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LOVER

VENGEFUL VILLAINS BOOK SEVEN

LETHAL LOVER

VENGEFUL VILLAINS: BOOK SEVEN

KRISTEN LUCIANI

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IMPORTANT NOTE TO READERS

This is a dark romance that contains very triggering situations and mature themes such as graphic violence and gore, graphic murder, graphic language, dub con, kidnapping, and explicit sexual situations, including anal sex, meant for an 18+ audience.

CHAPTER I

VALENTINA: AGE SIXTEEN

I let out a loud whoop as Jimmy Butler tears down the court at FXT Arena here in Miami. He goes in for a layup and the crowd goes insane around us.

Swish!

“This was a really great idea.” I turn to Charly with a smile. “I was afraid it might be a little weird...”

Charly nods and takes a long gulp of her Diet Coke. “There’s no reason why other people’s mistakes have to get in the way of our friendship.”

“True.” I bite down on my lower lip and glance down at my phone. My older brother Dima told me to call if I needed a ride home. And since Dad gave me very specific instructions not to tell him who I’m with, I’ll need to show up at his car alone or else there will be too many questions I can’t answer.

The last thing I want is to get caught in the middle of this drama.

I’m only here tonight because I really like Charly and I want to get to know her better. It may have taken us a while to find each other, but now that we have, I feel like I’m being pulled to her, like she’s a funnel cloud and I’m dancing around on the outskirts of it. Every step toward her tugs at me a little bit more.

But something holds me back. I can’t explain it. I just know deep down I can’t allow myself to get sucked inside.

Maybe it’s because of the tiny twinge of guilt that twists my gut when I think of my mother.

Charly punches a fist into the air. “Yes! Let’s go, Love!”

I jerk my head toward the court, dragging my mind back to the game.

Power forward Kevin Love just scored against the Celtics, tying up the score with only a few seconds to go. Charly stands up next to me, a big smile stretched across her lips, blond curls bouncing over her shoulders as she claps and cheers on the Heat.

I can't deny that this situation is beyond weird, but it would be wrong of me to turn my back on her, especially after we met purely by accident. Dad wasn't thrilled when I burst into his office in downtown Miami a couple of months ago and found them together.

It took him some time to warm to this whole idea of us being... friends.

And none of my siblings have a clue.

I asked questions, of course. But since Dad was pretty tight-lipped about the answers, I gave up. He's a stubborn Russian. I know better than to test his patience.

So I've kept his secret, and damn, if it doesn't eat at my insides every time I lie to my family... especially Mom... when I'm heading out to meet Charly.

Charly is as locked down as Dad. She lets me in a little bit, then pushes me away so that I'm dangling at arm's length. Never asks me anything about my brothers or sister. Only my mom, and every time her name comes up, it makes me break out in a cold sweat. I try to give her short answers for those questions and then change the subject as quickly as possible.

I found out Charly went to college at Vanderbilt University and now she's got some fancy job at a sports management agency here in Miami. She handles public relations for a lot of the top players, which is why we were able to score these awesome floor seats tonight.

There's something about her that captivates me, but at the same time freaks me the hell out. There's a push and pull, like a perpetual game of Ping-Pong. I want to figure her out, but I hate feeling so darned deceptive about it.

And the reality is that I don't even know how much time we'll have together.

It makes me a little sad to think about.

The deafening roar of the crowd rattles my eardrums when Cody Zeller makes a three-pointer from the line, sending the Miami Heat to the playoffs. Players, media, and press rush the court, the fans around us screaming like they've just won the lottery.

Charly's cheeks are flushed deep pink, her green eyes sparkling with excitement. "What an incredible comeback. Come on, all of that excitement

just made me super ravenous. Let's grab something to eat. I know an amazing place for Cuban sandwiches we can hit."

My mouth waters. Cuban sandwiches. My very favorite food in the whole world. I could seriously live on them. They cover every major food group. The tang of the pickle, the right flavors of thick cut ham and pork shoulder married together with Swiss cheese and spicy brown mustard. A good Cuban sandwich can make me swoon faster than any guy ever could, that's for sure.

We dodge through crowds of rowdy fans holding up plastic cups full of beer. Some guy hip checks me and his beer sloshes over the side of his cup. It splashes my bare skin, drenching the side of my tank top.

"Oops," he says with a leering grin. "Can I help ya dry off?"

I glance down at the wet spot covering my right boob, the part that took the brunt of the splash, and then glare at the guy. "Thanks, you've done enough."

Charly grabs my hand and pulls me away from the guy. A quick glance over my shoulder confirms he's still got his lecherous eyes on me.

Blech.

I shimmy from the shiver that zips through me.

"What was that about?" Charly looks back at the guy. "He's cute."

"Ew. He's so gross." I rub my hands up and down my arms as if that'll protect me from what his mind is definitely doing while he licks his lips and grins at me. "Can we get out of here? He totally gives me the creeps."

We finally make it out of the arena, and I follow Charly as she turns left down a hallway.

"VIP parking," she says with a wink. "Perks, you know?"

"They're pretty awesome." But an unsettled feeling swirls through my gut and clenches tight. I peek over my shoulder. We're alone and still... something taunts my nerves.

"So where is this fabulous place you're taking me?"

"Don't get too excited. It's a hole in the wall. Tuto's Place. You won't be impressed by the look of it, trust me. But they have the most amazing food."

"Can't wait."

Charly pulls open a large metal door. The sound of my footsteps echoes in the massive and mostly empty space.

I dart my head left and right. "Wow, with all those people here tonight, how did this parking deck clear out so fast?"

"The VIP parking deck is private. You have to be a player, an owner, or

know one to get in here.” Charly points to a black Maserati parked in the far corner. “That’s me over there.”

She pauses for a second. “There’s a reason why I asked you to meet me here tonight, Val.”

“Oh, yeah?” I pick up the pace, my leg muscles tensing, pulse throbbing against my throat.

What the heck is wrong with me? Why am I so panicked right now?

“My company is moving me away from Miami. That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

I stop, my jaw dropping. “What do you mean?”

Charly shrugs. “They want me to head up the New York office. But I think it’s better this way, better for all of you that I’m gone. Otherwise, it’d be too hard to—”

A loud noise reverberates between the walls and makes me jump. I jerk around, grabbing on to a column to steady myself. A guy with dark-rimmed glasses is crouched on the floor of the garage with a jack. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I’m not an expert with this thing and it slipped. My boss is going to be pissed.”

I narrow my eyes at the guy. But his smile is sweet. Self-deprecating almost. I hesitate for a second, then smile back.

Charly flashes a tight smile of her own and grasps my wrist before pulling me next to her.

Screeching tires assault my ears. I flip around. A blacked-out Ford Expedition squeals to a stop. The back and passenger side doors fly open and two guys jump out. Charly swerves around them, holding me against her. A strong hand grips the back of my hair, the barrel of a gun cool against my cheek.

My eyes fly open wide as I catch a glimpse of the guy with the glasses holding it against my face. “Don’t speak. Don’t breathe,” he hisses.

Charly tries to scream when the guys grab her, but they smack something against her lips. Her body goes limp in a hot second. At least she fought.

I’ve never been held at gunpoint before. My family is deeply entrenched in the Russian bratva, but I’ve always been protected from that world. Until now.

Tears sting my eyes. If I fight, he might kill me.

But if I don’t, I’ll regret it forever. And hell, they may kill me anyway. I struggle against him, taking a chance and elbowing him in the gut. The gun

drops from my face and I kick him in the ribs before taking my next step.

Too darn slow.

With a grunt, he pulls me back by my hair. I trip over my feet and crash onto the ground. I cringe, my knees stinging like hell once they're dragged against the concrete. I scream as loud as I possibly can, but since we're the only ones here, nobody makes a move to save me.

He tightens his hold on my hair and shoves me toward the truck. I land against it, my palms stinging from where they slam on the steel door. "You can do this the easy way or the hard way. Fight me and you both die."

One of the guys who snatched Charly throws me over his shoulder and flings me in the back seat like I weigh no more than a newspaper. I pound my fists and feet against his thick, massive body but he doesn't seem to feel a damn thing.

I land on my ass in the back seat, then scramble to the driver's side door. I jimmy the handle, but they must have predicted my next move because the door is locked.

"Let me out of here." My voice is hoarse from screaming, but the pain is nothing compared to what these people are about to do to me, judging from the menacing looks on their faces.

"Don't fight, Valentina."

I choke on a gasp, then someone behind me pulls me backward. I'm pinned to the leather seat, my heart lodged in my throat. Charly spasms on the seat next to me. Her eyes flutter, a gurgling sound making my gut twist. Foam pools at the corners of her lips.

"Oh my God, what did you do to her?"

The Expedition lurches forward but still, I'm plastered against the seat.

The men mutter to each other in a different language. One yells at the one closest to Charly.

"Help her." I scream again when a sharp pinch in my upper arm makes me wince. I cry out at the stinging sensation. Then a second later, my body floods with warmth and goes slack. I slide down in the seat, my head lolling to the side where tremors rock Charly's body.

My arms and legs lay limp on the seat. A few seconds later, everything goes numb, including my fingers and toes. Lights streak across my vision as if they're being stretched like brightly colored taffy. Every breath feels shallow and hollow, like I'm not part of my physical body... like I'm hovering in space, floating in the air.

I turn my head. A man next to Charly stares at me. His eyes are dark, his mouth frowning. I blink hard, struggling to see the black mark on the side of his neck. It's an upside-down four-pronged pitchfork with a star over the center prong. The bottom part forms a letter. I squint but my vision blurs before I can make it out.

I sink deeper into the seat, my eyelids drooping as I study the man. His light-blue eyes glare at me, his lips forming words I struggle to hear.

“Val, I told you to call me. Why did you do this? Why did you let them take you?”

“Dima... I'm sorry...” I manage to whisper the words before his face ripples like a rain puddle. With one last breath, blackness swallows me and I tumble fast and hard into the funnel cloud I've been so careful to avoid.

CHAPTER 2

QUINN: AGE SEVENTEEN

I push open the door to the VIP parking deck at FXT Arena and stop short with my hand on the metal bar. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” My brother Niall gives me a shove toward our rental car.

“I heard screaming.”

“I think it’s the ringing in your ears from all the damn Heat fans. Fucking Zeller. The one time he doesn’t choke on a game-winning shot.”

“Someone’s in trouble. A girl.”

My heart clenches. Our cousin Molly had been taken outside of a pub in Dublin years back. I was a lot younger than her, but we were close anyway. And since I was just a young teenager, there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it. We lost her to a family enemy who ran a huge leg of a sex trafficking ring that operated across Western Europe.

“You don’t know that for sure. It could be tinnitus, not screaming.” Niall grabs the keys out of his pocket and clicks the alarm for the Porsche 911 Turbo we rented for our weekend down here in Miami. Once, twice. It doesn’t beep. “What the hell is up with this alarm? Is the battery dead, for fuck’s sake?”

“It’s not fucking tinni—”

Tires screech, shattering the air. A black truck corners a cement pole near us like it’s on a race course instead of in a parking garage.

I jump out of the path of the truck and knock Niall out of harm’s way since he’s too busy grousing about the Celtics loss to realize he’s about to get steamrolled by the fucked-up driver.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, finally paying attention.

“Something’s up with that truck.” I grab his arm and jog toward our car,

pulling him along behind me. “I know I heard someone scream.”

The truck squeals to a stop about twenty feet ahead of us. The back door opens, and I watch, my breath caught in my throat.

“Get in the car.” I say the words through clenched teeth, my spine stiff as if standing still will make me invisible to whoever is in that truck.

An outstretched hand reaches out of the back seat. Before I can blink, gunshots pop into the air, ricocheting off metal, shattering glass.

Niall manages to get inside, and as soon as he unlocks the doors, I dive into the passenger seat.

The back door of the truck slams shut. Smoke kicks up from the tires as the driver stomps on the gas.

“What the hell was that all about?” I rake a hand through my hair. “Go after those fuckers. Don’t lose them.”

Niall lets out a frustrated breath. “The one time we leave our guns in the car.”

“We’d have never gotten past security.” I pull our guns out from under the passenger side seat. “It’s a damn good thing that idiot was a shitty shot or it’d have been us taking those bullets instead of the car next to us.”

“They weren’t trying to kill us. They wanted to keep us away.”

“Yeah, well, they fucking failed. They have a girl in that truck and we’re going after it.” An ice-cold chill slithers through my insides.

“Are you nuts, Q? This isn’t our battle. We’re here to get away from all that shit, remember?”

“Go after the truck or get the fuck in the back seat and I’ll do it myself.”

With a roll of his eyes, Niall slams his foot on the gas and swings the steering wheel around a curve. The truck barrels down the aisles of cars, not slowing down for any of the sharp turns.

“Stay on them.” I clutch the side of my seat, my fingertips digging into the leather.

“Why the hell are you doing this? Do you really think Dad wants our name to be associated with whatever the hell is happening here?”

“Things are so crazy with the crap Conor is stirring up in the city, I doubt he’ll give a damn.” Conor is my oldest brother and the one who’s been promoted to boss of our family. “Besides, he’s broken up enough about Heaven writing him off since she married Villani. Why the hell do you think he agreed to us coming down here? It’s like he doesn’t give a damn about anything anymore.”

There's more to the story than my sister Heaven just disassociating herself from my father and the Mulligan organization. She and Conor were both underbosses to my father. Conor is a fucknut... the eternal screwup... who put our whole family at risk when he killed a drug cartel lieutenant's daughter. And even after Heaven iced the cartel kingpin's ass, Dad still promoted Conor over her. Because he's a guy. I can't blame her for making a disappearing act after that shit show.

"You're not a cop. Or a fucking superhero."

That's the fucking understatement of the year. I'm the furthest thing from a superhero. Impulsive, careless, dangerous... that's all me. But I believe in getting revenge. And justice. It's the only way for me to self-protect. My family's notorious reputation always chased me like an attack dog trying to bite me in the ass. Nobody wanted to associate with the mafia boss's kid. I was reckless, always starting fights because it kept people out of my way.

The guys in that truck may not have my cousin in the back seat, but they have someone's cousin, sister, or daughter in there. And they pulled a gun on us. As far as I'm concerned, that's an open invitation for me to fuck shit up.

"Nobody was able to save Molly. Nobody could help her." Anger bubbles to the surface, the vicious streak that protected me when I was younger lighting up my insides.

They see me as an animal, so I'm going to be that animal.

It's worked for me so far.

"Yeah, well, Heaven fucked up that night. She was too plastered to do anything about it, and the guys got away with Molly."

Rage roars through me. "Heaven stabbed one of them with her shoe, for fuck's sake. She fought like hell and is lucky she didn't get thrown into that car, too. We could've lost them both, asshole."

We're on the street now. Niall swerves around cars to keep the truck in sight. His jaw tightens. "Just because we lost Molly doesn't mean we need to be fucking martyrs for a complete stranger."

"Tell you what. You stay in the car and I'll handle the guys in the truck. Okay? That way you don't get blood on your new Jordans."

Niall scoffs, taking a sharp right after the truck. The driver tries to lose us but we're driving a Porsche. Never gonna happen.

The buildings get farther apart. Streets open up and there are fewer cars to dodge as we head out of downtown Miami.

"They're headed for the port." I scrub a hand down the front of my face.

“This isn’t just a regular kidnapping. This is bigger.”

“Listen, Columbo. I’m not battling a fucking trafficking ring alone in a city where we don’t know anyone. Get it? I know you wanna be the protector, but it’s not happening. Find another cause, Q.”

I turn to glare at him. “Then how come you’re still driving? Is it because you know I’m right? That we can’t just run away with our dicks tucked between our legs? That we’re not those fucking guys?”

Niall slams his hand on the steering wheel. “We’re not those guys.”

“Thank you.”

“But I’m also not the guy with a death wish, either.”

“If we play it right, death won’t even flick us in the balls.”

A red traffic light stops flashing just as the truck goes through it and a cop appears in the opposite intersection. Niall slams on the brakes.

“Son of a bitch.” I crane my neck to see where the truck turns. It’s only a couple of blocks ahead.

When the light turns, the car lurches forward.

“Turn here.” I point to the street. “They can’t have gotten too far.”

The port is close by. If there’s a boat, there’s a damn good chance this girl they snatched isn’t the only one who’s gonna be shipped out of Miami. There’s a huge human trafficking business in South Florida and the bastards get away with it by greasing any palms they can find to get them to look the other way.

It grates on me that I was too young to help Molly. Dad found the guys who took her and killed every last one of them, but it wasn’t enough to bring her back. And if these guys are into the same business, they’re gonna die because now I’m old enough to pull a trigger and plug them in between the eyes.

Niall slows down as we drive down the street. The port is at the end of the block, and sure enough, there’s a boat docked.

“They’re selling girls.” I curl my fingers into a fist and pound on the side of the door. “They can’t get on that boat.”

“Oh yeah? And what army is gonna stop that from happening?” Niall downshifts and brakes about a block away from the port.

I scan the area. There’s a darkened building right across from the port. There aren’t any cars around, but shadows move through the windows on the lower level. “That’s where they’re taking the girls. I bet it’s an auction.”

Niall lets out a deep breath. “And you wanna go inside.”

“No.” I push open my door. “I’m *going* inside.”

He curses under his breath but follows me toward the building. “There has to be a back door somewhere. Nobody is using the front.”

We creep around in the darkness until we find a side door that’s unlocked. It creaks open. The hallway in front of us is narrow, like a tunnel. A chill sets into my bones. Is this tunnel for transporting girls in and out of the place? Or for sending them into one of the viewing rooms so that buyers can bid on them?

I did a lot of research after Molly was taken. I needed to understand exactly how these rings worked and what would happen to the girls. It became an obsession, all because we had no closure after she disappeared. Only a lot of my own shattered hopes of finding her and saving her one day.

But that never happened.

And since I’m big into justice, I’m gonna get it, not only for Molly, but for whoever the hell these bastards snatched.

“Why the hell is this hallway empty?” Niall whispers as he has his gun outstretched. “If they’re moving girls in and out, where the fuck are they?”

We duck in and out of rooms until I twist the handle on one black metal door. Five girls are sprawled on mattresses, some clothed, some naked.

“Shit.” I creep inside and drop to my knees next to a blond girl wearing a Miami Heat shirt. Her skin is pale white. I grab one of her hands. Ice-cold. A trail of what looks like dried-up vomit streaks her cheek. “I think she’s dead.”

My pulse hammers. I stumble backward. It’s not like I’ve never seen a dead body before but this one... this girl...

With her curly blond hair, it could be Molly.

Did Molly die like this? On a dirty mattress, so shot up with drugs that she choked to death on her own puke?

I jump away from her and move to the girl lying next to her. Her hair is a reddish brown. It’s stuck to the sides of her face. I cup her chin and move her head slowly. Her eyes open a crack.

“Daddy,” she croaks. “I’m s-sorry I didn’t call.”

Her voice slurs as she struggles to form words. Then her body buckles and she flips over, gagging and heaving on the floor next to her.

“We need to get the hell out of here.” Niall grabs me by the back of my shirt. “There may be other girls here. The guys who are running this place will eventually make their way down here. Let’s call Conor. Maybe he can tell us what to do.”

I shake off his hand. “Conor is probably high on Christ only knows what and fucking some girl up the ass right now. He won’t give a flying fuck that we’re in the middle of this hell.”

“Hell, yeah that sounds right. Let’s get out of it before we’re the next ones to die.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” a deep voice grunts from behind us.

Niall turns and shoots, but another guy charges him and knocks him to the ground. I grab for my gun because like a complete fucking moron, I didn’t have it in my hand already.

“Watch out,” Niall yells to me, struggling against the guy on top of him.

I turn... too late.

The barrel of a gun slams into my temple. I fall forward onto the girl.

A second guy tugs a chunk of my hair and yanks me toward him. He growls into my ear, spit wetting my skin. My stomach roils from the stink of stale cigarette smoke on his breath.

“You’re gonna be real sorry you tried to be a hero, you little prick.”

CHAPTER 3

VALENTINA

I drag in a sharp breath before shifting on the mattress to ease the ache in my gut. Blinking fast, I clear the cobwebs from my eyes. The stench of vomit and sweat makes my stomach wrench. A gunshot cracks, and I clutch the edge to steady myself.

Slowly, I turn my head. Four guys battle in front of where I lay, punching, kicking, bleeding. My pulse picks up speed, alarm bells faintly ring in the depths of my mind.

Charly. The black truck. *The man who knew my name.*

A hand grasps my shoulder, and I force my body to roll over. Charly's blond hair is matted to her face, her blue eyes filled with tears. She holds out her hand, reaching for mine.

“Val, please help me. Help *us.*”

I stretch out my arm, my fingers lacing with the air as her hand disappears from my sight. I drop my gaze to her face. Her pale, lifeless face.

A strangled cry escapes my dry lips.

More gunshots ring out. Bodies drop to the floor.

I struggle to sit up but my head feels like a cement block and it refuses to peel away from the mattress. I manage to flip myself over. Squinting in the dim light, I can make out the shapes of a few more girls on mattresses scattered around the floor. I clutch my throat, my body buckling as another round of dry heaving assaults me. I kick out my legs and pull myself to a kneeling position.

I have to get help. I have to save us both.

Charly's hand is so cold. She doesn't respond when I tug it. “Charly, please. Wake up.”

But she doesn't make a move. Her eyes don't flutter, her lips don't quiver.

She's as still as a...

No. Just *no*.

"Don't fight, Valentina."

The man's voice loops through my mind, droning on like a broken record.

I gasp for air like my lungs are caught in a vise that keeps cranking tighter and tighter. Clawing at the wall next to me for balance, I struggle to my feet, barely making it to my knees before they buckle and I crash back down to the floor.

Before I can try again, someone lifts me off the mattress. Someone strong. I'm in his arms, cradled against his chest. His heart pounds against my side while he runs from the room and down a dark hallway.

"Wait, we can't go. Charly... she's still in there..."

My voice is barely a whisper, all of my energy sapped from trying to escape.

The guy holding me doesn't say a word. He just moves as fast as possible.

Footsteps pound along the floor behind us. Another guy runs next to us. Looks a lot like the guy carrying me. He runs backward, pointing his gun at whoever is behind us.

A few bullets explode into the air. I bury my face in the guy's shirt like that will block out the mind-scrambling noise. The fabric of the t-shirt smells like some expensive cologne I can't place. But I like it. It makes me happy. Relaxed. Comforted.

My head drops back onto his arm, my neck no longer able to hold it up. I gaze up at him. His jaw tenses and he casts a quick look over his shoulder before the guy with him kicks open the door to the building. Darkness falls over us. He carries me like I'm stuffed with feathers. Never once slowing down to shift me in his arms.

My temples throb like banging gongs. The pain shoots down the sides of my face.

Where are we going?

Why is he even here?

"We have to get Charly," I mumble through a mouthful of imaginary cotton. "They'll hurt her."

We finally stop. A car alarm beeps.

“Motherfucker, this is a two-seater.” The guy holding me pulls open a door, then slides into the passenger seat with me still in his arms. Between his massive size and the tiny sports car cabin, I’m shocked I can even breathe since I’m insanely claustrophobic.

Then he drops his gaze to me and suddenly, the tight squeeze doesn’t even register anymore. His deep blue eyes are mesmerizing to the point where I can’t even hear the words coming out of his mouth.

The other guy in the driver’s seat presses the ignition button and snaps his fingers in front of my face. “You with us, sweetheart?”

I blink, shifting around in the guy’s lap. “Sorry, what?” My voice is thick with sleep and groggy, just like my brain.

The car lurches forward as he shifts, the sudden movement making my stomach threaten to revolt again all over the lap of the guy holding me tight.

“The guys who brought you and your friend here were gonna auction you off. There’s a boat waiting at the pier to take you all away.” Blue Eyes pauses, his eyebrows knitted together. “Do you remember anything about being taken from the arena?”

“They came out of nowhere.” I press my fingertips to my temples. “They grabbed my... my friend, threw her in the truck, put a gun to my head.” An icy hand clenches my heart.

“Don’t fight, Valentina.”

“That’s all I remember. And then I woke up in that room next to Charly. She’s still inside. Why did you take me and leave her?”

He and his lookalike friend exchange a quick look. “Because she didn’t make it.”

“Didn’t make what?” But even as I ask the question, I know the answer. I just can’t force my mind to process it.

“Whatever they drugged you guys with must’ve had a bad effect.” His lips pull together in a tight line. “She’s dead. I’m sorry.”

My hand flies up to my throat, a knot of tears lodged deep enough to choke me. “No, that can’t be right. She was talking to me—”

“It was a hallucination.” He smooths the hair away from my face. “She’s gone.”

“Gone.” I repeat the word. It doesn’t sound like it’s coming from my mouth, though. My lips twist as if they can’t stand the taste of it.

“You’re lying. She can’t be dead.” I sit up as straight as possible without slamming my head into the roof of the car. A surge of guilt zaps my heart. “If

she is..."

No. She can't be.

If it's true... if she's dead...

Whoever did this knows who we are.

This wasn't a random kidnapping.

This was planned. They knew who they were after.

The big question is why.

My mind trips back to my father.

Someone knows the truth.

Someone was watching and waiting.

Someone found out about Charly and knew I'd be with her tonight. They got her... but what happens when they realize I'm gone?

I choke on a sob and wiggle away from Blue Eyes.

"I need to get help." I slam my hands against the window. "Stop the car."

He tries to hold me still. My head aches so badly, even my teeth hurt.

"I can help you if you just relax, okay?"

"Can't... relax." My breaths turn into short, sharp gasps. "I'm next. They're coming for me."

"We can't do much more for her." The driver guy gives me the side-eye.

"We should take her to the hospital. She can get help there."

Blue Eyes only squeezes me harder. I collapse against his chest, sobs shuddering my body.

"We can take you home. Where do you live?"

But before I can answer, the driver scoffs. "Are you fucking kidding me? We can't get mixed up in this. Bad enough we ran into a fucking sex den and stole a girl. We would have been in serious shit if we'd have gotten caught by those assholes."

"We didn't." Blue Eyes jerks his head toward the driver. "And I'd have done it all over again if we could have saved anyone else. This girl has a chance because of us. Molly didn't get that chance, remember?"

Molly.

Another girl taken.

My blood turns to ice. How many of them are lucky enough to make it out of that hell alive?

I bet I could count that number on one hand.

Maybe only one finger.

Is death a better option than enduring the torture of being caught if they

escape?

“I’m sure she’s digging your knight in shining armor routine, but I’m not getting dragged any further into this shitstorm. We’re going to the hospital.”

Blue Eyes clenches his teeth but he doesn’t argue.

We sit silent for the entire ride to Sunnyside Medical Center. Palm trees whip past as we fly down I-95.

I never called Dima. And I’m sure he’s tracked me by now, freaking out that I haven’t answered my phone.

Has he told Dad? Have they gone to look for me?

Dima doesn’t know who I was with tonight.

And I have to keep the secret.

My heart clenches.

I couldn’t stop it, Daddy. I couldn’t protect us. And now Charly’s dead.

The driver pulls up to the emergency room and slows to a stop. “Take her inside, give her some money, and say goodbye.”

I can feel Blue Eyes stiffen against me. The truth is, I’m scared to death to be left alone right now. But I’m even more scared of the fact that I don’t want this guy to leave me because admitting that confirms that I’m as weak as those killers thought I’d be.

And I can’t be that girl. I’ve been sheltered for my entire life, and tonight it could have ended if these guys hadn’t shown up to save me.

No. I refuse to be that girl ever again.

He opens the door and lifts me out of the car before getting out himself.

“You don’t have to do this alone. Don’t listen to my brother. I never do.”

“You don’t even know what you’re offering.”

“I don’t really care. I want to help.”

My heart thrashes in my chest. I stare up at him. It’s the first time I really take a long, hard look at the guy who rescued me. God, he’s tall. I don’t know how he managed to fit in that tiny Porsche at all, much less with me on his lap.

The moonlight makes the top of his dark-blond hair glow. I drink in every inch of him. He is jaw-droppingly gorgeous. And a Good Samaritan, too.

But this is where we end.

The driver rolls down the window. “Hey, sweetheart,” he calls out, startling me. He waves a piece of paper out the window. “This is the address of that building. I doubt you’ll find anything there because those kinds of places move constantly. But maybe you’ll get some clues that can help track

down the people responsible.”

I lean toward the window to take the paper and the driver gives a look to Blue Eyes, who’s behind me.

“Thanks.” I swallow hard and turn back around, ignoring the butterflies that swarm when his eyes capture mine. “Look, I know you probably think I’m a helpless little princess. And I’m very sure some lucky girl would love to have you ride up on a white horse and carry her away from this hell. But I’m not her. You and I aren’t the same. We don’t live in the same world. And in my world, there are no Prince Charmings.”

With a throbbing pulse and wobbly legs, I take a few steps toward the revolving glass door, leaving Blue Eyes behind me.

I stop just before pushing open the door and look over my shoulder at him one last time. His deflated expression makes my heart free-fall into my sneakers. “Just leave and forget you ever met me. Otherwise, you might end up dead, too.”

CHAPTER 4

QUINN

SEVEN YEARS LATER

I run down the shiny lacquered gym floor at the YMCA in Hell's Kitchen, dribbling the basketball like the fucking exhibitionist I am. I bounce it between my knees, twisting and turning so fast that none of the high school kids can touch me. My sneakers squeak on the floor as I dart down the court, sinking a perfect layup.

Swish!

"Show-off," Eric, one of the kids, mutters.

I grin. "Hey, don't hate because I've got skill."

Kevin, the quietest of the bunch, lurches forward and grabs the ball from me. "Not all the skill." Then he takes off toward the basket on the opposite end of the court, the other kids on his heels.

Massimo Marrone, one of the founders of Sportsociety, an after-school program we run for underprivileged neighborhood kids, smirks at me. "You're always one-upping someone, yeah? Even kids half your age."

I shrug. "Gotta keep 'em sharp and on their toes. You never know when the rug's about to be pulled out from under you."

And I know from experience.

Growing up the youngest in a brutal Irish mafia family with two older brothers who committed the worst acts of betrayal imaginable meant that I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. And it came down pretty damn often, like a fucking lead brick.

They're gone now, but their legacy still haunts us. I grit my teeth, the gut punch of Niall's traitorous moves still hitting as hard as it did a few years back when I found out the truth about him and his twisted plans for our family.

I can't believe how much has happened, what we've lost and can never get back.

My brother Patrick runs things now. He keeps tabs on our businesses and has built a successful weapons trafficking organization out of his nightclub, Risk. Our brother-in-law Matteo is a partner and we keep everything in the family.

I handle security since maiming is my specialty, and if ignorant fuckers try and mess with our cash flow, they answer to yours truly.

I keep shit in order and so far, nobody's been stupid enough to cross us.

It's just the two of us left here in the city—the last Mulligan brothers standing. Heaven and her husband Matteo spend most of their time in Las Vegas with their family.

Aunt Maura still runs Molly's Pub, named after my cousin. She makes sure I'm fed and hydrated with stuff other than beer and Jameson. I've got a crew to keep shit tight here in Hell's Kitchen. It took a while to rebuild after our lives got sucked into a funnel cloud, then spit out on the other side.

But the guilt still eats at me. My oldest brother Conor was a drugged-out alcoholic who was a lost cause from the second he was born. But Niall... Niall could have been saved.

If I'd only been paying more attention. I should have read between the lines, asked him more questions, tailed him that night, and grabbed him before he made the worst fucking decision of his life.

I bring a hand to the back of my neck and turn to look at the guys battling over the basketball. They've all become close since they started this program, and it's given them so many things they don't get at home, like hope and humor and self-esteem. They all have it rough—broken families, no money, sometimes no food.

Sportsociety gives them the sense of family they're missing. We take care of the kids however we can, whenever they need a boost. Money, clothes, meals. But most of all, they always know they have each other for support.

Massimo looks around the gym. "I was thinking we should have a group dinner this week at Molly's. What do you think? Davis has been having a rough time since his dad split. I figured it'd be good to get them together for a night out. We can take them to a movie afterward. I know they all want to see that stupid *Super Mario* whatever the hell movie that just came out."

My eyes fly open. "Stupid? Bro, you really need to get a PlayStation. You sound like a fucking old-ass dinosaur when you talk about pop culture shit."

"I've got more important things to deal with than video games." He lifts an eyebrow. "Maybe if you didn't play as much of that crap as you did, we'd have another nightclub up and running already. You waste talent on the wrong things, Q."

"My talent is beating the fuck out of people who get in my way." I waggle my eyebrows at him. "You know it."

"Is that all you want to do? Bust kneecaps for the rest of your life? And run away from the big things?"

“The big things take a lot of work. I like to get in and out fast.”

“If you stuck around for a while, you’d learn things. You’d get a chance to make your own rules and call your own shots.” Massimo leans against the gym wall. “But you don’t. You like causing chaos.”

“That’s right. It’s how I leave my mark.”

“Your mark is gonna get you killed if you don’t watch your ass.” Massimo leans toward me. “There are different groups moving into the area. They wanna take over what we’ve built. If you keep running around torching shit, they’re gonna come for you. Take you out of the game for good.”

“They’ll never get me.” My eyes narrow. “I’m better than them. And I’m not like Conor or Niall. I won’t fold, and I’d never betray Patty.”

“You might not get that choice.” His voice is dark, his eyes clouded by knowledge that something ominous is coming.

But in my life, my world, I’m literally drenched in everything ominous.

“You’re too reckless. It’s gonna come back to bite you and threaten your organization.” He takes a quick look around. “They’re watching you. They’re watching all of us. One wrong move and they’ll attack.”

“Look, Mas, I bleed for my family. For Sportsociety. For you and Patty and the kids. Nobody will ever fuck with what’s ours with me watching out for it all.”

“You take too many risks.”

“I keep things protected.”

“And what about you? One day, you’re gonna—” Massimo recoils and pulls back. “Oh, shit.”

The door to the gym slams shut. I twist, my jaw dropping when I see Davis limp across the floor. The knees of his tattered jeans are torn, his arms scraped up and bleeding. A thin trickle of blood streams out of the side of his mouth.

I run over to him. “Davis, what the hell happened?”

The other guys crowd around us.

Davis shifts, his lip quivering. My gaze drops to his feet. His white socks are dirty and streaked with mud.

“Where are your shoes?”

My blood starts to boil. A spark of rage zaps my insides.

I ask him again.

He clenches his fists tight as if he’s trying to keep from crying in front of the other boys.

“J-jordans,” he whispers. “My aunt bought me a secondhand pair for my birthday. Mom told me not to wear them to school but... I did. And when I was walking here, some guys j-jumped me. They had a knife. I c-couldn’t stop them.”

I slap my hand against the wall. “Who took them?”

“Quinn,” Massimo says. “Don’t.”

I put my hands on Davis’s shoulders, seething when I ask again. “Tell me now. Who and where?”

“It was a group of guys. They were hanging out in the park near the school. They were about my age.”

“Those fucking bastards.” I run over to the office and grab my keys.

A few of the boys helped Davis to the bleachers in the few seconds I was gone. He’s drinking a bottle of water, his bruised face hanging with shame and sadness. Ire floods my veins. He feels like he should have been able to defend himself but failed.

The key ring digs into my palm, I squeeze it so tight.

I know that look too well. I lived with that same shame when I was younger... until I turned the tables on the fuckheads who thought they could get over on me. They iced me out because of who I was and where I came from, so I had to show them just how big of a mistake that was.

“Q, where the hell do you think you’re going? We just talked about this.” Massimo steps in front of me, blocking my path out the door. “Patty will kick your ass if he knows you’re going head-to-head with another street gang.”

“Mas, these bastards are gonna keep coming at us. If nobody stops them, they’ll take over everything. And then all the work we’ve done for the community is for nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” He waves a hand behind him. “Look at what we built here. These kids need us. They need each other. Don’t put everything at risk. Don’t do that to the kids.”

“I’m doing it *because* of the kids, because they shouldn’t have to feel afraid walking around in a damn pair of sneakers, the one nice thing they have in the world that makes them feel good about themselves.” My face heats with the same kind of hot lava anger that bubbles in my blood. “These guys come in and destroy neighborhoods. This is my home. And fuck them if they think they’re gonna blow it up.”

Massimo grabs my t-shirt but I wrench myself out of his grip and stalk out of the gym. My tomato-red Dodge Challenger sits pretty obnoxiously in

front of the YMCA with a ticket tucked under the windshield wiper because it's not an official spot. But I'd rather pay the ticket than park a million miles away from the place.

I grab the ticket and jump into the black leather driver's seat. The car was custom-built by one of our Red Ladro connections down in Miami. Alek Severinov, the senior member of Red Ladro, hooked me up, and the second it was delivered here to the city, I was head over heels for my girl.

She's not high-maintenance; she doesn't bitch when I come home late, and she doesn't get jealous. She just lets me ride her, as fast and as hard as I want.

The perfect woman, if you ask me.

I shift, hit the gas, and peel away from the curb. Merging into midtown traffic at this hour of the afternoon is always tricky, but I drive like a fucking cabbie so most people stay out of my way. The school isn't too far away, so at least Davis didn't have a long shoeless walk to the Y.

Wrapping my fingers tight around the steering wheel, my eyes dart left and right. The scumbags might still be hanging around the park, or they could have ducked into any number of places around the area. There are always gangs trying to dip their toes into our territory, but they never stick around long.

This group won't be the exception if I have anything to say about it.

I slow in front of a red light on Ninth Avenue and 28th Street. Another look around makes my throat tighten.

Two guys on my left. One has a beefy arm with a large black scorpion crawling up the side. The letters C.D.S. appear underneath it.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

They're part of the Sinalia Cartel. And I'm betting that their lieutenant, El Azul, is here with them.

This isn't just a gang invading our area. This is a vicious group of killers peddling drugs laced with fentanyl and Christ only knows what else.

I need to get in touch with Patrick.

I probably also need to turn my car around and get the hell out of here.

But I don't do either.

Instead, I spin the steering wheel as far left as possible, cutting across traffic, resulting in a lot of middle fingers and honking horns. But what the fuck ever with them. If they live or work in this area, they'll thank me for it.

I downshift and put the car in Park. I palm my gun and stick it into the

waistband of my shorts, not that I'm planning to use it out here in the open. But I won't go near those assholes without it.

I get out of my car and walk over to where they stand near a jungle gym, watching the kids run and play. I know my sister-in-law Kyla sometimes takes the kids here. Never alone, but also never fucking again.

"Nice Jordans." I nod my head toward a pair of black-and-white retro Pandas next to a black backpack on a bench.

The guys look at each other and mutter some shit under their breath. I really should have paid more attention in Spanish class, but I don't need a translator to know that what they just said ain't good.

"I know a kid who had a pair like that." I take a step closer. "Exactly like that. Up until this afternoon when he was jumped on his way home from school. You guys know anything about that?"

"You wanna say something, you fucking mick?" one of them growls in an accented voice. "Then say it so I can pound your ass into the ground before I plug it with bullets."

These guys outweigh me by at least thirty pounds each. They're short and probably slow as shit. But they're also packing, and with all the kids around, I'm not gonna take any chances. The last thing I want is for them to shoot up the park.

But my eyes bleed red, drenching everything in my line of sight. With a throbbing pulse, I move closer to them. The gun in my waistband sears my skin, begging for me to palm it and blow the heads off these assholes.

I get close. Maybe too close since the stink of stale cigarette smoke mixed with weed makes my gut twist. But I want them to hear every word that comes out of my mouth so there's no question about exactly who they're fucking with.

"You challenging me, *ese*? That's like holding a red cape in front of a bull." I lean in and hiss into his ear. "Because I'm the bull. And when you mess with the bull, you know what you get, right? Or do I need to show you?"

He stares at me, his black irises bleeding into the whites so he looks more demon than human. The corner of his lips twitch. "I love a good challenge, *Mulligan*. Why the fuck else do you think we're here right now?"

CHAPTER 5

VALENTINA

Thin trickles of sweat stream down my back. I blow a damp strand of hair out of my eyes, turning slightly to take in the aqua water surrounding us. My flip-flops slap against the stone path that guides us around the beach resort. Crashing waves of the Caribbean splash against the thick, jagged cuts of rock surrounding part of the property.

Late afternoon beams of light dance on the swirling curls that hit the shore below, the caps glittering brighter as the sun dips lower over the horizon.

“My granddaughter loved to swim.” Boris Vetrov’s raspy voice is like a pang to my heart, laden with sadness because he’s talking about Angelica, his nine-year-old granddaughter who died in a tragic accident along with her mother years ago.

“I bet she’d have adored this place. It’s so beautiful.”

As dusk falls around us, the clear blue sky deepens, now tinged with rich orange and pink hues.

“My daughter would’ve, too.” He sighs and nods toward the wedding setup on the cliff tucked away from the rest of the resort. “She’d always wanted to get married in a place like this. A fairy-tale wedding, she used to say. So tragic she never got the chance.”

Swallowing hard, I remember the day of my own sham of a fairy-tale wedding and how it plunged me into my own personal hell for years to follow. A thick lump lodges in the back of my throat. I lost so much because of that arranged marriage—my brother, my father, my mother, my life.

Disappearing from the bridal suite right before the ceremony was the only thing that saved me.

But it was my choice. I made my bed. My siblings don't even know the whole truth, why I left Miami and why I can't go back until my work is finished. I was already in too deep when I agreed to marry Dmitri Stepanov, and after my brother Luka killed him, there were plenty of others who were ready to pick up where he'd left off.

I made a commitment to my father and to my family to right all the wrongs done to us.

The Brotherhood 7 is now down to two.

And I won't rest until they're at fucking zero.

I loop my arm through Boris's and lean my head against his shoulder. Boris was my father's oldest and dearest friend and having him close always makes me feel like Dad isn't so far away, that he's right here with us.

Tears sting my eyes. Dad wanted to stop my wedding to Dmitri. He came to me only a few minutes before, completely panicked about something, like he knew we were about to be targeted. But I told him my decision was made. I would avenge Charly's death and destroy the people who took her.

He said he couldn't lose me, too.

And then the wedding planner showed up to take him to the room where the ceremony would be held. I got a quick kiss, but the pain in his gaze... I'll never forget it.

"I'm sorry." Those were his last words to me.

My dress clings to me like a second skin. "I'm so glad Alexis is letting us wear whatever we want for the wedding. I can't imagine putting on a long dress. Even at night, it's still scorching hot. Where's the sea breeze?"

We get closer to the tall grasses that shield the rows of white chairs. My brother Taras stands at the edge of the area, grinning at me like a lovesick fool, so unlike his normally prickly self. I guess love will do that when it's right.

I wrap my arms around him. He looks so handsome in a white linen shirt and beige pants. His skin is a deep bronze, his blue eyes popping against it. He looks relaxed for the first time in as long as I can remember. "That huge smile is such a good look for you."

He squeezes me tight. "I'm glad you're here. We've missed you."

"You have no idea how much I've missed you all." I pull away and look up at him. "But I'm back now."

"Yeah, but for how long?" His eyebrows knit together and a scowl replaces the smile that lit up his face only a few seconds before. "You

shouldn't have left. We could have done this together. You didn't need to do it alone."

"Yes, I did."

I had to keep Dad's secret. I had to protect Mom.

Turns out, I couldn't protect her at all.

Luka and Nik walk over and pull me into a sandwich hug. I breathe them in. "Mm, you guys smell so good. Like a Chanel Bleu cologne factory puked all over you."

I take a long look at them, laughing, joking, and ribbing each other like I remember them doing. Danil and Zak wander over and we huddle together, almost complete.

"What? Nobody invited me to the party?" my sister Tori snaps playfully. She runs over in a cloud of pale pink, holding two bouquets of flowers in her hands. She thrusts one at me. "Come on, it's almost time."

She tugs at my arm. I look back to where Boris stood overlooking the sea but he's gone. My brow furrows.

"Hey, did you see Boris?"

Tori shakes her head. "I didn't think he was coming."

"Sure, he's here. He walked over with me. He's staying in the suite right next to mine."

"How much champagne have you had, Val? Wait, before you answer that..." Tori holds up her hand and grabs two flutes off a passing silver tray as we walk past a waitress toward the makeshift bridal tent a few feet away. "Add two more to that number. You're drinking for me tonight."

I take a long sip of one glass of bubbly liquid. It fizzes on its way down my throat. Bubbles rush into my nose, tickling the tip. I glance behind me one more time.

I walked over here with Boris.

Didn't I?

I guzzle down some champagne, finishing one flute full. "So what's Alexis going to wear? One of her famous leather bikinis that barely covers her? Did she have one custom-made in white?" I snicker and take a gulp of my second glass.

"Would you really expect me to be *conventional* with my wedding look?"

I gasp and flip around, champagne sloshing over the side of the glass and dotting my dress with wet spots.

Taras's fiancée, Alexis, smirks at me and folds her arms over exactly

what I just described. My jaw drops. “Sweet Lord, you are really doing it.”

She puts her hands on her hips and does a little twirl around. Kenzie, Larysa, and Skyla, my other future sisters-in-law, clap and hoot as Alexis twerks in my direction. I nearly choke on my laughter.

“Holy crap, you could bounce a quarter off that thing, it’s so tight,” Tori says with a trace of wistfulness in her voice. She peeks around to her own ass, wincing as she turns back to us. “My ass will never be that perky and tight again. And I haven’t even popped out the kid yet.”

“Look, one thing I’ve learned is that you never know what tomorrow brings, girls.” Alexis turns to face me, her long curled hair draping one bronze shoulder. “So live for the fucking day. That includes pushing the envelope on wedding wear.” She pulls me close and whispers in my ear. “Things can end at any time, Val. When you least expect them to. I won’t waste a second being unhappy or something I’m not.”

Kenzie positions the cathedral-length veil on Alexis’s head and hands her a long-stemmed red lotus, which I know is her favorite flower. “Perfect.”

“At least something is covering me for the walk.” Alexis winks at me. I guess she’s used to being the center of attention since she has her own Netflix show.

Then you have me on the opposite end of the spectrum. I’ve managed to survive the past years by embracing anonymity and being skilled at fading into the background.

Fame is never something I’ve craved. It’s been more of a fear than anything else.

Alexis turns and adjusts her veil with one hand, but my eyes focus on the lotus. Red droplets bead along the sides of the petals and slide onto her hand. My eyes catch each one, watching as they stain Alexis’ skin. I blink fast.

Maybe I really *have* had too much champagne.

Tori links her arm with mine. We leave our flutes on a glass table and follow Alexis out of the flowy white tent. She leans her head close to mine. “I love you. Please stay this time.”

I smile, the lie on the tip of my tongue. But instead, I don’t say a word. I told Taras what he needed to hear on the day of his wedding. Let them believe I’m back for good. Soon enough, I will be.

My eyes drop to the white paper leading us to the flower-encrusted arch at the edge of the cliff. Drops of red form a path. I tiptoe around them, careful not to smudge them. When I look up again, Alexis is already at the end of the

aisle with Taras.

Maybe this is more of her shaking things up and being unconventional.

Because what kind of bride leads the wedding party to the groom when it should be the other way around?

The officiant stares past Alexis and Taras, his dark eyes latching on to mine, daring me to look away. I stop next to a row of chairs, my flip-flops rooted to the sand. Tori hip checks me into the row and I gather my dress in my hands and sit. He speaks but I can't hear a word. I just follow the movement of his lips with my eyes.

White and red lotus flowers weave together to form the tight arch over the bride and groom. In the dusky moonlight, droplets of bright red fall from the top of the arch. They land on Taras's shirt, seeping into the fabric like blossoming flowers. Red beads splash onto the soft white tulle of Alexis's veil.

But they don't notice a thing. They just hold hands and stare into each other's eyes, lost in their own world. My pulse rockets when my gaze scrapes over the neck of the officiant.

I jump out of my chair.

"His tattoo," I scream, my hands flying up to my throat.

The four-pronged pitchfork pointed downward. I've seen it before. I saw it that night.

But nobody moves. They all look at Taras and Alexis, oblivious to everything else.

Did I say it out loud? Or did I—?

Spotches of red explode in front of me like paintballs, hitting Alexis and Taras. They jerk and buckle as if in slow motion. Luka turns and reaches for something behind him, a splash of red hitting him square in the chest. Nik and Danil run to their fiancées... too late. They dive into the sand, sinking into deep red puddles. I yell, but the only sound filling my ears is that of the now choppy sea. It thrashes against the cliff, the waters rising and rising until the waves reach the tip of the cliff like a tsunami.

The water continues to rise. My family lies sprawled all over the sand. The only person still standing other than me is the officiant. He steps over Alexis and Taras, slowly making his way to me. Another wave comes barreling for the cliff. The pitchfork tattoo tugs at my gaze. I grip the back of the chair. Wind picks up speed and strength. The officiant's lips form words I can't hear or understand. A deep ache tears at my chest, my lungs squeezed

tight like they're being pressed together in a vise.

I can't help anyone. I can't save them.

Sea spray shoots up from the next wave, soaking my face and dress. It practically touches the deep blue sky, swirling over me like a dark and threatening cloud before it swallows me into the abyss.

I shoot straight up in my bed, a sharp scream tearing at the sides of my throat as it erupts from my lips. Staggering toward the window, I peer out at the swaying palm trees surrounding my apartment in Las Vegas.

That dream had to be some manifestation of the stress plaguing me. We're so close to finding Branko Ivanova, the enemy that turned our world upside down and inside out.

