



Once upon a time
she became mine.
Mine to protect.

OCTAVIUS'S



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

V.F. MASON

OCTAVIUS'S OATH

V. F. MASON

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To the power of love...

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Octavius's Oath is a dark romance.
It mentions abuse, rape, and graphic violence.

PROLOGUE

“When you throw a challenge at a powerful and cunning being, be ready for the consequences.

For they have a lot of things.

But one thing they lack?

Forgiveness toward those who crossed them.”

Isla

*I*sla

Fisting the skirt of my heavy wedding dress, I rush out of the room, my heels clicking loudly on the marble and echoing through the halls of the cursed mansion that I wish would burn to the ground. Voices bellow after me, one more panicked than the other, laced with fear and agony that speak volumes about the monsters roaming within these walls. “Isla!”

Ignoring their pleadings, I scrunch my eyes and shake my head because they mean nothing.

They don’t care about my well-being. They only care about *him*, who rules them all and makes them dance to his tune. Anyone who refuses to listen to him faces horrible torture.

And as such, none of them deserves my pity or sacrifice, even if I brought this doom on myself by daring to do the unthinkable.

I forgot one crucial thing.

Never attack a hunter on their hunting ground because they will retaliate when you least expect it.

I should have known better.

After all, he's the king of manipulation, hiding behind the facade of goodness and sainthood bordering on insanity. His gaze alone has the power to freeze people on the spot and send them to an early grave.

Mercy, compassion, empathy.

He has no idea what these concepts mean, making him the most dangerous man I've ever met. Unfortunately for me...he showed me in full glory how he punishes those who cross him.

I cascade down the stairs, my heavy breathing filling the hallway and not letting me fall into the abyss that's my desperation and misery.

"Isla!"

Trapping the sobs between my lips, I use all my strength to run to the double doors and then fly through them, getting outside. I welcome the frigid air slapping my cheeks and sinking coldness into every bone in my body.

Coldness that grounds me in the present and reminds me I'm on borrowed time because the only thing I can do right now is survive.

An owl hoots in the distance when the powerful boom shakes the sky lit by thousands of stars, shining brightly and announcing the upcoming storm when dark clouds gather.

A tremor rushes through me.

Even Mother Nature seems to be on their side and never mine. Isn't that just tragic?

The moonlight glows in all its magnificent glory, opening up the enormous garden to my view and all the ways to get lost in it. The thick trees with long, dangling leaves brushing the ground almost invite me to find sanctuary among them and hide me from *him*.

My feet burn, the pain travels from my calves to my thighs, and I'll probably have blisters for days. However, I ignore my hurt, focusing only on one goal.

To escape from this prison so I still have a chance because anything is better than being trapped here with him.

"Isla!" A seductive yet sinister voice calls my name this time, sending chills down my spine and breaking goose bumps on my skin.

The voice is straight from my nightmare as it belongs to a devastatingly handsome man, despite an angry and red scar marring half of his face, with a soul so cruel and rotten, even hell has no place for him for all the atrocities he's committed.

My hold on the cloth tightens as desperation fills every cell in my body, which only causes me to push myself harder and add more speed when one of my heels breaks, making me stumble a little.

I slip them off quickly and dart to the side, my eyes roaming through the perimeter and searching for a better place to escape.

My lungs burn from lack of oxygen, yet I pay no attention to it, running even faster because my life depends on it.

I race toward the endless path leading to the massive gates that don't have anyone guarding them. The empty road is my only hope now to catch someone's attention and finally end this once and for all.

"Isla!" he calls again. The heavy footsteps echoing behind me let me know he's chasing after me, intending to catch his latest prey and smear me in blood.

The man listens and belongs to no one, living by his own rules where gore and chaos thrive. His selfish desires force me to do whatever he pleases since his absolute power can't be challenged.

I reach the ground, rocks flying under my feet and digging into my skin probably drawing blood, but I don't stop.

For stopping means death to my soul, and how can I give up without a fight?

“There is no escape from me, kitten!”

Shaking my head, I gasp while tears form in my eyes at the prospect of being caught by such a man, the images painted in my head each more depressing than the other.

The wind whooshes around me, plastering my dress against my legs and billowing my hair backward, all the while I stare at the gates, needing to reach them because it's my only solace in this darkness.

I sigh in relief despite the exhaustion my whole body faces when three men step from under the shadows into the light. Their energy alone promises you suffering so strong you'd wish you were never born in the first place.

Halting my movements, I curl my toes into the asphalt.

Vicious hunters eager to sacrifice anyone and anything as long as it fits their selfish desires because they have no value for human life and play it however they see fit.

Everyone obeys their rules.

No one could ever stop them, and because I tried to... well...

One of them flips the lighter between his fingers while the other puts a cigarette in his mouth and leans closer to let him light it up, both seemingly bored and barely sparing me a glance.

Only one of them drills his green eyes into me, his blond hair caressed by the wind, and disgusting shivers wash over me as nothing but hate fills them.

The man despises me, and he makes no secret of that.

Finally snapping out of my shock, I spin around, ready to find another way, only to come to a full stop when I see *him* walking toward me wearing black jeans and rolling up the sleeves of his white shirt, emphasizing his muscled body and the deep veins on his forearms.

Dark hair covers his scarred cheek as his brown eyes sweep over me, possessiveness coating them. He comes closer, and with each step, the drumming of my heart intensifies. “Kitten, I think someone gave you the wrong directions.” His lips curve into a sinister smile while his eyes stay hollow, and fury practically emits from him, whispering about the retribution for my actions in the future. “The church is that way.” Finally, he reaches me, the tips of his shoes touching my bare toes. A gasp slips from my throat when he threads his fingers in my hair. Several pins drop around us when he pulls me to him, our chests bumping against each other’s and our gazes clashing. “Willing or not, kitten. Willing or not, you will become my wife tonight. After all, isn’t this what you wanted?”

I close my eyes at the sheer mockery in his tone, my fingers crumpling his shirt in my hold. The events from the past few months flash in my head like an endless kaleidoscope, not letting me rest.

No.

I never wanted this. I have no one but myself to blame, though.

All my choices led me to this moment.

When I have to marry the devil himself.

Because I made him break what he valued the most.

His oath.

CHAPTER ONE

“Obsessions are a dangerous addiction.

Ironically, in my case...

Obsession is what will finally set me free.”

Isla

*N*ew York, New York

Three Months Earlier

*I*sla

I knock on the door three times before pressing on the handle and entering, plastering a smile on my face. “Chief Grayson.” I greet him as he occupies the chair behind his desk, wearing his uniform while his massive form fills the space.

His gray hair and pale skin contrast with his green eyes that scan me like a hawk. The indifferent expression he gives me sends panic through my veins, and I groan inwardly, already anticipating the lecture coming my way in full force.

After all, I went against his orders, again.

Almost jeopardized an entire undercover operation that took months to plan, again.

Ran off after a criminal because he reminded me of *him*, again.

Simply put, the list of my sins grows larger by the second, and without thinking much, I say, “I’m sorry.” His brow lifts,

and he leans back on his chair, which doesn't really help the nerves eating at me, but I'm seriously concerned I've crossed the line from where there will be no return. It's a wonder he let me stay with him all this time without kicking my ass out of here years ago.

“What exactly are you sorry for, Isla?”

Okay, so he won't make it easy for me, and why would he? The man's patience needs to be rewarded for all the bullshit I've put him through over the years.

“For blowing off my cover in front of a suspect, and then instead of following him so he'd keep his mouth shut, I ran off to chase someone else.” Even I wince at this, grateful for my partner who caught the criminal wanted for three assault charges and robberies. “There is no excuse for my behavior.”

“We both know you aren't sorry, and there is always an excuse.” I lock my hands behind my back, despising that he can see them tremble from the constant anger in me whenever he brings up this topic. “It's been almost thirteen years, Isla.” A beat passes while my heartbeat speeds up. “Thirteen years is a long time.”

An agonizing scream echoes through the space while heavy chains keep me locked in place, glued to the cross right in the middle of the church. Despite the pounding in my head, I manage to lift it long enough to see my mother being stabbed right in the middle with a silver blade, the blood spilling everywhere and smearing the white-as-snow clothes of the murderer, who wears a plastic mask. “Please,” my mother begs just as he twists the knife in her and then removes it, the blood pouring from her while she drops to her knees. “Please, don't hurt her,” she begs him, and I open my mouth to call after her while tears stream down my cheeks, but no sound comes from my throat.

He must have damaged my vocal cords when he wrapped a rope around my throat and squeezed it so tight I couldn't breathe.

Instead of replying to her, the murderer laughs. The sound sends chills down my spine, and he clicks his tongue. “Where

would the fun in that be?”

“You won’t ever let it go, will you?” Chief’s question forcefully pulls me away from the memories that haunt me every single day, and I focus my attention back on him, for the first time seeing rare traces of softness on his face. His cruel temper is legendary among us all, and it’s a wonder he still hasn’t retired because he isn’t liked much. “When your parents died all those years ago, I promised myself to take care of you.” I press my thumb inside my palm, ordering myself to stand still even though the last thing I want to hear right now is what my parents would have wanted me to do. “As your godfather, that was my responsibility.”

“Uncle Grayson...”

“Even when a sweet little girl who dreamed about becoming a historian decided to be a police officer just to catch her parents’ killer, I went along with it. I should have stopped it right there.” I hang my head, hating to see his disappointment when his kindness was always absolute. “Ironically, I thought you’d be protected under my nose, but your need for revenge cannot be controlled.”

“That’s not true. I solved many cases.” While I will admit I won’t be winning best anything awards anytime soon, I’ve done the job well ever since he hired me.

I dedicated all my time to countless unresolved cases, collecting information and connecting dots all over states so the serial killers who committed the crimes ended up behind bars.

“Yes. You’re good and have great instincts, but they all go out the window the minute you think you have a lead on *him*.” He taps on the stack of folders next to him. “All these cases almost failed because you got distracted.”

“That’s not—”

I jump in place when he slams his fists on them, anger flashing on his features while his voice drops a few octaves, indicating he has reached his limit and no longer wants to

soften his blows for me. “You’re unfit to be a police officer, Isla, until you sort your own problems.”

I bristle at what he says even though it has merits. “I found the lead. He’s alive. He has done it to another family just weeks ago.”

He slides his finger through the stack and takes out one of the folders before flipping it open, several pictures of chopped flesh and blood coming into view. “The man has been dead for probably a decade, Isla. No one goes this long without sustaining his cravings, and this”—he taps on the pictures—“is a copycat and not him.” He points at the victim’s sliced throat. “You see this cut? It lacks his expertise.”

“No!” I reply stubbornly, knowing full well that this was the Church Killer’s intention all along. Kill everyone and leave all the clues, only for the police to doubt his *modus operandi* and not link the cases. “It’s him. I can feel it.” Saying all this makes me feel like a broken record because no one believes me.

Or rather, he thinks I’m so thirsty to catch the serial killer who wiped my entire family years ago that I’d settle for anything.

Even a copycat.

We have a long stare-off, and he shakes his head right before pushing his chair back and getting up. He snags a paper from his table and puts his stamp on it. “Effective immediately, you no longer work here, Isla.”

My heart plummets in my stomach while panic envelops me, creating rather depressing images in my head, starting from being evicted from my apartment to not being able to pay for Grandmother’s nursing home. “Uncle Grayson—”

“No.” One single word yet its weight settles on me, almost chaining me to the place from how heavy it is. “I gave you an endless number of chances.”

“You’re firing me.” Oh my God, even in my worst nightmares I never expected him to fire me. Transfer to a

different team or forbid me from handling criminal cases? Yes. But firing me?

If anyone else gets wind of it, my career in the force will be finished. No one would trust me when my own godfather kicked me out!

“Right now, I’m transferring you to Chicago.” I freeze at this while he sighs. “You’re still my goddaughter, so I’m giving you one last chance to start in a new city and focus on your life instead of the past.” Since I just gape at him, he elaborates, “If you can’t do that, you can always refuse the job once you’re there. At least you’ll have your reputation, or what’s left of it.”

“I can’t move!” He ignores my exclamation and walks around the table, brushing past me and opening the door wide while holding out the paper. “Uncle Grayson, this is my home.”

I was raised in New York, having countless memories with my family in this beautiful city, and he expects me to just pack up and move to Chicago, a city I’ve never been to?

“You have a choice to make, Isla.” He pushes the paper at me, and I finally grab it, hating seeing the word transfer on it. “Unless you want to focus on the present and not the past, don’t bother calling me either if you get yourself into trouble.”

Ignoring the sting his words cause inside me, digging into the festering wounds that would never heal no matter how much everyone tries, I swallow back my resentment because, apparently, even his love has limits, so I nod. “Understood, sir. Thank you for everything.” I walk out of his office and he shuts the door soundly. Everyone around stares at me in shock before returning to whatever they were doing when they noticed me staring back at them.

My antics are legendary, so it’s probably no surprise they listened to the entire exchange and exhaled in relief to finally be rid of me.

Clenching the paper in my hand, I raise my head high and roll my shoulders back before walking to my table and

grabbing a huge box. I place all my personal belongings inside, already thinking several steps ahead.

Uncle Grayson can't fool me.

This transfer to Chicago is his idea of teaching me a lesson. He fully expects me to go and come back crawling on my knees, begging for another chance to return to New York. Then he'd agree with a condition that I will forever let go of my revenge.

Since he knows my financial situation and how much debt was left after my parents died because the insurance hasn't covered shit, he expects me to do anything as long as I keep my job and stable social package.

My gaze lands on the picture in a silver frame on my desk, and I pick it up. My heart pangs in my chest when I look at my parents' happy faces while they squish me between them during one of my birthday parties. All my family is in the back, waving and smiling into the camera.

A raspy breath slips past my lips, and I trail my fingers over their beloved faces. They're forever imprinted in my mind with blood smeared all over them while the monster disfigured them one by one until I was the only one left.

The world always expects you to move on...but what if moving on is the one thing that might kill you?

I can't peacefully exist in a world where this bastard roams our earth freely with no consequences for his crimes while my family is buried six feet under.

So...

Chicago.

Here I come.

CHAPTER TWO

“They say some people are born evil.

Oh, how wrong they are.

*Because no matter the crimes of a person, evil is always a
choice.*

*And as such, all the monsters of this world choose their path
willingly.*

Even me.

*For the injustice done to you doesn't justify the pain inflicted
on others.*

Not that it ever stopped me from indulging in my dark vices.”

Octavius

*C*hicago, Illinois

*O*ctavius

Heavy rock music blasts in my ear, the headphones vibrating on my head and muting any other sounds around me as I stroll to the metal door leading to my basement, my boots thumping on the perfectly polished marble glistening under the harsh light.

Ah, light.

Until you go without it you never truly know what a privilege it is to have it brighten up the space around you.

You spend countless hours wishing for someone to come and save you from your unfortunate fate where the whole world stays deaf to your pleas.

Darkness, after all, needs its prisoners, and what better prisoner than a hopeless creature living in misery and agony subjected to the highest of tortures every single day?

A creature that can be transformed into someone hideous with the right amount of pain and discipline.

Although sometimes it's useless.

Vices and monsters exist in the daylight too. They just learn to hide themselves better, and if I wasn't one of them, I'd find it tragic.

Instead, I thrive in the knowledge.

I press the passcode in the keypad, a smile curving my lips when it opens, and I enter, shutting the door behind me with a kick. I close my eyes, breathing in the chlorine-filled air.

A scent that sends adrenaline rushing through my veins, and anticipation promises me the only pleasure that can temporarily numb anything else and silence the voices screaming in my head.

Voices remind me of the past from where there is no reprieve, no escape, just an endless pit awaiting me.

Grabbing one of the several lanterns hanging on the wall, I flick it on and go down the brick stairs, tapping my headphone to turn off the music. A chuckle escapes me when I hear faint whimpers in the distance, echoing through the space and enhancing my senses.

When I'm inside my dungeon, the past doesn't exist.

The whimpers become louder the closer I come to my torture room, and finally, I step inside, clapping once, and the almost blinding light brightens everything around me at once.

My dark soul soars at the view of my dungeon, the space designed for chaos and pain that knows no bounds because whoever ends up here has no mercy or salvation in sight.

Only endless agony awaits them, even in the afterlife.

Although it reminds everyone of a sterile operating room because I first enter a small room where I grab my scrubs and quickly put them on along with the mask. Then I pick up the soap and wash my hands, shaking the water off and turning off the faucet.

Catching my reflection in the mirror, I see my hollow eyes and the angry scar peeking from the mask.

Nothing has the power to cover it up from the world, nor do I wish to.

People tend to stay away from the scarred beasts because they dread our wrath. If anything is better than the fear permanently surrounding you, it's the smell of temptation as it speaks about your absolute power and domination.

When people fear you, they don't dare to hurt you, and for those of us who used to live at the mercy of others...that's an aphrodisiac in itself.

A louder whimper snaps me out of my thoughts, and I look through the glass door at the black trash bag on the floor moving violently. I find the idea of anyone hoping to get out of it alive hilarious.

Human stupidity truly has no limits.

Or hopefulness. It depends on how one prefers to look at it.

The doors to my dungeon open when I press the button on the wall, the smell of antiseptics twitching my nose while the spotless tile floor squeaks under my leather shoes, alerting my victim to having company. He freezes, the bag rising and falling from his breathing. Various machines buzz around me, surrounded with surgical tables holding all the necessary equipment.

What is torture by our hands if not an art form where we express our deepest desires and showcase evilness to those who deserve it, treating their bodies like canvases designed to forever imprint our rage in them?

True skills lie underneath a calm exterior and precise planning, as no murder done in rage ever amounts to anything.

The minute a killer loses his mind, everything becomes blank because when a hunter has no clear target, he's dangerous to society and loses his purpose.

I drink in the environment around me, welcoming the peace settling over me. Only here do I have the freedom of being myself without having to pretend to be anything else.

I'm a monster with no redeeming qualities as redemption requires remorse, and I have none. How can I, when anticipation nips on my skin at the sight around me?

From a knife collection gathered all over the world during my travels, each more deadly than the other and having the ability to cut any flesh with just a little pressure to poisons found on the forbidden markets that would make any victim complain for whatever I have in mind.

Sometimes a person just has no patience for fucking screams, especially from cowards, but then again, who has respect for cowards in this cruel world of ours?

Not me.

You either survive or die, and if you can't survive...act with dignity because that's the only thing left when someone destroys you piece by piece.

I should know.

After all, I rebuilt myself from the ashes, but I haven't risen like a phoenix.

I've soaked in darkness instead.

"Please, someone help me!" the person in the bag shouts. He thrashes several times before yelling again, this time louder and sending annoyance through my entire system. "Please! Help me!"

Six lamps above me cast a harsh light on the medications stored on the shelf counters. I guess one good thing came from my medical degree.

Walking toward them, I snag several bottles and prepare the syringe, placing it on the tray near one of the operating tables along with several blades.

“I’ve been kidnapped!” The person continues to talk, making me roll my eyes. “What do you want?” He tries another tactic when he’s ignored once again, and I turn on a few machines before finally grabbing the bag and putting the body on the table with a loud thud. “Please, help me!” I tear the bag, and a naked man opens up to my view, relief etched on his features. “Thank God. A doctor.” He sags back and gulps for breath while sweat slides down his skin as I remove the bag and throw it away. Only for him to tense when I grab the leather straps hanging on the sides and start securing him to the operating table. “What are you doing?” he asks in confusion. He moves to sit up, but his agonizing scream echoes through the space when I punch him hard in the collarbone, sending him flying back and securing him in one position. “Please, no!” he begs, choking a little on the blood while doing his best to wiggle, but it’s useless.

Once they are on this table, they are helpless and motionless. “What do you want?” He clenches his fists, his fingers digging into his palms and drawing blood. I put on my gloves, and he swallows hard. “I have money. Lots of money. I’ll do whatever you want.”

Ah, money.

I have it in abundance, but even if I didn’t...I’d never take a dime from the likes of him.

“Do you?” I finally ask as I pick up the syringe and insert it in the vial, drawing enough substance to satisfy me.

“Yes. I’m wealthy. Just name your price. I’ll double it.”

I stab the needle into his neck as he twists his head to the side trying to avoid it, only to yelp, his saliva flying in a different direction. “Did they offer you money as well?” He stills, our gazes clashing as realization flashes in them. I click my tongue. “Ah, no. They weren’t powerful enough for that. Right, Principal Smith?” Dropping the syringe, I wrap my hand around the heavy drill and goose bumps pop all over his

skin when I press on the button, the *trrr* sound sending humming through my entire system and coating this place into something wicked.

This a doom.

A doom of my creation, and as such, only I make the rules and have the freedom to display my vices and dark desires however I see fit, for no one can stop me.

Those who tried are already dead.

“It’s a mistake. All the allegations were false.” He gasps when I press the tip of the drill against his pulse and glide it lower, sheer terror reflecting in his gaze. He scrunches his eyes, biting on his lip. “Children love to lie, especially in boarding schools. They’ll say anything to go back home.” He shakes his head. “None of them have proof.”

“Every action has consequences, Octavius.” He leans closer, whispering into my ear as his hand flexes around my throat, cutting off my oxygen supply while I slap his arms, but it’s no use.

My strength was always nothing against his. “And you sinned this world just by being born.” He slaps his belt against his knee and throws me on the floor where I land on my ass, my head hitting the table, and judging by the pain I feel, I know I’ll have a bump. “Don’t you dare open your fucking mouth ever again, Octavius. Everyone will ignore it. Just like they did today.” He grins as I slide back when he advances on me. “No one would believe you.”

Fury ignites my veins, sending gasoline on the burning fire that’s my hatred, and without any warning, I pause the drill right above his crotch. His agonizing scream fills the air, his flesh becoming nothing but a mass under the drill as blood soaks his body and slides down his sides, smearing the table.

Satisfied with the result, I put the drill away and wipe my hands on the towel while tears blanket his eyes and his heartbeat speeds up, his body doing its best to adjust to the unbearable pain he must be experiencing. The medication mixed with the poison should kick in very soon, keeping him

awake for all the atrocities his body would experience while being unable to yap or do anything else. Just face all the torture and being at someone else's mercy, like all these countless souls he's trapped and ruined in his kingdom where he thought he was invincible. "Except they told the truth, hadn't they, Principal Smith?" I slide the mask lower. He still has some strength left to look at me, and I see when recognition hits him.

"Octavius," he whispers, swallowing as the blood continues to gash from his wound. I do several bandages and stitches to control the bleeding.

He has to be alive for several more hours. A quick death is not punishment enough for what he has done. Some may say he should rot in prison, but I disagree.

Prison doesn't change monsters like him. They either find a way to hide their true nature and get out and cause even more pain...or other prisoners find out about their sins and kill them anyway.

At least I make something useful out of their deaths, a sort of twisted way to repay all these souls they have crossed.

I mean, most would say I'm an insane psychopath who loves to kill people, and they would be right.

However, there is goodness in my darkness, and shouldn't the world appreciate at least that?

"Octavius," he whispers again, his eyes glistening with fake remorse. "Octavius." He whimpers when I cover his mouth with my palm, and then, with my other hand, I squeeze his nose until I hear a crack, his chest rising and falling while his pulse speeds up until finally, no sound comes.

The poison has started to work, and I throw my head back, closing my eyes and seeping from this eternal misery the only thing that brings comfort to the hungry and cruel beast living inside me, always eager to inflict suffering and craving for blood.

Every single day spent without killing someone is a day wasted for him.

Because for every victim of mine who manages to escape my wrath, there is another one...crying in the corner wishing for divine intervention to come and protect them from them, to spare them in this unfair existence where their wishes mean nothing.

Greater good means nothing.

Goodness and honor mean nothing.

And in this I can never rest, always catching those who deserve it, and I will never stop.

If I'm breathing, then someone is suffering. That's the absolute rule in my life.

Throwing the gloves into the nearest trash can, I go to another table and grab several containers with ice and flip them open, preparing for everything and checking the temperature in the room. Satisfied with it, I tap on my tablet and quickly shoot a message to one of my university acquaintances.

A worldwide famous surgeon praised for his grand work and innovations, he's saved countless people over the course of his career because he found solutions to every problem.

Expect a little present soon.

After that, I scrub my hands again and put on new gloves, my fingers tightening around the tenth blade as I slowly start to cut my victim open while he feels everything.

Unimaginable pain that he has to withstand and stay silent because no one hears him slowly dying inside. Isn't that a poetic way to go?

Quite fitting for a piece of shit who used his power to exploit those whose parents entrusted their children to him.

Monsters have many forms on this earth, but none of them deserve pity as they know better than anyone that actions have consequences. No matter what you do, whether in the name of goodness or evil...it's a choice.

That's why only death can stop them because their sadistic cravings will demand fresh flesh to feast on until they take their last breath.

And I'm not an exception to this rule.

"Principal Smith. The agony, the terror, the hurt is nothing compared to what you've done to *them* for years." I spit on his face, and he can just scrunch his eyes, tears trembling on his eyelashes. "Don't worry, though. I will prolong this for as long as possible. And you know the best part about it?" I lean closer to his ear so he won't miss a thing. "No one will know because no one will ever have proof." I repeat the words he always said to all the children who had to encounter him and methodically remove all the necessary organs, monitoring his stats on the machines as he slowly ceases to exist.

I've already destroyed his legacy by gathering all the evidence and sending it to the police and a few reporters to make this a public case. Everyone would know about his deeds, and it'll serve at least a small justice to those he harmed.

While most murderers prefer to prolong the death of their victims, enjoying their hopelessness and coming up with creative ways to torture them, I never found any interest in that.

Why spend so much time on those who do not deserve to breathe and just suck up much-needed oxygen that should be spent on someone else?

It's way better to destroy them in ways that ensure nothing is left of them and no one mourns them as that's ultimately human nature.

Everyone wants to be remembered and loved even after death but very few truly deserve it.

It takes me around an hour to pack everything up in the assigned boxes, writing down all the details of the matches since I've done all this work in advance.

No victim of mine is an accident or spur-of-the-moment person. It's someone I've done extensive research on to dissect

his body in the most hideous of ways.

Throwing away yet another pair of gloves, I look at the trophies I've just gathered.

A heart that will go to an eighteen-year-old who needs a transplant urgently. Things got so bad for him that he wrote a goodbye letter. He wished for at least several more months to live so he could attend his prom with his boyfriend.

Two kidneys to twenty-year-old twins who've been on dialysis for years, and their family has lost all hope.

A liver for a thirty-year-old single father of five who barely held on after the death of his wife.

And finally, lungs for a sixty-year-old man who had one single wish. To be able to walk his daughter down the aisle, but his declining health barely lets him breathe, let alone do anything else.

Now that's a day filled with purpose, isn't it?

Picking them all up, I place the boxes in the scrub room and press on the button alerting Antonio to handle the delivery as fast as possible.

They were all notified about the upcoming surgeries and "miracles."

Although, who knows? Maybe my vices and methods can be seen as miracles to some, but at least I'm eliminating those who cause harm and stopping them from touching the innocent.

Not that it matters on the grand scale of things because a kill is a kill, and there is no justification.

Going back to my dungeon, I unstrap the body and throw it on the nearby table before rolling it toward a farther room on the right, turning on the fire. My lips tip in a grin when the fire burns brightly, so without waiting, I throw the corpse in and sigh at the sight.

Nothing but ashes left from that bastard.

Is there anything more magnificent than this?

My reprieve lasts exactly five minutes before my phone vibrates, and I snatch it from the table, reading the message, and everything inside me grows stone cold.

Looks like Chicago will have an unwanted visitor.

A visitor who will bring me nothing but trouble as her existence alone inspires unfamiliar emotions in me that urge me to do the unthinkable.

Trap an innocent creature in my cage and never let her go, chaining her to me in ways most people would find disturbing.

Especially since she wishes to put the likes of me behind bars.

She should have stayed in New York, because her past will threaten the foundation of my present as my secret contains a key to hers, but the truth won't set her free.

It will destroy her.

That's why she can never know it, and I should never come close to her.

As the truth will be inevitable then.

After all, *vita est intolerabilis*.

Life is unbearable.

And so am I.

CHAPTER THREE

“If you want to catch a serial killer...

You need help.

And who better to help than a murderer indulging in similar vices, even if he thinks he does God’s work?”

Isla

*I*sla

“I think this is a mistake,” Giselle, my best friend since forever, says, her voice echoing through the car as I drive straight and wince when I encounter a ditch, the seat belt saving me from hitting my head on the steering wheel.

“Crap,” I mutter, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Giselle. She might be on speakerphone right now with me miles away, but she knows me better than anyone.

My craps usually mean nothing good.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” She sighs while annoyance coats her tone. “That’s why I told you to wait till we come back home and use our apartment in Chicago in the meantime.” A beat passes, and she adds, “The offer still stands.”

Right.

While she might be blissfully in love with her billionaire husband, Callum, who has a rather questionable reputation that I refuse to examine since he makes her so happy, I’m not an idiot.

He's totally obsessed with his wife, so he would do anything for her, but it doesn't mean he won't butt into my business while doing it, making sure that I don't endanger her.

And right now, Giselle can't know about my true plans. Otherwise, she'll hop on their private plane and come here to kick my ass for even thinking about my idea, let alone anything else.

"I know. I promise if living here turns into hell, your number will be the first one I dial." She huffs, clearly not believing my bullshit because we both know if there is one thing I hate the most...it's asking for help and receiving charity.

When you depend on the generosity of others for years due to a vicious human who destroyed your life once upon a time...you tend to resent it because the emotions suffocate you to the point where you feel indebted to everyone. I have to learn to be on my own, and I might as well do so now while moving here.

Gripping the steering wheel harder, I press on the gas pedal and continue to drive to my destination, which is ten minutes away according to the GPS, while trying my best not to judge the neighborhood around me.

After my godfather dumped his big news on me, I had around one month to get all my affairs in order and very little time to look for a new apartment that would fit my budget.

By sheer coincidence, I found a newspaper lying near my apartment on a random evening, and there was an offer for a one-bedroom apartment circled in red, which made me think someone else in my building was planning to move to Chicago.

I quickly called the landlord and paid the deposit without even checking anything or the neighborhood. Over the years, I've lived in some horrible places, so how bad could it really be?

Well, I guess I shouldn't have asked this rather rhetorical question because life once again found a way to surprise me.

The neighborhood presents a gloomy atmosphere consisting of gray and black concrete buildings with cracks visible under the streaming sunlight, indicating they might collapse at any moment.

Nothing but emptiness surrounds the place. The grass that had once been green is now yellowed with a little orange thrown in. Several overturned trash cans are scattered across the premises, with half-open black bags filled with rotten food spilling on the ground. Flies swarm above them while a couple of cats dig into the food, meowing loudly.

At least they won't get hungry, but I won't be opening my windows anytime soon.

"Is it far away from your station?" I blink at this, momentarily forgetting about our conversation, and bite my lower lip, guilt slowly sliding through my veins along with embarrassment. "I don't think your car can survive driving long distances every single day."

My vehicle chooses this moment to emit some weird sound and flash some kind of warning on the display that I always ignore. "Hey! Don't talk about Mercy this way." I pat the seat next to me. "We have some fond memories in my car."

"If you're talking about a road trip across the country that ended in three hours because it broke down, and we had to stay in a cheap motel where we heard a couple screw each other for five hours straight, then yeah."

Despite the situation, laughter slips past my lips and eases some of the tension squeezing me so tightly that sometimes it's hard to breathe. "You have to admit that man had some stamina."

She giggles. "I guess. My husband's is better."

"Oh, come on!" I groan, a shudder rushing through me at the details of her sex life because her husband might be handsome...but once you know him, it's weird as hell to think about him in such a way.

Callum has this 'don't fuck with me and anything of mine ever or you'll never know peace' attitude, so being

intimidating doesn't even touch the tip of the iceberg in his case.

In short, I prefer not to know how my best friend gets her rocks off with him. "All right. You haven't answered my question." As I drive farther, I notice various people dressed from formal dresses to bike tops roaming the street, chatting or cruising with each other. Some of them hold drinks and engage in board games, erupting in loud laughter if their thrown-back heads are anything to go by.

"What question?"

"Is it far from your station?"

"No, it's super close," I lie through my teeth, hating every minute of this because my best friend deserves better, but she can't know the truth.

The one where I decided to work as a private investigator instead for the time being, hiding it even from my godfather under some bullshit pretense that I wanted to get to know Chicago better before working on the police force there.

Not sure he even bought it. However, the man clearly has been fed up with all my shit, so he just agreed to it, although not without adding that I'm making a huge mistake, and no one waits for me with open arms anywhere.

Ouch.

"We've been friends for almost ten years," Giselle says, and my brow furrows while I drive by a larger area with a kids' playground containing broken swings, slides, and a sandbox filled with more trash than sand. In the middle of all this, kids run around, giggling loudly, and still find joy.

So, all in all, the ad didn't lie. It is a family neighborhood, after all.

My heart pangs painfully, and the air sticks in my lungs when I see parents walking with their children, hugging them close and kissing them on the cheek, reminding me that nothing matters but the people who love you.

If you have them around you...you'll be happy even in a ditch, but if you don't...all palaces in the world won't fill the void in your heart that nothing heals.

Although having money sure makes life easier.

“Isla.” I almost jump at her calling my name sternly. “You cannot lie to me. What are you doing in Chicago?”

I sit up straighter, pressing on the gas pedal harder and heading to the massive gray five-story building with even more cracks than the previous ones. It has a large entrance where a group of people hang around, playing cards and drinking. A woman wearing revealing clothes leans next to them, powdering her face.

A car honks in the distance, and she glances at it, sweeps her gaze up and down, and then waves at the guys before running in her heels toward it and jumping inside.

I have a suspicion about her profession, but hey, no judgment from me. I've got my own problems to focus on.

Finding a parking space with so many big rocks, it's a wonder the cars don't break here. I find an empty spot closer to the building and turn off the car, exhaling heavily and resting my back against the driver's seat.

Placing my palm on my nape and kneading the sore muscles from all the driving, I finally reply to my friend, who patiently waits on the line for me. Sometimes I don't know how she survives this friendship of ours. I zone out during most of our conversations, and my hectic schedule and obsessive tendencies regarding my past don't help my situation either.

That's Giselle, though, the best human on this earth to ever walk, and no one can convince me otherwise. “Okay, you want me to be honest?”

She replies without hesitation, “Yes.”

“I need to do something but can't tell you about it.” I wait a bit to gauge her reaction, but she stays silent, so I continue. “I promise you I'm not in danger. You need to trust me and be on my side on this. I don't need lectures or anything else.”

A longer beat passes before she speaks up, her voice soft yet holding traces of sadness. “I understand, Isla. I won’t push, but promise to contact me if you need help or are in trouble.” Her tone leaves no room for argument or anything else.

Not that I expected it. If she and I have one thing in common, it’s being fiercely protective of those we love.

“I promise.”

“I love you, Isla.”

Warmth travels through me, and I smile, wishing she was here right now so I could hug her. “I love you too. Bring me presents from Paris!”

“I will. Call me once you settle in.”

“Okay.”

She hangs up, and I grab my phone from the front seat, putting it inside my pocket before getting out of the car and covering my nose from hideous smells wafting in the air.

Everything about this place speaks of complete hopelessness bordering hell on earth and the inability to push past the shitty hand fate has dealt you. Instead of trying to break the cycle, you’re stuck in this dump with no hope in sight.

It’s quite fitting for my situation, so I better get down from my high horse. Otherwise, this whole idea of mine would crash and burn before it could begin. Not to mention the lack of funds in my bank account, since I wasted all my money on the latest equipment and laptop, urge me to appreciate that the lease has been paid for three months.

“Hey, pretty girl!” one of the drunks from the stairs shouts, pausing his game while the other three men look in my direction. He lifts his beer can at me, and they follow suit. “You’re new!”

Shutting the door, I walk around the car and open my trunk, getting out my suitcase along with my shoulder bag. Having very little belongings has finally paid off.

Closing the trunk, I head to the stairs leading to the entrance, which involves me having to pass by the drunks, and greet them back. “Hey.”

“I wouldn’t call you pretty,” the other one says, and then the third guy smacks him in the chest. He shrugs. “At least I’m honest. She’s average at best, plain at worst.”

Amusement sparks inside me at this, although I’m in no mood for their bullshit right now. “Thanks for that, I guess.”

The first one who noticed me grins, wiping away his mouth with the back of his hand and smearing some dirt on his face. “Don’t listen to him.” He seems younger than the other three, and judging by how mischief still plays in his eyes compared to the devastation in the others’, it tells me he hasn’t encountered his share of disappointments in life.

He will, though, if he remains in company with this group.

The oldest of them all, who stayed quiet the longest, introduces himself. “I’m Kevin.” Since he says it as if it should mean something to me, I give him a long stare. “I run things around here. You’re new.” He glances at my suitcase. “Moving in, I assume.” He takes a long swig from his can, finishing it up and then crushing it in his grip before throwing it away. The thing lands by my feet with a screeching sound. “There are certain rules to know.”

I roll my eyes at this display of pseudo dominance that’s probably supposed to scare me, but all it does is just annoy me because all of them are wasting my time.

“I’m Isla. I know how to use a gun and kick all of your asses without breaking a sweat.” They all blink at me, their jaws dropping as I assume they don’t hear such replies often. “Now let’s make a deal. I won’t bother you, and you won’t bother me. I’ll even buy you a pack of beer to celebrate our deal.”

Drunks aren’t my favorite people, but they’re mostly harmless unless they have violent tendencies. And these specific individuals rarely drink outside in company. They do it at home before beating their family up.

Plus, there are no better spies in the neighborhood than them. If used right, they can give you all sorts of information, and I need such people in my circle at this new place. So I can be mean enough to show them not to fuck with me but nice enough to sway them in my direction.

As my grandmother always used to say...life is a game, so play it smart and get what you want, not forgetting that greed and stroking someone's ego can go a long way into achieving what you desire.

Kevin loses some of his bravado. "No need to get offended, Isla. Just little jokes to welcome you in the neighborhood."

More like scare me into it, but I guess we are past that.

The younger one adds, "Beer sounds nice."

"Splendid."

I pick up my suitcase, going up the granite stairs with so many cracks in them I'm surprised they don't break under my leather boots, and the drunks sway a bit to the side, making room between them before resuming their game and chugging alcohol.

It takes several more stairs before I enter the building, my brow raised at the stained-carpeted floor that's a washed-out green color along with yellowish walls with graffiti on them.

The single light bulb brightening up the hallway flickers several times, creating a rather gloomy atmosphere around me. Rock music blasts all over the space, vibrating a door on the right and mixing with screams and baby cries coming from another apartment.

I walk to the narrow stairs leading to the second floor, the wood creaking under my shoes while the wind blasts from the broken window. More graffiti greets me on the wall from threats to swear words and children's drawings.

The second floor isn't much better, although bile rises in my throat at the sweet scent polluting the air. The bulb in here flickers as well, although several lights are scattered on the

floors, as if the residents left them there to find a way back home once they returned.

No music is blasting in here, however my relief is short-lived when loud noises echo in the hallway emerging from one of the apartments.

“I’m tired of your bullshit, bitch!” a man screams, banging on something. “All you do is nag and fucking nag!”

“Maybe if you did something besides drinking, I wouldn’t nag!” she yells right back at him. The door rattles, sounding like someone was pushed against it. I halt my movements, my instincts going on high alert. “Let me go!”

“Tired of me? I took you in with that fucking bastard! Shut the fuck up!” The door rattles again, and then I hear a scream followed by crying, and I can’t do this anymore.

Without thinking much about it or my vow not to get involved in anyone’s business because announcing you’re a cop in such a place is almost a death warrant, I knock on the door three times. “Everything all right in there?”

After a long pause, the disgusting male voice replies, “Keep going.”

“Not unless you open the door.”

He opens it swiftly, and I come face-to-face with a man around my age with a long beard wearing a shirt and sweatpants with several brown stains on them. Anger crosses his face as his glassy eyes sweep over my features. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Your new neighbor.” I crank my neck to the side to see a woman hastily adjusting her dress while quickly wiping away the blood from her lips in a rather small apartment that doesn’t seem to have much besides a couch right in the middle. “I heard you scream.” I keep my eyes on her so she has no choice but to look at me, and complete terror fills her eyes, which lets me know this has happened before. “Is everything okay?”

She glides her palm over her hair before nodding, her voice slightly hoarse when she speaks up. “Yes. We just had a small argument.”

Small argument? I sigh inwardly at this, although my experience at work pretty much tells me it was pointless to even interfere.

Some victims are rooted so deep in their traumas they develop a strong bond with their abusers and defend them till they die. And without their statement...there's not much anyone can do.

Before I can reply to her, I hear the small patter of feet, and then my eyes widen at the small boy running to her, hugging her thighs. He must be around five, and my heart sinks at the fear etching his features while his clothes seem too small for his form.

"Nothing to see here," the asshole points out. My focus returns to him, and he snarls at my raised brow. "Learn to mind your business, new neighbor."

Sometimes I really wish people could take care of such assholes without the law getting involved because we'd get rid of a lot of bastards this way.

Scars inflicted by them last a lifetime, and sometimes no matter how much love one gives to another, it's not enough to wipe away the terrors their younger self experienced. In this, they are forever imprisoned in their grief and trauma.

Apparently, such thoughts are hideous and unacceptable, according to my godfather, who thinks everything should be done by the law. As a man who tastes such power, he would never stop and become a true killer.

Or so he says. I've yet to see some kind of a serial killer vigilante who hunts the bad guys and spares the innocent.

"If I hear more screams tonight, I'm calling the cops." By how a muscle twitches on his cheek, I know he hates it, but I don't care. "I'm in apartment twenty," I say to no one in particular right before the man shuts the door in my face.

Maybe challenging this guy on the first day isn't the smartest move. However, I can't keep my mouth shut in such cases.

One more sin to add to my never-ending pile.

Finally, I reach my apartment and insert the key, unlocking it with a soft click. I fully expect the inside to be worse than the outside, so I'm surprised at the interior opening up to my view.

The small one-bedroom apartment has a tiny kitchen with relatively new equipment, the silver glistening under the bright lamps when I turn them on, and a spotless kitchen counter where I see several mugs and plates on it. It has everything from the fridge to the oven, even a mixer and blender!

The arch-like opening leads to the living room with a brown couch, a small wooden table right in front of it, and a TV hangs on the opposite wall. There are even bookshelves.

“What in the hell?” I put my suitcase aside, kicking the door shut with my foot while removing my bag and dropping it on the couch, blinking at the spotless carpet underneath me.

Even the walls are white, and some flowery smells float in the air, bringing my attention to the houseplant in the right corner, closer to the couch.

I touch the soft green leaves and recognize the indoor citrus by the smell.

Giselle is a landscape designer, so despite not having much love for the houseplants because I couldn't take care of them, no matter how hard I tried, we had them scattered in our apartment, and her studies sort of interfered with mine.

I quickly stroll to the bedroom, turning on the light to see a huge new bed with silky bedsheets, two nightstands, and a bathroom with a bathtub.

Although the apartment is tiny, somehow it managed to include all the luxuries and make a rather comfy atmosphere all around me even though the landlord warned me I'd have to buy everything because it's empty.

Snatching the phone from my pocket, I type a message.

THANK YOU!

My best friend replies instantly as if she was waiting for me to finally move in.

It was the plant, wasn't it? I knew it would give me away!

Well, yes, and all the new stuff. How did you know the address?

It was Callum's idea. You know him. If he wants something, he'll find a way.

Gratitude settles into every bone in my body at their affection, and I sit on the couch, pressing on my phone to see the photo of Giselle and me smiling with the ocean behind us.

Rubbing the display, I promise myself to fix all of this and truly find happiness once it all ends because I still have people who I love and love me in return, and that's worth living for.

Not until I get my revenge, though.

I owe my family this much.

A smile slips from my lips, bringing the familiar anger and despair. Pushing the phone aside, I go to my bag and snatch out a blue folder from it along with my laptop.

The last time the Church Killer committed a crime was almost thirteen years ago near this city, and then he disappeared as if he didn't exist.

The police thought he died since he had a tight schedule for his crimes, but I believe otherwise.

And if I know one thing about serial killers who I've studied all these years...they stay close to their crimes and revel in the enjoyment from all their memories, basking in the terror they once inflicted.

His last terror was far greater than in any other city.

He will emerge from hiding sooner or later, and I need to catch him before he does it.

I'll be damned if I let him destroy one more family.

My phone vibrates again, and I see a message flashing that makes me roll my eyes.

Who knows? Maybe Chicago can be your new beginning. And a place where you can find true love. Just like your namesake.

At moments like this, I regret spilling the beans to her all these years ago about my true name, the one my mom gave me. She loved everything about ancient Greece, from the myths to its history. Her favorite masterpieces were *Iliad* and *Odyssey* written by a famous Greek poet Homer.

When the Trojan prince, Paris, fell in love with King Menelaus's wife, Helen, and stole her, the Greeks declared war on Troy. It lasted ten years, with the Greeks winning and setting Troy on fire. Since Troy had an unbreakable wall, they used trickery. They built the Trojan Horse and presented it as a gift from the gods. Soldiers hid in it, and once the horse was brought inside the city, they all emerged, burned, and conquered it. It's one of the reasons the horse became the symbol of great deceit for thousands of years.

The war saw many losses, victories, and love stories with brave and power-hungry, vicious men on both sides who would do anything to win.

My mother had a favorite among them, though, leading me back to my name.

My true name caused me a lot of fights since kids loved to tease me about it even though half of them couldn't pronounce it right.

A name that still brings me trouble whenever someone checks my paperwork, but thankfully, I swapped it with my middle one, so now I'm rarely called this. I'd remove it completely, but doing so would have meant disrespecting my parents.

Andromache.

Mom chose this name for me because Andromache was the wife of the Trojan prince, heir, and a true warrior beloved

by people and respected by his enemies for his skills and morality alike.

Hector.

A prince who would do anything for his land, people, and family—even die.

Their true love match lasted years, and her life was a constant heartbreak after his death.

Not a love story that inspires poets, for it wasn't legendary enough...it was calm, peaceful, and then it ended like every love story in those times. With tragedy, death, and blood.

Mom was superstitious and believed our names defined our destinies. She wanted me to experience a love story that would last a lifetime and bring me the most happiness on this earth. She wished for a Hector to swipe me off my feet and treat me like the princess I was raised to be.

What a funny concept, isn't it?

Once upon a time, I believed and dreamed about finding my Hector. However, a monster destroyed me in ways my heart became an empty void, bleeding every single day, crying out for justice and revenge.

My name might be Andromache.

But I shall never fall for a Hector.

For he would have to understand me and my quest, have less than stellar morals, and believe in the morally gray despite what our consciousness and society preach to us.

A man who would have to accept me for who I am, the revenge burning my blood, and understand that I won't rest until all the responsible people face the consequences for their actions.

And such a man doesn't exist.

CHAPTER FOUR

*“We should be careful what myths we love and cherish.
Especially when we decided to name our loved ones after
them.*

For some of them might come true.

And are we truly ready to live the life our namesake had?”

Octavius

Octavius

Thunder booms in the sky, dark clouds gathering right before pouring heavy rain on nature while lightning flashes, casting a temporary light on the darkness around me before everything goes black again. Owls hoot in the distance, hiding in the bushes to avoid the impending storm.

I step barefoot on the terrace, my open shirt flapping backward as the wind whooshes over me, the coldness sinking into my skin, and a grin shapes my mouth at my blood-smeared clothes that remind me about my latest hunt and victory.

For me, murdering a person means peace to a small child somewhere, and what can be more precious than that?

Monsters have different shapes and forms on this earth. We never have a heart, for that would require empathy even to those who don't deserve it, but we do have different moral codes.

And our moral code defines our victims, or how the law loves to call it...our *modus operandi*.

I walk farther until finally the raindrops touch me, soaking me instantly from head to toe. I throw my head back as the chaos in my head and soul temporarily settles, silencing the hideous voice playing in my mind repeatedly like a broken record that no one can get rid of.

A worthless piece of shit who is a constant reminder that I failed. Look at me when I speak to you, boy!

My hold on the whiskey bottle tightens, and I flick it open, gulping the alcohol and welcoming the burning sensations in my throat mixing with the salt water, grounding me in the present and pulling me away from a past that should not haunt me.

Yet it does every single time, as there is no reprieve from the madness consuming me and urging me to step over the invisible line and dedicate my entire existence to the darkness that saved me.

Lightning flashes again, followed by a boom, and the rain intensifies. I stay glued to the spot, though, because rain was my beloved weather as a child.

It was the only time I allowed myself to cry and freely express my emotions in a house where the monster ruled, set on tearing my flesh apart bit by bit until nothing was left.

Look at me, boy, and beg. Beg for mercy!

The bottle cracks in my grip, the liquid spilling on my bruised hands while the sharp glass digs into my palm, drawing blood, and a chuckle escapes me.

My body has so many scars. What's a new one added to the collection?

Compared to my friends, I'm truly a monster on the inside and outside, scaring everyone away with my looks alone, and I guess that's a gift I should cherish.

I throw the glass on the nearby trash I installed specifically for such occasions and splay my arms, welcoming more blood

while a loud roar echoes in the night.

“You’re awake, my friend,” I say, thinking about my pet roaming through the territory and refusing to hide, although I didn’t expect that from him.

We share a lot of qualities, bravery being one of them.

I hear the soft, barely audible sounds from the grass before my huge golden leopard with black spots steps on the terrace, baring his teeth at me while roaring once again, probably wanting to wake the dead since he rarely shows off this much.

His paws are soundless as he prowls toward me, breathing through his nose. His cat eyes are trained on me, and I know he can scent my blood by how his whiskers twitch.

“Easy, Lampos.” I address him by his name so he won’t miss the warning in my tone.

He huffs and comes closer, circling me before playfully rubbing his muzzle against my leg. He stands right in front of me again and jumps up, his paws landing on my shoulders, leaving our faces inches apart.

I palm his broad head and run my thumbs over him, earning myself some purrs, although doing that always inspires rage inside me because scars mar his skin just like mine.

Deep, red painful slashes that affected his eye.

Several years ago, while hunting a particular fucker, I found Lampos as a cub at his home living in a cage under strong tranquilizers. The fucker who captured him plucked most of his teeth, hurt him with a knife, and enjoyed watching his agony.

After killing the human in the most vicious way, I took Lampos to a vet who told me that even with all the treatment, the cub wouldn’t survive in the wild, and it would be more merciful to just put him to sleep.

Needless to say, I told him to fuck off and brought him home, deciding to take care of him with the help of another vet

and nurture him back to health. We got attached, and I kept him as my own.

He reminded me a lot of myself, scarred and beaten down, yet he survived no matter what. You just don't turn your back on a kindred spirit, even if the world thinks you are a horrible human being for claiming the wild creature.

He nuzzles into my shoulder, purring, and I chuckle when he tickles my skin, coming dangerously close to my pulse point.

He might be my pet, but it doesn't change his nature.

Because that's the thing about hunters...

No matter what we do and who we become, we always have the deep need to possess and tear flesh apart.

I push at his massive form, and he gets the hint, falling back on his paws and haunches in front of me, stretching, and then he yawns, huffing through his nose again. "Hungry?" He roars. "Come on."

I spin around and go back inside my home, grabbing a nearby towel and drying my hair. Lampos follows me and jumps on the couch, swaying his tail back and forth while I pick up my phone, pressing on the latest number. "Yes?"

"Antonio, get the food for Lampos here. He's hungry." I can almost imagine my old butler paling at the suggestion and how he adjusts his uniform before straightening up. Despite working for me since forever and seeing all the chaos I indulged myself in through the years, he's still terrified of my leopard.

Unfortunately for him, though, he's the only one allowed inside my house, so he has no other choice as I don't let Lampos roam freely through the mansion and possibly harm someone from my staff.

I go to the bar, snagging another bottle of whiskey, and pour it into my glass before dropping ice cubes in it, when the ringing reverberates through the space, snapping my attention to the TV hanging on the opposite wall. I connect all my devices to it to have easy access to whatever I need to do, so

with my command, “Pick up,” the video opens up, and a smug face greets me.

“Octavius,” he says, his voice even and deep while amusement dances in his brown eyes that mostly stay deadly as they promise death to whomever encounters him in his dungeon. His dark hair falls below his ear, and he flips the lighter through his fingers, leaning back on his chair.

“Callum.” I grit his name through my teeth, not in the mood for whatever bullshit he plans to spit my way. Of all his fucking friends, he’s the most annoying one because he always strikes you where you least expect it and does it so swiftly you barely see the blow coming.

Dark protégés—or, as I prefer to call them, righteous assholes—who think the world revolves around them and their wishes, are an underground brotherhood of the most skillful serial killers in the country led by the king of New York himself, Lachlan Scott.

He rules his protégés with an iron fist, and his reputation precedes him. Everyone knows not to fuck with him or his city because the consequences for it are severe. He finds them all on the brink of insanity and then channels their dark desires. Rarely anyone goes against him, and those who do usually end up dead.

Considering our net worth is about the same, though, I don’t much care but prefer to keep him as an ally rather than an enemy. I control my hotheaded nature around him and his students, who love to pull at the strings of my sanity.

Besides, the last thing I need is the underworld king arriving in my city.

I’m not particularly close to any of them except Callum since we had some business together back in Houston, where he lives with his wife.

Among other things.

“What do you want?” I ask, walking to the couch and dropping on it, kicking my feet on the table. Lampos rests his muzzle on his paw, his eyes trained on the TV, and by the glint

in them, I know he would have attacked Callum if he were here.

Compared to all the “pets” we have, mine is the most unpredictable and doesn’t do well with anyone. He barely tolerates my best friends.

Callum lights a cigarette and puts it in his mouth, pulling at it and sending the smoke flying, momentarily blocking his face from my view. I just sip my drink, allowing him this rather dramatic entry in order to deliver an upcoming blow.

Friends or not, we’re all monsters searching for the next outlet to unleash our fury on, so while we can play nice, we don’t really strive to. We prefer to attack and find pleasure in watching our opponents sweat under pressure while we push all their buttons.

Even with each other, and while I’d find it amusing any other day, I’m too wound up tonight to engage in the verbal spars with the most sarcastic of protégés.

“My debt to the Four Dark Horsemen is paid.” He leans back in his chair, taking another greedy pull. “In fact, I think you owe me one now. After all, I’m keeping your little secret.” He chuckles, the sound grating on my nerves, and places his hand on his chest, sighing. “Oh, I do love this feeling. You must have enjoyed it all this time, huh?”

“You got me there, Callum.” A beat passes. “I guess I’ll have to destroy my secret notebook with your name doodled all over it.”

He laughs, choking on the smoke, and I take a bigger sip. “And that’s why I like you, my friend.” He presses the bud of his cigarette into the ashtray and twists it. “I have something else for you.” I still at this, finishing up my drink and putting the glass on the table while keeping my gaze trained on Callum, who picks up a black folder and shakes it in his hand. “Consider it a gift.”

“I don’t need gifts from anyone.” Especially in our dark and violent world where gifts are another word for favors that need to be repaid.

Anyone who thinks anything is freely given is a fool who believes in fairy tales. Everything has a price.

You just don't always have the means to pay it.

“Let's just say when I was hunting my own wife...” My mouth twitches at his choice of words. “I conducted my own research, including her best friend.” Anger washes over me, and awakens every violent nerve in my body. My hand clenches into a fist, despising any man thinking it's his right to dig into a past that should be buried. Because her past is no one's concern but my own.

Lamos must feel my agitation because he raises his head and growls, his whiskers moving while he flexes his paws, his nails digging into the leather, and a ripping sound echoes through the room.

Callum whistles. “Easy there, leopard. Totally obsessed with my wife, remember?” He shows off his wedding ring as if it means anything to me. I didn't think he had a thing for Isla.

Still.

Why is he digging up her past?

“I'm not sure how this concerns me.”

He rolls his eyes. “Octavius, you cashed in on an old favor two days ago by asking me to take credit for furnishing her apartment and creating a safe environment around that fucking ditch of hers. Not a fan of lying to my wife, by the way, but I did it. So can you stop at least pretending you have no interest in Isla and use the helping hand I'm giving you?” He raises his splayed palm. “And before you get suspicious, let me put it this way. If my wife is happy, I'm happy. And her friend's happiness is vitally important to her, so if anything happens to Isla, it makes it my problem as well.”

“Isla was never and will never be your problem, Callum.” Steel laces my tone as I stand and run my fingers over my hair while Lamos jumps from the couch, pacing around the room, huffing through his nose while adrenaline rushes through my system, pumping my heart. “If that's all...”

“Check the information I sent you in your email. The man you’re looking for made an appearance several months ago in one of the small towns. He changed his usual method so the murders weren’t linked, but it’s him.”

“It’s impossible. I handled it a long time ago.” Fate left me no choice but to deal with the repercussions of my decisions that started a chain of unstoppable events. “You must be mistaken.”

“I’m not. He was content in the shadows. She’s relentless, though, and he despises it. Sooner rather than later, he will attack if she continues to dig deep. And it wouldn’t be wise or beneficial to anyone involved.”

I understand that he knows about the secret I’ve kept hidden all these years.

A secret that has the power to destroy everything I’ve build over the years and endanger those I care about.

I dedicated my life to hunting down the piece of shit who issued deaths to people just because he felt like it and had no respect for human life. And I finally found him five years ago. His body was burned to the point of being unrecognizable. I had no idea how he looked anyway, but he had a distinctive scar on his left hand. And the burned body had the fucking scar.

“If he’s alive...”

“Then you are his biggest target and by default so is she.” Callum rubs his chin with the back of his hand. “He would have never done what he did to her family if it wasn’t for you.”

Memories like a kaleidoscope play in my mind, one more hideous than the other, and thunder echoes in the air in time, the chaos slowly erupting inside me with each passing second.

However, showing my weakness is not a privilege I can afford.

We and Chicago are invincible, and it should stay that way.

Schooling my features, I focus my stare on him as his eyes grow stone cold, studying me intently. “I don’t need your help, Callum. So I advise you to stay the hell away from this.” He opens his mouth to say something, but I stop him, not in the mood to listen to his bullshit anymore. “I’ll consider the information you gave me a debt I shall owe you.”

“Octavius, you’re messing with my family right now. You do realize that?”

My voice drops a few octaves so he doesn’t miss how serious I am about his threat spoken between the lines. “She stopped being your family the minute she stepped foot in Chicago.”

“Don’t provoke me.”

“I’m stating a fact. You know the rules. If you want her safe, then maybe your wife should have kept her ass in New York.” I click my tongue. “Giselle has a weird sense of friendship.” She knows what we all do, so her allowing Isla to come here with all her fucking plans paints her as rather foolish.

I don’t give a fuck how irrational that is either.

“Careful, Octavius. Be very careful how you speak about my wife.”

Ah, my friends and their possessive nature.

A hunter in love is no longer a predator because he has a weakness that’s so easy to break and snatch away.

That’s why I’ll never give such power over me to anyone.

Never again.

I grab my little sister’s shoulder, my fingers digging into her skin and bruising her as I drag her toward the door, open it wide, and push her outside.

She screams, “No!” But I already shut it in her face as Antonio runs to her. The lock clicks, and I slip the key underneath the door. My order rings in the air. “Don’t enter, Antonio, until I stop screaming.” I know he will follow my

commands because if there is one thing everyone has in common in this fucking house?

Staying deaf and helpless when it comes to my pain.

“Take her away!” I manage to bark right before strong hands grab me and subject me to so much pain, I don’t expect to survive it.

“Handle the mess so it won’t touch anyone else.” Callum’s voice tears me away from the memories as lightning flashes in the sky followed by a powerful boom, making even Lampos hunch and wiggle his tail as he stares at the terrace.

Any other time, his ordering tone would have earned him a big fuck you, but considering his help, I let it slide. Barely. “Leave it to me.” If the fucker is truly alive, I’ll end him using whatever means necessary because playing with me is an unforgivable crime.

I have no respect for my enemies who try to scheme behind my back instead of facing me head-on.

So they die even more painful deaths than my usual victims.

Live with honor, or don’t live at all.

Callum watches me for several seconds, and I pick up the remote, ready to disconnect us, but my thumb hovers over the button when he speaks up again, an unreadable expression settling on his features. “Restraint is a great character trait. But restraint can become our greatest enemy. Sometimes it’s okay to claim what you want.”

Ah, I’m getting the lecture after all.

Fury glides through my veins, burning my secret wounds and pouring salt over them as their existence reminds me I’m still human.

Lack of restraint is a privilege of those who never knew what it’s like to hate your reflection and see people shying away from you in fear for simply existing.

“Sometimes what we want is selfish and brings greater destruction to everyone involved.” I press the button, throw

the remote, and return to the terrace. Standing in the pouring rain, I soak it up, hoping to get at least some atonement for what I'm about to do.

Desire.

What a funny concept anyway.

It should be forbidden for how vulnerable it makes you as even the most deadly men have the ability to attach themselves to innocent creatures, craving their light that they wish to destroy because it hurts them.

I might be a vicious killer who has no mercy for anyone.

But even I'm not cruel enough to subject any woman to such a fate.

I'm not just a monster. I'm a hideous beast who wears a demon's mark on his cheek for everyone to see.

And what woman would ever want to be with someone like me?

CHAPTER FIVE

“When you set yourself on the path of revenge, you need to remember one thing.

To survive until you can actually fulfill it.

Because hate is a strong emotion.

And where there are strong emotions, common sense dies.”

Isla

*I*sla

Something cold glides over my skin, painful sensations rocking my body while I breathe heavily and barely manage to open my eyes, only to whimper in distress when a maniac greets me, his gray eyes flashing in delight. They seem exceptionally large on his mask-covered face while his gloved fingers wrap around my throat, the air sticking in my lungs. He brings the blood-smeared knife to his mouth and licks it, my stomach turning at the sight because he stabbed my cousin with it just seconds ago. “I set you free, darling. One day, you’ll thank me.”

With a loud gasp, I sit up in bed, my raspy breath filling the room while the pounding in my head makes me wince. I rub my neck, only now realizing I’ve fallen asleep on the couch right after taking a long shower. I’ll pay for it later.

I always pay one way or the other when I decide to randomly fall asleep as only complete exhaustion after a few days allows me a blank state of mind with no nightmares to scrape at the remaining pieces of my heart.

I glance at the clock and sigh. It's only two in the morning. "Just great." Throwing the blanket away, I swing my legs to the side and go to the window to open it wide, breathing in the scent of wet granite after the rain, although judging by the dark clouds remaining in the sky, Mother Nature isn't done.

The wind billows my hair, and a smile tips up my lips when it breezes over my form. The skirt of my summer dress plasters over my legs, and I rub my feet against each other. "Chicago. Even your weather is unwelcoming. I love it."

My stomach rumbles, and I wonder if there's a place that delivers here at this hour because I didn't have any time to buy food.

"Probably not," I mutter, going to the kitchen and opening the fridge, only to blink several times in surprise when I see it's stocked. From the water bottles to fruits, vegetables, and some cheeses and bread. There is even a big container in the second row, and I take it out. "What in the hell?" I tear the note attached to it and read it out loud. "This is your favorite chicken pasta, cooked today. Heat it up and eat."

Oh my God.

My best friend is a gift from heaven because who else would have known me so well to even put a homemade meal inside the fridge to feed my hunger? "Giselle, you're one of a kind." I'll message her in the morning to thank her because if I do it now...she'll call me trying to calm me down, and I don't want that.

She found her happily ever after, so she doesn't need to worry about me. Especially not after what she's been through.

I place the container on the counter, and I'm about to grab a plate when three knocks rock off the door, halting my movements.

Alarm bells go off in my head at this, and without thinking, I grab a nearby knife and tiptoe to the entrance, looking through the peephole. My brow furrows when I see no one on the other side.

Even though I know better, I still flip the lock but keep the chain on, partially widening the door, and that's when my eyes land on a small box in front of my apartment with a red bow attached to it.

Shutting the door and removing the chain, I open it again and lean down to pick it up, rattling it a little to hear something shift inside it. A chuckle escapes me at the squeaky clean white box because, once again, it has Giselle written all over it. I won't be surprised if it's some lucky charm to bless the new place. I'm about to go back inside when I notice the small boy from earlier sitting several feet away, resting his back against the wall while he hugs his knees. "Hey!" I call. He jerks at my voice, his big blue eyes widening, and he freezes. "What are you doing here?"

He digs inside his pocket and snatches out a paper, extending it to me.

I come closer, take it, and read it.

Mind your business. My kid is none of your concern.

He places his hand on his throat, opens his mouth from which comes no sound, and closes it again as if trying to explain to me that he doesn't talk.

The child is non-verbal.

Before I can say anything else, I hear loud moans echoing through the hallway, followed by grunts and what seems to be the headboard banging against the wall. All the sounds come from his apartment. His shoulders sag while he covers his ears with his palms, and anger zaps through me akin to a hot volcano wanting to burn these fucking assholes alive.

I take a step toward the door, ready to unleash my fury on them because they kicked their child out in the middle of the night, leaving him vulnerable to God knows who. He jumps up and catches my hand, shaking his head and still gazing down as if begging me not to do it.

My heart breaks at the sight of him, his actions alone speaking about repercussions he might face after everything is said and done because, in most cases, no one gives a shit what happens inside someone's home.

They might be horrified after something happens to the child or say that the neighbors always seem weird, but to actually do something in order to save a child?

Nothing.

And in those rare cases when someone reports it...it's either too late or people don't care once again, giving an endless number of chances to unfit parents who end up scarring their children more in best-case scenarios or straight up killing them in the worst.

"Come on, kid." I push him in the direction of my apartment while his brows lift in surprise. "You can stay at my place. Do you usually wait long?" I wonder if he doesn't speak by choice or if something happened to him in the past.

God knows with such parents that the possibilities are endless.

He runs inside the apartment, and I groan inwardly at his easy trust. What if it was someone creepy wanting to hurt him?

Kids are too innocent for this world, and it's a shame they sometimes get shitty parents who should have stayed forever alone for their inability to care about anyone but themselves.

I shut the door behind us, putting the box on the counter when he points at the wooden clock on the table and taps on the number five.

So they expected him to sit outside till five in the morning?

A growling sound comes from his stomach, and he covers it with his hands, rolling his lips and casting his gaze down again.

Okay.

I have no idea how to act here because on the rare occasions I've dealt with kids, they usually stayed far away.

“Wash your hands.” I motion with my chin toward the bathroom. “And come back to eat.” The words are barely out of my mouth, and he already sprints to do as I say, which alarms me, but I shake my head.

I’ll go insane and really stab one of his parents if I delve too deep into the psychology of why the kid acts the way he does.

Quickly washing my hands as well, I grab two plates and fill them with pasta before heating it in the microwave. I take out the second plate just as he returns, hopping on one of the chairs, his stomach rumbling even louder when I place his food in front of him along with a fork and some napkins. “Here.” That’s all the command he needs as he practically starts inhaling the pasta, eating so fast I wonder if he even chews it. “Slow down.” He stills at this, shooting me a worried glance, and I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose because my fist really itches to leave an imprint on his asshole of a father’s face. “You can eat. It’s okay. Just chew it.” He nods and resumes eating, albeit thankfully slower.

He stares at the TV, so I ask, “Would you like me to turn it on?” He nods again, and I grab the remote, flipping through the channels and finding a cartoon, to my shock, considering the time. Once it starts playing, his whole attention zeros in on it, and he continues to munch on his pasta.

I guess he’ll stay here till five, and in the morning, I’ll have a talk with his parents in the nicest way possible.

My own hunger reminds me to eat too, and I reach for my plate when I remember about the box and rip off the bow, removing the lid and seeing a black velvet box inside.

Ah, Giselle decided to get me something pretty?

I have no jewelry, could never afford it, and while I’ll have to probably send it back to her because it’s too expensive, I’m curious to check it out.

Flipping the box open, though, I freeze as my heartbeat stops only to start beating so fast that I feel the pulse in my

neck and sweat breaks on my skin while thousands of screams echo in my head, one more agonizing than the previous one.

The box falls on the floor right along with a golden necklace there, a heart-shaped medallion with my family's picture inside it, our smiling faces staring back at me.

He sees his grip on me, so I gulp for breath and cough when he wraps his fingers around my necklace, and I wish to kick him or do something so he wouldn't touch it.

Wouldn't tarnish the gift my parents gave me on my fifteenth birthday just a few days ago.

I can only cry, though, when he tugs on it hard, pain ricocheting all over me, and he winks at me. "I need a little souvenir. If I can't take you, then I should at least have this, don't you think?"

I swallow past the bile in my throat, breathing air into my lungs, and grip the kitchen counter so hard my knuckles turn white, mentally counting to ten to control the slowly rising panic that will send me into a catastrophic pit.

While doing so, I see the note attached underneath the lid, its red color akin to the blood that seeped around me on that fateful day.

Just a name.

Octavius Reed

I have no idea who it is or how he's connected to my past, but I'll get to the bottom of this.

Because this necklace tells me one thing.

The murderer who wiped away my entire family is alive.

He's watching and waiting.

Waiting to end what he had started almost thirteen years ago and couldn't finish because someone stopped him.

Stopped him from killing me, making me the only victim who ever escaped his clutches alive.

Octavius Reed.

Whoever he is...he has answers for me.

And I'll get them.

No matter what I have to do in order to achieve that.

CHAPTER SIX

“Troy.

An entire country got destroyed because their prince fell in love.

With a woman he shouldn't, and his lack of restraint cost his people everything.

This tragic poem proves one thing.

Our emotions and actions always have consequences.

And some of them are too high to pay even in multiple lifetimes.”

Octavius

*S*la

My hand on the steering wheel tightens, and I mutter, “You have to be kidding me,” when I get on the narrow road leading to the skyscraper shining under the beaming sun that transforms it into one of the most beautiful and luxurious buildings I’ve ever seen.

The massive structure seems to be made of glass due to all the windows, which probably creates a rather pleasant working environment. The view from up there must be magnificent. The big fountain right in front of it oozes water, bringing attention to the marble lion statue carved so precisely it seems even the lion’s whiskers move under the wind.

The neatly cut grass surrounds the perimeter while their company name flashes up.

Reed.

Everything about this place, even from the outside, screams wealth and power. Which shouldn't be surprising, considering it's owned by a billionaire dynasty whose reputation might be less than stellar, but they have one talent remaining through generations.

How to make money, even out of nothing.

Parking the car near the entrance, I see a valet guy running to me, wearing a gray suit and white gloves while holding on to his hat. He opens my door, letting the frigid air in, and smiles at me, although it doesn't reach his eyes. In fact, he can barely cover his shock as he sweeps his gaze over my beat-up car and my washed-up jeans with scuffed shoes.

In my defense, this is the nicest pair of jeans I own, along with the black sweater.

"Hello," he greets me and extends his hand to me.
"Welcome to Reed Enterprises."

"Hi," I say, grabbing my keys and phone and getting out of the car. "Do you have free parking here?" Who knows? Maybe they charge for it, and I'm sure it costs more than my monthly salary, so wasting money like this is not an option for me.

"No, ma'am. I'll take care of it for you." He splays his palm open once again, and I drop my keys in it and frown when the car honks from behind me.

"Move, lady."

Ah, clearly whoever sits in his expensive sports car can't wait.

I decide to ignore it. The last thing I need is some kind of scene in front of the building and having my ass kicked or, worse, banned.

"Be respectful, Mark." My brow rises at the valet's stern voice and the dagger he shoots the driver's way. "Or else you won't step another foot on this property." He turns his attention back to me, and his smile returns while I try to process what just happened. Why is he defending me? "Your

car will be here whenever you need it, ma'am." With this, he hops inside and drives off while I just gape at him and shake my head.

Whatever.

Taking a deep breath, I walk toward the building and enter when the doors slide open.

Instant buzzing sounds surrounding me mix with light classical music, and hushed voices echo through the space.

Security guards are spread all over the place, occupying different corners and wearing casual clothes, presenting to be someone else, and if I wasn't a police officer, I probably wouldn't have noticed their assertive and drilling looks either. They scan every newcomer, and I can physically feel how they calculated how much trouble I can potentially cost them and if they should keep an eye on me.

The sun brightens up everything around me, the perfectly polished parquet flooring reflecting the light, and if I glance down, I can see my reflection.

I zero my gaze in on the administrative desk in the distance with various people sitting behind counters and answering phone calls, wearing headphones while machines beep around me, printing something every second, it seems.

Along with heavy footsteps all around me, employees must rush back to their work after lunch, flashing their access cards and flying through the panels, holding on to their coffees.

There is even a small reception area with several chairs and a small table in front of them while a small counter behind them has everything from coffee to tea to pastries, the delicious smells floating in the air and twitching my nose.

I've never felt more out of place in my life, and my best friend comes from a rich family!

A soft, monotone voice pulls me back from my musings. "How can I help you?" I turn around to see a woman who must be in her early thirties sitting behind one of the counters as she taps on her earpiece and types something into the computer.

“Hi.” I come closer and place my hands on the counter, smiling at her. She doesn’t return it; she just waits for me to answer her question. “I’d like to see Octavius Reed.”

She adjusts her eyeglasses. “Could you please tell me your name?”

“Sure. Isla Evans.”

She types something again, scrolling with her mouse. “I don’t see your name on the list. Did you get a confirmation email on your appointment? If yes, could you please give the code they provided you?”

Shit, this is going to be harder than I thought, but then again, did I even think all this through?

Ever since receiving that necklace, all I could think about was the Church Killer who showed up in my life, once again playing a game. Even though seeking Octavius is probably part of his plan, I have to know if they’re connected in any way.

