, princess."

She's the Grim Reaper disguised as an angel.

Now all I have to do is sit back and wait for him to open my special gift. I'll be able to watch the sky light up. Tilly always used to enjoy watching the fireworks with me.

CHAPTER 43

SEB

I walk around in circles. I must have circled the room at least three times already. I see my mother, distant cousins I actively avoid, and a few others I do business with, but no Rose.

Where is she?

Whenever I take a step, people draw me into conversations to persuade me to invest in their hair-brained schemes. After getting my ear chewed off by Lord McGowan about an opportunity that's most definitely a pyramid scheme, I'm ready to bail. Getting cosy with Rose in front of the fire sounds like the best way to end the evening.

My older brother, Ralph, catches my eye while schmoozing with other guests and smirks. He walks with his chest puffed out like a peacock. He's the golden boy of our family and can do no wrong in my mother's eyes, but he'll always be the cunt who almost drowned me in our pond as a child.

Mum beckons me over with a wiggle of her finger. It's too late to pretend I haven't seen her. From the outside, we project the illusion of being the perfect family, but we're toxic.

"I see you were speaking to Lord McGowan," she comments.

Inevitably, she'll have been watching me like a hawk all evening. Since an unfortunate incident when I got wasted as a teenager at the yearly garden party and passed out behind an ice sculpture, she doesn't trust me to behave at public functions.

"Yes," I reply vaguely, still looking for Rose.

"His daughter Beatrice is a lovely girl," Mum says. Beatrice is at the top of her list of potential matches for me. I'd rather marry a horse than Beatrice, although there's not much difference. "She's a different class of woman. She

knows how we do things. That's the type of woman you need. She'd be a fine choice."

"You mean a match the family would like me to have," I correct her. My impatience is rising. "I'm with Rose. If you can't accept that, then you can fuck off."

Her head jerks as if I slapped her. "Don't speak to me like that, Sebastian," she hisses under her breath, quickly looking around to make sure we're not being overheard. "This is her influence. I didn't bring you up to act so uncivilised. We're not in Hackney."

"No, you brought me up to smile and wave and pretend everything is alright when the real backstabbing happens behind closed doors," I snarl, then spot Rose on the other side of the room. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to find my date."

I push past anyone standing in my way. When Rose spots me, she hurries over. I didn't think she'd be a fan of PDA, but she ends up grabbing my shirt to pull me close. I'm not complaining. I know plenty of places where we could go to be alone.

"There you are." She's breathless. "I've been looking for you."

"Where have you been?" I ask.

"I've been getting to know some of the guests better." Her voice is laced with a resentment I know all too well. "You have to leave."

"What do you mean?" I frown. "Has someone said something to upset you? If they have, I'll deal with them."

"This is bigger than that," she insists firmly. "You need to go."

"I'd love to." I put my hands on her waist and imagine running my hands over her gorgeous naked body. "Trust me, I'd love nothing more than to tear that corset off and—"

"This is serious, Seb," she interrupts. "Something bad is going to..."

I hear Spencer Bexley's distinct laugh before I see him. It echoes around the room and dashes my chance of leaving early.

"Don't worry," I tell Rose as her voice trails off. "Everything is fine. I just need to stay a little longer for work, and then we'll go, okay?"

CHAPTER 44

IVY

I hear it. His voice splits the air, cutting through it like a knife and stabbing my eardrums. I could pick it out in a packed football stadium. Spencer is here. Chills slither down my spine. I thought he might keep a low profile after the recent deaths, but he can't resist a special occasion.

The last words he said come floating back to me, "If I can't have you, no one can."

He doesn't control you anymore, Ive.

You're a ruthless killer who has beheaded men for less.

Remember how far you've come!

It doesn't stop him from sucking all the air out of the room like my head is trapped inside a plastic bag. A knot tightens in my chest. Being in his presence is like stumbling into a black hole. This isn't how I imagined seeing him again. I fantasised about him being chained up in a torture chamber, laid out in the perfect position to be skinned alive, but we're surrounded.

I can't kill him here, no matter how much I want to. Alaric trained me to keep my guard up, ward off my emotions and think on instinct. I slip straight into work mode and put my shield up.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say, then dash away before Seb can say anything. Beatrice heads in his direction, taking advantage of the opening. She'll keep him talking while I slip away, pushing away the thought that this could be the last time I see him.

I look for an escape route and head into the garden. The breeze chills my skin, and a firm hand on my shoulder makes me jump.

"We've been waiting for you," Alaric says. His fingers dig into my shoulder. "Let's take a walk."

“I can explain—”

“Not here,” he hisses, steering me towards Stephanie, who is waiting by a bush that’s cut in the shape of a swirl but resembles a poop emoji instead. “Come on.”

I fall into step and follow them through to a quieter part of the garden, away from the hustle and bustle.

“You’ve seen him, haven’t you?” Stephanie demands. “That’s why you’re here.”

“It doesn’t change—”

“You’re compromised, Ivy,” she interrupts coldly. “We know Sebastian Montgomery is a Duke.”

“Tom ruined everything.” It’s easier for me to blame a dead guy who can’t argue than admit I spent my time getting railed by three guys. “Everything was going to plan until he showed up.”

“What happened?” Alaric asks.

“I wasn’t there,” I lie. “Callen killed him. I only saw the body.”

“We’re going to kill them all,” Alaric growls. “Starting with Sebastian tonight.”

I open my mouth to make an excuse about finding more information when a giant bang behind us makes the three of us spin around.

What the fuck is happening?

CHAPTER 45

SEB

I go to follow Rose, not wanting to leave her alone for the second time tonight.

“Sebastian,” Spencer approaches as if he can sense I’m about to leave. His fingers dig into my arm to keep me in place. He’s paying thousands for our protection. “Why don’t you join me for a drink?”

The last time I left a mark unattended, someone poisoned him, but I can’t lose Rose. She’s too important. I’d choose her. I’d always choose her.

Suddenly, there’s a blinding flash of light. A deafening bang sends me flying. I shield my eyes and stagger to my feet. Dust and smoke fill the courtyard, blurring my vision. Screams come from all directions. Women in tattered ballgowns wail and hold onto their skirts as they run, not caring about their hair falling out of place.

“A bomb!”

“They’re dead!”

While Spencer sprints in the opposite direction to the fiery blaze that threatens to consume the manor, I run towards it.

“Rose?” I yell, fighting against the flow of people trying to escape. “Rose!”

Panic takes over. I see bodies. Some are moving, others lie motionless on the floor. I squint through the rubble to see what’s left of Lord McGowan. There’s no saving him. He appears to have taken the brunt of the blast, and his arms are bloody stumps.

“Rose!” I shout again desperately, looking around wildly. “Rose!”

But she’s nowhere to be seen...

**Talk about ending with a bang, right?
How will Freddie react when he finds out what happened? What's going
to happen when Ivy returns to the Killers Club?**

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secrets will be revealed...

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If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review and sharing your
thoughts with other readers. Reviews help readers find new books, and I truly
appreciate your support.

AUTHORS NOTE

Woah, how are you feeling after that ending? Hating me a little? Don't worry, I'll make it up to you—promise!

Thank you for picking up this book. I feel unbelievably lucky to be able to share all the stories buzzing around in my head with you.

A special thanks to Kyla and Ria, my beta reading babes, for your wise words and suggestions to make this book even better.

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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:
www.hollybloomauthor.com**