He won't escape this time. I can't let that happen again.

Clutching my chest, I sink into a chair out on the balcony, each breath slicing at my insides like the sharpest razor blades. My heart blasts against my rib cage, tears streaking my cheeks.

It's okay. You're okay. It was a dream. Just a dream.

Each calming breath is short and shallow. I swipe at my tears with shaky hands, my stomach roiling at the horrific memory.

Then why does it feel like a warning?

CHAPTER 6

QUINN

“Do you know why you’re here, Quinn?”

I glare at Alek Severinov. Condescending prick. His massive desk is the only thing that separates us up here in his private office at the Montepremi Resort and Spa. His younger brother Kazimir, who looks as roided up as Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*, and his hot-ass cousin, Katarina, stand on either side of him looking at me like they wanna drop me off the side of the roof and onto the Las Vegas Strip below.

It's a long damn way down. Maybe I should play nice for a little while; otherwise, these two crazies will definitely be dangling me over the side by my ankles.

I steeple my fingers and hold them up to my lips. His jaw tenses and I bite back a smirk. He's famous for pulling the power play moves. But since I'm here in his hotel a week after my attack on the Sinalia Cartel and not buried six feet under somewhere, that tells me I do have some power.

He brought me here for a reason.

Or at least, he agreed to take me in after Patrick ordered me to get the fuck out of Manhattan until shit blows over with the cartel.

“You poked the fucking bear when you took off after El Azul for stealing those sneakers.”

“They weren't just sneakers. They were retro Pandas, not that I expect you to know much about pop culture with your stick-up-your-ass shoes and clothes.” I drop my hands to the arms of the chair, grip them tight, and pull myself toward the desk. “And more than that, they were a gift from a family member. We take care of our own. That's what Sportsocity is all about.”

“And what about your real family? Your blood? What about opening

them up to these vicious fucks? You've got a niece and nephew. You ever pull your head out of your ass long enough to think about the kids?"

"I went down to that park for all of them," I bellow. "Because I know that unless someone stands up to these guys and shows them how we play, they'll keep coming and digging their fucking toxic tunnels deeper into everything we wanna protect."

"You're a liability for your family and for Red Ladro." Alek slams his hand on the top of the desk, his blue eyes spitting flames. I sit back in the chair with a loud sigh before they shoot me in the eyes. "Fuck the sneakers. And fuck your ego harder."

I nod toward Kazimir and Katarina. "They your henchmen? Did you call them in to slit my throat and stuff me in a body bag to bury in the desert?"

"Henchpeople." Kat flips me off.

I blow her a kiss, knowing it's gonna get my ass kicked later.

But do I ever learn?

No. It's why I'm here right now.

"I like and respect Patrick too much to turn down his request for a favor. But in exchange, you're going to do something for me."

"Oh yeah? And what if I don't like the ask?"

Alek reaches into his pocket and pulls out a stainless steel Zippo lighter. He holds it up in front of me, the overhead light catching the side of the metal so that it gleams. I get one long look before he slams it on the desk.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" I chuckle. "Spoiler alert, I've heard plenty about you and your trusty Zippo. But if you think I'm gonna cry like a bitch if you burn my hand or crotch, forget it. I've been through way worse with deeper scars to prove it."

"Wow, I can't imagine that anyone would intentionally torture you," Kat snips, her words dripping with sarcasm.

I wink at her. "Not all torture is about pain, sweetheart."

She lasers me with a glare. Kaz doesn't say anything, just palms his Glock 19.

A long minute passes and the three of them exchange a look. I throw my hands into the air. "Okay, fine, I'll bite. What's the favor? And how soon can I get down to the craps table? I got a bunch of hundo chips burning a hole in my pocket."

"Don't get used to any kind of freedom." Katarina's red lips curl upward. "Because you're about to be shackled for the foreseeable future."

“Sounds kinky. I’m down.”

“Not in your wildest dreams, punk.”

“Enough.” Alek looks down at his Rolex. “He’ll find out right about...”

A swift knock on the door jars me.

“Now. Come in,” he calls out.

The door creaks open. I twist around in my chair, my eyes tangling with the deep blue eyes of a woman who stares at me like I’m a roach crawling up her long toned leg. My gaze drops to her denim cutoff shorts, drinking in the length of her tan and sleek muscled thighs. Smooth skin my tongue wants to taste.

Fuck, *those legs*. I’d like to feel them wrapped around my head.

I lick my lips, my eyes slowly tracing over every curve of her tight body until they meet her disgusted expression. She sticks a hand on her hip.

“Are you finished?”

God, even the annoyance and disdain in her voice makes the tip of my cock tingle.

“Sweetheart, I haven’t even gotten started. But I’m looking forward to it.” And that’s the truth. I have no idea who this is, although something about her is vaguely familiar. But I’m sure I’d have remembered this woman if I’d have seen her before.

She’d stand out in a massive field of sunflowers, even dressed as a sexy librarian with her long reddish-brown hair thrown on top of her head in a messy bun and her eyes covered by black-rimmed glasses. She pushes them back on her nose, her shiny pink lips twisting like she’s just taken a whiff of some rancid meat. I can’t keep my eyes from wandering, though, to her perfect perky tits tucked into a tight tank top with cleavage my face could get lost in for an obscene amount of time if given the opportunity.

With an exaggerated eye roll, she whips past me to give Katarina a big hug. Damn if my dick doesn’t jump at the fantasy of those two sandwiched together with me in the middle.

When she leans forward, her ass cheeks peek out of the bottom of her skimpy shorts. I have to ball my hands into tight fists to gather every bit of strength in me to pull my hungry gaze away from it.

“Mulligan.”

I snap my head toward Alek. “Yeah. So we were talking about me being shackled... I have some ideas about how that can go down.” Wagging my eyebrows, I grin at New Girl.

His lips press together and I know he's biting back words. I swallow a laugh. It's not too often you see Alek Severinov restrain himself.

"You're disgusting," she snarls. "And for the record, I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You stink of alcohol. Are you squatting in a distillery?"

"How 'bout I take you home with me so you can find out for yourself?"

She folds her arms over her chest, forcing her tits higher so that they skim the neckline of her top. "Alek, why am I here right now? I've got work to do."

"Yes, you definitely do." He holds out his hand to me. "Valentina, this is Quinn Mulligan. He's going to be working with us for a while. Working with you, more specifically."

Her eyes fly open wide. "What are you talking about? I work by myself. You know this. Why would you pair me up with anyone, now of all times?"

"Quinn is an enforcer for Patrick Mulligan back in New York City. He ruffled some feathers back East a week ago and is now in hiding. Out here, with us."

"So I'm supposed to babysit him and risk blowing my own cover because he couldn't keep his nose clean?"

"Hey, hey, my nose is spotless." I can't resist. Her head looks like it's about to spin off her neck and I'm aching to see her erupt.

Something tells me it's not too far off.

"Nobody's cover will be compromised. Val, you're one of my best operatives."

"Yeah, and what does this freaking goon bring to the table?"

"Ouch. You don't even know me, sweetheart." I stand up from the chair. "Maybe he wants me to loosen you up since you're wound up enough to crap out a diamond."

Her jaw drops, a gasp slipping from her lips. "Do you know what I could do to you?"

I take a step closer to her. "I have a pretty wild imagination. We can definitely run through some of my ideas together."

Valentina glowers at Alek. "You cannot be serious about us working together. I will kill him before I let him fuck up this mission."

"Plans for the mission have changed."

"Says who?" Her gaze darts back to Katarina, whose eyes not too coincidentally drop to the floor.

“Says me. We’ve uncovered some new information as of this morning. We have a new strategy for breaking into Branko Ivanova’s organization, but it’s gonna take two of you to do it.”

Valentina gestures wildly at me. “I will not let all of the work I’ve done be jeopardized by this clown. I don’t know what he did in New York, and I don’t care. Give him some other bullshit job so I can do this on my own. Please, Alek. You know what I’ve given up. We’re too close and this is too important.”

“I know it is. To everyone involved. That’s why the next phase will require us to go in a different direction. So you’ll change course and work together.” He looks between us, his voice grave. “As husband and wife.”

CHAPTER 7

VALENTINA

It takes me a solid thirty seconds before I can find my voice again. “I’m sorry, I must have had a mini stroke right there because I thought I just heard you say husband and fucking wife.”

Alek gives me a cool look. “You heard it right. Meet your fiancé.”

Heat pinches my cheeks. “I won’t do it.”

“You don’t have a choice.” With a glare, Alek roots me to my spot next to Kat. “You gave up your choices a long time ago, Valentina. When you decided to focus your life on targeting Branko Ivanova.”

“I *chose* to protect my family,” I growl, balling my hands into fists. “And to avenge them.”

“That’s why I know you’ll do the right thing now. What’s expected of you.” Alek pushes his chair back. The legs scrape against the shiny tile from the sudden movement. He edges around the desk until he’s right in front of me, all seven feet of him.

He’s so tall, I need to tilt my head back to glower at his gorgeous face. I might have had a tiny crush on him way back when I started working with him, knowing full well nothing could ever happen because he has a perfect family that he’s totally devoted to, and his wife Gianna is just incredible and the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen. I think it was probably the whole air of power and control, the way he carries himself, and the level of desperation I felt at the time that confused my feelings.

My life had spun so far out of control and there he was, a stake in the ground to cling to, someone who had answers and plans that could get me closer to my goal. I also think a little bit of it had to do with the fact that I lost my father and my brothers in the process. I had no one but this ruthless

Russian god to throw me a lifeline.

However, it didn't take me long to figure out I was just trying to fill a void. Years later, there's still a gaping hole in my heart and soul, but I found out a long time ago Alek would not be the one to stitch me back together. We've since graduated to more of a prickly older brother-younger sister relationship where I tell him exactly what I think of his ideas. Sometimes I get a pat on the head, other times, a kick in the ass.

"If you think that move is going to intimidate me, then you don't know me that well. I don't cave from pressure. That's why I'm one of your best operatives." I lift an eyebrow. People don't typically mouth off to Alek Severinov. If they do, they suffer for it. Long and hard.

"As such, I know you'll do what I ask."

"Why?" A lump throbs in my throat. "I need to know why you are punishing me like this."

Alek looks past me and nods at Quinn. "It's because of him that I got the idea in the first place."

I whirl around to look at my *fiancé*. Blech. Just thinking the word makes me throw up in my mouth. "What the hell did you do to get banished from Manhattan? I mean, what kind of bottom-dwelling thug derelict gets kicked out of the city?"

"The kind who knows how to shake shit up. I protect, too. Always. And I do whatever I need to make sure that nothing touches my family or organization." Quinn leans back against a wall and crosses his jean-clad legs at the ankle. I scrunch up my nose at his choice of clothes. Is he trying to look like a homeless person? The denim has so many holes and tears, I don't know why he bothered to wear pants at all. They hang low on his hips, his tight, black t-shirt stretched across his chest. He has the build of a basketball player more than a hockey player like my brother Danil, or a football player like my brother Zak used to be. He's long and lean with chiseled arms, but what his body lacks in bulk, his personality more than makes up for in arrogance.

"At everyone's detriment." Alek rolls his eyes. "You being out here comes with a lot of challenges, Quinn. You need to fly under the radar and learn how to take instruction."

"And is my wifey gonna teach me how to be a good boy?"

That's it. I storm over to him, grab the edges of his t-shirt with my fists, and pull him toward me.

"I like where this is going." His lips quirk and he snaps his peppermint

gum.

“You have no idea who I am and you never will. I have no issue with causing you major physical harm if you lay a finger on me.”

“I like challenges,” he hisses, his breath hot against my cheeks. “And I don’t ever back down from them.”

I swallow hard. My skin prickles under his devious stare, so much fire glittering in his eyes. My heart thumps hard as the fabric slips from my grip and I push away from him. “Why are you here?”

I need to focus on the reason why my life is about to get turned upside down again, not the fact that my insides are melting because of the scorching heat radiating through me right now.

“What you need to know is that Quinn wandered into the lion’s den and set fire to it. And the lion is the Sinalia Cartel.”

“Those fuckers stepped too close to the line when they invaded my neighborhood.” Quinn’s expression darkens. “I just showed ’em what would happen if they got real stupid and crossed it.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and crack my knuckles one at a time while I process.

“You know that’ll give you early arthritis.”

My eyes float open. I flip Quinn off when I finish cracking my middle finger.

“So you’re basically tethering me to this guy, even though you know damn well that I can follow this new trail of breadcrumbs on my own and find Branko.”

“What is this, Rumpelstiltskin or some shit?” Quinn’s face pinches with confusion.

“No, dumbass. Breadcrumbs would be Hansel and fucking Gretel,” I scream, slamming my fists against my legs. I turn to Alek. “I’ve done everything you asked over the past few years. If you have something, let me run with it alone.”

“Can’t.” Alek walks over to the corner of his office and plucks the crystal stopper out of a bottle. He pours clear liquid into a highball glass and drops in a few ice cubes. With a long look at me, he sloshes the drink around the glass. There’s no label, but I know it’s Beluga vodka. His favorite. Despite being Russian, he’s a total vodka snob.

“Why not?” My voice shakes, and dammit, it pisses me off.

Showing weakness is the worst thing I can possibly do, especially as a

woman. I have to be strong, always. That's one of the things Kat always drilled into me from the first time I trained with her after my escape from that sex auction so many years ago. The one Charly wasn't lucky enough to survive.

I haven't thought about that night in so long. I used to think about the guy who saved me pretty often, wondering if I'd ever meet him again, then immediately wishing I wouldn't since he saw me at my very worst. I buried that pathetic version of myself down deep along with the guilt of not being able to save Charly.

Forcing the memories to the back of my mind, I tap the toe of my flip-flop on the floor. "Hello?"

Alek takes a long gulp of the vodka, so it's a long, agonizing minute before he speaks. "Based on intel my data team found, we have a link to Luis Navarro through the Sinalia Cartel."

"The cartel that's trying to take over my neighborhood," Quinn mutters.

"The organization Luis heads up has cells in a lot of different cities, Vegas being one of them. They're known for hosting sex parties where young girls are brought in with the hopes of being 'discovered' by supposed producers and directors and agents. Instead, they're targeted by buyers and then 'disappear.'"

"And by 'disappear,' you mean sold." The words rake over my skin like the sharpest fork.

"Yes. Now, we know Colon is reclusive, like Branko. But if we get to him, we can nail Branko. And the guys found another connection, too." Alek raises his glass. "Your almost-father-in-law."

"Denis Stepanov?" My eyes narrow. "That rat bastard."

"Yeah, well, thanks to your brothers, Nathan Van Dyne was encouraged to give him up. That's two people who can lead us straight to the fucking toxic source of this ring."

"Great that we have more to go on, but that still doesn't explain why we need to get married."

"The only way in is through membership. These guys are greedy scumbags and they want to attract money to build new hotels, host more parties, and smuggle as many girls as they can find. But you can't just go in there waving a checkbook in front of them. You need to be one of them. They don't want questionable money. They want legitimate business people funding their dealings because it's cleaner. Keeps them off the radar."

“Also, they want people to be part of the life they provide through their clubs and parties. Husbands and wives. It’s a commitment thing. They want to know you’re not a fly-by-night, and singles don’t have the same level of commitment that a married couple does. Shows you’re stable, even though it is kind of bullshit,” Kazimir says. “One of the requirements is that all applicants are married. No marriage certificate, no entry.”

“There are plenty of people who have sham weddings to get access to things like this. Why the hell should it matter? How does it really set people apart?”

Kazimir shrugs. “Not our rules.”

“It’s ridiculous. It doesn’t mean anything.” I let out a huff.

“It’s perception. Once you’re married, the paperwork will be expedited. You’ll be a shoo-in because of the family line and alias we had created for you. Money, husband, boom. You’re in.”

“What about my family line? Any royalty in my blood?” Quinn snickers and again, I’m torn between wanting to smack him across his beautifully chiseled jaw and climbing him like a telephone pole.

“You married the money.”

“Aw, hell. I got a sugar mama.”

“You also need a makeover. No more of the grungy, ripped jeans and muscle t-shirts. As of now, you’re undercover. Kat will give you everything you need to complete your new look.”

“I can’t believe you’re really making me do this.” I touch the silver hoop hanging from my right ear and tug on it, another nervous habit I have.

“Once you get access to the highest levels of the organization, which you will with the kind of money you say you want to invest, Luis will come running. That’s how we get him. The marriage is a means to an end.”

An end. That’s fucking ominous.

Kat walks toward me and puts her hand on my shoulder, her lips close to my ear. “And let’s face it, it’s not like you’ve backed away from marrying out of obligation before, babe.”

I slant her a look. “That’s low. You’re a real bitch.”

Kat flashes a bright smile at me. “Takes one to know one. Besides, you could do way worse than him for your fake husband.”

I take a deep breath. “Okay, so we’ll just make an appointment for a few days from now and—”

Alek shakes his head and drains the rest of the vodka from his glass.

“You already have one.” He looks down at his watch. “In an hour.”

Holy shit. My jaw nearly hits the floor. “An *hour*? Alek, there has to be another way.”

I peek at Quinn, the mischievous sparkle in his gaze electrifying my insides. He pushes off the wall and walks toward me, his eyes holding me captive.

I’m going to need a drink. Like right now. Maybe the whole bottle.

My knees wobble as he approaches, staring at me like I’m his last meal on Earth.

“Valentina.”

My head snaps up at Alek’s commanding tone.

“It’s your call. But if you don’t do this, I’ll be forced to go with someone else who’s not as good.” His eyes narrow, fingers tensing around his empty glass. “And I can’t promise what might happen next... to any of you.”

CHAPTER 8

QUINN

Warm water streams into my eyes. I groan. My shoulders and back are on fire from being bent over the sink. “Are you done yet? My neck is killing me.”

“Don’t be such a baby. This is important.” Katarina massages her fingers into my sopping wet hair. I crack open my eyes, watching the black hair dye stain the white porcelain sink. “Okay, that should do it. Your transformation is almost complete.”

“I liked my hair the way it was.”

“Oh yeah? How much more do you like being alive? Guys who value their lives don’t go attacking fucking drug lords, Q.”

I let out a deep sigh, my shoulders slumping. Son of a bitch. What a clusterfuck I caused that day. I guess I should feel lucky that Patty didn’t agree to banish me somewhere else, like to Siberia. Alek could probably come up with plenty for me to do there while freezing my ass off in the brutal cold.

“Besides, changing up your look isn’t the end of the world. Your hair is black, not pink, for Pete’s sake. Don’t be so dramatic.”

She turns off the water and covers my head with a towel. I rub my wet hair and let the towel fall around my shoulders. Kat stands behind me, her arms folded over her chest. Her red lips curl upward and she gives me a little nod before handing me a comb.

“I did good work. Now slick it back.”

I stare at myself in the mirror for a second, my longish hair hanging in wet strands around the sides of my face. It’s a little startling, all this black

hair. My blue eyes practically look clear in contrast. I run the comb through it, smoothing it back.

Kat hands me a pair of glasses. “Now put these on.”

I slide them up my nose and lift an eyebrow at her reflection in the mirror. “I look like Clark Kent.”

She grins. “Yeah, you do. I wonder what your bride-to-be will think.”

“Like it matters. I think it’s safe to say she can’t stand to be in the same room with me, Superman or not.”

Kat takes a hand towel and runs it over the sink to get rid of the streaks of hair dye. “You know, Quinn. You two have more in common than you think. I’ve known Val for a long time and I’ve heard plenty about you from Alek and Patrick. You have the same goal—to protect your own. You just go about it a little differently.”

“A little?”

“You’re too reckless and emotional; she’s sometimes a little too analytical and cautious. I think if you work together, you can find middle ground and get the job done.”

“So what’s the plan? We get membership to this string of clubs, sniff out Luis Navarro, and then what? How does he lead us to this Branko Ivanova guy?” I turn, my back against the counter. “Seems like a lot of work to get to the source of the fuckery, no? Why can’t we just track Ivanova and ice him without all the fucking fake marriage bullshit?”

“Because Branko is like a ghost. He never reveals himself to anyone. Valentina’s family managed to kill his two brothers and a good number of his operatives. But they never got close to him. He just disappeared into his black hole.” She waves her hand out of the bathroom door. “Go in there and put on what I laid out on the bed for you.”

I pick up the black button-down shirt and slip it on. “If he’s gone, how are we supposed to lure him out?”

“Be patient and you’ll get answers.”

“I want to find this bastard, kill him, and get back to my life, Kat. Patience isn’t something I have much of.”

“Clearly, or else you wouldn’t be in this situation, right?” She pokes her head out of the bathroom just as I slide one leg into the black pants.

“You liking the view?” I snicker, buttoning up the shirt.

“I’m liking that you don’t look anything like the thug-ass street punk from earlier today.”

“Never got any complaints before.”

A smile plays at Kat’s lips. “This can definitely work.” She walks toward a large tote bag sitting on the dresser and digs around before she pulls out an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“New ID, passport, credit cards. Everything you need to convince the world you’re Liam McDermott.” She lifts an eyebrow. “Can you do a brogue?”

I give it a shot and she actually cackles. “You sound like the Lucky Charms leprechaun.”

With a roll of my eyes, I pull on a pair of black socks. “Fuck off. It’s not that bad.”

“Okay, so no brogue.” She takes a step back and clasps her hands together. “My goodness, you’re pretty.”

I straighten both sides of the black jacket. “Screw you. I’m rugged and tough.”

“Yep, and soooo pretty.” Her phone pings with a text and she grabs it from her bag while I slide my feet into a pair of black shoes near the door. “Okay, it’s go time. We have about ten minutes to get you to the Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel.”

“What about Val?”

“It’s bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other before the wedding.”

“Considering we only just met a few hours ago, are complete opposites, and were pretty much ordered to get married or suffer the wrath of Alek Severinov, I don’t see how much worse the luck could get.”

“That’s all true. So you need as much good juju as possible. Let’s go.”

A blacked-out Cadillac Escalade waits in front of the Montepremi, the back door already open. I jump inside and Kat follows.

She leans in close and whispers against my ear. “By the way, your bride’s name is Elizabeth Harper Remington, of the Remington Real Estate Consortium. A supersweet sugar mama, so don’t fuck it up.”

I settle back against the black leather seat, a blast of air from the vent above cooling my face. My phone vibrates against my leg and I grab it, rolling my eyes when I see the text from Patrick.

Congrats to you and Elizabeth. Keep your fucking nose clean out there so I can figure out how to sanitize the mess you caused back HERE.

WITH A SNORT, I stab a response.

If I didn't make that move, we'd be sitting around with our thumbs up our asses waiting for Sinalia to torch Hell's Kitchen.

THREE GRAY DOTS APPEAR, then the middle finger emoji.

I shake my head and suck air through my teeth before typing my reply.

Such a weak response. How are you the boss again?

It's because I'm the boss that your ass is still in one piece. Let's try to keep it that way. Try to use your head this time around.

I SMIRK.

It's Vegas. And also my wedding night. Lots of kinky shit can happen. And I'm definitely gonna use one of my heads before the night's over.

PUKE FACE EMOJI.

Okay, I guess I took it a little too far.

Whatever. When *don't* I do that?

The Escalade stops. I peer out the window up at the white stucco building. A leafy green archway sits over the entrance.

“Dum-dum-de-dum,” Kat hums, pushing the door open. She hops out and I follow. My gut knots for the first time as I stare up at the chapel. A sign for the Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel hangs above the arch in gold script letters. Shockingly, it doesn't look cheesy as hell from the outside.

But inside... I've gotta wonder. Is Elvis gonna marry us?

“It's quiet and off the beaten path so you can fly under the radar,” Kat says, pushing me forward.

Hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I struggle to move my feet. Feels like I'm wearing cement shoes. My pulse jumps, the reality of my hell swooping down on top of me like a plastic bag over my head.

Sweat beads pop up on my back. Dry heat, my ass. I'm sweating like a pig out here.

But I know it's not the oppressive Vegas heat that's making my shirt cling to my skin like I've just won a wet t-shirt contest.

“You look like you're going to pass out.” Kat slides her sunglasses onto the top of her head and narrows her eyes. “This makes you nervous? *This...* not battling El Azul, one of Colon's trusted lieutenants?”

I shrug. “I was pissed off. That cocksucker hurt one of the kids in our sports program. I wanted to fuck him up a little bit, show him what'd happen if he was stupid enough to do it again.”

Kat nods. “Okay, so the possibility of having your head sliced off with a machete doesn't scare you, but a marriage of convenience freaks you the fuck out. Noted.”

“What, like that's weird?”

Kat steps toward me and puts her hand on my shoulder. “Get the fuck inside, Quinn. Now. And don't make me say it again.”

My fake glasses slip down my nose so I push them back in place as she shoves me toward the door. The place is bright white with flowers all over. I take a walk around, scouting the lobby. No sign of Elvis, either. What a bunch of bullshit. If I'm gonna be tethered to this girl, I'd have liked the full experience.

Kat walks up to the desk and speaks in a low voice to the girl behind the

counter.

I keep wandering until I face a double set of glass doors. Rows of white chairs line the room. Tall glass vases of some kind of flower are set up along the floor in the front. Another arch of white flowers sits at the end of the aisle.

My nose tickles just looking at all of it.

Then a side door opens up by the arch. My eyes catch on the gorgeous woman in a tight floor-length white dress. When she moves, the shimmery material sparkles under the overhead light. Long reddish-brown curls flow down her back.

I swallow hard.

Fuck.

Is that—?

She twists slightly in my direction, the outline of her perfect tits making my mouth water. I rake my gaze over her curves, my dick tingling at the thought of fucking her against the window in my hotel suite.

Can you still consummate a sham marriage?

Her head shifts, but before she can look at me, someone steps in front of the doors, blocking my view.

“Let me make something clear before you walk down that aisle.” Alek glares down at me, his dark eyebrows knitted together. “I agreed to take you in because I need you. It doesn’t mean you’re safe from your enemies. And it sure as hell doesn’t mean you get to touch things that don’t belong to you.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Big Brother is gonna crawl into my marital bed to keep me from fucking my wife, huh?”

“There’s always a shoe waiting to drop, Quinn. I respect Patrick, but I won’t have my plans fucked up because you can’t keep your dick in your pants. This mission is too important.” He leans closer. “Make no mistake. I won’t need you for long. And if you screw this up, poking the Sinalia Cartel will be the least of your problems. Facing off with El Azul will be a fucking picnic compared to what I’m prepared to do to you if you step out of line.”

CHAPTER 9

VALENTINA

I stare down at the white camellia, brushing my fingers softly against the delicate petals. The last time I saw arrangements of my favorite flower was on the day of my would-be wedding to Dmitri Stepanov a few years ago.

The most horrible day of my freaking life.

Those flowers were the only things that brought me any bit of light and comfort, the fateful day that changed our family forever.

But today, the sweet-smelling blooms make my gut wrench.

Because they're a reminder that taking this next step is fraught with risk, more than I've ever taken over the past few years. And my husband-to-be, my partner in this mission, is a cocky, arrogant asshat who doesn't respect authority or know how to take instruction.

We're so close to finding Branko. With Alek's new information, I can get to him with my fake identity and the promise of bloated bank accounts as bait. But instead, I'm being forced to marry the guy who is quite literally the meaning of chaos.

Taking off after a fucking notorious cartel lieutenant by himself just to win a dick measuring contest? *Really?* Does Quinn seriously have all of his screws? Because there must be more than a few missing—forget loose—for him to voluntarily become prey for these sick and twisted cartel soldiers.

The flower slips from my fingers. It's beautiful, but I know all too well how something so shiny and perfect on the outside can hide a whole host of sins behind a glossy façade.

And I've seen too many real-life examples.

A gentle palm rests on my shoulder, the familiar smell of whiskey,

tobacco, and leather hitting my nostrils. I let out a shaky breath.

It's like Dad knew I needed Boris right at this minute.

"Your father would be so proud of you, Valentina."

I continue to stare at the strands of camellia wreaths weaved into the white arch in the chapel. A sarcastic chuckle slips from my lips. "Yep. Like father, like daughter. I'm a killer, just like he was. And also like him, I haven't been able to crush the threat hanging over my family. I haven't been able to avenge anyone we lost to it."

"You stepped up at only sixteen years old to find the people who took Charly and to hunt them down to the source." I look at Boris's lined, worn face, his blue eyes still alert as hell.

"A lot of good I did. The source just keeps changing colors and shapes and slipping through my damn fingers."

Boris nods. "I agree. It feels like failure a lot of the time. I know it well. Watching tragedy strike without being able to stop it. But think of all the good you've done, all of the people you've helped and saved. Your father... he was always a target. It was only a matter of time before one of his enemies got to him. You couldn't have stopped it."

"I don't feel like I stopped any of it. Luka could have been killed; Nik's been shot like a million times." I throw my hands into the air. "What have I really done except tear down different paths at full speed only to stop short once I realize they're dead ends?"

Dead ends littered with dark, dirty secrets, lies, and so much soul-crushing betrayal.

"Each step takes us closer to our destination."

"Feels like a never-ending journey. Denis Stepanov and Branko are the last of the Brotherhood 7 and yet, they're un-freaking-touchable."

"Not for long. You have exactly what you need to catch them both."

I let out a snort. "Oh, you mean Quinn Mulligan? My knight in shining armor?"

"I know him from my dealings with his brother, Patrick. He's a little bit of a rogue, but his intentions are good."

A dry laugh bites the air. "That's very diplomatic of you. I think he's a total idiot who has no idea what we're up against."

"He'll learn quickly how to play the game. But remember, you have a common bond. He wants to keep his family safe as much as you do. And Branko is as much of an enemy to him as he is to you."

“The guy is a loose cannon. He’s going to screw this whole thing up if he doesn’t play it right. This is our last shot to get Branko. If he gets tipped off about us getting close, he’ll disappear forever. He has information that can damage us all. At some point, he may just use it. We don’t have any chances left.”

“Maybe you should talk to Quinn.” Boris nods his head behind me, but I don’t follow his gaze to the lobby. “You’re about to marry him. You should at least have one conversation first. Get a sense of him.”

“I don’t trust him.” Something in me refuses to look in Quinn’s direction. Probably the annoying little bitch of desire that swirls in my core when his blue eyes sear a hole straight into my soul.

Those eyes, that undoing. I’ve felt that sensation before, at a time when I least expected it. It scared the hell out of me then because it was a glaring reminder of what I let happen that night at the arena, not only to me, but Charly.

Before that night, I was a bratva princess. A sketch artist. I loved puppies, Disney fairy-tale movies, romance novels, and lipstick. And after my life was nearly yanked out from under me, I decided to take on a new role.

I kept secrets from my brothers and sisters, damaging ones that came back to haunt them later. I gave up my dreams of happily ever after in exchange for a future. And I took control of my life when I realized how much I was missing it.

For years I’ve tried to channel my inner badass so I’m never that damsel again, never the one who has to rely on some white knight to sweep me off my feet and protect me from the villains.

I don’t need anyone’s protection. I battle the villains myself.

But Quinn’s gaze... it’s so disarming. It makes my mind trip back to the dangers that can overtake you when you’re so far out of control of your life, the way I once was.

Like how out of control I suddenly feel with him hovering over my shoulder.

Maybe the reminder is a good thing because it’ll keep me focused on what we need to do instead of the way my body hums when he’s near.

“You have no choice but to trust him.” Boris pats me on the arm. “That’s the only way this will work. You’re a smart girl. You know that.”

“Thanks for being here today. You make Dad feel closer somehow. And after what happened on the day of my last wedding...” Tears sting my eyes.

Dammit.

Weakness.

I blink fast. Forget what happened that day. It's only one of the reasons why I'm going to laugh when I plunge a knife into Branko Ivanova's throat *after* executing the most brutal torture imaginable.

"It's in the past." Boris turns me slightly to the side. "Look toward your future instead of dwelling on what was."

I reluctantly allow my eyes to travel through the glass door. They land on a tall man dressed in black who's staring down at a display case in the lobby. The jacket rests on his broad, muscled shoulders, his dark head dipped low to look at whatever captured his attention. The girl behind the case hands him something and he holds it up, a smile lifting his lips. A pair of dark-rimmed glasses perch on his nose, his strong jaw relaxed as he talks to her.

He turns suddenly, and I choke on a breath.

Holy shit.

It's Quinn.

A chill licks at the back of my neck, then shimmies down my spine as his clear blue eyes drink me in. I can feel them slide over my bare skin, causing goosebumps to shoot up my arms and down my legs. Every second that he takes to rake his gaze over the length of my body makes butterflies come alive in my belly and swarm wildly.

I snap my lips closed, aware that my mouth fell open once he flashed that come-hither look.

My legs move on their own, completely ignoring my mind, which is screaming at them to stay right where they are. But I'm inexplicably drawn to him like a moth to a flame, and my body doesn't want to hear the words "stop" or "hell fucking no."

"If it isn't the bride." Quinn lets out a low whistle when I push through the doors, and I can't ignore the shudder of pleasure that ripples through me.

Not that I really care what he thinks of my dress or makeup or hair.

For all I know, he's just playing his part. Because, like I told Boris, I don't trust him.

I can't trust anyone anymore.

"Check this out." He holds out a gold ring with two dice on it. "You need a ring. I need a ring. It's Vegas. What do you think?"

But I can't tear my gaze away from him. I absently move my hand up to his slicked-back black hair, smoothing it over the shell of his ear. "You look

so different.”

He was gorgeous before, but now? He’s pure sex wrapped in darkness and Tom Ford.

“You like.” It’s not a question but a statement. Because I very clearly like. There’s absolutely no way to camouflage the like.

“It’ll do.” I can barely squeak out the words. When I realize my hand is still touching his hair, I drop it like my fingertips just got singed by the heat radiating off him. Sweat bubbles burst and drizzle down my back.

He flashes a lazy, sexy as hell grin, and leans one elbow on the top of the display case. “Yeah. You definitely like.”

I clear my throat and take a step backward to breathe clear air instead of the lust-infused stuff surrounding him. “I just came out here to say that...”

My voice trails off.

Why did I come out here again?

Thoughts fizzle like a bottle of sparkling water left uncapped for too long.

A thrumming pulse hammers against my neck. Think, think!

“I just wanted to let you know that we’re, ah, starting. So... you know...” I shrug. “Maybe come inside so we can get this over with?”

He moves closer to me, his spicy musk floating in the air around me, making me dizzy with confusion and curiosity. I drag his scent into my lungs, letting it infuse me with the promise held in his glittering eyes. They swirl with heat and desire, white-hot sparks melting me from the inside out.

I reach out to grab the edge of the display case, steadying myself since my damn knees have morphed into Jell-O.

I’m a trained killer, for Pete’s sake. I don’t do bullshit romance novels anymore.

So why do I feel like I just traveled back to a time way before I plunged into this assassin life, a time when I was a starry-eyed preteen who couldn’t wait to meet her Prince freaking Charming?

“Yeah, I’m all for that.” Quinn’s lips lift. “Because it just gets us closer to the wedding night. And after all the talk about shackles, balls, and chains, I have a lot of ideas about how this night is gonna go.”

My jaw drops for the second time in less than ten minutes.

I should be horrified. Disgusted. Offended.

But instead, I melt at his suggestive words.

Tie me up, pin me down...

And I was worried about *him* compromising this whole mission?

Oh my God, I'm so screwed.

CHAPTER 10

QUINN

I can't take my eyes off her.

The way she shifts around in her fuck-me heels while the officiant performs the ceremony, the way she nibbles on her lower lip when he has us repeat our vows, the way her eyes keep sneaking peeks at mine when she thinks I'm not watching.

But I am. The whole time.

And still, she continues to look.

So that tells me she's one of two things—she's either insane or horny as hell.

I know I'm definitely the latter.

Maybe all this wedding crap is getting her hot and bothered. I'm definitely hot and not at all bothered by the idea of fucking my bride in the honeymoon suite at the Montepremi.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife." The officiant smiles bright and wide at me. "You may now kiss the bride."

Oh, shit. I forgot about this part.

I got so caught up in talk of shackles that I didn't think of "the kiss."

The smirk fades from my lips when Valentina's expression goes from defeatist to horrified.

Fuck's sake, am I that bad of a catch, especially as undercover Superman?

The officiant looks between us as if to say, *what in the hell are you waiting for?* Kat shakes her head and Alek shoots me a murderous glare.

I go in for the kill, shrugging off the invisible daggers plugging my skull. Capturing Val around the waist, I pull her close. She smells fucking

incredible, her perfumed scent clogging up my senses and making me think things that I'm sure would have Alek's dick in a twist.

She stiffens for a second, her eyes narrowing, very unlike a happy bride's. That's not at all suspicious. I force my eyes to focus on her instead of rolling backward in my skull. With gritted teeth, I press my fingertips into the small of her back and she finally buckles, falling against my chest. Her blue eyes float closed as our lips lock for a few fleeting seconds.

Her shiny lips taste sweet, like bubble gum and strawberries. I want to part those lips, to plunder her mouth with my needy tongue. But she doesn't give me the opportunity.

There's so much confusion in her eyes when her lids fly open. Her lips are still parted as if she wants to say something but forgot the words.

Or maybe she doesn't want to say them because they scare the hell out of her.

I kind of know how she feels.

I've never been so affected by a kiss in my entire fucking life, and there wasn't even any tongue action.

The "Wedding March" shatters the air, jolting me. I hold out my bent arm for Val and she loops hers through it before we walk up the aisle as husband and wife. A million thoughts swirl through my mind, and weirdly enough, none of them involve her naked and spread-eagle on a California king bed.

That kiss has my head twisting—*Exorcist* style.

I'm not a guy who's at a loss for words, but damn. That kiss sucked my breath away and I can't seem to get it back.

The glass doors open to the lobby, and the girls working at the chapel fling fistfuls of confetti at us. Silver and gold bits cover us. I hold my free hand in front of my eyes so my fake glasses don't get pelted. Valentina's sudden and surprising laughter grabs my attention. I turn to take a quick look. Her hair sparkles with glitter, and flecks of silver and gold cling to her skin and the front of her dress.

She giggles and peers down the front of her strapless dress. Her cheeks flush pink, her eyes laughing along with her mouth.

Wow. Happiness. Definitely suits her.

"There's so much in there," she says breathlessly. "And, oh my God, it's so itchy."

"Well, I guess we've gotta get you out of that dress fast, yeah?" I wink and the pink in her cheeks deepens. She bites her lower lip again and her eyes

fall to the floor.

Fuck me.

She liked that idea.

Alek pulls me aside after that comment. “Not a chance, lover boy. You’ve got dinner plans. Don’t get any ideas about what’s underneath that dress.”

I shake off his arm. “You know, she’s not your property. And since she’s the bride, don’t we all know she calls the shots? Not her fucking *handler*? Because from where I’m sitting, all you do is call out the orders. Maybe it’s time you let me handle her.”

His eyes blaze at that. I swallow a laugh. Big, bad Sev knows what I’m thinking right now and he doesn’t like it. At all. So I play a little harder because why the fuck not? It’s my wedding day too. I deserve to have some fun.

“And you know, once this dinner is over, we’ll be hitting the honeymoon suite. Hitting,” I say with a shrug. “Or hitting *it*. Whatever and wherever the night takes us. You feel me?”

“She’s too smart to get involved with someone like you.”

“You weren’t.” I waggle my eyebrows at him.

“Agreed. It was a dumb fucking decision to bring you out here. I see that now.” His nostrils flare and his massive hands are balled at his sides. He’s trying to keep things civil since we’re in public. But his head looks like it might explode any second.

“You need me. You said so yourself. And for whatever reason I’m here, you know I’m the right guy for this.” My voice drops. “I want this guy, Sev. Bad. And I want all of the motherfuckers who are in bed with him. So lighten up about me fucking my wife, okay? If anything...” I pause for a second, a half grin lifting my lips. “It’ll make me transform from Clark Kent into Superman.”

“So long as it ends faster than a speeding bullet.” He grimaces.

“Nah, I’m young, unlike you. I’ve got staying power.”

He forces a smile. “If we weren’t in a public place right now, I’d have you on your back and my Zippo in hand, burning off your eyebrows.”

“Well, good thing we’re in public, I guess.” I clap a hand against his arm. “So where’s dinner? Better be someplace good. Is Tommy Marcone out here? Are we celebrating at his restaurant in The Xcelsior? Do we get the penthouse afterward since my sister’s husband owns the place?”

“Actually, no. I got a special request for a very special spot. Heaven’s

pick.”

“Ah, shit. You didn’t invite my sister to the wedding. She’s gonna be pissed.”

“She understands the need for discretion. Our families are both well known in this town. You’re supposed to be in disguise. You can’t show up at her husband’s hotel and eat in Tommy Marccone’s restaurant. People will be watching and waiting. You want to stay alive long enough to get rejected by your wife? Keep a low profile.”

“Yeah, like she can resist my Irish charm.”

“I’m thinking it’s going to be more like her laughing at your tiny Irish cock.” Alek smiles and it’s real. Probably the first I’ve ever seen.

“Hate to burst your bubble, Ivan Drago. But my Irish cock is anything but tiny. I’m—wait, what do you call it?—an anomaly. So when she screams tonight, it’s not gonna be with laughter, but with fear of what my cock is gonna do to her. And then later... well, the screams will be different. Keep an ear out. Learn something.”

“You’re a real prick. Now get the fuck out of here. The car out front will take you to see Heaven. She said you’d love the place.”

“You guys aren’t coming?”

“We’re leaving. Remember, Liam. We never met.” With one last glare, he turns toward Kat and rushes her out a back door while Val was in mid-sentence.

Valentina shoots me a confused look. I sling an arm around her waist. “Come on, Lizzie. We’ve got places to be.”

She pulls away. “What was Alek talking to you about?”

“Our next stop.”

“Which is where, exactly?”

“I don’t know. My sister’s pick. I guess she wants to meet my new wifey.”

We walk out of the chapel. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her head jerk left and right. Same direction mine swings in because you just never know. I drop my gaze to her little purse.

I wonder if she’s packing, too.

Or maybe there’s a garter under that dress... with a gun tucked underneath it...

Shit, if I stripped her down and found that, forget it. She wouldn’t see the light of day until next Saturday, at least. That killer streak is sexy as fuck, and

I'm curious to know what other ways we can channel it.

When all's clear, I open the back door to the sleek black Mercedes and she climbs inside. I sweep my tongue over my lips, enjoying the few seconds of that ass wiggling through the door. I jump in after her and pull the door closed. About ten minutes later, we pull up to The STRAT.

Val's eyes light up and she claps her hands together. "Oh my God. This is one of my favorite places in Vegas."

I furrow my brow. "Why? It isn't even on the best part of the Strip."

"No, but they have Big Shot."

That high in the air? I don't even want to think about what Big Shot might mean.

My phone pings with a text from Heaven. No "hey, how are you?" No "congratulations." Just "meet me at the top of the hotel."

I hold up the phone. "I guess we're heading up."

We walk through the doors and head for the elevator to the top of the building. My neck prickles with sweat and I tug at the open collar of my shirt. My pulse hammers hard against the side of my throat as it tightens.

"Why are you so fidgety?" Valentina slaps the Up button in the elevator bank. "And you're sweating."

"It's Vegas," I choke out. "There's no such thing as dry heat. Heat is heat, and I'm fucking dying."

I take a few deep breaths, my stomach clenching tight. As the elevator sails all the way up to the 108th floor, my heart pounds harder and harder, like it's trying to explode from my rib cage. My ears pop, my temples throb. I grip the metal handrails around the elevator car.

Valentina looks more and more excited with every floor we shoot past.

When I think my head is going to erupt in a ball of flames, the elevator finally stops. Doors open and Valentina runs out. The observation deck gives views of the entire city. Since it's dusk, the view is lit up by a soft glow of lights.

Val grabs me by the hand. "Come on, there's something we have to do. Right now."

"We're supposed to meet my sister up here." I take a look around, but Heaven's long red hair is nowhere to be seen. "I don't want to miss her."

"We won't. It's not busy right now." She laces her fingers with mine and runs me across the roof toward a very phallic-looking tower where a group of people sail to the top of it and then come flying down again.

I stop short, tugging her backward.

My stomach just dropped to my shoes, and I only watched it happen.

“I’m not going on that.”

Her face falls like an overdone cake. “Oh, come on. It will give you such an incredible rush. There’s nothing like it.”

I lift an eyebrow, raking my eyes down the length of her body. “I can think of something like it. *Way* better than it, as a matter of fact.”

She rolls her eyes and lets out a huff. “What’s the problem? What, are you afraid of heights or something?”

I peek over my shoulder for Heaven. Jesus, she had to be late today, right?

“I just value my life, okay? This shit is high. It’s unnatural to be this high outside of a plane. And accidents happen all the time on rides like this.”

Val smiles. “You are petrified of heights.”

“Nope. I’m up here, right?”

“You won’t even go near the railing of the observation deck.”

“I can observe everything from right here.”

Val cocks her head to the side. “So, you aren’t afraid of going up against a drug cartel, but heights freak you the fuck out?”

“I like to feel the ground under my feet. Sue me.”

She takes my other hand and closes the space between us. With a tilt of her head, she flutters her long dark eyelashes at me. “Don’t be scared. I’ve got you.”

I look past her at the platform where people are strapping into the ride.

Fuck. What if I pass out? Or worse, have a heart attack and die?

But somehow, I let Val push me to the platform. My leg muscles tense, nerves like razor blades slicing at my insides. Blood turns to ice in my veins, my stomach knotting like a pretzel as I sink into my seat. Sweat drizzles down my back, the scorching heat of Vegas steaming up my fake glasses.

I take them off, gripping them between my fingers. This is crazy. It’s a stupid ride. I’ve looked down the barrels of guns, for fuck’s sake. I’ve been shot, stabbed. How the hell can this make me so panicked when staring into the face of death makes me laugh?

I look around at the other riders. Everyone is laughing and smiling. Nobody looks like they’re gonna puke all over themselves. I clench the side of my seat. Val places her hand over mine. Her lips lift, excitement flushing her face. She doesn’t look like the tightly wound control freak from a few

hours ago when she was only my fiancée.

At the top of this fucking hotel, a thousand and eighty-one feet in the air, she looks exhilarated.

And so fucking gorgeous.

The platform creaks and begins to climb to the top of the tower's mast. It's slow, maddening. And I want to scream. I don't because I'm not a fucking baby. But it's there, knotted in the back of my throat, anxious to rip through the air.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I already saw too much, and if I keep them open for another second, lunch will be spewed all over the observation deck below. Heavy chains wrap around my lungs, so constricting, I can barely choke out a breath. Higher and higher. My ears ring, my temples throbbing as blood rushes between them.

Finally, the platform comes to a sharp stop.

Oh God. Here we—

The drop is sudden. Gravity pulls the platform down at top speed. My ass lifts from the seat, my stomach in my throat as I wrap my fingers around the rail holding me to the platform. Everything I ate today is back in my mouth.

A hot wind whips through my hair as we sail down the tower. Val's fingers stroke the top of my hand like we're taking a walk through the park instead of clinging to our lives during a free fall from the top of the tallest building in Vegas. Her warmth clings to me, comforts me in the seconds where I'm not exactly sure if I'll live or die.

I crack open my eyes. Val smiles hard, the brightest smile imaginable.

And that's when I finally embrace it.

Freedom.

Same thing she's feeling right now.

A rush of energy flows through me. I've never felt so out of control of my life. And when the platform lands at the bottom of the tower, I realize I've never felt so empowered at the same time.

Like I can do anything.

It's like a drug, one I was forced to swallow that instantly addicted me.

My legs wobble when I stand up. It's still hella fucking high and I have to force my eyes away from the view below. I rode the ride, but I'm not in any way cured of my phobia.

I follow Val back down to the observation deck. She turns, a victorious look on her face.

“See? You loved it.”

“It was okay. I wouldn’t do it again.”

“Why not? Didn’t you think it was...” She smirks, a seductive look in her bright eyes. “*Orgasmic*? And let’s face it, that’s the only kind of orgasm you’re going to have with me on our wedding night, *hubby*.”

She’s absolute fire. So fucking white-hot with her comments and little cat and mouse game.

But if she wants to play with matches, she’d better watch out because I’m about to light them up.

“You’re gonna say that free-falling didn’t get you hot, too? That you don’t want to ride out the adrenaline rush with me?” I grab her arm and twist it behind her back, pulling her against my chest. A sharp breath slips from her lips in surprise. “That if I put my hands under your dress, I wouldn’t find your panties soaked at the thought of me inside you, fucking you on the balcony of our honeymoon suite for all of Vegas to see?”

I slap a hand over her thigh and push the dress up her leg, slowly and threateningly dragging the fabric over her skin. Her lips part, her eyes wild with hunger. “Let’s find out how much of a liar you really are, Val.”

CHAPTER II

VALENTINA

My breath hitches, my skin pebbled with goosebumps under the pads of his fingertips. I should tell him to stop, to get his hands off me. But my body melts against him, the primal scent of him—danger mixed with sin and seduction—makes me dizzy with a whole lot of things I don't want to acknowledge.

Because I can't.

This mission is too important for me to be distracted by my fake husband. And Quinn is the epitome of reckless abandon.

Gorgeous as he is.

But isn't that just like the Devil? Tempting you with smoke and mirrors so that you take a bite of the forbidden fruit, only to realize later that it results in your total and complete undoing.