The kid fell asleep on my couch an hour after eating, so covering him with a blanket, I grabbed my laptop and started doing all the research on the name that rang a bell, but I couldn’t put a face to it.

Well, once I’d done my research, I realized I could put more than a face to it. Maybe that’s why I hoped to get an appointment with a man who is considered practically a god in this town.

“I don’t have an appointment, but I have very important information I need to share with him.”

“I’m sorry. You can’t come in without an appointment.” She makes several clicks with her mouse, and I hear another paper starting to print. “We have a form you can fill out to get an appointment with one of his managers. And then if it’s important enough, you might get an appointment with Mr. Reed.” She scrolls some more. “In six months to a year.”

In six months? Is she insane?

“I don’t think you understand...”

She removes her earpiece, gets up, and snatches the paper, sliding it to me, dropping her voice to a hushed whisper. “No, I don’t think *you* understand. You’re trying to mess with the wrong guy.” She sighs and looks around before inching closer. “You seem like a nice person, so I’m going to give you advice. They will squash you, so whatever you have in mind, just leave.” She sits back on her chair, puts in her earpiece, and types some more. “That’s all.”

Oh God.

Huffing in frustration at my own stupidity for walking in here so unprepared and ending up being a fool, I grab the form and read through it, folding it in my hands because, no way will I wait this long.

So I have one last resort. I didn’t want to involve them in this. To get my answers, I’m even ready to withstand a myriad of questions as long as it gives me what I want.

Sighing, I slide my screen open and start a new message thread with a person I thought I’d never message in my life.

Hi. I need a huge favor.

To my shock, Callum’s reply comes instantly.

What kind of favor?

I need to talk to Octavius Reed. Can you make that happen?

I wait for his reply because my sanity hangs on it when the hushed murmurs around me become louder, and it seems as if time stops. “They are here,” someone whispers, awe filling her voice, and I glance at the entrance, stilling when four expensive black sports cars park one after another. The energy shifting around us at once becomes charged with tension and a wickedness that sends tremors down my spine.

Electricity rushes through my veins, awakening every hair on my body, and the ground seems to shift underneath me as the powerful blast almost threatens to knock me on my ass

when their sheer presence alone evokes complete surrender and inability to move.

All you can do is stare at them.

They get out of their cars in perfect sync with one another, and even the wind seems to still around them, recognizing the chaos they might cause should anyone dare to cross them.

After all, they get whatever they want, and if someone stands in their way?

They destroy them in the most vicious way.

They are all tall, probably each one of them above six-foot-three, which only brings attention to their unbearable presence that forces you to cast your gaze down in fear of breaking some invisible laws only they know about.

However, that's where their similarities end and differences begin.

They march inside in unison, one after another, and my gaze zeros in on the first one wearing a three-piece suit, highlighting his muscled physique.

His dark hair accentuates his tan skin and emphasizes the high cheekbones that bring attention to the symmetry of his face.

If people needed human representation of Greek gods, they'd have to look at him, for his handsomeness is haunting and mesmerizing alike.

His full lips tip into a smile when someone nods at him in greeting. It almost serves as a warning to whoever wants to come close, though, and lacks warmth, so no wonder the person hunches his shoulders, stepping out of the way. His piercing ocean-blue eyes stay cold, hinting at his cruel character and ruthless nature that's almost legendary among the society.

Sophisticated and stunning—two words describing any member of this dynasty spanning centuries, whose wealth could buy a small country, and still generations and generations of people to come would live in luxury.

Santiago Cortez.

My eyes shift to the man walking right behind him, his jeans and leather jacket along with heavy boots thumping soundly on the parquet, making him seem almost out of place among everyone else. His brown hair falls below his ears, his dark eyes subtly studying everything around him, yet you wouldn't guess it if you didn't pay enough attention to him. His face stays unreadable on most days, and he rarely gives anyone any smiles although his hotheaded nature made quite the sensation in the gossip columns.

Many shy away from his temper because it never works out in their favor, and he has no mercy for anyone, but then I guess it's hard to have any if the world showed you none.

That's one of his many talents that allowed him to climb from the rags to the top, as what he got he earned with sweat and blood.

And with the help of his friends, who stayed by his side through everything.

Remi Reyes.

I focus on the third man, one of the most handsome men I've ever seen, his blond hair glistening under the sunlight and emphasizing his bright green eyes that remind me of rare and expensive emeralds that are so clear, you can study them for hours.

Compared to the others, he's on the leaner side; the three-piece suit and lustful atmosphere fit him like a glove, while the sinister smile on his mouth charms any willing woman out of her panties in record time.

The only true manwhore among them, and according to various rumors, he left a trail of broken hearts, although he never promised anyone commitment or fidelity. In fact, I don't think women even tried to trap him in a relationship, considering the men in his family are known for a good time and disastrous marriages.

Belonging to the exclusive jewelry maker's dynasty whose pieces are displayed all over the world and cost a fortune, he is

considered one of the rare ones who got his great-grandfather's talents. Although to his family's dismay, he refuses to take the reins and inherit the business from his father.

Florian Price.

My hands tighten around the phone as my heartbeat pangs painfully in my chest. I take a deep breath, mentally preparing myself to look at the last man and the onslaught of emotions hitting me at once, each pulling me in a different direction and painting carnal images in my head. They poison my mind and envelop my body in heat it's never known until my eyes landed on him.

A man who has haunted my dreams ever since I felt his possessive stare gliding over my skin comparable to the tightening of ropes ready to wrap around me and trap me in the clutches of his creation. The scowl he permanently showcases to the world speaks about his less-than-stellar character and vicious nature.

If only I'd known his name back then, I wouldn't even dare give a second thought to him, for a man of such caliber would always be unavailable to mere mortals like me.

He walks farther from everyone else, giving them space. He reminds me of a leopard scanning his surroundings, a born predator ready to sink his claws into his next prey and tear their flesh to pieces for entering where they don't belong.

After all, he hates those who break the rules because he's a man of his word.

And he despises those who don't keep theirs. If you lie to him just once...nothing will save you, as kindness and empathy are foreign concepts to this man. He doesn't mind squishing his enemies, watching them fall down the abyss, never to be heard from or seen again.

If this man ruins you, there is no going back.

Half of his head is shaved, with the rest falling over the side of his perfect face, covering an angry-looking, long, red scar on his cheek that, despite healing, still seems to burn on

his face as if permanently marking him with pain and agony. For some unexplainable reason, the sight of it scrapes at my insides, my fingers itching to trace over the puckered skin and bring him relief.

I've seen many scars, have a few of my own, and even without knowing where he got it since that's one of the favorite speculations around him, I know it must have hurt him a lot. Some tissue didn't properly heal, and maybe that's why people give him a wide berth wherever he goes.

Especially women who ogle his best friends and barely spare him any glances, and when they do, only panic and fear coat them. They can't wait to run away from him despite the wealth and status he possesses.

Blind fools because he's the most handsome among them, and while his friends can easily grace fashion magazines with their looks, they do absolutely nothing for me...his rugged masculinity is an addiction, and I can't imagine anyone picking them over him.

Although their reactions inspire only his amused grins, he smiles on the rare occasion, bringing attention to his cracked-in-several-places nose that only adds to his charm and his full lips.

They also love to murmur behind his back about how hideous he is, and one of the reasons he got nicknamed a barbarian trapped in a suit is because his ripped body reminds me of a brick wall and threatens to rip his shirt open at any moment. He works out daily, and based on the videos I've seen, or rather stalked his ass all morning...he lifts such heavy weights, my cheeks heat just remembering the thoughts flashing in my head at that sight.

A shiver rushes through me, and I rub my arms because imagining his protection sends trepidation through me as he wouldn't be patient, lawful, and understanding.

No, he'd punish everyone accordingly. I wouldn't have to worry about a thing with him, and such thoughts are dangerous and stupid because I've always been independent and strong.

I had no other choice, so why then does his presence alone ignite my blood and urge me to act on my instincts trying to seek him out?

This deep need he awakened pushed me to hide from him at Callum and Giselle's wedding and even during the aftermath, avoiding him at all costs. I exhaled in relief when they told me everyone left to go back to their respective cities.

Not that it saved me or cured the madness creeping up on me whenever I allowed myself to think about the stranger causing havoc within me. Lust consumed me, whispering in my ears to indulge in my deepest desire and let go just once, finding solace in his arms, and maybe then the world would stop.

The memories would stop, and his shoulders would carry all the responsibility that sometimes suffocated me.

The air hitches in my throat, and I rub it, shaking my head but still staring at the man. Although obsessing over him is a waste of my time.

He can have whoever he wants, and the last woman he'd ever pick is a mousy, broke ex-police officer who was called cute at best and ugly at worst.

Men from his dynasty marry only the best of the best and never settle for anything less, and even though the thought fills every cell in me with hurt, I grit my teeth and keep my emotions locked deep down in my soul.

Because they are irrational and idiotic. Maybe if I dated more or at all, I wouldn't be this attracted to a man who just stared at me once.

I never asked for his name because I knew my obsession wouldn't let me rest, that I'd study his life. The idea of seeing the type of woman this man is attracted to just kills something inside me.

He's an heir to the oil empire who rules his kingdom ruthlessly and scares whoever comes in contact with him. Famous for his control and intelligence, he managed to triple his fortune after getting the reins at the age of eighteen.

People might fear him, but they respect him, and despite his disturbing appearance, they invite him to all functions and desperately wish to do business with him, hoping to get on his good side.

Although just the idea is laughable, considering he has a soft spot only for one person, and that's his little sister, Estella, who married her professor a few years back.

The most striking feature on his face, though, is his eyes.

His cold and hollow brown eyes have the power to stop everyone in their tracks and order them around however he sees fit, while his tan skin highlights several tattoos and deep veins on his arms and neck.

Among them all, though, one stands out the most.

The one he got with all his best friends.

The press loves to play guessing games about what it might mean and create fake stories to make them even more attractive and mysterious to the masses.

Three heirs to different thrones and one self-made king.

Each powerful on their own. However, their true strength lies in their unity, as their combined worth allows them to be invincible to anyone and anything.

Men for whom rules and order don't exist because they crush them under their thumbs.

Life is endless play, while women are nothing but interchangeable bodies.

They say there is no woman alive who can resist them, nor a man who doesn't bow to them.

I read the tattoo again.

In chaos do we thrive.

The Four Dark Horsemen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.

I guess I’ve never met a person who could see mine.”

Isla

Octavius

The minute the elevator announces our arrival, the silver doors slide open, and I step outside, strolling toward my office.

My secretary, Todd, jumps up and adjusts his suit while grinning at me, although fear is evident in every breath he takes. “Mr. Reed. Good morning.” He waits a beat and adds, “Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Cancel all my morning meetings,” I order without bothering to greet him. The guy just trembles from my voice alone, so there’s no need to be nice.

The only reason I hired him in the first place was because, compared to women, he didn’t stare at me or glance at the clock every second while staying in my company.

Apparently, women can’t stand me even if they’re paid a six-figure salary.

I enter my spacious office, the sun beaming brightly through the huge window, opening up the view of Chicago’s magnificent beauty during daylight and basking light into the rotten and dark place since it belongs to me.

I think one of my business associates once said that the suffocating energy inside makes it hard to breathe for anyone who dares to come here uninvited, and the black-and-white interior design contrasts with the luxurious paintings hanging on the wall.

I drop my phone on the heavy oak desk filled with two intercoms and a laptop holding all my secrets secured with a password even the best of hackers won't be able to crack. Various pens and several folders that Todd prepared for me to look through are next to it, and I pick up the red one, flipping it open.

"You need to invest in fucking curtains," Remi says, flipping a lighter through his fingers and fishing out a cigarette from his back pocket, putting it inside his mouth and lighting it up. "I'm concerned for my eyesight every time I come here." He slides the ashtray on the desk closer and sits on the chair opposite mine, tapping on the cigarette as the ash falls. "Gives off hospital vibes." His brow shoots up. "Unless that's the intention?"

Still keeping my eyes on the folder as I read the gathered information on the latest takeover, I reply, "I have an easy solution for that. Get the fuck out." He chokes on his smoke, puffs it all around us while his laughter rocks off the walls and Florian's lips twitch.

"*Ah, amigo.*" Santiago removes his suit jacket and goes to a wide couch several feet away with a small coffee table in front of it and throws it there before heading to the bar located on the right corner and grabs a glass, pouring tequila into it. "Why are you so rude? I'm disappointed."

"If you didn't want me to be rude, you should have warned me about your arrival." They blink at me as I sweep my gaze over them, and Florian sits on the couch. "Why are you all here?"

By how tension fills the air around us, I know they don't appreciate my tone, and their eyes flash in warning, reminding me that though they might be in my territory, they are hunters themselves.

We have no leader among us. We aren't some motorcycle club with presidents and enforcers or any of the bullshit that indicates one among us has more power.

We value freedom above anything else and don't allow anyone, even each other, to limit it.

We have mutual respect for one another and never follow anyone's lead, which is just one of many reasons we've managed to be part of the Four Dark Horsemen for such a long time with our different temperaments and less-than-stellar behavior toward each other.

That being said, I think most of our acquaintances who engaged in dark cravings as much as we do consider me the leader because I handle all the negotiations. That's my specialty while patience doesn't exist in my friends' vocabulary when they want something.

Santiago takes a large sip from his glass, and finally says, "A little bird whispered in my ear that you have an unresolved issue from the past." A beat passes. "So I guess it's us asking you. What's going on?"

"Yes. If you are planning mayhem that involves us, I'd like to know in advance because I need to finish a certain jewelry collection, and I hate to be interrupted." Florian pops a nut in his mouth and munches on it. "When I create art, I'm not in the best of moods to charm our enemies or whoever you decide to piss off."

The most hilarious part about us all? Is that everyone, and by that, I mean mostly Lachlan and his protégés, come to the conclusion that Florian is the easiest to deal with among us. The only one who listens to common sense or sees logic in their actions that might result in us backing off.

If only they knew what he does in his bayous, they'd change their minds because my charming friend, whose smile can make women forget their names, might be the cruelest among us all.

"Thanks, Florian. I appreciate my best friend's support." He shoots me a sarcastic wink, although I read him well and

know he'd do anything for me. I shift my gaze to Santiago, who raises his brow. "And you can tell your little bird that snitches don't live long."

Fucking Callum, I should have known he wouldn't keep his mouth shut. Not that I planned to hide it from them for long. We don't operate this way.

What might endanger all of us should always be shared between us.

However, I despise anyone dictating to me, and he ultimately did this when he shared the information before I was ready.

"He's concerned. Or rather...Lachlan is concerned."

"Why?"

Remi presses the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray and speaks up, "Your trouble somehow involves New York, and what involves New York concerns Lachlan." He chuckles. "Let's just say he wasn't nice on the phone and warned us that if we bring any trouble to his city, there will be hell to pay. He has no interest in cleaning up our mess."

"Yeah?" They all nod. "You can tell him to fuck off." Collective laughter fills the air at my reply.

Lachlan will always have my respect for what he does, but he can warn me all he wants. I'll still do whatever I think is needed.

The Four Dark Horsemen listen to no one but themselves.

Open confrontation with Lachlan is something I've successfully pushed out for years. However, if something is inevitable, we prefer to meet it head-on.

Whatever we want we get. That's our absolute law, and I pity anyone who thinks otherwise.

"I'm just saying it's not me who got us in trouble this time around." Remi utters the words like he expects a compliment for staying put for the first time in his life and controlling his hotheaded nature that always lands us in some kind of mess.

He acts on his emotions and thinks about the consequences later. Maybe because he always had us to pick up the pieces.

“The question remains, though. What’s going on?” Santiago drops on the couch next to Florian, offers him his glass, and he takes it, sipping a little from it. “What can be so important that you even got Callum involved in this shit?”

By how he voices his question, I understand that Callum might have spilled about the threat but not about Isla. A weird sense of relief washes over me when the dark-haired beauty comes to my mind as the idea of sharing her with anyone, even my best friends, awakens something primal in me.

As long as they don’t know about her, she belongs only to me. She’s mine, and I wish to keep it this way for eternity.

Craving her from a distance and never daring to touch for my touch alone inspires fear and disgust in women. Why would she be any different?

She deserves a prince, and I’m a beast, and while beasts have happy endings in fairy tales, life proved to me a long time ago that there is no such thing for us mortals.

My hideousness is incurable, so I’m destined to be alone.

Besides, my possessiveness is built on my insanity because emotions are a foreign concept to me.

“Octavius, we appreciate the dramatic silence, but we need answers.” Remi glances at his watch and kicks his legs up on my desk. “I have a meeting in an hour.”

I walk to the bar, grabbing a glass and putting a few ice cubes inside. I watch them melt a little before I pour whiskey into it and shake my drink, the ice cubes clinking against each other akin to a storm ready to erupt on us all the minute I tell them the truth.

The storm all of us thought had passed, yet it still has the ability to destroy us all. “The Church Killer is alive.” The tension falling on all of us is almost palpable, fury cracking on the edges of it while they all sit straight, and unreadable expressions cover their faces as they probably calculate all the consequences after my statement. “Five years ago, the police

found a body, but it was unrecognizable. He did have a familiar scar, though. I thought we put it behind us.” They stay silent, not that they would care one way or the other how often and in what manner I kill.

We all have our methods, and we don’t interfere with each other when it comes to our dungeons and vices, allowing each other to thrive in our own darkness without any shame or judgment.

Sometimes we even let each other watch on the rare occasion when we are either in great or sour moods.

“If he’s alive and faked his own death, tricking you in the process, he must be out for blood.” Florian takes a large sip, rubbing his chin over the rim. “He wishes to end us.”

Santiago drums his fingers on his knee. “He can’t do it without exposing himself. Everyone thinks he’s dead. One of the reasons all the unsolved cases got closed.”

“There has been another mass murder during a wedding in a church.” They freeze at this. “I thought it was a copycat.”

Months ago, he wiped away an entire family in the small, quiet town, and the wedding reception consisted of twenty-five people. He spared no one, letting their blood drip on the floor while they screamed in agony. The fucker recorded them and left the video for the police.

Classified information that I’d managed to get due to my connections.

Remi flips the lighter through his fingers again, clearing his throat. “Serial killers like him don’t stop. If he laid low, it means he was getting off on something else. But whatever sustained his desires no longer works. So he went back to his *modus operandi*.” He frowns, dropping the lighter on the desk. “It’s been thirteen years since he was most active. That year was hell because they could never predict when he’d show next, and that’s why a lot of people stopped having huge weddings back then. He must be in his fifties now. He can’t have the same strength as he used to.”

“Not to mention that security got better over the years. There are cameras everywhere. The level of control this requires speaks of a very cunning man with unlimited resources or a team,” Florian concludes, which makes sense on the grand scale of things.

We never understood how one person could so viciously kill the families inside the church without any help. Such plans require thoughtful preparations, good physical form to control everyone around him and catch them in his net without anyone suspecting anything for hours.

Even the most skillful profilers couldn't figure him out. His motives had no sense, and none of the families had anything in common. Everyone just assumed he picked them at random in his psychotic states, except psychotic states indicate mass madness.

If he operated based on his emotions alone, he wouldn't have been able to do all these things to his victims for hours without anyone close by to save them. Sooner or later, they would have caught him since his unstable psyche would have pushed him to make a mistake.

However, he left no DNA, no footage of himself, and no living victim.

Sans one.

Santiago shakes his head at Remi. “We assumed he was in his thirties back in the day. What if he was younger?”

“What do you mean?”

“The blood...the way he killed people...his desire to show off to everyone.”

Florian shrugs. “He's a narcissist. He craves an audience, even if their presence in his show will be short-lived.”

“Yes. But who has so much rage inside them and doesn't mind murdering people at random with different weapons? His cruelty was very creative, which was one of the reasons the profilers struggled. They couldn't figure him out since his killings were so different from each other.”

I lean my back on my desk, crossing my arms while we all seem to ponder his words or the implication that the Church Killer was a teenager, which means he's around our age.

Fucking hell.

Remi snaps his fingers. "Santiago's theory has merit, and it would explain all the missing pieces in this puzzle."

"Except the fact that he let a girl live." Florian finishes his drink and places it on the table, where it rattles soundly. "I think she's the key to it all." He gets up as our eyes trail him. "Whatever the terror she experienced and witnessed due to him was a pleasure he couldn't compare to murders. Her pain sustained the sadist in him. Her suffering trapped her in a constant nightmare, and he basically tortured her repeatedly. For a narcissist like him, it's the kind of drug that creates an obsession. To be the center of someone's attention."

My fists clench just thinking about her in such a way, vulnerable to the murderer who dumped her in hell on earth to amuse himself. The beast inside me roars, struggling to contain its rage and needing to sink his claws in the fucker and end his life once and for all so even his shadow doesn't hunt her.

Or maybe it's self-loathing filled with guilt.

Because if it hadn't been for me...her family probably would have been alive.

"Maybe she moved on," Remi says, "and he can't stand it, so he resurrected and created another nightmare." A beat passes. "He hates us, though, for what we've done all these years ago."

Unbeknown to us, we connected our destinies on that night that changed everything, and in this he aimed his hatred at us because we managed to do the unthinkable.

Frame him for a crime he didn't commit, and it was a blow a psychopath like him couldn't forgive.

So he retaliated in ways we never saw coming, and his cruelty even made us pause.

Santiago clicks his tongue. “Except he murdered everyone. He’d leave a victim behind if he sought the same high.” He drills his stare on me. “If you knew all this, why didn’t you share it with us?” At his question, Remi’s and Florian’s heads swing in my direction as well. “Thirteen years ago, we made an agreement regarding him. You keep all the tabs and have access to the classified information, including the girl’s name. And in exchange, you let us know if shit hits the fan so we can be prepared.” Anger crosses his face, and the tension rises in the air while I stand straight. “So why did you want to hide it?”

“Because the consequences of that night should always be mine to bear.” He opens his mouth, but my splayed palm stops him. “He’s dangerous and hungry for suffering. His hate is unlike anything we’ve faced before. We all have individual conflicts with certain people.” I shoot my gaze at Remi, who rolls his eyes, clearly not giving a fuck about how much trouble his constant back and forth with Lachlan caused us. Because he got obsessed with a woman he shouldn’t have. “However, we never dealt with someone who hates us all equally and wishes to see our downfall.”

“Exactamente. Por qué crees que es solo tu responsabilidad?” Annoyance coats his tone, and somehow, this sparks my temper which has been on edge all this time.

How can they not understand fucking why?

“I think it’s my solo responsibility because if it weren’t for me, none of this would have happened,” I spit, and now fury cracks through the tension. “So he’s my problem. You don’t have to get involved.”

“You do not make such decisions for us.” Santiago lifts his hand, his sapphire ring glistening as he taps on it. “We follow the rules and vows we’ve made on the day we put them on. We always vote.”

We operate with unity, creating a powerful front nothing can break, and in this, everyone stays away from us.

This means any small thing can shake the unity and bring the downfall to all four involved—one of the reasons we’ve

agreed to vote on decisions.

If a vote is not in someone's favor, it means one of the four is on his own and deals with his situation separately, never endangering anyone else.

"I have nothing to lose compared to all of you." Disbelief is written all over their features. "I cannot endanger your families this way."

"You're a part of our family," Florian replies harshly, and I exhale heavily because arguing with him over this is pointless. "And you have Estella."

Warmth spreads through me at the thought of my sister, but it's quickly gone. "She's married to Ryder. He can always take her away from danger. The same cannot be said about everyone else."

I knew they wouldn't see it in the same light as me, their sense of honor and loyalty to the vows we've made too strong to listen to reason.

I lost a soul a long time ago due to my actions, and unfortunately for them, they had no choice but to protect me.

"I won't allow anyone to become collateral damage because of me."

Remi gets up, twisting the ring on his finger, and then gently places it on the table as Florian and Santiago do the same with theirs, while the one still on me burns so hot I'm surprised it doesn't bruise my flesh.

"What the fuck is this?" Remi asks, picking up one of the rings with a black jewel and examining it closely.

"These are our rings." Florian gives us the rest, each with a different color stone in the middle matching our eyes, while the overall shape and the platinum surrounding it are identical. "With this, we are part of the Four Dark Horsemen, our unity."

Leave it to Florian to create a romantic flair to this whole thing.

“Isn't it like a chick thing?” I wonder, slipping a ring on my finger. Oddly, they all look good on us, not standing out as unnecessary accessories. “I vote for matching tattoos.” Besides, rings are so easy to lose anyway and bring too much attention.

Right now, despite our family names, we need less of it in order to cover our sins.

“We'll do that too.” Remi shows us the design on his pad along with the quote. “In chaos do we thrive.”

“That's what makes us feel alive,” Santiago replies, and we all laugh while the darkness slowly settles into our hearts as the full meaning of this hits us.

Those rings forever represent one simple truth.

We're murderers.

“It's all of us or none of us, Octavius,” Florian says as we stare at each other, their unity almost blinding in their intensity, and even though it doesn't matter, I remove my ring and go to the table. Putting mine to theirs, I admire the diamonds shining brightly and sending colorful squares on the floor.

Even though I know they're making a mistake, I never expected anything else from them.

Once upon a time, a group of boys made a decision.

Form two groups of best friends who would be able to defend each other if a fight erupted inside the four.

And connect each other with one brotherhood.

A brotherhood that would seal their fates together and friendship that nothing would be able to break.

Even death.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*“There is a certain darkness about him...
That pulls me to him with some invisible strings, everything in
me wanting to discover what hides beneath it.
I should be careful, though.
Because curiosity leads to disastrous consequences.”*

Isla

*I*sla

My phone vibrates in my palm, and I quickly open it up, exhaling in relief when I see the message flashing back at me that rushes excitement along with gratitude.

Done.

Thank you! I know you didn't have to do it.

Guilt dims some of my joy, considering I put him in an impossible situation and basically asked him to lie to one of his friends. I'd hate for Giselle to use my husband like this one day, but at the same time...I would totally understand.

<Callum> Anytime, anything. You're part of the family.

Callum is one of the coldest people I've ever met in my life, and considering I work with criminals on a daily basis, it means something. His calculating stare has the power to kill an already dead person, and his brown eyes soften only when Giselle is around.

Even though their story is shady as hell, and no one shared many details with me about it, I know he's totally obsessed with her, and that's enough for me.

It has been Giselle and me for such a long time, no one giving a shit about either of us while we struggled together since college, so having someone new and as powerful as Callum in our corner feels nice.

There are certain perks when your best friend marries a billionaire.

The reception desk lady sighs in resignation when she sees me again and shakes her head. "I already told you to leave. If you don't, I'll call security," she warns me, although her voice lacks any heat.

"Please check for my name on the list again."

"Why? Did you do a magic spell?"

I grin. "You could say that."

"Okay. I'll do it, but if your name is not on it, you will leave and never come back."

"Done," I tell her, placing huge faith in Callum to make sure I got the appointment to see the gods.

I wrinkle my nose, disliking thinking about Octavius in such a way because, based on everything that I know about him, he lacks the selfishness and prettiness of the gods who ruled the mere mortals as they saw fit and indulged in all their vices, treating people as toys they loved to play around with.

He reminds me more of a...brave warrior who'd do anything in order to protect what's his.

Even kill.

A tremor slides through me at the thought, and I grip the counter, inhaling air in my lungs to give myself some reprieve from the dark and tempting thoughts that speak about the madness living inside me as I don't find such thoughts disturbing.

In fact, it makes Octavius even more attractive in my mind, and I groan inwardly because a shrink would have told me I've lost my mind and probably have a warped sense of morality due to what happened to me.

"I'll be damned," the woman mutters, bringing me back to the present, and she looks at me. "Your name is on the list, and your appointment is in five minutes."

Go, Callum!

"Sweet."

She snags a paper and places it on the counter. "Read and sign it, please." I quickly scan it. My parents drilled into me from an early age to read every document carefully, especially the small print. It basically just says how I'm supposed to behave, and everything heard inside the company walls should be kept that way, and if I dare to spread any rumors, legal action would be taken against me.

Octavius really doesn't play when it comes to his empire, and grabbing a pen, I sign it and slide the document back to her.

She puts it away and replaces it with an ID that has 'VIP guest' on it. "Go toward the elevators and take the silver one. Just press it, and it will open. Top floor, and Todd will be waiting for you there to guide you the rest of the way."

"Todd?" I ask in confusion, wrapping my hand around the ID and wondering what Callum said to get me on the VIP list. Hopefully, he warned Octavius in advance. This way, his friend will spare me a minute just to amuse Callum.

"That's his secretary. You have to go through him before you enter Mr. Reed's office," she explains and then removes the earpiece. "My name is Marta."

"Nice to meet you."

"Yeah. So was it really a spell that helped you out?" I blink at this and stifle my laughter, forcing a straight face because she seems dead serious. "Because I think my boyfriend is cheating on me, and I could use some help."

“No.” I fish out my card and give it to her. “But if you need help figuring out what’s going on or why he’s acting weird, I’ve got you.” I’m starting my job in a week, so it won’t hurt scouting for clients now since my new boss agreed to take me in only if I showed good performance in my first month.

“Thanks. I might use your services.”

“We’ll keep in touch.” Saluting her, I quickly rush to the elevators, spotting the silver one that’s several feet away. I’m ready to press the ID to the keypad when it opens on its own, and the three horsemen get out, the surge of energy around me making me jump to the side.

They march forward, ignoring everyone around them, and as they pass me by, I hold my breath only to do a double take when Florian’s gaze lands on me, surprise flicking in his green eyes that he quickly masks with indifference, and then he shifts his attention toward the exit.

“That’s what born lucky looks like,” I mutter, the word luxury practically reeking off them. I enter the elevator, pressing the ID again and pushing the top floor button, leaning against the wall as it takes me up.

Mentally, I’m trying to prepare myself for the upcoming meeting, going over all the facts and evidence I have, needing to ask him all the questions without exposing myself.

Police officers went to great lengths thirteen years ago to cover up my name from the public. They explained that it was the best way to protect me from the Church Killer should he come and finish the job. I had to promise never to utter a word about it except in therapy provided by the state, and they moved me to another city so I could start fresh.

Although after working for such a long time in the field, the cynical and pragmatic part of me suspects they did it to have a witness on their hands so they could put him behind bars. They were desperate, not that it brought them any results.

Either way, my past was and still is a huge secret. The only people who know about it are Giselle and my godfather. Swiping my middle and first names also helped keep my

identity incognito, so I have to be careful not to spill too much while talking to Octavius.

The elevator pings, the doors sliding open, and my eyes widen when I step into the spacious hallway, with flowery scents floating in the air and complete silence.

The parquet glistens under the harsh light, opening up the view on the wide white leather couch, two chairs, and a small table filled with pastries while the coffee machine buzzes in the distance, mixing with the fingers tapping on the keyboard.

I follow the direction of the sound and see a desk with a single laptop and printer where a blond man wearing a suit sits, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. He pauses his work to lift the cup of steaming coffee to his mouth when our eyes meet. “Ms. Evans,” he greets me, getting up and placing the mug back on the table. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He gives me the familiar fake smile that must be Reed’s empire signature smile that lets you know you do not belong here. “Would you like some tea or coffee?”

“No. I’d prefer to just have my appointment now.”

“Of course.” He picks up his phone, presses the button, and only after a second, speaks into it. “Mr. Reed, your next appointment is here.” Several beats pass. “Yes. This appointment was requested by Mr. Callum MacRae.” Again silence followed by, “Do I have permission to quote?” He must get it because my jaw drops at what he says next. “Consider it payment for the favor I’ve provided earlier. And you can thank me later.” Todd tugs at his collar, sweat coating his forehead. “That’s what he said, sir. He also mentioned that if I don’t comply, you might fire me because your word means a promise and not getting this appointment would have meant for you breaking it.”

My God, Callum is indeed a master manipulator, and dread fills every bone in my body, anticipating Octavius’s mood. Judging by how Todd is sweating and drumming his fingers on the desk, Octavius has the guy stressed.

However, my fear pales in comparison to the determination fueling my blood that’s hungry for the answers

decades in the making, and if I have to withstand his infamous temper to get them?

So be it. I've been pissing people off for an eternity, so what's one more name added to the list, right?

Even to my own ears, this sounds lame because compared to most people, Octavius has the means to end me.

Figuratively and literally.

"Yes. I understand." He hangs up and stretches his mouth in yet another smile that must hurt him. "Mr. Reed is waiting for you." He roams his eyes over me and comes closer, whispering this time around. "Please don't stare at his scar." He swallows. "When people do, their appointments usually end in tears, and my day turns into hell."

My heart pangs painfully, imagining the man behind these doors being so vulnerable to the scrutiny or curiosity he reads on everyone's faces whenever they look at his scar. They might not have bad intentions, but his reaction says he doesn't give a shit.

In his book, whoever stares automatically flinches away.

"I won't."

I walk toward the brown doors and raise my fist, ready to knock while a tremor rushes through me in anticipation.

For whatever reason, it seems the world won't be the same once I enter the devil's den, and while it should scare me...it fills me with curiosity instead and the deep need to discover what hides underneath the almost mythical persona.

"Don't knock, just come in."

I close my eyes, gathering all my courage, and finally twist the handle, stepping inside. I see Octavius facing away from me, gazing into the window that presents one of the best and flattering views of the Chicago skyline.

He freezes when he sees my reflection in the glass and slowly turns around, our eyes clashing, and an insane hot flush travels all over my system, making it hard to breathe. On

instinct, I step away as if it has the power to stop the invisible pull this man has on me.

He's even more gorgeous up close.

We stare at one another for several beats, the only sound disturbing the silence the wooden clock hanging on the wall counting each second we spend in each other's company. Finally, I whisper, "Hi."

Possessiveness and heat fill his gaze, the muscle on his jaw twitching as he slides his burning eyes over my form, and goose bumps break on my skin because it's so vivid I can almost feel it on my flesh.

And miss it when he replaces it with such rage, panic envelops me, and I wince at his harshly spoken question. "What do you want?"

Yes.

It's safe to say he isn't happy to see me.

At this moment, though, when my body experiences the proximity of a man who finally awakens its hidden desires, I understand one thing.

Coming here was a mistake.

A mistake that might cost me my sanity.

But once again.

What choice do I have?

Octavius

If the gods wanted to create a human representation of quiet beauty destined to tempt the men around her with her softness and gentleness, promising reprieve from the agonizing pain and solace in the nightmares that are our lives, only to surprise you with her strength, it would be her.

A raspy breath escapes her when I drill my gaze into her, her shoulder-length curly hair swaying lightly under the AC and bringing attention to its unique brown-and-red color that

glistens under the sunlight. My hand flexes. I barely contain the urge to wrap her curls around my fist and inhale her rose-mixed-with-lavender scent, wanting to feel its silky texture.

The color of sunrise, it speaks to the dark part of me that craves light and hope despite facing nothing but misery all this time.

Her flawless and smooth tan skin calls my name with every breath she takes, my insides craving to take my knife and slowly drag the tip of it over her flesh, watching the goose bumps pop all over her while fear fills her eyes.

A blank canvas that I wish to taint with my marks of ownership so whoever is stupid enough to look at her would know who she belongs to.

Because my imprints would be all over her, visible stamps indicating her complete surrender to the man everyone calls a barbarian.

Mine and no one else's.

Her innocent, sensual aura attracts men like moths to a flame, charming them into believing they can conquer the stubborn creature whose striking gray eyes remind me of molten steel, and they flare in challenge when she raises her chin and meets my stare head-on.

Eyes that sparkle whenever she speaks passionately about something, eyes that cannot hide her emotions and leave no doubt in her honesty that soothes the part of me that has faced endless lies.

Gray has always been my favorite color.

Isla could never be called gorgeous in the classical sense of the word despite her symmetrical features and high cheekbones leading to her full lips that I crave to bite and suck on, listening to her whimpers and moans.

That's what attracts me the most to her, and possessiveness overshadows common sense, thinking how I'm the one to see the true beauty. If I listen to my desires, I can keep her all to myself.

My obsession would know no bounds, for she has been a constant in my mind since the minute I saw her, and by the time men realize what they've lost, it would be too late.

She'd be mine, attached to me in such ways most people would find me insane, and I'd kill anyone who so much as looked at her with lust, let alone think he could have her.

Men who don't appreciate her don't deserve her anyway, so why should I show them any mercy?

The oversized sweater and jeans along with scuffed leather shoes do little justice to her petite figure, her generous curves covered beneath the cheap fabrics and showcasing our difference in all its glory as she has no idea what existing in my glittering and luxurious world entails.

She deserves to wear silks and cashmere as diamonds grace her neck and ears. Unfamiliar sensations wash over me, imagining holding her in my arms and parading her blinding beauty around them, protecting her from their scrutiny, but also...

Claiming her over and over again. I feel my body growing hard just imagining having her all to myself, watching her skin flush in need and desire matching the one consuming me.

The beast inside me snarls being denied this right. I force myself to put my hands inside my pant pockets while she swallows hard, bringing attention to her wildly beating pulse that I need to trace with my tongue as I drive into her, her moans echoing through the space and coating it with something wicked and maddening just like my reaction is to her.

My instincts scream at me to drag her to my cage and trap her there for eternity, the voices so loud I barely resist the tempting urges pushing me in her direction with each passing second while she gasps for breath, feeling the sizzling energy between us.

Like a gazelle noticing a predator in the distance, ready to fight and run as far away as possible from her unfortunate fate.

A fate that became inevitable the minute our destinies entwined, and that connection serves akin to cold water pouring from above me, reining in my cravings, and I will all my control to help me do what's necessary.

Isla is mine.

However, I can never claim her.

For being mine is a curse.

And no one deserves it.

Especially not a woman who lost everything because of me.

This time around, I cannot allow it.

This time around, I'll save her.

Even if it kills me.

CHAPTER NINE

*“In our past, we can find the source of our deepest pain.
Because our past holds all the memories together, shaping us
into someone who we are today.
Sometimes, though, we can't find answers no matter how much
we try.
Because the answers lie in the past, yes.
Just not in ours.”*

Isla

***F**rom Isla's mother's diaries...*

We've committed a horrible sin.

*My heart still beats wildly in my chest as I write my
confession in my secret diary, and tears drop on the paper,
smearing the ink, not that it stops me.*

*How can I stop if this eats at my soul and creates a
hideous picture in my head where the whole world knows the
truth about what I've done?*

*My husband says we did the right thing. He says we had no
other choice.*

I know better, though.

*We had other choices, but we chose this one in order to get
what we always wanted.*

*And me writing about it...it's an atonement in a way to tell
our truth, to maybe show to everyone we weren't monsters*

should anyone discover it.

We were just desperate people who took the opportunity, even if it meant destroying someone's life in the process.

John and I...we've been together since we were fifteen. Countless years filled with joy, pain, and happiness as our relationship withstood all the storms.

There was one storm we couldn't overcome, though...and that's our inability to have children. We tried everything.

Nothing helped, and waiting on the adoption list year after year brought no results. Slowly, our house, where love ruled, became a soulless space where only disappointment and crushed dreams remained.

On our last hope to save our marriage, we booked a trip near the ocean, ready to unwind and finally face all the issues head-on instead of running away from them.

We had fun and even accepted that it might be just the two of us.

And then we did the unthinkable.

We stole a baby.

A perfect little baby girl, a precious gem who grabbed my finger so tightly, everything shifted inside me, and such overwhelming love poured from me toward her. I couldn't stop touching her.

I couldn't have had a stronger connection to her if I tried.

So I took her, and we brought her home where everyone already saw her, thinking we finally got approved for adoption and just kept it all a secret.

And while happiness rocks through me at the prospect of having my daughter, I cannot help but think about what I've done.

About the mother who trusted us to help her with the delivery when her car got stuck in the middle of the road, and instead, we took away her baby. We hid it inside our car as

paramedics arrived and rushed her to the hospital due to her bleeding.

My husband says no one would know. He thinks fate itself granted us this chance, and it's fair since the girl was only sixteen years old.

He thinks we spared her the trouble.

I don't think he'd be this confident if his best friend didn't help him with all the paperwork to cover it up. Maybe that's why he promised to make him a godfather even though he was never my favorite.

I can't help but think, though.

Think about what she said about the father of her baby, a man she desperately feared because he forced her to have this baby. She whispered in my ear when my husband couldn't hear that the baby's father was a cruel and horrible man.

And about another baby.

A boy.

She had fraternal twins. That was the reason we kept one. She mentioned she had never even had an ultrasound. I found out when I tried to distract her during labor, although it was useless as she kicked and screamed at my husband, not allowing him to touch her, so I had to be the one to help her.

A little secret no one would ever discover as my husband says, and a blessing from God to us, we were meant to be on that trip and on the side of the road where we stopped to admire the dandelions on the field.

Maybe.

Still, though, despite my sin and an awful deed, I pray.

I pray we never cross paths with these people again.

Because I think...I think while fate might be forgiving... they won't be.

And who could blame them?

*J*sla

Octavius sweeps his gaze over me one last time and then starts walking toward his chair while I stare at him. He sits down, leaning back, and drums his fingers on the desk. “Well? What do you want?” he asks again, finally snapping me out of my stupor, and I shake my head so I can focus through the gloomy fog this man creates in my mind.

For a moment in time, it seemed as if we were the only people in the world, and I half expected him to lunge after me, pressing me against the wall, and my nails cut into my palm just thinking about my disappointment when he hadn’t done it.

My whole life, I went without any stupid crushes, and now, when it matters the most, I experience a variety of emotions that have no place between us.

Octavius already hates my presence. If the annoyed glint in his eyes is anything to go by, he’d kick me out if he found out I lusted over the guy.

Pathetic and stupid, adjectives describing me to a T.

I clear my throat and answer him. “I’m a private investigator.” I go to the chair opposite him and sit on it, rubbing my denim-clad thighs with hope of calming my nerves. “I just moved from New York.”

His face stays unreadable, not an ounce of emotion, and I wonder what it is like to have such a skill because people can read me like a book. I can’t pretend to save my life, which sometimes in my profession is catastrophic. One of the reasons Uncle Grayson never gave me any undercover assignments. I blew them all anyway. “I’m not hiring.”

My cheeks heat at his assumption, and I squeeze my hands once again, hiding my chipped nail polish from him and hoping he hasn’t noticed my scuffed shoes. Among all the luxuries surrounding me, it’s impossible not to feel self-conscious, and besides, the notes lacing his tone...as if he expects someone like me to use all my connections to get some pity from him. “I’m not here for a job.”

“Then I fail to see why you asked Callum for this appointment.” I wince at the anger lacing his voice at this, contrasting the possessiveness filling his gaze, but before I can dwell on it much, he adds, “If that’s all...”

“I have a client,” I quickly say, and he frowns. Swallowing hard, I continue, “She received a package last night, and it left her...broken.”

“A package?”

I groan inwardly at the complete disbelief in his tone. He clearly thinks I’ve lost my marbles if I bother him with such stuff. And despite knowing how much he despises lies, I can’t be honest with him right now. “I think I should start from the beginning.”

He glances at his platinum watch that must cost more than I make in several years. “You have ten minutes.”

Somehow, his hostile mood hurts me, scraping at my soul that’s used to rejection, but I expected a man who everyone hates based on looks alone to be kinder to me. I must have been wrong. Even for Octavius Reed, you don’t deserve his time if you are a nobody. “Thirteen years ago, there was a serial killer called the Church Killer. He would barge into the middle of a wedding, trap everyone inside, and then torture them for hours before killing everyone.”

Run, Isla, run.

Digging my fingers into my thighs, I ground myself in the present and ignore my mom’s terrified scream echoing in my ears.

“I don’t understand what it has to do with me.”

“He had one surviving victim. A fifteen-year-old girl who watched him kill everyone dear to her one by one.” My throat grows tight. I place my hand on it and rub it, exhaling heavily because talking about this only brings me misery. “He spared her. He hurt her, but he still kept her alive.” Something passes over his face, but it’s gone so quickly I don’t have the chance to examine it. “He was wearing a mask so she could never recognize him. The police kept her identity a secret.”

“Yet you seem to know a lot about her.”

Ignoring his cold remark, I lick my lips and continue the lie that tastes bitter on my tongue. It's the only weapon on my hands. Otherwise, this powerful man would squash me. “The victim hired me as a private investigator.” Since he stays silent, not even freaking blinking, I decide to put all my cards on the table. “He contacted her.” I fish inside my jean pocket and take out my necklace, placing it between us, and it clangs soundly on the perfectly polished wood. I removed the family picture earlier. “It was the necklace she wore on that day, the one he stole. And on the box, on the said package...he wrote your name.”

A loud gasp escapes me when he gets up abruptly, his chair falling on the floor behind him, and on instinct, I jump up as well, moving backward as he advances on me, fury written all over his features. The air sticks in my lungs when my back connects with the wall.

Octavius cages me in, his splayed palms trapping me between his muscled chest and the wall while his scent twitches my nose, and unfamiliar sensations and fear travel through me in waves, shrinking this room where only one powerful force remains.

Him.

“What are you doing?” I hate how my voice trembles a little and shake my head, lifting my chin and pushing at his chest, but he stays unmovable. “Step away.”

“Never do that again, Isla.” I freeze when his hand lands on my collarbone, burning my skin and sliding upward until he wraps it around my throat, his thumb brushing against my pulse, and our gazes clash. “Never,” he repeats, leaning closer, our lips inches apart, and my heart beats so wildly in my chest that even he must hear it.

Too stunned to think rationally about how insane this whole encounter right now is, considering we barely know each other. I've told off guys in the past for less, let alone something like this, I ask, “Never do what?”

His voice drops a few octaves, a wicked energy cracking the tension around us, and his hand flexes on me, making me gasp because the pressure becomes tighter, almost cutting off my oxygen supply. He steps closer, pressing his chest against mine, and instead of pushing him away, my fingers curl on his shirt. “Lie to me.” I swallow, and goose bumps break on my skin when he glides his thumb up and down my pulse. “If you ever do that again, you won’t like the consequences.” He leans closer, his lips bushing over my cheek as he moves to my ear and whispers right into it. “I don’t forgive it.” He breathes me in, and I clench his shirt tighter despite the threat lingering on the edges of his tone.

“You know,” I whisper. Unexplainable relief washes over me at the realization that he’s aware of my little secret.

Lying to him was unbearable. Another thought I decided to ignore because thinking about it too much would lead to some stupid and difficult realizations.

“I know everything about you, Isla.” Scorching heat assaults me, and I gasp when his hold on me becomes even tighter. All I can focus on is his calloused fingers controlling my air supply and my heart ringing in my ears. “Always remember that. You have no secrets from me.” These words should fill me with fear. Instead, they urge me to know the meaning behind them, to understand if the same burning sensations envelop him as well as drive me insane and make me forget about everything in his presence.

Even if I know better.

Even if I know girls like me don’t ever get men like him; they stay in our unattainable dreams.

“Okay.” A ripple shakes him at my surrender, and I arch my neck a little bit when he eases his grip, clearly finding pleasure in my response. “I won’t lie to you.” My hand slides upward, slipping into the V opening of his shirt and connects with his hair-covered chest, his heart matching my beats and a low growl echoes between us.

Later, I’ll think about my behavior and how no one should react to a man this way when you barely know him yet feel the

right to touch him in the most intimate way.

Or how his words awaken a storm inside me, sounding almost like an obsession of sorts and how instead of running away from these psychotic confessions...I crave to delve deeper and discover what else hides behind his confident and harsh mask.

“Octavius—” I jerk when the rough texture of his scarred cheek touches mine, and he stills at this, his muscle growing rigid. Instantly, his heat is gone when he steps back, breathing heavily while I’m glued in place. All I can do is stare at him while my entire being cries out to him, not knowing what to do with the fire consuming me from head to toe.

Only to shrink inside when his words break the hypnotizing moment between us and demonstrate to me in full glory that I might be the inexperienced fool in this passion.

Octavius Reed, though, isn’t.

“Stay away from me, Isla.” My hand fists at this, and I quickly cross my arms so he won’t notice the effect his words have on me.

“Gladly. Just tell me why my parents’ murderer wrote your name on the box. And I’ll be on my way.” Mentally, I applaud myself for keeping my voice steady despite the verbal slap he has given me. “Why does he—”

“I’ll handle it. That’s all you need to know. Focus on your life. Or better yet...pack up your things and go back to New York. You don’t belong in Chicago.”

Gathering all my stubbornness and resolve I’ve mastered over the years, I seep strength from it and do what I always do when someone rejects or hurts me.

Retaliate.

“Last time I checked, you have no authority when it comes to my life.” He grits his teeth, and the muscle on his cheek twitches. “I’ll find out how you are connected to him one way or the other. I won’t rest until I catch him,” I warn Octavius because so help me God, if he tries to protect this monster or somehow knows him...I won’t spare him either.

Whoever plays on the monster's side is rotten from the inside out and deserves no mercy, for there is no explanation when it comes to his crimes.

“You intend to play a game you have no idea how to play.” He goes to his desk, his fingers hovering over the intercom. “Get out, Isla.”

“Just tell me, and I'll never bother you again. You're my only lead, Octavius.”

“I have no idea why someone wrote my name on that box, but the murderer you're trying to find was declared dead long ago. Murderers like him do not change. They seek to kill people for as long as they can. Whoever sent that box to you just wants to fuck with your head. I'll get to the bottom of this because I don't appreciate anyone smearing my name in dirt.”

What a bunch of crap! If he thinks I believe a word he says right now, he has another think coming! “I'm not a fool, Octavius. I was a police officer. Serial killers can go quiet for decades and then resurrect again.”

“You're too emotional to see the truth. Maybe if you'd learned to channel your grief into something else, your life wouldn't be as miserable and pathetic as it is now.”

We keep staring at one another, the battle of wills between us, and I hiss, “I won't go anywhere until I find the truth, with or without your help. But mark my words...if you have anything to do with it, I'll put you behind bars.”

I inwardly prepare for another blow when a smirk shapes his mouth, and coldness replaces the blazing fire in his dark eyes. “I have absolute power in this city, and you have none. Are you sure you want to throw threats my way, Isla? I can and will make your life unbearable here. Even the hardest structure can be broken with the right force.”

Taking a deep breath, I rub my forehead because I'm lost at this moment. I just almost kissed the guy when he uttered all these words. Now, he seems miles away and so intimidating I have no doubt he will make me pay for disobeying his orders.

Then again, I've lived in hell these past thirteen years, so how bad can it really be at this point?

"I don't scare easily." I snatch my necklace from the table and without sparing him a final glance, get the hell out while Octavius's threat plays in my head over and over again.

I should have known better.

When will I learn?

Octavius

The minute the doors close behind her, I press on the intercom and order Todd, "See Miss Evans out."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Todd? She's no longer welcome in the building. If she steps foot inside, it's your head and job on the line." I end the call before he can say anything else. I lean back in my chair, closing my eyes and inhaling her flowery scent into my lungs, my fists clenching as every hunting instinct urges me to follow her and trap her in my hell away from all the prying eyes.

Where no one would judge us.

Where no one tries to save her.

Where I'll have the freedom to make her mine.

So every man on this planet knows that she belongs to me. Jealousy flares through me just thinking about them looking or admiring her, or worse...believing they have a shot with her.

Isla might never wear my ring, for I've given an oath I intend to keep till my last breath, but she's mine nevertheless.

If I can't have her, no one else gets to, and I don't give a fuck how insane or psychotic it sounds. I've never claimed to be a saint.

Wanting her to the point of insanity is one of my countless vices, yet it's the only one with the power to shake me and

destroy my carefully built control over the years that allowed me to contain the monsters within me.

Because when we have no boundaries, emotions rule, and I've never had such privileges as emotions mean vulnerabilities.

And vulnerabilities are always a weapon that can and will be used against you.

The hurt crossing her face after my cruel words flashes in my head, and growling, I get up and walk to the window. I admire Chicago through my high view, thousands of cars driving on the busy roads with people rapidly moving to their destinations and stopping only by some coffee shops or food joints to catch a break from the restless energy that surrounds everyone here.

I can almost feel the delicious scents wafting in the air, the laughter echoing in the space, and exciting conversations about the newest art exhibition in town that everyone just needs to check out for its rich history.

My beloved city, even if I had to pay with blood and scars in order to stay here.

My cry is still in my throat when he fists my hair, dragging me to the edge of the stairs. He kicks me from behind so I land on my knees. "Repeat after me. 'I'm a piece of shit no one ever wanted.'" I bite hard on my lip, his tight grip almost ripping my hair. "Repeat it!" he shouts, but I shake my head, refusing to give him such satisfaction.

It won't change anything anyway because his fury always needs an outlet that results in my pain, so what difference does it make?

"I hate you. No one wants you here, Octavius. You should have died right along with your father. You're ruining my family." Fear sweeps over me when he pushes me even closer to the edge, and I try to halt the slide with my hand. "Maybe I should help you." A hard kick comes from behind, and my scream reverberates through the house as I tumble down the

stairs, hurt rocking off my body, and the only thought present in my mind is her.

The her who stands behind him and watches it all without ever saying a word.

A ringing sound pierces through the memories, and without taking my eyes off the road, I pick it up. “Hello.”

“Judging by the phone call your girl just made to my wife, she isn’t your biggest fan.” He sighs. “You make it really hard to be your wingman. I’ve given you a golden opportunity, and you blew it.”

My earlier fury comes crashing back to me, and I hold my phone so tight it’s a wonder it doesn’t crack. It wouldn’t be the first time for me either. “Never do that again.”

“Do what?”

“Blindside me like that again. Never, Callum.”

I should have known when Todd mentioned his name there would be some kind of catch. I just didn’t expect him to be this fucking stupid to allow Isla inside my domain and tempt the beast in such a way.

“I would have explained everything had you picked up the phone. Santiago must have gotten to you first and told on me. Nothing personal, Octavius. He’s just my friend, and you’re... potential family.”

I still at this. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Isla is my wife’s best friend, but they are more like sisters. So that makes me sort of her brother-in-law. Which means...”

“It means nothing.” I stop him before he can voice what he so wishes because it’s something that will never happen. “And she’s nothing to you.” We both probably don’t miss the possessive and warning notes in my tone, but once again, I don’t give a fuck. “Don’t ever indulge her requests again, Callum. Isla and her wants and needs do not concern you.”

“If she’s happy, my wife is happy. I cannot ignore her plea for help.”

Hilarious, really, how altruistic he sounds right now. The man is selfish and lethal on his best days; he might be obsessed with his wife and worships the ground she walks on, but it doesn't change his character.

Unless it benefits him, Callum won't lift a finger. "Isla is not your responsibility." In fact, the madness consumes me just thinking about her going to another man for any help.

She's mine, and what's mine should never beg anyone for anything because all the riches and connections of this world belong to her.

No other man will sustain her needs but me. Only I know what's best for her, and right now, she has to stay put while I'm handling the maniac hunting us both.

"Says who? You?"

"Yes."

"I don't like upsetting my wife, Octavius. Besides what would I tell her? 'I can't help your friend because my friend is against it'? You see, there is no reasonable explanation for it." A beat passes between us while my anger only intensifies. "Unless you can give me one." The challenge rings loudly, the fucker knows exactly what he's doing trying to force me to admit what's really going on.

"Find a reasonable explanation, then. I don't care how you justify it to Giselle."

"Well..."

"Callum, stay away from Isla and don't ever put her in any dangerous situations just because she thinks she can handle it. Only I decide what she can or cannot do." He laughs, and I hear him flicking open his lighter. "Go against me, and you'll discover what my wrath entails."

"Is this a threat?"

"It's a warning."

"You won't win this fight, Octavius. Sooner or later, you will break. I just hope you do it before you make irreversible choices."

Not bothering to reply, I hang up on him and rest my arm on the glass. I force all the indifference I can muster to withstand the next couple of months Isla will be in my city.

She will search for answers relentlessly, and when she doesn't find them, she'll leave for New York and finally accept her fate, living her boring existence.

And I'll do what I've done ever since my eyes landed on her.

Watch and protect her from afar because my touch alone would scare her.

I can handle a lot of things.

Disgust on her face, though, is not one of them.

CHAPTER TEN

*“Indifference never bothered me.
Until I met Octavius Reed.
Now I hate it with a passion.”*

Isla

*F*rom Isla's mother's diaries...

My greatest nightmare came true today, and I haven't even told my husband yet.

They are out on a fishing trip with Grayson, enjoying the last days of summer.

Ever since we...adopted our little girl, I've been the luckiest and happiest person alive.

She's a little angel, always curious and kind to those around her while studying the world. Her beautiful gray eyes are almost exactly like my husband's, which always surprises me considering they are so rare.

She's gentle with everyone and people adore her for always giving them her toothless smiles, a ray of sunshine that casts her loving light wherever she goes.

Which brings me back to today.

We decided to picnic in the park with Grayson's wife, who also happens to be my friend, Amanda, and our kids are close in age, so they can play together.

Isla was running around with her ice cream when she smacked into someone's knees and smeared the said chocolate ice cream all over the woman's white jumpsuit.

Since my eyes were always on my daughter, I got up swiftly and darted toward them, ready to apologize right away, when the woman kneeled and just laughed. "Are you all right, kiddo?" she asked, her melodic voice oddly familiar. She took out a tissue from her bag, wiping the ice cream from her hand. "You need to be careful."

Isla hung her head. "I'm sorry for staining your clothes."

"It's all right."

I sped up my pace and spoke up, breaking their eye contact. "My apologies. I'll happily pay for the dry cleaning." Both heads swung to me in unison and rendered me speechless.

Because the woman staring at me was...Isla's biological mother.

Even though I had no chance to study her features when we stole Isla, she was still this young and vibrant woman, just healthier-looking.

Gone were her earlier bruises. Her long hair that had been patchy in a few places cascaded down her spine in heavy dark locks while her skin glowed, and her slender form just emphasized her beauty.

A stunning woman in her early twenties gazed at me in shock and swallowed hard, rising up quickly and stepping away from Isla. "Hi," I greeted her, everything in me screaming to shield my daughter from her so she wouldn't notice any resemblance even though she was unconscious when we took her baby. "How are you?" Isla came closer to me, and I grabbed her, pressing her to my hip. "I'm sorry for the stain." I couldn't believe the words spilling from my mouth because they seemed too shallow and pointless in this awkwardness between us, overpowered by my guilt and probably her confusion. "I'm so sorry."

“Hi,” she replied, her voice trembling, and she swallowed hard again. “Everything is fine. No need for anything. I wanted to throw it away anyway.” Another step back and she yelled, “Diego!”

My stomach flipped when I saw a dark-haired boy hopping down from the swing and running toward us, blinking at us with his gray eyes, identical to my daughter’s, that accented his tan skin.

However, that was the only resemblance he shared with my daughter. He was a bit taller and bulkier than her and had this deep sadness in his stare that chilled my blood. “Si, Mamá?”

“Nosotras tenemos que ir.”

My limited Spanish allowed me to understand that she told him they had to leave and disappointment flashed on Diego’s face. “Ahora?”

“Yes. Say bye to your friends.”

He gave us a wave and ran back to a group of boys around the swing while the woman plastered on a tight smile, taking another long step back. “Have a nice day.” Before I could say anything else, she rushed to her blanket, packed everything up, grabbed her son, and hastily left the park.

I was just speechless because the woman acted like a fugitive around me when she did nothing wrong.

It was us who committed a crime.

For the rest of the day, I pretended everything was fine and even invited Amanda and her son to sleep over, but they declined. Grayson prefers for them to sleep at home. Our husbands always have been control freaks, demanding to know where and with whom we are at all times. Which is hilarious since they love their fishing trips so much, they go there almost every weekend. Maybe other wives would have been bothered by it, but they always come back so happy and energetic, ready to conquer the world and staying so nice toward us...it’s impossible to doubt their devotion to their family.

I can be calm. I should be calm and just focus on my life. In fact, I should feel relief...because we finally saw each other

and nothing tragic happened.

Anxiety, though, is a bitch, so it flicks an image of her over and over in my head, how she paled and wished to disappear as if I were the plaque that had the power to destroy her.

She recognized me. That much was clear. Shouldn't she want to hug the people who helped her deliver the baby? Chat with them or even pay closer attention to Isla and see a resemblance with her own kid?

Why was her first instinct to run away from me? Is it somehow connected to the sadness in her kid's eyes?

No matter how much I think about it, the answer doesn't come, and only one question remains.

Why?

*I*sla

“You should quit,” Giselle says, and I roll my eyes, adding speed to my morning run and breathing the frigid air into my lungs. “I know you’re stubborn, but sometimes even the most stubborn creatures need to let go.”

Adjusting the headphones better, I turn to the right and focus on my building in the distance while passing by various people either smoking joints or drinking this early, or maybe they just didn’t go to bed, period. For whatever reason, they all keep waving at me every single time, so I have to be nice as well and return their greetings while internally wondering why the neighborhood that generally doesn’t give a shit about anyone stays so polite to me. “He’s doing it on purpose.”

“What? Ignoring you? I think he made that abundantly clear.”

Even though she can’t see me, I stick my tongue out at her. “Hiding crucial information from me.” I grit my teeth. “And ignoring me, yes. At this point, he must be a master at it.”

I think reaching the dead is easier than having a conversation with Octavius, who banned me from all his

properties, so I can't step foot on any land that belongs to the Reeds.

That includes all their buildings, holdings, and even a shopping mall.

"Maybe it's a sign for you to focus on your work instead."

I snort a laugh at this. "That's all I've been doing for the past two months." Working as a private investigator for the old dude proved to be busier than I originally anticipated. The minute I joined his small firm, he had an influx of clients dealing with all kinds of family dramas.

On some days, I was so exhausted, I could barely walk back home and take a hot shower before crashing, and while it would have thrilled me, especially the constant bonus I kept getting from the owner...I knew Octavius was behind it.

He probably supplied all these clients to ensure I'd be so busy I couldn't think about anything else. Except his plan failed because all I could think about even during my assignments was the Church Killer.

No matter how much I tried to reach Octavius or his friends just to get some answers, a clue to move forward since I've gotten nothing in all this time...all my pleas and requests were ignored.

Even Callum told me he could no longer help me, and I didn't push. The last thing I need is Giselle's husband getting into trouble due to my problems.

I huff in annoyance, my sneakers slapping soundly against the asphalt as I add more strength to my laps, welcoming the pain traveling through my joints. It temporarily numbs the one pressing on my chest, reminding me how lonely and unfulfilled my existence truly is.

It seems as if my life stands still as everyone around me moves on and achieves something while I'm knocking on endless doors that refuse to open, stuck in the past.

Santiago Cortez got married two months ago. Rumor has it he kidnapped his wife and then blackmailed her into marrying him, and I wouldn't know if it's true, but the man is obsessed

with her big time. Sometimes it feels like a crime to even look at them. That's how intimate their stares are. It was the biggest news in the city: one of the dark four getting married and losing his bachelor status.

After all, everyone wants them...except Octavius, and I clench my teeth, breathing in more frigid air because despite his difficult character, it hurts me how dismissive these news columns are to his charms.

Which only proves I'm the biggest fool in town because feeling sorry for a man who makes your life hell is another level of pathetic.

"Isla!" Giselle shouts in my ear, and I wince, realizing I must have zoned out on her. "Will you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Let go?"

I sigh, reaching my building and stretching from side to side, catching my breath. "No. I can't do anything unless Octavius helps me. I've got no other clues." Whoever sent me the necklace stays silent too. The fucker clearly enjoys messing with my head, and it's enough of an aphrodisiac to get off on without committing other crimes. Everything inside me rebels at how much power I give him every day, yet...the scarred and traumatized part of me cannot help but wish to find answers. So I play the game in hopes of catching him and beating him at his own plan.

"How are you going to do it? He's not known for his patience. You provoke him hard enough, he will retaliate, and only God knows what that might entail."

Whenever we have a conversation about the dark four, I have this gut feeling she isn't telling me something, which is ridiculous since we have no secrets from each other.

Well, almost.

She has no idea my body has the hots for a stranger who couldn't give less shit about me if he tried.

Still, though.

My best friend was always an open book. However, when it comes to the dark four, or any of Callum's other friends, for that matter... she shuts down and never discusses how they all met or what they do besides being brooding billionaires.

I once jokingly asked if they were murderers or something and expected her to laugh, but she just blinked and changed the subject.

"Isla!" she yells again, and I lift my leg on the nearest bench, bending forward and stretching my back even wider, groaning at my muscles relaxing. "Answer my question, woman!"

"I have a plan."

"I'm already scared."

"I found information that might get me an in to one of the dark four's properties. From there, it should be smooth sailing getting to Octavius." Straightening up, I tease her, "I'll message you on the way there. If you don't hear from me within a few hours, call the cops because it means the dude killed me."

"It's not funny!" she barks, and I have to pull back the headphones as her high-pitched scream makes my ears bleed. "It's dangerous." A beat passes. "How are you going to accomplish it anyway?"

Putting the headphone back on, I walk to the building and wave at the drunks who continue playing poker and raise my eyes to the sky when clouds gather, creating a rather gloomy atmosphere, and I have to admit, Chicago won my heart with the weather because it always matches my mood.

No sunshine for this girl!

"We got an interesting case at work. A young woman from France is in search of her twin sister. They are originally from Chicago. Countless searches through the years and she got nothing. She contacted us, but the boss dismissed the case despite the generous pay that was offered." I huff in exasperation. "Truth be told, I don't understand why she even considered our firm. The boss has very limited resources."

“And how does this help you then?”

Fishing inside my pocket for the keys, I jump up the stairs and go to my floor, ignoring the screams and music trailing after me. “She sounded desperate, so I wanted to help. I did some research on her, and it turns out I know her sister.”

“How?”

“She was at your wedding.” Giselle groans, and I frown. “Her name is Amalia Scott. Why the hell are you groaning?”

“You’ll get us all in trouble,” she mutters instead of answering my question. “I think you should drop that case too. If Amalia doesn’t want to be found...”

“Amalia is not my client. Penelope is. That’s her name, by the way. Either way, she’s coming to Chicago to get the info.”

“Once again, how does this help you?”

“She’s wealthy. Not on the dark four’s level, but her name carries some weight. Since my boss dismissed this case, I’m working off the clock. I don’t need her money.” Silence meets this statement, so I decide to elaborate while inserting the key into the lock. “She can get me in the Four Dark Horsemen’s club tonight. Octavius will be there.”

“Isla.” Giselle says one word, yet it holds so much exhaustion along with judgment, and I admit I start to sound like a stalker when it comes to Octavius.

Don’t care, though.

I’m on a mission. Besides, he threw a challenge my way, and I love to prove people wrong. “All I want is a chance for another conversation. That’s it. I’m not arranging a kidnapping.” I roll my eyes. “Could you even imagine that?”

“How do you know he’ll be there tonight?”

“It’s his annual thing with women.” I open the door and step inside, shutting it behind me and dropping the keys on the counter while my eyes land on the kid lying on the couch.

He’s been coming five times a week in the middle of the night, eating and watching cartoons until he falls asleep.

Whenever I want to escort him back and say a few things to his parents, he always shakes his head and hugs my knee, silently pleading with me not to say a thing.

I sometimes think he does it so they won't forbid him from coming here, and it's the only time he eats or sleeps properly.

While the mother either moans loudly when the asshole sleeps with her or screams in agony when he beats her, any suggestions for help are met with shutting the door in my face and telling me to mind my business.

I gave up, and the only reason I have stayed silent thus far is because the kid has no bruises. The minute they touch the kid, though, my gloves will come off.

“What annual thing?”

Grabbing a bottle from the fridge, I flick the lid and take a greedy gulp, welcoming the cold liquid sliding down my throat, and slip off my shoes, heading toward the shower. “He has sex with women once a year. In his club.” My hold on the bottle tightens, and it crunches under the pressure, the water spilling onto my palm. Thoughts of Octavius with anyone send jealousy rushing through my system, awakening the green monster I didn't even know existed within me.

The idea of him touching, kissing, or...sleeping with another woman creates pain mixed with anger and rage, and the stupidity of this only adds to my confusion when it comes to this man.

And the fact that I have no right to feel this way...let's just say getting information from him tonight is second on my list of priorities.

“How do you know that?”

Turning on the light inside the bathroom, I put her on speaker and place the phone on the counter before removing my clothes and throwing them inside the hamper. “I'm a private investigator after all.” I decide to omit the fact that this information slipped from Callum during our latest conversation when he called me to ask what kind of surprise Giselle would prefer.

Thinking about it now, though, it seems he just called to inform me about Octavius because he hung up shortly after and didn't even care about my opinion regarding the surprise.

“So that's your plan? To anger the man even more by ruining his annual hookup?”

“Yeah. And interrogate him for the information I need.”

Giselle whistles. “Isla Evans, you're a brave woman. Stubborn and a bit foolish at this moment, but brave nonetheless.”

“What can I say? I love risks and hope for rewards.”

We share a long laugh before I sigh. “Gotta go. I have around three hours to take a shower and get some sleep before Penelope comes here. Love you, Giselle.”

“I love you too. And please message me when you enter the devil's den. I'll count the hours.”

“Will do.” Pressing on the display, I end our call and lean on the sink, studying my reflection in the mirror.

All the plain glory that's me with my messy and sweaty hair.

And despite how small it makes me feel to think this way...a thought in my head remains.

If I were beautiful, would Octavius give me the time of day?

At such moments, I hate myself.

Because my reflection reminds me that I can want and lust after a man who creates problems for me...but he...he won't ever feel the same.

If he did...he wouldn't plan to sleep with anyone tonight.

Ironic, isn't it?

A man can hurt you even when he's not yours.

ctavius

Rock music blasts through the speakers, echoing through the space and mixing with the loud whimpers as the man struggles in the metallic chains wrapped around him, tears streaming down his face. “Please,” he whispers, licking his chapped lips and wincing, crying harder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.” He tries to move to the side, his pants soaked from his urine, and the disgusting smell only adds to my annoyance.

Cowardliness inspires nothing but distaste in me, especially of those who deemed themselves invincible because no one could ever stop them.

How funny.

If there is one absolute law I’ve learned over the years... for every strength and power, there is the one that can best it. So you have to be careful and always think several steps ahead.

“It was just a hard week at work,” he continues, managing to get on his knees, scooting to the side, and cries out when his back connects with the wall, the sharp edges on the chain digging harsher into his bare skin and drawing blood. “I would have never done it otherwise.”

Rubbing my cheek with my gloved hand, I speak out, and he jerks. “Ah, so you were just stressed?”

He nods, the sweat flying in a different direction while he shifts again, dipping his knees in his urine, and more tears come.

Fucking hell, how embarrassing.

“Yes. We had a huge contract, and we failed. I was drunk and stressed. Otherwise, none of it would have happened.”

Swaying the metallic cane from side to side, I go to the nearby table and grab several photos, flipping through them and then throwing them on the floor where they land with a loud slap, spraying the urine on his face, and he winces again before gagging. “You beat your wife so hard, you broke her ribs. Your son tried to help her and ended up in the hospital with a concussion.” He looks at the photos, swallowing hard.

“That happened three months ago. Is this what you do when you’re stressed, Tim? Beat the shit out of your family?” I tap with the cane on their family portrait. “Your wife loves you so much. She always makes excuses for your behavior and never reports it.”

“I’m sorry. It was a hard year. She understands.” He pushes against the wall when I step closer, still swaying the cane, a smile shaping my mouth at the sight of goose bumps breaking on his skin and how fear fills his gaze, his breathing speeding up.

While I love my victims hopeless on the operating table, watching me remove their organs one by one...there is a different kind of high only live torture can give.

Their terror is a pleasure in itself, putting them in the same position they do their victims for countless years.

“Does she?” I ask, stepping even closer until my leather boots press on his feet, and his agonized cry fills the air.

Ah, one of the best sounds indeed.

“Yes. She knows me well. I would never do it otherwise.”

“Ah, I see.” Tapping my cane on the floor, I draw a circle while his fingers curl on the chain. “You’re a lucky man to have such an understanding wife.” He exhales in relief, gulping for air, and his eyes widen when I raise the cane high. “I’m not that generous.” I hit him hard, the cracking sound reverberating through the walls as his scream overshadows even the music. “Consider me fucking stressed, Tim.” I deliver several more blows to his ribs and face, knocking out two teeth, and he coughs on his blood, spitting it on the floor while whimpering in pain from his broken bones.

“Please,” he whispers, unable to move his destroyed limbs and falling on his face, his shoulders trembling as he cries his heart out. I throw away the cane, walking back to the table and snatching a silver blade glistening under the harsh light in my torture room. “Please,” he repeats when I flip him on his back with a hard shove. “I won’t do it again. I was wrong.”

“No, Tim. You will. Because a man would have never done it in the first place.” He stills when I put the tip of the blade on his chin, slowly dragging it down his stomach and reaching his dick. He shakes his head, probably surviving on adrenaline alone, considering his wounds should be catastrophic to him and send a lot of pain through his system.

Not enough, never enough for me.

“I can change.”

“No. Men like you do not change. You tasted power the only way you can get it. Like an addict, you will chase the feeling over and over again, desiring to be the king of the world who issues orders that have to be followed or else you subject them to consequences. Even if the said world is your wife and son who have to bear your cruelty.” Wrapping my hand around the blade’s handle tighter, I pierce his dick with one swift move.

He arches his back, a silent scream escaping him, his mouth hanging open while his entire body freezes as blood pours from his wound, soaking everything around him. Twisting my wrist, I cut off his dick and let it fall between his thighs while his eyes glaze over, and he just stares into nothingness.