That's what will happen if I let myself fall prey to him now.

So I swallow past the lump in my throat and push him away even though my body hums with a rush of desire from his rough touch.

Ugh, when did I become *this* girl?

My heart thrums. His fingers are still pressed into my hips even though I've put space between us.

He refuses to let me go.

His smile fades, his eyes boring into me like lasers.

Can he see what he's doing to me? What he's already done?

"Hey, hey, how about you guys get a room, huh?"

I jump away, forcing his hands off me. A deep flush floods my face with heat and I look around for the owner of the voice. A stunning redhead walks over to us from a corner of the observation deck. She's holding the hand of a

young girl next to her with thick, wavy auburn hair and dark eyes.

“Uncle Q,” the girl shrieks. She drops the redhead’s hand and runs over to Quinn. He lifts her into his arms, *Dirty Dancing* style, when she makes a dive for him.

I watch the smile on his face stretch from ear to ear as he spins her around. Jesus, did my ovaries just jump?

The woman grins at me before pulling me in for a hug. Her perfume blankets the air around us in a light citrusy scent. “Val, it’s such a pleasure to meet you.”

The hug catches me off guard but I lean into it. It’s been so long since I’ve been hugged. It feels good. Motherly. And I miss that so much.

She pulls back and holds me by my arms. Her bright-green eyes scour the length of my body. Perfect white teeth sparkle against her creamy skin. “You are absolutely beautiful. That dress is incredible.”

I can’t help but return her smile. “Thank you.”

“I’m Quinn’s sister, Heaven Villani. And that little girl being flung into the air is my daughter, Aisling.”

I turn to look at Quinn and his niece. They look like best friends reunited. It makes my heart flutter.

Dammit.

Quinn puts Aisling down on the ground and reaches for Heaven. He pulls her into a huge bear hug, and for a hot second, I’m a tiny bit jealous because speaking of heaven, that’s what his arms felt like wrapped tight around me.

Shit, shit, shit!

How is it possible that I’ve let this guy creep under my skin so suddenly? Am I really that much of a simp that a sham marriage ceremony and a ride on the Big Shot made me *soft*?

My heart melts a little in my chest. There’s nothing sexier than a guy who faces his fears and shows some shred of vulnerability even though he could probably fillet a guy with a stiletto knife without blinking an eye.

Tingles dance over my skin when his eyes slide over me. They glitter with intent, sparkle with promise. And my God, does my heart do a dance in my chest in response.

Aisling holds out her hand to me. “Mom says you’re my new aunt.”

“Val,” I say, pumping her hand a few times. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Aisling nods and grabs on to Quinn’s hand. She looks between us, then her eyes settle on him. “So you come to Vegas to get married and we’re not

even invited to the wedding? I couldn't even be your flower girl? How could you take that away from me, Uncle Q?"

He snickers at her snarky tone. "Wow, the grape doesn't fall far from the vine, does it? Why couldn't you be more like your dad?"

Heaven smiles at her daughter. "You know Uncle Quinn is a busy guy."

"That's right. But I'm here now, and we're gonna make the most of this visit, okay?"

Aisling narrows her eyes and thinks about it for a second before answering. "Okay. And what's with the weird hair? It looks so... neat. And yours is usually so messy like you don't own a comb."

"That's 'cause I style it that way. But that hair didn't go with this tux." He smooths down the front of his tuxedo jacket and sweet Lord, my mouth waters as my gaze follows his hands. Then he slides the glasses back on his face and my knees wobble. "I've got these now, too."

Aisling scrunches her nose. "You don't look like Uncle Q anymore."

"Yeah, but I'm still just as much fun." He ruffles her hair and then drops to his knees. "They have strawberry cotton candy up here, you know."

"Duh, of course they do. Why else do you think it's my favorite place in Las Vegas?"

"You wanna get some?"

Aisling's face lights up. "Race you!"

They take off toward the food court and disappear into a crowd of people.

"Aisling misses him so much," Heaven muses. "I just wish he was out here under different circumstances." Her expression clouds and her perfectly arched brows lift when my face drops like *The Big Shot*.

I suck down a groan.

Why the hell should that even happen when everyone knows this marriage is a total sham?

Heaven puts a hand on my arm. "Oh, sweetie, I didn't mean it that way. I meant the whole thing with El Azul. The Sinalia Cartel has so many ties out here. I'm just scared for him. Patrick and Alek can only do so much to protect him, and unfortunately, a new hair color and glasses won't protect him forever."

That's when my belly drops, because I know Heaven is one hundred percent right in her fears.

Out of the corner of my eye, a path clears through all of the people and I catch a glimpse of Quinn and Aisling by the cotton candy vendor. Aisling

throws her head back and laughs before wrapping her arms around Quinn's waist.

Tears sting my eyes.

Somehow in the time since becoming his wife, I've actually gone and caught feelings for this guy.

How utterly inconvenient.

And how devastated that little girl would be if someone in El Azul's crew found him here.

I blink fast.

Weakness, Val. For fuck's sake, pull your shit together.

"I knew what you meant." I return my gaze to Heaven's face. "And I don't want to see that happen either."

"My husband is very concerned." Heaven's voice is grave. "He had his own issues with a certain cartel leader who's now... not of this life." Her face tells me there's more to the story than her mouth will say.

"And is there any link between those groups?"

"I doubt it. It was a long time ago. Almost ten years." Her gaze searches the crowds. "Still, revenge is revenge. People will wait a long time to get it. And to hit both Mulligans..."

An icy chill settles deep in my bones.

Two Mulligans?

"Did Patrick—?"

Heaven shakes her head. "No. It was me."

My jaw drops. "Badass."

"You should talk." She grins. "And anyway, the bastard shot my husband. He almost died. There was no way I was letting that disgusting pig drug lord survive after that. I made him pay. One of my other brothers and I broke into his sex den to find him."

"I didn't know you had other brothers."

Her eyes drop. "That brother is—"

A buzzing sound startles Heaven from her thought. She digs around in her large Chanel handbag for her phone. "I'll be right back."

She disappears with the phone glued to her ear.

I'm kind of a little in love with her, I can't lie. A gorgeous woman battling a drug kingpin on her own to avenge a hit on her husband? That's hot no matter how you identify.

The hairs on my arms spring up. I rub my hands over them. Weird,

because even up here, it's still stifling hot. Sweat beads pop up under my wedding makeup, and tiny streams down my back make me cringe. I hate the feeling of sweating. Of being so overheated that your skin gets drenched in it.

I turn to gaze out at the horizon. Lights flicker in the distance, the Las Vegas Strip alive with vivid color. The sky is clear blue, swirled with streaks of pink, orange, and purple. I love being so far above the melee. Maybe it's why I love those rides so much, too. They take me away from the crazy and help me refocus my energy.

An uncomfortable sensation gnaws at my gut, though.

Things Heaven said. Two Mulligans. Revenge. Another brother.

She was about to tell me about him when her phone rang. What don't I know about this family? And how does Quinn's attack on El Azul link to Heaven's attack on the other low-life scumbag?

A strong hand lies on the small of my back, a whiff of the sweetest mix of sugar and strawberries wafting under my nose. I turn and another shiver ripples through me, this one wholly delicious.

"What were you thinking about, wifey? You looked all spacey." The vibration of Quinn's voice flutters against my cheek.

For the second time in much too short of a span, my mouth refuses to cooperate with my brain. It takes me a little bit to unscramble my brain from the lust clouding it. "Just, um, how beautiful the view looks from up here."

"It's not the only thing that looks beautiful." His lips curl upward.

That's when I roll my eyes. "Wow, does that line actually work on anyone?"

His eyes twinkle with mischief. "You'd be shocked."

"So the whole bad-boy attitude with just-fucked hair and a melt-your-panties smile plus that line gets it for you?"

Oh. Jesus. Did I really say all of that when I haven't even been drinking?

The self-satisfied smirk on his face tells me that yes, I most certainly *did* say it.

He presses his hand into my spine, drawing me closer so that my chest is flush against his. "You think I have a melt-your-panties smile?"

"I didn't mean it'd work on *me*." I choke out the words, heat flooding me so hard, it creeps to the ends of my hair. "I was using it as an example. I mean, obviously it doesn't work on me. I just meant it makes it pretty clear that you're just trouble. And girls should beware."

"Well, now that I'm off the market..." His words trail off, and again I'm

struck dumb.

“Please. We both know what this is. It’s a bullshit ruse. Nothing more.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “We have a job to do and then we’re over. You know it and I know it.”

“Oh yeah? Then why’s your heart beating so fast?” he murmurs, his fingers tangling in the ends of my hair. “Doesn’t feel like you believe those words.”

My lips part, but I can’t squeak out a sound.

But just before I can form a smart-ass response, my insides plunge into a deep freeze when my eyes latch on to someone standing behind Quinn.

Watching us.

“Revenge is still revenge. And some people will wait a long time to get it.”

Heaven’s words ring out like clashing cymbals banging between my temples.

A scream builds in my chest.

I finally find my voice.

“Aisling!”

CHAPTER 12

QUINN

I don't stop running, not when my legs threaten to give out, not when my lungs are about to explode. Where the fuck did all of these people come from? Suddenly, the observation deck is crawling with them, and Aisling is getting farther and farther away.

If that son of a bitch gets her into the elevator...

Blood rushes between my ears.

No fucking way will that happen. I won't let it.

Spotty memories pop between my temples like bullets.

Where the fuck is security?

I can't draw enough breath into my lungs to even yell.

Somewhere I hear Heaven's panicked voice, but I can't stop to explain.

My stomach roils. I'm losing Aisling's long reddish-blond curls in the throngs of tourists.

I run harder. He can't take her.

They disappear around a corner of the outside deck which is quiet. Empty.

A flash of white blasts past me.

Val tackles him to the ground and pulls off her high heel. She presses the sharp stilt against his neck, her knee jammed into the guy's sternum.

Aisling scrambles out of his grip and runs toward me. I squeeze her tight when she jumps into my arms. "What the hell happened?"

"I dropped my favorite bracelet. He was standing a little bit away from us and held it out to me. I didn't say anything because he was close. Then he grabbed me." Her big brown eyes shine with tears. "I'm sorry, Uncle Q."

"Aisling," Heaven screams from across the floor with two security guards

behind her.

“You’re a disgusting piece of shit.” Val’s fury pierces the air. She slices his face with her shoe. Security runs up to them. One of the guys pulls her away from the man on the ground. Blood streams from the spot where the heel tore open his cheek. He turns his head to glare at me.

Directly at me.

Then he rolls around and struggles to his feet while both security guards try to keep Val from leaping at him again.

“Really? You’re holding her down, but nobody has the guy who tried to snatch my niece?” My voice is thick with anger. I cross over to the guy who staggers around a bit. He wipes the blood from his face and stares at it for a second before his lips lift into a malicious smirk directed right at me.

The blood ices in my veins.

This wasn’t just a random attempt at kidnapping.

This motherfucker knew we were here. He knows exactly who we are.

So much for my disguise.

I don’t waste a second. I tear after him and shove him against the railing overlooking the parking garage below. Grabbing the sides of his shirt, I slam him back against the metal.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The guy doesn’t answer. Purplish smudges stain the area under his eyes. His lips are as pale as his skin. And under the dark clothes, his frame is thin and weak. Up close, he looks like a zombie in *The Walking Dead*.

I shove him against the railing one more time and he lets out a weak laugh. “You think you scare me? Go ahead. Pull the gun out of your pants and shove the barrel down my throat.”

Heat floods my body.

Strong hands pull me away. I thrash around, struggling in the grasp of the guards.

“We’ve got this,” one of them grunts.

“The fuck you do.” I pull free and lunge for the guy again.

“You’ll never get anything out of me. Lung cancer, three months left.” Just then, the guy backs toward the railing. “I’m already dead.”

And then he flings himself over the railing. A sharp scream shatters the air.

Val and I rush for the edge. My fingers grip the metal rail, clenching tight when the guy’s body lands in a bloody mess on the ground stories below.

I look at her. Color drains from her face, her eyes wide.

“They know.” That’s it. Two words, laced with promise that evil will always win.

“Fuck.” I fist my hair and slump over the railing, watching as people flip the hell out over the mangled body decorating the pavement.

Heaven grabs Val’s hand and nods her head toward the elevator when the security guards pull out their phones and turn away from us. “Come on. We need to get away from here now.”

We run toward the elevator bank, and she stabs the Down button. “I booked the Tower Suite for you guys since you can’t go back to the Montepremi.” She rolls her eyes when she sees the blank look on my face. “You need to keep your distance from all of us; otherwise, it’ll look suspicious.”

“Heaven, does it really seem like it’ll matter where the fuck we sleep? Someone followed you or us here. They tried to take Aisling. That’s a direct hit to our family, and whoever that asshole worked for will send someone else to take what they want, no matter where the hell we sleep.”

Heaven’s green eyes spark with anger and she holds out a finger at me. “Shut up, Q. Do not say another word.”

“What the fuck ever,” I mutter. Like it matters. For all we know, there could be an army up here mingling with the crowds of people, just waiting to pounce.

We already saw firsthand that security in this place is a fucking joke.

“Hey, you can’t leave,” one of the security guards yells.

Heaven pushes us into the elevator as soon as the doors open. The guard runs toward us, but the doors close just before he makes it.

Nobody says a word. The silence is thick. It chokes me, along with all the what-ifs.

What if we hadn’t gotten to Aisling in time? What if the guy had grabbed her and taken her along for the free fall over the side of the hotel? What if someone else had been here for the handoff and Aisling disappeared forever?

I pull at the shirt collar tugging tight at my throat and collapse against the elevator wall. My hand brushes against Val’s and she pulls it away like she just touched fire.

But not before the shock of electricity shoots to the tips of my fingers.

Heaven hugs Aisling tight. The elevator finally stops at our floor and the doors slide open. I push off the wall and poke my head into the hallway.

Light-gray walls with silver sconces give it a bright and airy look.

“Anyone out there?” Heaven whispers.

I shake my head and step out. “All clear.”

We follow Heaven to the end of the hallway. She pulls out a key card and swipes it over the lock. The door clicks and we rush inside. The place is huge, and under other circumstances, I’d be listing out all the places where I’d want to fuck my bride.

But shit’s gone sideways... way worse than I thought it could.

“I had clothes delivered for both of you.” Heaven waves her hand toward a few shopping bags and pulls her phone out of her handbag. “I figured you’d need to get out of those wedding clothes. I’m going to call Matteo.”

Heaven takes Aisling by the hand and leads her into one of the bedrooms. Val paces in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, her fingers twisting the ends of her hair. “Heaven said something when we were on the roof, something about revenge and two Mulligans.” Her eyes narrow at me. “Is there some link between the cartels you both attacked?”

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. “Don’t know. I didn’t ask for a list of known associates when I went after El Azul.”

“This was obviously a planned hit on you and your sister. Taking Aisling like that when they could have easily just gotten to either you or Heaven, instead? That was a message, and the idea was to make you both suffer, not outright kill you.” She pauses, her forehead pinched. “That means they know you’re here, and that can jeopardize our whole mission. You’re supposed to be Liam McDermott, not Quinn Mulligan.”

“Relax. You’re making a lot of assumptions without any facts.”

“I don’t need facts. The situation is pretty damn obvious to me.” She storms over to me, her hands on her hips. “You went after a drug lord and now they’re back for blood. Yours, your family’s. I’m not getting sucked into a black hole because of your bad judgment call.” Bright-red spots color her cheeks, her blue eyes darkening more and more by the second. “I’m calling Alek. There has to be another way for me to get to Branko. Without *you*.”

I capture her wrist in my hand and press it to my chest, forcing her closer. “How far do you think you’re gonna get on your own? You know the way inside, and you need me next to you; otherwise, the doors will slam right in your face. Even if you hate hearing that.” I grit my teeth. “You can’t control everything. You’re not playing by your rules right now, sweetheart. It’s not your show anymore.”

“Fuck you,” Val seethes, struggling to break free of my monster grip, which isn’t about to happen. “I’ve worked too hard to get Branko. I gave up everything to avenge my family. You’re going to ruin this for me, you arrogant bastard. And just so we’re clear, I don’t give a damn what you think. My rules got me this far.”

“This far?” A dry laugh escapes my lips. “I don’t know if you realize it, but you’re spiraling, babe. You’ve got nothing right now without me. No entry. No hope. No fucking backup plan. And if this guy managed to escape you, Sev, and all of his other fucking peons for this long, guess what? You’re gonna need more than luck to catch him. You’re gonna need a goddamn miracle because he’s way the fuck ahead of you guys.”

“I guess the same could be said for your family.” Her voice drops, her words breathless. “Revenge is revenge. And people will wait as long as they need to get it. Isn’t that right, Quinn? You get it. So does Heaven. And so do I. You’ve got your own army to battle all because you let your hot little head explode instead of thinking of the consequences.”

Her heart thumps, beating fast, her chest flush against mine.

“Seems to me like you’re going to need a pretty big miracle, too,” she hisses.

Val’s lips twist like she’s just tasted poison when I lock her in place. Her chest heaves, a vein in her forehead pulsing as our eyes battle a flaming duel. “So, good luck with that. Because I most definitely won’t be part of it. Just consider this marriage fucking annulled.”

CHAPTER 13

VALENTINA

“I don’t give a fuck who showed up at the hotel. This marriage is nonnegotiable. You will play the part, find that motherfucker, Branko, and do the work to kill him.”

Alek’s jaw tenses as he stares at his laptop screen, his eyes focused on something other than us. I know what it is.

Shark Attack.

It’s the computer game he plays when he needs to unwind, which is pretty much all the time. I remember the first time I caught him doing it. I watched over his shoulder as he demolished underwater cities. He’s not the guy you’d ever expect to be a video gamer, but I guess we all have our outlets.

Alek’s involves all-out destruction, which I guess is his occupational hazard.

I glare at the screen on my iPad. “You can’t be serious. Look, I get that you want to help a member family of Red Ladro, but this is putting my life at risk, too. And if I die, how the hell are you going to get to Branko?”

Alek lifts an eyebrow. “Sorry to break this to you, Val, but everyone’s expendable. You’re the best. *Right now*. Don’t think I can’t train someone else to be just as good, if not better.”

My jaw drops. “You are such an insufferable asshole.”

“If only that was the worst thing someone could say about me.” He clicks his mouse furiously for a second, his lips stretched into a tight line.

“Sorry, I don’t mean for my drama to interrupt your fucking video game.” I pace in front of the desk. The wedding dress lays in a heap on the floor a few feet away and I’m now wearing a t-shirt and shorts. So much less constricting. That damn dress felt like a noose around my body.

Ironic that it tugged as tight as the one around my neck.

He clicks one last time and returns his ice-blue gaze to my face. “We both have jobs to do. Mine is to give the goddamn orders; yours is to execute them. That was always our arrangement. We’ve lost a lot of time and more lives because we haven’t been able to catch Branko. How much more death do you want staining your hands, Valentina?”

My spine stiffens. “You’ve got some fucking nerve putting that all on me. What about your brilliant data guys who can’t seem to track a damn signal long enough for me to get to it?”

“Branko is a slimy piece of shit who knows how to get lost in the murk. We finally know how to get through his ironclad gates, and you want to change the plan?” He narrows his eyes. “No.”

“The link to the cartel will bring a lot of attention to us. The guy who tried to snatch Aisling knew who Quinn was, even with his disguise.”

“He called him by name?”

I make a face. “I don’t know. But I’m sure he put two and two together when he tracked Heaven and Aisling.”

“So I’m supposed to derail my plans because you have a hunch that you’re now a target for a drug cartel?”

I press my fingertips to my temples and take a deep breath. “I’m asking you to reconsider this marriage because it potentially makes Quinn a target. And since I’m right next to him, that bullseye will be slapped on my back, too.”

He stares at me for a long minute, and a sliver of hope flares up inside of me.

Yes, yes, Alek. You know I’m right. Come on, say what I want to hear.

“The mission is too important to alter any plans this late in the game. All of your paperwork has been filed and we should hear about your membership decision as early as tomorrow.”

My heart sinks to my ankles.

“Don’t forget about your objective, Val. You want to avenge the deaths of your parents, of Dima, of Charly. This marriage is a speed bump. Roll over it and get the damn job done.”

I shudder at the anger in his tone. He clicks off the FaceTime call without another word and his pinched expression disappears from the screen.

“No, he did not just hang up on me!” The sharp yell explodes from my chest. I sweep my arm over the top of the desk and send the full water glass

crashing to the floor. Shards skitter across the shiny tile, glittering under the overhead light.

The bathroom door opens. My head jerks in the direction of the steam cloud that obscures my vision for a hot second. And then Quinn appears in all his tattooed, ripped-muscle glory.

What fucking perfect timing.

Heaven and Aisling took off a little while ago when Matteo, her husband, came in with an army to secure them and get them back to the Xcelsior Hotel and Spa. So there's no buffer here anymore.

It's just the two of us now.

Sham newlyweds.

But fuck me if my mouth doesn't water at the mere sight of him.

The white towel hangs low on his waist, the cut of his V peeking over the top of it. I bite the inside of my mouth, my frenzied thoughts stalling as other X-rated ones take over the front burners of my lust-riddled mind.

He sweeps a hand through his dark hair, but instead of it staying slicked back, it falls over his eyes in wet strands. His half-hooded gaze pins me to my spot in front of all the broken glass.

"Sounds like your call with Alek went well." His lips curl into a smirk as he walks over to one of the dresser drawers. He pulls open the top one and grabs a pair of black basketball shorts.

My hand flies up to my eyes. "You couldn't have changed while you were in the bathroom?"

He casts a smug look at me over his shoulder. "What kind of fun would that have been?"

Swirls of black ink with bold colors cover his back, the muscles flexing as he moves around the room. He suddenly stops in front of the full-length mirror and drops his towel.

I almost choke because, hello! Reflection!

And sweet Lord, the sight makes my knees wobble. I grab on to the edge of the desk for balance.

The smirk on his face tells me he knows exactly what he's doing.

"You are unbelievable."

"Thanks. I get that a lot."

"It wasn't a compliment." I roll my eyes and drop to my knees. Luckily, the glass shards aren't too small. I pick them up and hope there aren't too many slivers left behind to get stuck in my bare feet.

“Are we breaking up or what? ’Cause if I don’t have to worry about my ball and chain anymore, I’m going down to the casino.”

I dump the pieces of glass into the trash and storm back into the bedroom. “Are you fucking kidding me? This isn’t a game, okay? Someone just tried to kidnap your niece. Someone wants revenge on your family. How can you joke?”

He pulls the shorts on and I’m so angry, I can’t even allow myself to stare at his perfect ass. When he turns to face me, I swallow hard.

The mischievous twinkle in his eyes, the cocky smirk, the teasing gaze... all of it has been replaced by a pained expression that makes my heart clench. And his eyes...

They don’t twinkle anymore.

They glower with rage.

“This isn’t a fucking game to me. You don’t know anything about me, my life, or why I do what I do.”

My skin prickles as he steps toward me, his turbulent irises stormy. They drag me into his volatile undercurrent, and I buckle at the sudden force. “I know you’ve dealt with guys like these before—”

“No, you don’t. You only know what you’ve heard, what breadcrumbs your precious Alek decided to throw. But you have no fucking clue what I’m all about.”

He stops directly in front of me. His breath heats my skin. The hairs on my arms spring to attention, a shiver slipping down my spine. This guy... who the hell is *he*?

It’s like the disguise is an alter ego he’s just morphed into... someone dark, devious, and ominous.

I slam my knees together.

Oh God. Please make it stop.

My fingers clench into tight fists. “I think you’re a liability, regardless of why you do what you do,” I mimic.

His lips twitch. “There are reasons why I went after El Azul. I wasn’t running in there like a goddamn loose cannon trying to win a dick-measuring contest.”

“So why would you go to him, alone no less? You didn’t think there’d be any consequences to the family you claim to want to protect?”

“Guys like that will take and take and take unless someone stands up to them and shows them what they stand to lose if they attack.” He runs a hand

through his hair again. Tiny droplets of water dot my skin. “They hurt people. A lot of people. And my brother didn’t want to go after them. He had his reasons, but I didn’t like them. And then one afternoon last week, a kid from the community sports program we run got jumped. Those fuckheads stole his sneakers. He just got them for his birthday, and they fucking ripped them off his feet while holding a knife to his throat.”

He’s so close, the fresh, clean scent of his skin invades my nostrils and clouds my brain for a long second.

“It was too risky to go alone.”

“Danger doesn’t scare me. Life’s too short to be someone’s bitch. And that’s what they want... to take over our territory. But no fucking way will I let them. I’m not sorry for what I did, even if it got me sentenced to a slow death here in the fucking desert.” A shadow darkens his expression. “And now that I know the cartel is in bed with Branko Ivanova, there’s no way they’re gonna win. And I’ll torch every inch of the Earth to find them and roast their asses.”

I square my shoulders. “This is exactly why the plan is going to fail. You’re too wild and unhinged.”

“Your problem is you think too much. How many times did you lose Ivanova because you were too slow to take action?”

“Oh, unlike you who doesn’t think at all?” I give him a shove, more so because I’m afraid of what else my hands may do if he gets any closer. My pulse hammers hard, the words getting caught in the back of my throat. Quinn’s chest grazes mine, his skin dampening the front of my t-shirt. “You don’t know me either. You have no idea what I’ve been through and why I’m even out here in the first place. But it’s damn clear you don’t care about anything but what the little voice in your twisted brain tells you to do. Like to wreak havoc.”

“That scares you, doesn’t it, Little Miss Control Freak?” He captures my wrist, using it to hold me in place. Then he closes the space between us, dipping his head low over mine. His toes graze mine and a sharp tingle dances up my ankles. “Because you already know that my twisted brain tells me if you feel it, then fucking do it. And I *always* listen.”

CHAPTER 14

QUINN

Her pulse hums against my fingertips, shallow breaths slipping from her lips. I brush my thumb over the inside of her wrist and her eyes pop open wide.

“Don’t fool yourself into thinking that my opinion of you will change just because you’re a good Samaritan. You’re still a reckless thug who brings chaos everywhere he goes.” Her voice shakes at my suggestive touch, her gaze dropping to my hand.

“I definitely bring it to the bedroom.” I can’t resist. I love it when she gasps like she’s offended, when she’s really more turned on than she’d ever admit. I caught her staring at my reflection in the mirror. I know what she wants, and I bet she hates herself for it because it challenges her viselike grip on control.

But let’s face it. The only control either of us has right now is all smoke and mirrors. Alek claims to have details and plans and strategies... all the bullshit Val needs to hear because it gives her structure.

I don’t care how long she’s been one of Sev’s soldiers, she’s too naïve for this life. And even after Branko managed to escape her time after time, she still doesn’t get that structure in this world is a fucking illusion. Nothing ever goes to plan, and just when you think you’re close to your target, someone else goes in for the kill.

And it’s not always the target that gets taken out.

I’ve had my share of fuckups, but even I know these scumbags have about a hundred lives. And sometimes trying to eliminate them is like playing a vicious game of Whac-A-Mole.

Spoiler alert, the mole usually wins.

Knowing that never stops me from playing, though. I'll always go after those fucking bastards. They can't hide forever, and when they poke their heads out of their holes, I'll be there to pound the shit outta them.

My brother Patty gets pissed off when I go off the rails, which I guess is pretty often. But as the boss, he needs to focus on the stability of our organization.

I'm not the boss.

And I don't give a shit about stability.

I won't turn the other cheek just to keep peace.

The only way to keep peace is to fucking demolish anyone who threatens it. That's why I went after El Azul. First, it's sneakers. Next, it's our weapons trafficking business. Nobody's gonna stick their grimy hands in our pie while I'm still breathing.

"You are freaking delusional if you think I'm going to sleep with you."

"We've got some time to kill. And since I still have that marriage noose wrapped around my neck, we should probably fuck out all of this frustration." I wink at her. "I mean, it's actually more your frustration than mine. I'm an enforcer. I get a job, I do the job. But you seem to be fighting this one hard. You need to let go and decompress before you explode."

"You're the one who has me wound so tight." She grits her teeth, but still makes no attempt to pull away from me.

"Then let me be the one to unravel you." My lips lift. "You know I've got the tools. I saw you checking them out. And they work *really* good."

Her face floods with a deep red flush. "This is serious."

"Oh, I know. Shit can go sideways fast if people start exploding. And if I'm to blame, then you should let me fix you before it's too late."

Her mouth drops open. I swallow a smile because I do want to fuck her senseless, and if I piss her off, I'll only end up cockblocking myself.

"Fix me?" she asks in a choked whisper.

That's when she pushes me away.

Okay, so she does have limits, and I just slammed right into one of them.

"News flash, Quinn. Nothing can 'fix me.'" Color bleeds down the sides of her neck and up to the tips of her ears. She pokes me in the chest with an accusing finger. "You came out here without a single regret about what trouble you might have caused to your family back in New York, your sports program thing, your whole world. I don't live like that. I have regrets, so

fucking many of them. And the only way I feel like I can redeem myself at all is to find Branko Ivanova and slice the skin from his body like I'm peeling an apple before I shove his dick into a sausage grinder."

"That's a vivid image."

"I've had a lot of time to plan my forms of torture." She uses one hand to sweep her hair out of her eyes. "And don't think I'll limit them to Branko if you get in my way."

"Now I'm scared. And a little hot, if I'm being honest."

"Please don't be, because the only way you're going to be able to cool off is to hop into a cold shower." She turns in the direction of the kitchen and pads across the floor, tiptoeing around the spot where she shattered the glass.

I shake my head. For someone who craves control, you'd think she would have thought twice before unleashing her rage by smashing a glass against the floor. She could have at least used something that didn't crack into a million tiny pieces.

Maybe that's her biggest regret.

Losing her focus.

I can make her lose a lot more than that.

She looks at me and sees a sex-crazed loose cannon who shoots first, thinks never. And to some extent, she's right.

But maybe that's what I need the world to see so nobody can see what really hides down deep. Because that shit is scary. And regrets? Christ only knows I have a boatload myself.

It's just easier to project than to deal with them, unlike Val who wants to wallow in them so they rule her life.

I let out a deep breath. If I can't play with her, I'm gonna have to play with something else.

And no, I'm not talking about my cock. Yet. 'Cause if she keeps stomping around here in shorts like that where her ass cheeks peek out of the bottom, I'm gonna lose my damn mind.

"I think we need to get out of here."

She pokes her head around the corner wall. "You're insane. What if the people who tried to take Aisling are just waiting for you to show up?"

I rummage through the shopping bag Heaven brought and fish out a black t-shirt. "You're assuming I was a target, not Matteo Villani, who is the most fucking notorious mob boss out here."

"I'm just saying that it's not smart. They know who you are now.

They've seen your new look."

I grab a baseball cap and put it on, pulling the bill down low. "No glasses. They'll never spot me now."

"This is exactly what I'm talking about." Val throws her hands in the air. "You're so oblivious to danger. Is that because you were knocked out by enemies' baseball bats one time too many? Does the gravity of this situation really not register with you?"

"YOLO, babe. There any beers in the fridge?"

Val's eyes roll back into her head, and she disappears again. The refrigerator door opens and slams shut before she appears with a bottle of Pellegrino in her hand. "That is the most irresponsible thing I've heard from you in the last..." She looks down at her watch. "Five seconds."

"I'm just saying that our work puts us in the line of fire all the time. We should always be prepared for attack. Haven't you learned that yet?"

She lets out a huff, shoves an open bottle of Stella Artois at me, and takes a long gulp from the clear green glass bottle in her other hand. "I'm very aware of that, thanks. I just like to keep myself out of harm's way until I absolutely need to make a move."

"So, what, you just hole yourself up in between jobs? How long do you wait for Branko to show up in between failed attempts to kill him?" I guzzle down the cold beer and place the bottle on a nearby table so I can pull on the t-shirt. "Must be a fucking boring life."

Val coughs and sputters on the carbonated water, flipping me off until she can speak again. "For your information, Branko isn't the only scumbag I track. In case you didn't realize it, Red Ladro has a laundry list of enemies who want to break what the members have built. I handle all types of threats that keep me plenty occupied. Branko just happens to be the big fish. And fuck you for your comment. I've come close to getting him lots of times."

"Close only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades." I smirk. "And I have personal experience with the hand grenades."

"I don't know." She walks toward me, fire in her blue eyes. "I'd like to test out the hand grenade theory. Fuck close. I can be spot-on. And you're coming really close to it."

"I bet you're a real firecracker when you're off duty." I brush my fingers over the top of her head, tracing them over the shell of her ear. "Too bad you're a workaholic."

"We could get word from Alek at any time that our membership was

approved. He has to be able to reach us.” She shivers when my fingers slide down the side of her face.

Did I mention the temperature in here is seventy-six?

Why, I have no fucking idea. It shouldn't feel like the sweltering desert inside, too.

“I heard him say tomorrow.”

“It could be sooner...” Her words trail off like she's out of breath.

Or self-control. I'm really hoping for the latter.

“I told you I'm not having sex with you.” She finally finds her words and damn, they hit me in the gut like a lead brick.

I force a smile. “Relax, I don't wanna fuck you. Although, your attitude gives new meaning to the words ‘tight ass.’ Can't say I'm not curious.”

The way her eyebrows fly up at that tells me she might be, too.

And just like that, I fall a little bit harder in lust with my fake, hot wife.

But she keeps fighting what she has no clue is a losing battle against me. “You will never... we will never—” she sputters.

I place a finger over her lips. “Save your breath now, sweetheart. Because there will come a time very soon when I steal it away from you.”

CHAPTER 15

VALENTINA

This is stupid. So freaking stupid. The stale stench of smoke hits my nostrils and makes my stomach roil. My mouth twists. Seems like there are smoking areas *everywhere* in here. I crane my neck, peering through narrowed eyes at the people walking through the casino, studying them, trying to gauge whether or not they're studying *us*.

Jingling slot machines make my ears ring and my brain scramble. It's maddening, much like my fake husband and his ridiculously self-assured swagger. It's like he wants to be seen, to be compromised so he just has to unleash holy hell on whoever is waiting to pounce on us like a cat on a ball of string.

His fingers lace tight around mine. I grit my teeth as the tingles dance over my skin every time he gives my hand a squeeze. "I'm trying to get the blood flowing through your fingers. Your hands are so cold, I'd think you were dead if you weren't walking right next to me."

"How charming," I sneer. "Way to compliment your wife."

He gives me the side-eye. "I didn't say you looked like a corpse. Just felt like one."

"Again, not really winning with that observation." I let out a frustrated breath. My body is crammed into a tiny black dress that's too short and too tight to make it even remotely comfortable. I doubt I could eat a lettuce leaf and not explode out of it.

I feel like a mummy. No wonder why my hands are so cold. All circulation in my body has been cut off by this getup I'm in. My high heels dig into the patterned carpet, resisting every step farther and farther away from our makeshift safe haven upstairs.

It was always temporary, though. Like everything else.

Quinn pulls me over to a row of craps tables in the center of the casino. He positions me next to him along the wooden ledge and pulls out a stack of hundreds from his pants pocket. His gun is tucked into the waistband, covered by a black jacket.

I take a quick look around. Jesus, I look like a hooker with my long bleached-blond hair, courtesy of a wig Heaven had brought, sky-high stilettos, and heavy makeup. I'm used to the disguises. God knows I've been donning them for years since I got caught up in Alek's army.

But I'm not used to the way Quinn's hungry gaze sweeps over me every time he turns in my direction. Sometimes I look away, but the heat from his eyes sears my insides, igniting all the sparks that I've tried to fight since we met only hours earlier.

I bite down on my lower lip, scouting the crowds. I feel so freaking exposed right now. I'd say it was the dress, but there's a nagging feeling twisting my gut. Feels like a warning.

An ominous one.

And Quinn is completely oblivious. No shocker there.

My fingers itch to palm the gun in my clutch bag, just in case. Instead, I shift next to Quinn, the stiletto knife tucked into my garter, rubbing against my thighs.

I'm always prepared.

I peek over at his profile. His face relaxes into a sexy smile as lots of cheering erupts at the table for whatever the roller just threw. The dealer pushes stacks of brightly colored chips our way. It's impossible for him to be aware of his surroundings right now when he's so focused on this game. I grit my teeth, grinding them together, not even bothering to try and follow what's happening. There are lots of numbers printed on the green felt. Dice get thrown, sometimes people clap, sometimes they groan.

Beyond that, I have no idea what's happening to elicit those reactions, and I really don't give a damn. My mind races out of control, tripping back to the sinister moments on the observation deck. That man, Aisling, Heaven's comments. Why would he go after the Villani family today when he could have easily done the same any other day since they live here in Vegas?

Could there really be a link to the Sinalia Cartel and Luis Navarro?

Or is there something else I don't know, something Alek may or may not choose to let me in on since I'm clearly on a need-to-know basis.

“Cocktails?”

The voice jars me and I spin around, wide-eyed, coming face-to-face with a cocktail waitress dressed in less than me.

“No, thanks.”

“I’ll take a Yuengling,” Quinn says with a megawatt smile. The waitress blushes to the ends of her extensions and I swallow a groan.

Vapid. So freaking vapid.

She sees the sexy as hell bad-boy big spender and melts like ice in the summer sun.

So pathetic.

Fingertips trail down the side of my bare shoulder and I twist back around. Quinn holds out a pair of red dice in his hand. “Blow on them.”

My jaw hangs open and I stare up at him.

“You look horrified. I didn’t say blow *me*.” He snickers. “Jeez. It’s just for luck, newbie.”

“Oh.” I lean forward and give them a sharp blow.

He tosses them across the table. They hit one end, land, and everyone goes nuts. I look around, completely clueless about what just happened.

“Was that good?”

He grins at me and damn, in that second, I feel as vapid as the waitress I just inwardly criticized because his eyes caress me *everywhere* and...

Fuck. I like it.

Love it, maybe?

“It was perfect. Now do it again. Exactly the same way.”

So I blow again. And again. And again.

The cheering gets louder and the chip piles get higher.

“I knew you’d be my lucky charm,” he murmurs, capturing me around the waist. “First-timers always are.”

For a second, I get lost in the moment, the warmth generated by his body as I nestle into his side, drawn to his energy like a moth to a lit candle. My head is thick with lust I know I can never act on, the temptation hanging over me like a guillotine blade.

I know exactly what happens when it slams down, too.

I’d be finished, along with everything else.

I take a sip of the water the cocktail waitress just handed me and scan the casino again. A group of girls decked out in black with brightly colored feather boas hanging around their necks catches my eye. A petite blonde all

in white, including a long white veil that cascades down her back, stands in the middle of the group, a big, bright smile on her face. She's not holding a glass, though.

She's got a bottle of water in her hand.

Interesting since she must be the bride-to-be in that bachelorette party.

They laugh and dance, clinking glasses every chance they get.

"What are you looking at?" Quinn says, shaking the dice in his hand before he holds them out for me to blow on.

"A bachelorette party. They look really cute, all decked out like that." I can't hide the trace of wistfulness in my voice. At the age of twenty-two, I've already been a bride in not one, but two sham weddings.

And there's not a single girl, other than Kat and my sister Tori, whom I'd have had in either bridal party.

Friends are a luxury I don't have. And after Charly, I didn't bother to make any more. Trust is major factor in a friendship, and I just don't have any more to spare.

"Maybe for your next wedding."

Cue the record-scratch sound effect.

My hair whips my cheek when I twist toward him.

He shrugs. "What, like this is really gonna be forever? Besides, it's what you want anyway. Once we're done, we're done."

Words catch in my throat because he's right.

It really isn't forever.

It's just one more sham, one more cover, one more job to do.

The biggest one.

And I just complained to Alek that I wanted out of this stupid bullshit marriage, so why does it feel like a knife is stabbing my heart when Quinn says it?

My eyes narrow as he turns back to the table.

I don't know. But I definitely don't like it.

I tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear, my gaze latching back on to the girls in the bachelorette party. More specifically, the bride.

A group of guys has wormed their way into the girls' circle, and one is hovering very close to the bride-to-be. The water is no longer in her hand and she's swaying left and right, teetering in her high heels. Her expression is vacant, her eyes fluttery. The others in the group seem oblivious to her, or they're just completely plastered and zoned out.

A tall brunette guy snakes an arm around the bride's waist. She collapses against him. He walks away from the girls and his friends, holding the bride tight.

My throat tightens. I want to scream but my mouth isn't getting the signal from my brain. The guy practically has the bride in his arms at this point and finally, my mouth remembers how to form sounds. I shake Quinn's arm and he groans.

"Damn, I just seven'd out."

"I don't know what that means, but I have to use the ladies' room." The words tumble out, laced with angst.

Quinn furrows his brows. "Hang on, I'll come with you."

I shake my head. "No, I'll be fine. Remember? I'm always prepared."

At least, I am now.

I wasn't that night at the arena in Miami.

The night I lost Charly.

The night I failed her epically.

I can't let it happen again. I can't let something bad happen to another girl.

It isn't something I can explain to Quinn. It's just something I know I have to do.

Panic rages through me. I follow behind them, my heart pounding fast and hard. I round a corner, the ominous feeling clenching my gut.

He could be her fiancé for all I know.

Except she went from sober to damn near comatose in a hot second.

I bet he drugged her.

Pushing my way through the crowds of gamblers, I keep my eyes on their backs. And even if I wanted to call for help, there isn't any security anywhere.

What the hell? How is there no security?

I pass by a bar and a huge fight, and I suddenly get where they all are.

The guy walks faster as he carries the girl out of the casino and toward a side entrance, away from people. I passed it earlier. There's a short hallway that leads to a door around the side of the hotel, away from all the taxis, Ubers, and limos. He hooks a right and my leg muscles tense as I pick up the pace.

I can't let him leave with her...

Just before I round the corner, I nearly collide with a woman standing a

few feet away from the ladies' lounge. Her hair is dark and thick, her heavily made-up eyes staring at me in an off-putting way that tells me she's not just admiring my outfit. Her full glossed lips lift the slightest bit, and she walks toward me. My spine stiffens, her perfume clouding my air to the point of choking me. There's something so eerie about her aura. I can't put my finger on it. I peek over my shoulder at her as she slowly heads back to the casino, the red soles of her high-heeled shoes my last glimpse of her.

I give my head a quick shake at the encounter before rushing toward the hallway again.

Headlights flash outside the glass door. Two guys stand outside a dark truck. The back door swings open. The blond guy pushes through the exit and takes a wad of cash from one of the guys standing next to it.

My mouth dries up like I've just shoveled a heaping load of sand into it. I'm not thinking about anything... not security cameras or disguises... just saving that poor girl the way I couldn't save Charly.

Memories pop between my temples like bullets. All I can see is Charly being wrestled into that SUV down in Miami years ago. Her arms and legs flailing, her face etched with fear. I jog toward the door, my hand fumbling in my handbag for my gun.

"You're not going anywhere, fuckwad," I growl just before pulling out the weapon.

Then a sharp pain in my shoulder stops me dead. A choked cry escapes from my lips as I'm pulled backward against a hard wall of muscle. I wince, hairpins scraping against my scalp as a hand yanks off my blond wig and spins me around.

"You think this fucking wig is fooling anyone, bitch?"

My heart plummets into my shoes.

Oh my God. He knows exactly who I am. He fucking knows!

CHAPTER 16

QUINN

Is she fucking kidding me right now?

I palm the gun in the waistband of my pants and creep toward the darkened hallway that looks like it leads to a service exit. Shiny black balls line the corridor on the ceiling, watching everything going out and coming in.

And she thought this would be the way to fly under the radar?

Jesus Christ.

Lying to me like that, making up some bullshit excuse about having to go to the bathroom when I knew exactly where she was headed the whole time. Like she completely forgot about all of her prissy control freak lectures to me.

Quinn, you're so reckless.

Quinn, you're going to blow our covers.

Quinn, you're going to compromise our mission.

Blah, blah, fucking blah.

I dart past the bar and the pile-on that has most of security occupied. It's a typical distraction play. I've seen it used plenty of times before. Occupy security with some danger and they miss what's right under their damn noses.

Those pricks got paid to attack each other while the real bad guys make off with the innocent girl.

If I had more time, I'd jump in there and really fuck their shit up.

My shoes squeak on the shiny floor. I round the corner toward the side exit and stop short to see Val drive her fist into a guy's throat. I mean, it was so hard, I fully expected it to come out the back of his neck.

She kicks him in the side of the head when he falls to his knees, clutching

his throat.

I'm pretty sure that shot blew a hole through his voice box.

Gotta say, that was hot as fuck to watch.

For a girl so prissy, I didn't expect her to move like Black Widow.

But she doesn't wait for her assailant to fall over. She just takes off toward the door where two other guys are about to load the drugged-up bride-to-be into the back of a truck.

The door slams open and she lunges for the guy hanging on to the girl. I run out the door next, launching myself at the second guy.

He lands hard against the side of the door. I grab him by the shirt collar and slam his head into the window a few times. The girl slumps backward against the seat, half-sprawled on the leather, half-hanging out of the door.

I smack my gun across his jaw, following it up with a smash of his nose. Blood flies out of his nostril and mouth. He tries to knee me, but I lock him against the truck, my hand clenched tight around his throat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Val elbow another guy in the temple, then twist to drive a side kick into his groin. And down he fucking goes.

Sirens ring out, bright-red flashes lighting up the dark evening sky.

The truck's wheels squeal against the curb as it lurches forward, the back door still open. The bride-to-be tumbles out of the back seat, her eyes glassy and half-hooded. I reach down to snake an arm around her waist and pull her against me before she cracks her head on the pavement.

Val has her guy on the ground, her high heel jammed into his neck. "One move," she says through gritted teeth. "And I will cut your fucking jugular."

"Fuck you, bitch." His breaths are short and sharp. "Fucking cops."

Val's dress is lopsided, her natural hair a mess of pins, her face flushed a deep pink. I've never seen her look so gorgeous, not even at our wedding.

She looks up like she's seeing me for the first time. When her eyes drop to the girl next to me, her shoulders slump with what looks like relief.

Suddenly, the place is flooded with people. I have no idea where they came from, I'm so focused on Val. Cops grab the two guys we maimed.

A slew of questions follows, assaulting us from all directions.

"Why didn't you call for help?" One of the cops glares at me. "What the hell were you going to do if there were more guys out here?"

"We'd have taken them out, too." I point my thumb back at the hotel. "And to answer your other question, all of the 'help' was busy breaking up a fight in the bar. I'm sure you guys know that was just a diversion to clear the

way for other bad shit, but security didn't think twice about it."

His eyes flash fire. "I'm sure not all of the security guards were breaking up the fight."

"Maybe not, but if we'd have waited to get their slow asses out here, that girl would be gone. For-fucking-ever, because that's the game these guys play. Here one minute, sold the next."

"And excuse me for interrupting," Val says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "But do you see these guys? We got their weapons and literally knocked them on their asses. Don't you think your aggression is a little misplaced? Maybe you want to interrogate the slimy bastards who tried to kidnap this innocent girl instead?"

That's right, fucker. My fake wife just put your ass in its place.

The cop just grunts a reply.

She removes her heel, the guy under her foot bleeding out of the side of his mouth. An EMT rushes over to the girl I'm holding onto.

"She was drugged. Not sure with what."

"We'll take it from here." The EMT claps me on the shoulder. "Good work. You saved her life."

The girl's head lolls back and forth as the EMT loads her onto a gurney. He wheels her toward the ambulance, leaving me and Val standing in the center of the chaos.

"We need to go. Now." I grab her wrist and lead her around to the front of the hotel. She rushes to keep up with my pace. Once she's next to me, I slide my fingers down to lace with hers. "Keep your head down. We need to get back upstairs before anyone stops us."

She squeezes my fingers like she's trying to strangle me through the hold she has on my hand.

My lips twist.

Tell me she has the fucking nerve to be pissed off at me right now after I saved her goddamn ass out there.

We somehow make it through the casino without any interference. With all the security cameras lining the ceiling, it won't be long before those data systems cross-reference live feeds with the feeds from that hallway and pinpoint the newlywed superheroes.

Val wrenches her hand out of my grip once we're inside the elevator. "How dare you—?"

"Don't say a word," I hiss at her, trying not to move my lips.

Fireballs of rage explode through my insides.

I unlock the door to our suite and she pushes past me. Damn my eyes for dropping to her ass in that tight dress. Damn them harder for licking my lips as the muscles in her legs flex with each angry step she takes into the living room, her heels clicking against the floor.

She spins to face me, her eyes blazing. “I didn’t need any backup down there.”

“Yeah, I watched you go all Buffy the Vampire Slayer on their sorry asses. But after your whole big scene about how I’m too much of a liability to partner with, you go and completely blow the hell out of our cover. And for what? Vigilante justice, for fuck’s sake?”

“It’s your way of life, isn’t it?” she sneers. “I get stuck with you, and you get no restrictions at all. How’s that fucking just?”

“Take it up with Alek.” I kick off my shoes and unbutton my shirt. “And why the hell wouldn’t you tell me where you were going?”

“Because you were too busy playing craps to notice anything. Just like I figured.”

My eyes narrow. “Bullshit. I saw the bachelorette party. I saw the same things you did. How the hell do you think I was able to find you so fast?”

“I had to go after her.” She tears her gaze away from me and turns toward the window. Her hands run up and down the sides of her arms.

“I want to know why. What the hell was so important that you just had to go without telling me when you know exactly what we’re facing here?”

She turns tear-filled eyes back to me. “There’s a reason why I do this, why I’ve been working with Alek for so long to find Branko Ivanova.”

“Yeah, because he fucked with your family.”

“It didn’t start with that. Something happened years before that, something only a couple of people know. When I was sixteen, I was kidnapped from an arena in Miami by Branko’s organization. But it wasn’t just me who was taken. I was with someone else. Another girl.” She scrubs a hand down the front of her face. “But it wasn’t just any girl. Charly was my sister.”

Holy shit...

My pulse jumps into my throat and hammers against the side.

It was her.

All this time, I’ve felt some kind of weird connection with Val. Now I know why.

I saved her from that son of a bitch.

“And there were two guys who found us and saved me. But not Charly.”

Her voice cracks. “She didn’t make it. And I couldn’t save her. I’ve lived with the guilt for so many years, hating the fact that I had to be rescued like some pathetic damsel who couldn’t take care of herself. I was the epitome of a bratva princess. My head was in the sand about every aspect of my family’s organization. I hate that I was saved. That I had to be saved at all. And I was so terrible to the guys who found me. One of them really wanted to help, but I sent him away like a total bitch. I was devastated and disappointed in myself. I couldn’t face him or ever look him in the eye again without knowing the way he’d always see me.”

The truth dances on the tip of my tongue but I choke it back.

“Fuck. I didn’t know.”

“Not even my family knows about her. I wasn’t supposed to know about her, either. She was a half sister. My father had a relationship with a woman before meeting my mother and they had a baby. He didn’t know about her for a long time until she showed up at his office one day. She’d go and visit him after the initial meeting. One day, I happened to pop in and boom. Bombshell dropped.”

She turns away and starts to pull pins out of her hair. Strands fall to her shoulders as she tosses the metal stick things onto a table. “I knew after I lost Charly I’d never let myself be in that spot again. So, I started training with Kat. And that’s when I found out about Alek’s organization. Now I hunt the bastards who hurt girls like Charly.”

I remember everything about that night so damn clearly. I wanted to stay. Hell, I made Niall pull around the corner from the hospital just to make sure someone showed up to take her home. It was an older guy who looked a lot like her. A brother, I guessed.

I always wondered what happened to that girl. I’d have never thought in a million years I’d see her again, much less marry her.

She doesn’t want to hear that I saved her. She wanted to push that guy away because of how he made her feel—weak.

And fuck, we both know how dangerous it is to be seen as weak.

I swallow down the truth and move toward her. My fingers twitch with the urge to run through her hair. Shocks of electricity jump across my skin, tiny tingles erupting in my core. I’d been drawn to her before, but the pull now is so strong, I doubt I could fight it even if I wanted to.

Which I don't.

She twists away from the window. I step closer, my gaze latched on hers. Her eyes darken, deep blue pools glowing with heat and hunger, the same things flooding my body and mind.

She may be my fake wife, but she's still mine. And it's time I showed her just that.

"You lied to me." I grasp a loose hairpin and slide it out of her hair. "If you weren't my fake wife, I'd have to punish you for it."

"Oh, so now we have boundaries?" She pulls out the last hairpin and tosses it with the others. Her long hair flows over her shoulders, her eyes narrowing as she closes the space between us.

"Only if you want them." I capture her around the waist and hug her against me. A rush of breath expels from her lips at the sudden movement. "But I bet that pussy is dripping right now, screaming for me to smash the fuck out of said boundaries."

Her lips part, a shocked gasp escaping them. "You are such a—"

"Cocky bastard. Yeah, I know. You've said it enough times today." My hand slides over her ass. She arches her back, her warm fingertips digging into my arms. "You have two choices, Val. Tell me what you want, or take what I'm about to give you." I lean forward, breathing my next words against her ear. "And we both know it'll be the exact same thing."

CHAPTER 17

VALENTINA

Quinn slides his hands over my hips, dipping his head so that I'm forced to stare into his crystal-blue eyes. Except instead of being typically bright with mischief, they're heavy with lust and brimming with need and want.

A shudder ripples through me.

Because I feel the same things, just like he said. For some reason, he can see through me like I'm a freshly washed window.

But giving in to him, giving in to this... it puts everything at risk. I can't lose my focus. It's why I've avoided this very thing for the past few years. Letting my head and my heart get all tangled up in emotions I can't afford to have will be a colossally huge mistake. I've already caused enough damage to our mission tonight because I let my guilt consume all rational thought. Sure, I did a good thing for a stranger, but at what cost to the people who matter most to me?

I let go of his arms and slide one hand up the slope of his muscled back. It tenses under the pads of my fingertips as I move over the soft fabric of his shirt. My heart thrums as I get lost in the depths of his cobalt gaze, like I'm floating far away from everything I know and feel comfortable with. It should make me disconcerted... panicked... fearful, even.

Instead, I feel secure, like nothing can touch me or hurt me.

How freaking ironic since this devilishly gorgeous man in front of me is quite possibly the scariest person I've run into over the past years. Not because of who and what he is, but because of what he does to me.

As if operating under a trance, I move my hand higher until my fingers lose themselves in his dark hair. It's soft and thick and my God, if I'm being

honest with myself, I want so badly to tug at it while he's fucking me senseless.

"What do you want, Val?"

His breathy words jar me from my reverie. My knees buckle, the vibration of his smooth voice making my insides hum with anticipation.

What do I want?

Such a simple question with a whole host of complicated answers.

But there is only one he wants right at this second, the one I can honestly say petrifies me most.

But fear is weakness. And I'm sure as hell nothing if I'm weak.

"I want you, Quinn."

His lips lift into a seductive grin. "Yeah, you do."

And then his mouth captures mine, devouring me like I'm the last bite of sweetness his taste buds will ever enjoy. He pushes through my lips, parting them with his tongue. It tangles and tussles with my own—devious, hungry, and intense. Coiling heat explodes down my throat and into every cell, melting me from the inside out.

I wrap my arms around him as he gathers me close. Lust courses through my veins, my temples throbbing from the blood pulsing between them. I snake a leg around his waist. He loops his arm under it, driving his hips against me. With one arm, he sends everything flying off the desk and backs me against it.

He lifts me onto the edge, shoves my dress up to my waist, and pulls off my panties. "I need to taste that sweet cunt," he growls.

My breath hitches, desire pooling between my legs. I fall backward onto my hands, my palms slapping against the shiny wood. I shiver at the delicious feeling of his stubble scratching against the skin of my inner thighs. They quiver and quake at his nearness. He massages my pussy lips for half a second before my pulse rockets into my throat. Eyes squeezed shut, I grip the edge of the desk to keep from screaming when his tongue juts out and pushes into me with the kind of reckless abandon I guess I really do secretly crave.

Who knew?

I thrust into his mouth as his tongue and teeth suckle my clit. Sparks ignite deep in my core as he works tirelessly and relentlessly to drive me over the edge of the euphoric cliff I've always believed was an urban legend.

It's not.

And neither is Quinn Mulligan.

He is very fucking real. And with the kind of magic his deviant tongue can work, I can't wait to become acquainted with the mystical tool that was straining against his pants only minutes earlier.

"Give it to me, babe. Right now. Give me every fucking drop of those sweet juices."

His voice hums deviously against my sensitive flesh. My heart thrashes in my chest, thundering in my ears. He laps up every drop of desire while working my clit with his fingers. I clamp down on his tongue. It grazes my clit with each push and pull.

Stars explode in front of my eyes, flooding my mind with light and my body with heat. I move one hand from the desk to his head and fist his hair, keeping his face burrowed into me, his stubble creating such a delicious friction against my sensitive skin.

"Quinn, oh my God... oh my... *ahh!*"

Holy fuck, did he just put a finger—*there?*

Oh, yes. He did.

I clench my teeth, but they do nothing to prevent my ear-shattering scream from piercing the air. I don't know which way to thrust, forward into his mouth or backward into his hand. All I know is that the sensations coursing through me are nothing short of incredible and otherworldly.

When Quinn finally pulls away from me, I collapse backward on the desk like a deflated helium balloon. I lost track of the number of orgasms he gifted me with, all coherent thoughts incinerated to ash inside of my reeling mind.

I open my eyes and gaze up at him. Dark strands of hair fall over his eyes, which glow with deviance as they drink me in from head to toe.

"Did I break you?" He leans over me and slips the straps of my dress down my shoulders, exposing my bare breasts.

"Maybe. But are you going to be the one to put me back together?"

He slides the dress to my waist, then lifts my legs so he can pull it off completely. Tossing it to the floor, Quinn shakes his head. "No. I'm not a fixer. I only have the power to destroy, babe."

I bring myself up to my elbows and puff out my chest. His half-hooded gaze sends swarms of butterflies aflight in my belly. Flickers of lust are alive in his eyes like the brightest candles.

"Well, I don't think you did a good enough job. A few cracks here and there, but I'm still in one piece. I think you need to really finish me off."

My God, I don't know who or what possessed my mouth to say these

things. I'm not sexy or snarky or alluring. But judging by the way Quinn practically drools over me, my method of seduction seems to be working just fine.

I raise myself higher and open his belt buckle. I pull it through the loops and toss it to the floor before unbuttoning his pants and shoving them to the floor. It's like a strange vixen-like force has overtaken me and transformed me into some kind of sex kitten. I've never been so brazen with a man before. Heck, most of my limited experience is of the missionary style. I've certainly never been eaten out on a desk before.

I slide to the edge of the desk. My feet hit the floor and I shimmy down to my knees, pulling Quinn's pants along with me. His cock is long, thick, and corded. My mouth waters at the thought of feeling it inside of me, stretching me wide, driving deep. I take it in my hand and give it a few strokes before taking him into my mouth. I squeeze the base with my hand while sucking on the tip. He thrusts into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. My eyes sting with tears as he fucks my mouth. The urge to gag is strong, but I breathe through it, wanting to make him feel as good as he made me feel.

"Your mouth feels so fucking good on me," he mutters, driving his hips against my lips. He fists my hair, pulling it so hard, I yelp and almost bite down on his dick. I bring a hand around to cup his balls, stroking them with each suck, tug, and pull of my lips on his cock. His hips rock against my mouth, harder and faster until he stills and warm cum shoots down my throat without warning.

I swallow down the salty substance, so much filling my mouth that a thin stream drizzles out of the corner. I was afraid of what it might taste like, but I wanted to return the favor more.

I peek up at him, my mouth still full of his cock. He pulls out and guides me to my feet.

"Goddamn." His lips slowly lift.

"Was that good?"

His eyebrows fly upward. "Are there any signs that tell you I didn't love it?"

I drop my eyes to the grout line in the floor tile. "I'm not exactly an expert in this stuff."

"I came, you swallowed. That's fucking heaven right there."

Dropping my head backward, I smile up at him. "I like it in heaven. How long can we stay here?"

He backs me against the window. My ass slams into the cool glass, a rush of breath catching in my lungs. “We’re gonna stay all night.”

With an expression so feral it practically comes with warning signs, he crushes his lips against mine, tugging at my lower lip with his teeth. His demanding hands slide down the length of my torso and then around to my ass. He clenches me hard to the point I squeal, partially out of pleasure and partially because I can’t compute how he just morphed into this animalistic alter ego from the normally impish version of himself.

And it’s a little disturbing, quite frankly.

He attacks my mouth with the most intense voracity.

The kind that makes my entire body shudder.

The kind that makes my skin sizzle under his fingertips.

The kind that makes me so wet, so lustful, and so ready to feel him inside of me.

Quinn leans into me, dragging the head of his cock down my seam. I bite down on my lower lip to keep from begging him to just fuck me already. His taunting and teasing is driving me absolutely insane. I grind my pussy against him, wetness pooling between my legs, my body so weak at the thought of him filling me.

“Fuck me, Quinn,” I breathe. “I need you inside of me now.”

“You really are such a dirty whore, aren’t you?” He lets out a low groan and pushes inside of me with one hard thrust. “My dirty fucking whore.”

“Yes.” I gasp and clench, it burns. Oh, God, it fucking burns, but in a good way.

Such a deliciously good way.

He juts his hips, his cock stroking my walls with long, deep strokes.

“You’re so tight. Fuck, and so wet for me.” He lets out a low groan, slowly filling me and then pulling out like such a damn tease when I want him to stay buried inside of me.

I grit my teeth, clenching my muscles around him and pulling him deeper and deeper. He lifts my leg and leans it against his hip, then captures my mouth with his own. I snake my arms around him, dragging my fingernails down his back. One of his hands finds its way between my ass cheeks and he uses one finger to skim the tight ring of muscle before plunging it inside my hole.

And holy fuck, I want to scream because the pleasure coursing through me is so intense, I almost forget who I am and why I’m here.

He drives his hips into me, pounding me like a man possessed. I pant for breath. We bite and suck and writhe and moan, fucking like savages against the glass for the entire Las Vegas Strip to see.

“It’s time for you to come for me, princess.” He captures my earlobe in his teeth, breathless. “I want to feel you lose yourself all over my cock.”

Then he lifts my other leg and balances me in his arms, his cock throbbing, pressing deeper and deeper as he angles my legs. Sparks in my belly ignite, shooting out to the tips of my fingers and toes. Our bodies slap together, the scent of sex and sweat heavy in the air around us. I throw my head back, hitting it hard against the glass.

“Fuck,” I moan. “Oh my God, that feels so incredible. I’m coming. Holy fuck, I’m coming.”

A guttural roar erupts from his throat and his movements speed up. I dig my teeth into his shoulder to stifle my screams, a flash of bright-white light exploding across my eyes with the same intensity as the explosive force that shatters me from the inside out.

Quinn thrusts a couple more times before tremors rock his body and he collapses against me, his chest heaving. He leans his head forward, the stubble of his cheek grazing my sweat-pebbled skin. My eyes droop closed, his lips softly nipping at the back of my ear.

Holy hell, does he have an “off” button? Because I don’t see how I’m supposed to keep my head straight when he only knows how to make it spin like a top.

A few minutes pass before I’m able to speak, and not just because he just literally took my breath away.

He may be my fake husband, but what I’m feeling right now is very fucking real.

He awoke... feelings. Emotions. All the things I vowed I’d never let get in my way of accomplishing the goal of avenging my family.

I was fine working by myself, dammit. I had full control of my life—what I did, how I did it. And today, all of that control was slowly chiseled away by a certain gorgeous thug mafia enforcer with no filter, a smart-ass mouth, and a magical cock.

The forbidden fruit that I just had to bite into. It tasted so good, so sweet, and then bam.

A harsh reality smacked me in the face like a wet glove.

Just like the most potent drug, he was instantly addictive, poisoning my

mind and infecting my heart.

Which leaves my brain grappling with one frantic question... *Now what?*

CHAPTER 18

QUINN

The sharp chirp of a cell phone yanks me from a sound sleep. I have no clue what time it is or when I drifted off after our crazy wedding night sexcapade.

And was it ever crazy.

I thought when we passed out the first time, we'd be done. At least until morning.

But my cock was far from it, and having Val's naked body plastered against mine kept him working hard until dawn.

"Make it stop." I flip onto my stomach and bury my head under my pillow.

Val finally grabs the phone. A croaky "hello" comes out of her mouth.

A few seconds pass, and then she jumps up like someone shoved a fire poker straight up her ass.

I move the corner of the pillow to peer at her darting around the room for clothes.

Oh yeah, she's awake now.

She flips a wall switch, and the room is drenched in light. Her voice gets loud, shrill even, and I don't even need to ask who's on the other end of the line. I press my fingertips to my temples, cringing like I have the worst hangover in the world. But I can't tear my eyes away from her sinful curves by diving back under the pillow.

I'd suffer through the worst pain if it meant I could keep my eyes glued to her perfect tits and gorgeous ass. And I'd endure a hell of a lot worse if I could fuck them both anytime I wanted.

"I'll come right to your office." She pauses, a t-shirt halfway over her

head. “Wait, what do you mean, you’re coming here?”

She’s silent for a few seconds, and then she twists around to look at me. With a big show of waving her hands around, she signals me to get out of bed.

With a deep sigh, I sit up and fling the covers away from me before dragging myself off the mattress.

“Well, when will you be here?” Her eyes widen with alarm. “Can you just —”

Her hand drops from her ear and she turns a panicked look at me. “They’re coming *now*.”

I scrub a hand down the front of my face and survey the suite. It’s definitely in critical condition. The place looks like the villa in the movie *The Hangover*... *after* the big night.

Well, sans the stolen tiger. Shit got pretty crazy but I know we never left the suite once we got started. Everything came to us. Food, champagne, candles, a silk scarf. I grin and pick it up, pulling the smooth fabric between my fingers. Val yanks it out of my hands and crumples it into a ball.

“You don’t have time to reminisce,” she snaps before tearing around the room like a funnel cloud. “We’re so screwed right now.”

With a shake of my head, my eyes sweep over the broken lamp, papers strewn on the floor, empty bottles littering tables and the floor, half-eaten plates of appetizers, wedding dress and tuxedo in pieces all over the place.

“Hate to break it to ya, but there’s no way we’re gonna get this place in half-decent condition before Alek gets here.”

She laser-beams me with a glare. “We’re sure as hell going to give it a shot. Why don’t you start by getting dressed? They don’t need to see... all *that*.” She motions at my damn impressive morning wood, trying like hell to keep her eyes away from it. She fails miserably, and I don’t bother to bite back my smirk.

“Jeez, last night I had wild child Val. Now I have Little Miss Priss with the pole up her ass again.” I rake a hand through my hair. “When do I get my little sex goddess back? Does she only come out at night? I can wait.”

An exasperated sound comes out of Val’s mouth as she sails past me with an armful of plates. “Are you always this useless?”

“Only in the morning.”

She storms back to the bedroom and a drawer opens and closes. She comes back with a t-shirt and shorts and hurls them at me like she’s throwing

a spiral into the end zone at the Super Bowl.

“They can’t know we were together last night. Now put those on... fast. I don’t know how much time we have before—”

That’s exactly when the knock comes. I shit you not.

Alek must have some sixth sense about him, sick bastard that he is.

All the color drains from Val’s face.

I didn’t hear what he said to her on the phone, and she didn’t have time to clue me in. But based on her stricken expression, I don’t think it was a congrats on your first-day-of-being-bullshit-married kind of greeting.

“This is not going to be good,” she hisses before jogging over to the door, unhooking the chain latch and twisting the deadbolt.

No kidding.

Like I didn’t see that coming a mile away.

I collapse onto the couch, my hands dropping to my sides. I glance down at Val’s lacy black panties, ball them up, and shove them into my pocket when I hear Alek’s deep, menacing tone. He barges into the living room, his blue eyes focused on me. He doesn’t acknowledge the mess, the candles, or the excess of booze consumed. He just keeps his murderous eyes pinned to me.

Boris Vetrov is behind him. He’s one of Patrick’s business partners in New York. Brutal and ruthless, the perfect kind of pairing for my brother.

“Whose fucking idea was it to leave this suite last night?” Alek growls. He fires off a look at Val, then turns back to me.

“How’d you even know we left? Aren’t you being a little presumptuous, coming in here and accusing us of doing something without really even knowing?” I spring up from the couch, nowhere close to the huge Russian’s seven-foot-tall frame. Folding my arms over my chest, I take a few steps toward him. Alek is a master of intimidation and there’s no way I’ll cower to him, no matter what he’s been rumored to do with the Zippo lighter he keeps on him at all times.

I heard he seared off a guy’s hand tattoo once. Fucking psychopath.

Boris speaks to Val under his breath. I grit my teeth when Val shakes her head and covers her face with her hand as he murmurs something to her.

“You forget, Mulligan. I have eyes and ears everywhere. I see everything.” Alek’s jaw twitches. “And I know everything.”

“Okay, then you already know that I’m the one who made Val go down to the casino last night. Right? The short fuse, loose cannon that always causes

shitstorms everywhere he goes?” I point a thumb at my chest. “All me.”

“So then can I logically deduce that it was also you who decided to go fucking rogue vigilante on a group of low-level soldiers for a sex trafficking cell operating here in Vegas?”

“Ahhh... yeah.” I put my hands up. “Guilty.”

“No, you’re not.” Val sighs and walks into the room. “Even though out of the two of us, Quinn’s the one most likely to start a shitstorm, he’s actually trying to protect me. Going after those guys was my idea.”

I furrow my brows. “Wait. How do you even know about that? Us not being here I get. You could’ve called or—”

He glowers at me. “Or watched the security feeds I had installed once Heaven checked into the room,” he growls.

Val’s eyes widen, her face horror-stricken.

“Well, I’m sure you caught quite a show at the after-party, then.” I can’t help the smirk from tugging at my lips.

Alek doesn’t look even remotely amused. In fact, he looks like a guy who’s damn close to stabbing me with the butter knife lying on the kitchen island.

“So, you saw that we weren’t here. But that doesn’t explain how you know that we were trying to save an innocent girl from being taken.” Val quirks an eyebrow. “And I’ll repeat that in case you didn’t hear me the first time. We saved an innocent girl from being kidnapped from her own bachelorette party. Saved her life, the life she’s about to start with her significant other. If you’re waiting for me to beg your forgiveness for using bad judgment, forget it. We did the right thing.”

Boris lets out a deep sigh and his shoulders slouch lower than they were a minute ago. “You did a good thing, but at what expense? Take a look at this.” He holds out a phone and clicks something on the screen.

I walk over, wondering if Alek is trying to kill me with his mind as I pass him.

Although, if he wanted me dead, he’d just tear my head from my neck. Why waste the brain power?

“What’ve you got?” I squint at the screen over Val’s shoulder at the dark images. “Oh shit, it’s us.”

“How did you even get this?” she gasps.

“It’s all over the Internet. Heaven registered this honeymoon suite under Liam McDermott.” He storms over and grabs the phone, stabbing the screen

with his big finger. “So now the biggest story in Vegas is Boy and Girl Wonder swooping in to save the bride-to-be. You’re fucking heroes.”

“Why do you make that sound like such a bad thing? We did good. You should be proud.”

Boris looks at me like I have a dick growing out of my forehead. “Proud, Quinn? For exposing yourselves under your fake married name and allowing our enemies to use facial recognition software to uncover your real identities and expose that you aren’t the newly married McDermotts?”

“Oh my God,” Val mutters. I lace my fingers with hers and squeeze. Shockingly, she doesn’t pull away.

Maybe it’s because she knows as well as I do that we just completely fucked our mission.

“That’s right, Val. I can finally see the light toggling on in your brain,” Alek sneers. “Mr. and Mrs. Liam McDermott, the honeymooners who are trying to get access to Luis Navarro’s lair as willing players in the sex trade, are now famous for trying to crush it. So congratu-fucking-lations. You’ve effectively killed our last chance to find Branko Ivanova.”

His fierce eyes narrow at us both. “Once he figures out who you both really are and what we were trying to do, don’t think he won’t send a message back in response. And I guarantee that *both* of your families will be the recipients.”

CHAPTER 19

VALENTINA

“Mulligan,” Alek snaps, pointing to the balcony. “Get out.”
Oddly enough, Quinn doesn’t argue. His lips stretch into a tight line and his gaze locks on mine for a hot second before he pulls open the sliding glass door, walks out to the balcony, and drops into a chaise lounge with his phone.

He never ceases to amaze me. I figured he’d put up a fight, being left out of the conversation that could lead us to a potentially life-threatening situation. But I guess he sensed that Alek has zero patience with either of us right now and it’s not worth the argument.

I dissect that look he shot me before he left the room... it gave me the same sense of peace I had last night... and any other time he’s near.

I shake it off like it’s an annoying gnat that won’t fly off my arm.

Quinn has the power to turn me back into that naïve little girl at the stadium who needed to be rescued because she had no idea what she was up against or how to battle it.

I can’t revert back to *her* again.

I won’t.

She was weak.

And dammit, he *makes* me weak.

So I need to fight my attraction to him with everything in me. No matter how loud my heart or body screams.

Alek whips his head back in my direction. “Do you know how much damage you did with that leaked footage?”

My spine tenses. I obviously didn’t realize it at the time, but the knot in the pit of my stomach is an all-too-painful reminder of what can happen when

I overlook consequences. “I wasn’t paying attention to the cameras. I was only focused on the girl and what was about to happen to her. It was stupid, but I’m not sorry for saving her. If you’re waiting for an apology, don’t, because there isn’t one.”

“You need to accept responsibility for fucking up our shot to get Branko. This is out there for the whole fucking world to see. How long do you think it’ll take before our enemies cross-reference your fake names to their facial recognition results and figure out who you really are?”

I tug at the ends of my hair, but I don’t avert my gaze. “I messed up the plan. Quinn only came after me to make sure I was okay.”

“No shock he missed what was happening right in front of him.” Alek rolls his eyes.

“No, you’re wrong. He knew exactly what was happening. He came after me because he was concerned for my safety.”

“You were trained to think clearly and anticipate danger. Every action you took last night went against what you were taught. It was reckless and stupid of you to behave that way. Expected of Quinn, but not you.”

I rub my toes against the floor, tracing the grout line in between the tiles. “I did what I had to do. I saved that girl’s life.”

Alek’s eyes flash with anger. “Yeah, sure, and now everyone thinks you’re a hero, but what about the plan? You’ve never gone off on your own like that and sacrificed our objectives. You exposed all of us—all of Red Ladro—by pulling that stunt.” He leans in close. “She was one girl. How many others’ lives did you gamble with because you just had to step in last night?”

My jaw parts. “Oh, so if someone kidnapped Ava, for example, you’d be okay with letting her go to save the masses?”

His jaw twitches. “You know the answer to that.”

“Okay, so because she’s your daughter, we should save her. But strangers we shouldn’t care about.” I throw my hands into the air and pace in front of the couch, careful to avoid the shards of glass housekeeping didn’t get a chance to vacuum up from my tirade yesterday afternoon.

“Val, you know it’s more complicated than that.” Boris’s voice is strained and tired when he finally speaks. My brow furrows at the deep lines etched into his worn face. His eyes are heavy, the bags under them stained a faint shade of purple. He doesn’t look like he’s been in retirement and out of the game, but then again, who ever really retires from bratva life? You either go

out in a coffin or... um...

Yeah. A coffin.

“You got sidetracked because of your unresolved guilt about Charly and it impaired your judgment. Now we’re stuck with a plan that will definitely fail because you blew your cover.” Alek runs a hand through his hair and walks over to the minibar. He grabs a glass, twists off the top of a bottle of vodka, and pours himself a double.

No ice. He’s hardcore like that.

He tilts his head back and drains the liquid from the glass. When he turns back to look at me, I see disappointment in his hardened gaze. There’s anger for sure, but it’s the disappointment that shines through, like a thin stream of sunlight peeking through a deep gray cloud.

You can’t miss it or shield your eyes from it.

“Take it from me,” Boris says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “That guilt will never be erased, no matter what you do. Things might make you feel better for a short while, but in the long run? Nothing can change the past or erase it. And the guilt will eat you alive if you let it.”

I take a deep breath. “Alek, I will figure this out. Please give me another chance. There must be some way to get inside—”

“We had a way.” His tone is flat. “And now we don’t.”

“I can fix this. Stop being so damn stubborn and just agree that we can work through it.”

“Why should I?” He takes another drink, the silence in the room rattling my eardrums. “You’ve betrayed my trust, Valentina. You really shocked me with this one. I never in a million years would have thought you’d have jeopardized this plan.”

Alek nods his head toward the balcony. I glance at Quinn, his long, muscular body sprawled over the lounge chair, his head bent over his phone. His fingers work the screen, his dark hair hanging over the sides of his stubbled face. A shiver slithers over my skin as I reminisce about how delicious the scrape of his scruff felt against my most sensitive areas... how delicious every bit of him felt in my mouth, in my hand, in my pussy.

My belly does a weird flippy thing while I watch him out there, the same weird flippy thing it’s done every time Quinn looks at me, smiles at me, makes a sarcastic comment... pretty much anything Quinn-related.

I clench my fists, pressing them tight to my sides.

God help me.

Alek walks back over to us and snaps his fingers in front of my face, jolting me from the fantasy highlight reel looping through my mind. “Quinn Mulligan is expendable.” His tight voice drops. “You are not. So anything involving only you at this point is too risky to execute.”

My chest tightens. “Wait, so you included him in this plan knowing that he might—?”

Alek holds up a hand, not waiting for me to finish my thought. “Don’t turn me into the villain here. He made his own bed when he went up against El Azul like a fucking moron. The pieces fell into place when we figured out the connection to Luis Navarro. I chose Quinn because I knew he could play his part. He didn’t need to be a mastermind, just someone along for the ride, someone to give you entry to the place where Branko is hiding.”

His lips twist and he glares at Quinn through the sliding glass door. “Patrick sent him out here knowing full well that his time was limited. He got him out of the city to prolong his life, but we all know that the cartel will eventually find him. In the meantime, why not use him?”

My jaw is on the floor right now. “Do you even realize how cold that sounds? Are you seriously that ruthless?”

Alek lifts an eyebrow. “You’ve known me for years. I’ll assume that was a rhetorical question.”

Blood bubbles in my chest. “And you claim Patrick knows about what we had planned, how Quinn might become collateral damage in the process. Is that even true? Or is that your perception of the situation? I’ll bet Heaven would never have agreed to using him under those circumstances.”

“I gave him an out,” Alek growls. “I made the offer and Patrick took it.”

“Yeah, Patrick. But what about Quinn?”

“Oh, so now that you’re so close, you give a shit about what happens to your fake husband?” Alek leans closer, sparks of ire shooting from his eyes. “I don’t give a fuck about Quinn. I give a fuck about saving Red Ladro and finding Branko Ivanova.”

Boris clears his throat. “I think we need to take some time, Alek. Let’s work through our contacts and see what we might be able to come up with.” His lips lift in a faint smile. “We will fix this, Valentina.”

I brush my fingers against his arm and return the smile, although my lips fight it. I don’t feel like I have anything to smile about or any shred of hope to cling to.

I may have used poor judgment, but then again, didn’t the guys who

saved me from that sex den in Miami do the same thing? What if they'd seen me struggling against those men in the parking garage at the arena and turned the other cheek?

They could have left and ignored the scene they witnessed.

I could have been killed.

Instead, they chose to run into the line of fire, not knowing what to expect once they got to me. The same thing I did last night with that girl. In some strange way, I guess I was paying it forward.

But now who's stuck with that debt?

I grit my teeth. "I'm not your pawn, Alek. I came to you because I want justice. And I will get it, with or without you."

He lets out a sharp laugh. "Good luck with that, especially if you're counting on Mulligan to help. The only one who seems to believe he's untouchable is him. If you really want to find Branko, you're going to have a damn hard time of it now with that noose of a guy wrapped around your neck." He leans in close. "So who are you going to trust—me or your fake husband?"

CHAPTER 20

QUINN

A day later, Val runs around the suite like a caged rat, piling dishes and glasses onto room service trays. She bounces from one end of the place to another, her hair pulled into a loose ponytail. I sit on the couch and flip through channels on the television.

She still hasn't let me in on what the hell happened when Sev read her the riot act yesterday. I didn't bother to watch. I'm not stupid. He thinks I'm a liability. I already know that from Patty, who didn't lose an opportunity to tell me how lucky I was that Sev agreed to use me for his mission.

It's pretty much a guarantee that I won't see my brother again. Sev threw me a lifeline, but if push comes to shove, he'll yank it away and let me drown. Going after El Azul alone wasn't my best idea, but I did what I thought was best for our organization and neighborhood. Patty doesn't agree. And if he and Massimo don't make any moves to stop him, the cartel will take everything.

Maybe what I did was stupid, but I hope this mission to find Branko and hunt their cartel associates will clear the path for us back in New York.

Even if I don't make it back to witness the victory.

"They have people to do that, you know." I stop when a scene from *Casino* appears on the large flat-screen television. It's the one where the guy's head is being squeezed through a vise.

"Oh, shit," I say, laughing when his eyeballs pop out of his skull.

Val narrows her eyes at the screen and then shakes her head at me. "Are you serious right now?"

"What? You got a weak stomach or something?" I turn away from the movie and waggle my eyebrows at her.

She tosses a rag onto the kitchen counter and slowly walks toward me. “I’m not joking. Is there one serious bone in your body?”

“No. Only funny bones.”

Val leans close, her blue eyes a mess of anger and frustration. “Do you want me to break them all?”

“Only if there’s a lot of rough sex involved.”

Our foreheads nearly touch. Her lips pull tight, nostrils flared. She’s clearly not amused with my response.

“That will *never* happen again.”

Her lips move slowly, seductively. I don’t really pay much attention to the words, though. She’s obviously never come across a guy like me. I wore her down once, and after that taste, there’s no way she’ll be able to resist me again.

“What the hell was so wrong about what we did? Does Alek have a hard-on for you or something?” I snicker. “Is that why he hates me so much?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. The reason he hates you is because you throw everything he’s so careful to protect into absolute upheaval.”

“Maybe if he didn’t have such a huge stick up his ass, he’d see I bring skills to the table that he might not have in his crew.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “I doubt that since you’re comparing yourself to *me*.”

“Ooh. Someone’s confident. But I haven’t seen you in action yet, so I’m not convinced you should be.”

Our lips are so close I can taste them.

“Trust me. I’m confident for many reasons.”

Her breath warms my skin. My cock tingles, aware of her nearness. I lean back against the cushion. “You’re gonna have to prove it to me or else I’ll just keep believing that you’re all talk and no action.”

Val pulls away, her eyes wide with shock. I don’t bother to hold back my chuckle.

“You might be damn deadly, babe, but you obviously don’t know how to handle a weapon like me.”

“You’re a dud grenade,” she snaps. “You make all hell break loose for absolutely no reason.” Then she turns and continues scurrying around, cleaning the same spots over again.

“Ouch.” I hold a hand to my heart. “You know what I think?”

“Don’t really care.”

“Sure, you do. And I think you and I need to get the hell out of here for a little while. This suite is making us both a little stir-crazy. We need some fresh air.”

Her eyes widen to the point where they look like they’re about to pop out of her skull, just like the poor sucker in *Casino*. Except in this scenario, *I’m* the wise.

“Do you remember what happened last time we left the suite? Another one of your fabulous ideas, by the way.”

“My idea only included hitting the craps tables, not blowing our cover.” I flash a smile. “If memory serves, you’re really responsible for that total fuckup.”

She balls up a white linen napkin and hurls it at me. “Screw you, Quinn. Before you rolled into town, I was so close to tracking Branko down. Now I’m stuck in a fucking ivory tower, and the moat below is filled with goddamn snapping crocodiles.”

“Nice imagery. But let’s be honest. You were about a million miles from close.”

She flips me off. “You know nothing.”

I stand up from the couch. “I know that my time is limited and that I don’t want to waste what I have left sitting in this fucking room. So take a walk with me or get undressed so I can fuck you. I need a release, one way or the other.”

Her jaw drops somewhere during the minute it takes me to get all that out. I knew she’d never go for the sex, but I’m a hot-blooded male. Can you blame me for making it an option?

She stares at me like she doesn’t quite know how to respond. But it doesn’t look like sex is in the cards, so I make it easy on her.

“Look, we have private access to the roof from here. Nobody will see us. Nobody else is even staying on this floor.”

“You want to go up to the roof?”

I motion toward the dusky sky behind me. “We’ll have a great view of the Strip.”

“We have a great view from in here. Inside, where we’re safe.”

Stepping toward her, I give my head a shake. “Not really. Safe is relative. My sister-in-law Kyla thought she was ‘safe’ in a hotel room until some fucking goon dressed as a waiter delivered room service and kidnapped her from the place. So don’t let the locks give you a false sense of security. It’s

bullshit. If someone wants to get to us, they will.” I move closer. “We just need to be prepared.”

Her eyes lock on mine, and even though she wants to resist, I can sense that she’s torn. That she needs an out, too. Even if it’s only a staircase away.

Her shoulders finally relax. “Okay, but not for long. Just to get a little air.”

I grab my gun and stick it into the back of my shorts. Val does the same, then slides her feet into a pair of flip-flops. I put on sneakers, grab the key, and pull open the door.

“Look both ways,” she mutters under her breath.

“I’m not a fucking amateur.” The hallway is clear, as expected. I grab her hand and pull her toward the stairwell leading up to the roof. She squeezes my fingers and stays tight against me. I push open the door, and she suddenly tugs on my hand.

“Wait, how will we get back out? Won’t it automatically lock?”

“Let’s test it.”

She stands in the hallway and lets the door close. I twist the handle to open it again. “We’re good. Let’s go.”

We jog up the short staircase that opens to the roof of The STRAT. It’s a secluded corner tucked away around the back of the hotel. Val takes a few steps forward, stretches her arms in the air, and takes in a large gulp of air.

God, her ass looks so good in those short shorts. The cheeks peek out from under the fringe of denim, and I just want to drop to my knees and bite them.

Like she can sense my eyes on her, she turns to face me, a smile lifting her lips. “This was a pretty good idea.”

I shrug. “I have them sometimes.”

“We’ll see if this is a one-and-done kind of thing.” Then she winks at me.

Shit, she does have a sense of humor after all.

“How’d you get yourself wrapped up in this whole quest for Branko Ivanova?” I lower myself onto a whitewashed ledge surrounding what looks like a generator. “Why’d Alek pick you?”

Val stares past me at the lit-up desert below, a faraway look in her eyes. “After Charly and I were taken... after I was rescued... I told my dad I never wanted to be in that position again. So I trained with him first and then with Katarina. Boris had connections to Alek and his family, so he hooked me up.”

“Yep, she’s brutal. Her reputation precedes her.”

Val’s face relaxes into a smile. “The most brutal. Anyway, a few years passed, and all the while, Dad had been trying to track down the people who killed Charly and targeted us. Turns out it was a member of this secret society, Brotherhood 7. And Branko had turned the members against my dad. They weren’t always enemies, but Branko wasn’t happy with the direction the Brotherhood was taking, so he decided to destroy my father and brother Dima who was next in line.”

“Betrayal.” I nod. “Had my fair share of that. So these guys... they’re the ones who killed your father and brother?”

“Yes. And my mother, years later. They also almost killed Luka, who’s now the boss.” Val twists her ponytail around her finger. “It’s like he won’t stop until he gets us all. Or until I get *him*.”

“You said you came close. How?”

“Dad knew one of the guys in the Brotherhood was working against him. He always suspected something was happening behind the scenes but couldn’t prove it before he was killed. A lot of what we know is stuff we’ve put together from what we’ve heard or found.” Val lets out a deep sigh and sits down next to me. “He needed someone on the inside. I volunteered because nobody else in my family knew about Charly or why we were hunting Branko. Dad suspected it was him behind our kidnapping. He arranged for me to marry the son of this guy Stepanov just so I could spy and find out the truth.”

“Shit, so you’ve already been married?”

“No, it never got that far.” Her face clouds over, her forehead pinched with pain. “That was the night Dad and Dima were gunned down. At my freaking almost wedding to that sadistic asshole Dmitri Stepanov. That’s when Alek pulled me. He got me out of the venue when my family was under attack. That was five years ago. I haven’t been home since. I’ve been tracking enemies of my family and of Red Ladro.”

Red Ladro is the one link we have in common, how we all are tethered to one another. It’s the crime syndicate our families are part of. There are seven families in total, and Alek is the senior member who governs all of the activities. We all invest in businesses and work to protect our collective interests.

Val’s lips twist. “And as a member of Red Ladro, you get why Alek is so pissed at you, right?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Yeah, yeah. I did something that’s gonna blow back on the group. I get it. I fucked up.”

“Being out here is your penance.”

“Is it yours?” I ask, my brows knitted together.

“After everything my family has dealt with, now this will blow onto them, too. I was supposed to stop it years ago and I didn’t. Denis Stepanov is still out there, still biding his time before the next attack is launched against us.” She looks up at me. “My penance is self-imposed. I gave up my freedom to hunt this guy because of what I let him do to my family.”

I lean toward her and graze the side of her cheek with my fingertips. “Never be sorry for what you did. You saved that girl the other night. She was steps away from losing her life forever.”

“Alek was right. I let my guilt guide my decision. It was stupid.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“In this life, you need to be.” A flicker of sadness glimmers in her eyes as the dusky sky deepens. “And I still haven’t been able to make up for it.”

“You tried. Hell, you were gonna get married to make things right.”

“Yeah. Have you ever been arranged to marry someone?”

I let out a snort. “I’m not exactly the marrying type. Sometimes I think my brother Patty would rather keep me locked away than put me in charge of something as important as a family union.”

“Technically, isn’t that what you’re doing now?”

I rub the back of my neck. “I don’t know. I’m just playing a part. Once my part’s done, I’m out.”

She recoils. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Val. There’s no happy ever after for me. The cartel will find me. They always do.”

“Yeah, unless we get to them first. Why do you sound so defeatist?”

“Because I know the deal. Alek doesn’t want me in the way. I came out here to get the heat off my brother back in New York. Figured if they knew I took off, they’d come looking for me and leave Patty and his family alone.”

“El Azul is pretty unforgiving.”

“Yeah. I probably shouldn’t have sliced his throat in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Probably not.” Val places her hand over my fingers that are still caressing her face. A charge zaps my insides like an electric pinball at her touch. “What made you become such a rebel, anyway?”

I drop my hand because this topic just watered down the sparks of lust ready to flare up in my groin. Raking my hands through my hair, I stand up from the ledge and pace in front of it. “My family life became pretty fucked up after my mom died. It was a mess of betrayal. I had two brothers who were so power hungry they just took everything down around us. Dad and Heaven became estranged because he fucked her over and forced her to marry Matteo. He ended up promoting my oldest brother Conor to boss when it should have been Heaven all along. Then a few years later, Dad died of a heart attack after screwing over my brother, Patrick. Conor and my other brother Niall were fucking traitors and got themselves killed. If I’m being honest, I think I escaped pretty cleanly. But I guess I just decided to march to the beat of my own drum after all that.”

Out of the corner of my eye, the door we used to get onto the roof moves the slightest bit. I narrow my eyes, but the only real light comes from the Strip below.

Val blinks fast, like she’s trying to make sense of something. “Wait, did you just say your brother—?”

With one swift push, the door opens, slamming against the side of the building. Three guys dressed in black rush through, guns pointed straight at us.

“Val, get down,” I yell, reaching behind me.

She turns a blank look at the door, then dives to the ground near my feet, her hand on her gun. Shots fire, bullets exploding into the otherwise silent air. I squeeze off a couple of shots.

“Stay here,” I grunt before leaping over the ledge and rushing the guys.

I fire shot after shot. One guy goes down. I clip another one in the shoulder.

Just as I’m about to pull the trigger again, a searing pain erupts in my side. It shoots down the length of my torso, paralyzing me on the spot. I crash into the wall, crumpling to the ground. My head cracks against the concrete. I squint at the man leaning over me, his eyes dark as death.

“Any last words, Mulligan?” he growls, holding the gun against my forehead.

“Yeah, fuck you. Pass it on.”

The final crack of the bullet leaving his gun is the last thing I hear before my eyes droop closed.

CHAPTER 21

VALENTINA

Holy fuck. He's going to kill Quinn...

I stretch out on the ground behind the ledge, clench my teeth, and pull the trigger, just beating the guy by a hair of a second. The assailant's hand explodes into pieces, his gun shooting up to the night sky before he stumbles backward into a concrete wall with his bloody stump hanging next to him.

A lump knots in my throat, blocking all of the things I want to scream out right now. Before the guy falls into the wall, I fire a few more shots until his head looks like his hand. Scrambling to my feet, I run for the third guy. He tears around a corner, jumping over pipes along the ground. I run after him, my calf muscles tensing and tightening with every leap in this goddamn obstacle course.

He ducks and darts around every shot, turning every few seconds to pop off a shot at me. There's a door in the distance. If he gets out, we won't know who the hell leaked our location. Reality pummels me. Whoever went after Aisling might have done it as a distraction to lure us out... or more specifically, Quinn.

Fuck, it really is his family that's under fire.

They know we're here. Hell, they probably tracked us to the honeymoon suite, just waiting to make their move.

My face twists into a grimace. He's at the door now. Bullets explode from the barrel of my gun. Metal casings fly back at me, searing my exposed skin. I fire until my magazine is empty and then lunge for the motherfucker before he can pull open the door.

Please be locked... please be locked...

But it's not. And he escapes after shooting at me a couple of more times. I dodge the bullets around another concrete column. My screams shatter the still air. I hurl my gun against the wall with a deafening roar that erupts out of my chest with such force it makes me hoarse.

My breaths are ragged, shuddering my chest. I turn, a shock of devastation quaking my insides. Quinn's leg hangs over one of the pipes in the shadows. I run back and fall to my knees next to him. I run my fingers down over his side, the tips warm and sticky. I pull his t-shirt up to examine the wound when he makes a faint mumbling sound.

"Quinn," I rasp, cupping his chin with my other hand. "Thank God."

His eyes flutter, unfocused. "V-val..." he croaks. "Y-you did good, babe."

"Don't talk. Save your energy. I need to get you to a doctor." Tears sting my eyes, an icy hand grasping my heart.

"M-make sure you f-find those fuckers." He gurgles a little bit.

Alarm grips me by the throat. "Stop talking like that. You're going to be right next to me when I do."

"N-no," he mumbles. "Y-you have to g-get them. I need to sleep..."

His eyes float closed. I smack his cheeks, my stomach roiling.

"Quinn," I scream. "Wake up, please wake up."

His eyes pop open, a devious grin stretching across his face.

I gasp and sit back on my heels. "You son of a bitch."

He chuckles. "See, that's how I know you like me."

"I fucking hate you!"

"Hate that you like me." He brings a hand to the side of his head. "I must've gotten knocked out when my head hit this fucking pipe. Last thing I remember is that bastard hanging over me with a gun to my head."

I drop to a seated position on the ground, my shoulders slumped. Then I give him a swat on his good side. "Don't ever do that again, asshole."

"Then don't try to lie and think you'll get away with it." His blue eyes glitter with mischief and damn my belly for flipping like an acrobat under his heated stare.

"If I'd have known you were going to give me a heart attack like that, I might've let that guy blow your head off," I growl.

"I doubt that." He slowly raises himself off the ground and checks out his gunshot wound. "Doesn't look horrible. I've had worse."

My eyes trace over the tattoo ink snaking the length of his lean, muscular torso. Yes, he has plenty of battle scars in various places. I saw them up close and personal on our wedding night. But you never know when you'll be clipped with the one that'll do serious damage... or worse, kill you.

Quinn slowly turns his head toward the guys lying a few feet away. He lets out a low whistle. "Damn, you blew him away."

"You got one, too." I scrub a hand down my face. "But the last one got away. There was an unlocked door. He only made it inside because I ran out of bullets."

I stagger to my feet and walk over to the guy I plugged. I fish around in his jacket and pants. My fingers finally find a cell phone. I pull it out, hold it up to his face, and let out a groan.

His face can't be recognized because of my handiwork with the gun. And I don't have a damn passcode to bypass it.

Maybe there's a wallet with ID in it. If we can find a name, Alek can get his data guys to do some kind of tracking, cross-referencing, something, anything to figure out who orchestrated this attack.

I fumble in his pants pockets, then tug at his jacket when a choked gasp rocks my chest. I tentatively move the shirt opening to get a better view.

A four-pronged pitchfork pointed straight down. Honor to the Devil, staking his claim in Hell.

My teeth chatter. I've seen that image in my nightmares so many times over the past years, but this is the first time I've seen it branded on anyone's skin since that night at the arena.

"You find something?" Quinn slowly drags himself over to me.

"The tattoo." I point to it. "I saw that same tattoo on one of the guys who attacked me that night in Miami."

"What does it mean?"

I slowly turn my head toward him. "It's Branko. It has to be."

"Like some symbol for his organization?"

"My dad found out the men who snatched me and Charly were part of Branko's crew. They all have symbolic markings. After I saw the pitchfork, I did some research. It haunted me for so long until I was able to make sense of it. Four is a perfect number. It has a lot of symbolism, but the thing that always struck me the most is that in the Tarot, the number four is the card of the Emperor, who represents material goods and worldly authority. Whoever holds the Emperor's card can control everything and everyone around him or

her.”

“Except he’s really the serpent.” Quinn lets out a deep sigh, then winces. He holds a hand to his side. “And closing in fast if these schmucks work for him. By the way, I’d like to not bleed out on this roof.”

I shake my head. “Since I haven’t seen this tattoo in so long, maybe I haven’t been as close to Branko as I thought. I’ve been deluding myself.”

“I guarantee you’re gonna get real close real soon if we don’t get the hell out of here now. And I’m not just talking about getting off the roof. I’m talking about getting the fuck out of Vegas.”

My throat tightens. Getting out of Vegas means we need to get out of the hotel first. “He could have guys staked out at every entrance and exit. We’re not safe here. But they know we haven’t left. We can’t go to the Montepremi or the Xcelsior. If someone is tracking us by your fake name, we’re fucked. Everyone wants identification at check-in. They scan that shit and cross-reference it.”

“Babe, I’m starting to feel a little dizzy, and you’re making my head spin way too fast.” Quinn struggles to drag himself off the ground. “Before it pops off my neck, let’s call Sev. Maybe he can get us out of here.”

I gasp. “The safehouse. Alek had it built years ago. It’s on the edge of the city. If we can make it there, it’s completely armored. I have the codes to get inside.”