The blade joins the cane, and I grab the syringe I’ve prepared in advance and quickly insert it into his neck, letting the medication flow through him. It should keep the shock intact until he reaches the hospital. Otherwise, he might die with all his organs shutting down.

And where would be the fun in that?

Slipping off the gloves, I drop them in the trash can and wash my hands despite not getting any blood on them.

Wiping my hands with the towel, I take out my phone and press Antonio’s number. “Yes, sir?”

“Get him to the hospital and put the plan in motion.”

“Yes.”

I hang up and think about the letter I made him write earlier, admitting to his crimes and apologizing. Along with several pieces of footage I got of him beating his family and even an ex-girlfriend who reported him for rape, but no one believed her since he's such a charming guy everyone adores.

He'll rot in prison for a long time.

The restless energy consumes me still, though. A part of me despises how easy this hunt had been and wishes to find a new outlet for my rage.

It multiplied by a thousand since Isla came to Chicago, running around digging into the past she shouldn't and driving me insane with each breath she takes.

If obsession had been a human, it would be me. She consumes my mind and dark soul that craves to possess her so her independent and stubborn nature can rest and finally let go, succumbing to my desires and total control. Because the protective instinct within me needs to watch her twenty-four seven.

One of the reasons I got all these easy cases for her, or else she'd do something stupid. The idea of anyone hurting her sends me into a spiral of madness and rage so strong, I know I would destroy everything and everyone.

Which just proves to me once again I should stay away from her. I'll suffocate her, and it won't be enough for me.

I won't rest until she gives up everything, living and breathing, only for me.

My screen flashes with Callum's name on it. "What?" I bark, still angry with him for endangering Isla.

I've searched all over the country for the fucker who still causes her nightmares but came up empty-handed. It's impossible to hide from me, so if he can, it means he has resources.

That complicates a lot of things and leaves her vulnerable. She should be hidden inside my mansion with a golden chain attached to her ankles so her wandering nature wouldn't get her in trouble.

If this doesn't prove how unstable I am when it comes to her, nothing else will.

“Ah! Is this a way to greet the bearer of good news? I think you and I deserve a second chance.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I ask, “Second chance?” Marriage must have damaged Callum's brain. “Go fuck yourself, Callum.”

“Nuh-uh, my friend. I have some interesting news for you.”

Heading toward the stairs, I deadpan, “I doubt it.”

He chuckles, the crazy psycho. “You're going to the club tonight, right?”

“This is your interesting news? Guessing my schedule?” I sigh dramatically, my tone getting high-pitched. “Oh, my Callum. I'm impressed and surprised at the same time. Who knew that's possible?”

“Ask me how I know it.” Silence follows his request as I get to the mansion's first floor, and Antonio nods at me, already grabbing someone to take downstairs while I go upstairs to prepare for tonight.

The dark four decided to have an impromptu meeting at our club, probably Remi getting into some kind of shit again, and since his shit usually has big repercussions, we all need to be there.

“Oh, come on, Octavius. Ask!” he teases, and I roll my eyes. “Fine. My wife told me.”

I pause midway, halting my movements at this. “Your wife?”

“Ah, I've got your attention now, huh?”

“Callum.” My voice leaves no room for further bullshit, and I hear him flicking a lighter as he takes a greedy pull of his smoke and exhales loudly in my ear.

“Isla informed her about her plans tonight to ambush you in the club and do whatever the hell you both do with each

other.”

Fucking hell.

I banned her from all my properties and ignored her so the fucker hunting us both would calm down and see how indifferent I am toward her and choose a different strategy to attack.

A monster recognizes a monster, and what a better way to kill one if not to use his weakness? He pushes her in my direction to hurt us both, and I won't allow it.

“They won't let her inside without an invitation. Not to mention she's banned.”

“She got an in. Your girl is resourceful.”

An odd sense of pride washes over me at him praising her, surviving no matter what...I value her strong character and how she finds ways despite having no wealth or power. However, anger overshadows anything else, and I clench my phone tighter, already thinking about how to find the fucking name that would get her in the club and stop it.

Church Killer aside, I won't handle her proximity in a place built for sin and gore, where all inhibitions disappear and only lustful cravings remain.

“Oh, and, Octavius?” Callum exhales more smoke while laughing a little bit. “She knows about your yearly sexual encounters and thinks that's what you'll be doing tonight. Just thought I'd let you know.” He hangs up before I can utter another word while I close my eyes, cracking my neck from side to side and calming the inner monster awakening inside me just imagining what that information has done to her.

How did she find out?

And why did she assume I would fuck anyone tonight?

Compared to my best friends, who indulge in their sexual desires whenever the mood strikes them, it never held much interest to me because, from an early age, I've learned women value beauty no matter what they claim.

The disgusting stares, the winces, and sheer fear convinced me that approaching them for anything means their distress. However, I still had women willing to sleep with me due to my status, name, and friends they loved to ogle and dream about.

I have no interest in sex if the woman hates me or despises my touch.

I found the perfect solution—I hire expensive escorts once a year who keep their mouths shut and are paid generously for enduring my hideousness. Honest exchange.

I don't date or let anyone hang on my arms, no romantic dinners or wooing either. Even during sex, it's always from behind and never more than to sustain some of my needs.

Tenderness and gentleness do not exist for me, making Isla more tempting and dangerous to my sanity. I want to splay her on my satin sheets, bandaging her hands and indulging in her body, exploring it with my tongue and hands until she writhes from the same burning passion that rules inside me.

She has no idea how deep my obsession runs. I haven't touched anyone since my eyes landed on her, and even planning such a thing seems outrageous to me. I hold myself to the same standards I hold anyone else, and since I won't allow men to touch Isla...it means we are subjected to the same dry spell for a lifetime.

I know it's a lie, though.

Because every time she searches for me, she tempts me, and temptation is hard to resist for a man like me... She almost makes me believe she wants me, and I can't have it.

I've taken an oath.

An oath that saved me once upon a time.

And I intend to keep it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*“She’s a beauty to my beast.
A light to my darkness.
And unfortunately...
A cure to my curse.”*

Octavius

*F*rom Isla’s mother’s diaries...

After the disastrous meeting in the park, I told John everything, and he was shocked to hear about the girl living in our city and raising her son. He wanted to find the girl, so he called Grayson.

I was against it because it endangered Isla, but they assured me it was better to keep the enemy, so to speak, close rather than away. All my explanations that she was a victim, if nothing else, fell on deaf ears.

However, the girl seemed to be impossible to find. She disappeared into thin air, and I probably should have questioned how they knew her name, but I didn’t.

Grayson has this ability to find anyone with his police connections, and he must have researched the teenagers giving birth around the time she went into labor.

Life went on for a few months until yesterday...

When my husband got into a car accident. Thankfully, Grayson was with him and managed to call the ambulance on time.

He had a mild concussion, several bruises all over his chest and back, along with a black eye and a broken wrist. The doctor said he got lucky because these accidents usually end up with more catastrophic wounds, and he wanted to keep him overnight.

I stayed with him while Amanda came over to our house to look after Isla. Grayson handled all the paperwork as he always did, although I noticed something weird about him.

It seems he had bite marks all over his arm and was more nervous than usual. They kept exchanging weird glances with each other, but probably, it was all in my head.

We brought John home in the morning, and he has been resting ever since, which brings me to now.

Or rather a few hours ago when I finally got to read a local newspaper where they spoke about a hideous crime. A young woman committed suicide and attempted to kill her child as well by slicing his throat. He survived, despite the deep wound that will probably scar him for a lifetime. Aside from all his psychological issues.

Tragic, so tragic. I couldn't function well after reading it and barely held off before Isla went to bed to give myself a minute to process all this.

The woman battled some hard demons and instead of asking for help, she chose to end her life. She didn't even wish for her child to live on.

What happened to her?

Come to think of it...

Despite my panicked haze on that day and mostly blurry vision due to the rain and wind, I still remember clearly her worn-out clothes and bruised skin.

The wild look in her eyes and how she kept glancing at my husband, clenching my hand as if holding on to me and seeking protection.

Isla's biological mother is dead.

And the worst part about it?

Relief.

Because now there is no possibility of anyone ever taking her away from us.

I hate myself for it and try not to think about a little orphaned boy who was left alone to live with his trauma and probably will have to go to foster care, and truth be told...I don't want to know anything about him.

The farther away he is from our family, the safer we are.

My little girl is mine.

And for this, I'm willing to go to hell.

*S*la

“I think this was a horrible mistake,” Penelope says as her driver pulls up in front of the club with a mile-long line leading to the flashy red entrance where three bouncers guard the place.

Their arms are crossed as they broodingly watch their surroundings, their muscles bulging under their shirts, and I shake my head at it. Most of them act as if they guard the gates of heaven themselves.

Countless women and men dressed in fine clothes showcase several of the latest designer collections for the season. Callum bought it all for Giselle. That's the only reason I know. One dress costs more than my monthly check, so I'd never be able to afford it. Expensive-looking diamonds glisten under the shimmering lights all around them, and they probably show off to each other or just emphasize their status to get an in.

A lady scans everyone's invitations and even sends some people away. Some women burst into tears, begging to be let in.

One man tries to argue but shuts up when a bouncer shoves him away.

I huff, tightening my jacket. “Let’s not be dramatic.” I pat Penelope’s hand and motion to the door. “We should find out what all the fuss is about, right?” I send a reassuring smile before pressing the handle and getting out of the car. I hold back a smile from her scandalized expression.

It seems to be permanently attached to her face ever since we met earlier today, and she learned about my condition in order for her to get the information. I suspect the girl thinks I’m mental and have lost my head, and my familiarity with her doesn’t help the matter.

Based on the little information I got about her, she grew up in Paris with her uncle, a famous artist who adored her and doted on her. Up until she was fifteen, she considered him her father, and that’s when she learned about her family drama and long-lost twin.

She’s a sweet girl, too innocent for the truth she’ll discover once I give her Amalia’s file, and a part of me feels sorry for her.

Because the sister she so wishes to find wants nothing to do with her, and inwardly, I sigh.

What I would have given to have a sibling to carry the burden right along with me and understand my pain like no other. For he or she would have reminded me that no matter what happens or what I’ll do...I’ll have someone on my side.

Someone as eager for revenge and answers as me because we both would have suffered together and shared our agony.

Penelope is in for a big surprise, but that’s none of my business. The only reason I came up with this idea is because her father is friends with Rebecca Esmeralda Cortez, Santiago’s mother. She easily got us an invitation and advised us to wear something nice because it might be a club, but the company is rather...picky.

I put on my best pair of jeans, green blouse, and new leather boots while Penelope picked a pretty dress and still looked unsure when I showed up an hour ago at her hotel room. She blinked in confusion when I told her to stay close

and not make any sudden moves. She kept her mouth shut the entire way, and I think her curious nature just tried to understand what awaited her inside.

Since Octavius banned me from their club, I have no idea what hides behind its closed doors either. However, I've heard things, and, well...even my cheeks heated, so Penelope might just run away.

The girl is fiercely loyal to her cause and already loves her sister, whom she's never met, so she is willing to endure any discomfort if it means finding her.

On some level, I relate to her pain and longing akin to the one eating me from the inside out.

Getting out of the car on the sidewalk, I hear Penelope's driver speak up.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to, miss." The old guy clearly feels protective over her, and who could blame him? Penelope has this vulnerability aura around her that probably awakens a natural protective instinct in men. Something I'll never inspire in anyone, and my stomach flips at the thought, making me burrow into my coat even tighter.

No need to cry over impossible things. Some girls are destined to be loved by their fathers who shelter them from the hideousness of this world while others...well, we have to deal with whatever life throws our way because no one can protect us.

Somehow, the knowledge doesn't soothe me, and instead, I think about my father...if he were alive, would I be like Penelope?

Shy, introverted, gentle, and very kind?

I know one thing for sure.

I wouldn't try to use anyone's pain to my advantage and practically blackmail them into doing what I want.

Shame fills me when her driver glares at me, and Penelope musters up a smile for him. "It's okay. You can go home. We'll catch a cab back."

“As you wish, miss.” A beat passes. “Should I come tomorrow morning?”

Joy flashes on her face, happiness lighting up her eyes because tomorrow she will go find her sister.

Her dream will come true, and I can't help but be jealous.

Grinning at him and exhaling a little bit, she replies, “I'll call you.” He nods, and she gets out, her heels clicking on the asphalt.

Since she looks a bit unstable on them, I grab her elbow, hook my arm through hers, and then drag us to the bouncers, who lift their brows, scanning our appearances from head to toe.

“You lost, ladies?” one of them asks.

I bite on my lip so I wouldn't tell them what I think about all these displays and get us kicked out before we can even enter.

Penelope shifts uncomfortably, a gust of wind whooshing over us and billowing her locks. Tightening the hold around her velvet jacket, she extends the invitation to them, and they share a look before stepping to the side and letting the lady greet us with a plastered-on fake smile stretching her thin lips. “Good evening, ladies.” She takes the envelope from Penelope, her eyes widening for a fraction of a second before she even opens it, and then she motions with her head toward one of the bouncers. “I hope you'll have an excellent time.” The bouncer removes the golden rope, allowing us to go inside.

“Thank you,” Penelope barely manages to reply, while I move forward rapidly and thank the gods Santiago has such a great relationship with his parents because their name alone on the invitation is enough to give us all the passes.

But it also means that our names will be in the system soon, and I prefer to get lost in the crowd, or Octavius might pull a fast one on me.

Once in, we walk down the narrow, dark corridor leading to the reception desk lit only by the lights on the floor, giving

the place a mysterious vibe, and Penelope shivers next to me. For someone who grew up in wealth, she doesn't seem to handle the whole exclusivity thing well, but I have no chance to dwell on it much as another woman meets us here behind the desk with the same fake smile. I read the name tag on her chest.

Samantha.

Ah, the infamous hostess. Her temper might rival one of her own, and no one dares to fuck with her because she will have you banned quicker than you'll have a chance to utter a single word.

"Welcome to the club, ladies. Could you please give me your invitations?" Penelope extends her hand to her, and she grips them, opening them up and typing something furiously on her keyboard.

She blinks at the desktop screen several times, and then more warmth slips into her gaze, and she picks up two menus. "Ms. Walsh, it's a pleasure to have you here. Your table is in the VIP lounge. Please follow me." Her green pencil dress showcases her lean figure, and her golden locks emphasize her subtle beauty, fitting organically into the luxury and prestige surrounding us.

Her beauty reminds me that Octavius is surrounded by gorgeousness all the time, so I'd never have a shot with him, even for a fling.

Heck.

A one-night stand. Whatever that moment we shared back in his office meant nothing and probably was some kind of plan of his to make me let down my guard.

Samantha saunters to the heavy double doors while Penelope and I trail her, and she whispers from the corner of my mouth, "VIP lounge?"

I explain to her, "Rebecca Cortez's son is one of the owners."

Penelope opens her mouth to ask more questions when Samantha pushes open the doors vibrating from the music, and

instantly, the smell of alcohol, cigarettes, and sex envelops me.

The loud music echoes through the space, accompanied by the click of shoes on the parquet as people lose themselves on the dance floor, rubbing against each other. Some even engage in heavy make-out sessions. In the corner, two men have a woman pressed against the wall as they take turns kissing her as she moans under their touch and wraps her legs around one of them. Any minute now and she'll jump them.

Penelope's jaw drops, almost hitting the floor, and I blink several times.

A threesome.

In the club for everyone to see, I've never seen someone making out with two people before, so while part of me is shocked, the other...well, is a bit curious.

Although revulsion rushes through me just imagining doing something like this with men, so no judgment, but not for me.

"Oh my God," Penelope mutters as we continue to scan the gorgeous club more and do our best to ignore the various sex acts happening all around us. A threesome might be the most innocent thing Penelope's eyes land on in here.

The Four Dark Horsemen are smart businessmen; vices and mysterious places always had a unique appeal to their wealthy society as getting inside such an establishment proved your status and allowed you to engage in the most lustful cravings without facing anyone's scrutiny.

In fact, no one is allowed to take any pictures or mention who they've seen inside it, and the profits must have skyrocketed when they introduced this new contracted rule.

It's true, after all.

Whatever they touch turns into gold because they have this knack for human psychology and always use it to their advantage.

The club is decorated in silver, red, and black, and the first thought that comes to my mind is the four riders of the

apocalypse as they rode horses with these colors.

The myth fascinated me as a child despite my mom preferring Greek and Roman mythology—the idea of four majestic beings who would someday come to Earth to end it, but not before sending misery to all those around them.

Somehow, it fit the dark four, casting a cruel veil around them and increasing their appeal.

The bar is in the back right corner, with four bartenders busily preparing drinks for everyone while the rest of the staff easily navigate the club to the booths and tables in the left corner. They deliver orders of steaming food on porcelain dishes, the delicious smells wafting through the air and making my stomach rumble.

Each one of them wears black pants and white button-up shirts.

When it comes to furniture design, they've settled on round, leather couches looking comfortable enough to sit on, and there are chairs at round tables with lamps should anyone need to speak privately. Most of the people sitting at them are either making out or drunk.

Penelope steps toward the booths when Samantha's voice stops her and gently nudges her to the left to the small stairs. "The VIP zone is on the second floor, which has several soundproof rooms. You'll be more comfortable there."

Nothing but the best for the Cortezes' guests, apparently.

I stay quiet through the entire thing as we push through the sweaty bodies before going up the stairs, my eyes studying every little detail because I need to know all routes of escape. Otherwise, I'm restless in any place, let alone here, where I have zero power. Samantha continues to chat. "Twice a month, we have special dance shows. You should really come next time. I'm afraid tonight is a bit boring."

A chuckle slips past Penelope's lips. "Trust me, I won't survive it getting any more interesting." Since I won't be allowed to enter again should everything go according to my plan, I don't bother to reply.

Samantha grins at her as we step into a narrow hallway with about a dozen private rooms, and she swipes the card for number seven.

The interior is almost identical to the downstairs. The only difference is that the couches are black, and a private bar filled with an expensive selection of liquor is on the side.

However, the most striking thing about the VIP lounge is the glass wall that showcases the view of the entire club, presenting it in quite a different light.

Almost sinister and forbidden yet tempting nevertheless.

“Here are the menus.” Samantha puts them on the round table and then points at the small button on it. “Just press here when you want to order, and the server will come.” Her gaze shoots between us. “Should I inform Mr. Cortez about you once he comes?”

“No,” I finally speak up, and Samantha’s brows shoot up. “Thank you.” It’s game over for me once Santiago discovers us here and tells on me.

“All right. Have fun, ladies.” She spins around and dances off to the hallway, shutting the door behind her.

Penelope sighs in relief as silence settles around us as she sits down on the couch, wiggling her toes in her shoes while gluing her stare to the glass.

I follow, and a low whistle escapes me.

Four cages hang from the ceiling with dancers wearing provocative clothes inside, showcasing their skills and flexibility to the awe of everyone watching. The chandelier’s crystals shift in the breeze from the AC, brightening the entire space with colorful lights.

“If this thing drops, someone will get injured,” I mutter, taking a nut from the dish on the table and popping it in my mouth. “It must cost a fortune.” I drop in the chair opposite her, then rest my chin on my hand.

“Why are we here?” Penelope snaps, focusing her stare on me while I blink in surprise.

Ah, so there are claws underneath her politeness, and she's clearly had enough of the secrecy and following my lead without asking many questions.

I groan inwardly. Only I have a talent to piss off even the most calmest of creatures.

"I did what you asked. Don't you think I deserve to know what the hell is going on?"

"There is a man I need to meet." Her brow furrows. "Since he's rich, reaching him is almost impossible. Not to mention he kicked me out of his company. He doesn't want to talk to me. So here we are."

Judging by her blink and sigh along with concern blanketing her stare, she must think I'm a stalker and insane.

Not sure what's funnier, how close it is to the truth, or how sane I would seem compared to her twin once she gets to know her.

"Okay." She pours herself some water and presses the cold glass to her cheek. "Amalia's file?"

"You'll get the email in the morning. I promise." I scoot closer to the window and stare at the dance floor, the light flickering in my eyes, and I ignore her altogether for the next fifteen minutes as she flips through the menu.

I can't miss his entrance. It's my only chance to go to him and catch him off guard. If someone in the past told me I'd be chasing a man, I'd laugh.

Here I am, though, turning into a lunatic because Octavius Reed won't answer one single question!

And that's when I feel it.

The sudden change of energy akin to an electric blast sending goose bumps through my entire system.

"They're here!" I jump up, practically plastering my face against the glass, and she comes closer, following my gaze to the parting crowd on the dance floor.

It's as if the whole club has frozen in time to give space to the newly arrived people.

A murmur washes over the crowd, judging by their body language, as four men march inside in unison.

Florian walks in first, and a server runs to him, holding a tray with a drink that he snags easily, then winks at the passing women who giggle happily at his attention, and I roll my eyes at this.

I guess he does all he can to keep his manwhore reputation intact, as if anyone ever doubted it.

I look who's behind him and exhale when Octavius comes in next, scorching heat along with longing washing over me at the sight of him. All these months my body missed his, and my eyes drink in his magnificent features, greedy to memorize it all for fear of him forever forbidding me to even breathe around him once all is said and done tonight.

He strolls to the bar, snapping his fingers at the bartender, who instantly takes out an envelope and gives it to him.

The air hitches in my throat.

Penelope glances at me as I curl my fingers around the glass, my whole focus belonging to Octavius. I can't tear my gaze away from him.

How could anyone consider him anything but handsome? What's so great about the rest of the four anyway?

I barely pay attention to Santiago and Remi, who enter next, although I don't miss Penelope's reaction toward the latter. She should really nip this whole crush in the bud before it flourishes into obsession akin to mine.

Remi Reyes is too twisted for Penelope.

She grabs the water bottle, ready to pour herself another glass, when I see Octavius scanning the crowd, and everything inside me grows cold at the prospect of him choosing his flavor of the year right now.

Without thinking it through, I turn on my heel, and Penelope's brows rise when I gulp for breath, opening and

closing my mouth, searching for the right words to explain something I don't understand myself, but my mind fails me.

All I can focus on is the voice in my head screaming at me to get to him, so I whisper, "I have to go." That's all the warning she gets before I race to the door, open it wide, and take off down the stairs.

Her heels click on the parquet behind me, so she must follow me as we rush through the hallway and then downstairs, Penelope barely catching up with me on the dance floor. I push the bodies away, moving forward, keeping my gaze on Octavius who seems to still not notice me.

Anger zips through me. Of course, he's too busy thinking about other women to entertain even the idea of me, the dick!

And the fact that I have no right to blame him or act like an irrational, jealous woman scorned is not lost on me, not that I care.

Penelope grabs my elbow, halting my movements, and pulls me toward her so I look at her. Music blasts from the speakers, and the floor vibrates under us from people dancing.

"Where are you going, Isla?"

My cheeks heat at her perplexed and concerned expression, but how can I explain this? Exhaling heavily, I step closer to her, ready to at least give her something, when someone bumps into me from behind. Ignoring it, I say, "I'm sorry, Penelope. But I need to talk to one of them about my past." I hook a brown lock behind my ear. "I've been waiting for this for months, *believe it or not*." I mutter the last part, hoping for her understanding even though I deserve none for how I acted with her. Narrowing my eyes as I rise on my tiptoes, I try to look over people's heads to the bar, but everyone is too freaking tall! "I think you should go home."

She blinks in surprise at this, her hold easing on me, and she asks, "What?"

I nod, freeing myself completely from her grasp. "Thank you for giving me this chance. I'll send you the report tomorrow. You have no idea how you've helped me." I turn

away, glancing at the bar again. “But I have to go. I probably shouldn’t have dragged you into this, and for that, I apologize.”

I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to her, and the closer I get to Octavius, the clearer I see this will end in a disaster.

Exhaustion assaults me as I clench my fist, absorbing strength from the fire that’s been burning brightly in me for more than a decade. However, even vengeance has an expiration date. Does my pain really give me the right to exploit and harass people around me?

I’ve done nothing but force people to endure my company.

Penelope snaps, irritation lacing her voice. “Send me the report now, and we’ll be done.”

I shake my head. “No. I can’t. Not before—”

“You can’t?” she repeats and huffs in exasperation, glaring at the man who waves his hands around in the air and spills a little of his drink on her shoes. “Isla, keep your word, or I swear to God you’ll be kicked out of this club before you get the opportunity to speak to one of the owners.”

“I’m about tired of all you rich people threatening me.” I cross my arms, although amusement fills me at how easily she fell back into her heiress role. She played nice as long as she could. With them, it always ends in threats one way or the other. “It’s hilarious, all things considered.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m tired of all the shit you private investigators put me through. Send the report, and we’ll be done.”

I study her for several seconds as tension rises between us, and then a grin stretches my mouth, and she frowns.

“I think I’m starting to like you, Penelope. You have character under all that good-girl persona. You have that in common with Amalia.” She freezes at that. “She doesn’t hesitate to put people in their place if they try her patience either.”

At least that much I learned at Giselle's wedding; her twin was too cold and aloof to form any kind of conversation with her.

The music changes from a soft tempo to a hard thump, and people move around the dance floor, pushing us closer together. The scent of sweat and sex fills the air, and I grip her wrist, tugging her toward the bar as she won't leave, so we have to stalk Octavius together.

We make it a few steps before a young guy with a boyish smile stands in front of me, winking at us both. His suit showcases his lean body, and by how charm oozes from him, he has no trouble getting women. "Hey, ladies. I haven't seen you here before." His gaze darts between us before he gives his full attention to me.

Generally, men act as if I'm invisible and choose whoever is next to me, and while during my teens it might have hurt me, I've dealt with my plain status and accepted it. Which explains my lack of desire for sex, really. I tried it, and well... it was so...so...so weird, awkward, and unfulfilling. I never wanted to do it again.

Well, until I met a special someone who might see me but still treats me akin to a pesky insect he can't wait to get rid of.

The man scans me from head to toe, interest sparking in his eyes. He must love a challenge, and I stand out among the endless dresses. "Would you allow me to buy you a drink?" He extends his hand toward another lock of hair that escaped from my band, when a muscled hand drops on his, squeezing it hard and making the guy wince.

"Don't touch her, Steven." I still at Octavius's deep, dangerous voice. A furious expression settles on his features as he shoves the guy away.

Steven shakes his injured hand, blinks several times at Octavius, and with a nod hightails his ass in the other direction, but not before I hear him mutter, "Why do I always offer drinks to their women?"

Octavius looks at Penelope and asks, although it sounds more like an annoyed growl, “What are you doing here? You’ve brought enough trouble to us as it is.” He must mistake her for Amalia, and then he shifts his focus on me, while I stare at him in awe, my whole body enveloping my head at the sight of his dominance and momentarily forgetting about my plan altogether.

He steps closer to me, and despite the fear flaring, I stand still, curious about what he’d do next. “I told you to stay away from me or there will be consequences.”

Swallowing, I raise my chin. “And I told you, I don’t scare easily.”

A sinister smile, like a grimace—due to his scar—shapes his mouth, warning everyone to stay away, and I gasp when he wraps his hand around my throat, pulling me to his chest while my skin burns under his touch. “You should, darling.” A beat passes, and he leans toward me, our faces inches apart as his masculine scent twitches my nose and only increases the yearning inside me. “Every brave act has a price. And yours might cost you more than you expect.”

Fisting his shirt and holding on to him, I reply, “I’m willing to pay it.”

The sexual tension envelops us both, swirling in the air, and any rational thought vanishes from my head, blocking the outside world and leaving me in this moment with this complicated and handsome man who controls the lust brewing within me with his presence alone. He has such power over me it should scare me.

Instead, I’m attracted to him, needing to discover if...if...

“Then you’re more stupid than I thought. And I haven’t given you much credit to begin with.” I reel back as if he slapped me, paling at the words destroying my illusion and reminding me how deep down, this man despises me and his touch means nothing.

Octavius lets go of me. “Get the fuck out of my club.” He looks at Penelope again. “Both of you.” Then he walks off,

people parting to give him space, and she shifts awkwardly, probably not knowing how to react at how the man rejected me for the whole club to see.

“Listen—”

I’ve had it with everyone rejecting me, especially him! He doesn’t get to play with my emotions like this and then throw his disgusting ultimatums and threats my way, turning me into an insane person! “That infuriating man!” I exclaim and dart after him. I see Remi moving toward Penelope and I promise to get to her as soon as possible.

Just after I give Octavius Reed a piece of my mind!

Octavius

Fury along with lust slides through my veins, awakening every protective and possessive instinct inside me. It pumps adrenaline in my blood and urges me to go back to my woman and wrap her in my arms, taking her far away from all these hungry men admiring what belongs to me and thinking they have a chance.

Not in fucking hell!

Her beauty up close is unbearable. I crave to mold all her curves, taste her skin on my tongue, and get her off in all the ways I can, watching pleasure filling her molten gray eyes as only one thing exists in her vision.

Me.

And the fact that I came this close to actually acting on my desires forced me to spit all that bullshit just now. I hated the pain in her eyes, her flawless skin growing pale because I became the source of her agony.

My job is to shield her from it, not cause it.

I barely pay attention to what goes on around me. People can do pretty much anything their heart desires in our club as long as it’s consensual and they pay the large amount of money to be allowed to enter.

The more unique the place, the higher the demand, and with demand comes affluent clients who, with the right information, can be blackmailed into doing whatever the fuck you want them to.

Our club is considered one of the most luxurious establishments in the country, with guests begging to get onto our waiting list that's a mile long.

Not one person has ever slipped in here by chance; the list of guests is always reviewed carefully so we know who we are dealing with and what they can offer us should we come to collect.

Although we do pick beautiful women occasionally to have fresh blood for all those willing to pay, Samantha usually finds those.

We have strict rules everyone has to abide by, and if you ignore them...you're dead.

The Four Dark Horsemen don't give second chances.

Despite making us a profit every single year, the money we earn from it is pocket change and hardly makes a difference to our bank accounts. But the club is the perfect cover to use should the police come knocking on our doors and asking for alibis, although it's hilarious.

Our hideous nature doesn't need clubs to cover up our vices or give us the freedom to showcase them. We do whatever the fuck we want and wherever the fuck we deem appropriate.

I stroll back to the bar where Santiago and Florian stand, leaning on the counter while drinking tequila. "What the hell was that?" Florian asks, and I shake my head, snatching whiskey from the nearby tray and drinking it in one gulp as my friends share a long look.

"Problemas de mujeres, amigo?"

"I don't have women trouble," I snap at him, sending him a warning glance because I fucking hate him acting all high and mighty. He's deemed himself an expert in relationships since he got married.

He kidnapped and then blackmailed his wife to marry him while threatening to kill her father because he wanted the girl, which hardly makes him an expert on anything, although she did fall for him.

“Are you sure? It looked like it from our angle.” Florian grins, winking at me. “There’s always downstairs.”

The floor below holds our meeting room, and individual fuck pads are always available if the mood strikes us.

Well, except Santiago’s.

He renovated his and never touches his wife there. There was something about her being special and all. I think after getting married, he didn’t even enter it once, hating just the memory of anyone else but his wife.

We don’t bring women home. In fact, we don’t do anything with them in public.

Dates. Relationship. Wooing, just the thought is laughable.

Only one-night stands, and the guys are always honest about their intentions.

We are not sane or normal, so unless we’re obsessed with a woman, she presents no interest to us.

“Right on schedule too,” Santiago says, barking a laugh. “I’m surprised your woman of the year is not here.” He motions with his head in Isla’s direction. “Or is she the one?”

“One more word, Santiago. And my fist will leave an imprint on your pretty face.” Amusement flashes in his blue eyes, and he raises his splayed hands. “She’s nothing but a nuisance.” The words taste bitter on my tongue, and I reach for another glass, despising myself for tarnishing Isla like that in front of them, but what choice do I have?

Until I eliminate the danger around her, I have no privilege of being near her, let alone showing an ounce of emotion.

Florian’s brow rises. “Oh, I see. I guess that’s why you almost killed poor Steven.” Sarcasm drips from his tone, and he pours himself more tequila. “Could have fooled me.”

Zeroing my gaze in on him, I hold my best friend's stare and fire my own question at him. "Is this what we do now? Talk about our personal lives. Maybe we should discuss yours." He stills, his eyes narrowing on me, and a silent threat hangs in there, not that I give a fuck.

He started it.

We don't question each other in front of Santiago and Remi. We're always a unit, yet here he's siding with the guy instead of having my back.

Santiago chuckles, rubbing his chin with the glass. "What's there to discuss? He's a whore. Who's going to grace your bed tonight, *amigo*?"

Florian tenses, an unreadable expression settling on his face while he drums his fingers on the counter. He closes off whenever anyone mentions women to him or brings up his less-than-stellar past.

A man who once claimed to fuck his way through Chicago loathes his reputation now. "I'm not in the mood."

"Since when?"

Florian grits his teeth, his hold on the glass tightening, and if he puts any more pressure on it, it will crack in his grip. "Why do you care? Jealous?"

Santiago winces in revulsion. "*Por supuesto que no.*"

"Then mind your business, Santiago. Who I fuck is none of your concern."

Except there hasn't been any fucking done on his part since a certain forbidden someone confessed her feelings to him and kissed him.

When Santiago finds out just who occupies Florian's head, made him a monk for almost four years and forced him to play the part of an interested whore just around him while refusing any proposals thrown his way, he'd be livid.

In fact, I dread the day he discovers the truth and just how many people deceived him in order to hide Florian's secret.

Friendships and loyalties will be broken, more than one.

Santiago clicks his tongue. “Why are both of you so defensive?”

Before he can spit any more bullshit, I ask, “Where is Remi?” His latest actions brought us to the brink of war with Lachlan, and he better explain why he acted on all his decisions alone without discussing it with us. “I’m tired of his temper and him getting us into trouble.”

Florian points to the dance floor, and I follow the direction, only to see Remi dancing with Amalia Scott of all fucking people, or rather, the source of all our current problems. “Looks like he’ll be busy.”

“He needs to wrap it up quick. I promised my wife I’d be home tonight.”

“I’m not waiting for him. He better have a good explanation for us.”

“Or what?” Santiago snaps, straightening up, clearly disliking my implication of his best friend. “Don’t forget our rules, Octavius.”

“Remi is the one who needs the reminder of our rules, not me.” I’m ready to go after him, dragging him by the collar if necessary, when commotion on the dance floor catches my attention.

“Let go of me, you asshole!” Isla yells, pushing at some guy and delivering a punch straight to his face while he stumbles backward, spilling his beer on the floor. “No means no.”

Fury washes over me, and before my actions even register in my head, I march toward them, seeing red and ready to beat the shit out of the guy for daring to touch her, when she flicks her gaze to me and slides in front of me. “You don’t get to hightail your ass whenever you feel like it.” She pokes her finger at my chest, and my body jerks at the contact. The pulse beats rapidly on her neck, showing me how agitated she truly is. “I might not be pretty enough for the likes of you, but you can scan the crowd for your next woman after I’m done with

you.” She pokes her finger again. “Answer my one question, and then I’ll never come close to you again!” She screams the last part in my face, breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling as we stare at one another, and that’s when I’m done.

Without saying anything, I dip down and throw her over my shoulder, to be met with her loud yelp, and spin around on my heel, going upstairs to my private VIP lounge while Santiago and Florian salute me. Flipping them the finger, I drag Isla to a place where no one would disturb us.

I hope she’s ready for what’s about to come next.

She managed the impossible.

Snap my control.

And now she has to deal with the consequences.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“My desire is my greatest weakness.

No.

She’s my greatest weakness.”

Octavius

*F*rom Isla’s mother’s diaries...

My Isla turns fifteen tomorrow.

She’s a bright girl who loves to throw challenges and dreams about becoming a historian one day because, according to her, I made her love everything ancient.

Everyone praises her for her kind heart and helping hand to whomever needs her, she never refuses anyone and always stays late in school to tutor kids from less fortunate families.

According to her, everyone deserves a chance as long as they are willing to change and have pure intentions. She even cries whenever she sees injustice done and promises to speak more about it in the future once she has a career.

We moved to a new house one year ago, my husband got a big promotion and the money was insane. I asked to put some aside for Isla’s education but he was adamant about finally getting us our dream home.

I didn’t need my diary all these years...because my life has been smooth sailing, something calmed inside me after her biological mother died.

The sense of impoundment doom vanished, leaving only happiness and hopefulness in its wake.

Well, almost.

At the beginning, I still followed updates on Diego. According to the newspaper, he spent around three weeks in the hospital and then got taken into state custody because they couldn't find any blood relatives for him. At that moment, a crazy idea entered my mind. I wondered if we could adopt him and raise them together without anyone knowing a thing...and somehow, this way clean up our mess and make up for our horrible sin.

John couldn't stand the mere idea; anger crossed his face the minute I mentioned it, and his voice dripped with fury, which surprised and scared me at the same time. My husband never raised his voice in my presence.

"You need to stop, Suzanne. Isla will always be your daughter. I gave her to you. The boy is none of your concern." He walked off, leaving me standing and gaping after him until Isla came running to the kitchen, asking for her pancakes.

We never spoke of Diego again, and I decided to stop following his journey since he was such a sore subject for my husband.

Despite us making up...I couldn't get his words out of my head.

About him giving Isla to me as if he had any right to give her to me.

The human mind is a tricky thing because, with time, I forgot about it even though it bothered me a lot, his kindness and attentiveness wiped away the horrible conversation, filling me with happiness.

Today, though, I remembered it again as the world around me shattered.

Isla wanted to celebrate her birthday at home, throwing a huge party for her friends, so while she was in school, I went to the basement to find some supplies.

Usually I never go there since John is scared about me slipping on the stairs and he hates for me to carry anything heavy.

Him being on a business trip made me go, though, and well, at first I was surprised how sturdy the stairs actually were and how clean the basement was.

I searched for all the old boxes when something snagged my attention.

A small silver box under one of the tables, hidden behind everything else, and without thinking, I grabbed it, flipping it open, only to gasp in horror when Isla's biological mother's pictures came to my view.

Black-and-white photos of her either strolling through the field wearing a long, white flannel dress with her hair cascading down her back or her sitting at the table gazing into the distance.

Her very pregnant belly peeking out from the dress, and the box fell on the ground as I kept going through the pictures, discovering more of her in different states of undress while always being stunningly beautiful and...sad.

Deep sadness etched in her eyes as she stared into the camera, her bare feet bruised.

The only thing playing in my mind was, how did John have all these pictures of her?

My heart hammered in my chest while my stomach flipped several times as I continued to go over them, horror sliding through my veins the further I looked as the girl seemed younger and younger on the pictures.

Until I found the one where she must have been around ten years old because she was a spitting image of Isla at that age. I sank to my knees, and with my trembling hands, I flipped it over to read what was written on it.

My girl on her first day.

And that was when her face clicked, all the puzzles floating in my head over the years, forming a clear yet hideous picture

that made me gag. I grabbed the nearest bucket and vomited my breakfast into it.

Because her face...her face was all over the news more than twenty years ago. A little girl kidnapped during a family vacation, and the whole state searched for her relentlessly until someone found her clothes near the lake, and everyone assumed her body sank into the water.

They held a funeral, her family was devastated, and since they were rich, they opened a foundation in her name.

More vomit spilled into the bucket while tears streamed down my cheeks as the realization that my husband was a child predator hit me, someone who kidnapped a child and then...then raped her till she was sixteen and pregnant with his children.

All his various trips over the years, bite marks that he explained as minor accidents, and his amazing and generous mood after them...it was all done after he repeatedly hurt a child he stole.

Just thinking about someone hurting Isla like this...

I barfed some more before wiping away my mouth and scooting back, flashes of the past playing in my mind like a bad horror movie, shedding light on all the things I preferred to stay in the dark about.

How he bought the tickets for that trip fifteen years ago out of the blue, how he dragged us in the middle of nowhere to see the sunset, and how she drove there, her hands shaking and her horrible state.

Her fear of him and him commanding me to help her deliver the baby as if he knew what he was doing.

My God.

How many babies did she have to deliver before he decided he had enough of her?

She was probably too old for him at the age of sixteen, and he wanted to get rid of her but keep one of the babies as I thought about a divorce.

John couldn't have that, right? A child predator without the perfect family to take the heat off him.

I sat there for what seemed like hours and then gathered all the evidence ready to go to the nearest police station to turn him in when I stopped abruptly, thinking about Grayson.

His best friend Grayson who accompanied him on the trips, who was about to become the chief for his achievements.

Slowly I put everything back in place, cleaned up, and left the basement as if I had never been in there, and then rushed into the shower, scrubbing myself so hard, my skin started to bleed, not that I gave a shit.

I couldn't stand the thought of him touching me over the years, the sick monster who deserved nothing but punishment for his deeds.

So it brings me to now.

I'm sitting on the couch waiting for my daughter to come, the living and breathing result of her mother's agony and her father's sickness.

A living and breathing representation of what was done to Gloria.

A child he gave to me because he clearly didn't give a fuck about the boy. She was a price he paid to stay married to me and occupy me enough so I wouldn't question his whereabouts.

I have no one but myself to blame. This is how God's punishing me because instead of seeing the girl's plea for help...I added to it by taking away her baby and participating in my husband's plan.

No wonder she was terrified to see me.

I can't go to the police because Grayson might destroy all the evidence. I can't say anything to John because he controls all our finances and has the power to take Isla from me, or worse...prove me mental and lock me up in some institution.

I have no idea what to do except protect my child from these monsters.

I block away the thoughts that he's away once again. What if there is another child out there who suffers because of him and...

I can't think about it. Otherwise, I will die or freeze, leaving my Isla.

No matter the truth, she is my baby, and I love her with all my heart. Now I owe it not only to her but also Gloria to make sure Isla stays away from all these horrors.

We're attending a wedding, one of John's cousins is getting married. It will happen in a few weeks.

Enough time to come up with a reasonable plan to escape and find a solution. Even living in a cult is better at this point than staying here.

Just a few more weeks.

I can pretend for a few more weeks, right?

*I*sla

“Let me go!” I shout as Octavius takes us upstairs to another VIP room, identical to the one I'd been in before, and shuts the door behind us. The club's music mutes instantly, leaving us in silence.

He finally places me on the floor, and I back off to the window while groaning inwardly at how humiliating this whole experience is.

The entire club stared at us in shock, and his friends snickered, the dicks!

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” My jaw about hits the floor at his question. He runs his fingers through his hair, and the muscles on his arm flex, bringing attention to his powerful form, and my insides clench, making me wince.

Just great, I still want the man, and if that's not pathetic, I don't know what is.

He's so painfully handsome that it should be forbidden. The fact that he looks so hot while planning to fuck someone

else tonight makes me angry, jealous, and insane at the same time.

Taking a deep breath, I will myself to calm down and focus on what's important. I'll deal with my stupid emotions later.

Preferably at home with a big bowl of ice cream as I shoot darts at Octavius's picture.

"You're the one who dragged me here instead of listening to me like a normal human being. So *I* should be the one asking *you* what you're doing."

"After you made quite a scene downstairs, you left me no choice, kitten." He goes to the bar, snatching a whiskey bottle from it and pouring himself a drink. "I can't have you hysterical in my club." He takes a sip, his Adam's apple bobbing, and his nonchalant tone grates on my nerves. "It's bad business."

"Well, excuse me for not being more understanding," I deadpan, and his lips curve in a smile. "I have no time to waste. Since a serial killer is chasing me and all." Anger flashes in his gaze. He clearly doesn't appreciate the sarcasm in my voice, but I'm beyond caring at this point. And did he just call me kitten? "I'm tired of your hot-and-cold attitude. Just answer my simple question. Why did he send me the box with your name on it? And you won't ever have to see me again."

"I thought you got all your answers." My brow furrows at this, but thankfully, he elaborates. "The video you sent to all of us is self-explanatory of why he wrote my name." He takes another long sip. "So it's me who is tired of you sticking your nose where it doesn't belong and endangering your life."

He rolls up his sleeves, exposing more of his arms and those deep veins I wish to trace with my fingers.

Among other things.

I shake my head, awed by the audacity of this man. "What are you talking about?"

He clicks his tongue. “Now, kitten. Let’s not play a guessing game. Your blackmail tactic was amusing but stupid. Especially when you tried to blackmail one of us.” Darkness settles in his features as I gape at him in shock. “My friends are vicious creatures. It’s better not to provoke them or me.”

“I never blackmailed any of you. What kind of information could I use anyway?” A humorless chuckle slips past my lips. “You’re all untouchable. Besides, you banned me from all your buildings, so it’s not like I have access to you or your friends.”

He finishes his drink and rests his back on the bar, studying me for several beats. A shiver rushes down my spine when rage blankets his gaze and vibrates from him, warning me to stay away or else it might swallow me whole like a rapidly falling snowball destroying everything in its wake. “You really have no idea what I’m talking about.” I jerk when he bangs his fist on the bar. “Fuck.”

I blink several times and gasp when realization hits me. “Someone tried to blackmail you all with some kind of video and put my name on it?”

“Not someone. The Church Killer.” Familiar panic swipes over me, coldness sinking into my bones, and I cross my arms, desperately wishing to protect myself from this murderer’s intent on ruining my life. “Which means he’s escalating.”

For whatever reason, he seems to want me to be with Octavius, and our behavior goes against his plans, so he doesn’t even mind creating a scenario where the dark four might punish me as long as it serves his purpose.

When a predator doesn’t mind putting his own prey in danger, it means they’re losing their mind, and it’s rather depressing for me.

God only knows what he will come up with next to make me dance to his tune.

“What was on that video?”

“Once upon a time, I crossed him, and the video shows how.”

“So you know him?” My throat becomes so tight I can barely breathe. “You know who he is?”

“No. I have no idea who he is, but I’ll find out. No one fucks like that with me and mine.”

If he were talking about me, I’d feel so cherished and protected because so much promise coats his words, leaving no doubt he will achieve what he set himself up to do. However, even through this haze he always manages to create around me, common sense pushes in. “What do you mean you don’t know who he is? If you crossed him, you must know him.”

“Life is a bit more complicated, kitten.” He straightens up and puts the glass away, motioning for the door. “You need to leave. I gave you an answer, so stay away from me. I’ll handle it. Just stay fucking put.”

Ignoring the pain from yet another rejection, I shake my head. “You’re lying to me. There is something you’re not telling me.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation, kitten.” He sucks in a breath through his teeth. “We’ve wasted enough time on this. I won’t change my mind, and I don’t recommend going against my word. Don’t ever step on my properties again.” He turns around, grabbing the door handle. “Otherwise, you’ll only feed his delusions and escalate his madness.”

“Stop calling me that!” I yell at him, fed up with everyone’s elusive bullshit. My anger comes right back to me, making me say things I shouldn’t. “I’ll do whatever I want, and I don’t need your permission to seek the truth or fight against a man who probably wants to kill me.” I march toward the door as he looks over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Octavius. I won’t *waste* any more of your precious time. You can go now and fuck whoever you want. Clearly, you’re in a hurry.”

My gasp echoes in the air when he grabs me and pushes at me until my back hits the window. He splays his hands on either side of my head, caging me in while his brown eyes glisten with fire. Searing heat travels through my entire system at his nearness. “Step away,” I order, placing my palm on his

chest and swallowing when his muscles ripple at the contact. “Our conversation is over.” I need to get the hell out of this club and forget all these people exist so I can focus on my miserable life.

“It was Monday. You wore a black jogging suit that has seen better days.” I blink in confusion. “You stopped by the ice cream parlor on the way and ordered three vanilla scoops. You gave it to a kid nearby who kept on staring at the ice cream and desperately counting his coins.” I vaguely remember what he’s talking about. “Ask me how long ago that was.”

The energy around us shifts, becoming more electrified, and the idea that anyone glancing up could see us in such an intimate position sends fear and trepidation through me. I push at his chest, shaking my head and refusing to be pulled into his tempting and confusing haze once again. Because it always has the same ending.

He bursts the bubble of his creation with the sharpest needle and leaves me alone in it. “I don’t care. Step away.” He stays unmoving, and I push again, only to fist his shirt when he doesn’t budge. “Step away, Octavius!”

“Ask me.” His voice drops to a hushed whisper as I stare at his buttons, my heartbeat speeding up while goose bumps break on my skin as if signaling my doom, alerting me not to indulge in my illusions and run.

Run before he hurts me further, but the stupid and curious me, fascinated by the man, asks. “How long ago was that?”

“Look at me.” I raise my gaze to his, and the air sticks in my lungs when our eyes meet as the blazing fire in them threatens to burn me. “Eleven months and five days ago. That was when I saw you for the first time.”

Warmth washes over me, and my hold on his shirt tightens while I tilt my head back because the deep possessiveness and need coat his voice akin to metallic chains wrapping around me and dragging me toward the darkness from where there is no escape.

As my desire and lust for this man promises nothing but agony in the future.

“Why are you telling me this?”

He settles his palm on my collarbone, and everything goes still around me as he slowly skates it upward until it circles my throat, and he tips my chin up. He leans closer, our breaths mingling. “I haven’t touched, looked, or thought about another woman ever since.”

He slams his mouth on mine, trapping my surprised gasp, and his tongue delves inside.

Everything around me becomes still, the world shatters and life as I knew it ends and something new, exciting, and dangerous begins.

I should be afraid, but I don’t care.

A moan echoes in my throat when he tips my chin up, his tongue sinking deeper and roaming inside my mouth, exploring the new unconquered territory and seeking mine.

A kiss that’s a statement on its own as it brands me and stakes the claims where it shouldn’t. It has the power to destroy me because my insides burn and yearn for one man only.

Him.

He presses me harder into the window, growling into the kiss when his thumb pushes at my chin, opening me wider for his passionate strokes while his kiss becomes more bruising and yet it sends pleasure into every cell in my body.

No one ever kissed me the way he does, as if warning everyone that I’m taken and no one should dare to come close to me because only he exists for me. The possessive glides of his tongue along with his strong grip on my neck let me know he won’t ever share what he considers his, and to him I’m his.

At least for now.

My heart pangs painfully at it, the idea of him changing his mind hurting and confusing me at the same time because I shouldn’t be so attached to a stranger.

A man I barely know even if my body ignites in his presence.

Right in this moment, when he owns my mouth like it's his given right and he'd kill anyone who thinks otherwise as his dominating thrusts claim every inch of me, I can't help but love it.

Love the idea of being his.

Even for a moment in time.

It should be forbidden to be this enchanted by a man who does his best to avoid you, a fact that's hard to remember when his hard muscles dig into my curves and his frame makes me feel fragile and small next to me. This adds to the desire slowly polluting my mind.

Because I've never felt this protected or cherish in my entire life and such thoughts are insane so I grip his shirt tighter, pulling him to me, and angle my head for better access which earns me a groan from him. He continues to own my mouth in the most primal way.

If someone told me kissing could be this good, I would have tried dating harder but revulsion rushes through just from the idea.

Somehow despite how stupid such thoughts are...I know. I know that only he can inspire such emotions within me.

His free hand lands on my hips, his fingers digging hard into me, and I gasp, only to moan when he pushes his pelvis into mine, his hard-on brushing over me center while hot flashes blaze all over me, awakening every hair on my body.

The thick bulge makes my core wet, just imaging what he can do with it, and his demanding grip speaks about control he wishes to have even here, and the worst and best part about it?

I'll gladly give it to him as long as it ensures the pleasure he promises me with his endless kisses.

"I told you to stay away from me," he says gruffly when he tears his mouth away, both of us gulping for breath. His lips skim down my throat, breaking goose bumps on my flesh.

“You’re temptation and beauty wrapped in one, how the fuck could I ever resist you?” he whispers, and the fire grows in the pit of my stomach while a blush mars my cheeks because his words bring me joy and it transforms into lust, demanding one outlet.

To be taken by this man on the nearest available flat surface.

He inhales my scent when he reaches my shoulders, rocking his hips back, only to drive into me again, and I gasp when he scrapes his teeth over it before sucking on it hard, probably marking me.

I should be outraged at the possibility of him leaving hickeys on my skin, instead I just arch my neck, exposing myself to him while he has his fill. Thousands of tickling sensations wash over me combined with the clenching of my core creating a frenzy, begging me to find relief before I burst in his arms.

Finally he laves the abused and sensitive flesh with his tongue, a mix of pain and pleasure designed to drive me insane. “Don’t resist me then,” I whisper back. He stills, our heavy breathing filling the air as he leans back and our gazes clash.

His brown eyes hooded by a desire and need matching my own, we stare at one another for what seems to be forever before he finally says, steel and determination lacing his tone, “You chose this, kitten. Remember that.” I have no time to react or dwell on this statement much as he captures my mouth in another kiss, similar and yet so different than the previous one.

Because this one almost serves as a permanent brand on me, each stroke telling me something, but I fail to grasp the meaning behind it besides the fact that this man...came to a decision and he doesn’t plan to change his mind in the future.

My hands move upward, until I circle his neck and lace my fingers in his hair as we explore each other and I groan into the kiss when he thrusts forward again, his erection pushing against my clit making me see stars.

His tongue almost mimics the rhythm of his thrusts and I hike my leg over his hip, opening wider for him. He traps my gasp in his throat when it becomes unbearable, pushing toward an abyss where only pleasure exists.

He starts to unbutton my shirt until I feel his hot palms on my bare stomach, and my arms drop so we can take off my blouse while he continues to deliver stroke after stroke, wiping away everything but this man from my mind.

However, when he unhooks a bra and throws it away somewhere while he palms my breasts, squeezing them so hard, hot sensations envelop me, sending electricity down my spine, and we groan again as reality comes crashing back.

I push at his chest until our mouths separate and whisper, my voice hoarse from need and want rooted so deep within me it's hard to breathe, "Octavius. Everyone will see."

He spins me around so swiftly, my head gets dizzy, and I put my splayed palms on the glass, my fingers curling into it when the tips of my nipples touch the cold surface, more goose bumps breaking on my skin. A hot flush zaps through me as I can see everyone downstairs clearly from people dancing to countless couples engaging in sexual activities that make me blush.

Octavius's hands land on my hips, sliding to my stomach that dips under the contact, and I feel his hot breath on my ear when he moves closer and whispers in my ear. "You're mine." The air hitches in my throat at the possessive note lacing his words while his hands drift upward, leaving burning sensations in their wake until he cups my breasts again. I throw my head back, resting it on his chest as his heat and scent surround me, my core clenching and growing wetter by his touch. "I barely give myself the right to look at you." His lips skim to my pulse, he presses his mouth and bites on it and then sucks hard as his hands knead my breasts. His thumbs flick my nipples back and forth, creating maddening sensations within me and promising me eternal bliss if only I succumb to the temptation. "Do you think I'll ever share even the idea of you with anyone else?" The fire in the pit of my stomach intensifies, turning into a raging inferno as he licks

over my pulse, traveling down my shoulder while his hands continue to drive me insane, the earlier hesitation slowly disappearing.

How can I care about anyone watching if he makes me feel this good?

“You’re a siren destined to tempt the men all around you.” I gasp when his hold tightens, thousands of rocking tingles washing over me, enveloping me in something wicked and forbidden. His voice in itself has the power to pull me in a sensual haze, creating countless webs designed to keep me trapped in this madness. “But you’re my siren. Only I can touch, kiss, and look at this body born for sin.” His hands drop to my jeans and he unbuttons them before lowering my zipper, the sound exceptionally loud around us and piling up on the fire consuming me. His one palm moves upward until he reaches my throat and angles my head, tilting it so we can stare at one another’s and I bite on my lip when his other hand slips inside my jeans, covering my throbbing core. “This is mine. No one else gets to have it but me, Isla.” His fingers skim up and down my flesh, rubbing my panties, and my breath heaves as we stare at one another. “Repeat after me, kitten.” He cups me, the heel of his palm putting pressure on my pulsing clit, and my thighs flex around it, anticipating and dreading what he’ll do next. My whole body buzzes with anticipation so strong, I can taste it. “I belong to Octavius.” He tugs at my hair, licks the column of my throat, and the window in front of us fogs, whatever happening downstairs becoming a blur as carnal desire rules me. “Say it.” His voice is a temptation in itself as it urges you to listen to him and admit the words that might be catastrophic to your heart.

Because if I say it...I’ll admit he has power over me, and it’s one thing to want sex...but it’s another to announce to a man that you belong to him.

Promise him devotion when he has given you nothing but rejection all this time.

I shake my head, murmuring, “No.” Making myself vulnerable in such a way will destroy me and while I might

want him to take me hard as soon as possible, my soul still hurts from his behavior.

How foolish does a woman need to be to give a man rights over her when he offers her just a fleeting encounter that would have never happened had I not sought him out?

“Say it.” His fingers skim over my flesh again, twisting my panties to the side, and we share a breath when he touches my bare flesh while seconds trickle by and we have a battle of wills going on.

He uses one weapon against me that I can't seem to block.

My lust.

“Say it.” Urgency along with possessiveness and impatience coats his tone when he leans closer, our lips brushing against each other's, and I swallow back the moan threatening to escape when his hard-on pushes into me. “I belong to Octavius.”

“No,” I say again. “No.” I kiss him hard and he growls into my mouth as we engage in a hot and raw kiss as our tongues duel for dominance, which he wins.

Pulling on the strands of my hair, he forces me to open my mouth wider while he roams inside me and continues to put pressure on my clit, the rhythm and rotation causing electric volts snapping all over me, making it hard to breathe.

I whimper when he removes his hand and tears his mouth away, spinning me around once again, and sucks his finger clean, my insides clenching at the sight. He hisses through his teeth. “You're delicious, kitten.” He slams his mouth on mine again and we share a moan when he hikes me up, my legs wrapping around him, and his erection prods my most intimate part, swirling heat rising up around us and casting a spell on us because, what else explains this unbearable need?

He owns my mouth, his tongue strokes deeper and almost punishingly as if daring me to refuse him again and showing us both that no matter what I say it doesn't change the truth.

I do belong to him, even if I hate it.

He starts walking toward somewhere, each step pushing him harder into me and creating a certain kind of friction that can lead me to what I so crave, and that's when I feel him place me on the smooth and flat surface of a table.

Gulping for air, I lean back on my hands, exposing myself to his curious and hot mouth as his lips skim over my skin, traveling from my throat to my collarbone, light nips prickling on my skin, and my thighs flex around him, pulling him closer to me, which earns me a chuckle from him. "Patience, kitten, patience."

"We should stop," I find the strength to say, swallowing back the moan when his teeth scrape at the mound of my breast, his tongue peeking out and lazily circling around my nipple, bathing it in saliva. "We *need* to stop, Octavius." I don't sound convincing even to myself let alone to Octavius and my fingers curl into the table so hard when he draws my nipple in his mouth, sucking on it hard. His tongue flicks it back and forth, each swipe more maddening than the other and adding gasoline to the already burning fire that sends me flying down the dark abyss where only pleasure remains. "This is wrong."

My back arches when instead of listening to me, I welcome the heat rushing over my system, boiling my blood, and my skin becomes taut, despising wearing any clothes near this man.

Because clothes separate me from his magnificent male body and that's an offense in itself.

He growls against me and slowly pulls his mouth up when I squeeze my legs tighter around him and his thick bulge taps on my clit. Gracing the tip with his teeth, he licks around it and drags his mouth to the other nipple, repeating his action.

All the while subjecting me to this sweet torture laced with need and mistakes in the future because a desire so strong can't be controlled.

And what can't be controlled promises trouble but I'm too lost to listen to all the warnings.

I need him in ways I never expected to need or want a man, and is it so bad just once to indulge in my deepest cravings?

Like Cinderella who allowed herself one ball where she could shine.

“Octavius, please.” I’m not sure whether I’m asking for him to stop or continue.

He lets go of my nipple, stepping back from me, and instantly I miss his warmth, frowning in confusion only to exhale in relief when he grabs my foot, removing my boot. It doesn’t go unnoticed by him. “Ah, kitten. Where you afraid I’d really stop?” He picks up my other foot and does the same, my shoes dropping on the floor while he grips my jeans, pulling them down. I help him and shortly, only black lacy panties cover me from his view. “Fuck. Look at you, kitten.” His voice turns hoarse and an odd thrill rushes through my veins at his dumbfounded stare, his brown orbs sweeping over my form in a possessive glide that I can almost touch. “Beautiful, hot, and all fucking mine.”

We lounge toward each other simultaneously, our mouths meeting and locking in a desperate kiss, our tongues entwining and stroking one another’s. I wrap my arms around him, my nails cutting into his nape, earning me a hiss while he thrusts his hips forward, my core contracting at the contact while thousands of carnal thoughts rule my mind.

I could never imagine that a woman might want a man the way I want Octavius right now.

Holding on to him, I wish to remove all the barriers separating us and feel his flesh against mine, driving hard into me and ruining me for anyone else but him.

He’s already done that in a way and since the thoughts are too disturbing to examine, I arch my back and hips, meeting his strokes.

If he just stays this way a little bit longer...

“What do you want, kitten?” He asks, nipping on my chin while I inhale much-needed air. “Voice your wish.”

“I need...I need...” My cheeks heat just thinking about what I need and he chuckles, his hot breath fanning my shoulder. “I need...”

I close my eyes in frustration, hating being so shy all of a sudden as his lips move to my neck and he rubs his stubble over it, tickling sensations washing over me. “Ah, my little kitten. Do you need a little bit of help?” I nod, my fingers falling to his chest and gripping his shirt. “What do you want?” he repeats again, and a shiver rushes down my spine when he drops his voice to a hushed whisper. “My tongue licking this needy pussy clean?” He thrusts forward and my core clenches around him instantly, proving his point, and a sob slips past my lips. “Or maybe you need my fingers, probing deep inside you and preparing you just for a fraction of what’s to come next?” He places a kiss on my pulse, his hands grabbing my hips while he moves closer to my ear. “Or do you want me to just fuck you so hard we shake the table and no reservations remain in this pretty head of yours?”

His words should scare me or offend me, but instead they light me up like nothing else, the images painted in my head too vivid to withstand. So I lose all inhibitions and say, “Everything. I need everything.” My squeal echoes through the room when he sends me flying flat on my back, the ceiling so spotless it gives me the reflection of us in it. My body grows hotter if that’s even possible. “Octavius.”

He places both of my feet on the edge of the table and makes room for himself, his hands gliding over my thighs. “Greedy, greedy kitten.” He puts his mouth on my stomach, dragging it to my navel and breathing me in before ripping my panties away, leaving me bare to his hungry gaze, and part of me wants to close my legs and hide from his piercing stare.

However the other one watching the man look at me with so much heat and desire thrives under his appreciating gaze and I arch my back, begging, “Octavius, please. I ache.”

“Do you now, kitten?” His fingers skim over my folds, making me jerk as he traces my opening and leans closer, rubbing his stubble on the inside of my thigh and leaving small stinging sensations. He repeats the action with my other thigh

all the while I grow wetter and more breathless. “Luckily for you, kitten, my tongue and dick are exclusively yours. So you can get whatever the fuck you want and need from me.” I gasp when he presses his thumb on my clit, hotness washing over me. “Only from me.” His palms slide under my ass, gripping it and lifting it to his mouth. “Only ever me.” My fingers curl around the edge of the table while we stare at one another and he says, “You have my permission to scream.” I have no time to muster up a comeback at this rather condescending order because my cry tears from my throat when he opens his mouth wide and stabs his tongue deep into me, all thoughts flying from my mind.

The hot flushes along with electric volts nip my skin, creating a blissful cocoon where pleasure travels through me wave after wave as he roams between my folds, my core clenching around him as he groans into me.

My hands drift to his hair, lacing my fingers in it, and I grip it hard while he enters me in even strokes, so I lift my hips to match his rhythm, gasping at the friction and lust enveloping me as countless moans slip past my lips. “Octavius.” I pull at his hair, placing my foot on his shoulder and opening myself wider for him while he puts me back on the table, his foreman keeping me in place and not allowing me to speed up the process.

Every breath feels like a chore because I teeter on the edge of the cliff and wish to jump off it to reach the high he promises, but some invisible chains stop me.

I clamp my thighs around him and he forcefully pushes them apart on the table as he slowly drags his tongue out and traces it upward, licking me from bottom to top until he reaches my clit and traps it between his teeth, making me hiss. “Octavius, please.”

“Octavius, please what?” he asks, sucking on my clit while slipping two fingers inside me, stretching me for what’s to come next, and the double pressure almost makes me burst.

Almost because the high still seems unattainable as this man likes to subject me to his torture and deny me the pleasure

that's mine to take. "Octavius, please what?" he repeats, his lips drifting back as he licks me clean before pinching my lower lips and biting on them, my hips flying up only for him to press his arm on my stomach as I twist my head side to side on the table. "You're brave, kitten. Say it." He slips one more finger in, drumming them inside me while I grip his hair so hard, it probably brings him pain. All I can do is arch my back and welcome all these sensations creating their own frenzy.

"I want to come." We both still at my words, I'm shocked I found the strength to say them and my moan echoes when he removes his fingers and replaces them with his tongue yet again, owning me while his thumb flicks over my clit, bringing me closer and closer as he pushes deeper and deeper. "Make me come." I start to move again, just a little bit longer and the bliss calling my name on the horizon will be...

I cry in frustration when he lifts up, his lips glistening with me, and he sends me a wicked grin. "I will, kitten. But the first time you come will be with my dick slamming into you hard." He wipes his face on my stomach and straightens up, stepping away. My whole body buzzes with need and I whimper when he lowers down his zipper, his cock springing free.

It's thick and long, my insides clenching at the sight while I bite on my lip, resisting the urge to lick the precum dripping from the tip.

He takes out a condom from the back pocket of his pants and the need consuming me dims as anger overshadows it. I frown when he puts his palm on me and skates it upward until he reaches my throat and wraps his hand around, dragging me upward. He steps between my legs again. "I knew you'd be here. That's the only reason I have it on me tonight." His explanation soothes my jealousy, although I don't miss the amusement lighting up his face. "I want only you." He gives his hard length one long stroke before ripping open the condom with his teeth and rolling it on. "Come here, kitten," he says and grabs my hips, sliding me closer to him as the tip circles around my opening, the air hitching in my throat while anticipation and desire consume me. I expect him to end our misery and give us both what we so crave, but he stills my

hips instead and catches my gaze, steel and possessiveness coating his voice. “Who do you belong to Isla?”

No.

He’s going to ask me this now?

His fingers dig into my ass cheeks and my legs wrap around him, pulling him closer while my fingers thread in his hair, our mouths inches apart and my raspy breathing filling the air once again. “Octavius, please.”

His face darkens and he rubs his lips over mine, repeating his question once again. “Who do you belong to, Isla?”

I close my eyes, my entire being rebelling against the idea of denying him his request but conforming to it would mean my complete ruin and vulnerability.

I should be careful, I should be aloof, I should be...

So many things I’ve been all my life.

His rigid muscles mold my curves to him, and his scent alone envelops me in such a protective cocoon, all I want to do is stay near him because then the reality isn’t so scary.

So devastating.

So lonely.

Would it be so bad to belong to him?

Maybe...

For the first time, I can trust someone.

I can be reckless and hope...hope for something beautiful to happen.

He glides his length up and down my core, slipping it a bit inside, only to pull back, and the sensations tickling my skin along with the pressure in my chest become too much. I open my eyes and meet his stare head-on, finally giving him an answer. “You.” He stills, and I say, “I belong to you.” I gently place my hand on his scar, running my fingers over it before palming his head. “Only to you.”

He thrusts into me hard, trapping my cry in his throat when he slams his mouth on mine while he connects our bodies, his length stretching me so wide I don't know where he ends and I begin.

We share a long breath before I tilt my head. He deepens the kiss and rocks back, only to move forward again, his powerful drives shifting me on the table. The simultaneous pleasure crushing into me in waves, pulling me toward the unknown.

The unknown that ignites my blood, the fire spreading me turning everything into ashes while he continues to push into me, his strokes becoming deeper and harder as if he wishes to imprint his body on mine and remind me.

Remind me once again that no matter what happens afterward, I'll never forget him or be able to pretend nothing has changed in my life.

His grip tightens on me, my core clenching around him while thousands of sensations rush through me. I tear my mouth away, gasping for breath while his wandering lips skim to my throat and neck where he sucks hard, causing more goose bumps to pop on my skin, the tension intensifying.

My toes curl as I tighten my legs around him, my heels digging into his back, and it earns me a groan from him. I come closer to the edge with each drive of his hips into me, my nails scraping his skin, and he bites into the crook of my neck. "Octavius," I say, my voice so needy and lost while the pressure grows by the second, demanding to find the reprieve I so seek.

"Come for me, kitten."

His harshly-spoken command is all I need to erupt in his arms as heat cascades down on me, enveloping me in pleasure and dumping me in the blazing fire that has no mercy for me.

As I have found my new addiction.

He hisses when my core clenches around him, his thrusts turning faster and rougher while his hands travel up my back to my hair. He fists it hard and tugs on it until I arch my back

and meet his eyes. “Watch your man, kitten.” He delivers a few more hard strokes before hiding his face in my neck, groaning into it while he finds his release and spills inside the condom.

A man who found pleasure because of me.

A tremor rushes through me, my core spasming some more around him while his tight grip on me remains.

Maybe taking risks is worth it sometimes.

Octavius

Heaven.

I’m in fucking heaven because Isla is wrapped around me, her arms hugging me close while her raspy breath fills my ears, and our sweat-covered bodies are almost merged with how tightly we hold one another.

Her fingers thread in my hair, and she sighs while her sweet and flowery scent fills me, urging me to take her far away from here and place her on my satin sheets to indulge in her body for hours. I want to listen to her moans and whimpers as I drive into her hard, staking my claim with each thrust.

Hours?

No.

Even forever doesn’t seem to be enough when it comes to my woman. The possessive beast within me exists for her, craving to fucking destroy anyone who so much as breathes in her direction because everything of hers is mine.

That includes the air she breathes.

I thought I was insane before, but I was wrong. I knew no true insanity until my eyes landed on her.

“Octavius,” she whispers, rubbing her chin on my shoulder and pressing her lips to my neck, making me squeeze her tighter and earning another moan.

However, reality sinks into me and reminds me about the monster still roaming the streets. The one who wishes for my woman's blood, conspires against her, and threatens her every chance he gets.

A monster who sees her as my weakness and will use her against me.

As I hold her in my arms, though, all this loses its meaning because I can protect her better than anyone. I'll lock her inside my castle and build a fortress around her so no one even thinks of hurting her.

Whatever I want, I get.

Reining in my instincts brought us only misery.

The minute the thoughts enter my mind, I catch my reflection in the window.

The hideous, scarred reflection reminds me of my oath and past as various agonizing voices scream in my head.

I forgot.

Willing all my control, I slowly put her back on the floor. She lets me go, leaning back and smiling at me, but she freezes when she notices my expression. "What's wrong?" She must feel exposed under my silence because when I step back, she quickly grabs her clothes and starts to put them on. I hate the vulnerability and uncertainty polluting the air when she sends questioning glances my way. "You're kind of freaking me out." Her laughter sounds strained, and she starts moving toward me, but I step farther back, and she stills, panic filling her gaze. "Octavius?"

"We finally got it out of our systems."

Her mouth opens and closes before she whispers, "What?"

"We had sex. Now both of us can go our separate ways. We both got what we wanted."

"I don't understand."

Looking straight into her eyes, I utter the words that taste like poison, and I hate them with a passion as they dim her

light and pain flashes in her eyes. “You were a great lay, kitten. Now get the hell out.” I tap at my wristwatch as I adjust my clothes. “Like I said. I’ve wasted enough time on this.”

Without saying anything, she spins around and darts to the door, leaving and shutting it so carefully, I barely resist the need to run after her and apologize for these horrible words.

I’ve committed countless crimes over the years, yet I never hurt an innocent or felt guilty.

Until tonight.

And the worst part?

Of all people, I hurt my woman.

That should be a sign.

No one can be happy with a beast.

Inevitably, if they look hard enough, they will see what hides underneath our harsh exteriors.

And no one deserves to see my horrible past.

Especially not her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You need to explore a certain kind of vice in order to be accepted by darkness.

Funny, isn't it?

Even darkness has the power to reject you.”

Isla

***F**rom Isla's mother's diaries...*

The past few weeks have been hell.

John arrived two days before Isla's birthday, bringing a lot of gifts and smelling like the finest of colognes. He tried to kiss me relentlessly.

It took all my strength to keep my smile intact. My mouth still hurts from the efforts, and I explained to him that I had some period pains, and my doctor advised me to chill on the sex for a while.

Thankfully, he didn't insist. I guess it would have gone against his perfect fucking husband image, right?

Life continued as if nothing happened.

I researched online for the best lawyers but everything required finances, though.

John is a finance guy, so he always watched over our accounts, and I didn't mind his control.

What a fool I've been. I can't even help myself right now because all our accounts are joined, and he'll see if I take any large sums of money.

I finally have a perfect plan, though.

During the wedding, one of my college friends will be there. She married John's distant cousin a few years back, and we somehow lost touch once she became a district attorney. According to John, she seemed too standoffish, and of course, I listened.

All the people in my life are his friends and not mine. In true fashion, he isolated me from everyone.

It wasn't so hard to do with me being an orphan and all. My God, even I was a victim to him, a prey he caught in order to freely hunt for the innocent.

My old friend would help me. She has a pure heart. I just have to prepare for it.

And pray.

Pray that God has forgiveness for someone like me.

*S*la

I rush downstairs, pushing through the crowd as my heart beats wildly and pain washes over me.

You were a great lay, kitten. Now get the hell out.

I scrunch my eyes, biting on my bruised lip and buttoning up my shirt with my trembling fingers.