“Great, now we just need to slip out the front door of the hotel, hop in a cab, and zip over there. Before I pass out from blood loss.”

A sudden jolt makes my pulse jab at the side of my throat. I choke on a gasp and clutch the sides of my hair, the panicked realization smacking me across the face like a cement glove.

I stared at that pitchfork tattoo, gave Quinn a whole earful about the symbolism, and never made the damn connection.

Quinn, Heaven, Aisling, and Matteo aren’t the targets. They never were.

I am.

CHAPTER 22

QUINN

“I can’t call Alek. If we go back to the suite for our phones, who knows what will be waiting for us there? The guy who got away might be there now.” Val tugs at her ponytail, something she seems to do a lot when her ideas dry up like the fucking Mojave.

We took a gamble and walked around until we found an entirely different set of service stairs. Well, *she* walked. I hobbled against her. Without phones, we have no ability to call for help or an Uber. And looking down at my bloody side, I don’t know how the hell anyone’s gonna let me slide into a cab and bleed all over the seat.

I hang on to Val tight, wincing with every step while trying not to look like a complete pussy because my side fucking burns like I’ve been dipped in the flames of Hell. We take flight after flight of stairs until we find a service elevator. It stinks of old garbage, but I’d gladly inhale that stench if it means I can stand still for a few minutes. I hunch over, holding an arm over my wound. Val paces the elevator car.

“Okay, all we need to do is get to a cab. Then we can head to the safehouse and can call Alek. He’ll get a doctor.”

“If I make it that long.” I let out a weak snicker, but there’s a hair of truth in my words. My leg’s already starting to numb from blood loss, and I keep having to blink fast to clear my blurred vision. I’ve been shot plenty, but this time feels different. I really hope it’s not because I’m dying, because I need to fuck my fake wife at least once more before that happens.

She turns to look at me with actual concern in her eyes.

I knew she liked me.

“You’re going to make it. And we’re going to come up with a new plan.”

The elevator stops on the parking deck level. The doors creak open. She loops an arm around my waist and leads me into the concrete space. There are a few lights along the ceiling for us to follow toward what I hope is an underground cab stand.

It's still too bright.

Anyone waiting for a cab will see the blood.

"Val, what the hell are we doing? There's no way people don't see me and call the cops," I grunt, sucking air through my teeth.

"Relax, I've got it." She looks forward and backward, and I try not to fall over. She drags me the last few steps toward a bunch of parked cars.

Fuck me.

This must be the whale wing.

Lambos, Bentleys, Ferraris, a Rolls.

The stench of skunk hits my nostrils. A few feet away, a couple of valets are sharing a joint. A stream of smoke wafts into the air. Val leans me against a wall hidden by a large column.

"Stay here and don't move."

Then she jogs over to the guys. A few seconds later, her high-pitched laughter echoes between the walls. I peer around the column to see her standing in between the guys with the joint between her lips.

Even hunched over in a massive amount of pain, my dick jumps at the sight of her in those skimpy shorts. My vision blurs again, and when it finally clears, I see her with a phone to her ear. A few seconds pass, and she ends the call, then hands the phone back to one of the guys. She rubs his shoulder, takes another hit, and then backs away with a wave. As she passes the key box, she slowly bends over to scratch her foot with one hand, her other quickly reaching out to grab a set.

Cunning. She knows her ass cheeks are hanging out of those shorts, and she also knows they're watching, drooling, and hungry as hell because they're high.

Well played, wifey.

She straightens up, gives them a quick look over her shoulder, and sashays back to where I'm holding myself up. "Thank God my t-shirt is black, and they couldn't see the blood streaks all over it. I grabbed the keys to the car closest to us. Caught the number on my way over to those dumbasses."

"Give 'em a break. They just got blindsided by a gorgeous girl with an

incredibly bitable ass.”

Val shrugs. “I won’t lose sleep over this next part. We just need to get onto the Strip. Alek will be there to get us.”

“So which one of these babies are we taking for a spin?”

Her lips curl upward, and she nods at a black Honda Civic a couple of feet away. “Must be one of the valets’ cars. The good news is they’re so baked, they won’t be able to do a damn thing to stop us.”

I shake my head. “You’re seriously amazing.”

She cocks her head to the side. “You’re seriously woozy.”

“Yeah, no argument there. I’m starting to lose feeling in my toes.”

With one arm snaked around me, she moves in the direction of the Civic. Within seconds, she pushes me into the back seat and jumps into the front. I collapse across the cool leather, my face smashed against it. “You may not get me out of here. It smells so good... like coconut... and cotton candy.”

“Oh, Lord.” She starts the car, and it lurches forward. Muffled yells from outside the car hit my ears. “You’re delirious.”

“Gun it, babe.” My eyes float closed. “Get us the fuck outta here.”

The car loops around and around heading toward the exit. I don’t bother to open my eyes. We take a right and then another right, my body slides across the pebbled leather since the Honda doesn’t corner too well.

“Okay, almost there...” Val hits the gas again and the car speeds along a road. We must be close to the Strip now. A few minutes pass. Maybe it’s hours. Time’s a blur. So is my current reality.

“Are you with me, Q?”

“You never called me that before,” I say, my voice groggy.

“Admittedly, I’ve called you plenty of other things under my breath.”

“If I don’t get to a doctor soon, I’ll be calling you a widow. You know, from beyond the grave.”

“No way. Not after what we’ve been through. I’m going to take care of you.”

My eyes open a crack. I can’t make out much through the windows except palm fronds blowing in the hot wind. “In the biblical way, I hope.”

“In every way.”

A smile lifts my lips, and my eyelids crash down again. Maybe it was a dream. Maybe I’m hallucinating.

The car comes to a sudden and short stop. A door opens, and then a whoosh of hot air rushes over me. I grunt in pain when a strong arm peels me

off the seat and pulls me to a standing position outside the car.

“Alek, you don’t have to be so rough.”

I sway against the car, my knees wobbling. Val puts her arm around me for balance. I manage a grin at Alek. “Yeah, I’ve seen her naked, brah. Hopefully again soon.”

Val lets out a huff. “I will drop you if you don’t keep that mouth shut.”

Alek glares at me. “Get the fuck in the car and stay on the towel. If you bleed all over the place, I will finish you off myself.”

Val slides into the back seat next to me. She sits me straight up but I fall over. My head lands right in her lap, my lips pressed against her thighs. Oh fuck, I’ve wanted to have my head between them again so badly. I just never thought it’d be because I’m dying.

Although, what a fucking place to die in.

I don’t know how long we’re in the car. The ride is smooth. I drift in and out, tuning out the tight voices in the car. I don’t really care what they’re saying. I just want to be close to Val. I take in a deep breath, the tingling in my toes blunted by numbness. My head feels like a cement block, my ears ringing like clashing cymbals.

“...doctor... lost so much blood... no use to me dead... need him... love him...”

She loves me. My fake wife loves me. I heard it. It definitely wasn’t my imagination or a dream or the fact that I’m delusional because I’m at death’s door.

“I love you, too...” I mumble, my mouth filled with imaginary marbles.

Alek stops short. “Easy, Romeo. This is a job. Keep your head in the game.”

“I know exactly where I wanna keep my head.” I force open my eyes and stare up at Val. She rolls her eyes at me and gives her head a little shake.

I’m barely conscious as they wrestle me out of the car and drag me into an elevator. It isn’t until we’re inside an apartment and I’m on a couch that I even try to take in the space around me.

An old guy with thinning gray hair and crinkly blue eyes stares down at me, his thick brows furrowed.

“Who the hell are you?” I ask.

“This is Dr. Ivan.” Alek’s lips twist. “He’s gonna fix you.”

My gaze drops to a table in front of me, and there’s a mess of needles, gauze, and stainless steel tools spread out over a white cloth. “I thought you

volunteered to do that.”

“You have no idea what I want to do with those tools.” Alek turns and walks into the kitchen. Val drops down next to me and takes one of my hands. Her skin is so soft and smooth. Those perfect hands shot up a guy’s head not too long ago, saving my life. She’s like a dichotomy, so glossy and prissy on the outside, but underneath it all, she’s a fucking brutal killer.

No wonder Alek has a hard-on for her. How could any living breathing guy *not*?

“Dr. Ivan is going to put you out for this next part, okay?” She strokes the top of my hand. I’m so focused on her fingers that I barely feel the pinch of a needle go into my other hand. I stare up at her, struggling to keep my eyes open.

“You blew that guy on the roof away. It was so hot.” My voice is thick, the words catching in my throat as whatever the hell is being fed into my veins takes over my consciousness.

A small smile lifts her lips. “I did what I had to do for the mission. You saved me, and then I saved us.”

“Mm. It was good. You’re fucking vicious. I like that version of you better than the control freak one. I like it when you don’t have a pole stuck up your ass. I love your ass.” My eyes drop because I can’t keep them open for a second longer, the drugs taking over my body, mind, and mouth. “And I love you, too.”

CHAPTER 23

VALENTINA

I drum my fingers on the arms of the chair across from Quinn's bed, his words looping through my mind. He was completely whacked from the morphine that Dr. Ivan fed into his veins last night. He obviously had no idea what he was saying when he told me he loved me.

Still, it's hard for me to ignore the fact that I've never had a man tell me he loves me before, other than Dad or my brothers, of course. But relationships? They never got that far before my almost wedding to Dmitri Stepanov. And after I fled Miami years ago? I kept everyone at arm's length because any emotion that played with my heart could potentially put my life at risk.

Quinn's heavily medicated profession was my first time hearing it.

And I won't lie. It made me feel nice. Wanted. Warm and fuzzy inside.

It's not like he meant it, though. How could he? We've known each other for less than a full day.

I don't love *him*.

Leaning forward, I pick at a loose thread on the navy-blue comforter knotted around Quinn's ankles.

But I definitely like him. A lot. So much, it scares me a little bit.

Because I could see myself falling for him—his cocky charm, devil-may-care attitude, his sarcastic edge, playful nature. He's all the things I'm not, all the things I find myself drawn to like a magnet to steel. Impossible to fight the attraction.

And then there are the tiny little butterflies that take flight in my belly when he looks at me. Not a look where he's undressing me with his eyes, which I've caught him doing plenty of times over the past twenty or so hours.

The looks where he tries to see what's hiding inside of my mind and soul, the ones where he tries to peel back the layers and barriers that I throw up to protect myself and my heart, the ones that make me completely vulnerable.

I love them and hate them at the same time.

I lean back in the chair at the foot of the bed and stare at him, muscular, tattooed arms sprawled over his head, tight pecs decorated with intricate inked designs, the deep cut V that makes me bite down on my lower lip... hard.

He's gorgeous, but it's not his looks that captivate me. It's him—his passion, his loyalty, his love for his family, and his willingness to put his own life on the line to protect the ones he cares about. He's sloppy and snarky, but so sexy and selfless.

Yes. I like him. *Like him*, like him. And the thought that Alek dragged him into this, knowing that he'd likely become a casualty of this war against Branko pisses me off.

My fingers grip the arms of the chair and I stand up.

I respect Alek, but I don't like him very much right now. We had a long talk last night after Quinn's impromptu surgery. I told him about the pitchfork tattoo and berated him for the leak that led those assholes right to us. He didn't like me attacking his precious data team, but someone let our location be known to the enemies. Who the hell else could it have been?

So I fully expect him to be prickly this morning.

Alek doesn't like loose ends any more than me. And right now, we have a crap ton of them.

Pulling open the door to Quinn's bedroom, I take in a deep breath. The smell of bacon leads me into the kitchen where Alek stands at the stove with a spatula in hand.

"You think you can make everything better with bacon?"

He doesn't look up.

"All this time you've been blasting Quinn left and right, but lo and behold, it was a leak in your chain of command that led those bastards right to us last night on the roof." It still irks the hell out of me, and I can't help the caustic words from spewing out of my mouth.

"Nobody told you to leave the suite," he grumbles.

"Oh, so we should have waited for them there? Come on, Alek. Let's face facts. Quinn's not the problem."

"This time."

“Don’t deflect by making breakfast. You’re not fooling me. We have a serious problem. Someone is feeding information to Branko’s organization. The pitchfork tattoo? That wasn’t a coincidence. And that internet leak is just a bullshit distraction to make us think it’s someone else.”

“I’m going to smoke the bastard out,” Alek growls.

“Great. How the hell are you going to do that when you don’t know who to trust?”

He flashes an angry look at me over his shoulder. “I don’t trust anyone. Don’t you know that, Val? Nobody knows everything ever.”

“Well, someone knows some stuff. And if they suspect you’re hiding things, they’ll stand down until we’re thrown off course again. That’s when they’ll strike.”

“I have this under control. It just requires a change in plans.” His jaw tightens. “I’m going to someone outside of the network, someone I’ve worked with in the past. Someone who understands discretion and has a lot of knowledge about the world we’re about to invade.”

“Why didn’t you go to him earlier?”

“He’s a lifeline I don’t like to call upon unless the situation is desperate. That’s exactly where we are right now. He’s an unknown. He operates under different aliases. And he’s untraceable.”

“Sounds like a treasure,” I say with a sarcastic edge to my voice.

“He’s taking a meeting with us later on. Here.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Is that smart?”

Alek nods. “It’s the only way to do this under the radar. We do this in a secure location where nobody has access except for us.”

“And he’s going to help us figure out a way to Branko?”

“He’s already working on something.”

“Great. I can’t wait to hear what your mystery man comes up with.” I open the refrigerator door and grab a carton of orange juice. “Want something to drink?”

“Yeah, I’ll take a screwdriver, hold the orange juice.” His voice is dry. I spot a steaming coffee mug next to the stove and roll my eyes.

I take a seat on a stool by the kitchen island and pour the orange juice into a glass. “Why are you being so hard on Quinn?”

Alek pokes at the slices of bacon before turning to look at me. “I’m sorry, should I cuddle him like a fucking teddy bear instead? We have work to do. I don’t have time to coddle people who can’t cut it.”

“You’re being a dick, and I want to know why.”

He tosses the spatula onto the counter and lets out a deep sigh. “Val, you’ve known me for a long time. Am I a funny guy? Do I appreciate humor?”

“No, and it makes you pretty darn scary to people who don’t know you.”

“Yes. And they respect me.”

“They fear you,” I correct.

“Whatever the fuck. They know what I’m capable of, and they tiptoe around me because they don’t want me to unleash holy hell on them.” He sweeps a hand through his hair. “There are a number of families that are part of Red Ladro. They all have their own ways of doing things. As the senior member, it’s my job to make sure they know how to do things *my way*.”

“So, what is this, like a tough love kind of thing? Are you purposely being an ass so he learns from you? Are you trying to be his mentor or something?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, news flash. It isn’t working, Mr. Miyagi. You’re only pissing him off more. He knows he fucked up. You’ve brought it up, I’ve brought it up. He’s a hothead and he realized he should have done things differently back in New York. *He* realized it, not because of anything either of us said or berated him for.”

Alek takes the pan off the stove. “Look at you, being all protective of your fake husband.”

“Don’t deflect. You know I’m right.”

“Why do you think I have Kaz as my right hand?”

The question throws me. “Um, I don’t know, because he and Ivan Drago look like a photo and its negative?”

Alek piles the bacon onto a plate. “Wrong. I keep him close and involved because he’s a hotheaded motherfucker who has the ability to blow shit up if I let go of the reins. I love him, he’s my brother, but he can be very dangerous. Heaven’s brothers? Same fucking thing. I’ve had plenty of conversations with those guys to keep them from going off the rails. I’ve had to clean up messes from your brothers, too. And Konstantin Romanov? He’s a crazy bastard.”

“I know about the hand tattoo you burned off.”

“I have to find new ways to make my point.” He places the plate in front of me on the counter. “Bottom line is I need Quinn to figure out his place on

his own before he fucks up and gets himself killed. And if he doesn't, trust me, the cartel will find him. He's not one of my operatives, but he might be able to save himself if he learns the rules of the game. I can't save everyone, Val. I've lost people, too. But I can't lose any more. I won't put anyone at risk for a guy with no regard for authority, a guy who does what he wants, when he wants, screw the consequences. Quinn needs to learn, not be taught. I've given him the tools, now he needs to use them."

"So you want him to prove you wrong?"

Alek nods. "He's a proud guy with a huge ego. He wants to tell me to stick my comments up my ass."

"I think he's already done that."

"I needed to light that fire under him so he takes this seriously. He has to understand it's not a joke and that lives are at risk." He lifts an eyebrow. "You think he gets that? Because if he doesn't, then yeah. He's expendable."

I stare at the plate of bacon, my stomach roiling at the thought of eating a single bite of it. "When I said Quinn was a liability, I was wrong. He's got a savior complex. He will run into the flames of Hell to rescue someone he loves. He might not be the soldier you groomed, but he's got more passion than any of your other guys."

"You don't think I see that in him?" Alek folds his arms over his chest and leans back against the stove. "He's been through a lot, I'll give him that. Two brothers, dead after betraying the family. Parents are gone. It's only him and Patrick now. He feels a lot of that burden on himself, his need to protect clouds his judgment. His problem is he doesn't think of consequences, unlike you, who thinks of them ninety-nine percent of the time."

I let out a huff. "Jeez, it was one—"

"That's all it takes, Val." He picks up the spatula and points it at me. "One time, one lapse, and boom. You're fucked."

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. "Speaking of fucked—"

"Nope. I don't like the start of that sentence."

"Relax. I meant the leak. You need to find the source; otherwise, wherever we are, we'll be vulnerable to another attack. Even here."

"This place is like Fort Knox. Nobody is getting in here. I told you. Not unless I allow it."

"Except on the roof, right?" I lift an eyebrow because of the helicopter landing pad above us. "Enemies have tried landing there before. What's to stop them again?"

“We’re off the grid. Location settings are hidden, I have a VPN installed. That’s what makes it a safehouse. We didn’t have all of the necessary precautions taken before that attack. But thanks for bringing it up. I appreciate it.” Sarcasm drips from his words, and I allow myself a small smile. Alek hates when you poke holes in his armor.

“And your secret mystery pal? You’re really sure about him?”

“Ninety-nine percent.”

“That’s not a hundred.”

“It’s the best you’ll ever get from me.”

“Noted.” I smirk, standing up from the stool. “I’m going to see if Quinn is starting to wake up. He’s probably starving. The guy has an appetite like a jungle predator.”

“You’re not the type to get attached to what deep down you know is only temporary.” Alek moves toward me and places his hands on my shoulders, his voice holding a twinge of something that sounds suspiciously like empathy. Which is weird, because it’s *Alek*. And that’s why it makes the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. “Things are about to get really fucking ugly and messy. You’re going to have to make hard choices, choices that can make or break this mission. And if you want to finally nail Branko, Quinn can’t ever be one of them.”

CHAPTER 24

QUINN

“Do you need help with that?” Val walks over to where I’m standing in front of the mirror, cursing the damn t-shirt in my hands. It’s a real bitch to put it on when one side of my body is up in flames.

I managed to change my shorts, but who the fuck ever Alek’s trusted contact is, he’s gonna have to deal with me bare-chested. Tossing the shirt onto the bed, I grimace. “Fuck the shirt. Did the doc leave me any more morphine?”

“I think we have something to take the edge off.” Her smile makes me wish she was suggesting something other than drugs. Hell, I’d expend the energy for that any day over trying to put on a shirt.

She leaves the bedroom and comes back a couple of minutes later with two pills and a bottle of room temperature Poland Spring. She couldn’t possibly know this, but I actually like my water better at room temperature than straight out of the fridge. I twist off the cap and take a long gulp before the pills because my mouth is bone-fucking dry. Then I pop the pills and sink onto the edge of the bed.

“You have to be careful you don’t make any sudden moves because the pills will numb the pain enough for you to think you can do things your body isn’t ready to.”

I lift an eyebrow. “I’m no rookie, babe.”

“No.” Her lips lift. “You’re definitely not.”

“Tell me the deal with this guy. Why should we trust him?”

“His name is Mercer.” Val walks over to a large window overlooking the desert since that’s the only thing surrounding us in this compound. “Alek trusts him, and I trust Alek.”

“That means I’ve gotta trust Alek, too?” I roll my eyes. “Why doesn’t he just shoot me between the eyes right now and get it over with?”

Val turns to me. “Patrick trusts Alek, too, or you wouldn’t be out here in Vegas right now.”

I fist my hair and tug on it. “Sometimes I wish I’d just taken off, disappeared somewhere. I could’ve gone off the grid.”

“But you didn’t.” She steps toward me, curiosity in her gaze.

“Nah.” I let out a deep sigh. “I’m not the kind of guy who starts a shitstorm and then walks away from it. I owed it to Patty to come out here. He’s a member of Red Ladro, and my job is to protect our interests. If I get a little banged up in the process, what the fuck ever. Not like it hasn’t happened before. And this time, I deserve it for what I did. But…” I wink at her. “I won’t lie. It was damn tempting to just take off.”

A giggle leaves her lips. It’s the sweetest sound I’ve heard out of her since I fucked her senseless at The STRAT on our wedding night. She closes the distance between us and stands over me. Her fingers graze my bandaged wound.

I recoil, sucking air through my teeth.

Her eyes widen. “Oh, no. I’m sorry. Does it hurt?”

With a snicker, I shake my head. “I’m fucking with you.”

“That’s not very nice.” Her breathy words make my skin tingle.

“Doesn’t seem like you’re too upset,” I murmur.

Her head dips lower, her forehead practically brushing against mine. And those sweet, sensual lips… they’re so close to mine, I can practically taste them. “Oh, trust me. I’m furious,” she whispers, bringing a hand around to the back of my neck and stroking it. She winds her fingers through my hair and fuck me, it feels so good.

“Oh yeah? You gonna teach me a lesson now? If not, I’ll keep being bad until you do.”

“Promise? Not like you need to answer that. I already know you will.” Then she recoils. “But you’re in pain. We can’t do this.”

She leans closer still, as if something is pushing her toward me, something she doesn’t want to fight, despite her words.

“Fuck the pain.” I reach for her with one hand and slide it around to the small of her back. My fingers graze the hem of her shirt before massaging the soft skin underneath.

Our gazes lock. Her eyes are hooded, glimmering with promise. The air is

heavy and thick with lust and need. It hangs over us like an erotic cloud, fogging up the world around us until I can't breathe without her lips on mine. I crush my mouth against hers, pulling her against me. She half straddles me, careful to avoid my injured side. But her lips have no boundaries. She thrusts her hips forward, rubbing herself against my throbbing cock as she devours my mouth.

Her tongue tangles with mine, twisting and twirling and coiling with heat and desire. I nip at her lower lip, our hands groping and tugging with desperation. "You're so controlling. But you can't control yourself around me, can you?"

"No," she moans, her lips humming the sound against my mouth. "And you're so bad for me."

"You still can't help yourself." I run my hand up her side, pushing the shirt up to expose her perfect tits. Her hands tangle in my hair, tugging it hard when I bring one nipple between my fingers and tease it until it's so hard it could cut glass.

I bring my lips to her breast and capture the nipple between them, suckling until she lets out a little whimper. Without thinking, I pull her closer. A sharp pain explodes down my side. I bite back a groan.

Val pulls away with a gasp. "Oh no. I hurt you, didn't I?"

I drop my hand from her breast and grip her hip, digging my fingertips into her skin. "Not enough to stop me."

She leans into me again, brushing her lips against mine. "Do we need a safe word?"

"Fuck no."

I press my fingers into her spine. She grinds her pussy against me.

"So fucking bad," she breathes.

"Mmm. Worse." I knead her breast, teasing the nipple with my tongue and teeth when a clicking sound sends her stumbling backward, interrupting her mid-moan.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter when Alek pops his head into the room. "Don't you knock?"

"It's my place. Why the fuck would I?" His blue eyes are like fiery lasers, and as he glares at me, I can tell he's trying to kill me with his mind.

Val just gapes at him. She quickly pulls her shirt down, trying to cover any evidence of what we just did. But it's too late. He already saw plenty.

Too bad she wasn't riding me. Maybe we'll get him next time he decides

to barge in like a big fucking asshole babysitter.

“Put yourself back together,” he grunts, nodding his head toward my discarded shirt. “My contact is here, and he doesn’t need to see all that.”

I flex my pecs and run a hand down the front of my chest. “I think you’re the one who doesn’t want to see it. Maybe it makes your old ass a little jealous, huh?”

“My old ass will tear yours apart with my bare hands if you don’t get the fuck outside.” He pulls away from the door and slams it closed.

Val bends down to grab my shirt. “Why do you keep inciting him? He’s obviously threatened by you.”

“Threatened by me?” I let out a snort. She shoves the neckline of the shirt over my head and helps pull the arm on my injured side through the sleeve. “What the fuck for?”

“You don’t exactly fall in line like everyone else around him does. He’s not used to smart-ass lunatics who blatantly ignore instructions. Do you want him to tear your head off your body? I’ve seen him do it.”

“Oh, fuck. Now I wanna keep goading him till he tries that shit.”

Val rolls her eyes and walks over to the door. “Behave. And you might want to hold off until you’re able to lift your own arm.”

“We’ll see.” I smack her ass with my good hand.

She pauses, tosses me a look over her shoulder, and licks her lips.

And now I’m supposed to sit in this meeting and not think about fucking that sweet pussy? I’m gonna make her scream so loud, she shatters the windows in this place.

That’s right, Alek. Me. *I’m* gonna do that to her.

I follow Val out into the living room. There’s a guy in there with his back to us. I narrow my eyes. He’s shorter than Alek—most people are, though, since he’s almost seven feet tall.

Alek nods his head in our direction and the guy turns toward us.

His hazel eyes flicker at me suspiciously, then dart right over to Val, who’d be jaw-droppingly gorgeous if she was wrapped in a plastic garbage bag. But in those shorts and that top, she’s a walking wet dream that’d be a perfect addition to any living, breathing straight guy’s spank bank.

My fingers ball into a fist. His eyes scrape over her, his carnal gaze settling on her tits for long enough that I’m about ready to smash his stubbled jaw. I grit my teeth, catching Alek’s amused look out of the corner of my eye. Fuck it, I’ll pummel his ass, too.

“Valentina, Quinn, this is Mercer Vale. He’s an associate from New York. I asked him to come out here because he’s got connections that can help us.”

I slide in front of Val, blocking Mercer’s view of her. “I think you’ve seen enough. How about you start talking?”

Mercer exchanges a look with Alek like I’m some territorial teenaged kid who doesn’t like the way he’s staring at my girl crush and is about to pee on her.

What he doesn’t know is that I won’t think twice before pounding his face into the floor if he doesn’t wipe that smug-ass smirk off his face. And I’ll gouge out his eyes right here and now if he doesn’t pull them off Val.

“You’re looking for Branko Ivanova.” Mercer swirls ice around the glass in his hand. Swirls of black ink cover the whole top down to his fingers. “And I know where you can find him.”

“Yeah, great. So do we, jackass. The problem is we can’t get to him.” I roll my eyes. “Jesus, Alek. This guy’s our best option? What happened to him being able to get us inside?”

Alek’s nostrils flare. I bite back a smile. He’s about to blow a gasket. “Mulligan, I will ship your ass back to New York today if you don’t shut the hell up.”

Val fists the bottom of my t-shirt to keep me quiet. “Shh.”

“My sources tell me that Branko is here in town to close a business deal. Once he signs the papers, he’s taking off for Slovakia. You won’t hear from him again since you’ve already shit the bed and made it known that you’re in Vegas hunting him.” His lips curl upward at Val. “Nice moves, by the way. I liked what you did with that shoe.”

My fingers twitch when Val’s cheeks stain a deep pink. “Thanks.”

“But you still fucked up by going after those assholes.” Mercer steps closer to Val. The billionaire scent surrounding him chokes me. It’s a combination of expensive cologne, wads of thousand-dollar bills, and Macallan 25.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, my gut in knots.

My God, I fucking hate this prick.

His appraising gaze drinks in the shape of Val’s long toned legs while my blood damn near boils over. “She’s perfect,” he says to Alek. Then he slides his eyes to Val’s face. “I’ve got your way in. It’s your only chance to get close. But be prepared, because you’re not going to like what you’ll have to

do once you're in there.”

His eyes tangle with mine, challenging me to breathe another word as his lips curl upward in a sinister smile. “And who you'll need to do it to.”

CHAPTER 25

VALENTINA

I press my fingertips to my temples, but it doesn't do a damn thing to stop the blood from pulsing between them. "You want me to *what?*"

Mercer's hazel eyes glitter with challenge. "It's the only way for you to get inside."

My jaw sits on the floor where it dropped only a few seconds earlier. "So I actually have to—"

"You need to do anything and everything to get noticed by Branko."

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Quinn growls. "And stop staring at her like that. We're married, motherfucker."

Alek rolls his eyes. "Relax, Quinn. This is business."

"Why should we trust this guy, anyway?" Quinn's face twists.

"Because I specialize in tracking scumbags like Branko."

"So why didn't we go to him sooner?" Quinn's eyes spit flames at Alek. "What the hell have you been doing for the past five years?"

I can practically smell the smoke pouring out of Alek's ears. "Don't question my methods, Quinn. Mercer isn't my hired gun. He handles very specific targets in his own way based on his client's requirements. He's here because he has knowledge of Branko's sex trafficking ring activities here in Vegas. He knows people in that network, and because of that, I pulled him in. I could have farmed out the assassination years ago, but nobody other than us will get Branko. His head is *ours*. I'm not paying anyone to take that away from us."

"Besides," Mercer interjects, directing a smug grin at Alek. "If I did this for Alek, he'd owe me. And Alek doesn't like to owe people."

"Fucking A right," Alek mutters.

“Then if we know where he’ll be, why not ambush him on the way in or out?”

Okay, I can’t lie. I love how protective he is. But my God, there’s no lack of reason for why people are so frustrated with him for going off the deep end. He’s so fierce and fearless. He’d run into the flames for anyone he cares about.

And that passion runs so deep within him. He channels it with every word and every action. It makes him even sexier and the fact that I’m inwardly drooling over that when I should be focused on what the hell I have to do to stop that bastard Branko is more than a little disturbing.

“You think he travels alone?” Alek rolls his eyes. “He’s got handlers in all positions. Only his most trusted know who the fuck he even is. The guy’s like a ghost.” His jaw tenses. “Mercer has the way in. It’s now or never.”

“Nobody’s gonna put Val on display in that place doing Christ only knows what to get to Branko. There’s gotta be another way.”

As my stomach roils at the thought, Quinn’s anger comforts me. A tiny shiver ripples through me as he steps closer, blocking Mercer’s view of me.

The protector. The savior.

I put a hand on Quinn’s arm. His concerned gaze flickers over to me, and I give him a reassuring nod, even though I don’t know why the hell I’m trying to reassure him when I’m the one who’s going to be on display in the pits of some sex den. “Look, I will do whatever I need to do to find this guy. But once I’m inside, how will I find Branko if I’m so busy performing? What’s the draw?”

“You have the look he wants. That’s why I was checking you out. It wouldn’t work if you weren’t his type, and I’d have already been out the door.” Mercer takes another sip of the drink in his glass before answering. “If he likes you, he’ll pull you into his private room. He always brings his favorites into private rooms. Chooses the ones he wants to save for himself. The crazier the performance, the better. We’ll arrange for someone to perform with you, someone we handpick.”

“Fuck that,” Quinn mutters. “Put me in a different disguise. I’ll do it. I don’t want some other guy putting his hands... and... other stuff... all over my wife.”

“Fake wife,” Alek grunts. “There is no way in hell you’re going in there.”

“If you don’t let me go in there, Sev, I’ll lay you out with a very fucking real throat punch.”

Alek storms over to Quinn, and I quickly step in between them. Holding a hand against each of their chests, I look at Mercer. “Tell me how to get Branko’s attention.”

“An A+ performance will get you access. That’s when you get him. Of course, if your husband can’t handle the plan, I can do the job for you. But like I said, Alek doesn’t like to owe people.”

“Branko is mine. I’m the only one who’s going to pull the trigger on him. Nobody will take that away from me.” I stare at Quinn and by some miracle, he doesn’t lash out with a comeback. As much as I appreciate him standing up for me and my honor, he won’t ruin this for me. I’ve waited too long, and Branko’s too damn close for me to lose him again. “*Nobody.*”

“Good. Tomorrow night, he’ll be at SLK. There will be an auction in a secret hidden location of the club. Invite only. I’ll send Alek the details. You’ll go in there, and one of my associates will take care of you.” Mercer places his glass on the table. “You get one shot. It’ll be dark, but you’ll need a new look to get past the eyes he has everywhere.”

My eyes tangle with Alek’s. “What about Boris? Does he know?”

“He agrees it’s the best plan.”

I can feel the heat of Quinn’s anger searing into me. But if this is how it needs to be done, I’ll do it. I will do anything to take that son of a bitch out and rid the world of his toxic filth.

Alek grabs his keys and heads to the door with Mercer. “I’ll be back with your new disguise, Val. Get some rest. Tomorrow will be the end.”

A shudder quakes my chest.

One way or the other.

I’m going into the lion’s den, and it’ll be up to me whether or not Branko makes it out alive.

The door slams shut.

“I don’t like that smug motherfucker. And I don’t like that he wants to send you in there alone with nobody watching out for you.” Quinn stalks over to the window overlooking the desert. The sun shines bright in the sky, illuminating the landscape below. We’re in the literal middle of nowhere, but for some reason, I feel so exposed. Like we’ve opened up a can of poisonous worms and they’re slithering closer and closer, ready to swallow us whole unless we make the right moves to escape.

“You were jealous. But Mercer was only here to help.”

“Yeah, help you get fucked by some random guy just so you can catch

that asshole's attention."

"He was just checking me out to make sure he wasn't wasting his time. I think you're being overly sensitive."

"Bullshit. I just don't like when guys eye fuck my wife to the point where she may get pregnant." He turns around, his face twisted with disgust. "And he could say a million times it was only because he wanted to make sure you had the right look. But that's a bunch of crap. Do you know what you look like?"

A smile tugs at my lips. His words grate the air and make my skin prickle.

Quinn steps closer, a glimmer of danger in his hungry gaze. "Oh, so you like hearing that."

He reaches out and closes his hand loosely around my throat before backing me up against the window. "Did you like him watching you, knowing he wanted to fuck you? To fuck *my wife*?"

I know this whole sham marriage doesn't mean anything. But every time he calls me his wife and gets all wildly possessive and over-the-top alpha over nothing more than someone looking at me the wrong way, it makes my insides melt and my pulse rocket out of control.

And dammit, I want him so badly.

"Do you think I liked it?" I rasp.

He nods, leaning closer to hiss against my ear. "You liked his eyes on you. You liked that he wondered how many different ways there are to make you scream, didn't you?"

"But only you know that number." I slide my hand around to the back of his shirt and scrape my nails up the slope of his ripped back. "And you liked having it over him."

He works the waistband of my shorts with his hands, taking his time to torment me. Heat pools between my legs, drenching the fabric against my pussy. I lean my head back against the glass as he forces the shorts and panties to my ankles. I kick them off, then shove his to the floor. His cock is swollen and thick, corded with veins pumping him full of lust and need.

"You're mine." His growly voice sends tingles dancing over my bare skin. "Nobody gets to look. Nobody gets to fantasize. And nobody gets to fucking touch."

"What will happen if they do?" I breathe, drunk on the carnal desire clouding the air between us.

He leans his forehead close until it touches mine. "I'll kill them. Anyone

who dares.”

With one swift tug, he uses his good arm to rip off my t-shirt. He dips his head, encircling my nipple with his lips, capturing it with his teeth until it peaks in his mouth. Electric shocks explode in my core, a moan slipping from my lips.

His cock presses against me, my thighs quivering as they fall open for him. He grips my hip and drags the head of his cock over my pussy lips before thrusting hard inside of me. I wind a hand around his good side, digging my fingertips into his flesh as he drives deep into me. He rolls his hips, his cock throbbing between my walls. I clamp down on his dick, thrusting against him.

My breaths morph into short, sharp pants. Each push and pull grazes my clit, paralyzing my body with a deep ache that only he can relieve. His ass tenses in my grip, his cock pulsating inside of me. He fucks me with long, hard strokes, staring into my eyes like I’m the center of his world, like nothing else matters to him but driving me to the point of ecstasy and bliss, over and over until the orgasm tears through me with the voracity of a bolt of lightning and I’m weeping in his arms. Only then does he tense up, releasing a loud groan as he fills me with his hot cum.

We stand together, skin pebbled with sweat, arms and legs entwined like strands of Christmas lights that are forever knotted.

Forever...

Quinn moves his hand to the back of my hair and tugs it hard, eliciting a shocked gasp from me. “Tell me you only want my cock fucking you like that.”

“I only want you. Only your cock.” My voice is thick, my throat dry.

He pulls on my hair again, his lips hot against my cheek. “Tell me you’re mine, Val. Tell me you want this, that you want *us*.”

God help me, I do. Almost more than anything.

My heart aches when Alek’s words come rushing back at me like an all-consuming, crushing wave.

Because I know I can’t have it all and my course is already set.

Impending dread knots my gut.

If I have to choose, I can’t pick Quinn.

I won’t... even though I know deep down he’d always pick *me*.

Until he figures out the truth... that I’m the biggest liar of all.

CHAPTER 26

QUINN

I lean forward against the window in one of the bedrooms in the safehouse, pressing my forehead against the glass. A day has passed and my injured side burns worse than someone holding a hand torch against it. But I'd gladly smile through the scorching pain a million times over just to feel Val's body glide against mine, writhing with pleasure only I can bring her. Being with her has turned me inside out because it's so much more than just mind-numbing, earth-shattering sex.

She's so much more than my partner and my fake wife.

My mom always used to say that things happened for a reason, even if that reason was so far beyond comprehension. Just like the cancer that ravaged her young life and yanked her away from us, shattering my family forever.

She always said you had to have faith that things would work out, no matter how insurmountable the obstacles. And when I think back to the hell that came to our doorstep years ago, starting with my oldest brother Conor, I know she was right.

So much betrayal. Even more secrets. Our family had been torn to shreds by them both, and for a long time, I didn't think we'd ever be able to patch ourselves back together. But we did. Heaven married into the Villani family, forming an important union for our future. And then we found Boris Vetrov and Red Ladro. Slowly but surely, we picked up the jagged pieces. We gave back to the community. We helped kids who had shattered family lives because we understood them and what they needed to rise above their circumstances.

It became the light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

I haven't always made the best decisions, but I've tried to do the right thing. I came out here to Vegas for that reason, to make up for my bad judgment and to help my family—both immediate and extended.

And somehow, in the middle of the shitstorm I created, I found the girl whose life I saved years ago. The girl who sent me away because she couldn't stand to accept what she'd let happen to herself and her half sister.

I gaze at her reflection behind me in the clear glass.

Kind of the way I feel about losing my brother Niall to our enemies. Maybe that makes us kindred spirits, people who were meant to find each other again.

Jesus. I usually make fun of people for buying into that kind of bullshit.

But as her eyes lock on to mine, I suddenly feel like it might not be bullshit after all. We connect on a level I've never experienced before. She knows it, too. I can feel it in her gaze, in her touch, in her words. It's like she knows there's something pulling us together, but she can't put her finger on it.

I want to tell her. I've swallowed the words so many times since she told me about her memories of that night. But I also don't want to drive her away, and it'd be too much of a reminder of everything she wants to forget.

So I keep the words buried. She's here with me now, and that's all I need.

I grit my teeth.

Except this next part is about to blow shit wide-open and put her in danger again with nobody to protect her.

But fuck Alek. I'm done taking orders from that prick.

Val moves toward me, a smile on her lips. Her fingers are electric. They graze my skin. Tingles in my groin explode in response to her touch. She massages the back of my neck with her lips, then moves to my earlobe. I suck in a breath when her lips and teeth tug at it. Every muscle in my body tenses. Her hot breath sears my neck, awakening a fierce and carnal hunger that swirls through my insides.

I twist and grab her around the waist. "Is that pussy screaming for me again?"

"Careful," she murmurs against my ear. "I don't want you messing up your stitches. One wrong move could—"

"Fuck my stitches." I bring a hand to her ass and squeeze before giving it a hard smack. She squeals and it makes my dick jump. "You can fix me."

The words shock me when they hit the air.

Yeah, she can stitch me back up, but that wasn't what I really meant.

Valentina is it for me. I knew it the second I realized who she really was. We were brought here together for a reason. It was for more than just taking down Branko, more than just preserving our families.

It's fucking fate. And like I said, I'm the last guy who buys into that crap.

I know it's only been a few days, but it feels like years. I guess in a way, I've bought into the "fate brought us back together" scenario. There's no other explanation for the way she makes me feel, for the way the emptiness in my soul is filled when she's near. I know Patty and Massimo would roll their eyes if they heard me say these things. I'm not exactly the committed type.

But I'd give up my life for Val in a second.

Again.

She pulls me toward her, backing against the bed before falling onto the mattress. Her tanned legs fall open. My mouth waters as I stare at her perfect pink pussy winking at me. Precum glistens at the tip of my cock. I drag it over her plump lips. A soft moan slips from her parted mouth.

I slowly lower myself to my knees. Gripping her thighs, I pull them open farther so I can bury my head between them. Her back arches, hips thrust forward against my lips when I blow out a thin stream of breath. My tongue juts out and presses into her, lapping up every drop of desire like it's all I need to live. Her walls clench as her fingers weave into my hair.

I suckle her clit, then drive deep with my tongue, French-kissing her sweet pussy like it's my last meal. Her body quivers on the mattress, her fingers tearing out my hair. But I don't stop. Her screams only make my mouth work harder and faster. I move one hand to her ass and slide my fingers between her cheeks.

She cries out when I breach her tight hole. I slowly press my finger inside of her heat, sliding it deeper and deeper. Her body stills until she feels comfortable. And then her ass relaxes, welcoming my finger. She alternates between fucking my mouth and my finger, jerking her hips back and forth, shuddering on the mattress, floundering at the sensation of all-consuming bliss. The pleasure coursing through her throws her body into a complete frenzy and she explodes, her juices dancing on my tongue.

"Oh my God," she whimpers, her voice raspy. "Fuck me, Quinn. I need to feel you inside of me. I need you to make me come again. I just need... you."

I crawl onto the mattress, dragging my dick over her wet slit. "My dirty girl. You loved my finger in your ass, didn't you?"

“Yes. You make me feel so incredible.” Her eyes are half-hooded with lust. Her arms wrap tight around me. I don’t give a flying fuck about the pain, only the pleasure I will chase until my dying breath.

“This is only the beginning, babe.” I sink into her heat and crush my lips against hers. She drinks me in, coiling her tongue with mine. Her hands flail, groping my head, my back, my ass. She kisses me with an unbridled furor, giving me everything she has. We feast on each other’s lips like we need them to survive. Teeth crack, tongues tangle, passion implodes.

With one hand on her ass, I grab the back of her head and drag my fingers through the soft waves. I breathe her in, dragging the fresh scent of her shampoo and body lotion into my lungs. Her scent, her moans, her heat—it infuses me with primal lust. The air between us is heady with desire, tinged with insatiable hunger.

Her breathy sounds drive me to tease and torment her with each and every movement. My strokes are hard and deep. Her walls tighten around me, clamping down on my cock. She arches her back, meeting me thrust for thrust, pressing her fingers into the small of my back when I hit her spot. Her breaths turn into sharp gasps, her skin slick with sweat.

I press two fingers into her asshole again because I know how crazy it makes her. I stroke the tight rim of muscle. It’s only a few seconds before her pussy explodes, juices flowing over my cock with every push and pull of my fingers. She fucks me like a porn star, wildly riding my fingers and my cock like a jockey on a Thoroughbred.

My balls ache, my groin tightening. Flashes of light blast behind my eyes. Blood courses through me, rushing to the head of my cock. I’m inside out over this woman, lost inside of her, so lost I don’t know if I can ever be found.

And for the first time in my life, I don’t want to be.

Because I know she was meant for me, and I’ll do everything in my power to keep her by my side.

Christ, speaking of sides...

My arms give out. I hit the bed next to her and groan loudly.

“Fuuuuck.”

Val rolls over, her eyes wide with concern. She gently grazes the taped gauze pads. “Oh no. I think you’re bleeding again.”

I fling a hand over my eyes and squeeze them shut. “It was worth it,” I rasp through clenched teeth.

“I’ll get the supplies. Just stay still, okay?”

She brushes her lips against mine and I smile.

Yeah, so fucking worth it.

Seconds pass and she’s back on the bed next to me, a whiff of her sweet fruity scent drifting under my nose. I uncover my eyes so I can watch her work. Her eyebrows knit together when she removes the bandage.

“I need to stitch you back up.” She holds out two more morphine pills and a fresh bottle of water. “It won’t help too much now, but it will once they kick in.”

I slowly raise myself up and swallow the pills down with some water. “I can handle it.”

“I know you can.” Her lips lift. “Okay, so let’s talk and get your mind off what I’m doing. Tell me about your family.”

“Oh, great. You want to put me through a different kind of torture.” I wince when the tip of the needle punctures my skin. “Tell me about your tattoo first.”

Val glances down at the two camellias on the side of her hip. “You’re deflecting.”

“Damn right. Now speak.”

“Camellias are my favorite flower. The black one represents the past.” Her shoulders sag. “It was dark. Bleak. A reminder of what I never want to experience ever again.”

“And the white one?” I can barely choke out the words because the pain is so intense.

“It represents the future. What I want it to be. Light, bright, and perfect.”

“So, kind of a pipe dream if you keep living like this.”

She chuckles. “I guess. Now, are you going to tell me about your family or what?”

“I don’t know if I can think right now.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you about mine.” She pauses to take a breath. “My oldest brother Dima totally betrayed our family. He was in line to take over for my father, but it was never enough for him. He craved power and control and didn’t like when he was left in the dark, like he was the night when Charly was killed. I told him as little as possible because I didn’t want to break Dad’s trust. But he knew there were secrets my father was keeping. And he decided to take even more control by working with our enemies to sabotage us at every turn.”

“Sounds like a real dick,” I grumble.

“He wasn’t, though. Not always. He and I were really close when I was younger. He was the one I called from the hospital where I’d been dropped off by those guys who saved me. Dima was upset and worried and desperate to find the people who hurt me. But after that night, something changed. Shifted. I know he confronted Dad but never found out what happened. He just iced over after that. Shut us all out. I hated losing what we had and not being there when he died.”

I clench my teeth and clutch the comforter as she continues the needle torture. “I had two other brothers. Conor and Niall. Conor was always a total fuckup. Drug addict, booze hound, manwhore. He was neck and neck with Heaven to be boss of my family. My dad picked him and married Heaven off to the Villani family. I guess he figured giving Conor the reins would keep him close, but he went off the deep end. Died here in Vegas after selling out my entire family.”

“Jesus,” Val says, stopping to stare at me. “What about Niall?”

“I could have saved him,” I mutter. “He was jealous when Patty took over for my dad. Thought it should have been him. So, he fucked us over. Cost him his life.”

“Why do you think you could have saved him?” Val brushes her fingers over my newly taped wound.

“Because if I’d have been paying attention, I could have stopped him from going to our enemies. I could have pulled him into Sportsociety, shown him that there’s more important stuff in life than being king.”

“You can’t save everyone, Q.”

“Is that what you really believe? Because one thing I’ve learned over the past few days is that you think you can save everyone, too. Maybe we’re more alike than you think.” I slowly raise myself off the mattress, my heart pounding when I grasp her hand. “And maybe we were supposed to—”

My next words are eaten up by a blaring ringtone. Val grabs the phone Alek gave us before he left and answers.

Her brows furrow, and she hands it to me.

“Yeah?” I bark, figuring it’s Alek giving me shit for breathing.

“Q, it’s Massimo.” His voice is thick and tight. My gut clenches with his next words. “There’s been an accident.”

CHAPTER 27

VALENTINA

“Mas, what the fuck is going on?”

I grab a t-shirt and shorts and pull them on. Sinking onto the edge of the bed, I watch Quinn pace the room, his hand fisting his hair.

“Are they okay?” He kicks over a chair. “Fuck!”

I wring my hands together, my pulse exploding against my throat. Is it his brother Patty?

“I’m going to the airport right now. I’ll catch the first flight out.” He pauses, then slams his hand against the window. “I’m not fucking waiting here and holding my dick, okay? Those motherfuckers are gonna pay. To-fucking-night.”

I can’t hear what that Massimo person is saying, but none of it calms Quinn down. His face is beet red and his eyes glitter with murderous rage.

Nothing will keep him here if his family is in jeopardy.

I clench and unclench my fists, knowing I’d want to do the exact same thing if it was my family.

But I also know I couldn’t, as much as it would kill me to hold back.

Because I know there’s a longer end game, and one rash step can make every well-crafted plan collapse like a row of dominoes.

“Mas, I can’t stay and let them do this to my family. Yes, I know it was a fucking warning. Next time, there won’t be a warning. There will only be a revenge play. Period.”

His chest heaves, the tips of his ears practically purple. I’ve never seen him so rattled. Rage rises like steam from his skin.

There’s a long pause before he speaks again.

“You call me the second you know anything, okay? I’m serious. The absolute second.” He turns and his eyes narrow at me.

My spine stiffens, the hairs along my nape springing up.

“I’ll talk to you later.” He clicks to end the call and tosses the phone onto the bed next to me.

“What happened?”

“Patty and my sister-in-law Kyla were hit on their way to pick up my nephew Aidan from a birthday party.” His lips pull tight together. “Thank fuck he wasn’t in the car, too.”

“Oh my God, are they okay?” I jump up from the bed and put a tentative hand on his arm. His neck is tense, muscles tight. He pulls away from me.

“For now.” His eyes flash with anger. “I should have never agreed to come out here. Those cartel fuckers are trying to lure me back and they figured they could use Patty and Kyla to do it.”

“I know it’s hard, but you have to calm down. Losing your head won’t help anyone. We have a plan. We can get to the people who—”

“Can we?” he yells. “Because they can get to anyone anywhere, Val. You know that as well as I do.”

“They haven’t found you out here.”

“Yet. We both know it. I’ve told you that I’m on borrowed time. These guys know we have something planned and they’re trying to scare me away from that fucking club.” He holds his side, storming for the bedroom door. “For all we know, that asshole Mercer whatever the hell his name is, could have given us up. Alek is ready to suck his cock, but he could be one of them.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about Mercer. You’re upset and looking to point fingers, but we know who the real villain is.” I move toward him. “You know what has to be done to stop him.”

“Yeah, except what if we can’t? You don’t know what you’re walking into, and I’m sure as hell not letting you go by yourself, especially after what just happened back East. And I’m going back there to finish what I started.” He runs a hand through the back of my hair. “If those motherfuckers want to play with fire, they’re gonna get their asses blown up. By *me*.”

He struggles to pull on a pair of shorts, shrugging off my hand. Then he walks into the living room just as a lock clicks. The front door opens and Alek walks into the foyer with Boris, Katarina, and a pile of shopping bags.

“Who are you blowing up now?” Alek asks in a bored voice.

Something snaps inside Quinn. He barrels toward Alek and backs him against the door.

“Patty and Kyla were ambushed. Someone plowed into their car in the city a little while ago. Isn’t it a coincidence that your pal Mercer was just here yesterday trying to ‘help’ us get to our target, and now my family has been hit?”

Alek pulls his gun on Quinn. “Stand the fuck down or I’ll shoot you in the fucking face right now without blinking an eye.”

Quinn lets go of his shirt and backs away. “What the fuck is happening here?”

With a look that could freeze ice, Alek regards Quinn. “You knew this could happen. They’re trying to hit you where they know it’ll hurt because they want revenge for what you did to El Azul. Did you think they were just gonna run away with their dicks between their legs and let you get away with it, you moron?”

Quinn sweeps a hand through his hair and leans back against a wall. “I wanted them to come for *me*.”

“Cartel bosses don’t typically take direction well. They only give it, dipshit. Next time, don’t fuck with their organization.”

Quinn glares at him. “I need to go back. I have to stop them from hurting anyone else. Next time, my nephew could be targeted. I’d never be able to forgive myself if something happened to him.”

“Then you should have considered the consequences of your actions before you unleashed your rage all over El Azul.” Alek’s nostrils flare. “And going back to New York won’t save your family. Killing Branko will.”

Boris holds up a hand to Alek and then turns to Quinn. “They’re waiting for you. If you make a move, what will happen then? They hit you and then Patrick will do the same back to them. It will start a war. A brutal, bloody war. We all know it. You need to stand down and get to the head. Don’t risk more bloodshed by going after the soldiers.”

“The war has already started,” Quinn growls.

“And you’re the one who can end it.” Boris pats his arm. “But you have to keep a clear head. If you go running into the flames, you’re not the only one who will suffer. Patty and Kyla are okay. That’s the important thing.”

“Yeah, for how long?” Quinn’s lips twist into a grimace.

“It’s just a little odd, the timing. How do we know for sure that Mercer hasn’t been compromised?” I ask the question and Alek turns his icy stare at

me.

“You’re saying you don’t trust me?”

“I’m saying that we have a lot riding on this plan going smoothly. He’s your contact. How can you be so sure the information he gave you is legit?”

“Because Branko fucked him over, too. He wants that bastard dead as much as we do, but nobody’s paid him to do it, and he’s got clients who need him on other jobs. He’d be very happy if we found Branko and plugged him full of bullets.”

“Tonight you can put all this to bed, Val.” Kat steps forward with some bags. “Everything is ready for you. Mercer’s contact will meet you at the club and get you set up. This is in your hands. You can end this. You *will* end it.”

“She can’t go in there alone,” Quinn bellows.

My spine stiffens. I level him with a hard stare. “I can and I will. This is my show now. Right now, you need to stay here under the radar. If you show up at the club, anyone looking will find you and blow the whole plan to shit.”

His jaw tenses. He does an about-face and storms into the bedroom. The door slams shut so hard, the walls shake. Alek rolls his eyes and nods toward an open door. Kat and I walk into an empty bedroom with the bags.

“Okay, the guy you’re going to meet is named Zavion. He’ll meet you inside one of the performer entrances.” She pulls out a wig. The hair is black with dark-blue streaks, and it’s shaped into a bob that grazes the top of my shoulders. Then she takes out bits and pieces of what I can only imagine is part of my costume. Black patent leather bra and matching panties, long over the thigh black high-heeled boots.

Kat settles the wig on my head and pins it in place. “You like him, don’t you?”

I rub the stress knot at the base of my skull. “He’s crazy and outrageous and unpredictable.”

“And so you *really* like him, then?” Her lips quirk up. “’Cause he’s completely in it with you, that’s for damn sure.”

I bite the inside of my mouth. “He’s risky and dangerous.”

“And sexy as hell.” She giggles. “Hey, I’m married but not even close to dead yet.”

With a small smile, I shrug. “It doesn’t matter though. Once this is over, we’ll be over.”

“What makes you so sure about that?” Kat lifts a perfectly waxed eyebrow. “Why do you think he’ll take off?”

“Because he’s got a savior complex. He’ll be on to the next person who needs saving. And we both know that will never be me.”

“That’s because I trained you.” Kat’s smile widens. “But, sweetie, don’t you realize you suffer from the same affliction?”

“I think about possible consequences before I make any moves. I plan my actions and have backup plans in case something goes wrong. He just flies in, out of control like a freaking funnel cloud. And whatever gets sucked in is destroyed in his wake. That is *not* like me.”

“I just think you should be open to the possibility that he’s not ready to say goodbye once we nail Branko and those fuckers in the Sinalia Cartel. I think he’s got other plans, and they include *you*.”

I change into my outfit and slide my feet into the boots. Once my makeup is done and I pop dark-colored contacts into my eyes, Kat pulls out a long black trench coat and tosses it to me. “Put that on over everything.”

I scrunch up my nose. “It’s hot as hell here and you want me in a trench coat?”

“It’s for your safety. You can’t very well walk to the private entrance in your skivvies.”

I roll my eyes and slide it on over my outfit. “What do you think?”

“I think you bear absolutely no resemblance to Valentina Malikov.” Kat nods her head and peeks at the door behind me. “I did perfect work. And now it’s time to do what you came here to do.”

A shudder ripples through me. I have the sudden feeling that I’m being watched. I twist to look over my shoulder, finding Quinn lounged against the doorframe, his laser hot stare making my blood bubble.

Kat moves toward the door, sliding past him with a knowing smirk on her face.

Quinn steps into the room. “Do I wanna know what’s under that coat?”

I swallow hard past the lump in the back of my throat. “I don’t think so.”

“Don’t do this, Val.” He wraps his fingers around my sleeved arms and squeezes. “We’ll find another way.”

I draw in a breath, tearing my eyes away from his pained ones. “There isn’t another way.”

“Fuck that. I’m not gonna let any of those bastards get close to you and do things to you. You’re my wife.”

“Oh my God, just stop.” I pull out of his grip, a gaggle of tears knotting in my chest because I want to stay with him. I want to be with him. But Alek

told me I'd need to make a choice and I am. Right now, as much as it kills me to do it and to speak these caustic words. "We both knew this bullshit marriage would have a shelf life of about a week. I'm not your wife. I never was and I never will be."

My heart clenches at the stricken expression on his face. He stares at me like I just plunged a knife into his heart. And I know that's exactly how I feel right now.

"If I don't do this, more people will get hurt, or worse." I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Just forget about me, Quinn. Otherwise, you might end up dead, too."

CHAPTER 28

QUINN

“I don’t give a fuck about your gun or your goddamn utensils, Sev. You wanna threaten to slice me open with a fork, fine.” My temples throb, my face flushed with heat. “But none of it will stop me. I’m going after her.”

Alek and Boris exchange a look. Then Alek steps away from the door, no longer blocking it. “I know.”

My jaw drops. “What the hell was that whole show about her going in there alone? Why didn’t you just let us go together?”

“Maybe one day you’ll actually learn this, although I seriously doubt it.” With a frustrated sigh, Alek puts a massive hand on my shoulder, rooting my feet to the ground. “Know your goddamn audience, kid. Val is desperate to get to Branko, and she’s the only one who can. She needs this, not only for her family, for Charly, but for herself. She feels so guilty about what she thinks she’s let happen and she won’t rest until that bastard is vanquished from this Earth. If I told her you were going, too, she wouldn’t have gone in there clearheaded, which is exactly what she needs to be to finish him off.”

“You don’t think knowing she has backup will relax her?”

He presses a hand to his forehead and Kat lets out a snicker. “Mulligan, there’s nothing relaxing about what she has to do tonight, do you get that? Mercer’s guy will be there to keep an eye on things. She needs to be on her guard, thinking she’s completely on her own because that way, she knows she doesn’t have the luxury of slipping up.”

“She’s too pissed off to slip up. And you could’ve at least told me your stupid plan earlier.”

He shakes his head. “You wouldn’t have been convincing enough. She

needed to make the choice to leave here alone. Singularly focused. That's how she works best. And she is the best."

"Um, excuse me?" Kat snaps.

Alek winks at her. "Learned from the best."

"Thanks, cuz."

Boris lifts an eyebrow. "The only reason why we're letting you go is because you clearly care about her. You need to be observant. Don't let your emotions get in the way of this mission. There will be things you will see and not like. She can't be distracted by you at all. You hang around like a fly on the wall and wait for her to get the job done. Then you get her out of there."

Alek's jaw tightens. "She doesn't need saving from you. She needs to be saved from the fucking guilt that's been eating her alive since she was sixteen. Killing Branko will give her that salvation. Not you."

I wave my hand at him. "Yeah, yeah. What the hell ever, Sev. Now give me the keys to one of your really sweet cars. I'm gonna have some fun with it on my way to SLK."

"Take the black Tesla." Alek pulls a set of keys from his pocket and drops them into my hand. "Don't you need the address?"

"I told you, I was going no matter what. I already got the address." I wave the phone in the air. "Google, bitch."

I don't waste another second before pulling open the door and running down the stairs. I don't even want to waste a second waiting for the elevator. Val needs me. I don't give a damn what she said before she left. I don't believe a word of it, and it's not just because I'm falling hard for her.

She's doing what she thinks she needs to do, what she feels she has to do to get to Branko and shut him down for good.

But I'm doing what I need to do, too. I won't leave her on her own to battle that fucker. I wasn't able to save Niall, Conor, or Dad. I caused Patty and Kyla's accident.

I have to be able to save someone; otherwise, what the hell good am I?

The patsy Sev has made me out to be?

Fuck that.

I click the alarm and jump into the Tesla. It's not my kind of car. I prefer mine with loud motors. Muscle cars with power. This car is bullshit. No noise. No fucking controls anywhere. It's like driving an iPad, for Christ's sake.

Once I figure out how to start it up, I drive to the exit. The security gate

lifts, and I hit the gas and fly down the private road. From what I remember, the safehouse is about thirty minutes outside of the city and through the desert.

The sun dips low, just peeking over the top of the purple mountains on either side of the straight desolate road. I speed past cacti and weird-looking desert-type bushes. I'm too far out to see the lights of Vegas, but Val can't be too far ahead of me. I stomp on the gas and the damn car doesn't make a sound.

"Fucking pussy car," I mumble, sweeping past screens on the display. It's too quiet in here. I need some music, preferably something with a lot of pounding and screaming to get my head straight. I stab a few icons on the screen, trying to keep my eyes on the road at the same time.

The sky darkens. A hint of light in the distance tells me I'm getting closer.

I hit some more icons when a dark shadow darts across the road a few feet away from me. My hand slips. "Fuck," I yelp, swinging the steering wheel in the opposite direction. I press down on the gas, maneuvering the car back onto the road. But it doesn't speed up.

It slows down.

And then it stops. Right in the middle of nowhere.

What the hell?

The display screen goes black.

Realization bitch-slaps me.

That bastard.

He did this. He never intended for me to go after Val, but he knew I'd find a way to get out of the safehouse.

So he gave me one. And then took it away.

I slam my hands on the steering wheel. "Alek, if you're listening, I'm gonna fuck your shit up, you prick."

Even though the car shut down, I can still get out. I shove the door open and give the side of the car a few good kicks. "I'm gonna pound the shit out of this stupid-ass car."

A flash of light from behind momentarily blinds me. I raise a hand to my eyes to block it, then instinctively reach for my gun with the other hand since I'm alone in the dark fucking desert with no help for days. I pat my pockets down and groan at the sky.

Of course, I forgot the stupid burner phone back at the safehouse.

Tires squeal against the pavement. I keep my hand on my gun, gripping the handle tight.

A blond head pops out of the passenger seat. She flashes a bright smile. “Hey, sweetie, you got car trouble?” She leans back the slightest bit to give me a look at the fake tits popping out of the top of her dress. “You need a ride? A date?” Her smile widens. “Both?”

The back window slides down. I catch a glimpse of another two girls piled into the seat. They could be porn stars, hookers, or escorts for all I give a damn. I need help. And I’ll play along so they give it to me.

I keep my hand behind me and walk up to the car. I’m no idiot. I know the hustle. And these girls could easily be pros.

“I could use a lift.” My lips curl upward and one of them claps her hands.

“Ooh, I’ve got dibs, bitches.”

The back door swings open and the brunette slides farther into the car. She pats the seat next to her with an inviting smile. “I don’t bite, love. Unless you beg.”

Goddammit. Alek couldn’t have planned this shit, but I’ll bet he’s having a big laugh right now if he did. I grit my teeth and get into the back. The brunette’s hand immediately finds a resting spot on my leg.

“Wanna party with us tonight?” Another blonde winks at me. “We’re a lot of fun. You won’t ever want to leave us.”

A tight smile pulls at my lips. “Thanks, but I need to get to a club. Meeting a friend.”

It dawns on me at that second that I have no way inside the place. Val has Mercer’s contact, but I’m on my own. No membership, no guest list. Nothing.

How the fuck am I getting in there?

Then... lightbulb.

They haven’t tried to rob me yet. Maybe they really do just want to party. I’m a fun guy. They can see it.

I turn to the brunette. “Just how crazy are you girls?”

“The craziest.” She reaches up and runs her fingers through my hair before sliding her hand down the front of my chest. “Mmm, so strong. I like that.”

“I’m heading to a party now at SLK. Why don’t we go together? Then we’ll have all night afterward for whatever you wanna do.”

The blonde in the passenger seat peeks at me over her shoulder. “Kinky

fucker, aren't you?"

I shrug. "I guess you'll have to come with me if you wanna find out."

The redhead driving looks at me in the rearview mirror. "I know what you're up to, sweetie. Don't think you're going to get away with it, though."

My heart stops. Fuck. Is this another setup?

I try to play it off. "I've got no agenda. Just trying to have a little fun with some beautiful ladies."

"Yeah, well, don't think because you're taking us to some sex club that you get out of paying for whatever we do to you." Her voice takes on a harsh edge. "You think we haven't been duped before?"

The brunette next to me reaches down and slides a hand up the side of her dress. In the moonlight, the glimmer of a metal tip hits my eyes. I recoil when she pops out the blade.

"You're hot, but I'll cut you if you try to stiff us." Then she leans forward and puts the knife blade to my cheek before grabbing hold of my earlobe with her teeth. She bites down hard. "Got it?"

Fuck, that's hot.

I need Val to threaten me at knifepoint sometime.

"Got it." I bite back a smile. I have no plans to do a damn thing to any one of them. But I'm sure there will be plenty of takers inside the sex den who will fork over cash to live out some of their fantasies with these girls.

"By the way, I'm Mandee." She grins. "And next to me is Penny. Lila is driving, and Jesi is in front of you."

"Nice to meet you." I smile. "I'm Q."

"Love it." Mandee winks at me.

Thirty minutes and a lot of groping by Mandee later, Lila pulls into the parking lot once we arrive at SLK. It's buried behind a bunch of palm trees. Black exterior, dim red downlights run along the roof. White lights scatter over the sidewalk like a path to the sin beyond the front doors.

I grab a pair of sunglasses from inside my jacket. There was no way I was making it in here in shorts and a t-shirt. The sunglasses will hide part of my face, at least.

"Don't worry, sweetie. Everyone gets a mask once you go through the front door."

I grasp the door handle and push it open. My pulse jumps into my throat and slams a fist through it. There isn't a huge crowd gathered outside. Maybe they won't even let us in. If it's true what Alek said about needing to be a

member, we're fucked.

The girls all get out, looking completely fuckable in tiny dresses that are so short they graze their ass cheeks. They fluff out their hair and pop their lips.

Mandee loops her arm through mine. "Remember, I called dibs."

I force a smile even though my lungs feel like they've been chained together. Lila walks right up to the man standing at the door. She leans close to whisper something to him. I keep my head down, hovering behind Jesi and Penny. After what feels like forever, Lila turns and motions for us to follow her inside.

I don't know what she said or what she promised, but we're fucking in like Flynn after that. Masks are handed to us, and I quickly ditch the glasses. We walk through the foyer. It has black walls. Fancy-looking red light fixtures drop from the ceiling. Dark-red velvet couches line each side of the long hallway leading into the main area of the club. People are in different states of undress all around us. They fuck on the couches, the floor, against the wall. At the bar, groups gather around to watch while sipping from long crystal flutes. I edge closer to Lila, although Mandee has me locked pretty tight against her.

"It seemed to be pretty easy to get in here tonight," I say.

Lila nods. "Yes. There's a private event happening, so the club is open to the public tonight. Selective public, of course."

My ears perk up at "private event." Is that where Branko is? That motherfucker is actually right here? And the doorman just offered that shit up to a girl with big titties?

I give my head a shake. Jesus. They ought to just shoot him now.

Mandee tugs me toward a room where a crowd is gathered. She pushes through to get a better look at the show. My breath hitches and a sudden urge to puke assaults me.

Val is tied to the back wall, held to a bunch of hooks by scarves. She's barely covered in scraps of black leather. The boots are the only things on her body covering skin.

Rage bubbles in my veins as I watch three guys with their hands and mouths all over her. I grab a fistful of my hair and tug it to keep my mouth from shouting all the things I'm gonna do to those bastards when I get a chance.

I swallow them down. If I open my mouth, if I make one false move, she

could be finished.

My insides feel like they've been submerged in ice water. I force myself to look away, my hand back on my gun. I could pull it out and fucking kill them all right now. I can save my girl and get the fuck out of here.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face, shaking with anger.

“What’s wrong, babe?” Mande’s eyebrows furrow. “You look upset.”

I swallow hard, blood pulsing between my temples. Lights flash in front of my eyes, my head woozy.

Jesus, this is not the time for a panic attack. And unless I’m dying, I need to fucking focus.

Mande tugs my arm. “Q?”

Her voice is muffled, like she’s speaking to me through water. My heart thumps, pounding against my rib cage. In my periphery, I see someone untie her. Her arms fall from the hooks, limply dropping to her sides. Another performer steps into her place. I clench my fists, the tattoo of her camellias glaring at me and taunting me from the wall.

Where’s her bright fucking future, Quinn?

Didn’t you want to be part of it?

Now she might not get it!

What are you going to do?

Suddenly, Val jerks her head left and right, desperation in her gaze. My skin crawls at the sight of three men pushing her into a corner away from the wall display. I pull away from Mande, shove my way through the crowd, and tear off my mask. Val’s gaze latches on to mine through the mask eye holes, the lower half of her face pinched with fear.

“No,” she mouths, shaking her head wildly. “Get out now.”

Then an arm loops around her waist and drags her toward a door along the wall. It opens to what looks like a tunnel, it’s so dark. One of the men shoves her inside and pulls the door closed.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Fuck that asshole Alek. Fuck his stupid Tesla. Fuck his goddamn life!

I’m too late.

And she’s...

Gone.

CHAPTER 29

VALENTINA

My high heels click against the tile floor as I'm rushed down the dark tunnel. With a rocketing pulse, the sound of my shoes is muted by the rush of blood pounding between my ears. I try to keep my breathing even, to center myself, to focus on what comes next.

Whatever the hell that turns out to be.

But my frenzied mind keeps tripping back to Quinn.

What the fuck is he doing here? How did he get out of the safehouse? And why did he have that whore plastered against him?

Thoughts swirl like fierce winds. I can't catch a single one to make sense of it.

He shouldn't be here. If they see him, it's game over for both of us. They'll never let us leave alive.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, sucking in all the control I can grasp. I can't think about Quinn right now. I can't let my focus waver. Anything that yanks me out of character could kill me and dammit, I will not die without filleting that murderous bastard.

The men who appeared once I was freed from the wall restraints don't speak. They surround me now, dwarfing me with their Hulk-like size.

Not like I couldn't take them all out if I needed to.

Except their role is part of the alleged "plan."

Mercer's contact, Zavion, disappeared once I was untied from the wall. One second, he was there, flogging me while people fucked all around us, and the next, he vanished like a puff of smoke. It would have been nice to know that I'd be on my own for this next part, but I guess it makes sense that Mercer wouldn't blow his cover because I have an insatiable need for

revenge.

At least Zavion kept his word and promised he wouldn't let anyone sample what's underneath my ridiculously skimpy ensemble. Our performance was hot and sensual and kinky as all hell judging by the reactions to people in our room, but not one finger slipped into any of my protected areas. He wouldn't even let anyone get close. I played the part of the slave, made the right sounds and movements, and boom.

I was discovered. I'd like to say it really was as easy as Mercer said it'd be but...

I'm not that naïve.

The small stiletto knife tucked into my bra presses tight to my skin.

A shiver slips down my spine.

I have no idea what to expect once I get inside the room with Branko. Will there be other girls? Will he be there waiting or show up later? Will he try to... I swallow past the bile creeping up the back of my throat... *fuck me?*

Whatever happens, my God, I'm so close to eradicating this cancer of a man from the world. If Mercer was true to his word, tonight will be the end of Branko Ivanova.

With a pounding heart, I keep up the brisk pace of my rigid escorts. These guys have a job to do and so do I. Goosebumps pebble my skin, the blast of air from overhead vents chilling my bones.

We finally stop outside of a closed door. Two guys take their positions on either side of it. The one in front of me sticks a key into the door, twists the knob, and pushes it open.

He turns, his lecherous gaze slithering over the length of my body like the slimiest of snakes. He takes me by the arm and leads me inside the lavish room drenched in shades of lust, desire, and sin.

A massive bed stands in the center of the space with four tall posters and a canopy of red silk edged with gold draped over it. A brass chandelier hangs low from the ceiling, illuminating the room in a soft red glow. The walls are draped in red silk panels, antique furniture scattered around the perimeter.

On the wall opposite the bed hangs rows of whips, handcuffs, blindfolds, floggers, and an assortment of other torture devices. A St. Andrews cross stands intimidatingly in a far corner.

One other realization hits me as I take in the contents of the room.

There are no other girls in here.

It's just me.

“Do you know why you’re here?” the man who opened the door asks gruffly.

I give my head a little shake.

“You were spotted by management. They were impressed by your performance.”

“Okay,” I say.

He nods his head toward the bed. “Someone will be in to see you soon. Undress and wait on the bed.”

Is he fucking kidding me?

He narrows his eyes at me when I don’t make a move to obey his order. “What are you waiting for?”

I lock my lips together before my jaw hits the floor.

How the fuck am I supposed to take off this bra without my weapon clattering on the damn floor?

Sweeping my tongue over my lips, I slowly reach behind me and take my time unhooking the back of the bra. Maybe there’s some way I can lean forward to keep the knife from falling out of the bra cups—

A loud buzz jars me. The guy watching me strip in the most unsensual way imaginable takes out his phone and holds it against his ear. He murmurs a few words and grunts a few sounds before ending the call. Turning to the other two guys, he points back to the tunnel.

With one look back at me, his leering gaze lingers on my boobs. “Next time.”

Then he leaves and slams the door shut behind him. A loud click tells me I’m stuck here, locked in this eerily decorative BDSM cage. I grab the knife from my patent leather bra and stick it into the back waistband of the matching bottoms. The wall full of kink has nabbed my attention. I take a few steps toward it, fingering the soft leather tassels on one of the floggers.

This is a playroom.

But where the hell is the dungeon? The place where the auctions are held? The space where girls are drugged and sold to the highest bidders?

My stomach twists.

The area where some girls overdose and die before they’ve gotten the chance to live.

Flashbacks pummel my brain. They careen back and forth between my temples like a fierce game of pinball. Charly’s matted hair covering her face, the lifeless, vacant stare I could barely make out through the wet strands.

They killed her. He killed her and so many others, including Molly Mulligan.

Rage floods my insides.

I grab a flogger off the wall and hurl it across the room. Then I pull the rest of the wall apart, every whip, chain, and rope strewn all over the floor once I'm done. It doesn't make me feel better, though.

Nothing will, until I get the justice my whole family needs.

Seconds stretch into minutes that feel like a lifetime. I pace the room, rubbing my hands down the sides of my arms. I can't just stay locked in here forever. Something is happening tonight. Something that needs to be stopped.

The balls of my feet burn like I've been walking over hot coals. I sink onto the bed and lean forward to hold my head in my hands, careful not to disturb the mask that covers the top half of my face.

My head jerks upward when the door opens what seems like hours later. I spring up from the mattress, my fingers itching to grab my knife. A whiff of a familiar scent swirls under my nostrils, a cloud of something so noxious and overpowering I know I've smelled it before.

Then he appears.

My stomach plummets into my boots.

"Did you really think your little disguise was going to fool me, Valentina?" His low, gruff voice grates against my skin.

Denis Stepanov, my almost father-in-law and one of Branko Ivanova's close business partners.

No, no, no!

My spine stiffens, my heart galloping at a crazed pace.

It's over.

CHAPTER 30

VALENTINA

“I must say, you’ve gone to great lengths to fly under the radar over the past few years. The hair, the makeup, the eyes, the clothes.” Stepanov circles me like a lion about to pounce on a raw steak. “But did you really think you were going to get away with that little show tonight? You think we haven’t been waiting for you to show up?”

Fury percolates deep in my gut.

How the *fuck*?

He steps closer to me, and with one thick finger, traces the outline of my tattoo. His fingertip is like a red-hot poker on my flesh.

I recoil. “Take your fucking hand off of me.”

His thin lips lift. “You might have fooled me, too, if not for that tattoo. But I’ve had eyes on you for a long time, just waiting for you to show up in the lion’s den. I was patient. We all were. We knew we’d get our chance to have our way with Viktor Malikov’s youngest daughter, the ultimate revenge for him shutting us out of the Brotherhood 7.”

“He shut you out because of the filth you were investing in. He never wanted to be part of that. It was never the goal of the Brotherhood,” I sneer. “Branko opened Strathmore Enterprises to funnel money into his sex trafficking operation, and then you directed those funds from him to Strathmore Enterprises... to Branko. *You, Denis.*”

“Viktor was too shortsighted. We made billions.”

“You betrayed him and set him up to take the fall for those investments.” I step closer, seething. “You climbed into bed with Branko and killed Charly and Molly. You fucking cocksucker!”

“Grow up, little girl. Your father made his bed a long time ago. Did he

really think that he'd be able to go rogue and stop his entire consortium from doing the very thing that he brought us together for?" Denis shakes his head.

"The Brotherhood was created to protect the organization from outside threats, an objective you agreed to when you joined." Heat rises in my cheeks. Time ticks past, and if I don't stop this bastard in his tracks, I won't be able to help anyone, including myself.

"I only joined so I could sink my dick into your sweet pussy. It was only a matter of time before my idiot son Dmitri was killed. I knew I'd eventually get my chance. And here it is."

I swing a fist against Denis's jaw, smiling when he stumbles backward. He wipes away a thin trickle of blood from his mouth.

A low, condescending chuckle rings in my ears. Denis's beady eyes narrow to slits. "Your father should have stopped his witch hunt for Branko after Charly was taken. But he didn't learn his lesson. He fucked Branko, so Branko fucked him right back and has been ass-ramming him ever since. Too bad he's six feet under and can't see what I'm about to do to his precious angel, the one he gave up to my family in exchange for silence."

I almost choke on my next breath.

"Silence?"

Denis grabs hold of a bra strap and yanks me toward him. "That's right, sweetheart. You didn't know? You thought it was a business deal to solidify a union?" He grins, an ominous scumbag grin that I want to cut right off his face. "No. It was to save his own ass. He gave yours up to protect his own."

"He gave me up so I could keep you close and track Branko." My voice wavers the tiniest bit and I hate myself for it.

"Try again. You were just an insurance policy, Valentina, and I knew it. That wedding was never going to happen. Viktor knew where to find Branko. But he also knew that a move against Branko would have the rest of the Brotherhood 7 leak his involvement with the sex trafficking ring. Nobody else would have been implicated. All of the transfers went directly from your father's accounts. And by the time he pulled his head out of his ass and found out the truth, it was too late. He had no choice but to stand down, or else his empire would have crumbled and he'd have gone to prison for the rest of his pathetic life."

"No," I scream. "You're a liar."

"Am I?" He closes the space between us and his cologne locks around my neck like a noose, suffocating me slowly and torturously.

“Branko knows we had intel on him. That’s why he’s been targeting the rest of my family, why the other members of the Brotherhood have been acting on his behalf.”

“Is that what your friend Alek Severinov is telling you?” Denis shakes his head. “*Tsk-tsk*. I thought you were smarter than that.” He fists my bra strap. His cigar-tinged breath makes my stomach roil. “They’re both guilty as sin as far as that intel goes. Both funded the illicit activities. Both vulnerable to exposure. Only difference is we already got your dad. Alek won’t be too far behind him, though. Same with Mulligan. We’ve always been a patient group, and their time is almost up.”

“What group do you even have left?” I struggle against his grip, elbowing him to the gut. I want to cut his throat so badly, but Branko is still out there, and the information I was just pelted with is making my head spin like a top. “My brothers have completely destroyed your sick little club.”

“Those are the members you know about, Val. There are so many more of us. Some hide in shadows, some in plain sight. We’re all around you and we will get everything we want, everything we deserve, everything your father cut us off from when he decided he didn’t like our choices.” With one hard shove, he pushes me backward. My back hits the mattress hard. “And I’m starting with *you*.”

My chest heaves, my eyes wide as he climbs on top of me. He leans into me with one knee, pressing it against my sternum.

Fucking idiot.

He really thinks I’m a helpless princess.

I drive one knee into his groin, and just before he collapses on top of me, screaming like a little bitch, I shove him backward. He flies against one of the posters, his head slamming into the wood.

I crawl toward him. “You wanted to play, right, Denis? With me?”

His face is pinched with pain, bright spots of red bleeding into his cheeks. His breaths are ragged. I hover over him with a smile, then reach behind me and grab the knife. I pop open the blade and hold it in front of his face.

“Fuck you, Denis. I hope you burn in hell with the rest of those assholes. And rest assured, Branko will be joining you soon.”

With a resounding yell, I jam the blade into his neck and pull it out. I jump back before the sea of red spurts from his sliced jugular. His hands fly up to the wound and he tumbles off the bed, crashing to the floor. I stand over and watch him writhe on the floor, gurgling as he chokes to death on his own

blood.

A pool forms around him. I tiptoe around it, careful not to bring any evidence along with me. Once I'm out of range, I sink to my knees, clutching the sides of my head. Hot tears sting my eyes.

This could have been my life.

That sick bastard could have actually become my father-in-law.

The thought of him even remotely close to me makes me gag.

But more than that, the reality that I may have gotten everything about this mission against Branko completely wrong makes me sick with anger and disgust.

There may be more to this puzzle than I knew, but one thing still stands.

Branko Ivanova is an evil son of a bitch who needs to die.

No matter what stories or half-truths I've been fed over the past years, he still owns my family if Denis's claims are true.

I grab Denis's phone with my shaking hand and hold it up to his face. Thank God, it opens to his home screen. My shoulders quake, my chest constricted by the sob threatening to escape. Through the tears, I stab the icon for text messages and scan the incoming texts.

It has to be here somewhere. The location of whatever this "event" is. Branko isn't coming for me. I need to go to him. And I'm so close, the screen practically singses my fingertips.

Then with a startled gasp, I jerk my head up toward the door. The brass knob twists.

Shit.

Someone is here.

I stare down at Denis's knife-torn body, then jump to my feet. The blade hangs from my hand.

The door creaks open.

My heart stutters to a stop.

Words catch in my throat, tangled with a gaggle of tears that I refuse to let slip from my eyes.

His gravelly voice makes my body quiver and hum as he moves toward me with a feral look in his eyes.

"You've been a bad girl, Valentina. A very bad girl. And you need to be punished."

CHAPTER 31

QUINN

Val's jaw smashes against the floor when she sees me, right next to the bloody dude next to her. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

Despite the fact that we're on seriously borrowed time and I have an extremely pissed-off "escort" next to me who wants to be paid big for what she just did, I can't help but gape at Val in that getup.

The images of her tied to the wall in the club are branded into my memory but this... holy fuck.

Hotter than hell, and the icing on the cake?

The knife hanging from her hand.

I know we have way bigger fish to fry, but that fantasy about her and the knife consumes my lust-fogged brain.

My cock jumps.

It may be sick and twisted, but hey, whatever gets you going. I don't throw glass or live in a stone house. Or whatever the fuck the saying is.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Her words are a breathy whisper, just one more thing to keep my dick nice and hard. "You're supposed to be at the safehouse."

"Yeah, well, your buddy Alek is gonna get a serious ass-kicking once we get back there. I thought you were a control freak, but that guy? There aren't words to describe what a fucking stubborn and controlling pain in the ass he is." I shake my head. "He played me like a damn violin and then was gonna leave me for dead in the damn desert."

I walk toward her while Mandeel stays back by the door.

Val's eyes narrow as she focuses on Mandeel. "New friend?" she snaps at

me.

“She helped me get back here to you. Hit up a security guard and told him all the shit she was gonna do to me back here.” I shrug. “I couldn’t shoot the place up by myself. And if I made a scene, they’d figure out who I am.”

I point to the guy bleeding out on the floor. “What’s his story? I bet he never saw *that* ending coming.”

“Denis Stepanov. My almost father-in-law.” Val’s lips twist like she’s just tasted shit as she glares down at him. “He’s a disgusting, vindictive bastard.”

“You mean *was*.” My eyebrows knit together, fists tight at my sides, not that there’s anyone for me to punch right now. “Did he hurt you?”

She looks up, her fake dark eyes simmering with disdain. “In the worst possible way.” Her voice is choked, like she’s pushing past a lump in her throat. “But he lost. And so will the others.”

“You mean Branko.”

“He might not be the only one. You missed a hell of a lot.” She holds up a phone. “But we don’t have time to chat over cocktails about how that man just devastated me on a whole new level. There’s an event tonight.”

“I know. The door guy said something about it.”

“Well, this string of messages on his phone told me that it’s being held here, on the lower level. A perfect place because it’s business as usual for most of the club. Plenty of distractions while deals are made underneath all the commercial kink.”

“Okay, guys.” Mandee’s impatient voice breaks into our conversation. “Sorry to interrupt your little *Mission Impossible* strategy session, but Quinn and I have some unfinished business.”

Val keeps her eyes locked on Mandee while she slowly wipes the blood off the knife with Stepanov’s jacket before making a show of holding out the clean blade.

“Really, sweetie? You think I’m just a pretty face and a hot body? I’m no stranger to cutting someone when they go a little too far. Occupational hazard.” Mandee lifts an eyebrow. “Look, I think your guy is hot. I wanted to fuck him. Now I just want his money. That’s it.”

Val’s eyes skate toward me. “And did you perform services that required payment?”

I let out a snort. “Yeah, I had her sweet-talk security into letting us back here so I could find *you*.”

Val waves the knife at Stepanov. "I didn't need saving. Clearly."

"Yeah, yeah. Great. But it could have been worse. You might've been thrown into a gang bang or some shit like that. You could have been in trouble."

"Seems like I'm always in trouble with you." Val cocks her head to the side.

Mandee lets out a frustrated huff. "Just pay me my money. Then I can go on my merry way and you guys can go back to whatever game you're playing. You obviously want to fuck, so you're in the right place." Her lips lift. "And once I get paid, I might go and find a fuck of my own."

I chuckle and pull out my cash. I slap the crisp bills into her outstretched hand. A flicker of surprise crosses her face.

"You really saved my ass tonight. I'd give you more if I had it."

Mandee's face relaxes into a smile. "Good luck, sexy." She tosses a casual glance at Val over her shoulder. "Don't let this one get away, sweetie. He's a good one. He did a lot to get to you tonight."

She gives us a little wave, flips her hair, then disappears.

"I can't believe you brought her in here," Val says. "She could be working with the enemy for all we know."

"I think you were a little jealous." The corner of my lips lift. I move closer, reaching behind her to grab her ass.

"I didn't like the way she looked at you."

"She was honest. Said she wanted to fuck me."

"Yeah, well, you're *my* fake husband. Nobody touches you, nobody thinks about you, unless they have a death wish."

"You sound really possessive right now." I pull her against me. "A little while ago, you pretty much told me to piss off, that I didn't mean anything to you, that this whole thing is a sham. What changed?"

"It's still a sham."

"So you want me out of your hair? I'll go find Mandee and fuck her, if it'll make you happy."

She takes a deep breath. "It won't make me happy."

I run a hand up the slope of her spine. "Then what will make you happy, Val?"

A scared expression shadows her face. "You. But you—"

"I know, I know. You never know what you're gonna get. I keep people on their toes. I like to think that makes me unique." I wink at her.

“You’re scary because of it. Because I’m the girl who always needs to know what to expect. I hate surprises.”

“Maybe fate is telling you to open yourself up to the possibility that sometimes unpredictable can be fun. And give you massive orgasms.” I nuzzle the side of her neck, completely oblivious to the dead guy on the floor at our feet. “Speaking of orgasms, I definitely think we’re in the right place.”

Val pulls away like she just remembered why we’re in this playroom at all. “Your fetishes need to wait. We have to go. Now.”

The place is a labyrinth of eroticism. We creep into the hallway and lose ourselves in the couples and throuples and orgies taking place on either side of the walls. Bodies writhe, mouths moan, limbs flail. Everywhere we look, people are fucking. I focus on Val’s ass in those tiny black leather panties. My dick is so hard right now, it’s about to bust through my pants.

Val laces her fingers with mine and glances down at the phone again, not paying the least bit of attention to the salaciousness surrounding us. With a quick glance behind me, I squint at a stream of light from the door at the far end of the hallway.

The door Mandee and I used to get to Val.

A few big dudes squeeze through the doorway. Their faces are menacing, their eyes searching the place for something.

Or maybe *someone*.

I sidestep Val and pull her into a corner behind a couple going at it on a sofa. “Go with it unless you wanna get iced right here in this club.” I push her against the wall and cover her with my chest before crushing my lips to hers. Her legs fall open and I grind my cock against her covered pussy. I swear my only objective was to get us out of the line of sight, but fuck me, this feels so good. *She* feels so good.

She takes my lower lip between her teeth and tugs seductively on it, dry fucking the shit out of me. I grab her leg and rest it on my hip. She thrusts hard, our hips rocking together. Breathless, she pulls away suddenly.

“Are they gone?”

My cock is dripping. All I want to do is push those panties aside and sink into her hot pussy. I fist my hair to get the blood pumping through the rest of my body. I lean backward and peek into the hallway behind me. Still plenty of fucking in the darkness. But the ominous guys are gone.

“I think we’re clear.” I move back into the shadows, closing the space between us. “Those guys are—”

I suck in a breath, the rest of the words knotted in my throat.
The barrel of a gun jabs me in the back.
Goddammit.
Not gone.

CHAPTER 32

VALENTINA

Quinn's eyes harden as they wrestle with mine. Two men stand behind him and from the way he tenses against me, I know they've got a gun to his back. They might even have *his* gun to his back.

At this point I don't know who in the motherfuck is working with us or against us.

Did the little whore he brought back here give us up?

Was it Mercer?

Or just fucking bad luck?

Anger snakes through me like poison, seeping into every crevice and cell. I want to grab Alek by the neck and throttle him, but that's going to have to wait until we get back to the safehouse. And we *will* get back there if there's still breath in my damn body.

"You're coming with us," the guy directly behind Quinn grunts.

My eyes dart left and right. The hallway is dark and filled with people otherwise occupied with more carnal happenings. In the throes of orgasm, I seriously doubt any of them would blink an eye at us being accosted.

Scenarios fly through my mind. If we run, they'll shoot us dead. And if the powers that be are onto us, I'm sure there are more security guys waiting for us outside this hallway of ill repute.

We have no choice... at least, not until we make it out that door.

I give Quinn a tiny nod, hoping to God he gets my telepathic message to stand the hell down.

The guy behind Quinn grabs his shirt and shoves him forward. I follow close behind. I press myself into his back, the imprint of his gun against my

stomach. I let out an unsteady breath. With my stiletto tucked back into my bra and his gun, we might be okay.

A nagging feeling twists my gut.

But what about Branko? And the auction? And the girls?

Guilt and regret pummel me. I can't let him get away. Not again. I've been chasing him for too long.

This—*he*—end tonight.

Unwelcome fury flickers in my gut. I don't want to acknowledge it, but the possibility gnaws at my insides like a rat on rotting trash.

Quinn might have led them straight to us. Who the fuck knows who that Mande girl really is? She could have been paid to give us up. Who knows what she said to security when she was angling for a way to get back here? And the fact that she was completely unruffled about seeing Stepanov's dead body splayed all over the floor should have been a glaring red flag.

So yeah, it's entirely possible that Quinn might have fucked us again.

And even though I don't want to believe it because I'm falling for the goddamn crazy vigilante asshole, he might be the very reason why Branko slips through my fingers again, and from what we're told, it might be the last time.

I flex my fingers, electricity crackling on the tips as we walk toward the door at the end of the hallway. The barrel of a gun is stuck to my back, a reminder that if I make a move once we're outside the door, it puts Quinn at risk.

That realization sends a shudder through me.

I lied to him back at the safehouse to piss him off and keep him from following me.

Now he's here, right in front of me, and it turns out he's the biggest obstacle between me and the elusive Branko.

My heart clenches with fear.

Alek always told me I'd have to make a choice and until now, I'd been able to avoid it.

But it hovers over me like a threatening cloud, a warning of the impending evil that waits for us outside that door.

Sweat beads on the back of my neck. The man leading us grasps the doorknob and twists it. A dim glow peeks out from beneath the door. My skin prickles, teeth gritted as he pushes it open.

With a blaring pulse, I clench and unclench my fists.

The door opens. We're pushed through, and then it slams just as quickly behind us.

Black fabric billows in the chilled air as we pass, soft golden lights form a path along the floor. It's the only light in the empty tunnelloike space. Before we reach the end, one of the guys yanks my arm and tugs me to the right. He presses something on the wall, and it slides open, revealing a hidden door. I struggle in his grip, a feeling of impending dread suffocating me like a thick rope lassoed around my throat.

Whatever lies beyond this next door may be bad... like deadly bad.

"You're already dead," his deep, gruff voice mutters. "Don't bother fighting it."

Quinn is now behind me. My breaths become shallow and sharp.

Is Branko behind this door?

Will I survive long enough to find out?

My core tenses.

Fuck yes, I will. This jackass may have one of my arms, but the other one is free to grab my knife. The air is sucked from my lungs as I wait for the door to creak open. I catch Quinn's eye one last time before I'm dragged inside.

The smell hits me first, like a machete to my gut.

Death, foreboding, and fucking sandalwood.

I keep my mouth shut, my gag reflex in overdrive. The man shoves me into the space. It's gray, bare, and cold. Eyeing the walls around me, I take note of chains, whips, and a variety of torture devices that don't in any way contribute to an aura of seduction and primal fantasy.

"This is another of our playrooms. Although it's not the kind of torture our patrons typically like to experience."

"That's right. This next part sure as hell won't tickle."

I choke on a gasp. It's *her*, the girl from the room, the girl Quinn trusted enough to bring to me. The fucking whore.

She flashes a bright smile at us, swinging her hips as she walks toward us.

"Mandee, what the fuck did you do?"

I turn to glare at Quinn. "What did *she* do? Really?"

Mandee cocks her head to the side. She takes a few more steps and drags her finger down the front of Quinn's shirt. "Sorry, sweetie. It's all about the cash. And you're not worth much to me beyond that pretty face." She points to the security guys. "They just pay better. No hard feelings, okay?"

“You did good.” The guy next to me pulls out a wad of cash and hands it to her. “Now get out.”

Mandee puts her hand on her hip and waves the bills in front of her. “I think I’m worth a whole lot more than this for what I did. At least double. Times two. Got it?”

The three guards exchange a tense look, and the one who handed her the money nods. “You are worth it.” His lips stretch into a sinister smirk. “I’m just not paying for it.”

He holds his gun out and shoots her between the eyes. Hundred-dollar bills fly out of her hand, scattering around her like a fan.

I stare at her lying there, a vacant look in her overly made-up eyes.

Fucking A. Looks like the greedy little bitch got what she deserved.

One of the other guys grabs my hair and tugs it backward. I scream, the hairpins securing the wig in place stabbing my skull. He grunts and pulls it off, revealing my natural hair.

“You killed the boss. Now you pay.” Another man grabs Quinn’s arm and drags him over to the wall.

The boss? What the—?

But before I can even hear my brain finish asking the question, Quinn has his gun out. Shots fire, ricocheting off the cement walls. I duck down, and in a hair of a second, I have my knife. I pop out the blade and lunge for the feet of the man who’d grabbed me. I drag the knife across his Achilles first, then stab him in the thigh. He collapses to the ground, his face smashing against the concrete.

Bullets pop and explode across the room. I pray it’s Quinn’s gun firing at them. I dive on top of the thug writhing on the ground, a pool of blood gathering around his lower body. Grabbing his hair, I yank his head backward and press my lips against his ear.

“Where is Branko?” I bring the knife to the side of his head. “And don’t fuck with me. I will stab you in the fucking ear if you do.”

“No, you won’t,” he rasps. “Because you want answers.”

I fist his hair harder, then slam his face into the floor. He cries out when his nose smashes against the concrete. “I’ll get them or you die, understand?”

I move the knife to his throat. “Now, I’ll ask one more time. Where is Branko?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

I press the tip of the blade into his flesh. He yelps.

“Don’t cry like a little bitch. Tell me where he is.”

“I don’t know any Branko.” He groans when I smack him back against the floor, this time making sure his forehead takes the full impact. Skull against concrete makes such a pleasing sound.

“Think very hard right now, because if you don’t give me the information I’m looking for, I will split your fucking head in two.” My fingertips numb from gripping him so hard.

“I swear, I don’t know who that is.”

“Bullshit. Then who’s your boss?”

“Denis Stepanov,” the guy growls. Blood from his nose and mouth trickle over my fingers.

“No. It’s not him.” It can’t be. He absolutely cannot be the one who is running this fucking ring. Branko is here. He has to be!

I flip the guy onto his back and clench his shirt tight in my fist. My other hand holds the knife poised over his eye. “One last time or you lose the eyes.”

“There’s no Brank—”

With a loud yell, I drag the knife across his throat. I hover over him, the life draining from his eyes. More bullets crack against the wall behind me. I fall backward, rolling around on the ground before jumping to my feet. I crouch low next to a column just in time to see Quinn pop off one more shot that sends the last guy crashing into a wall, then the floor.

I run toward Quinn and slam my fist into his jaw. “You son of a bitch! She led us right to them. How the fuck could you bring her into this?”

He holds a hand against the spot where I decked him, then captures my wrist in his hand. “I did what I had to do to get to you, okay? I didn’t have a crew or a bunch of weapons. I didn’t even have a fucking car because of Alek the asshat. So if you wanna be pissed at me for bringing her here, fine. Fucking sue me. But I only did it to find you.”

“Great, so now you have me. There’s going to be a witch hunt to find us.”

He rubs his face. “We need to get out of here. Now.”

A faraway whimper makes my ears perk up. “Wait. Did you hear that?”

“Val, there isn’t time to—”

I hold up a hand. “I came here to find Branko and stop him from destroying any more lives. If there’s an auction happening, it can still lead us to him. We can still save lives.”

“We have a shot to get the fuck out of here before they find us, and you

wanna go running right back to them? Someone sold us out, Val. And it wasn't only Mande. Maybe you need to focus on that, instead, yeah?"

"I want Branko. That is my focus," I say, my voice shaking with rage.

"I heard what the guy said before you iced him. He doesn't know a Branko. You're chasing a fucking ghost."

"No. I'm not. He's real, dammit, and I'm going to find him—with or without you." My heart clenches with each word that tumbles from my mouth.

Quinn releases my wrist, his blue eyes dark and narrowed to slits. "It's not a shocker that you'd leave me here to redeem yourself for something you'll never be able to change," he snarls. "Shame on me for not seeing it coming this time and for believing that you gave a damn about me. But you're on your own now. I'm fucking done."