I've just had the most amazing experience of my life, my whole body buzzing with satisfaction, only for it to become my greatest shame once Octavius spoke and tarnished it to pieces.

The man who occupied my fantasies and nightmares alike sees me as a convenient lay and probably not that great either since he kicked me out right away.

I shake my head of the memories and push all my emotions aside, hooking a strand of my hair behind my ear while looking around for Penelope, needing to find her and leave to drown my sorrows in some criminal TV show.

All my plans went to hell the minute Octavius brought me to that room and a hollow chuckle escapes me. How foolish I've been, thinking I can get what I want from him.

The man managed to put me in an even weaker position than I originally was, and the worst part? He knows my body craves him and showed me how easily he controls me.

Anger joins my disappointment. I clench my fists, heading to the bartender and catching his gaze. "Have you seen a dark-haired girl? Blue eyes and she wore a black oversized dress with heels?" He grabs a whiskey bottle and pours the drink into one of the glasses before dropping several ice cubes in it. "She's very pretty and was with me earlier."

He shrugs. "Nope."

"Come on, please." He puts the drink away and picks up the shaker, pouring tequila into it along with something else and starts to shake it. "I need to find her."

"And that's my problem, how?"

His bored tone sparks salt on my already wounded ego and skyrockets my fury to epic proportions, so gripping the counter tight, I lean closer. "Octavius just told me to get the hell out. But I won't do it without my friend." He pales a little, stilling while pouring a new drink into a tall glass and swallowing hard. "So when you refuse to help me, you kind of make me go against his orders. You see what I mean?" He slowly nods. "Great. Let's try it again then. Where is my friend?"

"She went to Remi's VIP room with him."

She did what?

Not that I can judge her much, all things considered. Remi is a certified psycho, and well...she won't be too pleased once she gets to know how he's connected with her twin and other

details about the past. The last man on Earth who she should be interested in is Remi!

I should have never brought her here. “Thanks!” I spin around, ready to bolt after her upstairs, only to freeze when I see Florian standing in front of me.

He scans me from head to toe, lingering on my neck, and I quickly cover it up with my hand. My skin is still tender there. “Where is Remi’s VIP room?”

Amusement crosses his face while his green eyes stay absolutely dead, and despite the charming smile melting women all around him, so much power and fury coated in danger radiates from him. I step away a little, my back digging into the counter.

Handsome and deadly indeed, although what women see in him truly baffles me. How can they ogle him when Octavius is right there?

I raise my chin, refusing to think about the asshole who broke my spirit earlier and practically compared me to a whore he used to get off. “Well? Do you know?”

“It’s useless.”

“What’s useless?”

“Going to Remi’s room. Your friend just bolted outside a few seconds ago. I guess her date went as smoothly as yours.” He chuckles, sending chills down my spine for how hollow it is. “Expectations have the tendency to crush over the hard reality that’s life, wouldn’t you say, Isla?” Something coats his voice, but it’s hard for me to understand what, and I’m about to ask him how he knows my name, when Octavius’s words from earlier ring in my ears.

My friends are vicious creatures. It’s better not to provoke them or me.

What the hell was on that video that has them all so angry with me? Do they participate in some illegal activities, and the Church Killer caught it on camera? Whatever it is complicates everything around me because it shows the serial killer plays a game with me and won’t stop until he gets what he wants.

God knows what else he has done in my name all this time, so I should be careful. Although with each passing second, I feel more defeated as his power seems too strong to fight on my own.

Even survivors can run out of their strength.

“I’ve no time for philosophical debates, Florian.” I try to step to the side to walk around him, but he blocks my movements. “I need to go,” I state the obvious, expecting him to drop this domineering act. I got the message loud and clear.

I’m not wanted here.

A gasp slips past my lips when he grabs my elbow hard, his fingers digging into my skin, and he brings me closer to him, lowering his voice by a few octaves so only I can hear him while warning laces every word he utters. “Whatever you do with Octavius in your spare time doesn’t concern me. Have all the fun you both want.”

“Let go of me,” I grit through my teeth, pulling at my elbow, but his hard grip allows no movement.

“However, if you ever try to blackmail any of us again, I’ll end you.” I still at this, blinking because, for the first time, something else pierces through the tension around us.

Fear.

A sense of doom hovers over me while my instincts yell at me to run far away from him. This man is a predator who would destroy anything in his wake, and right now, I’m vulnerable.

But also...it’s his eyes and calm posture. He issues threats as if he speaks about the weather, which means one thing.

Whatever he says goes. Having Florian Price as my enemy with one psycho already chasing after me is not only dangerous.

It’s terrifying.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I already explained it to Octavius. Whoever sent the video wasn’t me.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Your existence alone endangers my best friend, and what endangers him endangers all of us.” I wince when his grip becomes tighter, pain shooting up my arm, and my free hand clenches, ready to punch him. “Think very carefully about your loyalties, Isla.” He pushes me away, and I stumble a little, catching my balance easily as I lean on the barstool, watching him in shock and confusion because, what the hell is that supposed to mean?

What loyalties? He speaks as if I’m part of their world and should not betray them when I’m just an outsider they all treat like shit!

Even Callum’s friends, who do questionable things if the news reports are anything to go by, were more welcoming than these four!

He fishes inside his jacket and takes out a golden envelope, and I blink when he extends it to me. “Here. Consider it a gift.” I grab it before the action even registers in my mind. “But if you tarnish it, it will be your death warrant.”

What does that even mean? Why is he acting like some kind of psycho capable of killing people?

Rubbing my elbow, I open my mouth to say something but think better of it and instead rush outside, hoping to catch Penelope before she leaves and so I can apologize.

And give her Amalia’s file.

Frigid air grits me when I step out of the club. The wind whooshes over me, and I gulp some oxygen into my lungs. I welcome the coldness sinking into my bones, temporarily replacing the panic swirling inside me.

Looking around, I don’t find Penelope, and I wave my hand, catching a cab ready to go to her hotel, when my phone vibrates inside my pocket, and I fish it out.

I’m at the hotel. Will see you tomorrow.

Two emotions swipe over me at reading Penelope’s message: surprise that she got to her hotel so quickly and relief that she’s all right and Remi didn’t damage her.

Sure. I'll bring you the file first thing in the morning.

A cab honks, and I glance up to see the driver rolling down his window and motioning for me to get in. Hopping inside, I say, "Hi," and rattle off my address while he blasts music loudly.

I lean my head on the window, watching the scenery around me and hoping for the oblivion to take me tonight so I won't think.

Rejection and threats, danger and fear...I'm used to it all and will not lose sleep over it, even if I find Florian's behavior weird.

You were a great lay, kitten. Now get the hell out.

A single tear slides down my cheek, and quickly wiping it away, I roll down my own window and order myself to forget.

Forget about a man who ended up being just like everyone else.

Casting me away when I became inconvenient, but then again...I can't blame him.

When you chase after a man, I guess you're nothing but an easy lay.

* * *

Steam trails after me as I get out of the shower and snatch the towel, wrapping it around me and wiping away the mirror to watch my reflection.

I sigh at the various marks marring my skin, a sign of obsession and possession, except the man who imprinted them on my flesh did so in the heat of the moment, and it has nothing to do with the above state emotions.

"You're an idiot, Isla. What's so great having a man obsess over you anyway?" I huff, although even I can hear the lie in

my voice as obsession doesn't seem so bad if it implies something like what Giselle has with Callum.

I've officially lost my mind.

Drying myself off, I put on my pajamas and head to the kitchen, ready to munch on some pasta, and my growling stomach agrees with the idea when a soft knock echoes through the space.

Despite the disaster that's my life, I open the door, grinning at the boy waiting for me, pressing his blanket to his chest. "Hey, kiddo," I greet him, and at my nod, he enters. "Are you hungry?" I shut the door as his mother moans loudly, shaking my head.

How you can be willing to sleep with a man who beats you and kicks out your kid is beyond me. I know he isn't forcing her because she's an active participant and even gushed about his dick to our prostitute neighbor.

The same prostitute who asked me if I minded protecting her from handsy clients for a ten percent cut. Needless to say, living here is an experience.

The kid nods and runs to the bathroom, washing his hands. He rushes back to the kitchen while I open the fridge and take out the pot, ready to heat it. "Have you eaten something today?" He nods again, although I doubt it since he practically vibrates with anticipation when I put food on the plates and place it on the table, diving right in.

I wonder what will happen to him once all this is done.

The kid makes me feel less lonely in this awful town that's so beautiful yet unwelcoming to me.

We eat in silence for several beats as he periodically grins at me and pats his stomach, telling me that he enjoys it. I think I should invest in some sign language program. Maybe we can find something for him to learn so he can communicate with the world better. And arrange a doctor's appointment to determine whether it's a physiological or psychological problem.

Can't afford it for shit, though.

I sigh inwardly. I probably will have to call Callum. At this rate, the dude will block me for good soon.

Finishing up, I load everything in the dishwasher as the kid jumps on the couch, already turning on the cartoons and grinning while covering himself with his blanket, and that's when the envelope snags my attention again.

My pathetic self felt so sorry for myself I didn't even open it on the way home and then wanted nothing else but to hop in the shower to clean myself up from the hurtful words akin to razor slices through my skin.

"What is it? Another threat?" Or maybe he wants to buy me off? If there is a check, I'm so cashing it in to pay for the doctor's visit and will donate the rest. Screw being noble with these entitled assholes. "Oh." I rip it open, and a card falls into my palm when I realize it's an invitation.

To Atlas Price's eighty-fifth birthday tomorrow.

Even if I haven't done excessive research on the dark four, I would still know his name, considering Atlas is legendary in the business and design world alike, always striving for success and luxury.

While his character leaves a lot to be desired, he's wildly respected for tripling his family fortune and building the Price dynasty into what it is today.

One thing no one could ever question him on despite all the shit he pulled over the years is his devotion and love for his family. He protects them fiercely, and if you hurt one of his own, his wrath is absolute.

Price men might be easygoing and charming, but you better never fuck with any of them because the rest will eat you alive.

They've planned the celebration for the past year. The elite practically stayed on the edge of their seats waiting for an invitation because only the best deserve it. The patriarch's birthday is a privilege not everyone is worthy of, and no one wants to be in the unworthy category when it comes to the richest of the rich.

The Prices don't just want the best; they demand it. And if they send you an invitation, you have to go.

Otherwise, they ban you from everywhere. That's how much power this dynasty has.

Despite having given the business reins to his son long ago, Atlas still designs their jewelry pieces along with his grandson, and they sell obscene amounts. Callum gifted one to Giselle, and even my broke ass found it mesmerizing and worth the money, the diamonds glistening so brightly one could go blind.

Florian invited me to his grandfather's birthday? Why? People literally had to beg Atlas on his knees to get an invite, and he just randomly gave me one?

"You can go to hell, Florian." I open the trash can and drop the invitation there that's a mockery in itself. What would I even wear?

The minute I step foot inside, everyone will judge me and say shit to me, and maybe that's what the dark four crave.

To show me that I don't belong and never will.

Well, they shouldn't worry! I'm not chasing their friend anymore. I have pride and can avenge my parents without his help.

My phone vibrates, and I grab it, frowning.

Follow the rules, pretty little thing. No one can touch you. Remember that.

It falls on the counter with a loud clutter while I step away, breathing heavily at the implication of this message and what it means.

Pretty little thing.

Only that monster called me this, and he spies on my life so much he even knows what I'd done tonight.

Thousands of thoughts play in my mind when my phone buzzes again, the sound breaking disgusting goose bumps all over me.

Everything in me screams not to open the new message, yet I know it's inevitable. Unwillingly, I became the participant in his twisted game, and now I have to follow the rules to catch him.

I press on it.

You'll find another clue at the Price mansion.

I cover the sob ready to emerge from my throat, and close my eyes because I have no choice.

I'll do what he says.

Attend the birthday and pray Octavius doesn't see me.

Because his rejection among those he belongs would hurt more than the anguish spreading in my soul right now.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*“Be careful what you wish for.
Because fate may grant it to you.*

And then...

Then you’ll be paying for it for the rest of your life.”

Isla

*F*rom Isla’s mother’s diaries...

Today is the wedding, and the place couldn’t be more magical or beautiful...along with the bride and groom who gaze at each other with so much love.

They make me think about John and me all those years ago, how I fell in love with him and thought I had found my prince.

When in truth...

After we arrived yesterday, I found Meghan, told her everything, and provided her with all the evidence.

She was horrified. Shocked. Disgusted.

And understanding.

She assured me they would put him behind bars and find any other victims after the wedding.

Something inside me calmed after that.

Meghan warned me all this would be public knowledge. Everyone will be investigated, and I have to be ready for the social scrutiny and endless questions.

*How could you not know? How could you live with him?
Why did you stay?*

How could you have taken someone else's baby?

*She has a few lawyer names ready for me so they can
hopefully keep me away from jail since we did kidnap a child.*

*She promised me that for my cooperation and everything
else, nothing will happen to me, but I don't care about any of
this.*

*I only care about my daughter, who will discover what her
parents had done.*

And I beg.

*I beg for everything that's holy that she will find it in her
heart to forgive me.*

*Hopefully, she will remember that I always loved her no
matter what, and even what I plan to do today is because I
love her.*

Please, Isla. Forgive me.

*Even if I'm one of the reasons your biological mom
suffered in her nightmare and found no other solution but to
end her life in order to escape the monster hunting her for
years.*

One thing I know for sure.

*My daughter will survive everything, no matter what
happens.*

*Not because I raised her. I'm a coward who hid behind her
husband, allowed him to use me as a puppet and play on my
insecurities.*

*She will survive as her mother's blood runs through her
veins.*

*She's Gloria's daughter, and if she was able to escape her
nightmare even for a moment in time and tried to save her son
from John...she possessed strength I can only dream of.*

For the sake of both her mothers...I pray for my child to live a long and happy life with a man who adores her.

And protects her. Protects her from men like her father and never turns his back on her.

Find your Hector, Andromache.

And forgive this fate of yours for being so cruel to you.

*J*sla

“Hello?”

“I’m about to do something stupid.”

“How stupid?”

“Remember how in college I had a brilliant idea to sneak into the pools and throw a party?”

Giselle snorts. “Yeah. We got arrested, but your godfather saved our asses.”

“Well, this one is even stupider.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m a bit late to the party of the year. Got invited by one of the dark four, and I’m underdressed.”

“What!” she exclaims and that one word alone lets me know she’s going to rip me a new one for keeping this from her and not asking her for help when it comes to a dress.

The only suitable one I found in my closet was a black one made of the cheapest fabric that I bought on a whim when I needed a dress to wear to a funeral. It’s two sizes too big, has a weird design, and some of fabric got discolored after one wash.

And while on most days I don’t care, the closer I get to the mansion, the bigger the panic becomes, bringing up shame and humiliation as I imagine everyone’s reaction at the sight of me.

They’d think Prices invite people for charity!

“Why are you going there? Actually, no. Why the hell did Florian invite you?”

Before I can answer, the cab driver pulls by the golden iron gates where security guards wearing black nod at us, and one of them comes closer. The cabbie rolls down his window and swallows hard. “We need to get inside,” he says nervously while the guard assesses him and shifts his focus on me, lingering on my bare ears and neck.

The guard extends his hand to me. “Invitation.” Picking it up from the seat next to me, I give it to him, and he flips it open, reading it, and then gives it back to me. Not a muscle twitches on his face, and his tone stays indifferent and cold when he shouts to someone, “Let them in.” He nods at us again and steps back while the driver closes the window and exhales in relief.

“I have no clue. Maybe he felt generous.”

“The Four Dark Horsemen are not generous. They don’t do anything unless it benefits them.”

The gate slides open, the annoying sound reverberating through the space, and the driver starts the car again, driving onto the narrow asphalt road while my heartbeat speeds up, and I wipe my wet palm on my knees, the chaos erupting inside me.

The reason I called Giselle is that someone has to calm me down before I enter or otherwise I’ll make a fool of myself again.

This might be my full-time job in Chicago, but I’m also terrified and determined because of the Church Killer who promised to provide me with a new clue.

“Well, I couldn’t pass it up.”

“Isla, do you have some kind of a new kink you forgot to share with me?” I roll my eyes when she continues. “You get off on public humiliation or something?”

“Is this judgment I’m hearing?”

“Concern. Nothing wrong in wanting what you want, but maybe try getting it away from Octavius.”

A heavy weight settles on my chest at the reminder of the complicated and handsome man.

It’s been twenty-four hours since our encounter, and in these hours, I got nothing.

No message. Phone call. Or a visit.

Rationally, I understand it was a one-night stand and all, but the irrational part of me is so deeply hurt without even having a right to be so, and doesn’t this just show once again how forgettable I am?

Remi freaking married Penelope last night. Whatever happened between them must have been life-changing. I tried calling her, but it went to voicemail, so she’s either in marital bliss or simply hates my guts.

“I don’t have any kinks. And I don’t plan to interact with Octavius.” My ego won’t survive another public rejection. “In and out.”

“But why?”

Despite needing this phone call to calm me down, it does anything but because I can’t disclose any details. If the Church Killer is watching over me, I want Giselle to be far away from all this mess and not get on his radar. “I can’t have all of the dark four hating me. Being nice to Florian might prove a great connection.”

“Even toddlers come up with better lies than you.”

“Not sure if I should be flattered or offended.”

“The word we are using here is concerned.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Don’t you dare, Isla!”

“I love you, Giselle! I already feel better, so you’re the best!”

As the car drives farther, I gasp in shock, plastering closer to the window and studying the gorgeous Price mansion. I've never seen anything more magnificent, and all the pictures on the internet and in magazines give it little justice, toning down the stunning sight that should be illegal for how surreal it is.

Emerald-green grass covers the enormous property, so smooth and neatly cut that it brings attention to the massive marble statues depicting Greek goddesses from Aphrodite to Athena spread throughout the land, each more beautiful than the other. The art pieces are extremely detailed. The goddesses' dresses give the impression of movement, while their stubborn expressions are perfectly carved, showing their fury.

A fountain stands in the middle of them all, a man holding an arrow as he points it at someone in the distance, and the water falls from his mouth, giving it a rather dangerous and irking vibe, making me want to stop looking at it or he might actually come alive and send his deadly weapon my way.

His clothes are scarce, being a character from a myth, and I rack my brain over some information I've read online on the mansion.

Paris.

The Trojan prince killed Achilles, the bravest Greek warrior, by piercing an arrow through his heel. The warrior's one weakness by which his mother held him when she was dipping him in the river to give protection from any wounds. It was quite a tragic death for such a brave man. Then again, he preferred to die in glory, and I guess he achieved his life goal.

Apparently, it was enough for Atlas Price to admire Paris, although why is beyond me.

The dude cost war with his selfish actions, he stole a whole-ass wife from someone, and then his entire family paid for his mistake!

The driver whistles in awe as he drives farther inside, where a mesmerizing garden consisting of various bushes and heavy trees greets us, the flowers blooming and giving the

whole place a colorful and magical vibe contrasting with the earlier statues.

Countless lamps brighten the space, showcasing its beauty under the most flattering light.

There are even alcoves with white roses climbing the walls, almost inviting you to indulge in sin and the most basic cravings inside them.

In fact, everything here reeks of carnal needs and vices permanently attached to us humans.

The moonlight casting shadows along with thousands of stars in the sky only adds to the sinister atmosphere, bringing attention to the massive building in the distance with many expensive cars pulling up for people to emerge from, greeted by the staff.

The three-level mansion spreads horizontally, made of brick and the finest wood, judging by how the double doors open widely to welcome all the guests.

The number of windows alludes to a large number of rooms, and two more statues stand by the front door, lions roaring at one another in fighting stances, and several women even jump a little while passing them.

All in all, only two words describe the energy buzzing in the place, making me curious to get a peek inside the mansion yet dreading it simultaneously.

Power and status.

Whoever enters it does so with a knowledge that the Price dynasty has the power to destroy them and strip them of all their riches, and just the idea of meeting them all sends pain through my system along with fear as their scrutiny can be deadly.

“Gotta say, miss, your dress isn’t going to cut it here.” The cabbie exhales heavily. “These people practically glisten under the light from all the diamonds they are wearing.”

I’m getting dissed even by the cab driver. This evening promises to be splendid, indeed.

Fishing inside my pocket, I take out fifty dollars and place it on the front seat just in time for someone to open the cab's door, and a man wearing a red-and-black uniform bows a little, greeting me. "Welcome, Miss Evans." Their staff sure knows how to be efficient and share information with each other. It's been, what? Barely five minutes with endless numbers of vehicles parking near the mansion, and they memorize all the names! "Please," he says, extending his hand to me, and the cab driver salutes me, so I grip it, getting out. Coldness envelops me when the frigid wind slaps me on my face and billows my hair backward while several flashes go off in my direction.

"Who are you?" the photographer asks and frowns, sweeping his gaze over me.

"No one important," I tell him, and he huffs, clicking on his camera, probably deleting the useless photos.

"Miss." The staff member addresses me again while people seem to shout all around me, running toward whoever arrives next, and coldness sinks into my bones that has nothing to do with the weather.

I've never been more out of place in my life!

"Miss," he repeats again, and finally tearing my gaze away from them, I focus on him again. He motions to the doors. "Please, come inside. Mr. Price awaits your arrival."

Oh, hell. I knew it was a trap.

"Thank you." I go toward the marble stairs, not missing how two women do a double take at me and then smile, winking as they pass me by and rush upstairs.

Well, if everyone acts like them, it should be smooth sailing as long as I understand what Florian wants from me and where to search for a clue from the Church Killer.

The minute I step inside the building, the scent of flowers and expensive cologne mixed with tobacco assaults my senses as I soak up the gorgeousness around me that could rival the one we just encountered outside.

A gold-and-platinum color scheme dominates the huge place with marble floors glistening under the light—so spotless it might even show us our reflection.

My jaw almost drops at the sight of paintings hanging on the wall in this hallway, depicting gory images of four riders arriving into this world to cause chaos to humankind. The oil paintings almost serve as a warning to enter at your own risk and accept any consequences. My mom loved art, so I know it cost him several millions to acquire this painting that must be from the Renaissance era, judging by the style.

Massive staircases with brown railings invite you upstairs, yet the complete darkness there shows you that nothing good awaits you should you accept the invitation. Despite the mansion being featured in magazines due to its design, the Price family never, ever allows anyone outside the family to go upstairs. Rumor has it that even their friends cannot go there, raising all my cop instincts.

What do they hide to have such a rule that they don't even bother to hide it from people? Besides, they always host parties, so it seems strange that they have such a temptation for everyone, considering what's hidden always inspires thrill and curiosity in people. That's human nature, we're attracted to the forbidden like moths to flames.

All in all, the whole house has a weird vibe going on, drawing in luxury and prestige while reeking of sadness and doom that I find so strange. The Price family isn't perfect, but they are a loving bunch and were never involved in any scandals, aside from their whoring ways.

Walking through the hallway, I study it some more as people pass me. I think where I should go to find Florian, when classical music combined with melodic and cold laughter grating on my nerves and bringing back the earlier fear along with shame echoes through the space coming from the arched doorway.

Various servers carrying trays of food and drink move smoothly through the hallway toward the room, plastering

polite smiles on their faces while wearing black uniforms consisting of pants and a shirt.

One of them stops by me. “Would you like something to drink?” The champagne could really calm my nerves, so I grab one of the glasses, muttering a “Thank you” while she darts inside, ready to deliver all these drinks to the other guests.

I stop by the doorjamb, freezing on the spot as my eyes drink in my surroundings, and with each second, the pit in my stomach grows while my nails cut so deep into my clenched palms, they bruise my skin.

Women and men wearing expensive clothes from the latest designer collections occupy the spacious ballroom, engaged in heated conversations with each other while either drinking or eating finger foods, erupting in laughter every other second.

Their jewelry, probably designed by the Price family to show them their tribute, glistens under the crystal chandelier above us, brightening up the whole space and bringing attention to its magnificence.

Florian’s great-great-grandfather created it, so it’s absolutely priceless, and no wonder several people gape at it in awe as the crystals cast colorful squares on the floor, and the moonlight streaming through the wide-open terrace door leading to the garden only intensifies its beauty.

Right in the center, a band plays classical music, their movements and notes so precise one could listen to them for hours, which gives this whole gathering a rather deceptively peaceful atmosphere.

Although, believing in it would be so foolish, as silent games are played here in which one establishes their power and connections by flaunting their wealth. They do it with so much class you’d never guess it if you didn’t look close enough.

Servers roam around the room, offering everyone drinks, and I see several tables heavy with food while another arched door leads to the dining table, where the main dinner will probably be served.

A sense of disappointment hits me because it's so freaking calm... Somehow with Atlas's reputation for throwing the most extravagant parties in the world and shocking his guests every single time, I expected something more wild and entertaining.

Although I read a rumor that apparently Jacob, Florian's father, put a stop to it a long time ago because he was tired of all that bullshit happening around his kids. So now Atlas lets the crazy out in his country club. Despite being eighty-five, he still fucks everyone willing, and I quickly take a quick sip to wipe away the bile rising up in my throat at the thought of Florian's grandpa acting like some kind of sex god. I'm surprised he didn't get married to some young woman, but again, he's never been faithful in his forty-year marriage to Jacob's mom, so why bother getting hitched if you can't keep it in your pants?

"Have you had enough of staring?" I jerk at the harsh voice, and spin around to face a man wearing a black suit who curls his lip in disgust at the sight of me. "Another cloud chaser to deal with," he mutters, trying to grab my elbow, but I step back, evading his grip. I quickly put the glass on the nearby table. "Get the hell out, lady."

"I have a right to be here." The disgust in his gaze only intensifies. "I have an invitation." Only then do I realize I forgot it in the cab! "I lost it."

"How convenient," he spits, lunging after me again, but I shift to the side so he catches air instead.

"You can check with the security guard by the entrance. I'm not going anywhere!" I try to keep my voice even, although already several people turn their heads in our direction. "Please don't make a scene." Or maybe that was Florian's plan all along?

For his staff to kick me out like trash as everyone watches so I won't dare disturb his best friend again?

"You're leaving even if I have to drag you by your hair," he hisses, grabbing my wrist and digging his fingers so hard I wince. He pulls me to the entrance while I tug on my arm,

ready to use all my strength to stop the man, when everything changes in a second.

One moment he's holding me in his tight grip, and then the next, my hand is free as a big and muscled man slams him into the wall, his groan echoing through the space. The passing servers don't even blink.

I sigh in relief because Octavius is here.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he asks the man, his voice cold as warning laces his every word while the man plasters his palms on the wall, freezing.

"Mr. Reed. I was just doing my job," the asshole defends himself, struggling to get free yet failing. "She has no invitation, and I have strict orders to escort out anyone who comes here without permission."

Before I can say anything, Octavius speaks to him, and I shiver a little as the energy seems to become frigid around us. "You ever touch her again, your job will be the last thing on your mind." The man wants to look at me but groans when Octavius shakes him hard. "Don't look at her. Do you understand what I said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now you get out before *I* drag *you* out by your fucking hair." He sends him almost flying to the entrance, and the man barely saves himself from falling, catching his balance at the last minute. He hightails his ass while people all around us stare.

I have no time to study their scandalized expressions as Octavius focuses his brown eyes on me, breaking goose bumps on my skin, and I swallow hard, searing heat traveling all over my system at the sight of him and every nerve ending in my body coming awake from his proximity.

While I could ignore what happened between us yesterday when his territorial and possessive gaze glides over me, the memories play vividly in my mind, blazing fire through my veins. I freeze in anticipation as he strolls toward me, his powerful form covered in a three-piece suit that only

emphasizes his handsomeness. Everything in me cries out to hide behind him and let him handle all the scrutiny from everyone around me because standing among all this wealth is so lonely.

But then his harshly spoken words ring in my ear.

You were a great lay, kitten. Now get the hell out.

And with them comes anger.

“Thanks for this. Is your protection a perk for being a great lay?” The minute the words slip past my lips, I know I’ve made a mistake.

His face darkens, and the energy around us shifts, charging with tension and fury so strong it speeds up my heartbeat. I dart to the side, ready to escape whatever storm he plans to send my way, but it’s too late.

He wraps his strong arm around my waist, and I have a second to gulp for breath before he backs me in the corner, looming over me, and slams his fist into a wall above my head. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Okay.

I guess I shouldn’t have been this petty earlier because now I’m in the same position as the staff member.

Blinking several times at him, I’m thinking what I should say next and decide to be honest. I don’t need him thinking I’m spying on or stalking him. He can forget about all that after yesterday! However, he deserves to know what’s going on and that someone uses him and his friends to get to me. Whatever connects him with the Church Killer must be huge, and while he might not want to share it, it might endanger those he cares about. And doesn’t it just sting that I’m not one of these people? “I need to talk to you. There is something—”

“I don’t give a fuck what it is. What part of “not interested in you” do you not understand?” I flinch at this, my fingers curling. I should hate him in this moment, and I probably would have, but his eyes...his eyes are filled with an emotion I cannot name while his body gravitates toward mine as this familiar heat rocks between us. For a second, my delusional

mind almost believes he says one thing but feels another. He quickly kills this illusion, though. “No man likes desperate women, Isla.”

My God, what is it about this man that makes me a doormat, searching for scraps in hopes of him putting a show of hating me just so it won't hurt so much to know he rejects me over and over again?

Penelope's voice breaks the silence around us. “Hey!” she calls, and we both look at her. She's stunning in her dress that showcases her figure in the most flattering way. “You're here! Glad you got here okay!” My brow furrows at her cheery tone. I expected her to at least be pissed off for a while, considering what happened in and after the club. Instead, she walks to us, squeezing between Octavius and me so he has to step back, giving us more room. She hugs me close, and her flowery scent calms me a bit. Finally, a familiar face belonging to someone who's semi nice to me. “What took you so long?”

It takes me a few seconds to understand she's trying to save me from Octavius, and I sigh, grateful for this gesture even if I don't deserve it. My insides are still too raw to have any type of conversation with a man who wishes to strangle my neck on a daily basis. “There was traffic on the road, and I forgot my invite.” I might as well play along.

Octavius darts his gaze between us, lifting his brow at Penelope, and she comes up with an explanation quick. “She wanted to see me, so we agreed to meet here.” She really doesn't need to lie so hard for me since I got legitimately invited by the heir to the throne himself. I keep it to myself, though. Rebuffing her lies would be stupid now.

“Here?” he repeats, and she nods. “At this party? Who gave you the authority to invite anyone?” A shiver rushes down my spine at the coldness seeping through his question while he straightens up, and Penelope swallows hard.

She finds her voice again, though. “Remi.” She lifts her chin. “Or is that a crime now?”

Oh, she's good.

Using her new husband as an excuse is the perfect save because Octavius won't be able to argue that.

A smile curves his mouth and unreasonable jealousy washes over me at the sight of it; he has smiles for other women but reserves his frowns and growls for me. Only to gasp when he wraps his hand around my throat, pressing me into the wall as his thumb brushes over my pulse, breaking more goose bumps in his wake while we stare at one another as he leans closer, his stubble scratching my chin. "Do not wander around the mansion. Stay inside with the girls," he orders, and at this moment, I can almost believe he cares about me as his hold on my neck becomes more gentle despite his finger flexing harsher on my throat. I want to scream at him and kiss him at the same time, which is such a disaster in itself.

Especially in the house where I have to watch my back and expect the unexpected due to all these cryptic messages.

"If anything happens to her here, your husband will pay the price." He throws the threat Penelope's way as we share a breath, and then he pushes back, going back to the party room and leaving us all speechless while I rub my fingers over my bruised skin, oddly missing his touch.

Maybe that's lust that finally got into my head at the age of twenty-seven, so I obsess over a man who acts hot and cold with me, and instead of examining his motivation, I should focus on curing myself from this madness.

"I'm really confused about all this," Penelope mutters as I rub my hand up and down my neck, hoping Octavius didn't wipe off the foundation I've used to cover up his love bites from last night. "Am I the only one?"

She's confused? She's the one who married a stranger. It doesn't get more confusing than that! No judgment from me, though.

"Octavius is usually very reserved. That's so unlike him." I blink in surprise, noticing two women standing beside me. Probably the "girls" he mentioned earlier, and they focus their attention on me.

The one who just spoke up, Briseis, grins at me. “You must have unsettled him.”

Her brown hair falls down her spine and contrasts with the silver dress that points out her unusual eyes. One is green and the other is dark brown, and they both shine with curiosity as amusement dances in them when she smiles wildly at me. Her pale skin is flawless besides some fading bite marks, and I blush just imagining how she got them.

After all, she married one of the dark four.

Sometimes it seems as if Santiago lives and breathes for his woman, and it’s so interesting and fascinating to see, considering he has been nothing but cold and reserved in the past. His marriage makes me think he’s actually human.

She’s soft and curvy, and while she can never be called beautiful in the classical sense of the word, she has a magnetic presence.

I chuckle inwardly, remembering how some magazine called her a plain woman who got lucky to score an eligible and handsome bachelor.

The journalist got fired on the same day. Simply put, Cortez men don’t take disrespect toward their woman well.

Since she stares at me, I clear my throat and reply, “He wants to kill me with his bare hands. I wouldn’t call that unsettled.” I don’t know much about Santiago’s wife but I don’t need anyone romanticizing our relationship or, God forbid, assume his behavior is normal.

Besides, he’ll turn ballistic if he learns they are trying to convince me he has the hots for me.

Penelope sighs, hooking a strand of her hair behind her ear while she gives me a once-over. “I think you need to stop stalking him.”

A melodic laughter greets that statement, and my eyes shift to the woman standing next to Briseis, and I gasp inwardly.

I’ve never seen a more stunning woman in my life.

She has long black hair falling down her back in heavy waves. The bright light shining from the ceiling reflects through the wavy, silky strands that reach her bottom.

Her blue eyes remind me of the clear sky on a summer day and stand out like two diamonds against her tan skin. The flowery red dress she wears wraps around her body, showing the generous curves of her breasts, butt, and...the slight bump of her stomach, which is almost invisible to a passerby. I would have missed it if it wasn't for my assertiveness due to my profession.

She's pregnant and does her best to hide it. However, judging by the bump size, she has a month, tops, to keep it a secret.

The dress ends slightly above her knees, revealing her long legs, and as she steps closer, her scent, roses mixed with orchids and lavender, washes over me. "Oh, please continue. Didn't you hear how protective he is of her despite being angry?" She pats my shoulder. "I grew up around these men. He doesn't want to kill you. Fuck you? Absolutely."

Jimena Elena Cortez.

The infamous heiress to the throne and the Four Dark Horsemen's princess they all love to dote on. Even Octavius's sister doesn't get as much attention as this girl does.

Maybe because she's eleven years younger than them, they all feel protective of her, especially her older brother Santiago.

"I wouldn't have stalked him if he just listened to me and agreed to help me." I run my fingers over my dress that stands out in a bad way among the four of us, bringing attention to the washed-out fabric, and all the girls grimace. Their faces do little to hide their internal thoughts. "Why is it so hard for him?" Oh God, I sound desperate again, but truly, why is it so hard to cooperate with me on this one? It's not like it was my choice in the first place to seek his help—the rules of the game dictate my actions.

"Well, these men are difficult," Jimena states, and I wonder if that's supposed to reassure me. Because it does

exactly the opposite! “Let’s go to the terrace. It’s has a nice view and a small gazebo where we can talk while all this madness is happening.” She swirls her finger in the air. “And maybe you can share your little problem with us. We are pretty powerful too, you know.” She winks at me, and I relax a bit in her company, as with each word, she proves her reputation true.

Kind, gentle, and warm despite the beauty and status life has granted her, and I hope whoever the baby daddy is, he mans up quick as Jimena would have never hid her pregnancy otherwise.

And good luck to the dude because her father and brother would kill him.

Besides, blending in the party sounds like the best solution, allowing me to scan the property and await the unexpected from the Church Killer while in good company. “Sounds like a plan.” I grin. “I miss talking to someone. My best friend got married and lives in Houston.” I hate phone conversations but learned to love them due to the distance. Nothing will stand between Giselle and me. “You probably met her husband, Callum.” A beat passes. “So I could use new friends.” When what I implied registers in my mind, I correct myself. “Not that I expect you to be my friend. I’ll just shut up now.” At this rate, even they might ditch my ass for being a clingy weirdo who assumes friendships and relationships based on one encounter. I might be stupid, but I’m not that naive.

Everyone laughs, and Jimena hooks her arm through my elbow, bringing herself closer to me. “Let’s start with a talk.” She pulls me in the opposite direction of the ballroom and to a narrow hallway. “We should drink some tea too.” Jimena grabs Briseis with her other arm.

“Whatever you say, sister-in-law.”

And all the way, I feel a burning feeling in the back of my head, the drilling possessive stare of a man who haunts my dreams, but I don’t turn around to try to find it.

Because he can stare all he wants.

But unless he intends to do something about it, he can go to hell.

Octavius

“I know you’re lacking experience but generally, when you want a woman, you don’t go around choking her at parties and acting like a dick toward her on most days,” Florian says when I reach around him and grab a whiskey bottle, flicking it open and pouring myself a glass while the music echoes through the space mingling with the hum of people.

One of the greatest tragedies this society faces, no one knows when to shut up and listen to their thoughts because their thoughts are way more painful and agonizing than any other boring conversation could be.

That’s why I prefer to fill the silence with screams and cries of my victims.

I take a large sip while my best friend continues to talk, oblivious to my warning glare thrown his way. “There are more practical ways to woo a woman.” He taps on his chin. “You could, for starters, buy her a new apartment and move her there.” I sip my drink some more. “God knows it would have been cheaper than bribing her entire neighborhood to act nice and give her a wide berth.” He sighs, placing his hand on his chest, and his voice turns high-pitched. “Although it’s so romantic.”

My hold on the glass tightens, any more pressure and the damn thing will crack in my grip. I keep the indifferent expression on my face, despite the whiskey tasting bitter on my tongue, an inferno erupting inside me, ready to burn everything around me because the woman who consumes my every thought just got hurt by me.

A-fucking-gain.

Madness still swirls all over me just thinking about how she endangered herself by coming here with the prick almost kicking her out, and the idea of her being hurt by anyone, let

alone some staff member...it awakens the rage so strong, I can barely contain it.

Isla is mine, and no one has a right to upset her or make her feel anything less than.

No one.

Which is ironic, considering no one hurt or disrespected her more than me in the past twenty-four hours.

I have no other choice, especially not after last night when I watched the surveillance video from her apartment where she got a strange message. She paled so much, I quickly hacked her phone and read the message myself.

The fucker is playing with her and brought her here for a reason, and I want to strangle her pretty neck for playing along and putting herself on this unknown path. But then I crave to kiss every inch of her skin, apologizing to her flesh for ever bruising it, and if that doesn't show how insane I am about her and the fact that I need to stay away from her, nothing else will.

My obsession for her is her greatest curse because even if she's never going to be mine...she will never be anyone else's either.

I control her whole life, and she can't hide anything from me as her protection comes before anything else. The shitty neighborhood filled with people hungry for basic necessities is easy to control, especially when you dangle whatever they need in front of them. It drives me insane that she lives there. However, I made it my mission to create as much of a safe environment for her as possible.

She might think I give no shits or abandoned her while she gave herself so sweetly to me, my whole body growing hard as her moans echo in my ears, my back still bearing scratch marks that I hate to cover up. I want to show them off to everyone so they would know my woman is mine and no one can get her off the way I do.

Even if I'm a hideous monster who everyone thinks should stay locked in his castle because just looking at me makes

them all uncomfortable.

Florian clicks his fingers, snapping my attention back to the present as he raises his brow. “Nothing to say?”

Taking one more sip, I put the empty glass on the table and scan the crowd for my woman. They must have really gone to a terrace. After how I treated her, I wouldn’t be surprised if she spits in my face next time we cross paths. “Besides the fact that you have no idea how to woo a woman either? Nothing at all.” A muscle on his cheek twitches and he narrows his eyes on me. Oh, I touched a nerve. Then again, would it be us otherwise? Subtle and gentle, we are not. “In fact, one might argue you are in an even shittier situation than me,” I hiss through my teeth. “Your secret will blow in your face really soon, and who’ll be there to pick up the pieces?” I hit my chest with a fist. “Me. So I would be nice to your best friend.” A beat passes. “Probably your only friend once a certain someone finds out.”

He picks up a strawberry from the table and pops it in his mouth, chewing on it. His mouth curves into a smile while he covers the troubled expression with amusement. Not that he can ever hide his true emotions from me. “Going after me won’t change the fact that you made a mess out of your situation.”

“Why did you invite her?” I didn’t believe for a second that Penelope had anything to do with it. She was mad last night at us all, and her wedding with Remi was one of the reasons I couldn’t go to Isla right away or watch her through my cameras. Remi has always been a crazy fucker, but he lost his damn head once he met Penelope.

“Why do you think it was me?”

“Only you could have given her the kind of invitation that cleared her with security.”

I snarl, remembering her cheap dress, announcing from miles away that she doesn’t belong here and, in this, has no status or wealth, which opens her up to the scrutiny of others.

In my world, power means everything, and if you don't have it, no one will protect you, and my fist itches to punch Florian for inviting her and not providing her with the right dress and diamonds.

"Well, aren't you glad she's here? It's better to keep an eye on what's yours rather than wonder what she's doing after you so carelessly treated her last night."

"Careful, Florian, careful," I warn him as he steps on dangerous territory, questioning me where he shouldn't, and besides, I do not have the privilege to do what I crave the most.

Throw her over my shoulder, kidnapping her, and then locking her in my room where I'd take her hard over and over again until nothing but me remains in her troubled head.

"You cannot resist her. You can either claim her, or this mess will get worse." He pops another strawberry in his mouth before wiping his hands on the tissue. "I invited her because you needed to see what happens when you do not give her the protection of your name."

"She's chasing a criminal and needs me because he led her to me. Once she catches him, her obsession will fade away and she'll return to New York." Except I'll be the one catching the said son of a bitch and delivering him to her on a silver platter. No one messes with me or what's mine, and this fucker is trying to play us both like puppets in his theater.

"And it has nothing to do with your oath?"

I still, his question hanging heavily between us as we stare at one another while memories from almost twenty years ago flash vividly in my mind, bringing back pain and desperation along with fear and determination that should have never been part of my life. However, destiny hasn't been kind to me.

It was cruel.

My cheek burns so badly, blood dripping on my chin while pain assaults my senses, and my whole body cries out in agony. The wind nips on my wounds and adds to the hurt consuming me. I try to move, yet every muscle refuses to do a

thing, and instead, I gaze up at the sky where clouds gather ready to pour rain on me, and tears stream down my cheeks, the salty liquid akin to gasoline to the fire that is my agony, flaring up the pain to epic proportions.

Once the rain starts, there will be no reprieve from this nightmare of mine. "Octavius." Florian drops next to me on his knees, his eyes widening in shock as I keep mine open by sheer will alone, and his hands hover over me, his fingers trembling. He probably doesn't know where he can touch me. My whole body is raw meat right now.

Not an inch was left untouched by him.

"Oh my God." I hear another voice, and Remi appears in my vision as well, dirt smeared all over him. "Octavius."

"There is blood everywhere." Florian's words are shaky, and he wipes away his own tears as Remi presses his fist to his mouth to cover his sobs. "We can't move him."

"What will we do?"

"I need to call Dad."

No! I want to scream at him to stop, but he wouldn't listen to me anyway.

A boy who grew up in love and protected me his whole life won't leave me alone to die in my backyard.

"Florian," I whisper, although it comes out so hushed, it's a wonder he hears me.

He places his hand in mine, squeezing it, and our gazes clash as he leans forward, closer to my ears. "I'm here, Octavius. I'm here." His voice drops a few octaves. "We'll punish him this time around. I promise you."

No, we can't. I can never tell his father what this monster does to me because then he'll take Estella away.

And I prefer to live every single day in agony than let the said agony be experienced by my little sister.

It's unbearable.

In this very moment, I make an oath.

If I survive this...this viciousness that sinks into every cell in my body, I will never get married or father a child.

Never.

Because no one deserves to live with someone like me.

A person permanently cursed by the gods for daring to simply exist, and as such, I bring trouble to anyone who stays close to me.

And also...

When I love, I love for life.

One more vulnerability, though?

It will kill me.

“It has nothing to do with it,” I finally reply, blinking away the memories and refusing to dwell on them much.

Even after meeting Isla, I had no intention of breaking my oath. My darkness is cold and cruel, and it will destroy anyone.

Especially my gray-eyed girl full of hopes and dreams who still believes in goodness.

“If you say so.” Florian pushes off the table. “You’re not twelve anymore, Octavius. You hold all the power now. Think about that.” He walks off, charming all the women with his smiles along the way while a hollow laughter escapes me, startling a few people around me who step away from the barbarian, as they call me.

When it comes to Isla, I’m powerless.

And in this, she’s my greatest vulnerability.

How can I ever allow her to become a weapon in my enemy’s hands?

Losing her...I won’t survive it.

She’ll stay my greatest secret.

No matter how much it pains us both.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*“Andromache was considered a perfect wife.
Loyal, loving, and always by her husband’s side.
And how had fate repaid her?
By killing the one she loved and subjecting her to a life of
misery.
Love is our greatest weakness.
We cannot do anything but chase it, though.
Because without any kind of love, our life has no meaning.
That’s our true tragedy.
As love can only be freely given.”*

Isla

*I*sla

“The view is stunning.” Sighing, I lift my teacup to my mouth as I gaze at the magnificent garden in front of me lit by thousands of stars with the moonlight streaming so brightly, it showcases every little detail about it.

From neatly cut grass to blooming roses and orchids and various statues that have the ability to awe you but also hunt you in your nightmares for their rather scary expressions.

Ever since the girl brought me to the terrace with a gazebo, all I did was stare at the nature around me, doing my best to ignore the drama from Remi and Penelope darting somewhere with the rest of the dark four following after them.

Whatever happened, though, took the heat away from me, and I didn't even have the chance to talk to Florian or Octavius.

In fact, I haven't seen him all this time, and I touch my neck again, a raspy breath escaping me while I drink my tea, welcoming the hot liquid sliding down my throat.

Despite the slight discomfort, I love how it wipes away thoughts of the confusing man, and I check my phone one more time for any notification but find none.

I've been sitting in this gazebo for around twenty minutes now, and while the girls try to be nice and speak about anything, even the weather, all I can think about is the Church Killer and finding another lead.

Or, rather, a token in his game.

"Yes. The Price family loves beauty, one of the reasons they incorporate into their business so well. They have the eye for it," Jimena says, picking up a date and biting on it.

"Grandpa Atlas considers it the biggest gift humankind received from God." I'm yet to meet the family patriarch or any of their relatives, but seriously? "That's why he values natural beauty."

"He sounds shallow," I tell her honestly, and Briseis chuckles but quickly gulps her tea when Jimena glares at her. "No offense."

The Cortez and Price families have been tight for decades, generations after generations of friendships built on trust and loyalty that makes even the best of people jealous. Lucian, Santiago and Jimena's father, and Jacob, Florian's father, even made each other the godfathers of their kids.

Jimena is the only girl born in either of the dynasties in the last hundred years, so she's been loved and spoiled rotten by both families, and rumor has it, Atlas Price even mentioned her in his will because, according to him, she's the granddaughter he never had.

"He has a heart of gold." She finishes her date and puts the seed on her saucer before lifting her own teacup. She surprised

the staff earlier when she requested tea instead of the coffee they had prepared for her. “It tastes like shit,” she informs Briseis and frowns at her cup. “I don’t understand how you like it.” She motions with her head toward her. “This girl has a whole collection at home. My brother made it his mission to gather teas for her from all over the world so she can try something new every day.”

A dreamy expression settles on Briseis’s face, and she grins, her eyes lighting up and the colors in them becoming richer. “Yes. He’s amazing, isn’t he?” As I look at her now, it’s hard to believe he forced her into marriage, so maybe it was a love union after all? No woman who hates her man reacts this way, and he practically swallowed her whole in his embrace before going with the guys. “But enough about us. Let’s talk about you and Octavius.”

Jimena nods. “Yes! What’s going on between you two?”

I place the cup back on the saucer, quickly thinking of a good explanation that won’t paint me as a crazy stalker and spill my secrets to them. Santiago would have my head if I got them involved in my troubles. “I’m researching a case for one of my clients. I’m a private investigator.” They blink at this. “I just need his help to solve a puzzle. A missing piece to lead me to the criminal, so to speak.” Somehow the energy around us changes after these words. They grow tense and exchange a long look.

Why the hell did this unsettle them so much? Maybe they’re worried about the dark four? “It has nothing to do with the guys. Just something I need to solve, and Octavius has some key information for me. I’ve been a bit too insistent.” A nervous laugh slips past my lips as Briseis continues to sip her tea while Jimena just stares at me, a calculated and guarded look settling over her face, and for the first time, I see the striking resemblance between the Cortez siblings. “But I’m done now. You can’t force the unwilling, right?”

Jimena cocks her head to the side. “How did you get past the security?”

Okay, she clearly thinks I'm a psycho. "Florian gave me an invitation. I just forgot it in the cab, and Penelope came to the rescue." At the sound of that, Jimena's eyes flash in pain, but it's quickly replaced with earlier guardedness, making me think I imagined it. "He thinks I have the hots for his best friend and probably tried playing Cupid." I have no idea why I add the last part, but for whatever reason, her pain unsettles me. The last thing I need is anyone thinking something is going on between Florian and me.

Maybe the girl just feels territorial about the guy who can be considered her brother in everything but blood?

Briseis reaches out, patting her knee, and finally, Jimena's lips stretch in a smile that's so forced, I wince inwardly. For whatever reason, the whole invitation thing rubbed some old wounds. "Four Dark Horsemen, that's what everyone calls them." I still at the abrupt change of subject. Okay then. "Women always throw themselves at them, charmed by their power, status, and money. They dream about carrying their heirs because it would mean they'd be set for life." My fingers curl on my knees while my hold on the phone tightens, hating hearing this, and by how Briseis puts her cup on the table, she isn't thrilled either. "Octavius wasn't an exception even though he got way less attention than everyone else. But the allure of the Reeds' wealth was too strong for some to resist. They considered him an option if things wouldn't work out with the other three." Now anger swirls through me for an entirely different reason. Why the hell did they think him not worthy of attention on his own? The man is smoking hot, the hottest if you ask me! "There has never been a woman as insistent as you when it comes to him." Her smile widens, and some warmth returns in her gaze. "I think part of him likes it, but don't tell him that because he'll deny it."

"It's about the case. It has nothing to do...with us." I clear my throat. "In fact, there is no us." I can't allow my delusions to grow in their company and believe there is something more.

Come for me, kitten.

I wish to cover my ears from his raspy voice echoing in my head and goose bumps breaking on my skin just from the

memories alone, where he took my body as if it was his most prized possession and made me believe for a moment in time this obsession of mine was mutual.

Madness and desire wrapped in one create a burning inferno designed to drive me insane and find solace only in his arms.

But I'm a police officer, right? Which means I have to believe the facts, and the facts are the following...

"He rejected me several times. I think he finds me annoying and wishes for me to disappear." It physically hurts me to utter these words. They ground me in the present, though, and don't let me float to the land of unattainable dreams.

A deep voice breaks the silence around us. "Some things in this life cannot be tolerated."

Our heads swing to the right, and I blink at the tall, old man walking toward us wearing a colorful purple three-piece suit while his wrinkled face frowns at me. His signature green eyes scan me from head to toe, and displeasure fills them. His appearance is stunning for his age and it leaves no doubt that Atlas Price in the flesh has graced us with his presence. "Who are you?" he asks me, stopping several feet away, and I sit up straight. "And who invited you?"

At this point, I've been asked this question so many times, it starts to annoy me. "My name is Isla Evans, and your grandson did."

"My grandson?" He sweeps his gaze over me once again. "Maybe I should write him out of my will. He's clearly lost his eye for beauty."

Oh my God.

"Grandpa Atlas—"

His hand stops whatever Jimena wants to say as he drills his stare into me. "Isla Evans, your dress is a slap in the face to me. You're so far from the word beauty, it's sad and pathetic, and these two descriptions are almost deadly for women."

Briseis chokes on her tea while Jimena exclaims in outrage. “Grandpa Atlas, that’s rude and offensive. You need to apologize.” Her tone grows cold, and she crosses her arms while I study the old man. She’s right, he’s rude as hell, but seeing someone so honest is refreshing.

Everyone has been thinking this, but he’s the only one who spoke up, and maybe he has a right to do so. After all, the party of the century is in his honor, and my worthless self is ruining his image.

“No, princess. She offended me first by showing up looking like this to my eighty-fifth birthday. I celebrate beauty, not desperation.” He comes closer and grabs my elbow. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” I mutter, too stunned and, honestly, maybe that’s what I need. For him to kick me out and to go home, take a warm shower, and forget all this like a bad dream. The Church Killer wanted to see my humiliation, and he got it. He might not even send me anything. Isn’t it better to finally go back to my world?

“Grandpa, what the hell are you doing?” The girls jump up, and Jimena moves to us. She’s ready to tear me away from his grip, but his stare halts her movements. “She’s my friend.”

I gotta give it to the dark four women. At least when chips are down, they are on your side.

“I don’t care if she’s the saint herself, we need to change her dress before she embarrasses me any further.” What? “You’re welcome to join us.” He drags me into the hallway, and we reach some room on the first floor in record time.

He gets us inside, and I gasp at the woman already waiting for me there, sitting by the vanity table with a bed behind her and several chairs around. The small door on the left probably leads to a bathroom. Why even have such a room on the first floor, though? I don’t get the chance to dwell on it much as he orders, “Make her presentable, Michelle. I picked the dress already.” With this, he ushers the girls inside and exits, shutting the door, leaving only the smell of his expensive cologne in his wake.

Michelle pats the chair, and I glance at Jimena who exhales heavily. “He won’t let us out unless you’re presentable.”

“You have to be kidding me,” Briseis says, and her sister-in-law shakes her head before going to the bed and dropping on it, sighing when she slips off her heels and wiggles her toes. “Grandpa Atlas is psychotic.”

“He prefers the word stubborn, although I agree with you.” She rolls onto her side, hugging the pillow, and presses her cheek to it. “You might as well commit to the whole makeover thing.”

Well, at least he has a heart of gold, right?

Octavius

Parking the car with a loud screech by the Prices’ mansion, I get out and throw the keys to the valet guy. “Mr. Reed. Welcome back.”

Nodding at him, I head to the entrance with Florian and Santiago following me, our leather shoes exceptionally loud, thumping against the asphalt in the otherwise silent space.

“I’m not dealing with Remi’s bullshit anymore. Fucking tired of his drama.” His hotheaded nature made us chase his ass and protect his woman twice now, and it hasn’t even been a whole-ass day since he got married. Or met her, for that matter. Fucking insane.

Santiago clicks his tongue. “*Ah, amigo*. It’s not nice.”

His amused tone only adds to my annoyance. “I don’t feel nice. Control your best friend. Our lives don’t revolve around him.”

Florian puts a cigarette in his mouth as we start climbing the stairs. “Ignore him. He’s angry he had to leave Isla alone with the wolves tonight.” A beat passes. “The internet connection was shit there, so he couldn’t spy on her.”

“Who’s Isla?”

“The woman from the club?”

“Ah, the one who is his woman, but she is not, but she really is?”

“*Si.*”

Barely holding on to the remaining pieces of my patience, I speed up my pace as my whole body requires me to be close to Isla and check on her. The inability to see what was going on with her drove me crazy.

I couldn't go, though. The Four Dark Horsemen never leave each other behind, and Remi needed us.

Loyalty above anything else.

“If he spies on her, how could he allow her to show up in that horrible dress?” Santiago whistles under his breath as we finally reach the doors. “He has to burn it.”

“He didn't invite her. I did.”

“Ah.” I hear Santiago slap Florian on the back of his head, and his cigarette falls on the floor before he has the chance to light it up. “*Eres un idiota.*”

“Don't worry. I took care of that.”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

I have no chance to ask, though, as we finally step inside. The smell of food and expensive cologne wafting the air around us while the staff hectically runs around the hallway with heavy trays, probably cleaning up after dinner.

“So what's the plan, *amigo*?” Santiago hooks his arm over my shoulder as he shares a look with Florian. “Whatever it is, we've got you.”

Florian takes out another cigarette. “His plans so far included staring at her from a distance obsessively and then saying some rude shit whenever she's near.”

Santiago sighs, patting me on the chest while I count to ten in my head so I won't punch my best friends since the age of five. “That's why we never allowed you to plan anything. At

this rate, your prey will run away, and your reputation as a hunter will be ruined.”

“And it reflects badly on all of us. You have to stop being selfish, Octavius.”

“You can both go to hell.” They laugh, sharing a high five in front of me. “And there is no plan. I’m paying respects to your grandfather by attending his party, and then I’m going home. Isla has no business being here, so you’ll kick her out.”

I’ve had enough of being an asshole to my woman for the night. I cannot stand the haunted look in her eyes and her reeling back as if I slapped her after my words. In front of all their damn women too, as if she’s not as important, as vital to me as they are to them.

I can’t breathe without thinking about her.

Florian exhales, sending smoke flying around us, and I pause at this. Why isn’t he angry with my request that sounds more like an order?

He’s the only one who could never be rude to women, even those who always throw themselves at us. We have no patience for their bullshit, but Florian? Always a charmer, and that’s why they all love him so much.

If only they knew what truly hides behind his charms, they’d run in a different direction.

“Whatever you say, Octavius.”

And I lied, anyway.

I’ll follow her to her apartment, then go back home and watch her from there because the peace my soul experiences just staring at her is incomparable.

As we step in the room filled with people walking around, eating cake and laughing with each other, I scan the crowd for Isla.

“I see my wife.” Santiago slaps me on the back. “Good luck. You’ll need it.” He walks off to Briseis who holds her plate up for a piece of cake while smiling at someone, and she

gasps when Santiago wraps his arms around her, pulling her to his chest and hiding his face in the crook of her neck.

Sometimes it astonishes even me how she fell for him despite his obsession and dark ways. How can a woman who never knew darkness love a man who is permanently coated in it?

She accepts him as he is.

It's a gift.

"He never gave her a choice," Florian says, reading my mind. "He took what he wanted. His determination paid off."

"I'll ruin her life."

"You already have one way or the other. So why be noble now?"

"Santiago is a prince." I tap my scarred cheek. "I'm a beast. You should know, beauty means everything." And whoever tries to convince you otherwise is a fool.

People are shallow creatures destined to be attracted to the gorgeousness this world has to offer.

My reflection is a curse and a cross I'll bear till the end of my life, but no one else has to.

"Let's test your theory." He motions to the room again, and I search for my dark-haired woman, but once again, I don't find her. "She's with Grandpa and Jimena."

I locate them by one of the tables, closer to the terrace door, and everything inside me stills when my eyes settle on a beautiful woman in an emerald-green dress.

The silky cloth cascades down her body, hugging it tight and showcasing her curves in the most flattering way and her flawless, tan skin seems radiant. My fists clench at the sight of an open V down her back, emphasizing her mouthwatering ass.

The dress covering most of her skin seems almost indecent on her as it reeks of sensuality and sin, attracting men who already send her interested glances. At the same time, her

silver heels point out her dainty feet and bring attention to her graceful posture.

Her gray eyes are luminous on her face while her lips are painted red, making me crave to bite on the plump flesh until I draw blood and mark her for everyone to see while her sleek hair falls down to her shoulders, shimmering under the chandelier.

She's always been beautiful, but right now, she's straight from a fairy tale. It fucking hurts to look at her, and our differences have never been clearer.

However, I don't give a fuck as my body grows tight and my mind screams one thing only, pounding in time with my heart.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“So tell me, Octavius. Do you want your woman more now?” Florian drops his voice to a barely audible whisper. “Or does her beauty make you want to whisk her away so no one else gets to appreciate it?”

The beat inside me roars when a man comes closer to her, grinning and saying something while she frowns and steps back.

All these men needed a fucking dress to see what a diamond she is, and none of them deserve her. I wish to destroy them all piece by piece for daring to think they can have her when she belongs to me.

But how would they know that if she has no claim of mine?

“You're a dead man, Florian,” I tell him before darting toward my woman—because she's mine.

Always has been and always will be, and the time has come for me to be selfish where it counts.

After all...

Once she realizes what she's done, it will be too late.

She'll have to accept me even if she hates me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*“Lust is a sin, or so people say.
To me, it’s salvation.
Because in his arms, I find freedom.”*

Isla

*I*sla

“Everyone’s staring,” I whisper to Jimena, feeling almost naked under their watchful eyes skating over the dress. Instead of the earlier scrutiny, appreciation and even jealousy fill their gaze as they murmur something to each other.

“You’re stunning, so let them.” She winks at me, snagging a strawberry from the table, and lifts her chin. “Grandpa Atlas approves.” I look ahead and see him coming toward us with a huge smile on his face, deepening some of his wrinkles, not that it lessens his charm.

My eyes almost bulged out of their sockets when Michelle finished working magic on my hair and face, transforming me into this pretty creature that could be considered...worthy of someone like Octavius. The dress somehow finished the whole composition and presented my average height and body in the most flattering light.

Maybe I should have invested in some makeup classes back in the day instead of saving every penny to go to police school. Little good it did me anyway. My mood sours as I squeeze my phone, checking it once again and finding nothing new.

The Church Killer's had at least three hours now to contact me and give me the clue, but he hasn't, which means he's not going to do it. I should go home. The little boy got the key from me so he could get inside without me. Staying here any longer is just rude at this point.

The girls tried to entertain me as much as they could, although Jimena fell asleep around twenty minutes into the whole transformation, so Briseis kept singing her husband's praises and how they enjoyed their mini honeymoon in Italy.

"Ah, my darling. Now this is what I call finding a diamond in the rough!" Atlas says the most offensive things, but his tone and delivery make it seem as if he truly cares about your well-being, and you don't feel angry. "Beautiful." He scans me from head to toe and grabs my hand, raising it to his mouth and placing a kiss on it, winking at me, and I can't help it. A chuckle escapes me when he adds, "Now I can flirt with you."

"Grandpa Atlas, you're a bit too old for her," Jimena teases him, her cheeks rosy after her hour-long nap, and she pops another strawberry in her mouth. She has cravings for those.

"There is no such thing as being too old for romance, child," he fires back, glaring at her, but then his gaze softens. "Do you feel better now?" She nods. Apparently, she was sick on the way here. He frowns. "Since when do you like strawberries?"

"Since forever."

"You hated them your whole life. Florian can't live without them." He rolls his eyes. "As a kid, he was unbearable if we didn't have them at home." He leans closer to me. "The boy would throw a tantrum if you didn't do what he wanted." He straightens up, puffing his chest as pride drips from his every word. "A true heir of mine. Never been more proud."

Okay.

The Price family is weird as hell. I've yet to meet Jacob Price, his wife, and their child, but so far...they are so eccentric and value things that most people hate.

And then I see it.

Jimena paling a little, the strawberry pausing midway to her mouth while she swallows hard, and it takes me five seconds to understand what unsettled her so much.

Oh my God.

Florian is the baby daddy?

He touched his best friend's little sister?

Scratch that.

His parents' goddaughter.

Scratch that again.

His godparents' daughter?

He broke so many codes, I won't be surprised if he ends up dead somewhere in the river once the truth comes out.

However, I don't have time to reassure her or whisk her away so she can digest the fact that her baby already takes after their father when it comes to food preferences as Atlas claps his hands, and a guy appears next to us, holding a velvet box. "I designed this back in the day. It was one of my first collections I created myself without my father's help, and it was a success. They especially loved my emerald pieces. I believe the magazines called them jewelry of gods." He flips the box open, and I gasp at the emerald earrings surrounded by countless diamonds. They are so big they must be the size of my thumb. They glisten under the light, sending colorful squares on the floor. "The only thing I kept were these earrings. I had a sentimental attachment to them."

"They're...magnificent." These are some of the clearest stones, and the Price vintage pieces are an art form in and of themselves that they will probably grace museums in the future. "Congratulations." I'm not sure why he's showing them to me, but then, it's his birthday. He's got a right to gush about his talents and successes.

However weird and out of the blue that might be.

He picks them up and steps closer, ordering, "Give me your ear, child." I blink at him. "We can't have you walking around without jewelry." My heartbeat speeds up because

these earrings cost a fortune, and if I lose them, I won't ever be able to pay him back.

"I'd rather not wear something so expensive," I say, glancing at my phone and deciding to leave in a few minutes. "Besides, I'm going home soon."

His eyes become frigid, sending coldness into every bone in my body while his voice turns so furious I wince inwardly, and Jimena sighs heavily. Oh, I think I'm about to see the infamous Price temper. "Isla Evans, let me teach you a lesson. When a man like me offers you gifts, you accept them with a smile. Do you understand?"

Gifts?

"I can't accept a gift like that. It must cost a million."

He huffs. "Never insult a Price piece like that. It cost fifteen million dollars." Is he insane for giving them to me? However, he's already putting them in my ears one by one, and I'm so shocked and afraid to ruin them that I stand still.

"My mother could never leave my father." He steps back, throwing my hair behind my shoulders, and the emeralds feel so heavy on my ears, unused to any weight on them. "He was wealthy and famous, and she was a naive fool who fell in love with his looks. Too bad his soul was too rotten to cherish her. Whenever she wanted a divorce, he reminded her she had nothing to her name." I rub my forehead. One might get whiplash from him changing subjects so quickly. "She had to sign a prenup before marrying him. All women in our dynasty do."

"Except *Madrina Calliope*. *Padrino* Jacob never allowed for her to sign anything."

I don't know much about their romance, except that he was a divorced single dad since Florian's mother ran away with her lover, and Calliope worked for them as a nanny for a few weeks before he married her. It was a huge scandal. Atlas didn't approve. In fact, he threatened to disown his son but accepted the union when Jacob chose his wife above anything and anyone.

Clearly, the Price family loves to taste the forbidden fruit.

“Yes. Calliope managed the impossible. To have a loving, long-lasting, faithful marriage with a Price. She bewitched him, that sneaky creature.” He huffs again while Jimena rolls her eyes, but despite the heat in his words, there is a certain warmth when he speaks about his daughter-in-law.

“I’m so sorry about your mom,” I tell him. It must have been awful to grow up in that.

Not awful enough for him to be a faithful husband, though.

“Yes. It taught me a valuable lesson. A woman should always have a means to escape if she wants to.”

“I agree.”

“You’re broke. If you marry a wealthy man, you won’t have shit compared to him.” And we’re back to being brutally honest. “Don’t you worry, though.” He palms my cheeks and pats them. “Grandpa Atlas took care of that. No matter what happens, you’ll always have these emeralds. Consider it a welcoming gift, Isla.”

I haven’t felt a family’s warmth for so long, and right now, a sense of gratitude envelops me toward this difficult and complicated man who lives by his rules yet manages to love his family. “Thank you,” I whisper through my clogged throat, and he pats my cheeks again. “I have no plans to marry a wealthy man.”

“Ah, darling. Plans mean nothing when they’re met with determination.” He winks at me, and Jimena chuckles just as Atlas spins me around. All thoughts fly from my mind while heat zips all over me at the sight of the handsome and furious man marching toward me, his suit jacket long gone, and the veins on his arms stand out more with his sleeves rolled up.

When God created him, he gave him all the qualities that signal my downfall because I’m ready to run to him and wrap myself around him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” And just like that, he ruins the mood once again.

“Having fun,” I reply, grabbing a grape from the nearby table and popping it in my mouth. His eyes darken when he focuses on my lips, and hotness washes over me, the dress tightening more on me as fire travels all over my system. “Seems to be the theme of the party.” I hook a strand of my hair behind my ear, touching the earrings. “Even got a gift.” The next grape slips through my fingers when he grabs me by the elbow, ready to drag me somewhere once freaking again, and I’ve had it. “Let go, or I’ll scream.” It’s an empty threat because the last thing I want is to cause a scene and be the headline of this event.

Instead of answering me, he addresses Atlas, who stands behind me and sips his whiskey. “Grandpa Atlas.”

“Yes?”

“No one gifts my woman jewelry but me. Expect a blank check in the morning. Write any amount and cash it in whenever.”

He toasts to us, and I barely have the chance to glare at him as Octavius keeps his tight grip on me and pushes us through the gaping crowd to the hallway. I hiss, “Stop it, Octavius.”

He doesn’t listen, just moves toward somewhere, and finally, we reach a massive door, and he gets us inside before shutting it.

Or rather an office, judging by the desk, bookshelves, and various machines all around us. “I’m tired of you manhandling me. That’s our fourth meeting, and in the span of one night, you managed to do that twice!” I cross my arms as he rests his back against the door and watches me with hooded eyes. “If you have a problem with me being here, you can blame the Price family.” He behaves like a caveman one minute and then treats me like a pesky insect, confusing and hurting me in the process. “This is the last time, Octavius. You might be powerful but you’re not immune.” One more empty threat, it’s not like I can ask anyone for help.

Well, maybe Callum...

“You look stunning.” I still, and while it should shoot joy all over me, instead it makes me tense because his voice is gruff and displeased. “I fucking hate this dress.”

“You can blame the Price family for that as well.” I applaud myself for keeping my tone even despite him managing to hurt me once again. “If you’re done berating me for the night, I’d like to—”

“I hate it because now everyone sees what I see.”

“What do you see?”

“Beauty. Grace. Sensuality. A body that belongs to me, yet every fucking man now can stare at it.” My cheeks heat while the air sticks in my lungs when his voice turns deeper. He pushes off the door, coming closer to me, and the familiar haze falling on us threatens to suffocate me. “Appreciate it. Long for it and crave it. So I fucking hate this dress because it shows off what’s mine, and no one has the right to lust after my woman. No one but me.” He cups my nape and drags me to him. “It’s selfish, but I don’t care. I found you first. They don’t get to even dream about you. They’ll never have the chance to indulge in their fantasies anyway.” He leans closer, his chin gracing my bare shoulder, and I clench his shirt while my eyes close. “I’d kill them all before they get the chance to touch you.” His fingers glide over my arm as he presses his mouth to my neck, sucking on the flesh and awakening a burning sensation within me, ready to erupt at any moment. “Because you’re mine.”

His touch and voice almost hypnotize me. It’s akin to the sweetest music luring me to the edge of a cliff while promising pleasure and euphoria as long as I trust it.

I want to soak up his nearness and let it soothe all the wounds, but another voice, harsher and cold, penetrates the fog, snapping me out of this moment and making me push at his chest hard.

You were a great lay, kitten.

“No. You don’t get to do that.” He steps back, confusion written all over his features, and this only angers me more.

“You don’t get to sweet-talk me into sleeping with you just because you’re horny and then act like an asshole afterward. I might be a great lay, but us great lays have dignities too. Imagine that!”

I head outside because I need to resist the temptation. He grabs me once again, though, and my back hits the door.

I huff in exasperation. What is this? His favorite position or something? “Look at me,” he says, and I do. “Look at my face. Do you see this scar? I have more. All over my body. As hideous as this one.” I swallow at this, my heart clenching painfully just imagining what he must have gone through. I fist my hands, resisting opening up his shirt and kissing them all. “You deserve better than a beast. You deserve better than me. I’m possessive. Mad. And stubborn. All these character traits intensify while I’m in your presence. My need will suffocate you, and once I claim you as mine, there will be no going back.” He rests his arm above my head as his masculine scent surrounds me while all I can do is just look at him, too shocked to utter a word. “My insanity has only one name, Isla. Yours.”

Studying his expression along with self-loathing coating his voice, I finally see the picture clearly. “You think I deserve better so you acted like an ass toward me?”

I can’t believe this.

“Isla—”

“Shut up!” I hit his chest because now I’m the mad one. “You don’t get to make decisions for me, Octavius. But I agree. I deserved better than the bullshit you put me through.” I felt like crap, and he tried to do the right thing.

“I’m sorry. I should have never said it. I didn’t mean it.”

“Oh, you’re sorry? And you expect me to, what? Forgive you just like that.” I snap my fingers and gasp when he places his hand on my stomach, and it dips under his grip. “Octavius.” My voice drips with warning and desperation because my body cannot betray me now! He just confessed to being intentionally cruel to me because of his insecurities and

some stupid hang-ups about his scars and past. Instead of wanting to slap the living shit out of him, I crave to soothe every wound inflicted by someone else on his soul so he wouldn't doubt that his scars mean nothing to me.

“Do you want me to grovel?” he asks, and a raspy breath escapes me when he leans closer to my ear, his breath fanning my cheek. “How should I grovel, kitten?” His seductive voice should be forbidden, for it creates invisible silks around me, pulling me deeper into the lust and desire flaring within me whenever he's close to me, his presence alone driving me insane.

Nothing exists for me now but him, and shouldn't a girl have a little more pride?

“With my words?” His palm skates upward, leaving burning sensations in its wake as thousands of goose bumps pop on my skin while his mouth brushes over my chin, moving lower to my neck, and he breathes me in.

Putting my hand on his chest, I intend to push him away but instead grip his shirt, arching my neck and giving him better access to my flesh, earning me a growl that shoots arrows of need straight to my clenching core. Still, I find the strength to say, “Words mean nothing.” I bite on my lip when he sucks on my skin, probably marking me with hickeys, only to soothe it with a gentle lick of his tongue. “And I don't want you to do anything!” He chuckles, his lips tracing my collarbone and shifting to my shoulder, and with each touch, my resolve lessens. It's hard to remember why I should resist him so much when my whole body burns, yearning for him. “It's not like we're a thing or anything. We don't owe each other explanations.”