CHAPTER 33

QUINN

“You caused this shit show in the first place.” Val’s eyes blaze with anger. But conflict flares in her hard gaze. “You never should have come here tonight. I could have done this job on my own, without you fucking it all up with your stupid little whore.”

The vein in my throat throbs, rage humming through my insides. I want to grab her and shake her. “Do you realize that whether or not I showed up, they knew you were coming? Your pal Stepanov had you targeted from the second you shook your ass onto that stage. If you wanna blame tonight’s epic fucking failure on me, fine. But pull off those blinders, babe. Because you’re not fucking Teflon, that’s for shit sure.”

She recoils like I’ve just jabbed her with a hot fire poker.

“You hate hearing that, don’t you?” I grab the back of her hair and tug it hard. “That you couldn’t get the job done, that you couldn’t get the redemption you’re so desperate to find. That’s the life, sweetheart. You knew the terms when you signed on to be one of his fucking pawns.”

“Fuck you.” Her nostrils flare and she grabs hold of my shirt. “I killed Stepanov. He was a murderer, an evil bastard who steals lives. Tonight, I stole his. I got the fucking job done, asshole.”

“Keep telling yourself that. But deep down, you feel like Branko is still alive, still waiting to launch another attack because you couldn’t get to him. And now that you have a chance to get away and figure out what the hell to do next, you wanna risk death?”

“Everything I do, every move I make is a risk to my life.” Her eyes cloud over, glazed with disdain. “I accepted that a long time ago.”

“Sometimes, you lose. Accept *that*.” I release my grip on her hair.

She lets go of my shirt and shoves me away. “I always fucking lose. Always. For years, I’ve hunted this guy and... and...” Her shoulders shake, words caught in her throat. “Again, I... he...”

I wrap my fingers around her wrist and pull her close. She buries her head against my chest.

“It can’t end this way, Quinn. I can’t just walk away without doing what I came to do.”

“You took out the boss. The dead guy said it himself. What if Stepanov really is Branko? What if the chase is over? You ever think about that?”

“It would be too easy.” She shakes her head, her hair tickling the underside of my chin. “He was too stupid and sloppy to be Branko. Stepanov might be the face of the organization to people on the inside because he writes the checks, but I can’t believe he’d orchestrate all of this.”

Val seems convinced but I’m not so sure. I’ve seen plenty of powerful people creep out of their holes and expose themselves because they’re egotistical assholes. Maybe Stepanov was one of them. He obviously had no idea who or what Val had become since almost marrying his twat of a son.

A sharp whimper punctures the air.

Val twists around in the direction of another door on the far side of this torture chamber.

“Did you hear that?”

Dread knots my gut. “We should get out of here.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not leaving. Something is happening and I came here to stop it. Maybe it can lead me to Branko.”

“Or maybe it’ll lead to something worse.” An eerie sensation licks at the hairs on the back of my neck. I don’t like this. We found a big surprise behind door number one. I don’t want to stick around to see what’s hanging out, ready to lynch, behind door number two.

An annoying as fuck voice digs into my brain like tattoo needles.

Niall warned you against saving Val, but you did it anyway because you needed redemption, the same redemption she’s searching for.

Val bends down over the guy whose throat she just slit. She pulls apart his jacket, searching for another magazine for his now-empty gun. With a choked cry, she pulls back and sits on her heels. A stunned expression clouds her face, and she points to something on the side of his neck, something that wouldn’t have been visible unless she’d moved his shirt collar.

I furrow my brow at the ink. “An upside-down four-pronged pitchfork.”

“It’s the same tattoo I saw on the man who kidnapped me outside the arena. I’ll never forget it.” Her finger trembles as she traces the outline. “It’s the mark of Branko Ivanova and his terrorist ring. He is here. I’m certain of it.”

I close my hand around her wrist. “You don’t know that. That tattoo doesn’t mean he’s here. If he’s not actually Stepanov and he’s smart—which he obviously is because he keeps managing to get away from you and Alek and the rest of your killer crew—he would never be part of something like this. He’d always lay low because showing his face would jeopardize what he built.”

“Sounds like Mafia Boss 101.”

“Yeah, well, I failed that class the first couple of hundred times I took it, but this is common sense.”

“Maybe.”

Another cry echoes between the stark walls.

Val jumps to her feet. She loads the gun and holds it toward the door. “You may be right. But I need to find out the truth for myself.”

The door creaks open. I grab Val and pull her behind me. A girl with dark-brown hair that covers her face and eyes slides on her arms across the floor. Her dress is torn, stockings ripped. She rasps as she crawls.

“P-please help m-me.”

Val pushes me aside and darts over to her. I follow behind, my hand on my gun. Stepping around the girl, I edge closer to the door. When I peek around the side, it’s nothing but an empty corridor. Streaks of blood stain the cement floor.

Val helps the girl up to a sitting position. She smooths her hair back. “How did you get here?”

“My f-friend and I went to a c-concert. We met these guys.” She sniffles. “They were sweet. Bought us drinks. After the concert, we went to a restaurant. A dingy dive place off The Strip. They gave us food. That’s the last thing I remember before waking up here.”

I narrow my eyes. The girl’s dark hair pops against her pale skin, her eyes red and puffy. Tears streak her cheeks. My eyes fall to her hands... her nails, more specifically.

Manicured. Bright red. Not a single chip of polish.

“They must have drugged us,” she whispers as if she knows the question on the tip of my tongue.

Why doesn't it look like you clawed at them, kicking and screaming for your life?

"I passed out before I knew what was happening. When I woke up, they were gone, and we were here."

A fresh torrent of tears starts. Val puts her arm around the girl. "They brought us here and left us in a room."

"Is there anyone else here?"

The girl uses the back of her hand to wipe her nose. "No, it's just us. At least in that one room. But my friend... s-she's not waking up. We need help."

"You know the name of the restaurant?" There's an edge to my voice, one I hope Val picks up on. But based on the flood of sympathy in her eyes, I know it's totally lost on her.

"Something... Mariachi." She wrinkles her nose. "It stank. I remember that. Like grease and fried food. But I was so hungry, I ate what they gave us." Tears pool in her eyes and she smacks her forehead. "So s-stupid. I can't believe I let this happen."

Val hugs her close. "It's okay. You didn't know. But we can help you."

My eyebrows fly upward.

Who's got the fucking savior complex now?

Val helps the girl to her feet. She teeters, unsteady, swaying left and right. "We need to get her out of here before anyone sees."

"What the fuck are we gonna do with her?" I growl.

Val glares at me. "You want to just leave her to die?"

"I want to leave her, period. We don't need anything else hunting us right now. And she might have a fucking bullseye on her back."

"Please don't leave me," the girl whimpers. "I just want to go home. Please help me get home."

"I am not leaving her." Val hoists her up. "You wanted to get out of here so badly, well, here we fucking go."

"We don't have a way out, Brilliance. Remember? We were thrown into the dungeon. How do you think we're gonna escape with an army after us? They'll come looking for us if their guys don't report back that we're dead."

Val takes a look around and bites her lower lip. "It's dark. We need to take a chance and find another exit. We'd have to do it without her, anyway."

I grit my teeth and point my gun at the door we entered. "This is a big fucking mistake."

“Mistake or not, we still need a way out.” Val nods her head toward the door. “Move.”

I bite back all the things on the tip of my tongue. How can I be so fucking done for this girl? She’s worse than a loose cannon, too damn stubborn for her own good and the good of everyone around her.

Instead of going back out the front of the club, we stick close together and move slowly in the opposite direction. The girl stays plastered between us as we move through the orgies and voyeurs. The air is heady with the smell of sex and sweat. My stomach roils, my hand tightly clenching the gun. Finally, after a few turns through the maze, I find another door. A sharp breath slices at my lungs.

I push it open and let out a shaky stream of air.

Darkness falls around us, dry Vegas heat blanketing my prickled skin as we step into the night air. Ominous silence hovers like a heavy cloud, like the calm before the torrential storm.

We fucking made it out of the bowels of Hell.

Are we gonna be able to survive long enough to tell anyone about it?

A chill wraps tight around my bones. I shudder like I’m shaking off a heavy gaze.

I jerk my head around. A dark-haired woman stands a few feet away, a cigarette hanging from her hand. She’s older, her face eclipsed by shadows except for the slight lift of her lips, a sinister, knowing smile.

Like she knows something we don’t.

Dread crashes over me, paralyzing my muscles and rooting me to the ground.

We made it out alive, yeah.

But *how long* we stay alive? That’s the million-dollar question.

And that lady looks like she might have the answer.

CHAPTER 34

VALENTINA

Quinn stops short, his eyes focused on a shadow in the distance. A sudden rush of air brushes the back of my neck like a sharp gasp. I swallow hard as a calculating gaze pins my feet to the concrete.

It's the woman from the casino. The one who was outside the ladies' lounge when I went after the bride-to-be.

Even then, I knew I'd never forget her face. Eyes so deep set and dark, they appeared to be soulless. Long black hair, red painted lips curled up in a knowing smile, bronze skin etched with time.

Quinn stiffens, the girl falling hard against him as if she's trying to steady herself on the ground. If I didn't know better, I'd say she cast a spell on us both, paralyzing our limbs and mouths. Wisps of wind pick up around us, which doesn't make sense because it's Vegas. There's no wind, especially in the dead of summer.

My heart thumps like the percussion section of an orchestra, muffling the world around us.

Why is she here? Why now?

I part my lips with the intent to say something, but before I can squeak out the words, she disappears into the palm trees as if she was just an apparition.

And just as suddenly, the ominous whisper of a chill transforms back into stagnant air.

"Holy fuck," I mutter.

"You saw her, too?" Quinn's head darts in my direction.

"Yes. We need to get the hell out of here *now*."

The hidden parking lot is empty and thankfully, I parked back here

because of Zavion's instructions. He specifically told me not to park up front.

My gut wrenches. He couldn't have known... could he?

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. I don't know who the hell to trust anymore. Death always seems to be hanging over me, held up by the thinnest thread. One day, that thread is going to break, and I'll be fucked.

It can't be tonight, though. I have something important to take care of, and there's no way I'm dying before I handle it.

We hurry across the pavement toward the shitty Honda Civic I drove over here. It must be a million years old, but it got me here, and it's going to get us out. I left the doors unlocked and the keys under the driver's seat since it's not like I was given an employee locker or anything.

Quinn helps the girl into the back seat. She falls face-first against the cracked leather. The smell of stale cigarettes that permeates the air in here makes me gag. I turn the key in the ignition and clap a hand over my mouth, splintered thoughts slicing at my brain.

"Hey." Quinn puts a strong hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "You need to pull your shit together. A lot just happened back there, but I think we both know more is coming. Very fucking soon. Zip it all up till we get to the person who can answer all your questions, okay? Then unleash holy hell all over him."

I take a few deep breaths. He doesn't move his hand.

"Tonight was a total shit show." I turn to look at him.

"Yep. And you turned into a goddamn rogue soldier. If it'd been up to me, I'd have gotten us outta there after you killed Pops. Control freak Val never would have stuck around after hearing all that crap from Stepanov. She'd have run right back to Alek for answers."

"We saved someone, though."

Quinn peeks at the girl sprawled on the back seat. "Did we? I'm still not sure."

My jaw hinges open. I put the car into gear and speed out of the lot. "What are you talking about? She was kidnapped. Her friend was killed."

He turns a lifted eyebrow at me. "I'm not as trusting as you."

"What is she going to do back there? Passed out?"

He shrugs. "All I'm saying is a lot of things went down tonight that neither of us expected, including her. I'd have left her."

"What if it'd been Molly trying to escape?" I hiss. "And somebody left her? Would you be okay with that, knowing this girl might have a family

who's looking for her? Desperate to find her and punish the people who took her?"

"I just think if you'd have been thinking clearly and realized that she just coincidentally appeared at the right time, you might have chosen differently."

"She gave us the name of a restaurant where we might get some kind of lead. If Branko is still alive, that information might lead us to him."

"Unless he's not a real person and you ended the actual ringleader."

"No." I shake my head, pressing my foot on the gas. "Not a possibility."

"Isn't the easiest explanation always the right one? Isn't there some saying about that?"

"Not with this. I could have killed Stepanov a million times over in my sleep. He's not the one."

"For someone without any backing to that statement, you're holding fast to it."

I wrap my fingers tight around the steering wheel, gritting my teeth. "If I'm being honest, so much has been thrown at me, I don't know how to process any of it. Because it would mean the past years have been for nothing. That Alek would have had me chasing a ghost for no reason."

"He's a slimy self-serving bastard, so would it really shock you if he lied for his own gain?" Quinn stares out the window and slouches in the passenger seat. "I hope that douchebag is ready for a good ass-kicking."

Red Ladro is Alek's priority. It always has been. I just don't understand how everything fits together. I keep getting bits and pieces, analyzing it all as best I can, but there's never an opportunity to tie it all together. He's always held back little tidbits. I've figured some things out on my own, but still don't have the full story.

And dammit, I want it all. Now.

No bullshit.

No distractions.

We finally get back to the safehouse, the rage festering in my gut close to exploding in a fiery blaze. I park the car and jump out before opening the back door. It takes some prodding to get the girl out, but once we do, Quinn and I hoist her up between us and drag her toward the elevator.

He doesn't speak. Neither do I.

Alek is the only person I want to talk to right now.

The elevator doors open. The girl moans, slouching against Quinn as her feet drag along the hallway floor. I give the front door a swift kick, followed

by another when it doesn't open a second later.

Alek's tense face finally greets us. I swear, if I didn't have this girl hanging between me and Quinn, I'd punch Alek in his chiseled jaw. He narrows his eyes.

"Who the fuck is that?"

I fire off a glare and push past him with Quinn and the girl. Stopping short, I stare into the concerned faces of my brothers, Luka and Taras.

"What the fuck are you wearing, V?" Taras eyes my outfit. "Do I even want to know?"

"Trust me, you don't," Quinn mutters.

After laying the girl on the couch, I jump at my brothers, burying my face in their shoulders. They hold me tight. Nobody speaks. A gaggle of tears forms in my throat. I choke it down. No room for weakness during this next part.

I finally break free from their arms, smiling through the tears that make my mouth quiver. Then I spin around to face Alek.

"There are so many things I want to scream at you right now." My voice is tight, laced with disgust. "You fucking sent me into that club, had me do things that I will never be able to erase from my goddamned memory. And I was set up at every fucking turn." I stomp toward him and smack my hand against his chest. "Did you even wonder if I'd make it out alive? Did you fucking care?"

Alek grabs my wrist. "I did what I needed to do to get you close to Branko. That's all I've been doing for the past seven years. Helping you get your fucking revenge and redemption."

"Your friend Mercer sabotaged me. He said I'd be taken to Branko. But there was no Branko. Nobody had ever heard of him. Instead, Denis Stepanov showed up. Told me I'd been lied to for the better part of the last fucking decade. That my father married me off to Dmitri as a way to protect his own ass, not to keep tabs on the Stepanovs."

"It's not the truth."

"Truth?" I scream. "What the fuck is truth? I haven't gotten a sliver of it since I've worked for you, isn't that right? You give me little scraps and I gobble them up, hoping one day I'll get the full story. The real story. But it never comes. The 'truth' only unravels more and more. And pretty soon, there will be nothing left."

"You fed her so much bullshit over the years, didn't you?" Quinn spews.

“Like you want to lead her far enough to make her think she was getting close, but she never was. You did it to keep control over her. You knew she’d always be an asset to you if you kept giving her something to hope for.”

“Fuck you, Mulligan,” Alek roars. “You don’t know shit about this. You’re only here because I needed a warm body. That’s all. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you’re worth anything more to this job.”

“You’re a pathetic piece of shit who hates being beaten at his own game. And you tried to stop me from getting to Val tonight with your fucking stupid electric car. Why?” He walks toward Alek. “Were you afraid I’d actually be able to help Val find out why you’ve been lying to her for so long?”

I choke on a gasp and flip around to face Quinn. He doesn’t move his eyes from Alek’s face, though.

“Come on, Sev. Let’s be honest. You always knew there was more going on than you told her. How fucking deep do the lies go?” He waves his hand to my brothers. “Tell us all. What the fuck have you been hiding?”

CHAPTER 35

QUINN

“Alek, what is this guy talking about?” Luka asks.

I jerk my head in Luka’s direction. “Maybe Branko isn’t alive after all. Nobody at the club knew his name. All of them said Stepanov was the boss.” I turn back to Alek, every cell in my body screaming at me to lay him the fuck out. “Is that true? Have you been sending Val on a wild fucking goose chase all these years while you kept tabs on Stepanov to see what he was gonna do next?”

“Stepanov was the face of that sex ring. As the primary investor, he appeared to be in control. But Branko is very real and very much alive. He always pulled the strings from behind the scenes. He’s the one with the real motive behind the destruction of Red Ladro.” He glowers at me. “And you’re just a borrowed pawn, Mulligan. Don’t ever forget that.”

Val clenches her fists. “Red Ladro. I knew it. You never gave a damn about my family at all.”

“Not true.” Alek rakes a hand through his hair and walks over to the bar. “But this is bigger than just your family.” He pours himself a double shot of vodka and it disappears in one long gulp before he answers again. “The reason why I’ve been on this guy’s tail for so long is because he’s made threats against every family in Red Ladro... to me. He’s got surveillance on everything and everyone that only started getting sent after that safety deposit box in the Bahamas was uncovered.”

“What are you talking about? We found what was in it.” Val furrows her brow. “He knew we had everything.”

“Except we didn’t. We don’t.”

“More stories. It helps you buy time, doesn’t it?” I sneer. “All the bullshit

you weave together.”

“Fuck off, Mulligan. Your family stands to lose plenty, too. And when you went after El Azul, you opened everyone up to this fucking mess.”

“So again, you’re blaming me.” I throw up my hands. “Can’t you take any responsibility for the fact that you’re a liar? That you hold shit back for your own gain?”

Val puts a hand on my arm to stop me from burying him with more of my rage. “Explain, Alek. Because I don’t like where this is going.”

He looks at us, his blue eyes steely. I can see death threats flicker in his gaze when he points it at me, but screw him. I only care about the truth.

“Over the past years, all of the families have run up against different cartels. Dominguez, Rojas, Juarez, Sinalia—all of them have links back to Branko. Guys who’ve broken away and formed their own alliances. We’ve beaten all of them and they want revenge. Against all of us. And he’s handing us over on a silver platter. That’s why I tapped in Mercer Vale. Branko is about to go underground again, and we needed to stop him before it happens.” He pauses. “So yeah. This is bigger than the Malikov family and the Brotherhood 7. This is about all of Red Ladro.”

He sweeps a hand through his hair and looks at me. “I killed Sofia Rojas years ago. Her daughter, Maria, became Branko’s partner years later. I was always a target. Red Ladro funded their activities without knowing, just like your dad. I trusted the wrong people, people who wanted revenge for what I’d done.”

“And now what?” Val mutters. “When the hell does everything come crashing down on us?”

Alek leans back against the bar. He stares at his empty glass like he can’t look any of us in the eye for what comes next. “There’s one last code out there that can lead us to the information that can take us all down. I figured the lockbox in the Bahamas would have it. I was wrong. Nathan Van Dyne confirmed there’s another stash, but he didn’t know where it was. He said he was never far enough into the inner circle to get to it.”

“Inner circle.” I roll my eyes. “Didn’t you say you guys have gotten everyone in the inner circle? Sounds like a steaming pile of crap to me.”

“Branko has been waiting to expose us. He’s been waiting for all of his guys to fall around him.”

Val steps toward Alek—and away from me. It’s like she’s choosing his story, his lame-ass excuses. “As of tonight, Stepanov would have been the

last member of the Brotherhood 7 to fall. But why would Branko wait?"

"Think about it. Without his army, he has no evidence of his involvement in any of the sex trafficking. He covers his tracks completely because nobody still living can implicate him. Nobody left to stick their hands in the pot of money he's stolen. He wins."

"Jesus," Luka mutters behind me.

"I don't believe that's it." Val lifts an eyebrow at Alek. "What are you leaving out? Something tells me this is about more than just money and empires."

He pulls his lips into a tight line. "He targeted Gianna and Ava."

"Great, so *your* family is a priority, but nobody else fucking counts? You put Val in the line of fire how many times?" I rush at him and grab him by the shirt. "And what about Patty and Kyla, huh? Did you even care that they were targeted?"

"They were targeted because you were an arrogant son of a bitch who had something to prove to people who could crush your whole goddamn world," he thunders.

"Isn't it true that your real goal is protecting you and *yours*?"

Alek shoves me backward. He takes a swing at me, but I manage to duck around his thick fist. Thank fuck I'm used to people trying to clock me, and I've got a lot of practice avoiding the impact.

"I knew not to bring you out here. I knew you'd fuck everything up." He tries again and misses.

A sharp laugh escapes my lips. "Come on, old man. Can't battle with someone half a lifetime younger?"

"Quinn," Val hisses. "Stop."

I stare at her, shock swallowing any words.

Luka pushes me back, away from them all.

"Stop? Why should I stop?" I turn back to Alek. "Did you arrange for those bitches to pick me up in the middle of the desert once you disabled the car? How far would you go to steamroll me, dickhead?"

"I did what I had to do to stop you. Val needed to get into SLK tonight, without any distractions," he growls. "And I don't know what bitches you're talking about. I stopped the car. That's it."

"And I'm supposed to believe that because you've been so honest about everything else?" My temples throb, blood rushing between them. "And who's your leak? Because plenty of people knew we were at SLK tonight,

and those fuckers all tried to kill us. Shocker, no Branko, either.”

“You’re just as insane as everyone says,” Val’s other brother grunts at me.

I swing my head around. “Who the fuck are you? Do we know each other?” I ball up my fingers. “Because my fist really wants an intro.”

“Taras,” Val says to him. “Enough. This isn’t getting us anywhere.” She shakes her head at me. “You need to calm the hell down.”

“You going into that club tonight put my sister in jeopardy,” Luka says to me. “You were told to stay here. Sounds like the same story I’ve heard about you over and over.” He takes a step toward me. “Never knows when to stand down. Never listens to instructions. Does his own fucking thing. And the last thing landed you out here with a target on your back. Maybe you need a new MO.”

“Luka,” Val hisses.

“Am I wrong? Don’t you realize what a crazy bastard he is?” He glares at me. “I know about the fake marriage and everything else. I also know my sister is too smart to get involved with someone like you.”

I grab her by the shoulders. “You know me, Val. You know I’d do anything for you. If I didn’t show up tonight, you’d have been by yourself with those fucking thugs.”

Her eyes darken. “If you hadn’t shown up, Mande would’ve tipped off security, either.”

I recoil. “They knew you were coming. Stepanov was ready for you.”

She shakes her head. “You didn’t want to save the girl. She may have given us information that can help us find Branko. You being there might have tipped him off, and now who the hell can stop him? What if none of us can? What if tonight put the final nail in the coffin?”

“You can’t seriously believe that.”

She twists out of my grip.

“We don’t need this kind of guy working with us,” Taras says, leveling me with a glare.

Val won’t look at me. Does she actually agree with these asshats?

“Because I’m crazy, yeah? So crazy I risked my damn life to go back and find you after you and your sister were snatched from that arena, right? So crazy I fucking bulldozed you out of that warehouse before someone bought you and shipped you to some fucking place where nobody would ever hear from you again?”

That gets her attention.

“You did what?” Her voice is barely a whisper, shock settling into her features.

A hot flush creeps up the sides of my neck, spilling into my face. “That’s right. Such a loose cannon, yeah?” I turn to Luka and Taras. “The only reason she’s even here right now is because I saved her. Me. The crazy bastard.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me? I told you the whole story and you never said anything.”

“I knew how hard it was for you to hear. I didn’t want to bring up all those memories again.” My jaw tenses. “And I shouldn’t have had to tell you. I’ve proved it plenty of times to you since the day we met. I should have known it’d never be enough. That I’d never be enough.”

I twist away from her and walk toward the door.

“Quinn, where are you going?”

I throw her a look over my shoulder. “I’m bowing out. Clearing the path for you to find your guy without the inconvenience of my crazy getting in the way.”

But Val doesn’t respond when I grasp the door handle.

Doesn’t say a word as I twist it.

Lets me walk right out of the fucking door once it opens.

With my stomach in knots and my heart split in two, I storm into the hallway, letting the door slam shut behind me.

And she never comes after me.

CHAPTER 36

VALENTINA

I fall face-first into my hand, a frustrated sigh shaking my shoulders.

“You did everything you could.” Boris pats me on the arm and passes me the coffee creamer the next morning.

“Did I? Because it sure feels like I did absolutely nothing last night except fuck things up even worse for myself.” I trace my finger over the edge of the tabletop. “For so freaking long, I believed that Alek was leading me down the right path. And only now do I find out that he hasn’t even been honest with me about why he’s been so invested in Branko’s takedown.”

“You have to understand that certain information has to remain classified. It’s meant to protect you all.”

I roll my eyes and pour the creamer into the steaming mug in front of me. “I get that, but with everything at stake, ‘protect Alek’ is probably more accurate. I mean, he obviously has lots of incentives to find Branko, right? Gianna and Ava and his empire are what’s most important to him. And with all three of them at risk, he’s got a lot riding on me taking out Branko.”

“Does it matter why he’s so set on it?” Boris lifts his mug. “Your objective has always been to destroy Branko because of what he did to your family. Why do you care about Alek’s reasons for wanting him dead?”

I blow on the hot coffee before lifting the mug to my lips and taking a sip. “I want someone to finally be honest with me, I guess. Right now, I feel like I’ve been a pawn for Alek and for my father before him. Nobody’s been honest with me.”

Letting out a groan, I run a hand through my hair and sit back in the chair. “And then I let Quinn walk out the door last night without even trying to stop him. He was the one person who managed to save me from myself, the only

one who seemed to care.”

“Why did you let him go?”

“I was stupid, in shock over everything I’d just heard from Alek, floored by what Stepanov told me about Dad...” I shake my head. “He went off the rails completely and I just... I couldn’t even find the words to make him stay. He left because he didn’t want to get in my way again, but he’s the only one who made it a point to get in my way in the first place. I chose to stay here with Alek, who’s sent me into more fucking rabbit holes than I care to count.”

“I wouldn’t have blamed you if you went after him.” Alek’s voice makes me jump.

I twist around in my chair to see him lounging against the doorway to the kitchen. “I should have. He cares more about me than you do.”

“In a very different way, yes.” Alek shudders, walks over to the empty chair across from me, and sinks into it. “But you’re wrong if you think I don’t care about your best interests.”

“How could I believe that you do? Especially knowing that you’ve been putting me in these situations, all because you need protection? How is that showing me any bit of respect?”

“Val, you’re an assassin. You should be a cold, ruthless killer. You take instructions and you carry them out. There’s no room for coddling. If that’s what you need, you’re in the wrong business.”

“You’re a real dick, you know that?”

“So I’ve heard.” Alek’s lips quirk upward. “I know what you need, what you want. And I’ve always tried to give it to you. Sometimes leads run cold. Sometimes plans and targets change. Sometimes new information is brought to light. But it doesn’t mean I disregard you or your safety. I need you to be flexible and not so emotionally involved. A lot of the problems you’ve faced over the past few days have come from getting too attached to things. To Branko’s demise. To saving the world.” He takes a sip of his coffee and smirks. “To your fake husband.”

I cover my face with my hands. “I’m dedicated. Sue me.”

“Maybe you’re so dedicated because there’s something more there that you don’t know how to handle.”

“Oh, you think?” I spew sarcastically. “I’ll assume you’re talking about Quinn. Although I don’t know why you’d care, since you’ve made it clear from day one that cockroaches rate higher than him.”

“He’s a wild one, that’s for sure.” Alek strokes his beard. “But the second you let people know that they’re valuable, you lose control. And judging by what we’ve had to deal with, control was the last thing I wanted to part with.”

“So you used reverse psychology. Jesus, Alek.”

“It worked. I got what I needed out of him. He didn’t cause too many headaches. And now he’s gone.”

“Yeah, Val, how’d you let that happen anyway?” Luka’s intruding voice breaks into the conversation. He and Taras drop into two nearby seats at the table.

“You, too?” I look at them, my mouth agape. “You do remember that all of you were basically telling him to piss off last night, right? And this morning you’ve had a sudden change of conscience?”

Luka picks up a slice of toast and drops it on his plate. “You didn’t fight hard for him at all. I wanted to see how far you’d let it go. I was shocked when you didn’t go after him.”

“I made a choice.” I slap my hands on the table and the coffee in my mug sloshes over the side. “I chose the family. Defeating Branko. Avenging Mom, Dad, and Charly.”

“We’ve all made choices. Doesn’t mean you have to miss out on happiness. Or…” Luka exchanges a look with Alek that makes me gag. “Whatever else you two have been up to.”

“Stop looking at him like that or I’ll barf right here and now.” I stick my finger in Luka’s face.

“You think *you* wanna barf at that?” Taras mutters, running a hand through his sleep-tousled hair.

“Look, don’t get me wrong, the guy’s a buffoon. But I saw how he looked at you last night. How he was willing to step aside because he knows how much this means to you and he didn’t want you to have to make the hard choice between us and him.”

“He makes me happy, okay? And I want to be happy. Except there’s unfinished business to handle. I didn’t think I could have it all, okay? I’ve always sacrificed. It comes naturally to me now, I guess.” With a roll of my eyes, I sip my coffee.

“If you want him back, you need to go and find him. Tell him you made a mistake.”

I groan. “I was so shattered by what I found out last night. Hearing that I’ve basically been fed lies for the past seven years stung a little and

scrambled my damn brain. I shouldn't have let him go, and I've been berating myself ever since he walked out that door."

"You care about him," Boris says with a knowing smile. "I knew it would happen."

I cock my head to the side. "Yeah, oil and water always mix really well."

"You guys are like a spark and a powder keg," Alek says. "Once it explodes, everyone around you should kiss their asses goodbye."

Heat creeps into my cheeks. "What if he won't talk to me?"

"He'd really be the idiot we think he is if that's the case," Taras says.

I bite down on my lower lip. "I really care about him. I mean, like him a lot. Maybe even..." A smile lifts my lips. "Love him like him?"

"Oh Christ, here we go." Luka scrubs a hand down the front of his face. "The last one standing is about to fall herself."

"That's if I can even find him to tell him." I hug my arms around myself and turn to Boris. "Do you think you can get a location on him?"

Boris nods, his blue eyes crinkling in the corners. "I think I can do that."

"Um, excuse me." A faint, quivering voice breaks into our banter. We all look up to see the girl who Quinn and I saved last night standing by the kitchen door. I jump up and put my arm around her shivering body.

"How did you sleep?" I ask.

"Not great," she says, her voice thick with tears. "I was up a lot with nightmares. I guess I'm going to have to get used to that."

"What's your name?" I ask, smoothing her hair back.

"It's June." She snuffles.

"Well, June, I'm Val." I move my hand around the table and introduce everyone else. "You must be starving. Can I get you anything to eat?"

June shakes her head and clutches her stomach. "I feel really nauseous right now. But I'd love some water."

I run to the water cooler and hand her a full glass. "Don't drink it too fast."

She takes a small sip. "Look, I know I was too much of a mess last night to tell you any details about what happened to us before we were taken to the club. But I found something this morning that you need to see." She turns her bloodshot brown eyes up at me. "I couldn't save my friend. But maybe you guys can save everyone else."

CHAPTER 37

QUINN

A swift knock jerks me from a foggy, fitful sleep. I groan, kicking at the bedsheets until they've unlocked my ankles. A loud ringtone blares out, making my ears ring like a fierce case of tinnitus.

"Fuck." My mouth is as dry as the fucking desert I'm surrounded by. Boris took me to a sketchy hotel on the outside of the city last night—yeah, *he* was the only one who came after me and told me to stay put until he could find a way to get me out of Vegas.

Eyes shut tight, I reach over and slap my palm against the nightstand in search of my phone. Empty beer bottles fall onto the ratty carpet. "Where is it?"

Maybe if I crack open my damn eyes, I'd have better luck finding it. But the blinding pain that has my head on the brink of explosion tells me I'm better off using my other senses to find it.

Finally, my fingers find the phone. I pick it up and roll onto my back.

Another series of knocks makes my head shudder.

My eyes open to narrow slits. I squint at my phone and stab the Accept button on the video call.

"Patty," I grumble, swinging myself to a seated position. "Tell me everything's still okay."

"We're fine. Don't worry. But you need to get the door."

"I don't wanna move."

With a knot in my gut, I fall back against pillows so void of stuffing it's almost like my head is flat on the mattress.

"Get the door. It's Boris."

"Boris." I fling an arm over my eyes. "Why the hell is he here? He wasn't

supposed to come back till he figured out how to get me the fuck outta here.”

Patrick’s lips pull into a tight line. “He needs your help.”

I grab a pillow and stuff it over my face. “Fuck that. I’m done helping those assholes.”

“Quinn, it’s not only helping them. It’s helping all of us.”

I let the words seep into my fuzzy brain, the rush of breath deflating my lungs. “Fine. Anything for you guys. *You guys.*”

“Just open the door.” Patrick knits his brows. “You look like shit, by the way.”

I take my time swinging my legs around the side of the bed. “Thanks. I worked really hard to get this look.”

“How many six-packs?” Patrick asks dryly.

“I lost count.” I stagger to the door, unlock the chain and the deadbolt, and twist the handle.

Boris holds out a brown paper bag. “Breakfast.”

My stomach roils at the smell of eggs.

“You need the grease to soak up the booze, fucking amateur,” Patrick says.

Boris flips a switch and the cracked fixture on the ceiling floods the room with light.

I yelp. “Too bright.”

“What are you, a gremlin?” Patrick asks with a snicker.

I walk back to the bed and fall onto the mattress, dropping the phone next to me. “Why are you here, Boris? Can’t you let me wallow in peace?”

“There isn’t time.”

The edge in his voice has my attention. I raise myself up, eyebrows furrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Boris sits in a chair near the door. “Patty, you still there?”

“Yep,” he replies.

“Okay.” He looks at me. “Quinn, the girl you took from the club last night has a marking on her side. It’s a number and a set of initials.”

“Lemme guess. B.I.”

Boris nods. “Correct. We spoke to her this morning, and she took us through everything she remembers about the night she was kidnapped. We mapped out all the restaurants in Las Vegas and the surrounding area with ‘Mariachi’ in the name. Found a place in East Las Vegas that matches. We pulled it up online and she confirmed that was the spot.”

“So why are you telling me this? Let your fucking dickwad pals go down there and raise hell so I can go back to sleep.”

“Quinn, stop being an obstinate asshole,” Patrick growls. “You’re out there to do a job.”

I grab the phone and glare at my brother’s face. “And last night, I was told that I’m a complete fuckup who is crazy and doesn’t think about consequences. The job sucks, and I quit.”

“You can’t quit now.” Boris sweeps a hand over his head. “Alek and the guys aren’t going to the restaurant. Only Val is.”

“How the fuck could they let her—?”

“Nobody is ‘letting her’ do anything. She insisted. Wouldn’t hear of anyone going in there with her. She feels like this is something she needs to do on her own.”

“You were there last night.” I sit up quickly and clutch the side of my head to stop the fierce pounding, swallowing down bile when the smell of the egg sandwich infests my nostrils. “She was pissed as hell when I rolled in there. Me showing up tipped off security, had them chasing us, shooting at us. If you listened to Val, the shit show at the club is all on me. Meanwhile, and this is something nobody paid much attention to at the safehouse, Alek has a leak somewhere in his organization. He may not wanna acknowledge it, but he does. And if that’s the case, last night isn’t on me, much as they want to use me as a scapegoat.”

My nostrils flare, anger sizzling in my veins. “Val didn’t want to hear it, though. As far as she’s concerned, I’m the one to blame.”

“They were hard on you. But are you going to let them get away with thinking you’re the problem?”

“Patty, stop trying to play me with that psychobabble bullshit. I’m not an idiot.” I look at Boris. “Her going in there is a bad move. And I don’t trust that girl, either, by the way.”

“You know Val.”

I scoff. “Always saving the world.”

“Sounds familiar,” Patrick says.

“Jesus, neither of you is gonna let me go back to sleep, are you?”

Boris shakes his head.

“Why the hell aren’t her brothers putting up a bigger fight against her going? Don’t they know it could be a trap?”

“They’ll be close, of course. In case of anything. But she wants to do this

on her own.” He shakes his head. “I think it’s a bad move, which is why I’m here. Please go with her.”

“She doesn’t want to see me.”

“You’re wrong. I think last night she was just too overwhelmed to see things clearly. But she needs you, Quinn. We all do.” He leans closer. “And you need her. It was written all over your face last night.”

“She doesn’t feel the same way. She made that pretty clear when she let me go.”

“Don’t be too sure about that. Put yourself in her position. It was very traumatizing for her to hear all that from Stepanov. She had a lot to process.”

I drag a hand down the front of my face. She pretty much shattered my heart last night. I left the safehouse, convinced her feelings didn’t match mine. “Are you manipulating me, Boris? Because if you are, I’ll come for your ass next.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Quinn.” Boris’s smile fades. “I lost my daughter and granddaughter in a tragic accident. My daughter was just about Val’s age now. She never got a chance to find her happiness. I don’t want to see Val miss out on hers.”

“Q, you’ve got to do this,” Patrick’s voice hums in my hand.

My lips twist, conflict tearing my mind in two. “And if I don’t?”

Boris leans forward, the lines between his eyes deepening. “Then you might not get a chance to tell Val how you feel about her. Because last night might have been the last you will ever see her alive.”

CHAPTER 38

VALENTINA

“Daddy, I tried... to find her...” My breaths come in short, sharp rasps, sobs shuddering my chest. “But I couldn’t... I couldn’t get to her in time before she... before she...”

I collapse into my father’s arms. He strokes the back of my tangled hair. “You did what you could, Солнце.”

How can his voice sound so soothing when the vein in his neck throbs like it’s about to burst?

“I should have gone after her. Helped her get away from them. But my legs were like Jell-O. I couldn’t even move.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “And then she was gone. It was too late.”

“Not for you.” Dad pulls away and places both hands on either side of my face. “You got away. You’re safe.”

I swipe at the tears that stream down my cheeks. “I was so scared. What if they’d gotten me, too?”

“They will never get close to you again.” His blue eyes darken with rage. “I’ll make sure of that, if I have to torch the fucking Earth to do it.”

I grit my teeth and step out of the shitty Honda Civic. Vegas dry heat, my ass. I’m still sweating like a whore in church.

Could today possibly lead me to the man who wreaked havoc and hell on my family and so many others? This has to be the place. June saw the pictures online. She remembered it. Mentioned something about drugs, too.

Luis Navarro and Branko are partners. It makes sense that they’d both be involved with this place. A rush of anger floods my chest. I can get them both.

Quinn’s face flickers in front of my eyes. He’d think this is stupid, me

going in here without any backup. Part of me knows he'd be right, too. But the other part of me can't let this whole thing go. I should walk away, grateful to escape alive last night after destroying Denis Stepanov. But an inkling of a thought festers in my gut, warning me I'm not finished.

That Branko's not finished.

So here I am. By myself to avenge my family and everyone else whose lives were poisoned by the low-life scumbag.

I grasp the door handle to El Mariachi, a dingy Mexican restaurant in East Las Vegas. My stomach roils at the pungent smells of spices and herbs deep fried with beef and beans. Dark-brown ceiling fans spin lazily above my head, whisking the stench of grease around the room.

There are a few tables scattered around the restaurant. Looking around, it's pretty clear that the word "restaurant" is really overstating this place.

Patrons are bent over their plates of food. They stare at me and talk quietly, as if they know something I don't.

But I already know everything.

That's why I'm here.

I step toward a thin wooden easel, which I guess is supposed to be the hostess podium. An eerie quiet settles over the place, and a shiver slithers down my spine when my eyes meet the young girl's terrified, sunken ones. Her stringy hair doesn't look like it's been combed for days, and her clothes are spotted with dark stains.

Classic signs of sex trafficking victims.

June was right.

Blood pulses hard against my throat, my gut wrenching harder with each step I take. Even though I've walked into plenty of places just like this over the past few years, it never ceases to make me physically ill.

Because it could have been me standing at that cracked wooden stand. *If* I was lucky, unlike Charly.

I clench and unclench my fingers, my gaze sweeping over the cracked linoleum tile floor toward a set of double red doors that lead to the basement of the restaurant.

The others have to be close.

My self-imposed instructions are clear.

Find the rest of the girls who are being held here. Rescue them. Kill Luis Navarro and Branko Ivanova, the two missing links.

But I need to get inside those doors first.

“El baño?”

The girl nods and points to the doors. Her teeth clatter together, her skin pale and sallow, a contrast to the dark circles under her eyes.

Those motherfuckers. I’m going to dunk their heads in the deep fryer when I get my hands on them.

The Glock 19 stuck in the waistband of my jeans presses insistently into my spine to remind me of what we’re here to do. A trickle of sweat drizzles down my back, and my halter top clings tight to me.

I’m coming for you guys.

For years, we’ve been cutting off heads of a hydra. More always grow back, none ever lead us to the man responsible for the murders of countless, innocent victims. Every time I ambush one of these human trafficking cells, I pray Branko’s there, that I can be the one to end him and his reign of terror.

I will find him. And when I do, he’ll die an excruciatingly painful death for what he did to us. Him, Luis—every last one of those evil bastards.

Because Charly was only one of his victims.

And the rest need to be avenged.

I slowly walk toward the doors, and with one look back at the restaurant patrons, I push through them. Creeping past the signs for the bathrooms, I plunge myself into the darkness at the end of the hallway. The broken wooden floorboards creak under my feet. My head jerks left and right. The door to the basement has to be here somewhere. I run my hand against the tattered paneling and move past the empty office. A door opens behind me, and a young guy in a torn red t-shirt pops out of the refrigerator.

“Hey, lady, what are you looking for? Bathroom is up there.”

I force a smile and nod. “Oh right, *gracias.*”

I throw up in my mouth a little when he doesn’t walk away, shuddering under his leering stare.

Blech.

I take a few steps toward the bathroom, and he finally disappears back into the kitchen.

Time to move... *fast.*

Back down the hallway, tucked right next to the back exit is a steel door with a deadbolt. I pull it open. A tearful voice behind me hits my ears.

“Please help us.”

It’s the girl from the hostess stand.

I turn and put my hands on her upper arms. “That’s why I’m here. Show

me where the others are.”

She nods and stumbles backward, pointing at the door and shaking her head. “*No aquí.*”

I follow her around another corner, this one pitch-black. She disappears into the abyss, and I put out my hand to guide me along.

“Wait, I can’t see,” I say in a loud whisper. “Are you there? Turn on a light. *La luz?*”

The space is suddenly drenched in light, and fuck me, I really wish it wasn’t.

Four men stand in front of me with AR-15s in their beefy hands. A tall, dark-haired woman dressed in a long red sundress slides between two of them.

It’s the woman from outside SLK... the same one I saw at the casino on my fake wedding night.

A rich perfumed scent mixed with fried plantains hits my nostrils and almost makes me gag.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I try to speak, but the words catch in my throat along with the thick lump already lodged there.

“Hello, Valentina.” Her lips quirk upward, an evil smile stretching across her tan skin. Her dangly gold earrings glint in the obnoxiously bright overhead light. “My name is Maria Rojas. I see you’ve already met my daughter, Marisol. My associate, Branko, said you’d be dropping by for a visit.”

Maria Rojas, as in Sofia Rojas’ daughter, the one who supposedly partnered with Branko years ago.

I somehow keep my jaw from dropping.

There is so much in her words that has me reeling.

Like how the fuck could Branko possibly know I’d come here today?

Wait.

My fingers ball into tight fists.

Fuck.

I’ve been duped.

A chill shudders my insides.

Someone in Alek’s inner circle leaked our plan to the enemy. *Again.*

Someone who wants me dead.

“Your enchiladas are supposed to be the best in the city. Figured I should

sample them myself. Heard they were to die for.”

“You heard right.” The woman nods, folding her arms over her chest. “And so today, you should be prepared to die.”

“I don’t know about that.” I take a step toward her. “It’s not on my list of to-dos today. But you know what is? Destroying your disease-ridden sex den.”

“And how do you plan to do that by yourself?”

With four AR-15s on me, I can’t exactly pull my own gun. But I can pull my knife.

Sudden and muffled gunshots crack into the air. Marisol’s scream shatters my ears. She falls to the ground like a lead weight. The men twist around to see where they came from, but with a quick glance behind me, I can see we’re still alone in the room.

The men dart out the door, leaving us alone. The woman turns toward Marisol, a tortured cry escaping her lips as she drops to the ground next to her daughter. I yank the woman back by her arm.

“She’ll be dead in minutes if you don’t cooperate.”

In a hot second, my knife is in hand and pointed at the woman’s jugular.

“Tell me where to find Luis.”

“Never.” With one hand, she clings to my arm. Her eyes widen when I press the blade into her throat. “It’s too late for you,” she rasps. “And your sister Charly. You’ll never see her again.”

CHAPTER 39

QUINN

That fucking bitch.

I grit my teeth as I creep closer to the doorway in the back of El Mariachi, my finger pressed to the trigger of my Glock 19. Maria Rojas' sinister voice slithers over my skin like leeches ready to suck the life out of me.

Tell me I didn't hear that right. Tell me she's not dangling Charly's life in front of Val right now to save her own ass.

I know exactly what Val is thinking right now, what she's about to do. I have to stop her because my fucking blood burns for this woman and I can't lose her.

Val's brothers are really fucked in the head for letting her walk into this by herself. Boris said they'd be nearby and ready to attack, but shit can happen in a hair of a second. They'd never have time to save her.

But I came rushing down here as soon as Boris gave me the address. For some reason, now they suddenly trust me to handle a job. I shoveled my beefs with those guys aside when I heard what Val would be up against. No way does she go into this by herself. We started this together, and one way or another, we're finishing it together.

Sweat drizzles down the sides of my face. My sneakers stick to the cracked reddish-brown floor tiles, and it's an effort to peel them off the floor with every step I take. My gut twists. The air in this place stinks. Every time I try to breathe, it clogs my lungs like it would my arteries if I ate the fried food. Speaking of fried food, where the fuck are the people who are supposed to be making it? The kitchen was empty when I passed it, and the people sitting in the front of the place are huddled together with no plates in front of

them.

I don't like this. At all.

"Don't say that," Val snarls. "It won't save you or your daughter."

"Are you sure about that?" Maria says. "You want to call my bluff?"

I hold the barrel of my gun to my forehead and squeeze my eyes closed, willing her to hear me.

She's gone, Val. You know it. You saw her. Don't let her get into your head, don't—

"I can see the hope alive in your eyes. You don't want to give up on her or the belief that maybe Charly might be alive." Maria pauses, her voice desperate. "What if I'm telling the truth? What if she really is alive and you have the chance to save her after all this time? If you kill me, you'll lose her forever."

I tug at my sneaker and inch closer.

Don't buy it, Val. She's baiting you. We both know Charly is dead.

My fingertip tingles as it presses against the trigger. I want to barge in there and plug that woman between the eyes for what she's doing to Val right now.

"Valentina, your heart is telling you to listen, isn't it? You've prayed for this day, the day you hear that your sister is alive. Haven't you?" More desperation and tears.

I poke my head around the doorway. A girl is lying still on the ground wearing a blood-soaked dress. Val has Maria in her grip with a knife to her throat. She stares at the young girl on the floor.

A sudden and sharp scream pierces the air.

"She's going to bleed out." Maria struggles against Val. "That's my daughter. Let me go so I can save her."

Oh, *fuck*.

I raise my gun, pointing the barrel to the woman's head. With her one free hand, Val grabs the back of the woman's hair and yanks her backward.

"How fucking dare you say those things about my sister?" she growls against Maria's ear. "When you know damn well that she's gone!"

"She's not," Maria whimpers, her tear-filled eyes on the girl at her feet. "She can be saved."

"Liar," Val hisses. "You manipulative bitch. That shit won't work on me. You want to save your daughter? Then tell me what I want to know. Where are Luis and Branko?"

The woman's eyes blaze with anger, her lips twisting like she's morphed into a demon. "Maybe they're in Miami, killing the rest of your family. Or maybe they're at the safehouse, slaughtering Alek Severinov and your two brothers."

The blood turns to ice in my veins. How the fuck could she know who's at the safehouse? How could she know about the safehouse at all?

Jesus Christ, how far down deep does the deception go?

If Val is shocked to hear those words, she doesn't give it away, just tightens her grip on Maria's head. But this time Maria doesn't just stand there whimpering like the fake bitch she is. She jerks her head backward so it smashes against Val's nose, then wrenches herself away.

Val yelps, stunned for a hot second. She leans forward to grab Maria before she can fall to the floor next to the girl. But instead of going down, Maria lunges for a gun to her right.

She picks it up on her way down to the ground and swings herself around, gun in hand. The barrel is on Val. My throat tightens. I squeeze off a single shot before a hand from behind me closes around my neck. The cool metal of a gun barrel jabs me in the temple.

"Try that again and your brains will be all over that wall, *ese*," a grim voice hisses against my ear.

I drop my hand with the gun in it.

Motherfucker. How many times am I gonna forget to check my goddamn blindside?