He stills at this, his muscles growing rigid under my palm, and I gasp when he wraps his hand around my throat while our gazes clash. Possessiveness and desire emit from his brown pools, sending shivers down my spine. My fingers curl on his shirt when he leans forward and traps my lower lip between his teeth, biting hard and drawing blood. “You're mine.” He drags his tongue over the abused flesh before sucking it in his

mouth, and I barely hold back a moan as pleasure rocks through my system.

And because I'm still furious at him for treating me like crap and at myself for allowing all of this to happen, I throw back, "I'm not yours."

His hold on my throat tightens. If he puts just a little more pressure, he has the ability to cut off my oxygen supply, but I'm not afraid.

Somehow, despite all our history, I know I'm the safest in his arms, and his touch usually has one thing to offer me.

Pleasure.

"Whose do you think you are?" His mouth lands back on my bare shoulder, scraping his teeth over it while the dress around me becomes tighter, the silk disturbing my senses and only adding gasoline to the fire blazing brighter inside me with each passing second.

"I belong to myself. News flash, we live in modern times and—" I groan when he drags his lips to the side, gliding them over my collarbone and bestowing light bites on my flesh before sucking on it harshly. "Octavius, stop it!" I say without much heat in my words, my hand abandoning his shirt and moving upward, my fingers tangling in his hair and dragging him closer to me. I arch in his embrace, giving him more of me to explore.

"We live in modern times, yes." His lips tickle my skin when he speaks, continuing to kiss and lick my throat, and I moan when he bites the mounds of my breasts, my nipples becoming hard peaks and rubbing painfully against the fabric of the dress. "Yet, kitten. No matter the times, you're mine, and only I have exclusive rights to you." Everything in me screams to stop this madness, for the satisfaction rising in his tone grates on my nerves and promises me trouble in the future. This man has his mind set, and despite wanting him desperately...the idea of belonging to anyone scares me.

Especially to a man who so easily could push me away. I pull at his hair harshly, a hiss slipping past his lips, but his

licks and kisses continue. He treats my body as his personal canvas, smearing his marks all over me while coating me in corrupted, wicked desires I never knew existed until he showed up in my life.

Lust from where there is no reprieve besides indulging in it and giving him whole control. I sway toward him, gasping when my core connects with his hard-on, the thick bulge hidden behind the zipper. I wish to touch, kiss, and suck it, marking him in my own way, and the thought confuses me even more, swirling the inferno erupting inside me because my desires have no mercy for me.

They just have demands they need me to fulfill, and I'm powerless to stop myself from succumbing to them, even if I have no idea how to do all the things my vivid imagination is painting for me to do.

Wanting him is a curse I never wish to break, even if it brings me pain in the future because, in his arms...

I can be selfish instead of selfless and indulge in my cravings.

"Octavius, this is crazy," I still manage to say, but for whose benefit I have no idea since our bodies gravitate toward each other's, and there is no space between us, his muscles digging into my curves and electrifying everything around me. "We have to stop."

His other hand falls on my waist, squeezing it harshly, and I sigh in relief at his touch, welcoming the possessive grip as it grounds me to the present and blanks my mind, leaving only this man in it.

Where only he exists in my mind, nothing else bothers me because common sense becomes mute, losing the battle of wills with my heart and body. "No, kitten. I haven't groveled yet, have I?" He skims his lips upward, nipping on my chin and finally reaching my mouth as our breaths mingle. He tips my chin upward, and we stare at one another. The intensity in his gaze envelops me in heat and a need so strong I can taste it. "Mine and only mine." He sways back, only to drive forward again, his hard-on pushing against me, and he swallows my

groan, entwining us with a scorching kiss laced with hunger, need, and a sense of ownership.

A kiss that's a statement of its own as each glide of his tongue stakes a claim on me, consuming me and reminding me that no matter how much I try to deny it or run away...this man owns me in ways no one else ever will.

His kisses forever ruin me because they corrupt me and chain me to him with invisible ropes, always reminding me that I belong to him.

However insane, wrong, or impossible it might be.

I open myself wide for him when his thumb presses on my chin, and he delves his tongue deeper, pleasure zapping through me as he locks us in a passionate kiss that creates a false reality. Where it's just the two of us, serving a protective cocoon around us, hiding us from the outside world.

He swallows my whimper in his throat when his hands grab my ass, gluing us together, and my core spasms at the contact while I grow hot at his act of possession, requiring these displays on a daily basis, and maybe then I can believe him.

Believe that some fairy tales are possible even for the likes of me.

My fate must have been pre-decided for me because this man is my weakness, and no matter how much my mind screams at me to think and breathe, I ignore it.

The minute our destinies collided, he became...mine.

And is it such a bad thing to claim him as mine if he already considers me his?

My lungs beg for oxygen, so tearing my mouth away, I gulp for air and hit my head on the door as we stare at one another.

He steps back and slowly unbuttons his shirt, opening up to my view his magnificent carved six-pack covered in endless scars. Back in the club, I didn't have the opportunity to

properly see him, but the harsh light streaming from above hides nothing from me this time around.

The faded white marks from what must have been a belt buckle once. Deep and red slashes that, with time, transformed into scars that someone ignored because they didn't heal properly.

Scars on his stomach and sides trail toward his back, and some even on his collarbone. They all speak of unbearable pain, yet none look as vicious as the one on his cheek.

My eyes fill with tears because Octavius's body was an outlet for someone's cruelty and hatred. How much strength must one have in order to survive it?

No.

How much strength must one have to survive it and then face scrutiny from society for having these scars, indirectly hinting that what you went through tarnished you in their eyes when it should have been the opposite?

Perfection is valued above anything else when only imperfection truly shows character and soul because it speaks about resolve, resilience, and a will to live and move on.

"They are hideous, kitten. I tried to spare you the sight." He removes the shirt and drops it on the floor. "This time around, though, I want to feel your skin against mine. I guess I'll have to grovel for that as well." He splays both of his palms on either side of my head, once again caging me in, and it dawns on me that he misunderstood my tears. "Forgive me."

Taking a deep breath, I put my hand on his bare skin and kiss the angry scar on his collarbone, making him freeze. "They're not hideous. I wish I could take all the memories they cause away." Because at the end of the day, what haunts you the most is not the imperfections. It's how you got them and the painful reminders that sometimes transform into nightmares. Skimming my lips, I leave several more kisses on his scarred chest and tilt my head back, meeting his confused and heated gaze. "You're the most handsome man I've ever seen." His hands fist on the door as thousands of emotions

flash on his face. I feel the need to add, fascinated by his lack of control because for the first time, I can truly see into what hides beneath his exterior, “I’ve been getting off to thoughts of you for months.”

He traps my moan when he slams his mouth on mine again. The kiss is almost bruising and frustrated this time, though, holding so many meanings. I fail to catch them because his tongue roaming inside my mouth spreads fire, awakening every hair on my body while need consumes me.

He grabs the hem of my dress, clenching it in his hands and moving it up, up, up until his hands reach my bare ass. I gasp when he hikes me up, my legs wrapping around him, and we groan into the kiss when his hard-on rubs against my core.

Lacing my fingers in his hair tighter, I continue to kiss him as he spins around and starts walking somewhere, each step thrusting his cock deeper into me. My thighs flex around him, welcoming the friction on my clit. I wish to destroy all our clothes as they feel like a foreign object on my body, preventing me from experiencing his hard flesh over my bare core.

Throwing my head back, I gulp for breath as he moves his lips toward my throat, and my nipples hurt, begging for attention and his mouth. “Octavius.”

“I know, kitten,” he murmurs over my skin, earning a gasp when his fingers dig deeper into my ass right before he places me on a desk, making room for himself between my legs, and the air hitches in my lungs at the sight of him.

He blocks the light, darkening the space, which only adds to the forbidden and wicked atmosphere around us that invites me to indulge in my sins and cravings because they bring freedom and pleasure in ways nothing else can or ever will.

Octavius’s brown eyes flare with heat and lust while a sinister smile curves his lips. A shiver runs down my spine in anticipation because it promises me the sweetest torture. “Look at you. All flushed and in need of your man’s cock.” I swallow at the pure satisfaction coating his voice while he hikes the dress more, exposing my legs for his viewing

pleasure. Cold air lands on my skin, causing more goose bumps to pop out despite the fire traveling through my veins and creating this sense of rush in me that cannot be contained.

Only sated.

“Beautiful creature and all mine.” My squeal echoes in the room when he sends me flying on my back, knocking several things from the desk on the floor. Neither of us pays attention to it as he leans forward, and we both breathe heavily. “How should I grovel, kitten?” he asks again. This time, his hushed voice is so hypnotizing and tempting it only adds to the fire and causes an inferno in my stomach. “With my fingers?” I almost sit up when he cups me, pressing the heel of his palm on my clit, and sensations rush through me. “Stretching this dripping pussy for me so I can fuck you hard over and over again until neither of us can walk?” A whimper escapes me, and his grin widens. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, kitten? Having your man so lost in you, he wouldn’t give a fuck about anything else but you.”

The picture he paints in my head doesn’t help me. Instead, it makes me hotter, zipping electric volts prickling my skin, and my hands clench the dress, hating it right now. “Octavius, please.” His name is the only thing keeping me in the present moment and not allowing me to think about the consequences that will inevitably follow.

“Or should I grovel with my mouth first, kitten?” His palm drifts upward, joining my hand, and my hips rise at the contact, only to gasp when his mouth lands on my nipple, sucking on it through the dress and soaking the material around it.

Each lick of his tongue drives me insane and shoots lust straight to my core. My legs spasm around him as my fingers thread through his locks again, my whole body begging him to take me and end my misery.

The silky material grows wetter with each suck, hard and hot pulls destined to leave hickeys after them, the combined sensation having the power to make me come from this stimulation alone. He lavishes my breast with attention before

skating his mouth to the other nipple, repeating his action and thrusting his hips into me, the texture of his pants rubbing against my panties. The pain only enhances my pleasure.

His hands grip my thighs, keeping them in place and not allowing me to move while desire consumes me, urging me to end all of this and have him take me right here and act on all the vows he made. "Octavius, stop." My voice sounds weak, and he chuckles, the vibration sending prickles all over me as heat shoots through me. He finally skates his mouth upward until his hot breath fans my lips. I whisper, "Grovel with your cock." I can't believe I'm saying this, but I tighten my hold on him, shifting a little on the desk, opening wider for him. "Please." One of my hands falls between us, my fingers dancing over his thick bulge, and my core clenches, imagining it stretching and entering me. He growls into the embrace. "Make me yours right here and now."

"You've been mine since my eyes landed on you, kitten." Our eyes meet, and he raises me up a bit on the table, locking us in a hot yet short kiss I barely have time to enjoy. I huff when my back connects with the desk again as he looms above me, his skin glistening with sweat. "I'll fuck up a lot in the future." He skims his mouth from my collarbone to my breasts, giving light licks and then drifting lower, my stomach dipping under his touch while his hands lift the hem of the dress even higher until his thumbs hook into the waistband of my panties. "And I'll always grovel with my mouth first, kitten." He slowly drags them down and puts them inside his pocket, hissing through his teeth. "Look at you all dripping for your man. Twenty-four hours without me, and your pussy is already addicted to what I can give it." He slides his palm under my ass, lifting my center closer to his mouth. His breath fans my most intimate part, making me grab the edge of the table, my whole body tensing as his words light me up. "Only me," he whispers possessively, rubbing his stubble inside my thigh before sucking on the flesh. I jerk, but his strong grip holds me in place. He repeats the action with the other one before zeroing his gaze in on my core. "Watch me grovel, kitten." I cry out when he covers me with his mouth, stabbing

his tongue between my folds and roaming inside me while blissful sensations rock my entire being.

Gripping the desk's edge tighter, I welcome each swipe of his tongue, apologizing and staking a claim over me at the same time while creating a bubble around me that imprisons me in pleasure and lust so strong, I might burst at any moment. "Octavius." He places my hips back on the desk, and I gasp when his palms glide on the inside of my thighs, opening me wide for his sinful mouth while his tongue continues to swirl inside me. He licks me from bottom to top, trapping my clit between his lips, and I moan, my thighs clamping around his head as heat rushes over me. He flicks my clit, sucking on it hard while slipping two fingers inside me, stretching me.

Arching my back, I fist his hair, my heel digging into his back while I slowly move in time with his fingers, finding the much-needed rhythm for the friction. Lust consumes me, gliding over me and making my skin burn while the heat intensifies.

I groan in protest when he removes his fingers, only to moan again as he drags his tongue back, driving it inside me, mimicking the hard thrusts I know he's capable of delivering and pushing me closer to an orgasm, I can almost touch.

He can grovel like this all he wants in the future.

"Octavius," I whisper, the pleasure growing with each passing second and threatening to crush me in the most sweetest and hottest way. I slowly grind on his tongue, needing my release more than my next breath. "No, no, no," I mutter when he licks my lower lips, one by one before biting on them hard and then licking again, playing with my clit while his fingers enter me, only adding to the desire polluting my mind. "Please." I'm not sure what I'm asking for right now.

For him to continue and make me come on his mouth or stop and fuck me hard in this office where anyone can come in at any minute? And the worst part?

I don't even care.

“What do you want, kitten?” His lips tickle me as he rubs his whole face on me, and his fingers abandon me once again while he replaces them with his tongue, my core clenching around the velvet texture.

“You. I want you to fuck me.”

He gives one long lick and straightens up, his lips glistening with me as he holds my gaze. I watch him take out a foil packet from the back of his pants as he lowers the zipper, and his hot cock comes into view, making everything inside me clench.

I wish to trace the vein pulsing on his thick flesh with my tongue, licking the head clean and finally finding out what his desire for me tastes like. I wiggle my fingers, reaching out to it, but he shakes his head. “No, kitten.” He rips the packet open with his teeth while gripping his length, stroking it from base to tip before rolling a condom on it. “You’ll wrap this pretty mouth around my dick soon, though.” A moan slips past my lips. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, kitten?”

The promise ignites me even more, zapping hot sensations enveloping me whole while something inside me grows and grows, ready to erupt at any moment, yet I lack the push that it needs to find the bliss. “Stop talking,” I say, and he chuckles, clenching my dress and pulling me upward before gripping my thighs. I gasp when the tip of his length graces my slit, dragging up and down and driving me insane. “I hate you.”

We both know it’s a lie as my whole body cries out for him. I hug him closer, marveling at his muscles and rugged skin because it leaves no doubt that this man can protect me.

He’s a warrior.

My warrior.

“Do you?” I nod and throw my head back when he nips on my neck, bestowing small kisses on my throat and collarbone while continuing to sway his hips, the tip entering me a little but not giving me any relief. He skates his mouth up, nipping on my chin, and whispers over my lips, “Who do you belong to, Isla?” he asks, tickling me, and we share a breath while we

both freeze. “Tell me, kitten.” Another soft sway, his length teasing me even more, and my toes curl inside my heels, making me wrap my legs tighter around him. “Who?” he asks again, his fingers digging deeper while we both pulse with desire and need so strong everything disappears around me but this man.

I should be scared and tell him something snarky, scream once again that I belong to myself and cannot trust him with my heart yet.

Or give him any permanent right over me after he behaved the way he did yesterday.

Sex is not enough of a grovel!

Even to my own mind, though, it all sounds like excuses, prolonging the inevitable.

Because I’m his, and if I ever belonged to anyone in my miserable and sorrow-filled life...it’s him.

Gathering all the courage I can muster, I whisper, “You. I’m yours.”

He captures my mouth in a deep kiss, swallowing my scream in his throat when he thrusts hard into me, shaking the table underneath me and stretching me to the brink.

Lacing my fingers in his hair, I press him closer and angle my head back, allowing him deeper access to me while we both still and take in this moment of connection.

He’s right.

Twenty-four hours without him after knowing what it’s like to have him is too much.

He pushes back only to drive into me again, fire spreading in my veins and flaring everything inside me. The pressure in me grows, urging me to meet his every hard thrust as he enters me harder and harder while holding my mouth prisoner, bruising it, yet I welcome all of this.

We separate, gulping for breath, and my moan rings in the air when he hides his face in the crook of my shoulder, my

thighs clamping around him as he drives his cock into me, bringing me closer to the point of no return.

He hisses when I cut my nails on his nape, the pleasure consuming me, yet the possessive part of me I never knew rises. The words spill before I can stop them. “And you’re mine, Octavius.” A ripple shakes him. “You belong to me too.” His grip on me becomes almost painful, and he speeds up his pace, his thrusts growing deeper and harder as he enters me over and over again while tickling sensations wash over me in waves, so powerful and strong it’s impossible to resist them. “Mine and no one else’s,” I whisper into his ear, and a sob escapes me when he becomes rougher. With each drive of his hips, he pushes me toward the building pressure, my core clenching around him several times, and finally, I pull at his hair again, catching his mouth so no one else would hear me scream.

Even the sounds I make only belong to him.

I shatter in his arms, my core squeezing him so hard. He groans but continues to own me in the most primal of ways for several more thrusts, and a tremor rushes through both of us when he comes.

I hug him close, breathing him in and savoring this feeling of belonging as the world around us finally and unfortunately stops spinning, the reality penetrating.

My legs drop on the floor as we both catch our breaths, and Octavius steps back, letting coldness slip between us, and I tense, remembering how cruel he had been the last time.

He traps my chin between his fingers and raises it, pressing his lips to mine in a light kiss that echoes our lovemaking. “You’re mine.” I sigh because these words should scare me, yet they reassure me instead. “God help you,” he mutters, and I frown but have no time to dwell on it much since he puts his shirt back on and zips his pants. “Stay here. I’ll go find a jacket to cover you up and then take you home.” I don’t even get the chance to protest because he’s gone in a minute, leaving me alone while I shake my head, too shocked to process everything.

The past twenty-four hours have been the most hectic, bizarre, and exciting in my life, and I'm not sure if that's good or bad.

I adjust my dress, grateful it hides the fact that I'm not wearing any panties.

Someone knocks on the door, and I open it, blinking when I see a maid standing on the other side holding my phone. "Miss Cortez asked me to give this to you."

"Thank you!" I grab it and close the door. I can't believe I forgot about my phone during all this.

I freeze when I see a message flashing on the display and open it, my stomach flipping.

Consider it a gift, pretty little thing.

With trembling fingers, I click on the attached video in the message, and my brow furrows when I see black-and-white images that quickly change to a young man stabbing someone over and over again.

A scream echoes in the office, and it takes me a second to realize it's emerging from my throat. I cover my mouth while I watch in horror as Octavius kills a man.

Brutally. Viciously.

Blood. So much blood everywhere.

And then his friends cover up the body and clean up the crime scene.

Oh my God.

He's a murderer, and they helped him cover it up.

Another message pops up.

I always know how to hurt you.

What am I going to do?

Now everything about them, him, and us makes sense.

A man who is just like the Church Killer. Was this part of their twisted game?

To make me addicted to a...murderer?

How could I have been so stupid?

With my trembling hands, I dial a number, and on the second ring, a gruff voice speaks into it. "Yes?"

"Agent Noah?" I ask, swallowing past the bile in my throat. I'm about to tell a federal agent about my new discovery despite everything inside me urging me to stop, but I can't.

As a police officer, I used to catch murderers. How can I stay quiet and not do the right thing now?

"Isla? What's going on?"

"I have to tell you something. It's important."

"Sure. What is it?"

"The Four Dark Horsemen..." The door opens, and Octavius enters. He gives me a long look, and I know he knows what I'm about to do by the darkness settling on his expression. "The Four Dark Horsemen..." For whatever reason, I can't push the horrible words out, and this gives Octavius time to snatch my phone and drop it on the floor where it shatters into tiny pieces. "No!" I shout, ready to bolt, only to freeze when he grabs my throat and squeezes it so hard all the strength slowly leaves me.

The last thought in my mind before darkness overtakes me is that I made the wrong choice.

Again.

And this time around, I don't know how I'm going to pay for it.

Octavius

Once upon a time, I took an oath.

And now I have no choice but to break it.

For a woman who was ready to betray me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*“Secrets are always dangerous.
Because what’s hidden...hurts you one way or the other.
However, that’s not the worst part.
Some secrets are so painful they have the ability to destroy
you.”*

Isla

*I*sla

Something wet drops on my face, making me wince, and I shift my head to the side to avoid it, only to groan in pain through my dry throat as a piercing headache consumes me, sending hurt into every cell in my body.

I roll to the right, and my cheek presses against a cold and hard surface while the clinking sound echoes through the space, stilling my movements.

Only then does the heaviness in my wrists and legs register, and my eyes snap open. I hiss, raising my hand to cover my face from the blinding light pointed at me from above, and I pause, noticing a cuff with a chain wrapped around me.

Oh my God.

I sit up, ignoring the pain ricocheting through me and mutter, “What’s going on?” I gulp for breath when another splash of water hits my face, the liquid sliding down my collarbone and soaking up my dress. Blinking several times to

adjust my vision better, I finally focus my eyes on a man looming above me standing in the shadows while holding a glass of water as he shakes it a little before spilling the rest on me. “Stop it!” I yell, although it comes off more like a hushed whisper, and I put my fingers on my throat, rubbing over the sensitive flesh while trying to understand what the hell happened to me.

Maybe this is one of my nightmares where I’m stuck in a loop, trying to escape it over and over again and always ending up trapped in some ditch instead.

I haven’t had those in a while, but they love to show up unexpected and screw me up.

Swallowing, I hug my knees, curling my toes into the floor while looking around me, and uneasiness washes over me. Everything is so vivid and deadly, goose bumps pop all over my skin as the realness of the situation is disturbing.

Various tables surround me, heavy with knives, guns, and small bottles of various substances while the spacious place has all the torture devices, from drills to electric chairs, destined to bring agony to anyone who encounters it.

A shiver runs down my spine, and despite the heavy weight on them, I lift my hands and slap my cheeks, urging myself to wake up while still studying my surroundings.

The floor is squeaky clean in this space that reeks of doom, desperation, and human suffering. I can almost hear the pleading cries of mercy echoing around it, only to be met with laughter and refusal.

This must be hell on earth designed to strip you of your sanity and cast eternal sorrow on your soul, for this darkness is all-consuming and brutal.

I feel as if I’m in a torture chamber, the manacles on my wrists attesting to that, and when I press my knees on the floor, I’m pulled in different directions, confined to the same position in this room, or rather basement, that promises nothing good.

In fact, I think it was created specifically to drive someone insane in the most vicious way possible, as even my subconscious does its best to wake me up and snap me out of this nightmare, filling me with fear so strong I can taste it on my tongue.

“It’s not real,” I whisper, shaking my head and welcoming the hurt this time, for it temporarily shuts up the terrified voice screaming in my head to run away from here because just breathing in this space coats you in dirt and vices. “Just a nightmare.”

“I’m afraid the nightmare has become a reality, kitten.”

My thoughts come to a halt as a gasp slips past my lips along with a horrified whimper because memories flash through my head.

The Church Killer sending me a message.

A video of the Four Dark Horsemen committing a crime.

They are murderers!

And Octavius choking me so hard I lost consciousness.

“Rise and shine, kitten.”

Oh my God.

This is my reality!

Scrunching my eyes, I glance again at the man finally stepping out of the shadows, and my heart beats wildly at the sight of Octavius wearing jeans and the shirt from earlier with his sleeves rolled up, his muscles standing out, but while in the past I was attracted to that, my whole body lighting up with desire...

Now I’m afraid because his strength can kill me.

“Ah, Octavius. Be nice to your guest. After all, it’s her first time in your dungeon.” I hear footsteps and Remi comes into view, flicking open a whiskey bottle. “Poor little thing. Would you like a drink?”

Dungeon? As in a serial killer dungeon where he drags his victims and does vile things to them?

Is this what this is?

I barely hold back the need to barf all over the floor because with this sentence alone, he lets me know that they hadn't just stopped at one murder and continued killing people over the years. All the rumors floating around them finally make sense.

“Where are your manners, Remi? You don't offer whiskey to a lady from a bottle.” Florian joins them, tapping on an empty glass. “How about some wine, Isla? It's from my grandpa's vineyard in France.”

“I think she's still shocked. Tequila is the answer.” My head swings to the left, noticing Santiago leaning on the couch as he props his legs on the table in front of him and shakes the bottle. “Always answers all my questions.” Despite the antiseptic twitching my nose as if I'm in some kind of hospital and with the complete sterility of the place, it still has a comfortable viewing lounge on the left side with two couches giving the perfect view of what goes on in here.

The sick fuckers enjoy watching murders too?

“What do you want?” I croak, clenching my fists, and maybe if I had been anyone else, I'd lose my shit now, either cry or scream hysterically around these men who hover over me, talking nonsense when it's a psychological tactic to drive me mad.

Or rather establish control.

However, I'm a police officer and a serial killer survivor, so I made it my mission to study everything about them over the years.

Their psyche, methods, weapons, and I've even watched countless of documentaries and university sessions to delve deep into the thoughts of those we all hate. So I could understand them better and know how to act around them to catch them and save myself should the situation call for it.

Right now, I don't have the privilege to be difficult or brave because any sign of defiance would be met with some harsh blows, and besides, they should feel their power

because, deep down, they are all narcissists getting off on their actions.

“To enjoy my honeymoon in peace, but unfortunately, your big mouth ruined my plans,” Remi says, going to Santiago and dropping down next to him on the couch. He sighs heavily. “Pity.”

Straightening up, I lock my hands, the chain dangling loudly and again, emphasizing my dire state. “Don’t know how I’m going to live carrying that guilt with me,” I tell him sarcastically, and the men chuckle. Florian pours wine into the glass and gulps it, resting his shoulder against a wall while all their gazes shoot to Octavius, who probably stares at me.

I wouldn’t know since I refuse to look at him or allow my heart to think about a man who touched me so intimately and promised me so much earlier, only to tarnish it all when his true nature came to light.

A murderer I allowed to claim me, and now I’m forever bonded to him because even if I manage to escape their clutches, I’ll never be able to escape what we’d done or how it affected me.

So it’s easier to act as if he’s one of the guys and not the man who’d been my obsession.

I fell for a serial killer. I couldn’t have hurt myself more.

A man who kills cannot be the one I choose as mine. I’ve experienced firsthand what men like him do.

“Sense of humor. I have to say I admire it over hysterics.” Santiago toasts his drink to me before taking a sip from the bottle. “Makes it more entertaining compared to constant begging and pleading.”

“You should have picked a different hobby than killing people if you wanted to be more entertained,” I deadpan. “Victims tend to plead and beg in hopes of finding the good in evil creatures.”

“Ah, I love it.” Florian sighs. “Calling someone evil without actually calling someone evil to their face. That’s a talent right there.”

“I wasn’t trying to be subtle.”

“Not much forward either,” he points out while I slide to the side, testing the chains imprisoning me and judging by the waves they make, they must be long.

Enough to drag me around the room if they so wished, but not enough for me to dart to any tables and grab a weapon to protect myself.

When one deals with a serial killer, they must always be alert as their moods change like the wind. You never know which storm might be your last.

And I haven’t survived all the shit in my life to be killed by these entitled assholes!

“Look at me,” Octavius orders. “Isla, look at me.” Taking a deep breath into my lungs, I gather all the strength I have and place it like a shield over my heart that breaks anyway when our gazes collide, the air hitching in my lungs at the connection still lingering between us, electricity nipping at my skin while I know better. “You’ve made a big mistake.”

“Yes. I know.”

We stare at one another, and I tense when he comes closer. I scoot back, only for my groan to reverberate through the space when he tangles his fingers in my hair and pulls at it so hard, it adds to my hurt as if thousands of needles pierce into my scalp. “You betrayed me.” Fury coats his words akin to the one spreading in my chest because his touch has been nothing but gentle.

And now it brings me pain, although it’s overshadowed with the one flaring in my heart.

A hysteric laughter bubbles up inside me and erupts before I can stop it while the absurd situation registers in my mind. “I betrayed you? No, Octavius. You betrayed me,” I whisper, wincing when he angles my head a little, and we share a breath. “You’re a murderer.” How could he have done this to me?

Although that’s a rather stupid question, isn’t it?

Serial killers are psychopaths incapable of caring about anyone but themselves.

“Yes, a murderer who you chased all over Chicago for months.” Shame fills my entire system. Octavius clearly won’t hold back any punches. “I told you to stay away, and you didn’t listen.” I hiss through my teeth when he pulls me harsher until I get up, and to my surprise, the chains allow me some movement. “Now you have to face the consequences of your decisions.” An odd note laces his tone, but I have no time to examine it. “You see, kitten. Those who cross us don’t live for long.” Is he actually threatening me?

Swallowing, I raise my chin and slap his arm away, although it does nothing to loosen his grip on my hair that might be nonexistent at the end of this conversation. “I called Noah. We’ve worked together on a case.” That’s a huge stretch, of course. Agent Noah is a well-known profiler with a whole team to deal with, and we know each other because they helped us catch a serial child predator by giving his psychological portrait. There was a kidnapping, and we had less than twenty-four hours to find the kid alive. Still, I think he’ll make time for me. “He’ll help me. You can’t kill me.”

I expect any kind of reaction to my bluff threat. Truth be told, I’m not sure they give a fuck about any evidence and probably can cover up any crime they wish with their money and power.

However, I blink in shock when amusement flashes in his deadly orbs and several chuckles ring in the air, indicating his friends share his sentiments. “Kitten, if I wanted you dead, you’d be dead.” He points with a finger behind me, and I twist a bit to see a huge-ass thing behind me. I’m confused as hell about what it is until he explains and my stomach flips several times as the bile rises up again. “I’d cremate your body, and there would have been only ashes to remember you by.”

Oh my God.

How pathetic and tragic it is that this man has been inside me as I gave myself to him, yet he’s the one who’s hurt God knows how many people? “What do you want then?” I

challenge him, refusing to show him how scared and devastated I am right now because monsters are attracted to blood.

He cannot see he made me bleed as denying him satisfaction is my only weapon right now. “Your call alerted Noah that you know something about the Four Dark Horsemen. He might investigate us, and he has enough legal power to do so.” I shift, trying to free myself from his grip, but he only pushes me closer until my chest brushes against his, electricity zapping between us at the contact, and I huff in disgust. He tilts my head again farther. “They’ve wanted to put us behind bars ever since we killed that fucker.” I guess that’s what he calls his stepfather, and while, according to reports, he has never been overly affectionate with Octavius, they had no right to kill him! “The process promises to be difficult for everyone involved. I know Noah well; he’ll go into the war if he thinks he has the evidence to back up his claims. He’s a man of honor.”

A surreal moment to me because I’ve never heard a serial killer have any respect for law enforcement, let alone FBI agents.

Actually, this whole situation is surreal to me, and the fact that I’m acting so calm impresses even me. “Yes. So he won’t rest either.”

“He will ask you to testify everything you know. You’ll be their main witness, right?”

Realization hits me at once. I didn’t even think about it.

Of course.

Without me, Noah won’t be able to open the old case and build a whole new one where the Four Dark Horsemen get punished for what they do. That’s what this is about? “You want me to keep my mouth shut.” To defuse the situation, he needs me to act all cheery and dandy so he can’t lock me up in this dungeon. “Play along to your plan.”

“No, kitten. That ship sailed the minute you called him. You’ll be obliged by law to testify.” I try to see what he’s

getting at. “Besides, the fire burning in your soul must wish to destroy me. The righteous part of you that didn’t even hesitate to betray me minutes after I claimed you as mine.” I wish for the floor to open up and swallow me as he shares such intimate details in front of his friends.

But more so...

I can’t help but react to the odd hurt evident in every word he speaks, as if I’m the bad guy for doing what’s right instead of him, who kills people for his own amusement.

Betrayed him? He gave me no choice. How could I not call Noah? What sane person wouldn’t?

Yet the discomfort washes over me. The delusional me that still feels emotions toward this man who can’t die just because I found out the truth cries out to him, wanting to soothe the pain I caused him. I rein the emotions in, refusing to focus on them or give them any power.

Murderers don’t deserve pity.

Except psychotic murderers are cold and cruel creatures who destroy everything they touch, ignorant to the suffering of others.

The Four Dark Horsemen, though...they don’t fit that description, and that nags on my mind, urging me to come to a different conclusion.

That’s the human psyche, though. When we hurt, we do our best to justify all the bad deeds happening in order to find peace within our soul. I have no such privileges because I operate on facts, not emotions.

Facts are simple and to the point.

“Isla.” He says my name, snapping me out of my thoughts, and by the way everyone stares at me, I realize I must have missed what he said.

“What do you want, then? You can’t kill me, but you can’t keep me hidden from Noah either. It will raise questions.” His only option is to let me go, and we both know that’s a huge risk. “Are you going to blackmail me to get what you want?” I

roll my shoulders back. “You will use my sick grandmother or Giselle to make me play along in your little game until you can kill me?” I’ve never been close to my paternal grandmother, who disliked Mom on most days, but she took me in when everyone else died. We connected on mutual pain, and when she got admitted into a home after getting sick, I was devastated but always found money to pay her bills. We sometimes chat when she has her memories back, but the calls have been less frequent in the past year. Still, I’m paying the bills for her stay every single month. “I’m not a damsel in distress, Octavius.” His eyes darken at this, and I slap at his hand again, finally freeing myself and rubbing my scalp. “I know the drill and have no illusions.” A hollow chuckle escapes me. “You must get in line, though. One serial killer already needs to kill me to finish his job. Maybe you two can chat and hash out who gets to kill me first.”

“You have a very vivid imagination, kitten. I blame it on your childhood.” He catches my chin. “There’s an easier solution to fixing the chaos you caused.”

“I haven’t caused anything. It’s you who lives a double life!” I scream at him and sweep my gaze over all of them while the men continue to guzzle their drinks, unbothered by it all. “You’re all psychos!”

“There is no need to be rude, Isla.” Florian wiggles his fingers at me. “My family has been nice to you, and this is how you repay me?” He shakes his head. “Kindness brings humankind nowhere.”

“Shut up!” I tell him, and Santiago winks at me while Remi salutes me with his whiskey, but it’s Octavius’s bitter laughter that brings my attention back to him while hatred along with desire mix inside me, growing into an ugly and all-consuming emotion that signals my madness. “You’re despicable, Octavius.” I move closer to one of the tables, ready to snag a gun to defend myself.

In my fairy tale, no prince will come and save me, so it’s my job to take care of myself. I won’t be able to forgive myself for believing he was the man for the job.

And he won't hurt Giselle anyway, Callum won't let him, and I don't even bother thinking about how he's probably a serial killer too, which would explain all the weird shit happening with them over the past couple of months. If my best friend continues to live with him knowing the truth, then there is no way he kills innocent people and...

My mind comes to a halt once freaking again.

What if...?

I don't have time to dwell on my sudden crazy realization, though, because what Octavius says next crushes the world as I know it while a shocked gasp slips past my lips. "You'll marry me."

I blink several times, my mouth opening and closing as I whisper, "What?"

"Marriage will solve all our problems. After all, as my wife, you won't have to testify against me." He leans closer, our breaths mixing while the tips of his shoes connect with my bare feet. "Congratulations, kitten. You got what you wanted." His voice drops a few octaves, promising me eternal misery. "I'm going to break an oath for you, kitten. Even the devil himself won't be able to help you now."

No.

No, no, no.

However, as I stare at his hard-as-granite face filled with determination, I know he means everything he says, and I can read between the lines.

He might be offering me marriage, but in truth, it will be a prison with no option of parole.

Because according to him, I betrayed him.

And what better way to pay me back for my sins than to subject me to being forever legally bound to him?

As once I'm his wife...

He can do to me whatever he wants.

"Welcome to my dark world, kitten."

O ctavius

When a man who never knew kindness denies his deepest cravings, he shows compassion for the one thing keeping him human.

As even the darkest of creatures have their weaknesses to which their vices and vile needs come second because the little light within us gives us strength to stay sane.

Sane when the madness creeping on us forever whispers into our ears to succumb to our darkest desires in order to achieve what we want.

After all, if there is one thing all monsters of this world have in common, it's their selfishness.

Selfishness that pushes us toward the forbidden and sinful things as indulging in them brings us our greatest pleasure.

"I don't understand," Isla whispers, stepping back, her bare feet slapping against the cold floor as she drags her chains right along with her and rubs her forehead. "What do you mean we'll marry?" An odd sense of hope dances on the edges of her tone as if she thinks she heard me wrong and there is still salvation in sight from the unfortunate situation she has ended up in.

I warned her, didn't I?

To stay away, and now...

She's mine.

Her actions served as a red cloth to the bull that's Church Killer's rage and the obsession with his one living victim so there is no greater enemy to him now than me.

He wishes to destroy me for daring to fill her mind with something else besides revenge. He'll use any weapon in his arsenal to cause misery and sorrow to those around me, but never directly face me.

Oh no.

Monsters like him are cowards who play on the weak strings, getting off on the pain his opponents experience when he hurts those they love because confrontation of any kind with a person who shares his strength is terrifying to him.

I'll catch him one way or the other, but I'll be damned if my obsession brings any disruption to those I care about.

Or rather...

Two people who cared enough about me once upon a time to allow their sons to stay friends with me despite all the hell I had to live through.

“What’s there not to understand, kitten?” Her nose wiggles in distaste at the endearment that used to light her up in my arms, but then again, things changed. She no longer has any illusions about me. “They can’t force you to testify against me once we are married.” She steps back, grabbing the nearby table, and she’s about to reach for a small gun when my words stop her. “I wouldn’t do that, kitten. Whatever skills you think you have are nothing compared to the ones I do. Let’s not make it more difficult.”

The familiar fire flashes in her gray eyes that serves like gasoline to the burning lust and sense of betrayal within me. “So you expect me to just bend to your will? And for the record, your *great* plan has a little issue.”

Snatching the water bottle near me, I flick it open and take a greedy gulp, welcoming the cold liquid sliding down my throat and temporarily numbing the fire, demanding to take her upstairs to my room and punishing her in the most pleasurable way for what she was about to do before claiming her over and over again. “What is that?”

“I still can testify against you if I wish.”

“Ah, I see. I don’t think you’ll do that.”

“Why? Because you’ll use my loved ones as leverage?”

I sigh, and she frowns at me, abandoning her desire to grab a gun, it seems, as she crosses her arms, seemingly unfazed by the weight of her manacles.

Part of me, the one craving over the years for once to meet a worthy opponent, is fucking pleased to see her being brave in the face of her hardships right now. I guess it's fitting the only victim who didn't plead for mercy in my dungeon is my future wife.

Ah, the poets would have loved it.

"Kitten, I'm a villain, but not the kind who uses the elderly in my plans. There are lines we never cross." I take another sip, crushing the empty bottle in my hand and throwing it in the nearest trash can as she stares at me, waiting for the other shoe to drop. "And Giselle is Callum's wife. Trying to use her as leverage would have been unethical. We're close." Besides, we just settled our issues with Lachlan and his protégés. The last thing we need in Chicago is Callum coming here and declaring war.

The fucker would take offense, even if we just verbally threatened his wife with no intention of using her in our plans. I respect and understand that.

If anyone ever uses Isla this way, I'd end them all because no one threatens what's mine.

"You want me to believe you will not blackmail or force me into this marriage?" A bitter laughter escapes her as her fingers dig deeper into her flesh. "Why would I marry you, then?" She raises her hand. "Scratch that. Why would I not tell on you to the authorities?"

By the tension rising behind me, I know my best friends do not appreciate her threats. In fact, their dislike for her right now is evident because their women hadn't been thrilled to discover about all of us either.

However, none of them threatened to sell us out. In fact, they all promised to keep their mouths shut and earned our loyalties.

Isla won't be winning any points, but can I blame them? I don't trust her either.

A woman who betrays you at the first chance she gets doesn't deserve my trust or their loyalty.

“Kitten, you’re free to leave. No one will force you into anything.” She blinks, so I elaborate. “Choice is a beautiful thing. However, at the end of every choice lays a consequence.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“The Church Killer. You won’t catch him without me. All this”—I swirl my finger in the air while she swallows hard—“is his doing and not mine. Although I think he wanted you to expose me. Fucking me put a dent in his plans.” Her skin flushes, and a raspy breath slips past her lips while shame fills her gaze.

Hilarious and predictable. Didn’t I warn her that nothing good would come from her chasing me?

A man like me should never claim a woman.

“Our marriage will unsettle him, and then we can catch him.”

She shakes her head. “What’s in it for you? You’re murderers.” Her eyes send daggers my way. “You all can hunt him down.”

“My reasons are my own, and they do not concern you. So what is it, kitten?” I extend my palm toward her. “Marriage or another mass murder?” She gasps. “Because if you don’t follow my plan, he will strike again. While our marriage will focus all his attention on us.” My kitten has no sense of preservation. She throws herself at danger because no one cared about her for such a long time.

Reckless, so reckless but compassionate in nature. The idea of harming anyone else is devastating to her, and why not play on this character trait that always ends up fucking over whoever displays it?

People have no value for compassion because they will use it for selfish deeds, one of the harsh lessons this life teaches you at a young age.

“This makes no sense. Do you expect me to just magically forget about this and go on my merry way when we catch him?”

“Not really.” As she ponders on my words, I decide to strike the last nail in the coffin because this has already started to bore me, and nothing is worse than a bored murderer. “Oh, and, Isla?” She looks up. “Your godfather. I might take out my anger on him if you refuse me.” I hiss through my teeth, “God knows he’s done some questionable shit over the years, and I won’t be able to resist digging into it. I wonder if his weak heart can survive the public outrage it might cause.” I haven’t dug deep into the Grayson’s life—just a little report Lachlan got me—and it showed he likes to visit a certain brothel every other week. It’s enough to ruin his perfect family man image. “It would be such a tragic end to a man who protected you like a father all these years.”

She covers her mouth, tears slide down her cheeks, and the only thing disrupting the silence stretching around us is my wooden clock hanging on the wall.

Ticktock. Ticktock. Ticktock.

As each passing second announces my inevitable victory, hate spreads all over me because Isla made me do what I’ve vowed never to do.

Force a woman into a union with me.

Finally her arms fall, the chains rattling on the floor as complete defeat settles on her face. “I’ll marry you and play along with whatever you wish, as long as you don’t harm my godfather or anyone else.”

Even bravery is powerless while dealing with the likes of me.

Tragic for a proud creature like her.

“I guess I should have seen this coming, right?” she asks. “The only way a man like you could marry a woman was by blackmailing her because, what woman would have said yes willingly?”

“Fucking hell,” I hear Florian mutter as anger washes over me, akin to a brewing storm ready to demolish everything and leave only scattered pieces around.

She has no time to react as I charge toward her, grabbing a knife on my way. My hand wraps around her throat so hard, she gasps, fear staring back at me while she places her hands on mine, trying to snatch it away, but it's useless.

“You're saying yes willingly, kitten. Don't ever throw that in my face again,” I warn her as she struggles for breath. I loosen my fingers around her throat, so she gulps for air, only to freeze when I put the tip of the knife against her artery, her pulse beating wildly under my touch. “If I wanted to force you, I could cut this knife deep into you and watch the blood stream down your collarbone, slowly killing you.” Her chest rises and falls as I slide the tip closer to her pulse, skating it back and forth. “Until you begged for mercy, and maybe then I would have considered marrying you.” I lean closer so she won't miss my warning. “Remember that the next time you decide to show me your claws. Because next time, I won't be this generous.” I push her away as she stumbles a little, barely having time to catch her balance by grabbing the table. I dig the knife into the table so it stands still. “Florian?” I say as she rubs her fingers over her throat, breathing heavily.

“Yes?”

“Start the wedding preparations. Keep an eye on her until then.”

“Sure thing.”

Giving her one last glance, I spin around and go back upstairs because my fury is all-consuming while various flashbacks play in my head, hideous images designed to drive me insane, for they are followed by my horrible screams of pain.

But even through all this, I hear it.

Her soft “I'm sorry” just as I close the door behind me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*“Monsters can bleed too.
Who would have thought?”*

Isla

*I*sla

Thunder shakes the sky, the lightning flashing brightly, threatening to pour rain on us all while I sit in the expensive sports car. Florian drives it so fast that the scenery in the window passes in a blur, barely letting me study anything.

Not that I would have if I had the chance, considering I can see only one thing in front of me.

Octavius’s face.

For a second, I saw traces of hurt in it, and the thought that I did that by saying these vile things had a different meaning in my head altogether, only to turn into something ugly, like an attack on his scar, proving all these rumors true for him.

And along with my self-loathing joins complete stupidity because I should feel nothing toward a man who almost choked me to death and promised to kill me if I act up again or dare to say this bullshit.

I place my palm on my throat, wincing when my fingers connect with the sore flesh. It’s a wonder I have any voice left from him abusing my neck so much. “He was gentle.” Florian speaks up for the first time in the twenty minutes he’s been driving, forcing me to look at him as he changes gears and

takes a swift turn to the right, getting us on the one-way lane and pressing harder on the gas pedal. I'm not sure he's allowed to drive this fast, but then again, who cares, right?

They are invincible.

Pressing my back firmer against the seat, I rub my wrists, wearing imprints of the manacles on them, and they would fade probably in a week. Even the lightest of bruises stay on my skin forever. "If he were any more *gentle*, I'd be dead." It's hard to miss the sarcasm in my tone, and he chuckles, rolling down his window. The wind slips inside, and I shiver when the coldness sinks into my bones.

"You don't have any bruises on your neck. Trust me, if Octavius wanted to truly hurt you, we wouldn't be having a conversation right now without you whispering."

I'm not sure how this is supposed to be reassuring. He basically said he can take my ability to speak if he wishes! But arguing right now is pointless since he follows Octavius's commands blindly. Back in the dungeon, he grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me outside barefoot to his car parked in the garage. I didn't have time to look around the house or meet anyone on the way. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere private." I blink in confusion while panic washes over me because does he mean...does he mean Octavius plans to have a wedding night before the actual wedding? I won't submit after the truth.

Never.

He's a murderer, and I'll be damned if I sleep with one!

After agreeing to marry him, somehow the thought of sex didn't even cross my mind with everything else going on, but wouldn't he expect that from me?

According to him, I betrayed him, right? Maybe now I'm unworthy of him.

I huff in exasperation, rolling down my own window and welcoming the wind slapping me on my cheeks to temporarily remove the idiotic thoughts.

Like me hating the idea of him hating me. A little more time and I might become the classic textbook study of why a woman who never knew love fell in love with a serial killer and even justified some of his actions in order to stay with him.

“It’s useless.” Florian tears me away from my depressing musings, and I’m forced to glance at him again. Uneasiness fills me when he stops by a red light and focuses his green eyes on me. “You’ve already fallen for him. You can despise our vices, but it doesn’t change the variables in this equation.” A beat passes. “You want each other, even if you’re dangerous for each other. The sooner you accept it, the easier your life will be.”

“He’s a murderer. He killed his stepfather, and you all helped him to cover it up!” I yell the last part while he rolls his eyes, resuming when the light turns green. “God knows how many people you’ve killed after him.”

“Too many to count.” I still at this reply, my jaw dropping as I stare at him while he gazes ahead, gripping the steering wheel tight. “I think classic textbooks would call us psychopaths or sociopaths.” He smirks. “Although I don’t think we all fit that description.”

The Four Dark Horsemen clearly live in their make-believe world where everything they do is justified and right, so they have no qualms whatsoever about their deeds. Florian’s voice has no remorse or sadness to indicate his internal turmoil. He talks about it as if we’re discussing the weather! “You all should be in prison.”

“I think the law should be thankful for all the work we do. We take care of those the law is unable to punish or track. Maybe you should change the word murderers to vigilantes. It has a better ring to it.” He sucks a breath through his teeth. “Besides, you’re going to marry Octavius soon. You should be more supportive of our work, darling.”

Ignoring his last sentence because it’s insane, I focus on the whole vigilante thing. What’s he implying? That they kill only those who deserve it, aka bad people where the law

cannot do anything? I've seen many cases over the years with rapists and molesters who got away with crimes either due to their connection or lack of evidence. Or worse...where the victims' lives were threatened or they've been so brainwashed by their abusers they never spoke up. In all such cases, I always wished for a divine intervention to do something to these guys.

“You don't kill innocent people?” It would explain why Octavius didn't go after my grandma or Giselle and why he chose Grayson. While his character leaves a lot to be desired, he helped with Grandma's medical bills and tolerated all my antics through the years, so either way, he doesn't deserve to be dragged into my mess any further.

Florian opens his mouth to answer me, but I shake my head. “Whatever. It doesn't change anything.”

What difference does it make who they kill? A murder is a murder. None of us have the authority to decide who gets to live or die. Laws exist for a reason: they keep society restricted to certain norms in behavior and keep us all safe.

“If you say so.” He parks by the metallic gates, and I realize he brought me back to the Price mansion. “We figured this is the safest place for you to get ready.”

“Why? It's harder to run away from here?”

“No. The other wives are here.”

“Thanks, but I don't need their emotional support.” In fact, all my good opinions about them vanished because, what sane woman accepts this life, and worse...helps a bride prepare to marry one of their own?

They might have unhealthy attachments toward their men—Stockholm syndrome exists for a reason—but I don't have to. I can't control how my body reacts to a man who lights it up, but I can control my baser urges and not succumb to the temptation, reminding myself constantly that he kills people.

It should be enough to extinguish any fire, even of my own creation.

As Florian drives into the narrow asphalt road leading to the mansion, I ask, “Won’t your family or guests find it weird to see me like this?” I point at my dirty dress and my hair looking probably like hay. “Might put a dent in your reputation.” Not that I care one way or the other. But I don’t want to be yet another spectacle in this never-ending night.

“The party is over. My family went to Grandpa’s guesthouse, so no one will disturb you. Michelle is there too to fix all this.” He motions with his hand over my upper body as he finally stops the engine by the stairs. A doorman rushes down, ready to help us. “I wouldn’t advise—”

“Doing anything stupid. You all made that clear. I’m not a fool, Florian. I know what men like you can do, so playing by the rules it is.” As bad as it sounds, marrying Octavius right now is the safest bet, with the Church Killer going crazy and attacking me left and right. He already knows where I live. His next move might be deadly, and I don’t mind dying as long as he dies right along with me. I grab the handle, ready to leave. “I might be calm, but trust me, I’m seething inside and wishing you all eternal torture.”

“We can be allies or enemies, Isla. I would strongly advise to pick the first option over the second one.”

Unbelievable, another threat!

“You don’t have enough friends, Florian?”

Instead of reacting to my verbal jab, he holds my gaze and says, “I’ve protected Octavius since we were six.” What? Why would he need protection from such an early age? I frown, thinking back on all the reports about his childhood, but besides getting that scar, no one knows shit. “He’s my best friend—a brother, really. His happiness and well-being are important to me. Any offense done to him is an offense done to me. If you betray him again, Isla, he won’t be the one to hurt you. I’ll do it for him.” He leans closer as I press my back tighter against the door, fear running down my spine, and my fingers curl on my lap because his voice drops a few octaves, becoming deadly. The hollowness in his eyes is such a contrast to the charming persona he presents to the world. “He’s been

stalking you for months.” My eyes widen at this information. “Come on, darling. Use your brain. He’s obsessed with you. You betrayed him, then threatened to do it again at the nearest opportunity, followed by you spitting that bullshit about unwillingly marrying him. Yet you’re still going to marry him. If this doesn’t tell you anything you need to know, then you’re a fool.” He leans back, starting the car and roaring the engine back to life. “Think about this and choose your side, Isla. Because the minute you marry him, you’ll have certain responsibilities.”

I feel another headache coming in waves from all this information. “Why are you telling me all this?” On the grand scale of things, he doesn’t have to be nice to me, and while what he says is hideous, at least he’s honest. I appreciate honesty, even from serial killers.

“Because you’re in love with him.” I still and shake my head. “It’s useless to deny it. Your love won’t die just because the prince turned into a villain, darling. But you have a sense of loyalty in you.” Before I can say anything else, he motions with his chin toward the door, and I see the valet guy from earlier waiting for me. “Go. We’re on a tight schedule here.”

“You’re an interesting man, Florian Price,” I tell him, opening the door and getting out, ignoring the outreached doorman’s hand attempting to help me. Grabbing the door, I dip down and add, “Speaking of loyalties. I wonder how one of your best friends will react once he learns you’ve gotten his sister pregnant?” I purposely whisper the last part so the valet attendant won’t hear us.

His hold on the steering wheel tightens, and despite the anger crossing his face, amusement lights up his green eyes. “I guess that’s why Octavius calls you kitten. You sure have claws. Remember to use them wisely, as every bit of information we possess can be either our salvation or doom.” Another masterfully crafted threat! Unbelievable.

I shut the door in his face, and he starts driving off, but not before shouting, “I’ll see you in church, Isla. Be nice to the others.”

He leaves only dust in his wake while thunder booms in the sky, followed by rain falling rapidly around me and slowly soaking me from head to toe. “Miss, we better get inside. Everyone’s waiting.” The guy tries to urge me inside, but I’m frozen to the spot, my heart galloping inside my chest while various flashbacks play in my head, accompanied by horrified screams.

Church.

He’s going to marry me in a church?

Octavius

“Absolutely not,” Father Paul says, entering the church as he sweeps his gaze over us and places his hands on his hips, frowning. His black mantle flaps in different directions, and he looks quite comical with his glasses barely hanging on his nose. “You better all have come here to confess to your sins and nothing else!”

“We’ll have a wedding in thirty minutes here.” Remi winks at him, and he throws his arm over my shoulders. “Congratulations are in order.” He taps my chest. “Our boy is getting married.”

Father Paul gapes at us for several seconds, and I wonder if he’s experiencing a stroke right now due to all the excitement he has to face because of us. “Octavius? You’re getting married?” Surprise laces his tone, and a smile shapes his mouth, only to be replaced with a frown. “Where is the bride, then?” He glances around the various empty pews. “And her family?”

“She has no family.” He blinks at Florian. “True story, Father Paul. She’s an orphan. They died a long time ago.”

“Oh, poor thing.” Softness crosses his face, and he shifts his gaze to me. “Why such short notice, then?” Silence greets his question, and he gasps. “No. Another forced bride?” He slaps his forehead and shakes his head. “I’ll go to hell for this.”

“Like I said two days ago, we just call them brides. No one is forcing them into these unions. They come to us willingly.” Florian’s explanation is met with a harsh stare, and he moves closer to Father Paul. “We’re in church, so we can’t lie to you.”

He huffs, wiggling a finger at him. “As if you all follow the holy rules.” Santiago chooses this moment to pour tequila into a glass, proving his point once again, and we share a grin because seeing Father Paul all riled up is hilarious. Usually, I’m the one to drink because I cannot stand all the memories floating in my head whenever there is a sermon, but it’s my wedding. I can make an exception for that. “I don’t even understand why you drag me and the church into your mess since none of you have any respect for the institution!”

We just shrug while he sends more glares our way. While he has strict rules in his church that everyone follows to a T, we get away with all kinds of shit because Father Paul is the best friend of Uncle Lucian, Santiago’s father, and the Cortez family funds this church and all its charity organizations.

Otherwise, he’d have kicked us out a long time ago, not that we would have listened. Getting on Father Paul’s nerves has been our favorite pastime since we were little. Only back then, he chased us all over the church, promising to punish us in the most stern way while we laughed and even stole his mantle once.

Considering we ate the ice cream stashed in his freezer every single time after our antics, he never delivered on his promises, and that was why he stayed our favorite person, after Uncle Lucian and Uncle Jacob.

“That’s not true,” Remi says, crossing his arms. “We have respect. That’s why we’re here.” He sighs while Father Paul studies him, clearly expecting a catch. “You wound us deeply with your accusations.”

“Haven’t we attended church every Sunday?” Santiago pitches in, finishing his drink and pouring himself another. “It shows our dedication.”

Father Paul's face turns scandalized. "You haven't attended church since all of you were seven years old!"

"Are you sure?" Florian asks, hugging him and patting him on his chest. "Maybe you missed us during one of your sermons."

Santiago gasps. "*Dios Mios.*" He wipes away a nonexistent tear. "We're invisible to you."

"That's why you don't appreciate our dedication." Florian nods. "The devil hides us from you."

"Oh, that's a good one," Remi says, and they share a high five above Father's head, who's finally had enough of our bullshit.

I'm surprised he withstood it for so long. He always had the least patience for our banter among the grown-ups in our lives.

"Silence!" he yells, and everyone shuts up. "Don't try to be sneaky. It's a sin."

Santiago fires a question right away. "Isn't technically everything a sin?"

"Nope." Florian slaps him on the elbow. "Only the fun things are considered a sin."

"Ah, you—"

"I said silence!" Father Paul snatches a handkerchief and wipes his forehead while our gazes meet. "Octavius. You've always been the levelheaded one. Why are you doing this?" he asks almost with resignation because we both know he won't like the answer.

Or rather no answer of mine will allow him to sleep in peace tonight because he will perform the ceremony no matter what.

He christened all of us, watched us grow up, and was one of the few people who's seen my wounds. His loyalty to our families runs deep—deeper than his duty.

We're his family, after all.

However, his statement proves he hasn't been paying much attention to me because he would know that my levelheaded nature, as he calls it, is a cover-up for the constant storm and hunger consuming my whole being, striving for control in a world that offered me none once upon a time.

When a demon feasts on your flesh on a daily basis, you are at the mercy of his evilness, for you have no voice.

No emotions.

Nothing, as your life belongs to someone else, a prison with no way of escape where misery and devastation rule.

And agony, agony that has the power to either destroy you or make you stronger, and I chose the second option.

I had to, despite having people around me who cared about me and were ready to declare war if they had to in order to protect me.

My friends' parents will always have my respect and gratitude because they accepted and loved me as if I were their own, keeping an eye on my legacy and making sure no one took away my rights and inheritance.

If it wasn't for Uncle Lucian and Uncle Jacob, I wouldn't have had an empire or the means to protect my sister.

With power came responsibility, and I had to rein in the chaos to achieve the highs in my professional career and win the custody battle over Estella.

My control is ironclad, and the only person who ever threatened it is Isla.

At the thought of my gray-eyed beauty, my body grows hard while a sense of ownership washes over me, so I straighten up and reply, "I guess I met one woman with whom I couldn't stay levelheaded. I want her, Father Paul."

"You want her so much you can't wait to give her a proper wedding?" He crosses his arms and raises his chin. "All of you were raised better. Instead, you drag these poor women to my church and subject them to horrible weddings where they say I do, but it sounds as if they are signing a contract with the devil

himself.” He shrugs off Florian’s embrace and steps back, trailing his gaze over us, and announces, “I won’t consecrate it. You want to marry her so much, go to the courthouse. I’m done allowing you boys to make a mockery out of my values.”

Anger sparks up inside me, awakening the beast roaring in displeasure at anyone standing in the way of claiming my woman, so hooking my thumbs into my pants pockets, I ask, “Isn’t favoritism a sin, Father?”

His eyes widen in shock, and he exhales heavily. “Don’t even, boy.”

“Octavius is right.” Florian stands next to me, resting his elbow on my shoulder as we stare at Father whose cheeks heat, clearly ashamed under our scrutiny. “You gave us a whole lecture on how we shouldn’t show favoritism when we refused to play with other kids.”

“It’s a sin, Father Paul.”

“I’m trying to do the right thing.” Judging by his defeated tone, though, we forced him into a corner, and well...it’s not our proudest moment, and our parents would probably have our heads once they learn about this.

However, desperate times call for desperate measures. I can’t have him delay my plans because his consciousness suddenly became louder.

Besides, we could have acted way worse and used threats. I think our staying civil deserves a reward in itself.

“When Santiago and Remi came to you, you accepted their explanations and agreed to go through with the weddings.” I tap on my chin while Florian clicks his tongue. “Does this mean we are less important?”

“A reminder that Dad makes a hefty donation to your church as well,” Florian tells him. “Father Paul, do you have favorites among us?” He motions his hand between us. “You love Santiago and Remi more than us?”

Remi grins while Santiago winks at us as Father Paul’s eyes dart back and forth, and finally, his shoulders sag. “Fine. One more wedding and that’s it.” His voice grows firm. “This

is my final word.” He points at Florian. “I will consecrate your wedding, only if you have a big ceremony with a happy and willing bride.”

My best friend tenses next to me, and we share a long look with Remi when Santiago barks a laugh, finding even the idea that Florian might settle down someday laughable.

One thing is for sure, though.

Florian won’t be marrying Jimena in the middle of the night while blackmailing her.

But he will marry her no matter what.

That’s why he says, “Deal.”

Father Paul clasps his hands together. “Great. I need to change and grab my Bible, and I’m good to go.” With this, he walks off, leaving us alone, and without uttering a single word, I march outside.

Breathing in the frigid air, I snatch a pack of cigarettes from my back pocket, put one in my mouth, and Florian lights it as he joins me outside right away. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Taking a greedy pull, I send smoke flying as Santiago and Remi walk out, and we all stand in a circle where they watch me carefully, all traces of our earlier amusement gone. “What is it?”

“Now that we’re finally alone and have around fifteen minutes before the bride arrives, we need to talk.” Santiago puts his bottle away. “What are you doing, Octavius?”

“Getting married.”

“To a woman who was ready to betray you?” Florian asks, flipping the lighter through his fingers as he studies me. “Or rather...to a woman who you’ve been stalking for the past several months in New York. Your levelheaded nature sadly didn’t work whenever she was in danger, and we all had to face your mood swings without you voicing why you’ve been in a shitty mood.”

I should have known hiding anything from them was an impossible task. Besides, this brotherhood was built on honesty.

The Four Dark Horsemen never lie to each other. We might have spectacular dramas among the four, but we never lie to each other as it's an unforgivable sin in our eyes that threatens our unity.

One of the reasons I'm dreading Santiago finding out about Florian and Jimena is because he won't understand our stance.

While we never picked sides or betrayed his trust, all this time, we protected Jimena from being forced to end up in the war between their families that was as inevitable as the sunrise.

The Cortezes' and the Prices' patriarchs might accept a lot of things, but not anyone harming their cubs.

"We weren't thrilled you lusted after a cop, but we don't interfere in each other's private lives unless we absolutely have to," Santiago speaks up next. "However, by calling the feds tonight, she left us no choice but to interfere."

"So we have to ask." Florian lights up his own cigarette. "Is she simply bait to catch the son of a bitch who's been hunting us for over a decade and blamed his latest massacre on you?"

"Or is she a bride we guard and protect as our own because she's an extension of you and therefore of the Four Dark Horsemen?"

"More importantly, does your future wife know that she owes her life to you? Since you were the one to save her on that fateful day?"

I still at this, studying their blank expressions as they hold my stare, and realization hits me. "How do you know?"

This was my one deep secret I hid from everyone because its heavy burden was supposed to be my price to pay for freedom, and my friends who helped me out didn't deserve to carry the guilt.

The Church Killer sent me a special invitation two weeks after we killed my stepfather, promising to expose us all if I didn't comply with his invitation, so I had no choice but to go to that wedding.

A massacre.

So much blood pouring from bodies and smearing the floors.

So many dead people with horrified expressions permanently etched in their faces.

So much misery.

And among them all was one girl hammered to a wall with her hands above her, blood dripping from her forehead as she barely breathed because a piece of wire was wrapped tightly around her throat.

The minute I stepped foot in the church, I knew it was his plan all along to blame me as a punishment for putting our crime on him. I barely had time to remove Isla from the wall and cut off the wire, allowing her to breathe before the cops arrived, and then I escaped.

They said she was lucky because two more minutes and she wouldn't have survived.

The images are so vivid in my head that I could never step foot in a church without drinking again after that. I tried searching for her to keep an eye on her, but they hid her, and I had no skills or money back then to do my own research.

The idea of her death unsettled me and filled me with so much guilt. Her gray eyes haunted me for years until I saw her again, and my world tilted on its axes.

Beautiful and brave, calling to the darkness inside me craving to possess her for her mere presence, reminding us about the boy I used to be.

Who dreamed about other things than becoming a murderer, yet my darkness saved me, so I won't ever betray it.

Instead, I want to smear her in it so she wouldn't be so out of reach.

Mine and only mine.

“Thirteen years ago, we all got the invitation.” Santiago snaps me out of my thoughts, bringing me back to the conversation at hand. “We spoke about it before graduation, but you never said a word. That’s when we knew you wanted to go alone and face *our* consequences on your own.”

Ah, my best friends.

They don’t miss an opportunity to remind me that no matter what any of us ever do, they will always be *our* sins.

“We decided to go without telling you, following you in our car and helping you in case you needed backup.” Remi winces, taking a swig from his whiskey bottle. “We didn’t expect the fucking hell that greeted us.”

“The rest is history,” Florian concludes, puffing on his smoke. “So I repeat again. Who is Isla to us? Does her betrayal change anything?” A beat passes. “Bait or a bride? Make a choice, Octavius, but do so with the knowledge that whatever you pick...there will be no coming back from that.”

They all nod while I look at my best friend and frown. I can read between the lines well.

After all, we’ve been inseparable all this time, and our bond runs deeper than anything else in our lives.

Even Santiago and Remi do not understand our level of friendship as Florian isn’t just a friend or a brother.

He’s a soulmate who never ever gave up on me.

With a loud scratch, I finish writing on the parchment we all ordered, dipping the feather in ink one last time before putting a dot on it. “So nine rules in total, and we have to seal it with our blood.” After deciding to form the brotherhood, we all agreed on rules we all vowed to follow in order to control all our different characters and have our limits in case shit hit the fan.

Florian picks up the knife, ready to slice his palm, when Remi’s question stops him. “What about women?”

“What about them? You can fuck whoever you want. Just keep it covered because we don’t need little horsemen in our lives,” Santiago says, shuddering a little at the idea of bringing a child into this world. He has been the most vocal about never wanting to get married.

I find it so strange, considering he’s the only one whose parents among us stayed married their whole lives and loved each other madly.

“Ha ha. Fuck you, Santiago,” Remi barks before elaborating. “If any one of us claims a woman as his own, what happens?”

“Ehh, it’s up to you?” Florian supplies, as confused with this conversation as the rest of us.

Why the hell is he even asking that? I might be eighteen, but I’m still a virgin, while the guys fuck whoever they want whenever the mood strikes them. It’s not like any of them showed any sign of commitment toward others, or it’s in anyone’s plan.

“Except when a man takes a woman, he shares with her. She becomes part of you. It contradicts rule number five, in which we do not reveal the true deeds of the brotherhood.”

Florian runs his hand over his face, muttering something about Remi’s romantic nature, while Santiago huffs, his body language showing in all its glory how much distaste he has for that statement.

Which means I have around five seconds to defuse the situation before it escalates. “Look, Remi—”

“No. I won’t leave this to chance. We’ll agree on it right fucking now, or this brotherhood will run without me.”

My brow shoots up, and I share a long look with Florian, who shrugs, although he grins when I frown at him.

He always finds their fights hilarious, maybe because we never have any real fights.

Ever.

Santiago gets up, facing off with Remi, anger shining in his eyes while his fists clench.

Ah, hell.

“Who are you, Remi, to give me ultimatums?”

“Who are you to tell me I cannot protect my woman?”

“She doesn’t even exist. It’s a mythical concept you think you might want to have someday.” Santiago hits him on the chest, and he sways a little before finding his balance quickly and delivering his own blow, sending Remi flying to the wall, his back hitting the stone hard.

Florian chuckles and rolls his eyes while I shake my head.

Why the fuck do these two always find a reason to beat the shit out of each other?

“Fucking apologize!” Remi shouts, moving toward him, and Santiago punches me right in the face instead.

Yeah, time to interfere.

We jump up, darting to them. “Lo siento, Remi. Is this enough of an apology for you?” Santiago asks, a wide grin spreading across his mouth.

Remi launches toward him, delivering his own blows to his face as they fall back, continuing to punch each other.

“Enough, both of you.” Neither of them listens to me, though.

“What is it, Remi? Want a woman of your own so she can compensate for your childhood?”

Yeah, needless to say, these two get personal when they want to hurt each other, which is hilarious, considering you could never offend one without offending the other because they would die for each other.

Besides, Remi knew what he was doing when raising this question that’s a red flag to a bull when it comes to Santiago.

“Shut up!”

Santiago pushes him harder, and Remi falls on one of the desks, where they continue to roughhouse, only for one to kick the other hard, and as a result, they both tumble to the floor.

“Enough, Santiago, enough!” Florian screams, wrapping his arm around him and keeping him away while I do the same to Remi, both of them standing opposite each other and breathing heavily. Blood drips from Santiago’s lips, bruises already forming under his nose, and I guess Remi’s face isn’t any better.

“Let me go,” he orders, but Florian doesn’t listen to him.

When it comes to conflicts, his resolve shines through because Florian never does anything unless he is sure everyone has calmed down.

“Not until both of you are done.”

“Please, let me go. I’m fine. I’m not going to do anything.” I wait for a second, letting them calm some more, and nod, stepping back. Remi adjusts his shirt, wiping away the blood, and points a finger at Santiago. “You’ve got issues.”

Florian finally lets him go, and he steps closer to Remi, smirking. “Yeah, so do you.” They watch one another for a second before they hug, slapping each other on the back, and Remi whispers, “It’s important to me.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Florian bumps me with his shoulder, winking at me at their display of affection, and I grin because, yeah.

We are all untamed monsters who have a deep loyalty to one another.

I go back to the chair, dipping the feather in ink again and bringing it onto the parchment as the ink drips slowly on it.

“Write the law.”

“If one of the Four Dark Horsemen claims a woman as his bride, she becomes one of us.” The feather scratches against the paper while Remi continues, “She has our loyalty and protection.”

“Hold it. What if she ends up being a two-timing bitch undeserving of our trust?”

Ah, Florian, always the pessimist who never trusts women despite intending to fuck all of Chicago.

Why would we want a woman like that, though? I won't be putting my life on the line for a woman who lacks respect for this brotherhood and wishes to destroy us the first opportunity she gets.

Since none of them say anything, I speak up. “Considering who stands on the other side...” I stop writing. “We end her.”

We'll never harm an innocent, but we can make someone pay in many ways. Psychological torture is sometimes worse than physical torture.

“Not without a vote,” Remi warns.

With our nods, we wait till I finish and slice our palms one by one, sealing our oaths with blood.

With every breath she takes, Isla awakens the beast living inside me, constantly raging over the chaos consuming his soul, yet her existence alone soothes him, her acceptance and wonder tempting me and making me believe that the impossible is possible.

That a scarred beast can find solace in the arms of a beauty destined to cure him even though there is no cure in sight for the likes of me.

She's an addiction and obsession in one, my one true weakness because I can excuse and accept whatever she does. Life without her seems dark and uninteresting.

Staying away from her was a torturous and hideous art form that kept me alive. Staring at her from a distance was better than nothing. However, little scraps cannot sustain the monster for long.

We're selfish creatures who demand to get what we desire, and what I truly desired all my life was her.

A woman who can never understand me because she grew up with a different moral code, a woman who believes in the

law above anything else and follows it while I always break it when it suits me.

A woman unafraid to chase after a man who constantly pushed her away, driving me even more mad. Over the years, I engaged in sexual encounters, finding the release welcoming, a momentary reprieve from the constant memories eating at me from the inside out. Every encounter left me empty, creating a gaping hole searching for something more than an easy release meaning nothing.

They all hated me and despised looking at me, but I couldn't give two shits about it since I paid them generously and never forced them to face me, avoiding any sense of intimacy.

When it comes to Isla, though, I cannot imagine the act without any intimacy.

As my dark being wishes to be near her and worship her body on my sheets for hours, listening to her gasps of pleasure echoing through my house that knew nothing but sorrows.

I need to learn every inch of her body, finding out all her sensitive spots and claiming her in the most primal way so she has no doubt she belongs to me.

So other men will cease to exist for her, because there will never be another man who wants or cherishes her more than I ever will.

Despite all that, though...she betrayed me tonight.

The fire inside her burns brightly for me, her eyes begging me to make it all better and soothe the inferno consuming her, urging her to run away from me because my presence alone makes me relive her nightmares.

My fists clench just thinking about the fucker playing with her mind so much, damaging my pure and innocent creature.

He made her like me, and for this alone, he deserves death.

I open my mouth to give them the answer, when Santiago's phone rings, and he picks it up. "*Querida.*" Softness coats his tone, so even without the endearment, we'd know it was

Briseis. He doesn't bother being nice and gentle to anyone else. "I see." He glances at me and sighs. "Your future wife refuses to come here. I believe the exact phrase she used is '*He can go fuck himself if he thinks I'll do it.*'"

Well, she made my choice easy, hadn't she?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“As a little girl, I dreamed about marrying a prince who would love me with all his heart.

How ironic.

Because I’m not marrying a prince.

I’m marrying a man who’s drawn so much from his vices, they consumed him.

And as such, he has nothing but darkness to offer.”

Isla

*I*sla

“We really need to get going, Isla.”

“I won’t go.”

“They’re waiting for us.”

“They are? Well, tough luck.” Briseis drops on the bed, her dress crumpled from all the clenching she’s done in the past hour. “You shouldn’t worry so much. You already told them I’m not going.”

Octavius can argue until he turns blue, but I won’t go to a place that sends me falling down the abyss where only my pain and agonizing screams remain, taking me back to the one defining moment in my life where evilness wiped away my whole family.

No.

I'm weak and cornered in this marriage, but I still have self-preservation, and it urges me to stand my ground and refuse this, probably Octavius's punishment anyway.

If he stalked me like Florian said he did, then he knows better than anyone how such a possibility hurts me.

"He didn't sound pleased." I laugh at this, although it lacks any humor, and she casts me a worried glance as she adjusts the blanket over a sleeping Jimena. She barely spared me a glance when I entered, and Michelle started to work on my hair and makeup yet again. The girl is clearly exhausted from her pregnancy, and that's why she gets a huge pass in all this madness. Plus, she's related to Santiago, so she probably loves them and excuses them all.

Family before anyone else and all that jazz.

Now Briseis is a whole different story altogether. "I don't really care how the dark four feel about my actions."

"You sound angry."

It's hard to keep the bite from my tone when I reply, "Should I be happy?"

Michelle brushes my cheeks with blush one last time and leans back, grinning. "You look stunning." She starts picking up her things from the vanity table and placing them in her bags. "Florian's lucky he's so pretty, or I wouldn't have stayed overtime. Even for such a good bonus." She winks at me. "Congratulations on your wedding." She grabs her bag and nods at Briseis. "Bye, Mrs. Cortez. Have fun, you all." With one last wave, she leaves the room, and I exhale because having her in here was torture.

I couldn't discuss anything around her, and if she found the bride sad and uninterested in the whole thing, she said nothing.

"She's right. You do look stunning." Briseis speaks up in the stretched silence and taking a deep breath, I get up and spin around to study my reflection.

My locks cascade down my shoulders in pretty waves, creating a rather elegant look around my face, sharpening my high cheekbones, and a small pearly pin on the side glistens

under the lights, emphasizing my flawless makeup that almost transforms me into a princess straight from the fairy tales.

If the princess was dragged to marry a villain instead of a prince, that is.

However, all this pales in comparison to the white ball-gown-style wedding dress made of the finest silk and chiffon, the corset wrapped so tightly around me with various laces it's a wonder I can breathe. It gives an illusion of a slim waist, creating rather generous curves on my hips, and the endless skirt seems huge, allowing me to twirl around if I so wish. I could've never imagined wearing something so feminine and thinking how much it suits me, even with all my imperfections.

The blue heels finish the look, and according to Michelle, that was per Florian's request so I'd have something blue on my wedding.

The hilarity of this man never fails to astonish me.

My reflection makes me feel all kinds of ways, so to stop all the emotions sweeping over me, I lift my chin and adjust the veil on my head. "Octavius decided to go all in despite this wedding being a charade." I glance at Briseis, who stands up and pours herself yet another cup of tea. "Is this how you felt when Santiago forced you to marry him?"

She takes a tentative sip. "Yes. A bit worse, all things considered. But I'm familiar with the sense of doom and hopelessness you're feeling among these powerful and wealthy men."

"Oh, is this why you're helping me get ready right now? Because you empathize with my pain?"

She straightens up at my verbal jab, and her eyes flash in fury, although her voice stays even. "You have a right to be angry. You have no right to take it out on me, though." A beat passes as we have a stare-off. "Whatever happened between Octavius and you has nothing to do with me."

"So that's your stance? A woman needs help, and you won't do shit because you don't want to interfere?" I know

she's right, and I shouldn't take my anger out on her, but I'm about to be married to a man who might do God knows what to me. "Wow!"

She rests her back against a wall, sipping her tea some more as she ponders on my statement. "It's about loyalties." Since I stay silent, she elaborates, "My loyalty is with Santiago and the Four Dark Horsemen. I'm on their side even if sometimes I don't agree with their methods. However, I know them. They gave you a choice, and this"—she motions her hand up and down my form—"is a result of your choice. And no offense, Isla. But I've just met you tonight and you wanted to put my husband behind bars." She places her cup on a nearby table and crosses her arms. "I have my own anger," she finishes, and I have to say I'm surprised to see some character underneath her quiet and soft-spoken nature.

However, that's not what snags my attention.

It's how she protects her husband.

Despite everything, she loves him and accepts him as he is, and the way they look at each other should be illegal.

Is this kind of marriage possible with one of them if you forget about sanity, morals, and laws?

Briseis's phone vibrates, and she snatches it up, muttering, "Oh no."

"What is it?"

"They're on their way here. Octavius is going to drag you to the church, willing or not," she whispers, and she steps toward me as she probably reads the utter horror on my face, and suddenly, all this becomes too much.

A bubble bursts inside me, spilling all my fears out, and there is only one way to contain it.

Run.

Fisting the skirt of my heavy wedding dress, I rush out of the room, my heels clicking loudly on the marble and echoing through the walls of this cursed mansion. Their voices bellow

after me, one more panicked than the other. “Isla!” Jimena must have woken up.

Ignoring their pleadings, I scrunch my eyes and shake my head because they mean nothing.

Mercy, compassion, empathy.

Octavius has no idea what these concepts mean, and that makes him the most dangerous man I’ve ever met, and unfortunately for me...he showed me how he punishes those who cross him.

I cascade down the stairs, my heavy breathing filling the hallway and not letting me fall into the abyss that’s my desperation and misery.

“Isla!”

Trapping the sob between my lips, I run to the doors and fly through them, welcoming the frigid air slapping me on my cheek and sinking coldness into every bone in my body.

An owl hoots in the distance as the powerful boom shakes the sky lit by a thousand stars shining brightly, announcing the upcoming storm when dark clouds start to gather, and a tremor rushes through me.

Even Mother Nature seems to be on their side and never mine. Isn’t that just tragic?

The moonlight glows in all its magnificent glory, opening up the enormous garden to my view and all the ways to get lost in it. Maybe I can even find solace between the thick trees with long, dangling leaves brushing the ground almost inviting me to find sanctuary among them and hide me from *him*.

My feet burn, and I’ll probably have blisters for days. However, I ignore my hurt, focusing only on one goal in mind.

To escape from this prison so I still have a chance because anything is better than being trapped here with him even if the world thinks otherwise.

“Isla!” A seductive yet sinister voice calls my name this time around, sending chills down my spine and breaking goose bumps on my skin.

He's here.

My hold on the cloth tightens as desperation fills every cell in my body, and I bite on my lip to keep the cry of pain from emerging when one of my heels breaks, making me stumble a little.

I slip them off quickly and dart to the side, my eyes roaming through the perimeter and searching for a better place to escape.

I race toward the endless path leading to the massive gates, and the empty road is my only hope now to catch someone's attention and finally end this once and for all.

"Isla!" he calls again, the heavy thumping behind me letting me know he's chasing after me, intending to catch his latest pray and smear me in blood.

I reach the ground, rocks flying under my feet and digging into my skin probably drawing blood, but I don't stop.

For stopping means death to my soul, and how can I give up without a fight?

I'm stubborn and strong, and I'd rather die trying to escape than succumb to him.

"There is no escape from me, kitten!"

Shaking my head, I gasp while tears form in my eyes at the prospect of being caught, the images painted in my head each more depressing than the other.

Laughter bubbles up in my throat when the gates are several feet away, and I almost sigh in relief despite my exhaustion when three men step from under the shadows into full light.

Halting my movements, I curl my toes into the asphalt as I watch them.

Santiago flips the lighter between his fingers while Remi puts a cigarette in his mouth and leans closer to let him light it, both seemingly bored with the whole thing and barely even sparing me a glance.

And only one of them drills his green eyes into me, his blond hair caressed by the wind, and disgusting shivers wash over me as nothing but hate fills them.

Florian despises me for running away, and he makes no secret of that if his earlier threats are anything to go by.

Finally snapping out of my shock, I spin around, ready to find another way, only to come to a full stop when I see *him* walking toward me wearing black jeans and rolling up the sleeves of his white shirt, emphasizing his muscled body and the deep veins on his forearms.

Dark hair covers his scarred cheek as his brown eyes sweep their gaze over me, possessiveness coating them. He comes closer, and with each step, the drumming of my heart intensifies. “Kitten, I think someone gave you the wrong directions.” His lips curve into a sinister smile while his eyes stay hollow, and fury practically emits from him, enveloping me while whispering about the retribution for my actions in the future. “The church is that way.” Finally, he reaches me, the tips of his shoes touching my bare toes, and a gasp slips from my throat when he threads his fingers in my hair, several pins dropping around us while he pulls me to him, our chests bumping against each other’s and our gazes clashing. “Willing or not, kitten. Willing or not, tonight you will become my wife. After all, isn’t this what you wanted?”

I close my eyes at the sheer mockery in his tone, my fingers crumpling his shirt in my hold. The events from the past few months flash in my head like an endless kaleidoscope, not letting me rest.

No.

I never wanted this.

I guess I have no one but myself to blame, though.

After all, all my choices led me to this moment.

Where I have to marry him.

Because I made him break what he valued the most.

His oath.

“Please don’t make me do this,” I whisper, our eyes meeting, and a tear slides down my cheek. “Please don’t take me to the church. I can’t do it.”

He studies my face for several beats, his thumb wiping the tear away, and somehow, his warmth serves as a protective cocoon around me, as insane as it sounds in the current circumstances. “Is this why you ran?”

“Yes.” I swallow and take a deep breath. “The idea of going to a church kills me. I don’t want to relive that day. Please.”

His hold on me tightens, and he shouts, “Father Paul.” I blink at the priest hastily moving toward us, breathing heavily when he reaches us and glances at Octavius. “Start the ceremony now.”

Relief washes over me, and my knees wobble, but Octavius’s strong hold keeps me upward as more tears form in my eyes that he wipes away as well.

At this moment, he offers me kindness, showing me that deep down in all that darkness, there is still a heart and a soul.

“Here?” the priest asks in bewilderment as he scans me from head to toe. “The bride is barefoot.”

“Start. The. Ceremony.” Octavius’s voice leaves no room for argument, and the priest mutters something under his breath, and flips the Bible open while the guys gather behind us. I see the girls coming closer as well.

“Dearly beloved—”

“Get to the point, Father. We don’t have time for all this.”

Father Paul sighs and closes his eyes as if praying for patience. Then he snaps them open, focusing on me. “Do you, Isla Evans, take Octavius Reed as—”

“I do,” I reply quickly, staring right into Octavius’s eyes, and I don’t miss how pleasure lights them up at my answer.

“Do you, Octavius Reed—”

“I do.”

I've never thought about my wedding in my revenge-filled life. However, I never imagined this comical ceremony even in the worst-case scenarios.

I'm a mess, both emotionally and physically, while the groom wears jeans and the priest clearly wishes to be anywhere else but here surrounded by people who dislike me.

Life truly sucks sometimes.

"You may kiss the bride now," Father Paul announces quickly, and I still when Octavius tips my chin up, leaning forward, and presses his lips against my forehead, lingering a bit there. Somehow, his touch calms down the chaos, hitting me in waves. And then his mouth moves lower until it reaches mine, connecting us in a fast kiss that I barely feel before he scoops me up in his arms, and I wrap my arms around his neck. "Octavius." The priest gasps.

"I'm going to take my wife home." He looks at his friends. "A bride. She's a bride." They smirk and salute him while he spins around on his heel and marches toward the awaiting black car while I'm confused and lost.

One thing is clear, though.

I'm officially married to Octavius Reed.

And only time will tell if it's a blessing or a curse.

Octavius

Tonight, she became mine.

God helps us all.

Because I've never claimed anything for myself.

My desire, though, just might burn us both.

As the man who hates us watches, craving to snatch Isla for himself and do to her whatever he pleases because he cannot forgive us.

Well.

He should be careful.

As she is no longer Isla Evans, his only surviving victim.

She's a Reed.

And no one fucks with a Reed.

No one who wants to live anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY

*“All monsters have their beginnings.
Mine are so hideous and painful it’s a wonder I survived
them.”*

Octavius

*O*ctavius, 5 years old

“We’re here,” our driver announces, making me jump on my seat and grip the stuffed bear in my hands tighter. “Be careful!” he yells just as I open the door and get outside while Antonio exits the car, running toward me.

“Octavius, please slow down,” he says, but I just roll my eyes, almost clapping at the sight of my family home, and quickly race up the stairs, passing by the gaping maid in a blur with my butler hot on my heels.

“Keep up!” I shout at him, my shoes tapping soundly on the perfectly polished marble as I rush toward my mom’s room and finally stop in front of it, gulping for air.

Here it comes!

I knock three times and press my ear to the door, waiting for a reply as I hold my breath.

I hear a soft, “Come in.” I grip the handle and enter, the sunlight shining brightly through the huge window in my parents’ room, basking it in peacefulness and magical energy, instantly calming me.

Refusing to pay attention to anything else, I focus on the bed where my mom lies, propping her back against the headboard and holding a baby in her arms in the pink blanket.

Not any baby.

My little sister!

Happiness flashes on her face. “Come here, my sweet boy.” Warmth slides through me at my mama’s voice. I haven’t seen her since three days ago when she was rushed to the hospital to deliver the baby. She was in pain and screaming.

Daddy, or Wayne, who everyone says is really my cousin since my biological father was his uncle, joined her in the hospital, and he’d come to the house when I was already asleep. So I was very anxious waiting for this moment. Antonio even allowed me to eat ice cream while watching cartoons to pass the time because I cried or sighed in boredom otherwise.

“Mama! You’re here!” I come closer to her, showing off the pink stuffed bear. “I bought this for her.” Well, technically, Florian bought it because he always has money in his pockets, but it still counts.

“How nice.” She takes it with her free hand and puts it away, tightening her hold on the baby and shifting so I can see. “Meet your little sister, darling. Estella.”

She’s stunning!

She blinks at me several times, her flawless skin almost porcelain, and she has red hair, while her eyes curiously look at me.

A weird emotion fills me.

Something I’ve never felt before, and without thinking, I touch her small hand and gasp when she wraps her palm around my finger. She has quite a grip! “Hi. I’m Octavius,” I tell her, earning myself a blink. “I’m your big brother.” She fusses a little, her lips moving in a sucking motion, and she blinks again. “She’s so tiny,” I whisper and frown, thinking how fragile she seems compared to all the other kids I’ve seen.

What if anyone hurts her? What if anyone makes fun of her? What if someone makes her cry?

Somehow, all these possibilities are unacceptable, so I give myself a word right there. No matter what happens, I'll always protect her and be her best big brother.

She'll be a little princess in a castle with a brave knight protecting her and saving her from all these princes who stink.

Mommy opens her mouth to say something, when the door bursts open again and Daddy enters, throwing his jacket on a nearby chair. "Darling," he greets her, grinning while swirling the glass of whiskey in his hand as he walks toward us.

Jumping up from Mom's side, I rush to him and smack into his knees, tilting my head back, and smile. "Hi, Daddy!"

I expect him to do what he always does, pick me up, tickle me, and then hug me close. However, he does none of those things.

Instead, he barely spares me a glance as he pushes me away, snapping, "Not now, Octavius." I rub my arms in confusion. Pain travels through me at his rejection, and I watch him go to Mom, staring at Estella.

Does he love her more now?

I have a classmate who said his parents changed after having siblings. They paid them more attention and became more snappy and angry with my classmate. None of my best friends could confirm this story because they don't have siblings for now.

I didn't believe it, though. How could my loving parents not love me anymore just because they have another baby?

He leans forward and picks her up. Mom gasps when he straightens up and rocks the baby a bit in his arms, only to huff in displeasure when she starts to cry, her whimpers filling the air, and devastation rushes through me because I hate to hear that. "She misses Mommy."

He ignores my words and instead barks, “Antonio.” In a second, our butler rushes inside, and he orders, “Take the baby to the nursery. Have you called the doctor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“From now on, you’ll feed her from the bottle.”

“Wayne—”

“You’ve finally given me a true heir. She’ll get the Reed empire one day.” My brow furrows at this because what he says makes no sense to me.

Despite being five years old, some family traditions were taught to me from a young age, like the fact that only direct heirs inherit the fortune of the Reed dynasty. Wives and husbands get nothing and when my biological father Keneth died, fifty-one percent of his shares transferred to me while the other forty-nine belonged to Daddy.

Everyone said that one day I will rule our empire, and I couldn’t wait to work alongside Daddy and see our company prosper.

“Wayne, I need more time—”

“Nonsense.” With one last glance, he gives Estella to Antonio. “Hire two nannies taking shifts. I want someone with her all the time, and never bother Pamela. My wife needs all the rest, she has no time to have sleepless nights with a newborn.” He cups her cheek, swiping his thumb over her lips while she swallows hard, her face paling. “You’re too precious to me, darling, to waste on these children.” An odd note coats his voice, his eyes softening as he looks at Mommy. According to various people, he has always loved her, even when she married Keneth. She must have feelings for him too, because she married him two months after her first husband died.

I rub my arms once again, hating my thoughts as they were usually spoken by some jealous people who claimed Mom snagged a rich husband and decided to secure her position in society when she married his nephew.

I’m not sure about that, but I do know she had no money to speak of because Keneth left the power of attorney over my

shares to Uncle Lucian.

Daddy always hated it, claiming that a Cortez deciding what happens with a Reed was an offense and an unforgivable move made by his late uncle.

Estella chooses this moment to cry harder, and Antonio rocks her, trying to soothe her, but it doesn't help. "Take her fucking away. I can't listen to this anymore." Our butler nods, hastily walking outside and closing the door behind him as Daddy continues to stare at Mommy. "Pamela, you made me a happy man. I finally don't have to act in my own fucking house. No matter what happens, my daughter will be the one to inherit all the fortune." His laughter reverberates through the walls, cold and scary in its nature. I freeze when his gaze lands on me, his usually warm eyes now so hollow, reminding me of those belonging to a demon from all the horror books Santiago loves to read. "Keneth, I hope you're watching this," he says, and I step back, ready to grab the handle because Daddy is so scary that my hands shake. "Come here, boy."

"I need to check on Estella," I whisper, the walls closing in on me as I breathe through my nose, too afraid and confused to understand what's going on around me.

Maybe Daddy drank too much; it wouldn't be the first time either.

"Octavius." His tone leaves no room to disobey.

I spin around again to look at him, only to cry out in pain when he slaps me hard across the face, making me land on my side and hitting my head on the floor, hurt traveling all over me as tears fill my eyes. "Always listen to my orders right away, Octavius."

"Daddy, please stop," I shout when he kicks me hard in the stomach. Instantly, dizziness and the desire to vomit overtakes me, and I cover my mouth, silently crying because my father continues to loom above me.

"Don't fucking call me that ever again. Do you understand? I'm not your father, and your existence alone is a reminder that Pamela chose someone else over me." He fists

my hair and I tilt my head back, his grip so strong I'm afraid he'll rip it all off while I feel blood dripping from my forehead, mixing with my tears. "Your existence no longer has a purpose for me. Estella will get everything." He sways me from side to side while holding my hair and then he pushes me to the wall, my face hitting it. My mouth fills with blood as the scream traps in my throat, for the pain is so strong I can barely move my jaw. "I can't kill you, but I will destroy you. You won't win this time around, Keneth."

Keneth. Is it my biological father he's punishing right now?

He lets me go, and I fall back on the floor, everything spinning around me. I cough on the blood and gaze at the ceiling, unable to move a muscle, yet hope flares inside me.

Hope because Daddy might have become a monster, but Mommy is here. She would defeat all the evil and protect us.

Like in all these fairy tales.

Our mothers love us the most.

At least that's what society tries to feed us, claiming that the bonds between mothers and their children are absolute.

One person who accepts you as you are, loves you no matter what, and protects you fiercely if danger lurks on the horizon, ready to sacrifice herself but never ever allowing anyone to come near her child.

There are always exceptions to every rule, though.

The scars on my body and soul can attest to that.

*S*sla

The initial shock finally wears off, and everything comes crashing back at me, so I hit his chest, wiggling in his hold, and seethe, "Let me go! I can walk!" The last thing I need for him is to drag me around as if I'm some willing bride who married him because she loves him.

Pure blackmail and nothing else done by the murderer.

“Settle down, kitten. You can’t be trusted.”

“I can’t be trusted?” I ask with disbelief in my tone while hating how my body reacts to his presence, his hard chest simmers my blood while goose bumps pop on my skin, and the air hitches in my throat. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“I wasn’t the one running away. So yes, kitten. You can’t be trusted.” He glances at my neck, and I shiver at the possessiveness filling his brown eyes as he lazily sweeps his gaze over me. “Not until you have my collar.”

Not until I have what now?

Octavius marches toward the black car in the distance, where the chauffeur opens the back seat door for us. A blank expression flashes across his face, and I have to give it to him.

It takes skill to be this unfazed when your boss is carrying an angry woman in his arms. “Mr. Reed,” he greets him and looks at me. “Mrs. Reed. Congratulations.” He wears a uniform and holds on to his hat when the harsh wind whooshes over us.

“Thank you, Eric,” Octavius says and places me inside the car. I huff in exhaustion as the silk and chiffon almost swallow me whole, but I welcome the vehicle’s warmth. “Home,” he orders and shuts the door in my face, locking me as if I’m foolish enough to leave when they’re all here.

I don’t participate in fights I can’t win because it’s stupid. The strongest one wins, and the weaker one is left humiliated and more bruised, which lessens their chance of survival the next time.

I muster up a smile for the chauffeur who briefly glances my way. Something softens in his gaze, but he quickly covers it up, opening the door for Octavius on the other side and then getting in as well.

That’s to be expected, right?

A beast rules his faithful subjects who do whatever he wishes as it ensures their survival, and while I can’t be called a beauty...only one fairy tale comes to mind in this moment.

This is such a...

Disaster.

Because to the world, I'm Mrs. Reed from now on, but I know nothing about my husband besides the fact that he kills people for fun.

Splendid start to this marriage.

My heart aches inside my chest, and I place my hand on it, rubbing it as just hours ago, I wouldn't have minded to be... his wife, as crazy as it sounds.

Despite his colorful past and present, we have a connection, and I can't deny it no matter how much I wish nothing ever happened between us.

And there is goodness inside him because he didn't drag me to the church to enjoy my misery and show his total control and power over the situation. He and his friends must be perfect manipulators, using their psychological skills to get whatever they want, and one thing you can always do to a person to break them...is use their weaknesses against them.

A physical pain is bearable compared to the one we experience psychologically because there is no running away or healing in sight for these hidden wounds.

They fester or hurt but never heal, always reminding you about the horrors you've experienced.

Resting my head against the window and watching the passing scenery as Eric starts driving, I whisper, "Thank you."

Octavius presses a button and the screen divider slides up, creating a sense of privacy for us in this small space. "For what?"

"For not forcing me to go to the church. I won't run away again." Being hysterical and difficult won't win me any points, and it's exhausting. I'll find the solution to escape this marriage, but not tonight. "I give you my word." Eric gets us on a narrow road leading to the highway, and my brow furrows. "Where are we going?"

He introduced me to his chauffeur, but does he plan to make this marriage public knowledge? Maybe he wants to hide me somewhere, alone and isolated from the world so I won't spill anything while he deals with everything.

Although wouldn't he need to show me off to the feds if they knocked on his door?

I gasp when instead of answering me, he grabs my hand and brings me closer. His fingers unclip various pins in my hair hurting my scalp, and he massages the sore flesh, bringing me instant relief. I didn't realize how much they pulled at my hair. "You're my wife." I sigh when he lets my hair fall down my shoulders and cups my cheek, his thumb caressing me as he leans forward, our mouths inches apart. "Nothing and no one should ever hurt you. Never wear the damn things again." Displeasure laces his voice along with anger, and I swallow at the intensity in his gaze or how butterflies erupt in my stomach at him calling me his wife.

I must be really exhausted as there is no other explanation for these feelings. However, common sense still pushes through when I grip his shirt with my fingers and reply, "You hurt me." I trace my fingers over my throat. "Tonight, you hurt me." He might hate anyone else bringing me discomfort but that changes nothing in our reality.

He's the greatest threat to my sanity, soul, and heart so I should always be aloof and protect myself from the inevitable heartbreak it will all cause me.

He continues to caress me with his thumb, and I feel his heart thump steadily. "You hurt me too."

"So is this how this marriage will work?" I tilt my head back, and a raspy breath escapes me. "We'll continue to hurt each other until one of us can't take it anymore?" A humorless chuckle slips past my lips. "I mean, that's what we've been doing all this time, right?" I click my tongue. "Not really. I didn't hurt you in any way, but you...you treated me worse than the plague." Try as I might, I can't mask the pain in my voice and I hate myself for it. "Don't worry, though. This little

prisoner knows the rules and will act accordingly. Because there are always consequences for disobedience.”

The energy around us charges instantly, tension cracking the air while wicked electricity zaps through my entire system when he presses me hard to his chest with his free arm. His other hand slides to my neck, his fingers wrapping around my throat, and my pulse beats against his fingers. Thousands of goose bumps break out on my flesh when he speaks up, “You’re my wife, Isla. The whole world belongs to you as there is nothing I can’t get for you. You just have to wish for something, and it’s yours.” My hold on his shirt tightens when he squeezes my waist, his grip letting me know I can never argue his claim. “You’re mine to cherish, mine to spoil, and mine to fucking own. Your body and soul should have only one person in mind. Me.” He tips my chin up, his hot breath fanning my cheeks when he skims his mouth to my ear, continuing to whisper as heat travels all over me, burning me and awakening my senses. “Would you like that, kitten?” he asks, biting on my earlobe and tickling my skin. “Being the center of my attention all the time?”

Need consumes me at his whispered words, creating carnal images in my head that send desire straight to my core. I shift closer to him as he licks the abused flesh, only to trace his mouth back to my chin and nip on it. “Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Me owning this body whatever chance I get. My tongue licking this pussy until you can’t remember your name.” A moan slips past my lips, and he grins. I cut my nails into his chest, making him hiss, “Or my fingers stretching your tight walls and preparing you for me, ready to fuck you hard or slow, depending on how much you want it.” His face darkens, and I close my eyes, arching my neck when his lips trail lower, leaving burning imprints in his wake, yet every touch and caress sends me deeper into the madness that’s our marriage. Because I can’t fight the lust flaring inside me and spreading all over me, demanding one thing only.

Him.

“I could own this body for hours, enjoying every whimper and moan coming from your throat as you writhe on my

sheets. A beauty who got trapped by the horrible beast, yet she still loves his touch.” He sucks on my flesh, and I groan, gripping his shirt so tight it’s a wonder it doesn’t rip. Despite his words, though, his kisses are gentle and almost apologetic, and I don’t miss how he traces his lips over my throat, placing soft kisses where he hurt me.

My own kind of monster who thrives in darkness yet cannot stand my pain, and while this knowledge should scare me...it only pulls me toward him harder, making me hope for the impossible.

“Octavius,” I whisper, my voice so needy I blush, but I still beg him.

Beg him to stop this madness before I lose any respect for myself, as I’m powerless from the force that’s him.

Maybe my heart and body already belong to him, but my soul...my soul and sanity are still mine, and they scream at me to do the right thing.

His mouth skirts upward until he reaches my mouth, and we share a breath as he pushes his tongue against my lips and delves inside, entwining us in a deep and needy kiss consuming me.

A kiss that stakes his control over me, each glide and brush of his tongue conquering the territory inside me so no one else dares to touch me as everything in me belongs to him.

Warmth along with heat envelops me, and my hands glide upward until I circle his neck and deepen the kiss even more, enjoying how he dominates me, pleasure traveling all over me.

Angling my head back, I open my mouth wider under his, and he swallows my moans in his throat when the embrace turns hotter, our tongues dancing in a lustful duel threatening to wipe away anything from my mind but him.

His muscled frame makes my core clench as I remember how easily he can lift me and fuck me anywhere he wishes, making me come every single time because his whole focus belongs to me. His masculine scent surrounds me, and urges me to succumb to the temptation, bringing relief to this ache.

His fingers play with the laces on my dress, ready to drag it down as he continues to own my mouth, pushing deeper and deeper to take me here as well.

If he just...

A loud honking serves akin to cold water pouring on me from above, pulling me out of this maddening haze.

Oh my God.

What am I doing?

A few sweet words, and I'm ready to fold to a man who blackmailed me into this marriage!

Tearing my mouth away, I shove him hard and press my back to the door as our heavy breathing fills the air. His hooded eyes blaze with desire and need akin to mine, although it doesn't soothe the inferno in my chest. "No," I say, sliding the window open and inhaling the fresh air in my lungs. "Don't touch me again," I warn him, watching his reaction because up until this point, we haven't discussed physical intimacy.

Will he push even after I tell him no?

I hate having such thoughts about him, but how could I not?

We stare at one another as I gauge his reaction, and finally he says, "As you wish, kitten."

Still not sure with his mood, I press my back firmer against the door. "That's it?"

"I respect the word no. We don't take what's not willingly offered. Only pieces of shit do that." Instant relief washes over me, and the tension I didn't even know I feel eases out. I weep in joy inwardly because he might be many things but at least forcing himself on anyone isn't one of his qualities. "Sooner or later, you'll be mine, though. And you'll enjoy every single minute of it. It's a matter of time, kitten." A beat passes. "It's inevitable."

Anger bristles inside me, and I open my mouth to argue, but then shut it as it's useless. My behavior earlier proves his

point, so why would I waste time convincing him otherwise?

However, I give myself my word.

I won't let him touch me again unless he has some explanations for me, which reminds me... "You didn't answer me." He raises his brow. "Where are we going?" The minute I repeat the question, I see us pulling up by the huge iron gates as two security guards surveil the property, jumping up from their seats and nodding at the car.

"Home. Welcome to our castle, kitten."

The guards press some button near their small building, and the gates slide open, the rustling sound ringing in the air. Eric starts the engine again, flying through the entrance onto the narrow asphalt road surrounded by an endless garden.

Countless trees and rose bushes are spread all over the perimeter, neatly cut as emerald-green grass glistens under the warm lights coming from various lamps lighting up the space around us and showing us it all in its vivid glory. They create almost a magic atmosphere where the garden's beauty invites you over to explore it, yet the weird energy warns you to be careful because one might not leave it with their life intact.

Compared to the Price mansion, it has no statues or fountains in sight, and while it's gorgeous, it still seems secluded. I shift my focus to the enormous three-story house in the distance that piques my curiosity.

Over the years, the Reeds never allowed anyone inside, so society speculated about their mansions and what goes on behind closed doors. According to some rumors, Octavius renovated the house so many times, some people refused to work for him, even if he paid generously.

I sit up straight, studying the structure that dates back to the nineteenth century as this mansion has belonged to the family for generations, and it's...magnificent and haunting at the same time.

The moonlight shines brightly from above, pointing out its dark colors and endless windows.

We drive farther, passing by alcoves on the way, allowing me to notice little details about the mansion, like rose bushes near the entrance and lights in almost all the rooms.

This, combined with the thunder echoing in the air, gives this whole place a rather dark and unpleasant vibe. A tremor rushes through me, and everything in me rebels against the idea of entering inside.

It's almost as if, if I do, I'll find out all its secrets, and what if they are so hideous they destroy me?

Eric drives closer to the entrance, where stairs lead to the massive double oak door, and I blink in surprise when we pass it, turning to the right. "What's going on?" I look at Octavius. "We're not staying here?"

"I don't sleep inside this house. Fucking hate it." I still at how much distaste coats his voice, but deep down, I hear something else.

Something that's evident in my voice whenever I talk about church.

Was his house once the source of his greatest pain? Is this why he does all these renovations to it?

"Why do you keep it, then?"

He shrugs. "The mansion is a legacy entrusted to its heirs. It's not my great-great-grandfather's fault one of his descendants ended up being a piece of shit."

"Your stepfather, aka your cousin," I guess, and anger flashes in his eyes, but he nods. However, it leaves little doubt the man hurt Octavius in some way if he ended up killing the guy.

Not that it justifies the video and everything else, but my heart hurts just thinking about anyone harming a child. "So why did you bring me here?"

"I still live on this land. Just not inside the house." That's when another house opens up to my view, smaller than the mansion but still huge.

A one-level modern house spreads horizontally across the secluded corner, and once again, it has an endless number of windows, giving a full view inside it while there is even a terrace.

To study what? The garden? I find it strange that some weird wires on the grass are placed in different directions. “What is that?”

“Invisible fence.” He must see I have no clue what he means, so he elaborates. “It detects when you step outside of assigned borders and stops you.”

The hell? “Like a Taser?”

He takes out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his back pocket. “No. It doesn’t hurt. Just a little reminder not to go where one is not supposed to.”

This is a rather elusive explanation because, why does he need something like this inside his territory? Who needs a reminder to watch it anyway? His staff?

I don’t have a chance to elaborate on the topic as the car finally stops in front of the house, and the door opens right away. I see an elderly man wearing a butler’s uniform, bowing at me and stretching his lips in a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. He must be either in his late sixties or early seventies. “Hello, Mrs. Reed. It’s nice to meet you.” He places fluffy white slippers on the ground and extends his hand to me. “Let me help you.”

I feel uncomfortable that he goes through all this trouble for me at his age, so I grab his hand and swing my legs to the side, groaning in pleasure when the slippers swallow my feet. After running barefoot, this is heaven. “Thank you so much,” I tell him as I get out of the car and stand straight.

“Of course.” He studies me for several beats, and for a second, I think I catch joy on his face, but it must be a figment of my imagination. “I prepared tea and brought some food inside.”

Octavius comes to me, already putting a cigarette in his mouth ready to light it up, but I snatch it away and give it to

the shocked butler. “Throw it away, please.”

He glances at Octavius and exhales in relief at his nod. “Antonio, make sure the staff knows about the wedding. Also call Todd. Tell him to prepare all the credit cards and passes so my wife has access to everything we own.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good night.”

Antonio gets in the car after being dismissed, and he drives off with Eric, finally snapping me out of my shock. “What are you doing?”

He rolls his eyes and goes toward the entrance of his house while I grab my heavy skirt and follow him. “Your questions are starting to bore me.”

And just like that, the anger comes rushing back. “Well, excuse me if I haven’t prepared better questions for tonight. The wedding was not on my agenda.”

“Pity. You should always be prepared.”

“Maybe in your world, one should always be prepared for such stuff. Most of us lead a normal and ordinary life.”

“Just a reminder, kitten. You’re part of this world now, so I’d lose the judgment if I were you.”

He reaches the door and punches in the code, glancing at me over his shoulder. “The code is one, two, three, four.” A loud click echoes, and the door opens. He steps inside, and I trail once again after him. “We can’t have you not being able to access your new home.”

“That’s an awful code. So easy for anyone to guess.” I huff because this skirt will be the death of me. I never understood ball gown designs, but here we are. “Why did you tell him to call Todd? I don’t need credit cards and passes.”

“Because you’re my wife.”

I wish he’d stop calling me that because it makes me feel all kinds of way, and none of them are healthy but rather tempting and disturbing in their nature.

He claps twice, turning the lights on around us, and my eyes widen.

It's a spacious living room consisting of one leather couch, one chair, and a small table in front that has several books on it and a stack of cigarette packs.

Black and gray dominate the color scheme, dumping you deeper into this sense of doom around here, and the oil paintings hanging on the wall only add to your discomfort. I come closer to them and realize they must be some scenes from well-known myths, judging by the garish images that make my stomach uneasy.

Shaking my head, I shift my attention to the bar located in the left corner, spotting various bottles and ice along with a running fridge humming in the otherwise silent space.

There are bookcases too, and most of the books revolve around history. The nerd in me who loves reading about the past as it gives some insights into the present jumps up in curiosity. Does he enjoy reading about it, too?

And then my eyes land on the glass shelves with a knife collection, the blades so sharp and clear you probably can see your reflection in them as it slices you open.

I assume one more door leads to his room and the bathroom.

And while his space is rather...empty, it's still so much like him.

Aloof, sophisticated, deadly, and closed off.

Octavius walks toward the table and picks up the remote, turning on the TV hanging on the wall opposite the furniture, and my jaw drops when I see our faces flashing on the screen. It's on mute, but I read the headline.

Just in.

Another bachelor ties the knot: Octavius Reed married his longtime girlfriend, Isla Evans, in a private ceremony.

"What is this?" I exclaim in shock and barely resist groaning in frustration. Why is this newsworthy anyway?

Especially on the freaking TV.

Longtime girlfriend, let me laugh at that.

“Another question.” He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. “Florian must have done what I asked.” He winks at me. “My best friend is nothing but efficient.”

“Why would you do this? I thought you’d keep a low profile.”

“Two reasons.” He goes to the bar and picks up a glass. “First, the fucker needs to learn a lesson. You don’t go against me and win.” He grabs the whiskey and pours himself a generous amount before putting it away and dropping some ice cubes in his drink. “It’s better to attack him right away. This information will drive him insane. Insane psychopaths act recklessly, and this might play in our favor.”

Well, when he puts it this way...

“Second and most important reason, you’re my wife, and I want everyone to know it.” He shakes his glass a little and takes a sip while my heartbeat speeds up at the satisfaction pouring from him. “You’re mine. People need to understand that there will be consequences if they try to mess with what’s mine.”

“You sound like a caveman.”

“Don’t give a fuck, kitten.”

Pinching my nose and praying for patience, I walk farther into the room. “This marriage is temporary.” The glass pauses midway to his mouth and alarm bells go off in my head. However, I still continue, “Hopefully, we can catch the Church Killer with this stunt. Otherwise, it was all for nothing.”

“I changed my mind.” I blink. “I prefer your questions because this kind of talk pisses me off.” He drinks more of his whiskey while thunder echoes in the sky. It’s pitch-black outside, so despite the heat wrapping around me, I decide against going out on the terrace. The last thing I need is the rain soaking me up in this dress. “In case I haven’t made it clear, let me amend my mistake. This marriage is permanent. Till death do us part.” He toasts me and finishes his drink.

After placing the glass on the bar, he slides open the terrace door, the fresh air mixing with the rose scent floating around us.

Too stunned, I stay speechless for a second and shake my head again. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

I want to argue his rather scandalous point because it makes zero sense. How he expects me to accept that without questioning him, I have no idea, but I’m mentally exhausted.

So for tonight, I’m going to ignore it. No one keeps me down for long, anyway.

He’s a born predator, and what do predators love the most?

The hunt.

I’m his little prey that’s resisting him, so I’m difficult to catch. The minute he thinks he has, his interest will disappear, and he’ll want to get rid of me.

Even to my own ears, this psychological analysis sounds like bullshit to cover up the fact that some part inside me welcomes his claim and cherishes the idea of staying married to him forever.

I’ll need therapy at the end of all this.

My gaze lands on one of the books, and I pick it up from the table. “It’s about Troy.” I look at him as he steps outside while the rain slows to a drizzle, but he doesn’t seem to care. In fact, he stares into the darkness as if he expects to see someone out there. “Do you find Homer’s work interesting?” My heart pangs painfully because the last person I discussed this epic poem with was my mom who could talk about it for hours.

“I find it fascinating.” He snatches a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and lights one of them up, taking a greedy pull. “It’s tragic and beautiful at the same time as it showcases human vices in all their gritty glory. While giving the gods humanity.”

Since the dress is killing me, I sit down and reach out for the mug, welcoming the hot liquid down my throat. “In what way did it give gods humanity?”

“The whole war started due to vanity. Three goddesses, Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera, competed for the title of the most beautiful. Paris got assigned to pick the winner, and since Aphrodite promised him love, he chose her. She forgot to mention the woman was married.”

“He could always say no once he found out.” The Trojan prince was selfish, and I don’t like the goddess getting the heat for his choices. I bite into a cookie and mull over his words. “Humanity is usually associated with something good, though. This hardly paints gods in a good light.”

“I beg to differ. Even if we know our strengths, we still sometimes crave appreciation from strangers who mean nothing and have no value in our lives.”

“I guess.” I never thought about it this way, but come to think of it...yeah, it’s the perfect poem to see all sides and how it all led to tragic outcomes for many. “My mom used to read it to me a lot.” I’m shocked I’m sharing this with him right now. “She had a lot of favorite characters.”

“That’s why she named you Andromache,” he concludes, and I nod. “It’s a beautiful name.”

My cheeks warm at this, and I polish off my cookie before dusting my fingers and wrapping my hand around the mug tighter. “Thanks.” Silence falls upon us, and I’m desperate to fill it because, all things considered, I have to think about how bizarre it is to talk about Troy. “Your favorite character probably was Achilles. The brave and ruthless warrior.”

“No. He was Santiago’s favorite, and it made sense.” He doesn’t elaborate, though. “And before you ask your next question, the answer is no as well. Remi’s middle name is Odysseus, so that’s his favorite.” That leaves only one character a man like Octavius could have admired, and goose bumps break on my skin as he exhales more smoke while the rain intensifies and the scent of freshly wet asphalt tickles my nose. “Hector.”

“Why?”

“We read *Iliad* as kids, and I admired his love for his family. He spoke to me on a deeper level as much as a character can speak to a seven-year-old child.” He puffs more smoke, and then finally comes back inside. Going to the bar, he presses the butt in the ashtray. “Or maybe deep down, I longed for things I never knew. To have a rightful place in my family instead of being treated like a bastard who had no voice. An heir without a crown. Instead, I wore invisible manacles with sharp edges, making me bleed every single day.”

My soul cries out to the anguish burrowing in his words, everything in me craving to soothe it and discover what had happened in his past to mold him into the man he had become.

“Your stepfather...he was abusive?”

“Would it change anything if I said yes?” I still, my lips pressed to the rim of the mug as our gazes clash. “Even if he was a piece of shit who abused me, would it justify me murdering him and my best friends helping me cover it all up?”

“I don’t know. What were the circumstances?” I reply honestly, and judging by his face, he didn’t expect me to say that. “It shouldn’t matter because a crime is a crime. Countless people go through such hardships and come out stronger from it, seeking goodness and striving to be better than their abusers. I admire them for it. Laws exist to protect us, and we need to respect them. We have no right to decide who gets to live or die.”

“I admire them for it as well. They have strength and light, so they have all my respect.”

“But...”

“But I couldn’t do it. I’m a monster, and while I kill my own kind, I still kill. At the end of the day, we can’t change our nature.”

His own kind.

“Does this mean you don’t murder innocent people?”

He grabs the bottle and drinks straight from it. “We hope for grays in pretty clear situations when we wish for the impossible. Because when we crave something or someone... we don’t listen to common sense and follow our selfish desires. It’s human nature to feed our delusions as we refuse to face reality. My answer changes nothing, Isla. No matter my reasons, victims, or crimes...I’m a murderer. You can’t justify that. You can only accept it.”

Fear sinks into my bones because I know he’s right. I can spin all this till I turn blue, but it won’t change the reality. It’ll just make me exist in a bubble where I try to pretend I married a good man, and while he might be good...he’s evil too.

However, I hear the ultimatum loud and clear. I either accept him and this lifestyle or suffer because he has no intention of ever letting me go.

Putting the mug on the table, I ponder his words for several beats and ask, “What sane woman would accept it?”

Another greedy gulp while the tapping of raindrops becomes so loud, it leaves no doubt it will last the whole night. “Your best friend comes to mind.”

No.

I might have suspected it, but the confirmation still shocks me.

“My best friend...”

“Married a murderer. Actually, everyone who attended their wedding is a murderer in one way or the other,” he hisses through his teeth. “We tend to mingle together, it seems.”

Despite my refusal to believe it, though, memories flash in my head one after another of all these people and Giselle’s weird behavior when it came to Callum’s past or even his present. I just assumed they had a couple of secrets and minded my own business.

I always suspected something was off about all his friends. I got that from Amalia’s file too but...not this. Just some brotherhoods doing shady things and all.

“Nothing to say?”

I get up and cross my arms while amusement dances in his eyes, and I sense a challenge coming from him while he watches my reaction to this information.

Another test.

“I have a lot to say to my best friend. Not that I can be mad at her because that’s not something you share...ever.” I swallow and play with my skirt, watching the silk reflect the light. “All of you are clearly insane, but you don’t kill innocent people. This I know now without a shadow of a doubt.”

He places the bottle back on the bar and steps forward as the wind whooshes inside. His wet shirt emphasizes his carved muscle, and everything in me reacts to him. “And what makes you so sure, kitten?”

“My best friend would have never stayed with someone who hurts an innocent.” I’ve seen firsthand what true evil does, so I know Callum is not like the Church Killer.

None of them are.

“You have such faith in her.”

“I guess the same faith you have in Florian,” I fire right back. “You need to say it out loud, Octavius.”

“Say what?”

“That you don’t kill innocent people.”

“I already told you what I think about it.”

“I can’t resist you. My body is addicted to you. I’ve been obsessing over you for months.” He jerks at my admission, but I have no time to fixate on that. “One of these days if you try hard enough to seduce me, I will fold. And I’ll be a willing participant in the pleasure.” He takes another step toward me, but I move back, raising my hand to stop him. “I’ll hate myself afterward, though. I won’t be able to stand the knowledge that my husband, the man I allowed to touch me in the most intimate way...is anything like the psycho who massacred my

entire family.” I exhale heavily. “If you want an us, however insane that sounds now...you need to tell me the truth.”

He moves to the glass shelf instead and grabs one of the knives, and my stomach flips as I turn around, ready to bolt, only to cry out in surprise when he wraps his arm around me from behind and presses me hard to his chest.

Our heavy breathing fills the space as seconds trickle by and I feel his hot breath on my nape, goose bumps breaking on my skin. The familiar thrill and anticipation travel through my veins and ignite my blood. His lips skim upward until he reaches my ear and whispers into it, “Kitten.”

“Yes?” I ask, my heart beating wildly in my chest, and I try to peel his arm away from my stomach, wanting to free myself from his hold. Because his hard muscles digging into my curves and his hard-on paint all kinds of carnal images in my head that have no space between us right now.

Not until he tells me the truth.

In order to protect my soul, I have to deny my body, and that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to take.

“You’re mine,” he whispers almost in wonderment, rubbing his stubble over my shoulder before peppering small kiss over it, and my eyes close of their own accord at the contact, my fingers curling around his arm while I swallow hard. “You’re my wife now.”

“I know.”

This is my doom, isn’t it?

To be seduced by his gruffly and huskily spoken words that send me into a spiral of madness as they serve akin to gasoline to the fire that’s my lust and desire for this complicated and mysterious man that owns me despite all my reservations.

He sways backward and I bite on my lower lip, holding back the protesting whimper, but relief washes over me too. Maybe he has emotions for me, after all, and accepts my request to stay away unless he’s ready to answer my question.

My hopes crush and burn when instead, he places the tip of the knife on my upper back. I gasp when he starts dragging it down, ripping the laces on my dress, and it slowly starts to slide down my shoulders.

I press my hands to my chest, keeping it from falling and leaving me exposed to his gaze. "Octavius, stop." I hate how my voice trembles, speaking about my inner turmoil and giving him a weapon to use against me.

Or rather...

A weapon to seduce me with because even I know if he pushes hard enough, I will fold.

But then again...

I warned him, hadn't I?

Once he rips all the laces holding the dress together, he throws the knife away and it drops on the floor with a loud clang, the sound almost deafening with this tension-and-lust-filled energy swirling around us.

"Please don't," I whisper when he covers my palms with his and gently pulls them to the side, allowing for the dress to pool on the floor, leaving me standing in just my lacy white panties. I refused to wear any other wedding lingerie attire.

"You're so beautiful and so very mine." His voice should be forbidden for how hypnotizing and tempting it is, like the silk gliding over my skin and awakening every nerve ending in me. "And the world will know it." Something cold touches my collarbone and I glance down, blinking in surprise.

A platinum neckless consisting of black diamonds surrounded by smaller ones shimmers in the light, almost blinding for how clear the diamonds are. A true piece of art.

He puts it on me and when he clasps it closed, there is an odd finality about it. Like in this moment, truly nothing will ever be same because now I wear his claim.

"What is this?"

"People will never see most of my marks on you, because your body is for my eyes alone, but this," his fingers dance

over the diamonds, “they will never miss. We won’t wear rings because, fuck the rings.” So much hate coats his tone when he speaks about the rings that I decide to come back to it later, too focused on what he says next. “You’ll never take it off.” I whimper when he hugs me from behind, his hands skating over my sides, and my nipples peak at the contact while he whispers into my ear again. “I asked Florian to make it for me. Something to represent my complete obsession when it comes to you.” His hands roam over my flesh and land on my hips, gripping it hard, his fingers digging into my skin. I welcome the pain as it grounds me to the present and doesn’t let the pleasure consume me. “Ask me when that was.”

A raspy breath slips past my lips. “When?” I dread and await his answer that has the power to make me let go of all my inhibitions.

“Almost a year ago. I always knew you’d be mine, even when I tried to convince myself I could be satisfied by watching you from a distance.”

No, no, no.

He can’t say those things to me and melt my heart that yearned to hear this for such a long time.

I can’t accept it, though. This confession. How could I when...

“I don’t kill innocent people, Isla. I only kill those who deserve it and think they’re above God and the law when it comes to their crimes.”

His words break the invisible metallic chains around me, leaving me free to explore whatever I wish with this man and his gray morals.

With a sob, I spin around and circle my arms around his neck, locking us in a kiss as he hikes me up, my legs wrapping around him, and we groan into the kiss when his hard length taps on my clit. The lace barely protects me from the rough texture of his jeans and as he starts walking toward somewhere, he pushes harder into me with each step. The

mixture of pain and scorching heat makes me needy and hungry.

A hunger only he can sate.

My core grows wetter, my panties sticking to me while I deepen the kiss, our tongues stroking against each other's and adding to the frenzy swirling around us. "Take me to bed." Our mouths separate and I thread my fingers through his thick strands, swallowing hard when he pulls at my hair, his lips skimming over my throat. "This time I want you to fuck me hard." He growls, his length growing thicker, and I gasp as he bites on my neck, sucking on the flesh so hard he leaves a new mark. "Please."

"Don't beg me, kitten. You never have to beg when it comes to me. Your husband will fuck his wife anytime, anywhere, whenever she wants." He catches my moan, his tongue pushing inside my mouth, and the deep glides make me clamp my thighs tighter around him, shifting a little and whimpering at the desire spreading through me.

We need a bed and soon...

I squeal when he sends me flying, landing on his spacious bed in the moonlight-lit room that, despite the thunder echoing outside, lets me see everything clearly.

Sitting up, I roam my gaze over my man who starts to unbutton his shirt and drops it on the floor, giving me the most magnificent view.

His bare chest, his carved and ripped muscles. Everything in me yearns to lick and bite and claim him as mine so no one else thinks they have a shot with this handsome man. "Like what you see, kitten?" I nod eagerly and something flashes in his eyes. "I turn you on, kitten?" Another nod and a wicked smile curves his mouth as he hisses through his teeth. "Show me."

Since I no longer have any reservations that comes to my husband, I throw all caution and shyness to the wind.

In this moment, nothing but our lust and need for each other have a place between us.

Curling my toes on the mattress, I widen my bent legs as my palm drifts from my stomach to my aching core. “See how wet I am?” I palm myself, gasping when thousands of sensations rock through me. “It’s because of you.” He steps closer while something in me awakens, something that thrives in the knowledge that this man is completely obsessed with me. It’s disturbing and wrong and has so many issues written all over it, but who cares when he looks at me this way? “I ache because of you. Right here.” I flip my panties to the side, showing him my bare core, and skim my fingers up and down my slit as the fire in the pit of my stomach grows. Removing my sticky fingers, I ask, “Want to taste?”

His face darkens, and he crooks his finger at me, so I get up on my knees, scooting toward the edge of the bed as he comes closer. “Feed it to me, kitten,” he orders gruffly, and I put my finger on his lips, smearing them with my arousal. He rolls his tongue out, licking his lips, and my core spasms. “Now taste yourself.”

My eyes widen at this and I do as he says, nipping on my finger when he lowers down the zipper on his pants and his cock springs free, the thick and pulsing length ready to fuck me hard. Without thinking, I touch it and swipe my thumb over the precum leaking from the head and lift my finger to my mouth, tasting him for the first time. Our combined taste flares the lust threatening to drive me insane. “I want more,” I whisper as I place my lips on his collarbone, dragging my mouth down. I kiss and lick his scars while biting on his carved muscles, enjoying his groan as he threads his fingers in my hair, gripping it hard and stilling my movements when I reach his cock. “Octavius.”

“What exactly do you want?” He pulls my head back so our eyes meet while my hands grab his hips. “Voice your wish.”

“I want to take you in my mouth.” Nervousness washes over me when his gaze heats at my request, and I swallow. “I’ve never done this before.”

He brushes his thumb over my lower lip while my pulse beats wildly, awaiting his reply, and he says, “Yeah? I’ve never

done that either.” He pulls me up until our lips are inches apart and we share a breath while the truth he just disclosed to me shocks me. How is that possible? “I’ve never put my mouth on anyone but you either, kitten.” He swallows my gasp as he kisses me hard, the rough and bruising contact sending tickling sensations over me while the fire only intensifies and hotness envelops me. “You like that, don’t you, kitten?” He bites on my lower lip, tugging it and then sucking it hard while I shift restlessly, squeezing my thighs, but it gives little relief to my clenching core. “Knowing my mouth exclusively belongs to you?”

I can’t even lie. “Yes.” I don’t just like it, it ignites me in ways I never knew possible because we are in this together.

However fucked up all this might be.

I place my palm on his length, marveling at the soft texture, squeezing it, and he hisses as we look into each other’s eyes. “Harder,” he orders but I just wink at him, stroking him from base to tip, sitting back on my knees, my hot breath fanning his cock that jerks under my gaze. “Isla.” There is a warning in his tone.

“Watch me, darling.” I flick my tongue over the tip, his taste hitting me, and a moan escapes me when he fists my hair, the pressure maddening combined with the desire washing over me. I love having him at my mercy and the idea that he can come undone by something I’m doing is an aphrodisiac in and of itself.

I trace my tongue over the blue vein, familiarizing myself with him before skimming my lips back up and sucking on the head, pushing his cock into my mouth.

He palms my head, tilting it a bit back while a tremor rushes through him, and he rubs my cheeks. “Such a good girl.” He presses on my chin and my mouth opens around him wider, his length thrusting deeper while his hold on my hair tightness.

Arrows of need shoot through me and I draw him in deeper, my eyes watering. “Careful, kitten. We’ll practice a lot in the future.” I whimper around him, his muscles becoming

harder under my hand at that, and the vibration must drive him insane. “One day I’ll come down this pretty throat.” His hand lands on my throat as he swipes it up and down, zapping electricity surrounding me, and my core dampens just imaging it. “And you’ll swallow every drop, won’t you, kitten?” He pushes a little more while my tongue and lips work in tandem.

He thrusts forward, my nails scratching his hips as I take a deep breath through my nose and continue to suck him hard, enjoying every sound coming from him because this handsome man is mine.

And whatever I do to him brings him pleasure. It’s a turn-on itself, although my whole body hurts so much from the need closing up on me, I barely resist the urge to touch myself and get off on the act alone.

“Not on our wedding night, though, kitten.” He tugs at my hair harshly, so I start my journey back, my mouth sliding over his length until I suck on the tip, drinking him in more while the swirling sensations in the pit of my stomach grow so much it pains and frees me at the same time.

All I want and need right now is this man because this hunger eating at me demands to be fed.

“Lie down.” I scoot a little and land on my back, only to moan when he shoulders my legs apart, creating room for himself. His palms slide under me, clenching my ass checks hard while my skin grows taut, tension wrapping around us as sizzling electric volts hit at me from every corner. “Ah, so pretty and wet for your man.”

His light stubble tickles the inside of my thighs and his hot breath on my center paints carnal images in my head that add to the insanity owning me.

My fingers drift to his nape, tangling in his hair, and I arch my back, my voice hoarse and hushed. “Don’t tease.”

He sucks on my skin, pulling at it so hard, the sting travels all over me. “Don’t tease who?”

“Octavius.”

He rubs his face on my flesh, making me bite hard on my lip to hold back the moan wanting to erupt from my throat.
“And who am I?”

“My husband.”

My sob echoes in the night, interrupted by the loud thunder, when he places his mouth on me, licking through my folds and diving inside, his tongue claiming me all over again while heat surrounds me.

He lifts me up higher, his strokes turning deeper, pushing against the pressure building in me, the sensations so good all I can do is whimper and moan while he continues to fuck me with his mouth.

He puts me back on the bed, skimming his hands over the inside of my thighs and pushing them apart, opening me wide for him as he moves his tongue upward, licking me all the way to my clit that he flicks several times before drawing it between his lips.

Perspiration covers my skin, the silky sheets disturbing every nerve in my body, and my hips shoot upward when he bites on my clit gently, soothing it with a long lick followed by him drifting lower and stabbing his tongue in me again.

Pressing the heel of my foot on his back, I grip his hair and allow myself light movements that create friction, bringing me closer to bursting the tension holding me prisoner and find the release my whole being cries out for.

“Octavius.”

He slowly pulls his tongue out, roaming it over my core, up and down in maddening motions before he slides up, leaving wet imprints on my stomach and collarbone until he looms above me, his lips glistening with me.

He sits up, taking out a condom and rolling it on his length, his brown pools turning almost black from the desire blanketing them. He grabs my legs, wrapping them around him as he settles between them once again. “Greet your husband home, wife.” He slams his mouth on mine, catching my moan when he thrusts into me hard, my arms circling

around his neck and pulling him to me while his cock stretches me to the brink. A shiver rushes through us as he sways his hips back and enters me again, shifting us a little on the bed.

My fingers tangle in his hair as I tilt my head, brushing my tongue against his while he lazily drives in and out of me, each stroke designed to bring me closer to rapture while his hard grip on me shows his possessiveness in full glory.

His kiss and slow but confident strokes tell me a story on their own, promising me pleasure in the future, however, I'll always abide by his rules.

The hunter captured his prey and he has no intention of letting her go.

We share a breath when he tears his mouth away and nips on my chin, whispering while continuing to deliver hard drives, every word flaring the lust consuming me, sending me closer to the edge, "You're mine, Isla. No matter what happens, this will remain the absolute truth." This rather disturbing statement should scare me but instead makes me feel cherished and wanted, something I haven't felt in a while.

Or maybe ever.

Clawing at his back as he hisses into my neck, I clamp my thighs while my core clenches around his length, and he finds my mouth again, locking us in a hot kiss that takes my breath away.

In and out, in and out, until I can't think or do anything else but erupt in his arms, crying out into his mouth while he slams into me harder, his strokes becoming faster and more erratic.

My head falls on the pillow while I watch his muscles ripple under my touch while he chases his own high, sweat coating his skin, and my core clenches tighter and tighter around him.

We both groan when he spills inside the condom, our labored breathing filling the air while thunder shakes the sky again, followed by lightning, bringing us back to reality.

Although it doesn't change anything, does it?

Because tonight I made an irreversible choice.
And only God knows how I'll pay for it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Hell is here on Earth.

I know that without a shadow of a doubt.”

Octavius

*O*ctavius, 6 years old

The sun beams brightly, making the emerald-green grass glisten around us while birds chirp in the distance, perching on the trees and singing songs only they understand as the light breeze sweeps over us, cooling our heated skin.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I drag the heavy basket toward the oak tree several feet away from the lake, the blue water shimmering and inviting you to take a swim on this hot summer day.

“We’re going to get in trouble,” Remi mutters, holding another basket, and by how he huffs and puffs, walking beside me, it isn’t lighter than mine.

“Relax, no one is going to know.” Santiago adjusts his sunglasses on his nose and grins at us, running forward. “They know we went on a picnic anyway!”

“We were supposed to stay inside the mansion. We are so not allowed to wander to the lake on our own,” Remi replies, waving the mosquitoes off as Florian snaps yet another picture, winking at us and dancing off to Santiago. He throws his arm over his shoulders as they match their steps and laugh about something. “Do you ever feel like a third wheel around

them?" he asks me and I shrug, not really knowing how to answer that question because it's so complicated.

Santiago and Florian have been friends since they took their first breaths, their families so tight they had no other choice to become anything but close to each other. They do everything together and sometimes even celebrate birthdays on the same day because they were born weeks apart.

These families didn't have any bonds with the Reeds, so I shouldn't have even been part of their group. Uncle Lucian put his foot down and decided I should be friends with the boys. My parents weren't happy with the decision; they tried to object, but he always reminded them that he could do whatever he wanted with my shares. So that's how I started playing with the boys, attending their birthdays, and got enrolled in the same preschool. We spent most of our time at Santiago's or Florian's houses because my parents forbade me to ever bring them home, claiming they were spoiled brats.

Pain travels through me, and I bite on my lower lip to hold back the whimper threatening to emerge from my throat at the reminder of my parents.

I shake my head, focusing on Remi's question. "No. That's just who they are. They don't mean to exclude us," I tell him, and he nods, although he still sighs as if disliking the idea altogether.

There is some merit to his words, and it's one of the reasons I'm so glad he joined our group and it became a quartet instead of a trio. Sometimes no matter how much you justify someone's bond, you still can feel lonely around them.

Especially when you see such strong connections like Santiago and Florian's. They aren't just friends. Their families and lives are entwined together so much that breaking them apart seems almost a crime.

"Yeah. At least we have each other, huh?" He bumps my shoulder and grins as we reach the oak tree, and with a loud thud, he puts the baskets on the ground as the boys continue to pose for each other, snapping pictures one after another.

Remi's father works as a gardener for the Cortez family, and while he mostly drinks and rarely does a good job, they keep him around. It shows what a big heart they have because they protect Remi with their actions. They paid for his education as well and enrolled him in our school and encouraged our friendship. We've been inseparable ever since, doing everything together, and so what if Santiago and Florian love each other a bit more?

I'm confident we can form such a bond with Remi in time, although he's a bit hotheaded and difficult to deal with because he always expects us to ditch him or pick on him as he comes from poverty.

Like we care about those things, and besides, Grandpa Atlas would have boxed our ears if we acted this way. For all his strange nature, he respects the people around him.

Sometimes even strangers protect a child better than their own parents.

I shake my head again, refusing to go to my dark thoughts on the day fate offers me a reprieve from the constant nightmares.

"Octavius?" Remi's voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I glance at him as he takes a blanket from the basket, opening it up and throwing it on the grass right under the tree as it casts a shadow on us and hides us from the sun. "Everything okay?"

He's been asking me that a lot lately, his assertive eyes drilling into me, and I see him focus on the bruise on my arm that I told everyone I got from falling down the stairs earlier. Whenever I say something like this, Remi winces and bites on his lip while anger crosses his face, but he stays silent.

Deep down, he probably knows the truth because similar bruises mar his skin. God knows his father doesn't know the word kindness.

However, his father is nothing compared to the monster Wayne has become.

No.

I clench my fists, willing myself to think only about this spontaneous trip the Price family decided to take to their summer house and grabbed us on the way because Florian threw a tantrum.

A trip that saved me from yet another beating and starvation as it's the anniversary of my father's death this week. If there is one thing my uncle hates more than me...it's any reminder of my father or how Mom's eyes grow misty on the day he died.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

He sits on the blanket, and I do the same, flipping open my basket and snatching out various sodas and snacks while he watches me. "You can tell me anything."

"I know."

"I won't tell anyone." An understanding passes between us, the kind of understanding that only children from unhappy families can have, as those who grew up in love think everything can be fixed.

While we know the truth. Sometimes it's so hideous and unbearable we have no choice but to stay silent to save our loved ones as the monsters roaming inside our houses hold all the strings.

My uncle's words ring in my ears.

If you ever tell anyone, Octavius...I'll hurt Estella. Do you want that? To see your little sister cry?

Speaking up is a privilege I don't have in this world. I have to withstand all the torture until I can survive on my own and take Estella from them.

I'm ready to bear his hate if it means he never lays a finger on her.

"There is nothing to tell, Remi." I smile at him and pat his hand. "Estella started walking, so I've been worried about that." That's a partial truth since all the nannies the help keeps hiring miss her movements, and she runs away from them, causing her to slip on the marble floor and hurt herself.

No one can calm her down but me, maybe because in our evil house, I'm the only one who loves her.

"She's a little firecracker." He grins, but judging by his tone, he doesn't believe me. He lets it go, though. "Pass me the soda, please." I give him one, and he opens it right when the boys join us. "Are you done taking photos?"

"Hablar en español," Santiago says, and they have a stare-off because he's been relentless about teaching Remi Spanish and sometimes refuses to react or reply to questions asked in English.

We studied literature and different languages from an early age, so he was behind us on a lot of subjects, but we were all determined for him to get on our level.

Besides, it's cool to converse in different languages. Our secrets can be shared without anyone understating a thing.

"I don't want to," Remi replies stubbornly while Florian rolls his eyes and grabs a bag of chips, tearing it open and munching on them.

"We need to be in the same class, Remi. Why do you think you have all these tutors now?"

"I'm tired of studying all the time." He sips his soda and frowns when Florian drops next to him, hitting him on the back, so he offers a chip as a peace offering. Remi grabs it, pops it in his mouth, and chews. "Why do I need to know all these things about history and books in order to go to school?"

"Because to get into our private school, you need to be a bit smarter than the rest of the kids."

He barks out a laugh. "Yeah, because everyone there will be an heir of some kind. I don't have an empire to inherit, so why would I work so hard?"

Santiago places his hands on his hips and taps his foot on the grass while Florian's and my heads ping-pong between them. They get into spectacular arguments, which is hilarious as they are always on their good behavior around Uncle Lucian and Aunt Rebecca. "Because you're our friend. Our

connections will help you in the future to build your own legacy.”

Remi jumps up, pointing a finger at Santiago. “I don’t need handouts from friends.”

“You’ll work! If I give you something, you can pay me back. To achieve it, though, you need a brain.” He taps on his head. “So study!”

“Whatever!” he exclaims and starts to move toward the lake. Santiago follows, jumping on his back while the other tries to shake him off, and they both tumble to the ground, muttering something only for their laughter to echo through the space.

“Someday they’re going to fight for real, and I’ll love it,” Florian says, extending his hand to me with chips, but I shake my head as awkward silence falls on us.

While Santiago and Remi interact a lot at his family mansion, Florian and I don’t hang out alone, like ever. We live close to each other, but we are so different.

He’s pretty and talented, his fingertips smeared in colors from all the sketches he paints in his spare time, and he dreams of becoming the head Price designer one day. Everyone adores him while me...well, I have no talent whatsoever. Even learning languages was a struggle. Remi handles all this way better than I ever did.

Not to mention, people don’t really go “aw” when they look at me or have this deep desire to hug me.

In short, Florian and I have nothing in common. I know if it wasn’t for Uncle Lucian and his big heart, the boys wouldn’t be friends with me. I stay silent on most days and just go along with whatever they have planned.

The idea of losing them hurts me, so I prefer to be part of their group, even if deep down they might not like me or think I fit in.

“Hey!” Remi yells, and relief washes over me because finally someone interrupts the silence, only for it to be short-lived when he shouts, “Let’s swim in the lake!”

Oh, no.

Fear travels through my entire system, my fingers curling on my pants while Santiago and Remi remove their shirts, ready to swim. Florian gets up, glancing at me. "Let's go."

"No. I don't want to." If I take off my T-shirt, they will see my scars, various hideous bruises from the belt buckles, and endless kicks until my bleeding body couldn't stand it anymore and I passed out.

Once, he used a cane on me and pushed a sock into my mouth so no one would hear my screams as he delivered blow after blow.

While everyone stood around and acted like nothing happened, especially her. As long as she got her jewelry the next day, everything was all right.

Florian's brow furrows. "You love to swim. You're the best swimmer among us." I groan inwardly, cursing that trip to the water park two years ago, where I had to show off my skills. One thing I excelled at, and now it is a useless talent anyway.

Wayne changed my wardrobe too, from shorts and T-shirts to long sleeves and pants so no one would see any scars. Besides, he knows when to deliver his hits, either during the week or on vacations where no one would see me much.

If I'm meeting with the boys, I usually get slapped or kicked around, but he won't leave a bruise on my face or hands.

Antonio bought me a concealer. I'm not sure what it is, but people use it to hide imperfections on their skin. It helps me sometimes to camouflage my bruises.

Two days ago, Wayne beat me really hard, and some marks ended up on my collarbone. I used a lot of concealer, so even those bruises would be visible if I get wet!

"I just don't feel like it. I'll watch from here." I muster up a smile, reaching for a pack of nuts and shake it. "I'm hungry." That's not a lie either. Wayne loves to starve me for days just to see me curl on the floor when my stomach hurts.

The staff is forbidden to feed me and whoever goes against his orders usually gets fired, so they just allow for this to happen.

Once I even picked up crumbs from the floor in the kitchen rolled under the table because I was so hungry.

He opens his mouth to say something, when the guys run back to us. Santiago shakes his head, splashing water from his wet hair all over us. "Come on, guys!"

"Octavius doesn't feel like it."

"Que pasa?"

Remi says nothing. However, his silence is very telling. Several scars mar his body, but he doesn't hide them since the boys know about his father.

"Just drop it, Santiago, and go. Let me eat in peace," I tease, but my friend is having none of it.

"Come on!" He pulls me, my knees hitting the grass, and starts lifting my shirt. "We can play the Four Horsemen in the lake!" Excitement coats his voice as I try to wiggle free from his hold. "It's going to be fun."

"No!" I shout just as he pulls at my shirt so hard, it rolls up, and they all freeze, a collective sharp intake of breath filling the space while they all stare at me in shock.

Even Remi covers his mouth, blinking several times because his bruises aren't as bad as mine.

"Who hurt you, Octavius?" Santiago asks, getting on his knees as all the boys come closer to me, creating a circle. "Some of them are still fresh!" Anger drips from his every word. "Tell me!" he demands, and I bite on my lip. "Is it Wayne?" He mutters something under his breath. He's never liked my cousin. "I'm going to tell Dad!"

This snaps me out of my stupor, and I grab his arm. "No," I whisper, panic swiping over me and penetrating every bone in my body at the prospect. "He'll hurt Estella. You can't tell anyone!" I look at them all. "It's not as bad as it looks," I lie

through my teeth, and judging by their expressions, they don't believe me. "It'll be worse."

"Dad will help you. They have all the power," Florian speaks up, an odd note lacing his tone. "You know that."

"No. There is no proof of him hurting me. No one will speak up. And he'll find a way to make me pay. He'll stop eventually."

At least I hope so because if he doesn't, he's going to kill me someday.

"Your mom—"

"She goes to the other room when it happens, and then he buys her gifts. Mostly expensive diamond rings that she shows off to people so they know she married a great husband." Santiago gasps, and my mouth twitches with a sad smile.

His mother loves him so much he probably can't imagine anyone hurting him without her ripping their throats out.

"So we just do nothing?"

Santiago, always the protector of the group.

"Yes. Please."

They stay silent for what seems like forever before Florian finally speaks up once again, "We need to tend to your wounds. Some are red and festering."

My head snaps up, our eyes meeting, and I swallow past the lump in my throat.

From that fateful day when Wayne hit me for the first time, no one but myself treated my wounds, and half of them I couldn't reach.

Alone in my pain and left to deal with the consequences of my stepfather's cruelty.

"You don't have to. They'll heal on their own."

Remi's eyes flash with fury while Santiago rolls his lips. Florian ignores my words, fishing inside the basket and grabbing the first aid kit.

We always take it with us whenever we have picnics because we often fall and injure ourselves.

Florian flips it open, while Santiago grabs the antiseptic and pours it on the cotton pad. "Remi, hold the shirt." He does as he's asked, and I wince when Santiago presses the pad into my bruises, the skin still raw. "Lo siento, amigo," he whispers, and he sighs heavily.

Remi leans closer and blows on my skin as our friend continues to apply the medicine all over my back, I jerk when Florian places his palms above mine, gripping them hard, and our gazes collide once again. I see so much compassion in them, and my stomach flips while my heart aches in a weird way.

To my shock, tears stream down my face. The awful tears that mean nothing in my mansion, for the monster becomes even more violent when I display them.

Florian wipes away my tears with his knuckles while still holding my hand tight as if pouring strength into me. I hiss when Santiago puts ointment on next as Remi continues to ease the sting, trying to make it easier for me. "It's okay, Octavius," Florian whispers. "It's okay. You can cry here."

Remi pats my shoulder. "Don't hide your pain from us."

"Your pain is ours too." Santiago picks up a bandage, covering up a big wound on my back that's been periodically bleeding and staining my clothes. "You're not alone."

"You're one of us. No matter what happens, you have us," Florian finishes as tears fall and fall because I can't stop them.

For the rest of the day, we sit on the blanket, watching the sunset, eating and laughing, while the guys periodically give me huge hugs, reassuring me with their affection.

And Florian...

Continues to hold my hand.

On that day, the dynamic of our friendship forever changed.

We became an inseparable unit, ready to face the world if it meant protecting our own, a deep bond that survived any hideous thing life threw our way.

We shared our happiness and losses, for what was theirs was mine and mine was theirs.

However, Remi and I weren't meant to be the best of friends who supported each other no matter the screwups.

Because we both grew up in shitty households with awful parents who cared only about themselves and made us live in our own personal hell. We had no idea how to give or show love without the fear of rejection.

Never wanted to burden anyone with our nightmares, forever destined to stay lonely in our sorrows, and harboring it in our hearts as no one deserved to carry our heavy weight.

Santiago and Florian had a mind of their own. They made a decision that affected us all when they picked us as their best friends, for they had love in abundance and wanted to share it with us.

Florian became my truest friend, staying by my side no matter what and helping me survive hell on a daily basis, never letting go of my hand. I tried everything to push him away, but he never listened, powering through all my defenses until I had no strength left in me to fight him.

A friendship that brought him nothing except trouble and headaches, yet it was a friendship that saved me and set me free.

I'm alive because once upon a time, a boy with the purest heart chose me as his best friend, and that's a gift I'll forever cherish.

But I didn't pay him in kind.

No.

On the verge of insanity, I committed a horrible crime.

And they all helped me cover it up, tainting themselves in madness and gore.

After all, every dark brotherhood starts with blood, and ours formed the minute I took a life.