"Yours and your *wife's*."

Val's accusatory eyes tangle with mine. She's got Maria, the kid is still unconscious on the ground, drenched in red, and I'm here, useless because I lost my focus.

And she knows it, too.

How the hell are we gonna get out of this one?

"Seems like we both have something the other wants," the jerkoff behind me growls, following his words up with a thick phlegmy cough.

I gag on his stank breath. "Jesus, dude. You might wanna cut it back to five packs a day."

He smacks the side of my head with the gun. I wince, but fuck him if he thinks he'll get anything more out of me.

"Marisol was hit," Maria says in a shrill voice, no longer the in-control sadistic bitch she was only a few minutes ago. "She needs to get to a

hospital.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Val yells. “Unless you tell me what I want to hear.”

But her eyes keep flickering to the girl.

And just like that, the savior complex grabs hold... of both of us.

My limbs tense. Nobody is coming for us, I already know that. No distress call, no help from Sev or the Malikov brothers. It’s up to us to get the hell out of this shithole in one piece.

“Alek Severinov killed my mother,” Maria scream-cries. “He deserves this. Not me.”

“You’ve destroyed how many lives for your own gain?” Val jabs the knife into the side of her throat as a warning. Dots of blood appear. They stream down her neck, hitting the fabric of her dress, blossoming into rose-colored stains. “You deserve way fucking worse. And so do Branko and Luis. Make your choice right now. Tell me where they are, or I kill you and go find them. I already know they’re here and that you have girls stocked up for an auction.”

“Shut the fuck up, bitch,” the guy behind me bellows, shoving me forward until I’m standing only a few feet away from Val’s captive.

“Just save Marisol,” Maria weeps. “I don’t care if she kills me. Save her, Luis!”

Val’s eyes widen.

Luis’s hand tightens around my neck, cutting off my air supply. I try to wrench his hand away from my throat, but his thick fingers refuse to move. He clamps down so hard, I think he might just snap me in two. “That’s right, Valentina. You wanted me, now you’ve got me. But I’ve got your husband. Who’s it gonna be? Your life or his?”

CHAPTER 40

VALENTINA

I can't let Marisol die. She's innocent, just a kid caught in a vicious, brutal funnel cloud. Nobody asked her if she wanted this life; they just thrust her into it.

But I can't sacrifice Quinn.

He still came here today, even after I let him leave. He's here because he loves me. I know it in my heart every time he looks at me, even now.

Tears sting my eyes. I let him go. I risked everything by letting him walk out that door.

I can't lose him again. I won't.

Because I'm in love with him, too.

Except the odds... and guns... are stacked against me, and the one card I can play just said she'd rather exchange her life for Marisol's.

"Did you really think you would get away with what you did to El Azul?" Luis grunts.

"You sabotaged my brother and sister-in-law, bitch," Quinn snarls, twisting around so he can face Luis. "You tried to kill them."

"I don't try to kill people. I'm not a fucking amateur. If I want you dead, you're dead. That was a message to you, Mulligan."

"Well, here I am. What the fuck are you gonna do about it?" He nods toward Marisol. "And remember, she doesn't have much time. You fuck around, and Val will shoot them both in the head before you can squeeze off a shot, *ese*."

We stand, facing off with one another.

If I make a move, he'll shoot Quinn.

My fingers cramp up from clutching the knife so tight.

“Choose, now!” Luis yells at me. “Or else—”

A sea of bullets drowns out his next words. Luis throws Quinn face-first into the floor. “You can never beat us,” he thunders.

With a gasp, I pull Maria around a column and duck low, the knife still at her throat.

“Marisol,” she weeps.

Another explosion erupts. Bullets crack, ricocheting off the cement walls of the room. Windows shatter, dishes crack, metal pots clang as they’re assaulted by a barrage of shots.

My pulse jumps, punching a hole in my throat. Sharp gasps tear at my lungs. I blink fast, my vision blurred by tears. Luis fires his gun at the ceiling. Cracked pieces of stucco crash down around us. Footsteps pound like we’re being surrounded by an army.

I stretch myself, leaning forward to grab the gun on the ground near Marisol. I slap the ground, willing my fingers to lengthen enough for me to grab it.

A mass of angry faces blur in front of me. A stray bullet from Luis’s gun cracks against the floor centimeters from my hand before I can grab the gun.

My hand shakes, the tip of the knife driving deeper into the flesh of our enemy.

“Save my girl,” Maria whimpers.

I could cut her jugular right now, just drag the gleaming serrated edge across her gold-chain decorated neck until the life drains from her body.

“Bring them to the basement.” Luis pulls Quinn off the floor and shoves him toward the men who gathered in the doorway with what look like AR-15 rifles.

The basement.

The number on June’s arm indicates she was one of many girls tagged. The rest of them are here, in the underbelly of this craphole they call a restaurant. I choke on a sob. Are all of them still alive?

Luis yanks me to my feet. “Drop the knife or I will shoot a bullet through your hand.”

I release my fingers from the handle. The stainless steel blade clatters when it hits the floor.

“Maria,” Luis says, helping Sofia’s daughter off the floor. “Take care of Marisol. I will handle these two.”

Maria drops to her knees, praying in Spanish over Marisol’s body. My

heart spits in two as fresh tears stream down Maria's face. Another life taken senselessly.

Luis shoves me toward the stone steps. I stumble into Quinn's back, grabbing his shirt for balance. I fist the soft cotton, pulling myself to my feet.

"Back pocket," he hisses through his lips.

I make a big showing of tripping over my feet, this time hanging on to the back of his jeans. When I grasp what he's talking about, I swallow a groan. A Swiss Army knife? Is he fucking kidding me?

Luis steadies me, his heavy breaths directed at my face and making my stomach roil with nausea. "It'd be a shame for you to break your pretty little neck now before we have the chance to chop it off."

"You fucking sicko." My shoulders shake with anger. "Where are you taking us?"

His lips curl upward, exposing crooked, yellowed teeth. "You asked for something." He presses himself against me, his thick, chapped lips scratching the side of my face, the stench of his breath revolting. "And I'm about to give it to you."

I jerk away from him and grab on to the rickety wooden banister along the cracked yellow stucco wall. The deeper into the pits of hell we descend, the stronger the smell of body odor and rotting trash becomes. A strangled cry escapes my lips when we reach the bottom step. The hallway is long and straight, the floor dirty. Girls with tattered clothes and stringy hair line either side. Most of them are glassy-eyed, pale, and listless. Some of them are completely still, eyes closed, traces of vomit crusting the sides of their mouths.

"You fucking monsters," Quinn yells, suddenly hurling his fist at the jaw of one of the guys next to him. Two other guys pull him off before he can land another punch. They tackle him to the ground and pound their guns against his face and nose.

"Stop," I yell, darting toward them. Luis pulls me back and holds me by both arms. His fingers dig into my skin.

"Mulligan made his bed," he hisses. "And unless you wanna end up in the same one, I suggest you stand the fuck back."

A door flies open behind me. It crashes against the wall. Footsteps follow. I try to twist out of Luis's grip to get a look, but he forces me to keep my eyes on Quinn being beaten. Sobs tear my chest open. "Please, stop."

"Enough! Get away from him now."

It's a commanding voice. Russian accent. Familiar, but at the same time, not.

The hairs on back of my neck prickle.

The men move away from Quinn. He moans, clutching his injured side. Fuck, his stitches. Those savages must have torn them right open. His face is already purple and blue, his nose bloody, right eye swollen.

The Swiss Army knife is still in my clenched hand. My blood bubbles. How the hell can I get it open so that I can impale someone with it before I get shot in the head?

Splintered plans assault my frenzied mind when he speaks again. This time, he stops right in front of me. I stare into blue eyes that scream death, darkness, and devastation. His face is unlike the rest. This man is handsome, groomed, and clearly wealthy.

His lips lift.

The Devil himself smiles at me.

“Valentina Malikov.” He steps forward, the spicy scent of his expensive cologne choking me like an invisible noose. “After all these years, you finally found me. And I think we’ve both waited long enough for what you know comes next.”

CHAPTER 41

VALENTINA

Sparks fire underneath my skin, igniting into tiny flames as Branko Ivanov's blue eyes focus on me like lethal lasers. I've never felt more repulsed in my entire life. Hatred rages through me, my vision flooding with a deep red haze.

The Swiss Army knife burns a hole in my palm, my mind willing him to get closer so that I can jam it into his fucking eyes one at a time before ending him.

"The only thing that comes next is your excruciatingly painful death." My voice is steely, not at all giving away the angst knotting in my chest.

He laughs. The sound hits my ears, the vibration scraping against my skin like tiny razor blades. "Interesting, since I'm the one with the army here right now." His eyes sweep over me. My skin crawls with the sensation of being dipped in the most toxic slime under his leering gaze.

But he doesn't get close. He stays just far enough away where I'd have to lunge for him and risk taking a bullet. Of course, it'd be worth it if I killed the bastard. But since I have no guarantee that I can work this stupid weapon, I stand down and wait for my chance.

"It's a shame what had to happen to Charly."

"Oh, you mean a shame that you had to kidnap her and drug her to the point where she overdosed and died? Is that the shame you're talking about?" I can't keep the emotion out of my voice, my mind swimming with so many splintered memories of that horrific night. "She had her whole life in front of her, and you took it away. You snuffed it out without a second thought. I'd like to peel the skin from your bones and dangle you over a vat of fucking acid so that it eats you alive."

“You have quite the imagination.” Branko strokes his bearded chin. Then he nods his head toward Quinn, who lies nearby, struggling for breath. “Maybe we should experiment with that torture technique. Starting with him.”

I swallow hard past the knot of tears in my throat. “I’m the one you want. Leave him out of this.”

Branko cocks his head to the side and adjusts the lapels of his jacket. “I don’t think I could. You see, he tried to interfere with my organization’s business. And I don’t like when people try to derail me from my interests.”

“They’re our fucking interests, prick,” Quinn mutters. “You went after my family. And you’re gonna pay for what you did.”

“Are you going to collect on that debt?” Branko sneers, hovering over Quinn. “Because it sure as hell doesn’t look like you can stand, much less ‘make me pay.’”

“I want to know why you’re doing this. Why you needed to hurt us all so badly.” I press the hand with the knife against my side to keep it from slipping since my palms are soaked with sweat.

Branko brings a hand to the back of his head and rubs his neck. “Your father, Viktor.” He lets out a sardonic chuckle. “He was always such a greedy fuck. He formed the Brotherhood 7 so he could make money off of us. And when we came up with new and better ideas, he vetoed them all. He didn’t like to lose control.” With a lift of an eyebrow, he says, “Just like his daughter.”

“Of course, he vetoed your scumbag ideas. You wanted to make money by kidnapping and selling innocent young girls. He’d never agree to that.”

“But it didn’t stop him from taking our money and using it to build his own businesses.” Branko inches closer, but he’s still a little bit too damn far. “He used us. Used our investments. Used our connections and network. Then he pocketed the profits for himself.”

“I don’t believe you. He was always a fair man.”

“When *he* set the rules.” Branko smooths the front of his white shirt. “But he lost that battle. And for every life he took with his secret efforts to destroy the Brotherhood, we took one in return. He wanted to extinguish us all until we figured out a way to beat him at his own game. We took out each and every partner he brought in, including Olek Moroz.” His straight white teeth flash at me, a smile stretching across his thin pink lips. “We won, Valentina. And we will own you all. Anyone who’s still standing will wish they were

dead with what we will do with the information collected on Viktor, Alek Severinov, and the rest of Red Ladro.”

“We own you. Or at least, those of you who will survive the attack.” He steepled his fingers and brings them to his lips, his expression tinged with hatred and disdain. “And that doesn’t include you or Mulligan.”

“Do you want to hear how Molly begged for her life in the end? What she lived through before she died?” Branko shakes his head at Quinn. “All because your father and his brother took issue with the wrong enemy so many years ago. The beautiful part of this operation is that I control so much of it that you never really know for sure where I begin or end.” He flashes an evil grin. “Kind of makes me sound a little like God, don’t you think? Always is, always will be.”

Pain slices through my temples. It’s blinding, blurring my vision. His words are like daggers, sharp, jagged edges tearing into my heart like it’s a slab of meat being expertly butchered. I can’t breathe. Each gulp of air slices into my lungs, grating them like shards of glass. I stumble, using my free hand to steady myself.

I blink fast, the overhead light flashing in slow motion. Veins throb, ire coursing through them, bubbling in my chest. Branko leans toward me and there are two of him.

Which one is real?

I sway to the side.

“Val, are you okay?”

Quinn’s voice is muffled, like I’m hearing it underwater.

Branko just laughs and speaks to the men around us in Spanish. He waves a hand at us, then at the girls. I press a hand to my temple. I don’t understand what he’s saying, but I know it’s bad. White noise assaults me and a pain explodes down my left arm... the arm holding tight to the Swiss Army knife.

He turns away from me. I jerk my head left and right. The men watch him with rapt attention. My fingers tremble. Nobody watches me. They all watch him like he’s the leader of some fucking cult. I work my fingers to release one of the blades as inconspicuously as possible.

Something pops out.

My brows furrow.

This doesn’t feel right...

I cast a quick glance down.

It’s a fucking corkscrew. A shuddering breath expels from my lungs.

It's okay, I just need to try again. He's still babbling about how he's going to take over the world or whatever the hell. I have time. I can just—

Branko suddenly turns, his lips twisted into a grimace. He lunges for me, his eyes glittering with victory.

I yelp when he grabs me by the hair, and I drive the mini-corkscrew into his neck.

“Who's the big winner now, asshole?” I pull it out and then jam it right into his eye. Blood gushes from his wounds, spewing onto my clothes. He falls to his knees, the corkscrew still sticking out of his impaled eye. He clutches his neck, his mouth wide-open and unable to make a sound.

Forever silenced, just like all the innocent girls he snatched and sold.

Quinn rolls to his feet and dives at me. We collapse onto the ground. My back hits the hard concrete, the air rushing from my lungs with a loud *whoosh*.

The small windows lining the ceiling crack and shatter. Bodies crash through, dressed head to toe in black. Masks cover their faces. A blast of gunfire scrambles my brain.

“Stay down,” Quinn yells, covering me with his body.

The explosion of bullets drowns out my sobs. They hit the stucco, lodging into the walls. Bottles crack, glass flying into the air. Branko's men fumble for their weapons, yelling in Spanish. Quinn pulls me to the stairway and shoves me underneath.

“Where are you going?” I scream when he staggers back into the melee. One of the guys in black tosses him a gun. One of Branko's men jerks left and right when his chest is peppered with bullets. He goes down, his gun crashing to the floor next to him. I slide out from under the staircase, reaching for the gun.

I grasp it just as Luis points his gun at me. “Drop it now or I'll choke you with my cock before I—”

His body buckles, a shot blasting through the front of his chest.

Quinn stands over his body, panting, sweaty, and looking a lot like Rocky Balboa after fighting... well, *everyone*.

“Nobody disrespects my wife,” he growls, giving the guy a kick in the head. “And I'm the only one whose cock she's ever gonna choke on.”

He drops to his knees next to me. “It's over.”

I look around at the fallen men, my gaze lingering on Branko. For so many years, he haunted my family, devastated us with loss, guilt, and regret.

He caused endless amounts of pain to so many people. My goal was to eradicate him from the face of the Earth.

Mission finally accomplished.

“You did it, babe. You got him.”

I swipe at my eyes with the back of my hand. “Quinn, I—”

The men dressed in black move toward us. My spine stiffens. I recoil as they get closer, my train of thought derailed.

Then one of them removes his mask.

“Luka?” My jaw drops, slamming on the floor in front of me.

He nods. “You didn’t really think we were letting you come here alone, did you?”

“But how did you know to even come down here?”

Taras and Alek pull off their masks. “After you left, we pumped June for more information. She remembered a few more details and we put it all together. We checked the building once you went inside and confirmed the girls were down here.”

“You knew Branko and Luis would be here?”

Alek shakes his head. “Hoped is more like it. But he was always going to be yours. And Luis was tagged by Quinn.” His lips lift. “Looks like you both got what you came here for.”

Quinn and I exchange a look. “I think we can both agree we got way more than what we bargained for.”

Alek nods. He turns away from us and joins Luka and Taras in helping to release the girls.

I grasp Quinn’s hand. “I’m so sorry for everything. Letting you leave last night, making you believe that I was willing to walk away—”

He slides a hand down the side of my face. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m gonna collect for all that, babe. I saved your life just now, too, big badass assassin. You owe me.”

“I’m pretty sure I saved you first.” I wrap my arms around him and jump back when I remember his stitches. “Oh, shoot, did I hurt you?”

“I’d risk bleeding out to feel you plastered against me.”

“Oh my God, I love you so much.” The words tumble out of my mouth, and I crush my lips to his, losing my fingers in his tangled hair. The kiss is long and deep. I refuse to break away from him.

I never will again.

“What happens next? Another mission? We’re a pretty good team, yeah?”

Like *Starsky & Hutch*. Or *Batman and Robin*. We should make this team official, yeah?”

I quirk an eyebrow. “You want to incorporate or something?”

He pulls me toward the staircase again. “No.” With a grunt, he slowly lowers himself to his knee in front of me.

“Oh, sweet Lord, here? In the middle of a sex den?”

“It’s gonna be memorable, yeah? Just like the day we met and celebrated our sham wedding. I know the night sure as hell was unforgettable. And I wanna relive that, over and over and over.” He grins at me, his face swollen and bluish purple. “I want you, Val. Every little pain in the ass thing you do or say, your control freak tendencies, your need to always be right. It makes me crazy and hot at the same time. Most of the time, I don’t know if I wanna throttle you or fuck you.”

“Wow, this is just way too romantic. I don’t know if I can handle hearing any more of your poignant words.” I roll my eyes, snickering.

“I just know that if you’re with me, everything will be okay. Good. Perfect. Our kind of perfect.”

“Which is actually super dysfunctional.”

He shrugs. “That’s what makes it perfect.”

“You’re insane.”

“I know. I keep coming back to you.” He smiles. “And I always will... because I’m fucking nuts about you. I love you, Val. Be my wife. My real one. Forever.”

“Are you seriously proposing to my sister right now?” Taras stomps toward us. “You didn’t even ask for permission, prick.”

Quinn glowers at Taras. “I don’t give a fuck what you want. I only care about what Val wants.” He looks back at me. “If you say no, it’s gonna make me look bad in front of your asshole brothers,” he mutters.

My shoulders shake with laughter. I can’t even believe this is happening right now. I avenged my family, saved these girls, and scored a proposal from the man I am head over heels in love with all in the span of a few minutes.

“I know he’s a little tough to take, but I promise he’ll grow on you,” I say to Taras over Quinn’s shoulder.

“Yeah, like mold,” Taras grunts, turning away with an exasperated sigh.

“I should have saved the proposal for another time, I guess.” Quinn grins at me, his lip split but his eyes glowing as he stares at me with intensity that makes my insides melt like ice cubes in the summer sun.

“No.” I hold him tight. “I think we both realize that you can’t put off today what you want for the future because you just never know if you might lose your chance. I don’t want to miss mine.” I smile, my heart thundering against my chest. “So, yes. I will marry you, Quinn. I want more than anything to be your forever.”

CHAPTER 42

VALENTINA

THE WEDDING DAY

My sister Tori shakes her head as she looks at my reflection in the mirror. “Val, I’ve never seen you look so gorgeous. Or happy.”

I let out a breath and slowly do a half twist in my wedding dress. There’s been a perpetual smile on my face ever since Quinn’s proposal two months ago, making the muscles in my cheeks burn from overactivity. “I can’t believe I’m doing this, for real this time, and with a man I actually want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“And just wait until he sees you in that dress.” She lets out a long whistle. “You might get pregnant from him looking at you.”

I chuckle and put my hands on my hips. The strapless silk and tulle gown fits me like a glove, highlighting every curve. Long white gloves complete the look, my large diamond engagement ring perched on my right ring finger, the left one anxiously awaiting a wedding band.

Tori takes my hands and squeezes them. “There’s definitely a pattern with our family. Seems like the females need a bit of coercing to bring them around to the idea of marriage.” She shrugs and hands me a flute of champagne. “But it seems to work out damn well for the guys.”

We clink our glasses. I lift mine to my lips and sip the chilled bubbly. It makes my nose tingle. “So delicious.”

I watch Tori toy with the stem of her glass for a few seconds. “What’s on your mind?”

She raises her eyes. They shine with tears. “I just can’t believe you’re really here, finally, after everything that’s happened. When you disappeared five years ago, I was afraid we’d never see you again.”

A lump forms in my throat, my eyes stinging. “Don’t make me cry, Tor. Think of all the time it took you to do my makeup.”

She giggle-sniffs. “I can’t help it. I just missed you so much. And losing Mom, Dad, and yeah, even Dima...” She pulls a tissue from the box and dabs at the corners of her eyes. “The thought of losing you to that monster, too, it just killed me. But what’s worse was that I couldn’t do a damn thing to help protect you. I should have been the one to get married off to that scumbag Stepanov. I was older. But you made the sacrifice. You gave up so much for your future and ours.”

Tori's blue eyes glitter, her cheeks flushed pink. "You really are a hero, you know that?"

"Okay, are you trying to make me look like a complete hot mess when I walk down the aisle?" My lips tremble as a giggle slips from my glossy pink lips. "I'm no hero, believe me. If I was, I'd have been able to save Charly. I just did what I knew I had to do. There were so many secrets I had to keep. I wanted to tell you about everything so badly, but I couldn't or else I would have put you all in danger."

"I wish we could talk to Dad again," Tori muses. She takes a gulp of champagne and sighs. "I mean, all that shit Denis Stepanov told you at SLK... I don't believe it. Dad would never do that to us. He'd never hurt us by putting the family in the line of fire. Denis was a fucking lying sack of shit who needed Dad. His ego was just too big to let him acknowledge that."

"I wish we could talk to Dad, too. I have so many questions... questions I'll never get answered." My shoulders slump. "He's not here to give me away on what actually is the happiest day of my life. I'll never smell his aftershave or hug him or Mom again. They'll never hear me tell them how much I love them."

"But they both know." Tori pulls me in for a hug and I relax in her arms, finally settled and looking forward.

"I just wish I had more time. Maybe I could have come up with a different plan, a way we'd have all been saved."

"You gave up everything for us and our own families. You did everything you could. Never question that. And even if you don't want to believe it, you are my hero."

"Hey, I thought that was me." Konstantin, Tori's husband, walks into the bridal room set up for the beachfront ceremony.

"Different kind of hero," Tori quips, winking at me.

He leans over to kiss me on the cheek. "You look gorgeous. Quinn's a lucky guy. He also pounds beers like nobody I've ever seen. I think the bar might have gone dry because of him and his brother Patrick."

"It's the Irish blood, I guess." I smile. "Although, I've seen you shoot vodka like a champ."

Konstantin snickers and wraps an arm around Tori's waist. "Ready?"

"More than you know." I drain the rest of my champagne. "Where's—?"

Before I can finish my question, Boris pops his head into the doorway, a faint smile on his worn face. His pale skin hangs loose, his face etched with

lines like he's aged twenty years since that fire in Vegas.

A sudden rush of déjà vu chills me to the bone as my eyes sweep over his thin, slightly hunched-over frame.

The nightmare.

Taras and Alexis's wedding.

How troubled Boris looked.

How my entire family was decimated in the blink of an eye.

My God, it felt so damn real.

And that same dread knots in my gut right now, when I'm only moments away from walking down the aisle.

"Boris," I say, my brows furrowed as I slowly walk toward him. "Are you okay?"

He places a hand over his heart. "Just a little indigestion, I think. I'll be fine. Where's Luka?"

I peek over his shoulder at the door. "I don't know, but he'd better get here fast. We can't start without him."

"I saw him pull Natasha behind a bunch of palm trees back near the resort," Konstantin says with a knowing smirk.

I roll my eyes. "He couldn't wait until after the ceremony? Everything was timed perfectly so we'd say our vows at sunset."

Tori leans toward me and kisses my cheek. "It will be perfect at sunset, at dusk, at sunrise. Whatever. It's forever."

I relax my shoulders, catching a glimpse of Boris rubbing his chest once again. Something thick and dark hangs in the air, something ominous that I can't see, only feel. My heart clenches, pumping harder with each second that passes.

Taking a deep breath, I smile at Konstantin and Tori. "I guess I'll see you out there."

A few seconds later, Zak, Nik, Taras, and Danil walk into the suite. Their faces are all flushed, and I shake my head. "So much vodka. Please tell me Quinn is still standing."

"You'd never know he guzzled twelve beers in the last hour," Zak says.

"Twelve?" I clap a hand over my forehead.

"Relax, he's kidding. Maybe it was six." Taras winks at me. "Hey, you know, under that pain in the ass outer shell that makes me want to shoot him in the head sometimes, Quinn's not such a bad guy. You made a good choice."

“Gee, thanks for that,” I quip sarcastically, smoothing the front of my dress. “I’m so glad I have your approval.”

“He’s a little bit of a prick, you’ve gotta admit that,” Zak says, grabbing a flute and the bottle of champagne. “But it adds to his charm, yeah? First, you kind of wanna kill him, then you wanna drink with him. Not a lot of people can pull that off. It’s usually one or the other.”

I pace in front of the full-length mirror, my heels clicking on the floor. “You guys do realize that you’re not the easiest people to like either, right?”

They exchange a look and laughter fills the room.

“Who, us?” Danil asks with mock surprise. “Screw that, we’re the most charming fucking guys to walk the Earth.”

“Yeah, why don’t you go drink to that and find Luka for me so he can walk me down the damn aisle already?”

Zak gives my arm a squeeze. “I got it.”

They lumber out of the bridal room. I turn toward Boris, who’s been quiet the whole time he’s been in here.

“Something’s wrong,” I say, bringing a hand to the back of my neck. A cool breeze whispers against my skin and I swallow hard. “Tell me. Is it your heart?”

He shakes his head and twists open a bottle of Pellegrino before pouring it into a glass. I watch as he takes a long sip of the fizzy liquid.

“I had a nightmare.” I walk over to the dressing table and toy with my eyelash curler, the scene exploding with color and vivid imagery in my mind. “You and I were walking together, talking about your daughter and granddaughter. And then everything went dark. Suddenly, we were under attack. Everyone was killed except me.”

I turn back to look at Boris. “And you. You just disappeared.”

He lets out a deep sigh. “It’s time for that to happen again. For me to leave.”

I smile. “You always say that, but it won’t be long before you’re back again. This is in your blood. You can’t live without the action. Admit it.”

But he doesn’t smile back. He just stares at me, his fingers steepled against his lips for a long minute, like he’s contemplating something.

“The action you speak of cost me everything, Valentina. I keep coming back to right the wrongs, and it’s time for me to correct the last one.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean, cost you everything?”

“Stasia and Angelina. The accident that took their lives? It wasn’t an

accident.”

“Oh my God. You never said anything about that. Do you know who’s responsible?”

He looks at me, his blue eyes steely. “I do and have for some time. Turns out, betrayal can take on many different forms. In this case, it was the form of a dear friend. A friend whom I’d always supported and helped whenever possible. A friend whom I trusted and confided in. A friend I’d pledged my loyalty to.”

“Boris, I—” I snap my mouth closed, the dread in my gut spreading into my limbs, rendering them powerless to move.

“I lost my wife so long ago. Stasia and Angelina filled that void. They were my life. And then one night, my life was ripped away from me.”

I shudder, feeling too tight in my own skin. It prickles and stings with a sudden rush of fear. I’m torn between wanting to ask and admitting to myself that I already know the answer.

“Who caused that accident?” My voice is barely louder than a whisper.

His gaze hooks on to mine with such intensity and fire. I want to look anywhere else, but like an impending train wreck, I can’t pull my eyes away.

“The night after you were kidnapped, your father managed to get footage from arena security of the truck that took you and Charly. He went to Alek Severinov and found the men who drove it. Then they ordered a hit on them. After a high-speed chase, they ran a light, killing my daughter and granddaughter in a horrific wreck. My life ended in those seconds.”

My jaw drops. *No, please God, no...*

“Viktor buried the evidence of the hit and the footage. Neither he nor Alek took responsibility for the accident. Your father stood by me at the wake and funeral like he didn’t know a damn thing, like he wasn’t responsible. I found everything later, stashed in his safe with the combination he *thought* was secure. But I was able to bypass it. He kept everything from me. It was the worst act of betrayal I could imagine.”

“But, Boris, it was an accident. He couldn’t have known it would be your family who’d be hit.”

“It wasn’t an accident that he lied to my face. Told me that he’d find the people responsible and handle them, which he never did because it was him who orchestrated their deaths.”

“You’re being irrational right now.” Panic bubbles in my chest and I step backward. “It was wrong not to take responsibility, but he didn’t—”

“It doesn’t matter. He lied to me, broke my trust and my loyalty. After that, I found Branko myself. I decided to right the first wrong by getting revenge on your father. It was the first step in my plan.” He takes a couple of steps to close the distance between us.

“Your plan.” I shake my head. “No. No, no, no! Did you...” I stop, almost choking on the words. “Was it you who killed my father and Dima? My mother?”

“When you’re born into this life, you aren’t given much choice. You accept your place, and you do whatever is necessary to protect it. Your father’s deception told me that my place was in jeopardy. I had a choice—protect it or watch it crumble.”

“And to protect it, you needed to kill a third of my family?” I ball my fingers into tight fists, my shoulders quaking with rage. “You’re the reason why Quinn and I were ambushed in Vegas, why we could have been killed so many times over. You’re the fucking leak.”

“I am the fucking king,” he seethes, sliding a hand into his jacket. He pulls out a gun and points it at me. “I own you all and will enjoy every second watching all of Red Ladro implode. Everyone will pay the price of my loss.”

“You think that will make things better? That money and power will put you back together?” I cry out. “Because it won’t. It never will.”

“An eye for an eye, Valentina. Everyone else is dead. Just like Alek said, there’s nobody left to take what I’ve built. I made sure of that. Only one loose end remains before I disappear forever.”

He pauses, his hand extended. I stare down the barrel. “It wasn’t just a nightmare, but deep down, you already knew that, didn’t you?”

I scream just as a shot fires. The sound reverberates between my ears as I fall to the floor on my knees. Red drops slip down the side of my arm and dive into the fabric of my dress. They blossom into deep stains, stains just like the ones my father couldn’t wash from his hands.

And now they’ve transferred to mine.

My body numbs, my mind tormented by Boris’s caustic words. I crash forward, my back buckling, my face hitting the cool tile. Pain assaults my left side. I slap my right hand against the floor, trying to pull myself up.

This can’t happen. I have to stop it... stop him. His anger has already destroyed so much. I can’t let him hurt anyone else. I need to fight.

Boris’s face blurs through my tears.

Another shot fires.

My fingers tense and tighten, my wrist wobbles on the floor. An inferno of anguish consumes my body until my arm gives out completely.

I... can't... do it...

My eyes droop closed, and the world goes dark around me.

CHAPTER 43

QUINN

I storm around the hospital room, fisting my hair. After listening to all the sordid details given by everyone to the cops, I'm shaking with fury.

So much anger and hostility rages deep in my chest, and there's nobody left to unleash it on.

Normally, my choice would be Alek. But we're all battling the same demon now, which puts him on my side.

Who the fuck would have ever thought that could happen?

I glance down at Val sleeping in the bed. The heart monitor blips and bleeps, and I swear, my own heart rate is through the damn roof right now. They oughta hook me up to one of those things before my chest explodes.

"You have to calm down," Patrick says to me. "You're wearing a hole in the floor, for fuck's sake."

I turn toward him. "Would you calm down if it was Kyla lying in that bed?"

"Kyla *has* lain in that bed, dumbass. And no, I couldn't stay calm, which is why I destroyed the fucker who put her there."

"So that thing about glass houses and you know... pebbles." I crack each of the knuckles on my left hand.

"I really hate when you do that." Patrick shakes his head. "And I don't live in a goddamn glass house. You really need to learn the fucking saying. All I meant was only get pissed off and vengeful if there's something you can do about it. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"I don't know, okay?" My voice rises. "All I know is that I heard my fiancée scream her head off and that she was shot by the backstabbing son of a bitch, Boris. Boris, who pretended to help us, to help her, to help fucking

everyone. And all the while, he'd secretly planned to torch us all."

Patrick rubs his hand over the back of his head. "I opened the family up to him. I brought him into our organization."

"Yeah, but he'd already known Alek and the Malikov family. He was already in. You just didn't know it." I stop next to the bed and reach for Val's hand. I bring it to my lips, the other one hooked up to an IV drip that's been giving her fluids.

"It could have ended badly," Patrick says, a grave look on his face. "Really badly. Thank God Luka heard her."

Someone knocks on the door. I grit my teeth. "Come in."

Alek pokes his head into the room, Luka follows close behind.

"She hasn't woken up yet?" Luka asks, walking toward the bed.

"Not yet." I swallow hard.

I should have been the one to kill fucking Boris, not Luka.

I should have been able to protect her from him. From anyone or anything that could hurt her.

Like he can read my mind, Luka narrows his eyes at me. "Stop thinking that."

I squeeze Val's fingers in mine. "You don't know what I'm thinking."

"I think we all do," Alek says. "Because we've all felt the same thing. Don't blame yourself. She's fine. She's going to wake up."

"*This time.*" I fist my hair.

"If you don't want to make it a regular thing, then you'd better take your head out of your ass and learn a little diplomacy," Patrick says with a smirk.

I flip him off with my free hand. "How the hell did this even happen? Why did Boris shoot Val? Wasn't he supposed to be like a father to you guys?"

Alek's eyebrows knit together. "Only Val knows the answer to that."

"I didn't even think. When I ran in and saw him pull that trigger, I emptied my mag on him. She was in trouble. I needed to save her." Luka's shoulders sag and he leans over the metal bed rail.

"I want him alive so that I can split him in half with a machete," I growl.

A small amount of pressure clenches my fingers. I jerk my head toward Val's face. Her eyes flutter open. She blinks a few times, her gaze sweeping over the three of us hovering over her.

Then she slowly moves her head toward me. With a faint smile, she whispers, "You're here."

My heart nearly ruptures, my throat so tight I can barely squeeze out a breath. “Always.”

A flicker of confusion shadows her face. “What happ—?”

Then her blank gaze fills with horror.

She remembers.

“Oh my God. Boris,” she whispers, her hand trembling in my grasp.

“Val, do you remember what happened back at the bridal room?” Luka’s voice is low. He leans forward and strokes the side of her arm. “What Boris said to you?”

Tears slip from her eyes. Her teeth chattering, she nods. “He was working with Branko. He planned to destroy us all, and he came to... to...” A sob explodes from her chest. “To kill me because Dad and Alek killed Stasia and Angelina. ‘An eye for an eye’ is what he said.” Her voice chokes with tears. “He did everything—deceived us all, arranged the murders of Mom, Dad, and Dima—to avenge their deaths.”

I swipe the tears from her cheeks. Now I really want to fucking decimate someone.

Val recoils. “Where is he? Is he still—?”

“Dead.” Luka averts his eyes. “I made sure of that.”

“Yeah, about that...” Alek taps his fingers against the wall next to him. “The bullets tore into his shirt. Over his heart was a tattoo.” He drops his gaze to Val. “A four-pronged pitchfork pointed down at a set of numbers.”

Her mouth drops open. “The last code.”

Alek nods. “The information he’d been waiting to expose, locked away, accessible only with this code.”

“Do we know where it’s even stored?”

“No,” Luka says. “And now that he’s gone, we never will. But the thing is, nobody will because he made sure to eliminate anyone who knew about the evidence.”

“This all feels so surreal,” Val murmurs, wincing as she shifts on the mattress. “How could he have done that to us all?”

“He wasn’t thinking clearly. He’d suffered a tragic loss.” Alek’s lips stretch into a tight line. “I don’t know that I’d have handled it better.”

“I trusted him. He was like an extension of Dad.” Val looks at Luka. “Thank you for saving me. But I don’t know how I’m going to get over this. I feel like a piece of my heart was just bitten off and set on fire.”

“You’ll move on,” Patrick says. “Because that’s what you have to do.”

Quinn and I have done it twice. It sucks and hurts like hell, but it's life. It goes on."

A swift knock jars me.

The door opens and a doctor walks in holding an iPad. He flashes a smile at Val and makes his way over to her. "Looks like you had quite the eventful wedding."

She grimaces. "We never quite made it that far."

"Well, fortunately, you can schedule a redo." He looks down at his screen. "The gunshot wound was shallow. We were able to repair it easily enough since there wasn't much damage. We thought you might have a concussion because of the swelling on your head, but after running some tests, there's no indication of any brain trauma."

"Thank God," I mutter.

The doctor looks at me and then back at Val. "You're a very lucky girl. And you can relax. The baby is just fine." He backs away with a smile and turns toward the door.

Val's jaw drops. "I'm sorry, did you just say—"

"*Baby?*" I finish, my jaw now in the same spot as hers.

The doctor pauses and smiles at us over his shoulder. "I did. Congratulations. And maybe next time you elope if you think people might be shooting each other. Or you."

"We're having a baby." Val's eyes glisten.

"Holy shit." I scrub a hand down the front of my face, my own eyes wet.

"The baby's having a baby," Luka says in a soft voice, grinning wide at Val.

I dip my head, brushing my lips against Val's. Resting my forehead against hers, I whisper, "I thought I was here to save you, but now I know you were sent to save me."

"I love you so much." She snuffles. "And we're going to have a perfect life... our own version of perfect."

Her skin is smooth underneath my fingertips. She's breathed so much life and love into me, I don't know how I could ever survive without her. She's marked my soul, claimed my heart. Val's become an extension of me, the lifeline I never thought I needed or wanted.

Reminds me of something my mother said to me before she passed. I haven't thought about it in a long time, but today... right now... it hits home hard.

“Life always goes on, Quinn. And what you do with it is all up to you. Make the most of it. Don’t waste a second. Love hard, laugh harder, and be thankful for every blessing you’ve been given.”

I will, Mom. I swear I will.

EPILOGUE

MERCER

The moment she walks into the party, the air pressure changes.
It becomes thicker, alight with all the dark fucking possibilities that come along with her.

I know, because I can think of things so depraved, twisted, and thrilling even the unrepentant in Hell's depths would moan with pleasure.

I know, because I've done many of those things.

She sets off a vibrating edge, a sliver of excitement. The air sings when she's near.

I can use that.

And I'm going to.

Just not yet.

Because the wait brings the pitch up to a sweeter level.

I'm also busy watching a dead man walking.

Right now, the poison's destroyed his liver and kidneys, unraveling his DNA. He's dead. It just hasn't come full circle. Even if he was rushed to a hospital, he'd still end up dying.

I spent a long time devising the poison. Tasteless, odorless. Untraceable. Death cap mushrooms are a marvel, my favorite weapon when I'm not working with guns or knives.

But poisons take time. The right approach, the right formula, the right administration. And then they require time to work. Get one thing wrong, rush a step, and it all crumbles.

Patience, they say, is a virtue. And I play that game like a prodigy.

Stone-cold. A killer. These are me. I'm also rich as fuck. So rich my past can't touch me. That long and scarred path that stretches as far back as I can

remember might not have ever been paved with gold, but tools? Things that have enabled me to become who I am? *This* version of Mercer Vale?

Fuck yes.

Logan Cooke begins to sweat. There's a flicker of light in his eyes, a sign of things not quite right. But nobody notices.

And no one will.

The people surrounding me are off their tits and balls on coke; drunk on thirty-dollar artisanal cocktails. Not one of them is going to notice until Cooke hits the floor.

I lean against the wall in the shadowy corner of Seven7Seven, a trendy faux secret spot in TriBeCa, complete with an entry password and a non-descript flight of stairs. They lead to the graffitied door, which opens into a long, tall black velvet lined hall that opens up to the bronze door of Seven7Seven's dark, glamorous interior.

The height of the below-Fourteenth Street crowd's pretensions, here in good old Manhattan. As one of the silent, hidden owners, Seven7Seven makes me a shit ton of money, and I can keep an eye on movers and shakers of all kinds.

Some of them I can use.

Some of them I might need to dispose of.

The Barnes and Noble and Japanese convenience store on ground level don't even hint at what's up here. A person has to book for weeks in advance or receive a special invite. The place is well-known to its very specific target audience and entry is highly coveted.

I settle back in the shadows and observe.

I don't need to be here. Cooke's demise is a done deal and glitterati parties are not my fucking jam. With the next job I decided to take on? Let's just say there are other avenues to get what I need. But there's a certain symmetry, an air of fate about doing it this way.

Not real fate. This is crafted down to the finest detail of the evening, complete with her arrival on the dot. But like all good artists, it's going to appear seamless, effortless. A natural occurrence, just like fate. And when she realizes there isn't a drop of serendipity or chance of any kind involved, her real fate, her future, finite as it is, will be sealed.

But I still refuse to look at Ivy Gardner. Not yet.

I want to time everything perfectly. Cooke, my revenge, my next project

“You’re pretty,” a girl says, slurring, her hand on me luses fluttering furiously.

She’s hot enough, I guess, whoever the fuck she is. But she’s touching without permission.

I glance at her hand, then her until she releases her grip on me. Rich and never worked a day in her life. This type is easy to pick out of a crowd. She doesn’t go away and I’m aware my fellow Obsidian Knight, Malone West, is watching closely.

“Not interested. Go away.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“But,” I say, gauging just how cruel I can be. “I do.”

Her eyes narrow and she turns, flouncing off.

“That’s not nice, Vale.”

“There’s a lot more I could have said. Or done.”

“Boundaries,” he says.

“The thing, West,” I say, not bothering with the niceties of society—fuck society—as he hands me a Laphroaig, “is that money gives us the freedom to do anything we want.”

“You’re a cold fucker.”

“You aren’t?” I spare him a glance. “Also, *boundaries*? For fucking real?”

Malone doesn’t give a damn about boundaries. What he gives a fuck about, what all the Knights do, is his own ass. The ability to indulge in his deepest, darkest appetites when he wants, how he wants, with no repercussions.

The Obsidian Knights. A very secret society, one that exists in the realm outside law and order and rules the rest of the world follows. Each Knight has been carefully curated, each of us has special skills. The *crème de la crème* of underworld criminals. Shadowy, existing on the edges of society. No one *needs* to work; we take on jobs or projects for different reasons.

I’m not saying there’s no money involved. There is. So much that half the assholes in here would come in their pants over all the zeroes attached to the numbers we receive for our work. I’m just saying money is never the sole reason why we do what we do.

Revenge. Pleasure. Boredom. Power. Hate. Even love, for those who believe in it.

These all play a part.

But the reasons always change. We aren't heroes, but we are top of our game. And when we want to play, we'll burn things to the ground to get our prize.

My motivations are usually about the challenge, the meticulous set up. Matching the right tool to the right target. For Logan Cooke? Poison was the best bet. For others, it's a gun. Sometimes a knife. But each and every one of my kills are planned. Every scenario thought out.

I like the wait, the stretch of time, the heightening of senses that comes with control. Like when I have a sub on the St Andrew's Cross. Or have her tied up as I work out the next move. The most effective one to get what I want.

Layers and control.

For Malone, it's chaos and mess and carnage. I take a long look at the blond man with his aristocratic features and carefully manicured beard scruff. He looks like the type to help old ladies over the street. But I know he's the type to slit their throats if he wanted to; the type to charm them out of millions, whether it's art, jewels, or money.

Malone is deadly.

Just like me.

He thrives on chaos, it's like fucking to him. I don't. I thrive on the detail, careful planning, control. The minutiae.

It's pure patience, something that's come from my past, a way to survive. I've come, as they say, a long way from dealing and living on the streets, from that kid who'll do anything to survive, that monster.

It's what I had to be.

Become worse than those around you and own the game when it's time or fucking sink and die.

I had no intentions of the latter. Even back then.

When the Knights came knocking, I was more than ready. Primed to take my place among those like me.

Because if you don't have the urge to climb shaking ladders of morals and wear pristine clothes to hide the rot underneath, when you don't chase fame, when you finally have the billions, then...the world is there for the taking.

And I'm here to fucking take.

The Knights have a place to meet, to let loose, to talk in the open. But here, even in a place where navel gazing isn't an occupational hazard, it's a

prerequisite, talk is dangerous. It's why Malone pushes the envelope.

I allow it because he knows the rules of the game. And he wants something. I'm always interested in that.

"Broken Angel?"

My next job. Bring down the fucker behind the string of clubs. It's going to be involved. It's going to take patience. And skill. My skill set.

"Let's say I was asked."

And I was. This job comes with all enticements an Obsidian Knight wouldn't turn down. Stakes in the power game. Real power. Stuff most would kill for.

"By a higher up?"

"Yes," I say. I take another sip of the single malt and check my watch. The chaos Malone wants is going to happen soon.

"It's not going to be easy."

The request comes with an offer I'd be a fucking moron to refuse. But that's not why I'm taking this on. The challenge is more than there, but that's not the reason either.

"Since Orion isn't here," Malone says, his voice monotone as if we're at some board meeting and not in the middle of a party, "I'm guessing Cara, his latest fuck piece, is here to help you out tonight in his place."

Then he turns to me, a sinister smirk on his face.

"Or maybe the tasty little morsel she just brought in here with her is."

"She's off limits. Stay in your fucking lane, West."

He's right. Ivy is here for me. The job at hand means I need a certain kind of girl to bend to my will.

I can taste her name on my tongue. The sickeningly sweet coating and the bitter center colliding all at once.

Ivy is the exact kind of girl the depraved who play in the depths of the Broken Angel sex clubs want.

"Henderson won't be easy to get."

I lift an eyebrow at Malone.

"Plenty have tried. Broken Angel has a lot of information and...blackmail worthy stuff that's kept him alive."

"You want something." I pose it as a stamen, not a question.

"Yes."

That's all he says. I don't push.

In ten minutes, Cooke will hit the floor. Malone will feed off the chaos.

And I'll make my next move.

I'm not bothered by the untouchables. And I've known of the fucked up shit that happens in the bowels of Broken Angel.

I don't give a fuck.

That's not my reason either.

No. My reason is simple.

Revenge.

A finely spun web of revenge I'm finally ready to serve.

And timing?

It's everything.

I excuse myself from Malone, move through the party goers, and catch Cara's eye.

Her little gift, in exchange for taking care of a debt, looks like a favor to me. It isn't. At all. It's pure manipulation on my part.

Information is an important commodity. One I horde. And when another Knight—the one I've known the longest, Orion—started sleeping with a college student, I got curious.

Cara isn't his type. But she has family issues, gambling debts I'm not even sure Orion knows about,

But I made it my business to run into her, to help her. Especially when I discovered who her friend at college is.

That's around the time I decided to say yes to the Broken Angel job, for two reasons.

One is directly tied to Henderson, that rat fuck.

The other? Well now, that type of revenge is very different.

The honeypot.

The pretty girl with the hair like dark caramel. The one who shifted the energy in the room just by walking in.

Ivy Gardner.

She's no longer the skinny annoying kid sister of my long-gone best friend. No longer the little fourteen-year-old with the crush on me. No longer the girl I rejected when she tried to kiss me all those years ago.

Ivy is all grown up now. Gorgeous face, body filled out like a porn star. She'd snag my attention now, even if I'd never met her before. She looks sweet, innocent. Vulnerable. And with all the investigations I did into her, she's exactly that. A fucking Pollyanna.

But what she is now and always has been, is the girl who put me in

prison.

It's time for her to pay.

Ivy's a walking wet dream for the man I'm going to kill.

I'm going to bend her to my will. I'm going to take her, own her, defile her. And when the time is right, I'll use her to get me close to Henderson, the semi-recluse behind Broken Angel.

I'm going to get all the information I need, punish and kill Henderson, and then I'm going to crush Ivy.

And she's going to take part in her own destruction.

Willingly.

Because there won't be anything she can do to stop it...or me.

Mercer Vale is a vicious beast dipped in gorgeousness, a billionaire skilled in the fine art of death. Consumed with hatred and revenge, he needs someone to help him lure an enemy into his dark and twisted web and his best friend's sister is the perfect accomplice.

Except she doesn't know *she's* his real target.

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When an act of revenge becomes an act of obsession...and your best friend's sister is the target.

Born into a world stained with blood and violence, I've risen to the top, beyond rich, skilled in the fine art of death. I've never forgotten where I came from, how hard I hit rock bottom, or the girl who drove me there.

My best friend's sister, Ivy.

When a complicated assassination job comes my way, I have the chance to get my revenge on the woman who put me behind bars.

One thing threatens my objective. I didn't expect Ivy to be a natural submissive. One taste, and I'm addicted to the forbidden. But what Ivy doesn't know is that the dangerous secrets of my past can shatter everything she wants for her future.

She thinks she knows betrayal. She has no idea.

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MEET KRISTEN



Kristen Luciani is a *USA Today* bestselling author of steamy and suspense-filled romance. She's addicted to kickboxing, Starburst jelly beans, and swooning over dark, broken anti-heroes. Kristen is happily married to her own real-life hero of over 20 years.

In addition to penning spicy stories, she also has a part-time job as her three kids' personal Uber driver, which she manages to successfully juggle along with her other tasks: laundry, cleaning, laundry, cooking, laundry, and caring for her adorable Boston Terrier puppy. Mafia romance is her passion...and her poison.

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