Aunt Calliope once said that each one of us represents a certain strength, and that's why we are so attuned to each other, forever attached at the hip.

Santiago is our bravery because he survived in the hell of his enemy's creation. Despite being kidnapped for eight long years, he found his way back home and stayed strong through all the atrocities thrown his way.

Remi is our stubbornness because he climbed from the bottom, always striving to achieve more despite the constant disrespect people showed him. Focused on his goals, he was unstoppable in the face of his desires that never accepted defeat. Victory shall always be his. A king in his own right who has his own legacy now.

I'm our resilience because no matter how much Wayne tried to kill me, he ended up losing, never getting the satisfaction of destroying me or making me admit to my pain as I withstood his torture.

And Florian is our heart because compared to us, he shows compassion to everyone who deserves it, always lurking in the shadows, protecting us all and keeping our brotherhood together. If it wasn't for him, we'd never come this far as each of us owe something to him. He never asks anything in return, always acting like the villain in our story when, in truth, he's the only man worthy of the title *hero* among us.

We are the Four Dark Horsemen.

Only in unity we survive, because in chaos do we thrive.

*S*la

An annoying sound pierces through my sleep, making me groan and frown as I roll to the side, burrowing my head deeper into the pillow as a sigh escapes me, pleasure traveling all over my aching body.

My mind is still foggy from sleep. I'm ready to enjoy these heavenly sensations some more, but the irritating ringing continues, and the sound seems to drum on all my nerve endings, making me huff in annoyance. I blindly reach for my phone on the nightstand, wrapping my hand around it and raising it to my ear. "What?"

"What? This is the greeting I'm getting!" Giselle screeches into my ear, and I pull the phone back, finally snapping my eyes open and wincing when the beaming sun hurts my vision.

"What kind of greeting do you expect at nine in the morning?" I ask gruffly, my fingers curling into the blanket and covering myself tighter with it. "You know I'm not a morning person."

"You're one when you get married to Octavius Reed!" she shouts again, and the headache slowly starts to envelop my scalp. "You got married, Isla!"

I sit up in bed, last night playing like a colorful movie in my mind with all its hideous and carnal desires where my world shattered, only to get glued back together. "Oh my God," I mutter, running my fingers through my hair while looking around me and finding nothing out of the ordinary in Octavius's room.

My husband's room!

Except he's missing, and my phone is here? Didn't he break it?

Pulling back the damn thing again, I notice it's shiny, new, and an expensive model. A far cry from my old phone with a crushed screen. "Yeah. I'm glad you picked up. At least he's not holding you hostage." Rubbing my fingers over my diamond necklace, remembering how he put it on me, I wonder if that's true. "How did it happen, Isla?"

Swinging my legs to the side, I curl my toes into the cold marble and find a glass of water on the nightstand along with a small pill. There is also a note.

Drink this. It will help with the headache.

Not even bothering to examine how he predicted this, I quickly swallow it and groan when the warm liquid slides down my throat and brings some much-needed relief to it. “It’s a long story,” I answer, getting up and glancing around the spacious room to find something suitable to wear because my naked body shivers under the humming AC that breaks goose bumps on my skin.

“I have all the time in the world.” I walk into the closet, turning on the light, and my eyes widen when countless suits, shirts, jeans, ties, and every other male wardrobe pieces come to my view. “Don’t spare any details.”

“Like you did, you mean?”

Silence follows my question, and I give her time to process it while I scan for something to wear, when I blink twice, finding a gray dress hanging and I pick it up, instant jealousy washing over me.

Why the hell does he have a dress in his closet? I swear, if it was left from one of his previous hookups, I’m going to...

What? What are you going to do, you fool?

Not sure what but something, because after last night when we claimed each other, I now have rights over him, and he no longer can just obsessively stare after me from afar.

Octavius is mine! And I’ll be as territorial as I want with my own husband who forced me into this marriage, but I no longer mind.

I still have a hard time accepting and understanding what he does. My moral compass is miles away from his, but as long as he doesn’t kill innocent people, I think I can live with it.

Maybe I should have a bigger inner conflict and monologue over the whole thing, being terrified and all... I don’t, though. I’ve spent years alone and cold, and for the first

time ever, the man who seemed to be the center of my world for the past couple of months makes me feel desired, wanted, and protected.

I'm tired of feeling guilty.

There is so much unsettled between us. The secrets he hides from me that has to do with our past, his past, and all his scars that hurt my soul just thinking about how he got them. However, I won't let these obstacles stand in the way. We've had months to dance around each other, and I don't think it takes long to fall for a person.

Although, the fact that I'm so accepting of a serial killer as my husband truly paints me in a delusional and idiotic light. Especially after yesterday, when he exposed my body to the sweetest of tortures, claiming ownership over me while leaving endless hickeys on my flesh.

Heat rushes over me at the burning memories, my whole being awakening with desire and a need so strong I barely resist running around this mansion to search for my husband when I know better.

Groaning in frustration, I grab the dress, only to sigh in relief when I see a note with my name attached to it, and while dresses usually aren't my thing because they never really accentuate my features and just point out how plain I am...this one is pretty.

"You know...about them?" Giselle finally speaks up, worry lacing her tone along with guilt.

"Yes. That's why he married me. His wife won't have to testify against him." I drop the phone on the bed and press on the loudspeaker as I quickly put the dress on. The stretchy fabric molds against my upper body and skirts around my thighs, ending right above my knees. My brow furrows when I spot a small bag and open it up, finding panties and sandals in it. "Thanks for the warning, my best friend," I tease her because I get it. He's her husband, and it's not like you can go around and tell people about their true deeds. Besides, my reaction might have been unpredictable.

Unless you end up in such a situation, it's hard to understand, and you just assume the woman has lost her mind.

"I told you to stay away from him," she reminds me. I slip on the panties and sandals, locating the mirror nearby and removing the cloth covering it. My heart squeezes in my chest, thinking of how Octavius detests looking at his reflection so they're all covered. "I can talk to Callum, and we can fix it."

Twirling around, I gasp at how the dress showcases my body while my hair falls to my shoulders, and it does little to cover up all the marks on my skin. "We both know it's useless. Our husbands don't have the best tempers." Later, I will examine why saying *our husbands* out loud brings me so much joy.

"You sound...accepting of the whole thing." I get out of the room, and once again, the size of Octavius's wealth astonishes me as it allows him to have a whole-ass house near his mansion to himself. "Do you love him?"

I ignore the last question because how can it even be a question? I wouldn't know love if it hit me in the face, so whatever. "There is no need to panic. It is what it is."

My philosophic reply doesn't fly with her, though.

"It is what it is?" she repeats in disbelief when I go to the terrace door, mesmerized by the magnificent view opening up to me with countless trees swaying lightly under the breeze as the sun beams brightly. "I lost my shit when I found out, and you, the police officer, think it is what it is?"

"Former police officer." I don't see myself going back to work anytime in the near future. I never enjoyed it much, and it was just a means to an end. I'm grateful for the profession and all the skills I gained, but it was never my true passion. "If it helps, I lost my shit too, but there isn't much I can change now, so yeah. It is what it is."

"I swear to God if Callum didn't assure me that Octavius is solid and would never hurt you, I'd jump on our private plane and fetch you because you sound brainwashed!"

Unlocking the terrace door, I step outside and sigh at the warmth welcoming my feet. I go to the railing and rest my elbows on it, drinking in the beauty around me while thinking about her words.

Brainwashed? Maybe.

All these discoveries and experiences put a lot of things in perspective, and while I could be hysterical and plot an escape plan, I don't really see why I have to do that.

I don't feel sorry for their victims. It's cruel and not right, I know. I would never be able to kill anyone, just the idea makes me sick.

However, when it comes to them...yeah, I'm fine with it. Why should I feel sorry for all these monsters?

Giselle and I are very different when it comes to many things. Her gentle nature would have had a hard time accepting all of this, but I was always a creature fueled by revenge and dark cravings.

"Isla." I blink, realizing I must have zoned out on her. "Do you need anything from me?"

I thank my life for giving me an awesome friend. It would've been devastating without her in it. "Just be here for me. I'm still processing it all, mainly my emotions, and until I figure them out...I need someone on my side. Okay?"

She reads between the lines well. "I'm always on your side. I'm one phone call away, so if you need anything, just message me, and I'll be there."

"Thanks, babe. You're the best," I say and still, cocking my head to the side while studying one of the trees because it seems to move way too much. As if something is purposely shaking it.

I notice more movement, and my heart plummets while fear swipes over me, the air sticking in my lungs, and I whisper into the phone, "A leopard." A magnificent animal indeed, his orange-black fur glistening under the sun while his size shrinks the tree in proportions, yet despite all that, the creature is graceful and majestic.

“What?” Giselle asks in confusion.

“A leopard. In Octavius’s garden!” I can’t even form coherent sentences as the animal does a whole-ass flip against the tree and then lands on his paws, zeroing his gaze in on me. My heartbeat speeds up while every instinct in me screams to run from the predator. “Oh my God!”

He darts toward me, snapping me out of my stupor. I turn around and rush back inside while his paws tap against the grass. I want to shut the terrace door, but he comes too close, so I drop the idea, running faster only to hear him inside the house.

I spin around, my back hitting the wall, and I scrunch my eyes closed, ready for his attack while everything inside me tenses.

My pulse drums in my throat, and I clench the phone so hard, I bruise my hand. Seconds trickle by, and nothing happens, my heavy breathing filling the space with Giselle screaming, “Isla! What the hell happened? Callum, why does Octavius have a leopard in his house?”

“That’s his pet.”

“You said he was stable!”

I force myself to peel my eyes open and sigh in relief when a strong, scarred back greets me as Octavius blocks me from the animal’s view. “Mine, Lampos.” He steps back, and I frown at him when he grabs my palm and brings it closer to the leopard. I’m still too shocked to react, so I just go along with it. “Mine,” he repeats again as the wild cat sniffs me, his whiskers twitching and his eyes flashing while he roars, the sound hurting my ears. “Lampos.” Steel laces Octavius’s voice, and the animal huffs as if hating the fact that he can’t tear my flesh apart.

He sniffs me some more, his tail swaying back and forth, and he rubs his muzzle into my palm before roaring again and strolling back to the garden while my whole body trembles. I’m still glued in place.

Octavius takes my phone. “Everything is fine. And, Giselle? Callum lied. I’m insane.”

“You fucking ass—” He hangs up before Callum can finish his sentence and cups my cheek, shifting my focus back on him.

“You have a leopard,” I whisper, and he nods. “It’s illegal in this state.”

“I’m aware.”

“Of course you’re aware.” And why would he care if it was illegal anyway? He does whatever he wants. And while I can deal with a lot of stuff, I draw the line at the whole leopard thing. “It’s a crime toward an animal to keep it caged. He belongs in the wild.”

His mouth slams on mine, capturing my lips in a passionate and probing kiss as our tongues entwine, and a hot flush travels all over me while my fingers curl into his bare chest, and he wraps his arm around me, pressing me tight to his chest.

Tilting my head back, I allow him to deepen the embrace, and he swallows my gasp when he hikes me up, my legs circling him as his hard-on digs into my core. He continues to ravish my mouth, staking his claim with each brush of his tongue while sending fire into every cell in my body, wiping away any thoughts from my mind.

When I’m in his arms, surrounded by his strength and power, I feel cherished and invincible because he will slay all the dragons, and just for a moment in time, I can pretend to be the princess saved by a brave knight.

Or the villain, it depends which fantasy of mine I want to explore.

We groan when I lace my fingers in his hair, kissing him even deeper, but my lungs beg me to stop, so I tear my mouth away, gulping for breath while another roar echoes through the space. This one is a little different from the previous one, almost annoyed. Can leopards be annoyed? “He’s injured. He won’t survive in the wild,” Octavius says, skimming his lips

over my throat and biting on my pulse. My fingers dig into his shoulders, earning me a hiss. “So he lives here.”

“All the time?”

He nips on my skin before licking the sting away, breathing in my scent. “Most of the time. Sometimes I keep him in a special zoo so they can watch over him, and he has more land there to explore. The vet makes sure he’s all right.”

“And when he’s here, he roams freely inside the mansion?” Still too shocked, I need to know all the answers before having any kind of reaction.

He chuckles, the vibrating and his five-o’clock shadow tickling me, and a grin shapes my mouth. Of all the things I’ve imagined for this morning, making out after a leopard almost attacked me wasn’t one of them.

Which just proves how unique and a little psychopathic this relationship truly is. “No, kitten. Only in my house and the garden.”

“Just peachy, then.”

He chuckles again, walking to the couch and sitting on it while my knees dip into the cushions. I place my hand on his cheek and gently trace his scar as he closes his eyes and rests his head back, welcoming my touch and not shying away from it. It thrills and warms me at the same time as even though he still didn’t share with me what caused it...at least my touch soothes something inside him. “I don’t think I can live with a leopard who comes and goes. He’s a predator.”

“He won’t bite.”

“Says the guy who feeds him. Of course he won’t bite you.” I drop my voice to a whisper, “I’m convinced he’s plotting revenge right now after you kicked him out.”

“Lamos isn’t competitive, but he adores gifts. Just bring him a few steaks and play with him in the garden. He’ll be all yours.”

“I think he might combine his two favorite activities by eating me after chasing me in the garden.” He laughs at this,

and I smack him in the chest playfully. “You forgot to mention you have a leopard yesterday.”

He looks at me again, his gaze darkening as his hands land on my waist. His fingers graze lightly over my skin, creating sizzling energy around us. “A certain gray-eyed beauty occupied my mind.” I blush. Despite knowing I’m not really beautiful, it does something to my heart knowing that he finds me so. And he proved it with his mouth last night. A tremor rushes through me as his hot palm glides upward until it reaches the necklace, his fingers skating over the diamonds as satisfaction drips from his words. “It looks good on you.” Possessiveness flashes in his eyes. “Everyone now knows you belong to me.”

“So no rings for us?” He shakes his head, anger crossing his face, and I wonder why he has such an aversion to wedding bands. He wears the dark four ring just fine. “How would the world know, then?”

“Know what?”

“That you belong to me?”

His muscles ripple under me while his hold on me tightens, and he pushes me closer to him until our lips are inches apart. “Do you want me to wear something, kitten?” I nod, our lips brushing against each other’s as we share a breath. “Do you have something in mind?”

“No.” I doubt he’ll wear a necklace, but what else can shout from the rooftops that he’s a taken man? My God, but his tendencies must rub off on me too. Although I’ve been jealous even before anything happened between us. “I’m sure I can come up with something.” His best friend is a designer, so Florian can help me out.

“Some might say this scar of mine is enough of a neon sign that no one would want me, kitten,” he teases, and anger sparks inside me at this because I don’t think it’s funny.

His scar is a part of him, but it doesn’t make him hideous or unattractive.

Leaning back, I palm his head and kiss him on the scar. He stills underneath me, and I whisper over his torn skin, “I love it.” He swallows hard. “It speaks about your strength.” I sit up and smile. “So I’ll think about something you can show off to everyone.”

I expect him to tease me back, but he studies me for several beats before saying, “You’re not hysterical.”

“Should I be?”

“I expected a lot of things this morning. From you denying what happened last night to blaming it on me or any other excuse. Yelling I’m a monster was also on my list.”

I sigh, pressing my forehead against his as I draw circles on his bare chest, thinking about his silent question. “You told me you don’t kill innocent people. That’s all that matters to me. For now, I can accept it.” I shrug. “We need to catch the Church Killer. After that, we might...talk.” This sounds like such bullshit, considering I’m in so deep already, and the idea of leaving Octavius is devastating. “I don’t want to waste time and be hysterical. Call me selfish,” I finish lamely and wince when the leopard roars in displeasure again. I glance at the terrace and see him watching me while his tail continues to sway way too much for my liking. “Please feed him so he won’t eye me with such curiosity.” I guess I’ll also have to figure out how to live with a leopard in this marriage. I’m gonna bring this wild cat so much meat, he won’t think twice about biting me.

Bribing should work, and we need some rules because I do not want to wake up one day with a leopard looming over me.

“This marriage has no expiration date, kitten,” he replies, and my insides flip. “I’ll catch the fucker and bring him to you so you can see he’s dead and won’t bother you again. However, you’re my wife and will stay my wife forever.” This should scare me as it implies he won’t let me go even if I ask. Somehow, though, instead it wraps me up in warmth and protection, a feeling I’ve never known in my life. “We’re invited to a dinner tonight.” I blink at the abrupt change of subject. Reading my confusion, he elaborates, “Ryder called.”

Estella's husband? "He practically ordered us to be at his house, so that's where we'll go."

My brow shoots up. "Someone has the power to order you around?"

He rolls his eyes. "No. I know it's my sister who wants to see us. She's worried and excited." He must really love her, and I'm curious to meet the girl who hooked up with her professor. "Don't panic."

"Emotions don't work this way, Octavius. If I'm worried, you telling me not to worry won't fix it."

"We'll work on that." I laugh, and he's ready to dive for my mouth again when my phone vibrates next to me on the couch, and he curses under his breath. "Your friend is already cockblocking me."

I pat his chest and pick up my phone, frowning when the unknown number flashes on the display. On instinct, I slide it open and put it on the loudspeaker. "Hello?" I say, but no sound comes, just silence, so I try again. "Hello?"

If this is the Church Killer and his new cruel joke...

My insides freeze when loud shouts echo instead. "You little piece of shit. You'll pay for disrespecting me like that in front of my friends." Heavy breathing joins the sound. "Come here, you bastard."

"No!" I shout when I hear the leather whooshing snap.

The belt.

I left my number for the kid along with a small broken phone so he could always make a phone call if he needed. It was new, so I didn't save the number.

"The little boy," I whisper to Octavius, and his face changes instantly.

So does everything else around me.

ctavius

The minute I park the car, Isla flies from it, already running into the building. “Fucking hell,” I mutter, chasing after her while seeing three more cars pulling up beside mine.

On the way here, I called my best friends because I had no idea what we would face here, and the idea of a child being trapped in this hellhole awakens everything evil in me. I’d seen the kid in the footage, but he was never bruised, so I assumed everything was fine.

I catch up with Isla right before she starts wildly knocking on the door, yelling, “Open up, you asshole!” She twists the knob, and I gently push her away before kicking it open, the door bouncing off the wall as we enter.

My anger turns into blazing rage at the picture greeting me.

The little boy hides in the corner, covering himself up as much as he can while a beefy man hovers over him, holding a belt in his hand and pointing at the other man sitting by the table and watching it all with a fucking smile. “Get up, and go to the room to earn your keep. At least there will be some usefulness from you.” He reaches for the child, and the kid opens his mouth, probably trying to scream, but just barely-audible sounds come.

My fists clench, and the monster permanently living inside me rears its head as my head pounds with one desire only.

Kill.

A woman sits on the couch, flipping through a magazine, and she glares at the kid when he looks at her, stretching his hands out toward her.

That tells me everything I need to know.

“Step away.” My voice booms in the apartment reeking of alcohol and cigarettes, the air polluted by it, and their heads swing my way.

They’re so fucking high and wasted they haven’t even noticed our arrival.

The beefy guy spits, “Who the fuck are you?” He glances at my wife. Big mistake. “This bitch again! I told you to stay away!” He dashes to her, but I block him, delivering a punch straight to his gut, twisting his arm as the boy stares at me. “Let me go.”

Instead of listening, I break his arm and the cracking sound echoes through the space mixing with his cry of pain. I punch him again, and he stumbles, his back hitting the wall while the other man jumps up ready to run away. “I had nothing to do with it.” He raises his hands. “It’s his stepson, not mine.”

A hit to his face comes, and I see my wife punching him straight in the nose, his head jerking to the side, blood pouring through his fingers as he holds on to it, and she kicks him in the nuts, his agonizing scream filling the space. “You perverted piece of shit!” she yells at him, going to the boy and kneeling in front of him. He jumps into her arms, tears streaming down his cheeks. “It’s okay. I’m here now.”

“You bitch,” the man mutters, lunging after my wife, but I grab him by the throat and slam his face straight into the wall, knocking out a few teeth.

The boy continues to stare at me as tears fall down his cheeks, and something inside my heart stirs.

We hear the sound of a toilet flushing, and in a second, one more asshole comes out, zipping his pants. “I don’t have all day, Rick. Either give me your wife or give the kid to Bob. Pay up your debts.” He pauses when his gaze lands on us. “What the fuck.” He grabs the nearby knife on the kitchen counter and waves it at us. “Stay the fuck away.”

Bob gets up too, pulling out a gun from his back pocket, and the stupid bitch screams.

“Not so brave now, huh?” the man with the knife asks, coming closer, and some people are just born stupid. “Keep the gun on him, Bob,” he orders, stepping even closer.

“Isla, take the kid and leave,” I tell her without turning around, watching my prey carefully, and she gets up. “Now.”

“She’s not going anywhere. This one was promised to me.” Bob points his gun at the kid, suddenly brave again. “Stay put.” He removes the safety on the gun, and the bitch screams even louder, so he hisses, “Shut your mouth!”

“Don’t kill me,” she begs, sitting up on the couch. “You can take my son. I never wanted him anyway.” A painful, harsh intake of breath rings in my ear, and my fist clenches tighter because I can relate to the hurt the boy is experiencing right now. “And he’s defective. Stupid mute boy who’s useless and just gets in the way.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Isla slap her hard, and she gasps, holding her cheek. “You’re the one who’s stupid and defective,” she seethes, rubbing the boy’s back as he wraps his arms even tighter around her. “You don’t deserve your son.”

Focusing back on the two men as one of them keeps advancing on me while Bob repeats, “Stay put,” I’ve had enough of this bullshit.

“Florian,” I call out, and he steps inside. The men look at him in confusion while I finally disarm the stupid idiot and pierce the knife right into his gut, covering his mouth.

“What the fuck,” Bob whispers as Florian kicks the gun from him and delivers several hits one after another until he falls on the ground, blood now coming from his mouth.

“What do you need?” my best friend asks me as Santiago and Remi enter, scanning the apartment. Judging by their faces, they’ve heard everything.

“Take Isla and the kid home. I’ll deal with this.”

I expect my wife to argue because she isn’t used to just sitting still while someone else deals with her stuff, but to my surprise, she rises on her tiptoes and kisses me on the cheek. “If you’re going to kill them...make it painful, please.” Her voice trembles. “He has a few bruises, and his pants are wet.” She sends a deadly glare the woman’s way, and Florian nods at me, ushering her outside, leaving us all alone with three groaning men on the ground.

Their deaths will be long, agonizing, and full of misery. Chopped limbs, poison, knives, and drills are just some of the things we will use on them.

Because I have no mercy for men like that.

I might be a monster.

But at least I kill my own kind, so no child sits in the corner and gives out silent screams begging for help while the people who are supposed to love them ignore their pleas.

There is no atonement for the likes of me.

I don't look for it anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*“One of my favorite ancient Greek works was always Iliad by
Homer.*

How could it not be interesting?

A love story that divided even the gods.

*Hector sacrificed everything for his country and brother,
saving him when he should have allowed him to face the
consequences of his decisions on his own.*

That’s the tragedy of the situation, though, isn’t it?

Family should be the greatest source of our strength.

But sometimes family is our greatest downfall.”

Octavius

*O*ctavius, 12 years old

*My eyes snap open as a hot rush travels through my
veins, alerting me to something. Blinking the sleep away, I rise
on the bed and look around, finding nothing out of the
ordinary in the spacious room lit by the moonlight streaming
through the window while owls hoot in the night.*

*A rustling next to me snags my attention. I adjust the
blanket on Estella better while she hugs her stuffed bear
tighter, rolling to her side, and I exhale in relief because she’s
close to me.*

*I’ve been sleeping in her room for the past two years since
Wayne started messing with her to get to me.*

He'd lock her in various rooms while turning the lights off, give her the silent treatment, or just say shit to her that her seven-year-old self wouldn't understand.

All because he enjoys watching her pain as it causes my own. The sadistic bastard loves to find new ways to mess with me. He's determined to do what he hasn't done in a long while.

Make me cry and see me beg, but fuck that shit.

And then I hear a barely audible whistling sound followed by the manic laughter that drips with anticipation and joy. It sends chills down my spine.

Jumping up from the bed, I throw away the blanket and shake Estella's shoulder until her groggy eyes focus on me. "Wake up, baby girl." I pull her upward while she blinks at me.

"Octavius?" she whispers. "What's going on?"

Ushering her to get up, I practically drag her to the door and open it, peeking into the hallway and not seeing anyone.

However, the humming joins the whistles as the classical music echoes through the air, the demon's favorite. According to him, only masterpieces deserve to see how he deals with a person who is the bane of his existence.

As he said, some children need to learn they were never wanted, just a means to an end, and they deserve punishment for daring to be born.

A complete psycho who has lost his damn mind. That's who my stepfather is, although I detest the title. He isn't my anything.

A monster who rules this mansion while his faithful subjects let him get away with all the evil things in order to survive.

Stepping outside, I motion with my head. "We need to go," I tell her, grabbing her hand and turning us to the right. Her head drops on the floor as we race through the hallways while my heart beats so hard I feel the pulse drumming in my ears.

Because the whistles and music become louder, I speed up, holding on to Estella who huffs and puffs, barely keeping up with my pace.

My sister tries her best because she knows what might happen if we slow down, and guarding her life is my one single goal. Navigating deeper into the mansion in the dark, I move toward the direction of the secret door that allows us to get outside and hide in our massive garden.

Wayne has the power only between these walls. Outside, he becomes weak and useless, roaring in displeasure when we escape his clutches.

Heavy footsteps tail us, and my heart beats wildly, my hand gripping Estella's even tighter while his slurs rock off the walls. "You little bastards, come back here." Something crashes in the distance, and the sounds of gunshots make Estella gasp in fear, and she stumbles a little. "Come back, or I'll kill you both, so your whore of a mother can be sorry for what she has done to me."

Fucking asshole.

My mother never cheated on the bastard in her life, but he can never forgive her for marrying his uncle first and reminds her about it on a daily basis.

Ironically, I'm the only one on the receiving end of his cruelty, though, because my body is an outlet for his rage and resentment required to deal with my mother's betrayal toward his feelings.

Hilarious, really, as my mother is incapable of loving anyone but herself.

Maybe that's why his manic episodes have increased lately, occurring almost every other night as he turns the mansion into an even grimmer place where everyone is afraid of their own shadows.

I feel Estella tremble and grabbing her shoulders, I push her in front of me, blocking her from any danger coming from behind. It's the right call because the bullets ring in the air followed by something crashing in the distance. "Run,

Estella.” She speeds up, our bare feet soundless on the carpeted floor. More bullets ring out, and something crashes again while only one thought pounds in my mind.

To get Estella to safety before this bastard gets his hands on her. I can withstand anything.

Anything but her pain.

Gazing ahead, I sigh inwardly at the small opening in the wall, and we finally reach the secret door. Another bullet, along with his loud roar, reverberates around the walls, and she whispers, “Octavius.”

I palm her head. “It’s okay, Estella. Go inside now and run. Run until you reach the greenhouse and stay there. Do not come back home until someone comes to get you.” At her nod, I remove the painting hiding the secret passage and motion for her to go in before closing the opening so the bastard will never find out about it.

Or anyone else, for they’ll snitch on us at their first opportunity. Their fear is stronger than any sense of honor or empathy toward two hopeless children.

We found the passage with Florian two years ago; since then, it has been our saving grace. My bruises wouldn’t be so severe if I got out on time.

Florian even got us blankets, food, and a few lamps to put in there so we’d be more comfortable. He also bought a music player for Estella so she could put on headphones and block away everything while trying to fall asleep. A first aid kit is there too to treat any wounds since I refuse to report Wayne. I think all the families know at this point because Uncle Lucian and Uncle Jacob constantly try to keep me in their houses, they always talk to me and beg me to open up. They protect me in their own way, and frustration always flashes in their eyes when I refuse their help, continuing to live in this hell.

Wayne might go behind bars, but my mother...she would find another piece of shit to marry, and he might be worse. At least with Wayne, I know he only wishes to hurt me deep down.

What if another bastard would touch Estella? The bitch can't be trusted to make any good decisions.

Despite our wealth, which is our given right, Wayne never allows any money to be spent on me unless it's to buy me clothes for school, so no one knows about his hideous deeds. He loves to use it against me too, sometimes withholding food for days in hopes of me coming and begging to him.

I never do because fuck him, and my attitude angers him even more.

Florian pretty much pays for all the things I need and gets me food to eat at school or sneaks some sandwiches inside the house with takeout bags. It makes Wayne livid, and he barely resists snatching them away or hitting my best friend.

The bastard is many things, but he isn't stupid.

You'd have to be an idiot to go against Jacob Price's son in this town because Florian's dad would bury you alive if you dared.

In the greenhouse is a small phone too. Florian told us to call him in an emergency, but I never used it despite Estella begging me to do it.

As long as I can survive, we will never use this phone, and I have six more years.

Six years until I graduate and get access to my trust fund.

Six years until I can speak up and fight for custody.

Six years, but in this hell, six years might as well be six thousand because time stands still here.

The footsteps come closer, and I dart to the left, screaming, "I'm here!" Changing direction, I run away from the secret opening so he won't hear Estella crawling through the passage.

Rushing into the living room, I wince when he finds me, his laughter reverberating through the space. "Ah, here you are." He starts firing bullets at me as I evade them, jumping from side to side as he enjoys this.

He never shoots me, oh no. That would mean I'd need medical assistance and the possibility of him going to jail.

"Dance, Octavius. Dance to my tune, you little piece of shit." He continues to fire the bullets one after another until I catch a nearby vase and haul it at him, his gun dropping on the floor, which gives me an opening to run, and I do as he yells, "Come here!"

My breathing speeds up, my body already tensing in the anticipation of the pain because there is no escape from this nightmare as all the doors are locked, and even if they weren't...the guards or staff aren't allowed to let me outside.

I can roam around the mansion for hours and still end up in his clutches.

I take a swift turn to the right, ending up in the dining room, needing to snatch a knife or something when my gasp rings in the air as he wraps his leather belt around my throat, making me tumble to the floor while he cuts off my oxygen supply. "You think you're so clever, huh?" His heavy breath tickles my ear as I try to snatch the belt, my nails digging into the leather while he cackles, tightening his hold, and air sticks in my throat. "How I wish I could just kill you so you wouldn't go around looking so much like him. I hate your face the most. Spitting image of your father." More tightness, my head becomes dizzy while black dots start to appear, and my hands drop as my strength slowly leaves me, only to gulp for breath when he pushes me away, my head hitting the table. "I hate nothing more in this world than your face, Octavius." Lifting his hand, he starts delivering blow after blow, hitting me with the belt buckle as I crawl away, although it's useless.

He needs to get his fill in order to fall asleep and let me lick my wounds.

Biting on my lower lip, I taste blood while he hits me, and I think about a green field somewhere far away, taking me away from experiencing this pain that has no reprieve.

Gathering all my strength in my fist, I get up and dart back into the hallway with him running after me and come to a halt

when I see my mother standing near the stairway, sipping whiskey while she watches us.

No.

This gives Wayne a chance to grab me by the throat again, shaking me as he starts punching me in the stomach, demanding, "Fucking beg for mercy, Octavius. Beg me with his eyes!"

In true psycho fashion, every time he hurts me, he just pictures my father, and I hate it.

Hate it because my father knew his nephew would make my life a living hell and that Mom would marry him. That's why he left the power of attorney over my shares to Uncle Lucian, so he could protect me. Mom would have signed everything over to Wayne.

If my father knew all this...why fucking allow for me to be born?

I'm paying the price without doing anything to deserve it, and that's my tragedy.

I stay silent, coughing on blood, and spit at him, which earns me a punch to my face this time, the hurt prickling all over my skull. He throws me on the stairs, where my body bumps painfully into the marble. "You wanna be brave tonight? Let's see how brave you are, then. Remember, it's summer, Octavius. There is no school to rein in my cruelty."

With this, he drags me upstairs to their room as Mom continues to drink, not doing anything to stop him.

He tortures me for the next three hours until finally, he falls on his bed from exhaustion while leaving me bleeding on the floor from all the wounds. My mother enters shortly, going to sleep as I crawl into the hallway where Antonio finds me.

He takes me to my room, and I lay there, never letting the tears fall. I muster up all the smiles for Estella the next morning so she won't notice anything.

Although her assertive eyes don't miss yet another scar.

But who cares what happens to my body?

My soul weeps every time from her indifference.

And try as I might...I cannot be indifferent to my mother's inability to love me.

I always knew my family life was hell.

Turns out, though, all my pain wasn't me hitting rock bottom.

Oh no.

The rock bottom part came later.

After all, some cruelty has no limits.

A fact Wayne happily proved to me.

*S*la

I sit on the couch, arms wrapped tightly around the boy who breathes evenly against my chest, staring into the distance but squeezing me hard whenever I make a move to get up. Besides hugging, the only thing he allowed me to do was change his clothes to clean ones and tend to his bruises.

Locking him in my embrace, I try to control the anger spiraling inside me at the reminder of his awful parents who were ready to sell him in order to pay their debts. And as much as the guy disgusted me...his mother disgusted me way more, and I wish I punched her before leaving.

How can you act this way when your child is being hurt?
Is this what Octavius had to go through all these years?

He never shared any details. I made assumptions purely on all the rumors floating around over the years regarding them since their custody battle lasted months. She got a billion from him and, in exchange, signed off all her rights to her daughter.

"Shhh, little one," I whisper, and he calms a little bit when Antonio enters the living room, holding a silver tray with two steaming cups and some cookies. "Everything is okay." He lies still, although I feel wetness on my shirt, and my own tears form in my eyes when I think about how scared he must have been.

How isolated and alone.

Without having the chance to scream for help.

My precious baby boy, we've spent months together, so his pain hurts me on some deeper level, which just shows my attachment to him.

"The cook baked his signature chocolate chip cookies. He says it cures all the worries with jasmine tea," Antonio says, placing the tray on a nearby table. Antonio catches the kid's eyes and he lifts his head. "Would you like to try it?" He hugs me again after shooting a glance Florian's way, who lounges on the opposite couch, scrolling through his phone. He studied him a lot on the way here and even when we got inside the house, although he never displayed any sign of fear in his presence. "Mr. Price, would you like something to drink?"

Florian waves his hand in a dismissive gesture, and Antonio rolls his lips, sighing and giving me one last glance as he leaves the room. "You're very rude to him." I noticed it earlier as well when he brought us home. He never speaks a word to the butler, and his stare is deadly whenever it lands on the old guy. "He's old enough to be your grandfather, you know." I grew up where they taught us to respect the elderly, so his behavior is very off-putting.

He chuckles, meeting my eyes. "I don't care. I have no respect for those who hurt the people I love."

"Who did he hurt?"

"Octavius."

"What do you mean?" And if that's the case, why is he still working here?

"Ask your husband." Judging by his tone, this conversation is over, and I intend to do that for sure. Whatever happened, the old guy clearly regrets it, but I guess Florian made up his mind and won't change it. "You're handling it well." He cocks his head to the side as I continue to rub my hand down the kid's back, soothing him. "Marriage to my best friend." He grins. "It suits you."

"Well, I'm doing the best I can in my current situation."

He clicks his tongue. “So dramatic. It’s okay to admit you’re happy.”

Praying for the patience slowly slipping away in his company, because sometimes it feels as if he just constantly makes fun of me with his sarcastic replies, I say, “It’s hard to be happy when life keeps throwing you surprises every single day and with you-know-who hunting us.”

He shrugs. “We deal with all kinds of shit every day. You’ll get used to it.” He points at the boy. “Now this is unusual.” He goes back to scrolling through his phone while I think about all this.

I’m not sure what Octavius intends to do with these men, nor do I care. However, as funny and tragic as it is...my biggest worry is not about the fact that Octavius is probably murdering people somewhere right now.

It’s about the kid’s mother and how she can still legally take him away, or he’ll be thrown into the system. God only knows what hell awaits him in either of these scenarios. This sense of hopelessness consumes me and I hate it.

The sweet boy who never speaks but looks at me with so much trust deserves better than being anyone’s punching bag or for someone picking on him.

“Isla.” Florian’s voice pulls me out of my depressing thoughts. “You’re a Reed now.”

“So?”

He gets up and goes to the bar, pouring himself a glass of water. “So you have power. And a husband who comes with some great friends.” I roll my eyes when he toasts me and takes a sip. “Whatever worries your mind, relax. Octavius will handle it.”

“How do you know I worry?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“And you think it’s fixable?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re Octavius’s wife. Whatever you want, he’ll get it for you.” Another long sip. “No one is allowed to upset you. That’s how it is with us.”

My heart flips inside my chest at this admission, but I can’t help the next question slipping past my lips. “Why are you hurting Jimena, then?”

Instantly, all amusement is gone from him. He straightens up and finishes his drink in one gulp, placing the glass away, and I wince at the loud rattling sound. “That’s none of your business.”

Except it is. He’s my husband’s best friend, so this kind of makes him part of the...family? I’m not sure, but I barely interacted with the other two guys while Florian goes out of his way to converse with me.

If a war erupts between the two dynasties, we will have to pick sides, and well, Florian might be a jerk, but he’s our jerk at this point. I prefer to have all the facts so I can better defend him to everyone.

United front and all that jazz or whatever married couples do.

“She’s pregnant. You need to man up.” Whatever holds him back from her can’t be this big of a deal. “I understand Santiago is your friend and all. She needs to come first, though.” I can’t imagine how his behavior must hurt her.

To see all of them get married and find their happiness while the man she loves ignores her.

“It has nothing to do with Santiago and everything to do with Jimena and my child’s safety.” He sighs. “It’s okay to be a villain if it means you protect the princess from the psychopath ready to destroy her for daring to love you.”

I have no time to reply to his statement because we hear the main door being open and heavy footsteps vibrate the floor as Octavius enters. Relief washes over me at the sight of him. “Hi, kitten.” He greets me and nods at Florian. “Thanks for

staying.” He shifts his focus back to me, and I see him look at the boy. “Hi, kid.”

He jumps off from my arms and runs straight to Octavius, smacking into his knees and sighing heavily while wrapping his arms around his leg, and we all just blink in stunned silence at this.

He hasn’t moved at all in the past two hours.

My husband watches him for several seconds, shock flashing on his face that he quickly covers up, and he scratches at his cheek before trying to cover it up with his hair. My heart pangs painfully because I’ve noticed he does that whenever he wants to be less intimidating to someone.

He has no reason to do so, but I resist the urge to say anything as he crouches down, and the boy stares at him. He wipes away his tears. “It’s all right, little one. No one is going to hurt you.” A raspy breath escapes the kid, and he hugs Octavius. Despite being scared of all these men and ignoring Florian, he clearly likes Octavius. I guess he won him over when he defended him. “I give you my word.” The boy leans back, and Octavius points at the cookies and tea. “I love these.” The kid still isn’t convinced, so Octavius gets up and goes to the table, breaking one of the cookies in half and eating it while grabbing a mug and sipping a little bit of tea. “It’s good.”

The boy follows suit right away, climbing up on the couch to sit next to me, and reaches for the cookie, stuffing his mouth full. “He refused to eat anything. He must trust you more.” Which is strange since he ate all the food at my place.

My husband must read my thoughts as he explains, “You ate the food right along with him.” I don’t even examine how disturbing this statement is, considering he’s admitting to spying on me. “His stepfather probably tampered with his food, so he won’t eat it if someone else doesn’t as well.”

Oh.

Anger rushes back at me, so I ask, “Is he gone?”

He shakes his head, causing my disappointment. One day into this marriage and I'm already sad someone isn't dead. "He will be, though. Once Santiago and Remi finish with them all." I'm glad to hear his friends will end these sick people. "His mother signed all the paperwork. She has no legal rights over him. I paid her enough, so she won't ever show her face or open her mouth about it."

My jaw about hits the floor at this because, what? First of all, how did he manage to do all that in just a few hours, and second of all...why did he pay this bitch anything? "We could have built a case on her."

"Yeah and she could have pleaded with the public and the judge. People love all these stories, where parents reunite with their children, getting a second chance." His tone leaves no doubt that he despises the mere idea of it, and I really need him to share more about his past to understand what kind of environment he grew up in.

Not good, clearly, and how he guessed the kid's hesitation about food tells me everything I need to know.

That stepfather of his deserves death, and I don't care what anyone else says.

"So we need to start working on the paperwork," he tells me, and my stomach drops while I place my hand on the kid's head, running my fingers over his hair. He leans into the touch while reaching for the tea.

Paperwork, as in contacting social workers and sending him into the system?

"Can we do a few things first?" Octavius leans back and motions with his chin for me to elaborate. "Can we first run tests on him and find a good doctor who might help him? And just give him some time to heal from this nightmare before we start working on the paperwork?" Maybe even get him some psychological help.

The kid gulps his tea soundly, licking his lips before taking another cookie, and while all this sugar isn't good for his health, I let him have it. He might take comfort in it right now.

“These kind of tests require a lot of visits to the hospital, and while we can run them under the radar, it’ll be too difficult for everyone involved. I prefer the legal route, so nothing can surprise us down the road.” He shrugs. “It makes sense. The process will be easy. We always get what we want.”

Is this supposed to reassure me? “You have all the power to do that before we contact the authorities?”

“Yes. But why would I do it and waste our time?”

Waste our time? Is this how he sees this child’s situation? As wasting time?

The kid reaches for yet another cookie but frowns when he catches air as he polished all of them from the plate. “I have no words, Octavius.” I get up, huffing and crossing my arms. “None.” Somehow I expect him to show more compassion toward the child, given his circumstances, but maybe I expected too much.

Just because he treats me nice and acts all soft around me doesn’t mean it changes anything about his true character. These men are cruel for a reason, right?

“Why are you angry?” Now he sounds offended, as if I said something to upset him.

“Hey, kid,” Florian speaks up, clearly reading the tension in the air. “I heard they have good ice cream in the kitchen.”

I groan inwardly. More sugar? We won’t be winning any awards in anything at this rate.

The kid’s eyes light up, but he glances at me and Octavius first. Once my husband nods in approval, he gets up and darts to Florian. “Let’s go, kiddo. Calling dibs on the strawberry flavor!” The boy grins at this, and they disappear down the hallway. It still astonishes me how trusting he is toward strangers.

Or maybe kids have some intuition, and they feel on a subconscious level who is good or bad. Then again, you can develop such skills if you grew up among bastards.

Octavius drops on the couch and leans back. “Go on. Speak up.”

“Oh, thank you for permission. I didn’t think I needed it.” He rolls his eyes, and somehow, this pisses me off even more. “He’s traumatized. While his wounds are not deep and fresh, which tells me they never hit him before, still.” At least I’m happy the bastards didn’t touch him. “Also, he’s non-verbal.”

“I’m aware of all these things.”

“So why won’t you give me some time to prepare him and maybe help him adjust better in the foster care system?”

He frowns. “Foster care?”

“You said it yourself. To start working on the paperwork. That’s what you meant, right?” He shakes his head, and now it’s my turn to frown. “What did you mean, then?”

We stare at one another while indescribable emotion settles on his features, and he watches me carefully before speaking. “I meant to legally adopt him.”

Octavius

Isla’s mouth opens and closes, and she finally shakes her head, sitting back on the couch while rubbing her forehead. “Adopting him?” she repeats as if in a trance. “You want to adopt him?”

Annoyance burns at her lost tone. I understand this is huge, but somehow I expected her to be more supportive of the idea because, what the fuck is all this talk about foster care?

I won’t count on the lucky chance to find good people to care for him there.

“It makes sense.” I’m logical and pragmatic if nothing else, but I still have a conscience. While my friends took the bastards to the dungeon, I stayed behind.

Some victims are so deep in what happened to them that they act a certain way around their abusers, so I gave the kid’s mother the benefit of the doubt. That maybe she loved her

child and said all those things because she was traumatized as well. I was willing to help her get her life on track so her kid can have a good childhood.

However, the minute we were alone, she offered herself to me, and after I pushed her away, she started cursing at me and saying how she was on the way to become a supermodel when the unplanned pregnancy ruined all her plans. The kid's father promised her a rich lifestyle, only to leave her when he found a better option for himself, and she was stuck with a kid she didn't want.

Then she finally met Rick, a man who, according to her, worked his ass off to provide for her. She finished it all with saying that the kid isn't her responsibility as he just ruins everything for her.

As I stared at her when she gave me this monologue, I thought about my mother, who also used excuse after excuse just to justify a simple fact. She was a shitty mother and shouldn't have been one in the first place. I could see that if the kid went back to her, she'd find another asshole to fill up the void, and this time around, things might turn into bigger hell for him.

In short, there was no curing her indifference toward her child.

I did what always worked with my mother.

Offered her a decent amount of money, and she signed all the papers protecting the child and my family in the future from her. She almost fell on her ass at the proposition, willing to sign the papers right away, and I barely controlled my rage.

I contacted our family lawyer, and he drew up the paperwork in record time, along with starting the adoption process, promising to handle it as soon as possible. When you have our kind of wealth, power, and connections, you tend to get results quicker than most.

"It makes sense to adopt him?" Isla asks, tearing me away from my thoughts, and I focus on my beautiful woman. Her

chest rises and falls while her cheeks heat, probably from all this frustration. “Do you hear yourself?”

“I do. Once we adopt him, he’ll have the best life he could possibly have. We’re the right fit for him. He’s already bonded with you, and like it or not, you claimed the boy the minute you invited him into your apartment months ago.”

Once upon a time, I’d been a five-year-old starved for love and affection, so I know what he feels, how he thinks, and what he hopes for in this life.

He has this innocence about him, and while the pain his mother caused will never go away, he still has a chance to grow into a good person with all the riches this world has to offer.

Every time I look at him, I see my younger self.

I was his age when Wayne hit me for the first time. How can you be this fucking cruel to a child, I’ll never understand, and I won’t risk anyone turning him into another me.

I don’t care if it sounds irrational and psychotic. I’ve never been sane anyway.

The boy is ours, and that’s final.

“Stop acting as if we’re discussing another business deal.” She jumps up again, pulling at her hair. “This is a huge step. Once we legally adopt him, we’ll be his parents and responsible for him. He deserves a good, loving home where his parents adore him.”

“And we can provide that home for him. Why? You know anyone else who can do it?” Not that it would change anything. The kid became mine the minute I saved him. I’m not letting anyone adopt him but us. Because no one will ever hurt him in my house. “Like I said, we’re the right fit.”

I get up, walking toward the bar, and pick up a water bottle, flicking it open. “Up until yesterday, you didn’t want to get married, and now you’re ready to be a father?”

I take sips while she stays silent. “Things change. Accept it, and let’s start working on the paperwork.”

“Octavius, I love the boy and want to protect him. But this is a lifelong commitment, and you can’t change your mind down the road.” Anger comes at me in full force again as I already predict what she’ll say next. “Maybe I can adopt him, and then we can see how this marriage—”

Her gasp echoes in the air when I throw away the bottle and charge toward her, her back pressing into the wall as I cage her in, trapping her in my embrace with my hands splayed on either side of her head while our chests connect. “Kitten, I’m going to repeat it one last time so you’ll have no doubt left in that pretty head of yours, and then you’ll put this permanently to rest.” Defiance flashes in her eyes, and she lifts her chin. Doesn’t that just turn me on more, as if her existence alone doesn’t make me hard? “You’re mine. My wife. There is no end date to this marriage. We’re bonded for a lifetime. I won’t ever change my mind. I married you because I wanted to. You really think I didn’t have other options to achieve what I wanted?” It was the best strategy then, but it seems my kitten has some issues believing she’s it for me. “We’re together, and we’ll stay together no matter what.”

She sighs, her fists clenching my shirt while I rest my forehead against hers, and she takes a deep breath. “The Church Killer—”

“I’ll handle him.” The fucker hasn’t made a move yet, although I wouldn’t be surprised if this whole situation with the kid is his doing.

“We’re both so screwed up, Octavius,” she whispers. “Can we give him a good home, all things considered?” She leans back, and her eyes widen. “I have no clue about kids and what they need.”

“I think his mother screwed him up more than we ever could,” I deadpan, and her lips twitch. “Besides, we can give him a good home because we know better. It’s unexpected, but that’s life.” I cup her neck, tracing my thumb over her cheek, and she leans into my palm while her necklace glistens in the sun, making possessiveness rush through me as joy enters me. Seeing it on her always awakens something primal in me. “We can do this.”

“We’re moving at lightning speed.” She chuckles, gripping my shirt tighter. “This is madness, and I’m willing to fall down the rabbit hole.”

“Welcome to the world of the Four Dark Horsemen.” I place my mouth on hers, pushing my tongue between her lips, and we lock in a deep kiss, making her hug me close and relax in my arms instantly. Drinking from her for several seconds, I end it too soon, and she groans in displeasure. “I’d say snail’s pace. It took us almost a year to get here. Let’s not waste any more time.” I wink. “Besides, I raised my sister, and she turned out all right.” Her eyes soften, and a sigh slips past her lips while I grin. “I’m sure with all the means I have now, we can do an even better job. Although it doesn’t get better than Estella.”

My little sister is a ray of sunshine and always has been. She is and always will be my princess.

Even if the said princess got herself a husband, and a MacAlister at that.

My mood sours at the reminder of the cocky man, and that’s when three knocks ring in the air followed by my sister’s loud yell, “Open the door, Octavius Keneth Reed!”

Looks like my baby sister didn’t take me declining her dinner invitation earlier well and decided to come here herself.

Like I said.

I raised her right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Some people say it’s awful to have scars because they give you imperfections.

Something for people to stare at and make assumptions about it, rejecting you so easily because you don’t fit in their definition of beauty.

Oh, how fucking wrong they are.

Scars are awful because of one thing and one thing only.

They serve as a forever reminder imprinted on your skin of what was done to you.”

Octavius

Octavius, 12 years old

“What are you doing?”

Flipping the book, I smile at Estella as she drops next to me near the fireplace, extending her hands toward the fire.

She must be cold. The fucker doesn’t allow for the house to heat properly because he’s a greedy bastard. Besides, if he has the chance to create more discomfort for us, he’ll never pass it up.

“Reading a book,” I tell her as I put it aside and grab the nearby blanket, covering her up. “It’s an epic poem.” She glances at the title. “The Iliad. It’s about the Trojan War.” Estella studies at our school, and although Wayne hates his own daughter, he’s anal about her education. So she was exposed to all the literature from an early age. Thank God

she's smart and learned to read easily; otherwise, he might have been even more cruel.

"Ah!" she exclaims, tapping on the book. "Where a prince fell in love and kidnapped someone's wife." She frowns. "You should never do that."

"She was willing," I remind her, but yeah. No one should kidnap anyone, period. "Yeah, and about all the brave warriors and gods participating in this war."

"Who's your favorite?" she asks, sitting up on her knees and leaning forward, picking up my hot chocolate mug to take a sip. Antonio made me this because Wayne is on a business trip; otherwise, I'd be drinking cold water. I'm surprised we even have chocolate in the house.

"Hector."

"Oh! The Trojan prince everyone adored." She smiles and rests her cheek on my shoulder as she puts the mug back in my hand. "Because you're a lot like him."

The fire crackles, orange and blue flames mixing, creating even more warmth as the logs slowly disappear from our view. One of the most mesmerizing sights in the world for me as everything is powerless against the elements and nature. "What do you mean?"

"He always protected his brother." She pats my back. "Like you do."

I kiss the top of her head. "Always, Estella. No matter how old you are, I'll always be there watching over you."

She giggles. "Even when I marry a prince?"

"Even then. Because you're my baby girl." I tickle her with my free hand, and her laughter rocks off the walls, happiness spreading inside me at the sound of it because these are the rare moments of joy in our lives.

"And you're my big brother. I love you, Octavius!" Another giggle. "I promise not to kidnap anyone's husband, though."

Before I can answer her, a voice speaks up, freezing us both. "Well, aren't you two cozy?" Our heads swing to the right to see Wayne standing in the doorjamb to his office because it's the only place we have a fireplace. My father designed it this way because he always felt cold and spent most of his time here. Wayne hates the office, though, and always keeps it locked. It was our little secret. "So that's what everyone allows you to do while I'm away?" He steps inside and shuts the door. My stomach plummets, and I get up, my mind swirling, searching for escape routes.

He'll find me anyway, but Estella is my top priority now.

He might even restrict toilet usage. He's done that in the past until I couldn't hold it in and pissed my pants as a child.

"It was my idea," I tell him. "I brought us here."

"Of course you did. Like to feel closer to your daddy, don't you?" He removes his suit jacket while watching us like a hawk, trailing after our movements. "Too bad Daddy didn't love you much either because he failed to protect you." He chuckles. "It's your curse, Octavius. No one loves you or will ever love you. Some people are just born unlovable."

Estella laces her fingers with mine, her whole body trembling, and while I don't react to his cruel jab, my soul weeps at how true it is.

If my own mother hates me, can I ever expect a stranger to love me?

Although I have my friends, especially Florian.

He loves me in his own way.

"Estella, go to your room." He ambushes me in the most random of times. There is no rhythm to his sadistic cravings; however, he never touches his daughter. Not physically, at least. He won't care if she is collateral damage, and I won't allow it. "Go." My voice turns harsh, and she springs into action.

My heart flips when Wayne stops her with a glare, and she swallows. "Anna's mother called me." Oh, fuck no. "Told me you enjoyed the birthday party."

Wayne hates for Estella to have friends, so he never allows her to go to any birthdays. I wouldn't go either if he had enough guts to go against Uncle Jacob. "I said she could."

"Octavius here, always taking the blame."

He starts moving toward me, joy crossing his face, letting me know he's already picked a punishment and intends to deliver it shortly. I repeat to Estella again, "Go."

He snatches a knife from his back pocket, flipping it between his fingers as the blade glistens under the light streaming from above and the fireplace, giving the weapon an even darker edge.

He carries those around now?

"You'll listen to me, Estella. I've been kind, but I can be very cruel." She shivers, and I fucking hate her anywhere near him right now.

She doesn't deserve it. I'm already damaged, but her? She's innocent, and I intend to preserve her innocent and pure outlook on the world for as long as possible.

However, I have no time to warn her again because he delivers his first attack. "See, Estella?" Wayne prompts, wrapping his hand around my throat and squeezing so hard it's impossible to breathe. I slap his hand while counting the seconds in my head, the only thing grounding me to the present as my body cries out for oxygen.

Despite that, my whole focus is on my sister's terrified face. "You shouldn't have gone to that birthday." He shakes me, his fingers flexing tighter around my neck, and that familiar dizziness sweeps over me. "Now, someone has to pay for the disrespect." He puts the tip of the knife to my cheek and presses it until he draws blood. I hiss, but my face stays indifferent, hiding my feelings from him as I know his goal.

He gets off only when he sees my misery, and it kills him when I don't give him the satisfaction. Sadly this made him even harsher with me, but who gives a fuck?

He strips me of my sanity and pride every single day. I deserve some payback even if the said payback pains only me

in the end.

“Should I hurt him?”

Estella shakes her head and steps several feet away until her back hits the wall. Her eyes fill with so much regret, and she trembles.

All my protective instincts rise up, ready to do anything to save her as Wayne is unpredictable for the first time.

He laughs as the logs crackle in the fireplace. “I bet it would make you cry.” He slides the knife from side to side and then throws me on the floor, where I cough violently, gulping for breath.

She rushes to me, hugging me close. Pressing her to my side, I sit a bit in front, blocking her away from Wayne’s view. “You always cry, though, so it’s boring.” He flips the knife between his fingers again, sending a sadistic grin Estella’s way as his eyes focus on her.

I tense, predicting in advance what he says next, although I should have expected that, right? It was just a matter of time with this demon. “I would far more enjoy hurting you.” He looks at me when Estella gasps in shock.

The fucking piece of shit would hurt his own daughter if it ensures my hurt. She doesn’t exist for him outside of me.

His one method of manipulation as she’s a weapon in his hands he uses whenever he seeks to destroy me, but that’s fine.

I can’t lose my little sister. She’s proof that I still have a soul.

I’d prefer to die protecting her than submit to this bastard and show him my tears. Florian vowed to take care of Estella should anything happen to me.

A vow he hated to make but he did nevertheless.

“Come here, Estella.” Wayne extends his hand to her, but she ignores it. Did the idiot think she’d listen to him? She might be their child, but they have never been parents to her.

My words come above anyone else’s.

She burrows deeper into me, and it doesn't go unnoticed.

His eyes narrow, and an angry snarl curls his lip when he repeats, "Come here, Estella."

Since she stays glued to my side, he curses under his breath and then steps toward her, ready to tear her away from me.

A scream escapes her when I lunge at him and shove him so hard, he loses his balance and tumbles to the floor.

The knife falls from his grip.

I grab my little sister's shoulder, my fingers digging into her skin and bruising her in the process as I drag her toward the door, open it wide, and push her outside.

She screams, "No!" But I already shut it in her face as Antonio runs to her. The lock clicks, and I slip the key underneath the door. My order rings in the air. "Don't enter, Antonio, until I stop screaming." I know he will follow my commands because if there is one thing everyone has in common in this fucking house?

Staying deaf and helpless when it comes to my pain.

Heavy footsteps are heard behind me, and my heart sinks into my stomach while fear envelops me, but I bite on my lip, holding on and never giving him the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

That's one weapon I have in this never-ending nightmare of mine from where there is no escape. It's a prison built on my beaten skin and scars marring my body, serving as a canvas for his cruelty and resentment.

"Take her away!" I manage to bark.

"You little shit think you can make decisions in my house?" he asks, getting up and picking up the knife as he powers toward me, grabbing me by the throat and pushing me against the door as he lifts up the knife. "That smug expression on your face."

My cry of pain reverberates through the space when he pierces the knife through my cheek, digging it deep into my

flesh and dragging it back and forth while hurt swallows me whole.

He pulls it out, the blood pouring down my neck as he drags me closer to the fire and practically shoves my head into it, the burning sensations bruising my skin, and it's hard to breathe as I continue to scream. Although at this point, they are just barely audible whimpers. "You'll finally learn, Octavius," he seethes, extending the knife toward the fire and then piercing my cheek again, the hot blade burning my already torn flesh, and the pain is so strong I don't think I can stand it. "Cry and beg, Octavius. Cry and beg me for mercy, Keneth's son."

I have no idea how, but I order all my strength to hold back the tears forming in my eyes and stay quiet.

"Still brave. Well, this time around, it's going to be different. This time around, I'll teach you to obey." His manic laughter fills my ears. "Maybe we should go to your greenhouse where Estella loves to hide." He kicks me hard on the knees, making me bend, and I almost fall into the fire. "There is no safe place in this world for you, boy, because I rule this mansion. You need to die. Maybe I should help you speed up this process."

* * *

*M*y eyes stare up at the ceiling while Wayne hovers above me, holding the poker in his hand as he drags it on the ground and smiles.

Blood and sweat slide down my body, beaten up beyond anything I've ever experienced as he brought me here after destroying my face.

Then he proceeded to break everything here and forced me to eat soil, pushing it into my mouth and demanding me to beg for mercy, but I hadn't.

The beating with the poker followed shortly, and the pain has been such a constant for hours that I don't feel a thing or pretend not to feel it.

“Look at you. How pathetic and weak you are.” He chuckles. “Keneth’s son is a coward. You’re nothing like your father.”

Another blow to my stomach and I cough up blood, feeling it tear my skin and leaving yet another bruise, although if I survive this...it will be a scar.

Another scar on my body, and I hate it.

“Say it. Say it, Octavius, and this will end.”

Gathering my willpower in my fist, I throw dirt at him, and he curses while I start to crawl outside the greenhouse that had been my sanctuary, but now it’s coated with his hatred that I cannot stand.

I don’t want to die in the place he tarnished!

I barely make it out when he kicks me in the back, my cry echoing in the early morning, and I fall on my stomach, hitting my chin and rolling to the side. “Beg, you piece of shit! Beg and cry, Keneth!” He has lost his mind completely. Now I understand every time he punishes me...mentally, he punishes my father, who he tried to best his whole life and never could.

To him, I’m a symbol of my parents’ love, and he cannot stand it.

“Beg, Keneth. Who would come and save you anyway? No one gives a shit about you.” He clicks his tongue. “Even Estella hides in her room while you suffer.”

He can fuck himself. My sister deserves to be saved while he rages. I’ll take a thousand episodes like this over seeing her hurt.

Kick. Kick. Kick.

“Beg, Keneth. No one would come to the rescue.” His voice becomes high-pitched as he yells, “Fucking beg!”

“Florian.” My nails cut into the ground, and I whisper again, “Florian.”

The only name I can utter in my despair because there is a person who gives a shit about me.

“What did you say?”

“Florian.” It’s hard to keep my focus on him. “Florian.”

He always checks on me from the secret phone. If I don’t text back or call, he shows up. He came up with that rule a long time ago.

“You think the Price boy will save you? He’s busy.” He sways the poker back and forth. “That bitch Calliope gave birth to a son last night.”

I want to throw dirt at him once again, but my hands don’t listen to me. He doesn’t get to call Aunt Calliope a bitch.

She’s an angel who gives the most warm hugs, sharing her love with us all and basking us in her light. She loves Florian as her own, and he calls her Mom. She legally adopted him because he asked. Her whole big family adores us all.

She’s nothing like Wayne or my mother, and that’s why they hate her. She has a beautiful soul and loves her children.

Florian’s family is what I wish mine was despite his biological mother causing nightmares for her son.

I’m so happy they get to welcome their new son. They were very excited, but my heart weeps at the prospect of never meeting the little boy.

“Beg.”

“Never,” I croak.

He lifts the poker up above my face, ready to add more wounds, when he is hit from behind.

He freezes and then another smack—this time on the back of his knees—and he falls. My eyes widen when I see Florian holding a red brick while Remi has a small shovel.

Wayne sits up and screams, “Have you lost your mind?” To my shock, my friends share a long look and then jump on him, hitting him so hard, he falls on his back, giving him no time to regroup and use his size and age against them.

Hit. Hit. Hit.

Until, for the first time in my life, I see blood on Wayne. Florian pushes Remi away and looks at me, swallowing hard, and delivers several blows straight to Wayne's face, the cracking sound ringing in the air.

Wayne cries out.

Ah, I could never predict the sound would be so enjoyable.

"Stop, Florian! You'll kill him!" Remi grabs his shoulders, barely dragging him away from Wayne, who breathes heavily and whimpers. I can't see him clearly now, but judging by his position, he's in pain.

Florian drops the brick and spits on Wayne, kicking him for good measure. "Is he even breathing?" Remi asks.

"I don't care."

"What if we killed him?"

"What if I killed him, you mean? I was the one to hurt him." Remi opens his mouth to protest, but Florian's splayed palm stops him. "I was the only one. Remember that, Remi." And finally he spins around to properly look at me, our eyes locking as he shakes his head, agony written all over his features.

And as I stare at my friend in this moment, I finally allow myself to let the tears flow.

Allow for my weakness, desperation, and pain to show.

Because Florian is here.

We've always been the Four Dark Horsemen, a tight group of four who do everything together.

And then the enemy kidnapped Santiago when we were seven, casting a shadow on our friendship and almost tearing us apart because we couldn't imagine existing in the world without him.

We became a group of three who waited for their friend to show up even if everyone claimed it was hopeless, a group in which Remi expected to be left out of, yet we've done everything in our power to include him.

Florian did most of the work as he paid for all the activities we took part in, dragging Remi even if he didn't want to go, and protected us both from any school bullshit.

Santiago came back at fifteen, abused and broken, refusing to resume our friendship, and while we accepted it, Remi took it the hardest.

We reunited, but we could never fix what was once broken.

Because in the eight years that Santiago had been gone, we all experienced our individual hell, and it shaped us into vicious creatures hungry for the blood and suffering of those who, according to us, deserved it.

How can a woman love a man like that?

*S*la

Still reeling from the realization that I just became a mom less than twenty-four hours after my wedding, it takes me a few seconds to register the annoyed voice, and panic hits me. "Your sister is here!" I exclaim, quickly pushing him away and adjusting my dress while catching my reflection in the mirror and groaning because my hair is a mess. "Why is she here?"

"I called Ryder to cancel dinner, all things considered. We need to find a good name for him, by the way. We can't keep calling our son a kid or boy." He rubs his chin. "A name with good meaning."

Our son.

Why does this make me feel all kinds of way when, instead, I should be terrified of how deep we've gotten ourselves into this relationship? I think a good shrink would have told us we're insane and should not start a family at all, let alone bring a traumatized child into it.

But...

We can give him everything, and we might be screwed up, but we'll never hurt him like his "family" did.

The knocking continues, and Estella shouts, “Octavius, open the damn thing, or I’ll make Ryder do something!”

“Oh my God,” I mutter, grabbing Octavius’s hand when he goes toward the hallway and halts his movements. “I can’t meet your sister like this.” I motion up and down my form while he frowns. “I’m not ready!”

“Why are you panicking, kitten?”

Is he serious right now? “Because that’s, like, the definition of meeting the in-laws! It’s important, and I want to make a good impression.” The girl has been doted on by her brother her whole life, only to choose a handsome and wealthy guy as her husband and then thrive in her career. She grew up among wealth, and the last thing I need is for her to think I’m unworthy of her brother or that he could have done better. “What if she doesn’t like me?”

It sounds pathetic and all, but still. She’s very important to Octavius, and I don’t want to blow off our first meeting.

“If it helps, I hated Ryder for a long time before I finally liked him enough to accept him as my brother-in-law.”

This man!

“It doesn’t help at all!” I hiss as we get into the hallway, and I already see a maid opening the main door. “If she hates me, that’s on you.”

“I think my sister is incapable of hating anyone.” I groan inwardly because that’s such a lovely thing to say, but once again, it proves how much he adores her. Which means her opinion means a lot. The pressure is almost too much since I never handled expectations well and usually failed them.

The door opens, and I expect his sister to walk in, so my eyes widen in shock when three kids, two identical girls and one boy, rush inside and squeal, “Uncle Octavius!” He’s already kneeling and catches them all in his arms while they squeeze the life out of him. “We’ve missed you,” they say in unison, and that’s when I remember that Ryder and Estella have triplets.

Octavius leans back. "I missed you too, kids." They all grin at him. "How are you?"

"We're good!"

"We went to New York to attend Uncle Jaxon's wedding." The boy sighs. "It was fun. The bride almost ran away."

The girls nod, their hair swaying in different directions. "Uncle Jaxon barely caught her and dragged her to the altar while she kept on yelling bad words at him," one of them says and giggles. "She's very funny."

Jaxon, as in Jaxon MacAlister, the head of the Irish mafia in New York? He and his siblings are unbearable with their power, and even though the police know about them, no one can do shit.

They're wild, free, and have no mercy for those who go against their will.

I believe that's one of their mottos.

Now I understand why Octavius wasn't initially pleased with Estella's choice.

"That's what he gets for choosing a bride based on alliances." They wiggle in his hold so he frees them, and they all come to me. "Kids, this is my wife, Isla."

"So does this mean she's our aunt?" one of the girls asks, and he nods. "Hi! I'm Eve."

"I'm Esme," the other one speaks up, and finally, the boy steps forward. "I'm Raven."

"Hi. It's nice to meet you." They hug me as well, and warmth slides through me at their instant acceptance. They must grow up in a really loving home. "I don't have any nephews or nieces, so I'm happy to be your aunt."

"Oh, that's nice," Eve says as they step back, although she frowns. "We have aunts, though." I barely hold back my laughter, but she shrugs. "You'll be special because you're Uncle O's wife."

“I’m not sure how my sister Davina will feel about it.” Tearing my gaze away from the kids, I look at the tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed man who oozes confidence and dominance. A very handsome man valued for his brilliant mind, and his classes are legendary. To get into them, you have to be truly the best because his ruthlessness leaves no place to be weak. “Ryder MacAlister. It’s nice to meet you.” His deep and husky voice sounds friendly, although warning laces his tone as he scans me from head to toe and lingers on the kids near me, which lets me know he knows I threatened to go to the police.

No man acts this protective over his family unless he has a reason, and well, Ryder and Octavius are a lot alike.

“Hi.” My gaze shifts to a stunning redhead next to him wearing the white dress, pointing out all her generous curves while her green eyes drill into me as if she tries to stare into my soul while several beats pass in silence.

They make quite a visual couple, and I don’t miss how possessiveness fills his gaze as he watches her, the lingering energy swirling around them while she stands close to him, their bodies brushing, and so much love pours from him it leaves no doubt this marriage is a happy one.

I mean...she hooked up with her professor in her first year, who’s fourteen years older than her. She even went against Octavius! I respect her for fighting for her love despite her soft-spoken nature, or so the reports say.

I’m not sure what I expect her to do, but she surprises me when she turns her attention to her brother and pokes him in the chest. “I really hate finding out about my brother’s marriage from someone else.” She sighs dramatically. “My own brother making me miss out on his wedding.” She motions with her head toward me. “Your bride would think I have a bad temper or something.”

“Who told on me?”

“Jimena. She called me right away to share the happy news.” She taps her foot on the floor. “Little did she know I

had no idea about said news.” She sweeps his gaze over him. “Why didn’t you call?”

“Jaxon was getting married. Didn’t want to steal his thunder.” Ryder barks a laugh, and Estella glares at him. “The poor guy has suffered enough.” He snaps a finger his brother-in-law’s way. “Tell him we all enjoyed watching that video Callum took of his bride hauling ass from the church.”

“We left New York in haste, so you stole it anyway,” Ryder says and shrugs. “I’m glad, though. The ceremony was getting on my nerves.” I’m surprised he even attended it. Now that I think more on all the information I’ve gotten on them, he is Jaxon MacAlister’s half-brother and, well...their mother hated her husband’s bastard. A lot of history there, but they must have made up after all. “He says hi, by the way, and trust me, he’ll find a way to delete that video.”

“Who cares about Jaxon right now?” Estella hisses. “I’m disappointed, Octavius Keneth Reed.”

“Why are you using my full name?”

“Because I’m mad, that’s why!”

“Oh, so for the dramatic effect?”

They have a long stare-off, and finally, Octavius grins, trapping her chin. “Smile, princess.” She slaps it away, opening her mouth to argue, but whatever she says comes off muffled as he hugs her, rocking her in his arms while Ryder leans against the wall, rolling his eyes. “I promise you, you won’t miss any other important occasions in my life,” he whispers, kissing the top of her hair, and she sighs, returning his embrace. Watching them now makes me miss one thing I never knew I was missing.

What is it like to have such a loving older brother who’d do anything in order to protect you? Who serves as a shield from the outside world so nothing and no one can hurt you?

Who allows you to make your own choices even if he disagrees with them?

And finally...

What is it like to have a brother who never makes you feel lonely because you have him?

Just yesterday, I thought Octavius was a cold-blooded murderer, but he seems to have more love in his life than I ever did, and I wonder why he even chose me as his woman?

I bring nothing to this marriage.

No family, no connections, and no money.

Even his sister married a billionaire from a powerful clan.

Estella steps back from Octavius and wiggles her finger at him. “Don’t think I trust your promises. I’m watching you,” she warns him and then once again focuses on me, this time her plump lips are stretched in a wide smile while warmth fills her gaze. “Hi! Welcome to the family.” I have no time to reply as she squeezes me hard, her vanilla scent tickling my nose. “I’m so happy for my brother,” she whispers into my ear and palms my head. “You’re very pretty.”

I’m starting to think the Reed siblings have a warped sense of beauty.

“Thank you. You’re stunning.” Her cheeks heat. “And please don’t be angry with Octavius. Our marriage wasn’t in his plans either.”

She snorts. “My brother is nothing but a planner. Trust me, he knew.” Another glare is thrown his way. “So I want to know all the details. Including why someone showed you my brother’s true colors so he had to blackmail you into this marriage.”

I’m not sure what’s more disturbing, her breezy attitude toward the whole thing or how it doesn’t bother me much anymore.

I’m starting to get on board with their collective madness.

“Like I said, kiddo, strawberry ice cream is the best, but I applaud your desire to try them all. Not sure your parents will approve, though.” Everyone looks at the end of the hallway where Florian is walking with the boy as they both hold two black bowls, and the kid has so many scoops my brows shoot

up. “Busted.” He waves at our guest. “Hey, guys.” He smirks. “Ryder, I’d say it’s a pleasure to see you, but we both know it’d be a lie.”

“You’re still a bachelor, Price? So the rumors are true. You’re a coward.” Florian’s face speaks volumes, mainly that if children weren’t around, this verbal spiral would have turned more creative.

Does everyone know Jimena and him are a thing or what? How the hell they kept it from their families for so long is beyond me.

“He can’t have so much ice cream,” I say. “Why did you even allow them to put so much in his bowl?”

“Because I’m his godfather. My job is to spoil him, not parent him.”

“Says who, exactly?” I’ve been a mother for less than ten minutes, and all of a sudden, Florian also thinks he has a significant role in the child’s life.

He gasps, placing his hand over his heart. “What do you mean says who? We made a pact.” He points at Octavius, who wraps his arm around my waist, my back hitting his chest, and calmness envelops me. “If we ever have kids, we will be our kids’ godfathers.” He dips his spoon in the bowl and scoops a generous amount of ice cream before eating it. “Call it destiny.”

I glance up at my husband. “Didn’t you take an oath?” There is almost an accusation in my voice because who did he plan to have these kids with anyway? The idea of children didn’t even cross my mind before I met him.

“It was just a gesture. None of us expected to father a child.” He kisses my neck, causing goose bumps to break on my skin. “Relax, kitten.”

“And for your information, I’ll be the best godfather there could be. So I’d lose the frown, Isla. I’m starting to get offended.”

Estella stands between us and crosses her arms while taking a deep breath. “Someone explain to me what the hell is

going on, and who is this sweet kid here?" The boy grins at the compliment and then runs to me, holding on to his ice cream bowl while the triplets stare at him curiously. He hides his face in my hip, shying away from their attention.

"It's a long story."

"And I have all the time in the world." She yells, "Antonio." The butler comes rushing right away. "Set the table. We're all going to have lunch here."

Well...

This should be interesting.

* * *

Ryder and Estella sit on the opposite side of us as the wide, spacious table separates us filled with countless dishes while delicious smells waft in the air accompanied by the children's laughter as they play in the garden.

The triplets accepted the boy right away, and even though he was hesitant at first, he seems to like their company, and currently, they're playing tag.

Florian left earlier after getting an important phone call.

"I'm so sorry to hear about all of this. It's awful," Estella says, reaching out to me and grasping my hand. "I hope the dark four will catch this monster."

"Thank you, and I'm sorry too. I brought this trouble on you all." Octavius growls next to me, and I roll my eyes. "Yes, I know he was targeting you all along, but still."

"You have our support. If you need anything, just ask," Ryder says to Octavius. "I'll call Jaxon and inform him about this. He'll be on your side as well." He drums his fingers on the table, pondering on something. "What do you think will be his next move?"

"He's angry because in his mind I took Isla away from him. So he will attack but not directly." Ryder nods. "I think

his next move will involve the dark four.” He leans back on the chair. “He will hit where it will hurt me.”

I try to make sense of his words but Ryder beats me to it. “Florian and Jimena? You think he will expose their relationship to Santiago?”

Oh my God.

It’s one thing to find out your best friend is banging your little sister and quite another to get this information from a serial killer!

“Yes, and in the most brutal way possible.”

“Let me know when it happens. Because we both know Santiago won’t be kind. He’ll be vicious.”

“Will do.”

I pick the blueberries from my cake and pop them in my mouth when Estella speaks up again, her voice a bit shaky this time. “Mother called.” Octavius freezes next to me as tension charges the energy around us, and I shrink inwardly because coldness sweeps over me despite it being warm. “She wants to come to Chicago and reconnect.”

“Why? Did she run out of money?” I wince at his harsh yet softly-spoken question while his sister traces her fork over her cake. “She called me a week ago. Not sure how she found my number.”

“She started therapy a few years back and wishes to apologize in person. She wants to see her grandchildren too.” A hollow laughter slips past her lips that hurts my soul for how much pain it holds. “Her audacity never stops to astonish me.”

“She probably did run out of money, after all,” Octavius replies cynically, sipping his coffee. “I gave her one billion and some shares in various companies. She should be set for life, but I won’t be surprised if her lover screwed her over. She knows how to pick them.”

We share a long look with Ryder because the tension between the siblings escalates, and I hate how I have no idea

what's going on, but she probably was a very shitty mother for them to react this way.

Besides it's a little too late. Both her children are grown, and now she wants to reconnect? I can't blame them for being suspicious.

"She claims she has changed. I don't believe her. People like her don't change. She still plans a trip here and hopes we can all have dinner sometime."

Octavius places his cup on the table with a loud rattle. "I won't meet her. Ever. If you want to—"

"Why would I?" Now she's the one fuming with anger.

"She's your mother." He shrugs, although it seems he really musters up all his control in order to suggest this. "Maybe you have questions to ask her. I understand if you want closure." Judging by his tone, he won't understand, though, and says it only for his sister's sake.

"She's never been a mother to me." She casts her eyes in shame while swallowing hard, and Ryder puts his hand above hers. "Maybe if it wasn't for me, she'd be a better mom to you. What if you're the one who needs closure?" A beat passes. "Don't you have questions?"

Now fury joins the tension, and Octavius gets up while Ryder does the same. "That woman has no idea what being a mother means. Never say stupid shit like this again, Estella. You're not responsible for their inability to be good human beings." He walks around the table and leans down to give her a kiss on the forehead. "Let's end this conversation." He straightens up. "If she calls again, just ignore her, and if she shows up uninvited, I'll deal with her. She'll stop once I threaten to take away the shares. If there is one thing this woman loves above anything else, it's her lifestyle." He walks off into the terrace as the kids squeal around him, jumping on him. Ryder follows him, patting Estella on the shoulder and leaving us both alone in the wake of this rather unpleasant conversation.

Because despite everything, I could see Octavius hurting, and somehow, this information rubbed old wounds.

“He always does that.” I meet Estella’s eyes. “Bottles up his emotions and just finds an outlet for them in a different way. He never speaks about his pain.” She bites on her lower lip. “Because no one cared about it for such a long time.”

“He hasn’t shared much about his childhood.” Bits and pieces don’t really allow me to paint the whole picture in my head about what shaped him into the man he is today.

“It’s not something either of us likes to talk about.” She dips her fork in the cake and lifts it to her mouth. “You know our family history? How our mother married two men from the same family?” She munches on the cake at my nod. “Pamela loved Octavius’s dad and tolerated mine because he provided her with the lifestyle she desired. Father couldn’t forgive her for it but took his anger out on Octavius. According to some, she was a loving mother before I was born. She stopped being one, though, the minute Wayne forbade it. Which makes me think she wasn’t one in the first place.”

“All the scars that he has...”

She swallows hard again, a raspy breath escaping her, and she drops her fork. “Yeah. My father did that. Years and years of abuse.” Tears form in my eyes, but I hold them back, although my chest aches at the idea of anyone hurting Octavius like this in his own house. There is no greater betrayal and hurt than facing agony in the place that’s supposed to be your sanctuary and from the people who were supposed to love you. “And he accepted it all. Because of me,” she finishes on a whisper.

So much guilt drips from her words, and I shake my head. “You were just a child, Estella.”

“I was what kept him inside these walls. If it weren’t for me, he’d be free to go live with the Price family. Wayne always found a way to blackmail him with me. Even the scar on his cheek...he got it because he was protecting me.” She wipes away her tears. “My brother has a heart of gold, Isla. So

I'm asking you not to do anything that might hurt him, because if you do..." The unspoken threat lingers in the air, and I resist the urge to grin. I'm starting to think that's how all these people show their love toward their families.

"I'm not going to. Not intentionally, at least." Some tension eases out of her. "You're right. Your brother has a heart of gold." She gives me a tentative smile, grabbing her fork again, but stills when I add, "Because he had you while growing up." She blinks in surprise. "I think you were his reason to live in this hell and what kept him going. His humanity, kindness, and sense of honor...he has them all because of you." A beat passes. "And Florian who seems to be the annoying third wheel in this relationship right now."

She laughs, and finally, the sadness is gone from her eyes, replaced by amusement. "Yes. Florian is a bonus you get when you marry my brother." Her voice drops to a whisper. "It's impossible to get rid of him."

Oh, I'm going to like Estella.

"Lucky me," I deadpan, earning myself more laughter, and in this moment, I can almost forget about the serial killer wanting to kill me and enjoy this opportunity destiny has granted me.

For the first time in years or maybe ever...I'm happy.

And that's equally exciting and scary.

Because what can bring me happiness...can easily be taken away.

Especially when a person is set on hurting me.

Octavius

Owls hoot, accompanied by the sound of crickets chirping in the distance, while the wind caresses my skin as I step out on the terrace and breathe in the fresh air, welcoming the coldness.

Dark clouds gathering together almost hide the stars marring the sky, matching the chaotic whirlpool consuming

my soul right now, and I grin when a yowl echoes in the space. “Lamos,” I call, going farther, and my bare feet curl into the grass. “Come here.”

He yowls again and finally peeks through the bushes, breathing heavily, and while his eyes study me intently, I still sense his sour mood.

After all, we have a tradition to spend every morning together, and I ditched him today. Not only that.

Brought a woman home and ordered him out.

My leopard is just like me. He hates to share, but I think we can work it out. “I know, I know. You can hold a grudge.”

He roars and then prowls toward me, smacking into my legs, and I run my fingers over his fur as he purrs. Despite my shitty evening, or rather, the reminder of the woman I wish to fucking forget, I laugh. “Did you enjoy the steaks Antonio brought you earlier?” He rubs his muzzle into me, and I pet him some more. “Life is good, isn’t it, Lamos?” He huffs, stomping his paws on the ground, and then freezes, his eyes becoming glazed while his whiskers twitch. That can mean only one thing.

Turning around, I see Isla walk outside, her dress almost shimmering in the moonlight, and the organ that’s just pumped blood in my chest contracts at the sheer beauty that’s my wife.

How the fuck destiny let me be this lucky and claim her as mine I’d never know, but I won’t question it either.

Maybe she’s my reward for all the fucked-up shit I had to go through in order to get here.

She’s barefoot as well and shivers a little. I take off my shirt when she comes closer, although she still shoots worried glances at Lamos, who stares at her. “I don’t think your leopard likes me,” she mutters and sighs when I throw my shirt over her shoulders. “Thank you.”

She shouldn’t thank me for anything. If my wife needs something, I’ll provide it. That’s the law I intend to follow for the rest of my life. “He knows you’re important to me, so he won’t hurt you. He never hurt Antonio.”

Lamos nuzzles into Isla's extended palm and opens his mouth wide but stills when I say a firm, "No." He huffs and yowls, stomping his paws some more before strolling to the other end of the garden, cooling himself down.

He loves the rain but prefers to hide in the trees when it pours. "This is a surreal experience," Isla whispers and shakes her head. "Florian doesn't like Antonio."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"When Wayne abused me, he followed his commands. He never physically hurt me, but he did nothing to protect me. No one did. His rage was absolute, and I guess everyone preferred for me to be on the receiving end of it." Surprise and anger flash on her face, and by the stubborn expression marring her features, I know she now supports Florian's point of view. "However, there was still goodness in him, and he helped me when he could. When Wayne was away or had manic episodes, he always took care of Estella. And that was my top priority."

She swallows hard and exhales heavily, her fist clenching. "Was the abuse ever..." She trails off and swallows again, wincing.

"No. Physical and psychological but never sexual. He was a piece of shit, but not a perverted piece of shit."

She stays silent for several moments and places her hand on my chest. I close my eyes as peace settles over me. Her touch always gives me the ability to breathe freely.

My obsession and cure in one, an addiction I knew I'd never let go of and tried to save her by staying away. What an idiot I'd been, as life without her is just an empty void.

And I've lived for such a long time in an empty void that I refuse to do it any longer.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I'm surprised she took so long after my sister's lunch conversation to broach this subject.

After we played with the kids in the garden for an hour, Ryder and Estella had to go back because they had some work-related stuff waiting at home, and while the kids whined all the way, they promised to visit our boy as often as possible.

My sister smiled the whole time and hugged me while Ryder warned me to be careful and shared married life wisdom.

I flipped him off on the second piece of advice because the last thing I fucking need is my brother-in-law giving me pointers, our history considered.

He has all my respect and loyalty because he makes Estella happy and loves her madly. He's still the man who corrupted my little sister, though, and then acted like he owned her and even threatened war in order to get her.

Yeah, I'm a hypocrite.

Do I care?

No.

After they left, we spent some time with the boy who dragged us around the house, exploring it, and his eyes almost bulged out of their sockets when I showed him his room. Some renovations will be done to make it to his liking, but he smiled so brightly my heart hurt.

We even picked a name for him.

Braiden.

We had dinner and he requested to watch cartoons while I called my friends to find the best doctors and everything else we might need to adjust our lives around a child. Maybe I should be more concerned with the responsibility we're about to take on, but I'm not. I have wealth and power, and most importantly, I understand what it is like to be a five-year-old who needs love and doesn't know how to ask for it.

He finally crashed thirty minutes ago, and we decided to leave him at the main house for now but brought monitors to watch out for him.

Antonio stayed behind as well, deciding to guard his door, and I found it hilarious as fuck.

Braiden doesn't need his protection because he has parents who actually give a fuck for once.

Which brings us to now.

I never shared my story with anyone. However, I know this marriage would never work if I don't do it because shutting Isla out from my past will hurt her.

And I don't want to ever hurt her again.

"They say we become orphans when our parents die." She nods, although her brow furrows. "I became an orphan the first time Wayne hit me." A beat passes. "I was five years old."

A shocked gasp slips past her lips as she steps back when I go farther into the garden, taking a deep breath to continue. I need to have some space because I don't want my past to taint her in any way, and that's how it feels speaking about it. Rolling in dirt all over again. "Pamela just accepted Wayne's rules, and whenever I cried out to her, she ignored me." A hollow chuckle coming from my throat rings in the air followed by thunder. "I would have never known how much she didn't give a fuck if it wasn't for Wayne. He always needed for her to watch me bleed. He took pleasure in knowing that she allowed for Kenneth's son to be treated like shit."

"I'm so sorry, darling," she whispers, and I notice how she quickly wipes away her tears. She shouldn't cry for me.

It was a long time ago.

Why the fuck does my voice grow so hoarse and the words are akin to needles bruising my vocal cords then? "Over the years, her indifference stopped mattering, and sometimes I wondered if we even were her children. She showed no love toward Estella either. She abandoned us and lived in the mansion, enjoying all the riches and welcoming the endless jewelry he brought her. She'd drink heavily and still fucking watch." I stop, sucking a breath through my teeth while Isla stays silent, and Lampos roars as if sensing my turmoil. "No

empathy, no remorse. Nothing. Sometimes I think her anger or disgust would have been better than what she gave us.” I pick up the whiskey bottle and drink from it, welcoming the burning sensation as my physical discomfort numbs my internal one. “When Wayne died, Estella was thirteen so she got sole custody of her. I was willing to wait five more years to get rid of her, but Pamela found herself a new guy.” This woman couldn’t exist without a man. “He was rich and wanted to live abroad, so she started preparing all the paperwork for it.”

“Was she allowed to do that? I mean...legally she had custody, but don’t you guys have some stipulations considering forty-nine percent of shares belong to her?” Isla shivers once again when a gust of wind slaps us and she burrows deeper into my shirt. “I’m sure there was some protection in place.”

“Wayne wasn’t stupid, so while Estella inherited her shares, Pamela got nothing. One of the reasons she wanted to get married again. That woman does not like to work.” I take another sip and lick my lips. “I couldn’t have that, so I offered her a deal.”

My wife blinks. “A deal?”

“Yes. I paid her a generous amount to sign away her rights.”

“So that’s how you got custody.”

“Yeah.” I could finish this at that and never say another word. She wouldn’t question me on it anymore, understanding my resentment. However, the familiar self-preservation doesn’t kick in, and instead, I continue, “I gave her the benefit of the doubt.”

Isla cocks her head to the side, studying me, and whispers, “The offer was a test?”

“Over the years, I read so many books about abuse victims, their psychology and behavior. I wanted to find justification for her actions and could even pretend that maybe...just maybe her trauma consumed her so much she

couldn't imagine freeing herself from it. Or taking a stance for her children." I gulp some more whiskey, wiping off my mouth with the back of my hand. "All she had to do was refuse to sign that fucking thing, and I would have forgiven her." A bitter laugh escapes me. "How pathetic is that?"

"It's not pathetic, Octavius. We always hope for the best. And our parents...we crave to bond with them or understand why they did what they did if it affected our life."

"They say we have to be grateful to our parents for giving us life because we wouldn't exist without them. And that's true. I'm grateful to be alive and have a sister. To me, she's mine." I drink some more, but the drink does nothing to extinguish the hurtful fire spreading through me. "But even parents have no right to waltz back into your life and expect forgiveness just because they changed. Some things are unforgivable." I look at my wife, her gray eyes full of tears, and my soul aches.

Her pain serves as a balm over my old wounds. She cares about the monster that's her husband, and this makes the said monster bleed because he never expected for anyone to welcome him with all this baggage. Women deserve princes, not villains.

"I can't stand my reflection because I see all this every time I look in the mirror." I motion with the bottle over my form, the whiskey sloshing inside it. "Countless scars serve as a reminder of her indifference and his cruelty. So to predict your next question in case you have it, I don't want closure. I got all the fucking closure I needed when she put her signature on that damn document."

The rain slowly starts to fall on us as I breathe heavily and stare at her, physically hurting from saying all of this. I still when she comes to me and gently removes the bottle from my grip.

She places it on the ground and steps into my arms, my hands locking on her back and pressing her hard to my chest while she palms my head, her thumb caressing my scar, and I close my eyes, loving the contact.

No one touched it before her. I never allowed it, and thank God for that.

My scars, just like everything else of mine, belong only to my wife.

“When I look at your scars, I don’t see them.” My eyes snap open again and clash with hers as the world around me ceases to exist because she’s the center of my whole attention. “I see bravery, courage, and strength. I see a man who had to become a man too soon and took responsibilities he shouldn’t have had.” A tear slides down her cheek, and she smiles while warmth oozes from her, creating a dome over me and pulling me deeper into these emotions that awaken the dreams and hopes of the little boy I once was. “And I see love. So much love in them because you chose to fight and protect, and through all of it...you stayed you.”

She rises on her tiptoes, and our foreheads rest against each other’s while I breathe her in as the rain intensifies, soaking us both up but neither of us seems to care. “Don’t hide from your reflection. Because if you didn’t fight, you wouldn’t be here.” Her hands glide down, circling my neck while thunder roars, the dark clouds blanketing the sky as darkness surrounds us, and yet...I see her clearly.

Because even in this moment, she’s my light in the endless darkness.

“You wouldn’t be married to a beast then, kitten. You’d be free.” I’ll give her everything this world has to offer but never give her back her freedom. This knowledge alone should send her running for the hills but even that’s pointless since I’ll catch her. “I’ll never be able to let you go.” Gripping her waist, I hike her up, and her legs wrap around me while more rain pours on us. “Maybe if I didn’t have scars, I’d be more romantic and sane.”

Doubtful.

No matter my past, I would have fucking claimed her on the spot and whisked her away here so no one else got the chance.

She smiles despite the tears still present in her eyes. “I’m too messed up for a perfect prince.” She leans closer, our lips brushing. “Never wanted one anyway. I always wanted a warrior. And you’re my warrior.” A raspy breath escapes her. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Octavius Reed.” Her voice trembles a little on the admission.

I stand still, frozen in time while happiness seeps through me at hearing these words, because never in my life have I expected to hear them from a woman.

Especially not my woman.

“I have no idea what love is, kitten,” I whisper, “but everything that’s mine belongs to you.” I lick her lips, slipping my tongue inside her mouth and capture it in a kiss, swallowing her moan.

The kiss is hot, deep, and all-consuming, spreading fire through my veins while my mind pounds one thing only.

To claim her as mine and fuck her hard until nothing but me remains.

We both groan when I start to move, my dick pushing against her center and earning me more throaty moans, making me tighten my hold on her while her thighs clamp around me. She angles her head, deepening the kiss as her fingers lace in my hair, driving me insane with each breath she takes because she’s my woman.

Who loves and accepts me as I am, and to her I’m never the monster.

My reflection has always been the source of my greatest anger and pain because I couldn’t change it and had to face everyone’s disgust. No matter how much they tried to hide it, nothing could hide their first wince that let me know their true feelings.

What a gift it is to have Isla look at me and see *me*, not the scars or my awful past that smears me in darkness every single day. The darkness that’s not as dark or horrific when she is in it.

An angel who willingly signs herself up for hell, knowing I would never change but still finding the strength and bravery to trust and love me.

My precious wife.

The kiss grows more heated, our tongues entwining, and with each lick I stake my claim all over again, reminding her there is no one in this world who would cherish her more than I do.

We belong to each other and whoever thinks otherwise should be afraid because I'll end anyone who would wish to destroy us.

I step inside the house and she tears her mouth away, gulping for breath, and my hand drifts upward, fisting her hair and pulling at it hard, exposing her neck to my wandering lips. I lick around the neckless glistening in the moonlight, goose bumps popping on her flesh, before gliding upward and sucking on her neck hard, marking her for everyone to see.

Some of my marks started to fade and that's unacceptable.

No one should ever doubt how much her husband adores her and how much power she has over me.

And she's mine.

Her whimper rings in the air and her nails cut into my scalp as I scrape my teeth over her throat, moving toward her shoulder and biting on it hard, making her gasp, only to sooth the sting with one long lick. She wraps her legs so tightly around me, shifting restlessly in my arms, and I chuckle, whispering above her skin, "What do you want, kitten?" I blindly walk us to the nearest wall, pressing her against it, and she closes her eyes letting me lick around her collarbone. I sway back, only to drive into her, earning more whimpers, and I can practically feel her pussy dripping for me. "Me licking you clean while you get off on my tongue?" She jerks in my arms, her hands falling to my shoulders, and I hiss when she graces my back with her fingers, leaving marks of her own, but I welcome them. Let the whole fucking world know I'm taken and exist only for one woman. Her. "My fingers

stretching you up for me?” She shakes her head as I skate lower and bite on the mounds of her breasts, her nipples peeking through the thin fabric. “Or my dick fucking you so hard your voice becomes hoarse?” My own voice turns gruff as my body hardens just imagining doing all these things, the fire blazing in my veins and demanding to take my woman on the nearest flat surface.

“I want...” She pants as I drag my mouth upward, leaving wet imprints on her skin, and reach her chin, nipping on it. I press my lips against hers once again, sharing a long breath with her. “I want...” She sobs into our kiss that I end too soon to move my attention back to her neck, rubbing my five-o’clock shadow on it and enjoying her little whimpers echoing in my ears. I continue to rock into her, my thick length hiding behind my jeans getting wetter with each thrust of my hips, and her nails cut deeper, a sting of pain washing over me.

My woman is in need and only I can provide the cure for her.

“What do you want, kitten?” I repeat my question, putting my hand on her neck and gripping it hard, making her gasp. “Tell me.”

“I want you,” she replies instantly, pulling at my hair again and forcing me to lean back and meet her hooded gray eyes filled with so much desire, I barely resist myself from ripping her panties and fucking her hard right here. “I always just want you.” I dive in for another kiss but freeze when she pushes at my chest instead. “Put me down, please.” Her feet drop on the floor and although I despise any distance between us, I step back, giving her the freedom she so craves.

If she says no, truly says no, I will always stop.

She dances to the side and, holding my gaze, removes my shirt and throws it on the floor as she backs away to our room. “I want you, Octavius,” she repeats, bringing up my need right away.

“I’m right here, kitten.” I crook my finger at her. “Come here.”

She shakes her head and grabs the hem of her dress while continuing to walk backward to the room. “No. If you touch me, I forget about everything.”

“That’s the plan, kitten.”

Her mouth curves in a smile and we finally reach the room lit by the moonlight streaming so brightly, I can see every detail on her face from lust to need to something else I cannot name.

She stops in the middle of the room, sensuality dripping from her every move, and slowly drags the dress upward until her beautiful bare body comes into view, covered by a scrap of lace.

Her locks cascading down in heavy waves need to be wrapped around my fist as I lavish her perky breasts while her endless legs keep us locked together.

My woman is a vision that can tempt even a saint.

She drops the dress on the floor, breathing heavily while palming her breasts and squeezing them so hard, she moans. I barely resist the urge to go to her and bite on her nipples. “You’re gorgeous.” She blushes when I grip my jean-covered hard-on. “That’s for you, kitten. Only ever for you.” I want there to be no doubt when it comes to me that only she exists in my head. “Come here,” I repeat the command because if I don’t touch her again soon, I’m going to fucking explode. “Your pussy is dripping for me. Let me lick it all up.”

The air hitches in her throat, a raspy breath slipping past her lips, but she shakes her head as if resisting my softly-spoken words. “Not yet.” She saunters toward me, just a little bit closer and I can take her and fuck her so hard, she won’t think about escaping me again.

She wiggles her finger, though, when I reach out to wrap my arm around her. “Nope. Just feel for now, darling.” Excitement and trepidation coats her voice so I stand still, my fists clenching. Desire spreads through me as she kisses my throat and lifts on her tiptoes, meeting my mouth and giving me a soft, passionate kiss that quickly turns heated.

“Whenever I look at you, my body burns anew.” Her lips shift lower, peppering small kisses on the way to my chest until she reaches one of my scars and traces the abused flesh with her tongue, my heart contracting inside me at the action.

My scars wear my pain as they remind me about my terror and weakness that I wish to forget.

I despise showing them to the world, although I can never hide them anyway, they are angry and dirty.

Just like the monster who inflicted them on me was.

However, in this moment, as her hands gently rub over my countless scars and her mouth kisses them all, she takes away the memories and gives me part of myself I never knew was even missing.

To her, my scars speak about strength, and in this the scars become *mine* and not something Wayne had given me so I’d never forget what he did to me.

“Whenever you look in the mirror again,” she murmurs over the scar Wayne gave me during one of his manic episodes, “think how much I love them because without them you wouldn’t be here with me.” My eyes close while the overwhelming onslaught of emotion sweeps over me, shaking me at the sheer truth ringing in her voice. “Your scars are not hideous, Octavius.” She glides her mouth upward again, kissing my cheek several times before palming my head. “They’re beautiful.” She slips her tongue inside my mouth, roaming and seeking mine as we duel for dominance.

With this kiss I want to show her how grateful I am for these words that sooth and heal the invisible wounds still present within me. I can’t imagine ever studying my reflection in the mirror...the idea now seems more bearable if it’s her voice and words I’d hear in my head.

Only hers and no one else’s.

In her presence, even my nightmares are powerless.

“Octavius,” she whispers, dragging her mouth down my throat to my chest, and I hiss when she bites on my peck, quickly licking it with her tongue before resuming her journey,

scraping my flesh with her teeth on her way. “You’re so hot.” Her hands glide down my sides, leaving burning sensations in her wake until she lowers onto her knees, tilting her head back and looking up at me. “I want you.”

Lust flares through me at the sight of my woman, her perfect body on display making me harder with each breath she takes. She’s a temptation no sane man could ever resist, let alone someone like me.

My one craving and addiction is her. And I intend to indulge in my wife for the rest of my life.

“Do you, kitten?” She nods and gasps when I thread my fingers in her hair, bringing her closer to me and lowering the zipper on my jeans, the sound exceptionally loud in the room. Lust blankets her eyes when I take out my dick, stroking it, before asking her, “Show me how much you want me, kitten.” I feel her hot breath on me when she leans closer, causing fire blazing through my veins when she skims her lips over my dick from base to tip before wrapping them around me and earning herself a groan from me.

Hot heat surrounds me as she takes me as deep as she can, working over my length, and my hold on her hair tightens when she moans, the vibration only adding to the pleasure creeping up on me and threatening my control.

Tilting her head back, I press on her chin and open her mouth wide, thrusting slowly into her, and she groans, her nails digging into my hips. I welcome the pain mixing with pleasure because her mouth is heaven.

Swaying my hips back, I watch her suckle on the tip, her lips swollen and red from me. She swallows hard, her skin flushing while need for me practically pours from her. She places her hand on her stomach, drifting it lower until it reaches her pussy covered by her soaked panties. “Look at you, kitten. All needy for your man.” She moans, her fingers slipping inside until she cups her pussy. “Push your hand harder, kitten.” She presses the heel of her palm into her, a heavy breath escaping her. “Now your fingers.” She does, goose bumps breaking on her skin while she whimpers. “Not

enough is it, kitten? You need your man to come.” She nods and I can’t stand it.

It’s unacceptable to me to have my wife in need of something that’s my duty to provide.

“Isla...fuck!” I mutter when she puts her mouth on me again, along with her hand moving in sync with her mouth. She drives me crazier with each lick and suck, creating a vacuum around me where only desire for her exists as it pushes me to come down her throat while her little whimpers and moans add to my madness.

Someday I’ll do just that, but not tonight.

Tugging her hair, I slowly escape her mouth and she frowns at me, only to squeal in surprise when I grab her and throw her on the bed.

She bounces on it a little, huffing and puffing before erupting into loud laughter. It turns into a moan when I grab her hips and pull so she ends up lying on her back, her hair splayed all over her. I settle between her spread legs. “Octavius,” she whispers, gripping the sheets and meeting my eyes. “Take me, darling.”

“No, kitten.” I rip her panties away and breathe in her scent, rubbing my cheeks over the inside of her thighs. “First I have to taste you.” Sliding my hands under her ass, I lift her up to me and place my mouth on her as she cries out, her back arching.

Stabbing my tongue into her, I roam between her folds, loving her taste, and then lick her from bottom to clit, trapping it between my lips and sucking on it hard.

She hisses, gripping the sheets harder while she puts the heel of her foot on my shoulder when I skim my mouth back, biting on her flesh before thrusting into her again and again as she writhes on the bed and whimpers under my touch.

She starts to grind her hips in sync with me, her pussy clamping around me, but she groans in protest when I lick her up and down as lust consumes us both, destroying everything

around us. It urges me to take what she willingly offers and once again show her that we belong to each other.

My whole body buzzes with need and anticipation, my dick so hard and ready to fuck her hard, satisfying every cell in her so nothing but me remains in her mind.

“Octavius, please. Stop it!” she begs, yet continuing her movements and desperately trying to chase the release I’m denying her.

Because tonight we’re coming apart in each other’s arms so there is no doubt, no secrets, or anything else between us.

Whatever love this is must be just a fraction of what I’m feeling toward Isla because I can’t find words to properly describe my feelings that have the power to burst me open and glue me back anew as long as she’s by my side.

Gliding my tongue up and down several more times, I place a final kiss on her flesh, promising to give it more attention in the future, and drag my mouth upward.

I rub my chin over her flushed and flawless skin, leaving small bites and kisses on her flesh as she shivers under my attention, moving restlessly on my bed, “Octavius.”

“I know, kitten,” I whisper, sucking on her belly and causing one more hickey to appear, satisfaction rushing through me despite no one ever seeing it but me.

My woman has my marks of ownership and until the day I die, she’ll have them because there won’t be a day where I wouldn’t want to remind her she’s mine.

My hands glide up her thighs, opening her up for me as I settle again between her legs, and the air gets trapped in my lungs at the sheer beauty that’s my wife.

She hisses when I bite on the underside of her breast before soothing the sting with my tongue, drifting it upward and circling her nipple. She arches up, her fingers tangling in my hair once again as she presses me to her. “Octavius, stop teasing.”

Her pussy is dripping for me but how could I leave her perfect breasts without any attention? That would be a crime.

“Patience is a virtue, kitten,” I whisper and draw her nipple in my mouth, wrapping her legs around me. She moans when I move my mouth to the other one, repeating the action until her grip becomes painful as she writhes under me. “Kitten.”

She meets my gaze when I place my elbows on either side of her, caging her in, and mischief dances in her eyes filled with so much adoration, it hurts and heals my soul at the same time.

Isla is a gift and I shouldn't be selfish enough to keep her and yet...when it comes to her I always will be.

No one will ever want, need, crave and...love her as much as I do, so even if there is a better and more suitable man for her...he can go and fuck himself.

I'm never ever letting my woman go.

She moans when I swipe the tip of my dick over her slit, throwing her head back, and I lick her throat, drifting my mouth toward hers. “Isla.” I scrape my teeth over her chin and finally reach her lips, our breaths mingling while her nails cut into my nape. She brings me closer to her, leaving no space between us while thunder roars outside. Despite the heavy rain, moonlight streams through the window, letting me see her sheer joy and need for me. “You're my everything, kitten.” That's all the warning I give her as I thrust into her hard, her pussy stretching around me, and we both catch a breath at the connection, her eyes locked on mine. “Isla,” I whisper when she pulls me down for a hot kiss, swallowing my growl, and I moan as I slide back, only to push forward again, shifting us on the bed.

To be inside my wife is...everything.

Because when I'm inside her, there are no right or wrong, goodness or evilness, light or darkness.

We are just us, two people whose souls and hearts are so deeply entwined they cannot imagine living without each other. A fact our bodies love to prove to us every single time.

Because desire envelops us, pumping need and want through our veins and awakening everything in us to be fully aware of this glorious and fucking scary moment.

After my good-for-nothing past, I never expected to give power over myself to anyone, let alone a woman, but right now...I place my trust in my wife because I know she won't ever use my vulnerability against me.

No, she'll cherish it and keep it safe, giving me every inch of herself right back.

Her nails dig into my back, her legs wrapping tighter around me, while I continue to drive into her hard and fast, enjoying her whimpers in my throat while her pussy clamps around me, alerting me to how close she is to a release.

She pushes her mouth away, gulping for breath, although her hips still meet mine with each stroke. I bury my face in the crook of her neck, her scent surrounding me, and the desire within me grows even bigger, tension rising higher inside me. She moans louder when I speed up my thrusts, welcoming the tickling sensations forming in my lower back and skimming upward, and that's when she comes apart, hugging me tight while her pussy spasms around me, clenching me for everything it's worth.

Three more thrusts and I find my own release, spilling inside her while pleasure extinguishes anything else in my mind, leaving it blank and sated.

And my heart.

My heart that finds solace and a home after all these lonely, grimy years. Maybe if I'd known she'd be waiting for me at the end of it all, it wouldn't have been so lonely.

"Octavius," she whispers into my ear as our bodies are covered in sweat while we both breathe heavily.

"Yes, kitten?" I roll onto my back, taking her with me while still keeping us connected, and my soul soars at the happiness shimmering in her eyes as she smiles at me.

"I don't think anymore." A beat passes. "I am falling for you."

Is it possible to be consumed by light after existing for such a long time in darkness?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“There are certain defining moments in our lives that we remember vividly, even years later.

Because they changed the trajectory of our destiny.”

Octavius

*O*ctavius, 18 years old

“What do you think?” Estella asks, twirling around in her pink chiffon dress as her red locks sway under the light. “Do you like it?”

“You look beautiful, princess,” I praise her, and her eyes light up with joy. She quickly runs to me, wrapping her arms tightly around my middle. I squeeze her back. “What’s the theme of the party?”

“A tea party. Anna told us we all have to wear pretty dresses.” She wiggles her nose and grins. “So Florian bought me this.”

Even though I turned eighteen weeks ago and finally got access to my inheritance, my best friend continues to shower us with gifts and dismisses all my attempts to pay him back for all these years.

“He has good taste.”

Antonio enters the living room. “The car is ready.”

She squeals and tilts her head back. “Is it okay if I eat ice cream there?”

“Yes. Only two scoops, though, and after you eat something.” She nods, and I pinch her nose a little. “Call me whenever, and you can stay as long as you want.”

“Yay! You’re the best big brother in the world, Octavius.” She blows me a kiss and runs to the hallway as I follow her. She almost collides with Pamela by the entrance, shifting to the right at the last minute to avoid contact.

Right away, she starts backtracking until I grab her shoulders, steadying her, and she sighs in relief at my closeness.

Our mother scans her from head to toe and then glances at me before shaking her head and leaving, shutting the door while Antonio explains, “She’ll be gone the whole day. She has plans.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I tell him, and he casts his gaze down, clasping his gloved hands together because he probably has no idea how to act around me now. Shame fills his eyes whenever he looks at me, this deep regret written on his face as if his regrets can make up for the fact that he never protected me.

The dude is old, though, and a coward. He wouldn’t be able to do anything anyway, but at least he listens to my commands.

I might consider all these things once I get my family shares in three years and finally gain complete control over all the family assets, including this mansion.

“Have fun, princess.” I turn her around and kiss her on the cheek while she musters up a smile, and in such moments, I can’t wait to kick out Pamela from our house. The bitch tests my patience anytime she has this dismissive expression toward my sister.

“I will.” She waves at me, and I open the door, watching her run down the stairs toward the car, where the driver waits for her and helps her get in.

Once they drive off, I shut the door. “I’ll be in the living room. Make me coffee.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, well, well. Aren’t you throwing around too many orders in a house that doesn’t belong to you?” The disgusting voice comes from above, stilling my movements, and Antonio’s sharp intake of breath almost makes me chuckle.

The old man still gets scared whenever we have conversations.

I glance up the stairs where Wayne holds on to the railing, wearing his usual suit and drinking whiskey straight from the bottle. Why he bothers dressing up is a mystery to me.

He’s been fired from the family business by Uncle Lucian, who still has power of attorney over my shares. Pretty much whatever he says goes.

Our oil empire has a lot of things to offer, though, so he started traveling all over the world, making some profitable deals. However, the resentment stayed strong in him as he deemed himself the sole owner of the Reeds’ wealth.

“This house is a family legacy, and the older son and his offspring inherit it.” I tap on my chin, thinking while his cheek twitches and his fingers curl around the bottle. “That makes it mine.”

“You got so brave lately. Probably forgot how you cried like a little bitch whenever I was around.”

“Oh dear God,” Antonio mutters.

Without turning to him, I order, “Go make my coffee.”

“No, Antonio. I need another one.” Wayne shakes the half-empty bottle. “Get it for me. Remember who signs your paychecks,” he seethes.

We square off for several seconds as we give our butler a choice that will be a defining moment in his life. Considering his decision will show who truly is the owner of this house.

His trembling voice speaks up, “I’ll get your coffee, sir.”

Wayne’s face becomes red, and he opens his mouth to spit more bullshit, but my splayed palm stops whatever he wants to

say. "You can shut up, Wayne, and drink in peace. Otherwise, I'll be quick to remind you that you walk around because of my generosity."

He huffs, taking a greedy pull from his drink. "Your generosity? No, your weakness. You can kick me out, but I'll take Estella with me."

Fury washes over me, but I rein it in, giving nothing away because he's fucking right. The only reason I tolerate their existence in my life is for my sister.

Moving out is out of the question as legally, they have more rights than I do. However, I've started working on it. Just a bit more time and influence and I'll get what I want.

Freedom from these rotten humans once and for all.

Six years passed in a blur, although I had to almost die to get here alive.

Uncle Jacob arrived fifteen minutes after Florian called him. I can still remember his horrified expression as my friends explained to him what happened. He called an ambulance and completely ignored my mother who kept on yelling that his son killed her husband.

I lost consciousness before the paramedics came, but still found the strength to beg Uncle Jacob not to report it. I kept on repeating Estella's name, and he knew better than me what would happen to her with Pamela caring more about her husband than her son.

I spent a month in the hospital as the doctors worked on all my injuries while Estella stayed with the Price family. They even invited the best surgeon in the world to fix my scar, but the tissue was too damaged to do anything about it.

Broken ribs, bones, fractured knee, and lots of other things. Most of the doctors and nurses were shocked and probably knew what was going on.

Wayne was on another floor in the same hospital, and often, they forgot to give him any painkillers or inserted needles wrong so they had to do it over again.

He had a broken nose and minor injuries. While Florian's hits did some damage, he didn't have the strength to deliver stronger wounds.

During this time, Florian stayed by my side, practically living with me in the hospital, leaving only to feed Aunt Rebecca. After Santiago got kidnapped, his parents stayed in permanent sorrow that we thought their marriage wouldn't survive as they existed on hope alone despite everyone giving up a long time ago.

Uncle Lucian spent most of his time searching for their son all over the world, using all his underground connections, and we lost pieces of him every time he came back. And Aunt Rebecca stayed alone, forgetting to eat, so Florian made it his mission to check on her every single day and have lunch with her. She hated upsetting her godson. It got better when she gave birth to Jimena, although it only added more responsibility for my best friend, who watched over her as if she was his own sibling.

"I can always report you to the police, Wayne." He bristles at the threat, and I grin. "I'm sure the press would love everything I have to say about growing up with you." I sigh as his face turns redder, the bottle in his hand cracking. "The police might not do anything since it's been years and will be hard to prove, but public opinion is everything these days. Just like that." I snap my fingers. "Your reputation will be tarnished."

A thing he values above anything else. Uncle Jacob used it against him when he wanted to report the boys and warned him that if he ever spoke shit about them, there would be consequences. Not sure what kind of excuse they'd given to the police, but everything was swiped under the rug shortly after.

I was terrified to go back, not knowing how Wayne would make me pay for all this. Uncle Jacob must have had a more detailed talk with him because he's never touched me since.

Verbal jabs during the day and orders for the staff to ignore me? Yes.

Refusing to pay for anything but school and essentially leaving me to exist on the Price family's generosity? Yes.

Withholding food? Yes.

The psychological torture was strong, but the physical one stopped. I still stayed close to Estella, though, so no one would harm her.

Maybe my scar gave him so much pleasure. He got off on my daily pain as it throbbed and reacted to weather changes. No matter how I grew my hair, it still wouldn't cover it up, and I avoided looking at my reflection in the mirror, hating seeing his mark on me and my weakness.

A shrink hired for me wanted me to open up about the incident, but I wouldn't. How could I explain to a sane person that I found the scar offensive, but deep down under this offense was buried pain?

Too fucked up to explain.

Not to mention how everyone stared at the scar. The girls whispered to one another whenever I passed by or just trembled in fear because they found me hideous. One of them even asked me not to sit next to her in class because she didn't want a freak as her chemistry lab partner.

I felt bad for her because she said it in front of Florian, and well...he didn't take it well. I could do nothing to control his rage whenever someone disrespected me.

She was expelled the next day when a video of her drinking alcohol in school came out, and her parents couldn't argue with the school policy.

No one said a word to me after that.

I lived, had some fun with friends, and Estella thrived under my watchful eyes, so life wasn't too bad. I started working out while Remi decided to earn some money by participating in illegal fights.

Needless to say, no one wanted to bet on him, so Florian sneaked inside the club and put five thousand dollars on him. Since he won, he got the job and others later on. To this day,

Remi thinks it was his lucky star that gave him a chance, considering how there is still tension between him and Florian after the latter slept with his sort-of girlfriend.

If only he knew he did it because the girl called him a charity case she wanted to use to get to the heirs, aka us, he'd react differently, but Florian forbade me to do it.

He takes care of everyone while never allowing anyone else to take care of him, and that's his greatest tragedy.

One day, he'll need us all, and I hope he'll ask for help when that day comes.

The best part about these six years was Santiago coming back. Gone was the carefree boy; instead, we had a brooding teenager who hated us all. We reacted fine toward it, giving him a wide berth, which resulted in Remi getting into stupid fights whenever someone picked on him in school for being poor.

This leads me to today when we got into yet another fight protecting each other. As a result, we need to do some work on the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Even Santiago got into trouble because of us.

After drinking coffee, I'll go to him. Seeing his reaction and listening to all the shit he says our way while we ignore him should be hilarious.

He might have sworn us off, but we are still an us even if he hates us. Friendships like ours are for forever.

"Antonio, bring coffee to my room," I shout, climbing the stairs and passing by Wayne, ignoring him. "I'll head out in a few," I add when I reach my room, blasting rock music through the speakers.

I'm about to change when Wayne appears in my doorway, and I freeze, spinning around. "You think you're so brave and have it all figured out, huh?" He scans me from head to toe. "Think you won?"

"Get out."

“Even if your father wasn’t stupid enough to underestimate me.” He walks out, but his words rub me the wrong way, so I get out in the hallway and see him moving to the primary wing.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I fell in love with your mother first. Did you know that? She came to work for us, and I planned to ask her out on a date. But then your father appeared.” His voice lowers a few octaves. “And she fell for him right away. Older, wiser, and richer. Can’t blame her. Couldn’t fucking stand him.” He goes inside his room, pouring himself a glass as he holds my gaze. “They married shortly after, and he knew. He knew I would not allow him to live. Why do you think he gave Lucian power of attorney?” My body grows cold at the realization. “Arranging that accident of his wasn’t so hard. But I was fucking stuck with you.” He spits on the floor. “Fucking heir to the throne. Couldn’t stand you. You were a constant reminder that he fucked her.”

Did my cousin just admit to killing my father?

The information barely registers in my shocked mind. Flashbacks from my childhood pop in my head one after another, painful and agonizing in their nature as he continues to run his mouth. “I guess your father loved you. Little good it did you, Octavius. You’ll have the same fate as him.” His laughter rocks off the walls. “Your death will be a tragic accident, and Estella will inherit all your shares, making her the one true heir, and then...she’ll sign them over to me. She’s a lot like Pamela, weak and a doormat.”

“Stop talking about her.” I cover my ears, trying to control a weird sense of panic where his words almost echo as if I’m staring at myself from a distance and not being an active participant in this conversation.

“And when the time comes, I’ll sell her to the highest bidder. Some old friend so he can have his fill of her. I would love for her to suffer. The thing Kenneth’s son loved the most, his sister, subjected to a worse fate than some whore from the streets.” More laughter as rage slowly awakens inside me, big

and powerful, wiping away any common sense, and the ringing in my ears starts. "I always win, boy. Always. Wasn't the scars proof enough? You'll die, and Estella will be all alone. Maybe even someone will rape her? And when it happens to her, I can tell her it's all because of her big brother who failed to protect her." He sips his drink as my fists clench and my soul weeps just thinking about anyone harming her. "She might be my child, but I don't give a fuck about her. Means to an end to get the shares, that's what she is."

"Shut up!"

He keeps going, though. "Breaking you even from the grave will be my greatest victory of all time. Just like I break Keneth every single time I hurt you."

"Shut up!" The scream tears out of my throat, and all thoughts are gone. Just deep rage remains to destroy a threat to the only person I love and punish the one who killed my father. I grab the knife from the table near the fruit and yell again, "Shut up."

His eyes widen, and he takes several steps back, his glass dropping to the floor. I rush toward him and stab the knife deep into his stomach. His shocked gasp sticks between us, and I take the knife out, sending him flying on the bed.

All I can see right now is a murderer, a person who hurt me and now threatens my sister. Wishing for someone to rape her.

He doesn't deserve to live.

I stab him again, and again, and again.

The blood pours from different wounds, soaking the bed underneath us while rock music blasts. A weird high swipes over me, seeing the hurt and fear in his eyes while his actions catch up with him.

He thrashes in my hold, whimpering. I deliver more stabs instead of stopping, loving how easily the knife dips into flesh, producing more blood.

I clamp his mouth shut, annoyed with the sounds he makes, and raise my knife, hurting him in the throat and hitting an

artery as more blood pours, smearing my hands and clothes in it while I shout, "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" I don't want to hear a single fucking word from this monster again. He needs to shut up forever!

That's when my best friend's voice penetrates through the fog. "Octavius, no. Stop!" Florian lunges for me, yelling, "Stop!" He tries to catch my elbow, but I push him to the side, and he loses his balance, dropping on his ass by the bed and groaning.

Remi rushes in next, wraps his arms around my shoulders, and pulls me back, trying to separate our bodies, but no fucking way. Wayne might stay alive, and I can't allow that.

He's a threat to all my loved ones, and I've had enough of losing to him all my life.

I spin around, kneeling above Wayne, and swing the knife at Remi without thinking, just wanting to keep him away. He hisses and jumps to the side when I slice his arm, joining Florian on the floor.

They're my best friends, but right now, they're trying to stand between me and Wayne. No fucking way.

Estella and I will never know peace while he's alive.

I go back to stabbing my cousin, continuing to chant, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" His body is lifeless underneath me, eyes rolled back, and the beast inside me roars in satisfaction.

Finally, he cannot speak!

"You're killing him! Fucking stop, Octavius!" Florian traps my arm, trying to drag me to the side, but it has zero effect on me, and I shake him off yet again.

And that's when Santiago comes from a different angle, catching my wrist as I lift it, the knife dripping blood between us. Santiago's hollow blue eyes meet mine, glassed over with fury.

I jerk in his hold, ready to deliver another blow to the son of a bitch, when Santiago pulls his arm back and punches me

hard in the face.

And with that, everything inside me goes still as I start to breathe hard, the haze and rage consuming me slowly dying. I stumble back, dropping on the floor to my knees. The knife slips from my fingers, landing on the floor with a loud clatter.

Florian slides toward me and places his hand on my shoulder, squeezing it roughly while chaos erupts inside me.

I stare into space, my chest rising and falling with each breath that's heavier and heavier. My palms on the marble leave bloody prints.

Although I see everything, it's like my mind is blank, and I barely remember what I've just done. Santiago crouches in front of Remi and asks him, "You okay?" Remi nods, glancing over his shoulder at us before shifting his focus behind me.

"He's dead," Santiago tells him.

Remi smirks and spits to the side. "Good fucking riddance."

Tearing away a piece of his shirt, he presses it to the cut while Santiago just watches him in disbelief. His brow lifts in surprise, and noticing it, Remi whispers, "You're not the only one with secrets, amigo."

"What are we gonna do now?" Florian asks calmly, patting my back as I sit on the floor and hug my knees to my chest, rocking back and forth, still in a trance.

They are all here, and they all talk, yet I don't understand what's going on. What have I done? Why is there blood all over me? Why is everyone so tense and agitated?

My headache intensifies, and I wince, the pain almost unbearable.

Santiago gets up, rolling his shoulders while focusing on Florian, who has a bored expression on his face. The only concern he shows is when his gaze lands on me. Yet the body on the bed earns only a snarl and a muttered, "Rot in hell, fucker."

All of them share my sentiments on the matter, but I continue to rock, too shocked to utter a word while thoughts just fly in my mind as they argue, their voices exceptionally loud in the silence of my mind.

“He turned eighteen last month. If we call the cops, they’ll put him behind bars,” Santiago says, and the guys wince.

What did I do?

“He can plead self-defense.” Remi gets up, hissing a little when moving his arm. Did I hurt him? “We can serve as witnesses.”

Serve as witnesses in what? What did I do?

Florian shakes his head. “This won’t count as self-defense. He was holding a fucking knife and stabbed him repeatedly. He doesn’t have any injuries.” He lifts my shirt, probably showing them there are no fresh wounds on my skin. “Proving self-defense will be almost impossible.”

Self-defense. What did I do?

The headache becomes so strong that sweat breaks out on my skin while I breathe in and out, willing my mind to give me some clarity instead of being stuck in this frozen bubble where there is no past or future, only the confusing present.

“He’ll still get years behind bars. Either way, he’s gonna end up in prison.” Santiago supports Florian’s point. “Even years of abuse and a psychiatrist claiming he wasn’t in his right mind won’t save him.”

“Fuck!” Remi exclaims, stepping closer to me.

I just rock on the spot and chant, “Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.” My bare feet tap the floor, smearing more blood on my skin.

Where did the blood come from? What did I do?

“If we don’t call the cops right away, our asses will be on the line too.” Santiago addresses a valid concern. “The longer we stall, the guiltier we become.”

They need to leave. I did something horrible. Uncle Lucian and Uncle Jacob don't deserve all this trouble, and my friends all have bright futures ahead of them.

What did I do?

Florian pulls at his hair, standing up and pacing back and forth. "They have security cameras. That might be good evidence."

"And how do you plan to get them? Doesn't Antonio oversee this shit? I hardly doubt—"

A harsh clattering sound echoes in the space, interrupting Remi, as glass shatters into tiny little pieces behind them. All our heads swing to the doorway where a man stands, a tray lying by his feet.

We stare at one another for several moments. Antonio's gaze darts among us all and finally settles on me, then the dead body.

He gasps, covering his mouth, and trembles slightly.

Several emotions flash on his face, wave after wave, before he finally straightens up, adjusts his butler's jacket, and addresses Remi of all people. Maybe because Santiago is a stranger to him, and Florian hates him.

Then again, my best friend hates anyone who directly or indirectly hurts me.

"The driver took Estella to visit her friend, and the maids have the day off today." His quiet voice is barely audible. "The camera footage is downstairs in the basement." He looks among us. "What should I do?"

By my friends' stunned expressions, my actions didn't affect Antonio's newfound loyalties.

What did I do?

A chuckle slips past Santiago's lips. Florian pushes him in the shoulder, and all the amusement is instantly gone. "What's so funny, Santiago? Octavius might end up in jail!" he shouts, raising his arm. Santiago blocks it and punches him in the gut instead, so he stumbles back.

“Then he shouldn’t have killed his stepfather for everyone to see.”

I did what?

“Fuck you!” Florian spits, lunging for Santiago again, and that’s when Remi stands between them, shouting, “Shut up, both of you! Shut up! Fighting right now won’t help! We need to think!”

Flashes of cruel words come back to me, hitting me with a new force while my past plays in front of me like a colorful movie, a horror that’s impossible to look at.

I whimper, palming my head, and my rocking becomes more violent. The guys turn their attention to me and watch me while I desperately try to put together all the pieces in my head to present the full picture. To explain to myself what’s going on.

Why is my arm aching?

Why is blood smeared all over me?

Why is everyone so worried about me—even Santiago, who usually avoids us anyway?

Clearing his throat, Santiago orders Antonio, “Delete all the footage from the camera right now.” He nods, ready to bolt, but Santiago’s words stop him. “If you ever speak to anyone about what happened tonight, you will be guilty too. Keep that in mind.” He nods again and darts away while Santiago faces us. “Any ideas on how to handle this? Think fast. At this point, we’ll all be guilty of the crime. Our lawyers won’t be able to help us.”

“We need to hide the body,” Florian says, rubbing his face.

Remi sighs. “There’s blood everywhere, his DNA and fingerprints. We can’t just hide it. They’ll search for it; he’s one of the richest guys in the country. Besides, how do you plan to get rid of it anyway?”

What are they all even talking about? Lawyers, DNA, getting rid of the body? Are we in a thriller?

“I don’t know, Remi. What am I? A serial killer on the fucking hunt?” Florian spits. They stare at one another in anger, then look at Santiago when he snaps his fingers, holding our attention.

“Serial killer. We have one in the country right now, right?”

“Right. They mentioned it on the news. What does he...? He might be the cover we need.”

The Church Killer. He’s been all over the news, and recently, he destroyed a wedding in Chicago, leaving only headless bodies in his wake. He has no style. He does whatever he wants, but his actions are always hideous and deadly.

What did I do?

It’s as if finally the light bulb turns on in my head, casting light on the darkness that my mind desperately wished to hide from me. My actions register in my mind, and horrible sensations envelop me while bile rises in my throat.

No.

I killed him.

I took a life!

“Florian.” He rushes to me and lands on his knees, mindful of not getting in the blood, and places his hands on my shoulders. “What have I done, Florian?” How could I have allowed it to get this far? I didn’t even understand my actions until it was too late. My single focus was to destroy the man promising hell for my sister. “What have I done?” I shake my head. “I killed him. Fuck, I killed him.” Tears form in my eyes because my little princess... “Estella. She’ll be all alone.”

“No, we have a plan.”

Are they all insane? There can never be a plan after someone commits a crime. It’s a sin and inhuman to take a life, and I deserve to be punished.

Yes, he abused me.

Yes, he was horrible to me.

Yes, he killed my father.

But no one gave me the right to kill anyone.

“No!” I shout, slamming my fist against my chest. “My fault. I did it. Get out. Get out, all of you. I’ll call the cops and turn myself in. Just promise to take care of Estella,” I beg Florian. “Please.” If my best friend gives me his word, I’ll rot in prison in peace, knowing he would never ever allow anyone to harm her.

Especially my mother and whatever new fucking man she finds to fix her financial problems.

Florian squeezes me harder, his voice turning deadly. “I’ll do anything for you, man, but not this. We’ll find a way.”

“There is no fucking way! I’m a murderer! Get out!” After my sister, I love them the most, and I’ll be damned if any one of them is hurt due to my mistakes.

A man is defined by his honor. This I know for sure.

Santiago rolls his eyes and comes closer, slapping me hard across the face.

“The fuck, Santiago!” Florian roars, but Santiago pushes him back too, holding my gaze, and his blue eyes flash with a dangerous light, alarming me that we might be the same age.

But he has seen and experienced some horrible things that shaped him into a man we don’t recognize on most days.

“No one is going to prison because of your irresponsible ass. Our futures are on the line. Now, snap out of your fucking shock. We need to take care of your mess, and we have no time to console you.” I blink at his harsh approach, but oddly enough, his no-bullshit tone finally pulls me out of my self-loathing while my mind swirls with all the possibilities. Santiago takes a deep breath, internally contemplating something, judging by the expression on his face.

He thought this assignment that required us all to be together would end our friendship once and for all, destroying our bond.

However, now the assignment forces us to work together as we cover up my mess, creating a good diversion as if the Church Killer arrived at our house and killed off Wayne with some of his signature moves.

We burn all my bloody clothes, and the guys wash me with a hose in the garden near the gravesite so if the police have questions, they won't search for me.

Then we all go to Remi's fight that night to create the perfect alibi, and he performs despite his injured arm.

He wins the fight, and later, we all stay over in Florian's apartment in the city. Santiago finally shares what happened to him, breaking our hearts all over again.

Although I hate it, his confession fills me with a sense of relief because I might have killed Wayne, but Santiago...he was forced to kill people way earlier than me.

We ask him to teach us how to torture people the right way, so we can punish those who deserve it.

So no other child goes through what we did.

Our best friend is reluctant, but he does as we ask, and that's how we become invincible.

Slowly, not instantly, we become an unbreakable unit, destroying anything standing in our way.

Our name alone inspires fear and awe alike in those around us.

The Four Dark Horsemen gave me clarity, purpose, and the drive I needed to survive and push myself to be better and ascend the throne that became mine by default.

I found solace in my darkness that accepted me as I am.

Until I saw a gray-eyed beauty that awakened my soul and heart that I thought were long dead.

My Isla is not my salvation.

She's my reward.

As life had no colors or emotions before she became mine.

*J*sla

“And they lived happily ever after.” I finish reading yet another fairy tale as Braiden claps, resting his cheek on my chest, and I put the book away. “Have you picked the next one?” Ever since Florian bought him a whole collection of old fairy tales and myths that must’ve cost him a fortune, Braiden has been obsessed with me reading them to him every afternoon.

He leans back and blinks at me, only to run to the nearby bookshelf and snags another story, giving it to me. I read it out loud. “Trojan War.” A chuckle slips past my lips. “Have you been talking to Grandpa Atlas again?” I tease him, and he grins, nodding.

Atlas Price made it his mission to announce to everyone and anyone who’d listen that he had a new great-grandson, and as such, the kid deserved two things.

The best of the best this world has to offer, hence the expensive gifts and daily phone calls with him where Atlas spoke about his day and promised to show Braiden how to make jewels. In fact, I think he planned a whole-ass trip behind our back and just informed Octavius that our kid needed a passport to travel.

My husband laughed and hung up, and that was met with the silent treatment from the patriarch for two weeks. His silence didn’t extend to our son, though.

Braiden just puts him on the loudspeaker and goes around the house, occasionally smiling or nodding to whatever he says, letting me know he enjoys these monologues that the old man calls dialogues.

Jacob and Calliope aren’t much better either. They smother the kid with attention and always invite him over to bake cookies and cakes. At this rate, he’ll be a pro in baking in no time, not to mention how he always comes back carrying gifts and various new photos to add to their never-ending collections.

According to Florian, his parents became sentimental over the years. Even Florian's little brother accepted Braiden, taking him out to the park when he came back to visit from boarding school, and the whole family actively learns sign language so they can communicate with him.

Ryder and Estella bring their children over for the weekends so they can interact with Braiden. He hates spending the night anywhere else but home, so this works for us. He loves his cousins, and although he's still shy around them and sometimes just watches the triplets in shock due to all their antics, he's happy in their company. And he really loves his aunt, staring at her in awe and touching her red hair.

She was the one who found him the speech therapist who teaches him sign language now. The therapist is optimistic about the odds of his diagnosis and thinks we can still hope for the best. He also has a psychologist, and during these sessions, he just draws or plays with toys. Some of the drawings are so horrific it's hard to look at them.

My heart hurts thinking how the son of a bitch starved him, and on instinct, I hug him close, rocking him in my arms as the book slides to the floor. Braiden just wraps his arms tight around me, sighing. That's his normal reaction to hugs. According to the psychologist, most kids in his situation would shy away from the contact, but he craves warmth, so we give it to him as much as we can.

He adjusted pretty well to our lives, and we'll hire a tutor soon so they can teach him how to read and prepare for school. He seems excited enough. The whole family already says they will show up for his first day and be the first ones to attend all the functions.

Secretly, I think they do all these things Octavius wouldn't let them do back in the day, pouring all their love on the child who never knew what it was and trying to bask him in so much attention it cures all the scars his soul bears. And how can I not be grateful for that? For the people who love my child as their own and promise to be there for him every step of the way.

It warms my heart how much they all accepted us as part of Octavius's life in the past month and a half. After that magical night when Octavius and I confessed our feelings for each other, life has been unexpected bliss. Besides him going to work, we've been inseparable, exploring our relationship, newfound family, and life anew. He showed me *his* Chicago—the magnificent and luxurious buildings, private clubs, and helicopters—allowing me to appreciate the city from up high and study its details, falling in love right along with Octavius. We'd gone out on various dates and even had some get-togethers with Callum and Giselle. My best friend grew to like my husband but warned him that I'm not alone in this world and he should watch it.

Octavius found this amusing and endearing, so I think he likes Giselle now.

We couldn't do the same with the other dark four couples.

Florian and Jimena's situation blew up in everyone's faces just as Octavius predicted, and let's just say the outcome was so bad I wondered how Santiago didn't kill him. Needless to say, it's war between them now. Santiago and Remi don't talk to Octavius and Florian.

In fact, the environment is so hostile between them, it makes me question their friendship in the first place. Can you completely cut off people who you considered your best friends for simply one of them falling in love with your little sister?

Or maybe I'm protective over Florian. For what he had done for Octavius over the years, he has my loyalty—no offense to the Cortez family. I didn't get much chance to know them, so I'm not eager to understand why their children act so weird.

Jimena got engaged to Florian's cousin, and the wedding is in two weeks. None of us are invited, but something tells me Florian doesn't need an invitation to crash the wedding.

Whatever works, I guess.

My husband also shared with me how he saved me all these years ago, and my heart fell for him all over again.

Octavius makes a lot of time for Braiden. They have their little bonding sessions where they go either to golf clubs or horseback riding. Braiden loves it all, and I think their father-son bond is growing nicely.

I would have considered myself the luckiest and happiest woman in the world, if not for the fact that we still haven't caught the Church Killer. He's been silent, hiding in the shadows ready to strike, and we both know he eventually will. One of the reasons Octavius has security on us all the time and even inserted tracking devices is so he can know where we are. I don't mind his protection because it's an extension of his love, and his obsession envelops me in a sense of belonging, serving as a soothing balm on all the wounds still healing inside my soul.

I'm no longer alone; I have him to slay all the dragons, and I can just lean on him and accept his power that shields me from all the evilness.

Braiden pulls at my sleeve, and I blink at him, grinning as he frowns and taps on the book again, asking to read it, when his stomach rumbles. "Someone is hungry." He opens his mouth, smiling, and my chest contracts at seeing the joy in his eyes even though they are sometimes still clouded with sadness.

He pats his stomach and nods just as Antonio enters the living room. I think the old man has the best hearing among us all because the minute we utter a desire or a request, he's here. I'm still not sure how I feel about the guy, but whatever. "The cook has prepared some chicken and chocolate chip cookies." He waits a bit and adds, "Freshly baked." Braiden jumps up from the couch and looks at me while Antonio continues, "We set the table in the kitchen for him. Would you like to eat now, or will you be waiting for Octavius?"

"I'll wait for him." I'm not hungry anyway, and the cook has some hidden agenda to feed me for centuries because he keeps cooking five-star hotel-worthy dishes every day. "Make

sure he eats before you give him any sweets.” I laugh when Braiden frowns again and lean forward, kissing him on the cheek and hugging him close. “Go eat some food. I’m going to be there soon.” He squeezes me back and runs to the hallway as Antonio follows him, huffing and puffing, trying to keep up with his speed. He already complained that the boy might send him to an early grave, and Florian said he would add some money to Braiden’s trust fund if he managed that.

Antonio was not pleased. I found the offer hilarious, and yeah, maybe I’m mad at Antonio, after all, and don’t share my husband’s big heart when it comes to forgiveness.

I get up, stretching my back and welcoming the ache in my muscles. A smile dances on my lips, remembering how Octavius tortured me in the sweetest way last night until I couldn’t think about anything else but him.

My obsessive and possessive dark man who lights up my world like no one else.

Lamos adjusted to the new family dynamics and even acted territorial around Braiden, who never stays alone with him. He likes our company well enough and never even roars at us now. I think me bringing him food every chance I get warmed him up to us, and Braiden finds his presence soothing.

Walking to the terrace door, I open it wide and lift my face to the settling sun when an odd sense of panic hits me.

I tense and decide to go back inside, as such instincts usually mean nothing good to me, when a strong, gloved hand wraps around my throat and presses me hard against the wall, blocking me from view. Before I can scream, the masked person covers my mouth and orders, “Quiet. Or do you want your little boy to suffer as well?” I’m frozen on the spot, fear penetrating every bone in my body along with shock.

Because the person staring back at me...has the same gray eyes as mine.

That’s the last thought entering my mind as he presses on my throat so hard, everything goes blank.

Octavius

I flip through the folder, studying our expenditure in various countries, when Todd's voice speaks through the intercom, "Mr. Reed. You have a visitor."

"I told you to cancel all my appointments." I planned to finish early today and spend the evening with my family.

A grin shapes my mouth, my scar stretching over my skin, and despite the discomfort, an odd sense of possessiveness and satisfaction washes over me when I think about my wife and son who accept me as I am.

Never been fucking happier.

I live and breathe for her and just thinking about my woman causes my pulse to speed up, my body growing hard as my hands itch to mold her curves to me so my teeth can bite on her flesh and leave all my marks of ownership on her skin.

Because everything she is belongs to me, and instead of being afraid, my woman thrives in the knowledge and gets deeper into my heart and soul daily. I could never imagine having my life entwined with a woman so much, feeling her emotions as my own, and being so comfortable being myself in her company.

To her, I'm always the prince and never the beast. Isn't this the greatest gift a beauty has to offer? To ignore all your hideous scars and see the real you behind the various masks this society forces me to wear?

As for our son...

Every day spent with him cures something inside me. He reminds me of myself at his age when the world was cruel and harsh, and giving Braiden everything I lacked heals my past self.

My boy is a survivor, but he won't have to be resilient and fight his demons alone. We'll be with him every step of the way.

However, one thing threatens my newfound happiness, and that's the fucker who still prefers to hide instead of facing me,

proving to me he's a coward who gets off on torture but cannot withstand it himself. I've done countless searches, brought up all my connections, and dug so deep some discoveries devastated me and weighed heavily on my chest because I can't share them with my wife.

As some truths will destroy her.

I won't know peace until we catch him and bring him as a trophy to my wife, and then she can decide the fate of the man who ruined her life. In more ways than one.

Todd swallows hard, bringing me back to the conversation at hand. "I have. He's not on your schedule." A beat passes. "He's not inclined to wait." Panic laces his tone when he shouts, "Sir, you cannot enter without permission."

That's all the warning I get before the door to my office bursts open, and a man wearing a tailored, navy-blue three-piece suit enters. His powerful frame fills the space in my office and shrinks it in size as his domineering energy wishes to destroy everything in its wake and ensure the upper hand even where he has none.

It's restless, ruthless, and relentless, just like the man himself.

A sinister smile curves his lips while his shoulder-length dark hair billows slightly under the AC, bringing attention to his tan skin and symmetric features. No wonder women call him a living Greek god among us mere mortals. His handsomeness is deadly and dark, attracting people to him like moths to flames who inevitably burn as the fire blazing in his soul has no mercy for anyone who serves no purpose to him.

Cruel and cunning, just two words of many to describe his character, and he might be respected by his allies and enemies alike because he never backs down from a challenge...but no one truly knows or likes him, as his behavior is unpredictable on most days.

As the only heir to his grandparents' oil empire, he used his brilliant mind to expand their legacy and triple their net worth quickly while conquering more markets, making him

irresistible to the dynasties seeking worthy matches for their children.

After all, in our world, money marries money, and I can't say I fault people for that.

This is hilarious, considering he picked a bride who ran off with her driver, so her family offered their older daughter as a substitute after a huge scandal ensued, and they were terrified of his wrath. People held their breath, waiting for him to react to the offense as, according to reports, the sister was plain as day and lacked the grace and sophistication of his ex-fiancée. To everyone's surprise, though, he agreed to the match.

"*Hola, Octavius,*" he greets me, his deep baritone booming in the office just as Todd rushes after him, breathing heavily. "*Cómo estás?*"

"Sir, I called security—"

The man clicks his tongue, opening up his suit jacket, and his white shirt comes into view with several buttons undone, showing in all its glory the angry and long scar that seems endless down his neck. "Is this how you greet your guests, Reed?" He shifts his focus to Todd, who hunches his shoulders at the coldness in his gaze, and his tone turns more hostile. "Leave."

My secretary stares at him for several beats, then straightens up, huffing. "I do not work for you." He looks at me. "They will be here shortly, sir."

I knew there was a reason I kept him working for me all these years. Todd has a backbone, after all.

"It's all right. He's my exception today." Shock flashes across Todd's face. "You can leave us alone."

He nods. "As you wish, sir." He goes to the door, but before shutting it, he adds, "If you need anything, let me know."

"Your secretary is a nervous wreck. But I respect his loyalty." He drops in the chair. "You trained him well." He takes out a lighter from his suit pocket and flips it between his

fingers. “Or scared him enough.” He barks a laugh, finding the idea hilarious, it seems, but I’m not even surprised.

“I don’t train my staff.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Just your victims, then?”

The question hangs in the air, coating the atmosphere in danger and chaos as he reminds me we aren’t just billionaires who decided to chat.

No.

We’re both murderers, the only difference that I have some sanity left in me while he...his madness knows no bounds, and he thrives in all the pain he causes, torturing his victims sometimes for years before he finally ends their lives.

Rumor has it he created an underground prison where he keeps all those he deems guilty, and his methods...well, they have the ability to make even the likes of me uneasy.

He’s legendary among us all as Lachlan refused to train him because he feared his morals would be long gone, and he never bothers to play nice with anyone.

He’s a loner by nature, and no one really knows if they can be safe in his company because a certain sense of insanity surrounds him.

A true psychopath who mastered his craft so well, he changes his moods and manipulation tactics like a chameleon to fit a narrative he wishes to present to the world, hiding his true nature.

Instead of answering his question, I fire my own. “A little bird told me you’re getting married. Is it true?”

“*Si.*”

“What a pity.” I wait a beat. “For the bride.”

His grin widens. “Rather for me. I’m marrying a spineless spinster who follows her family’s rules instead of taking a stand.” Judging by his tone, he has little respect for his bride, and I wonder if his sadistic tendencies were a deciding factor when he made the choice. The man pays zero attention to

women unless he fucks them, but even then, no one ever caught him with one. The younger sister fit him more in style and behavior. “Which reminds me.” He snatches a golden envelope, then leans forward and throws it on the table. “You’re invited. It’s in two months.” He sighs dramatically, and the dramatics grit on my nerves. “Ah, I’ll be a married man with the most boring wife on Earth.” He laughs. “Maybe that’s my atonement for all my crimes.”

I feel sorry for his bride because he has no soul or heart, and he’s so hell-bent on this marriage that he needs to get something from it. The woman will be just collateral damage.

“And to what do I owe the pleasure?”

He flips the lighter several times as we stare at one another. “Not many people have the guts to summon me to their city and expect me to dance to their tune.” His voice becomes angry, and warning laces every letter, indicating he found the request offensive, and deep rage hides behind his nonchalant facade. “What do you want, Reed?”

After discovering some things, I connected all the dots and studied all the archive files that finally allowed me to create a clear picture in my head. Right away, I messaged him to come here, although I didn’t expect him to listen to me. The man rarely leaves Houston because his grandparents don’t react to his absence well. They found him at the age of fifteen and have kept a tight grip on his whereabouts ever since. He travels for work, but out of respect for them, he stays in Texas.

“I have a situation. And I think you might be the key to finally ending it.”

“Is that so? Interesting. Our paths never crossed in the past or present, and I don’t see us working together in the future.” He swirls a finger in the air. “We are sort of competitors, aren’t we? We work in the same field.” He snaps his fingers. “Ah, I see what it is. So the rumors are true.” My fists clench while I keep the indifference on my face, already predicting what he’ll say next. “The Four Dark Horsemen are over. The unity is broken.” He rubs his lighter over his cheek. “I guess Florian

shouldn't have fucked Santiago's sister, huh?" He hisses through his teeth. "He broke the code."

"Careful how you speak about my family," I warn him. We have another long stare-off, and he nods. "Besides, no. We're still a unit."

At least, Remi and I actively work on it, because Florian and Santiago refuse to listen to each other and have caused so much trouble in the past two weeks. It's a wonder they haven't killed us all at this point. There is no worse enemy than the one who used to be your best friend because Santiago uses the most cruel verbal and physical blows, and sometimes, I barely resist beating the shit out of him. If he takes it any further, there will be no friendship to salvage.

That's a story for another time, though. We might be in trouble, but no one fucking has to know.

No matter what happens, we are the dark four, and we handle all our mess ourselves.

"Octavius, I'm not the enemy here, but you have a lot of those. Some of them might come to Chicago and check if the rumors are true. I suggest you clean up your mess before it happens." He ignites the lighter, watching the flame. "So what is it that you want?"

"I have an enemy from the past who wishes to hurt me and my wife. Because I framed him for a murder he didn't commit, and his sadistic self found it as a great offense." His face stays blank as he listens to me and continues to flip the lighter. "He hid for years, but I finally figured out who he is."

"He wants your wife?"

Anger rushes through my veins just imagining this bastard getting his hands on my Isla, and I manage to grit, "Yes. He considers her his property. He got off on torturing her all these years, but now that she's my wife, he is no longer content." I wait for a beat. "That's where you come in. I think he'll make a move soon, and I need you in town to handle it with me."

"Because the dark four are a mess," he concludes, and a chuckle slips past my lips as amusement laces his tone as if he

knows everything. He might have a brilliant mind, but how arrogant do you have to be to assume I would call him, of all people, to help me with an issue?

“No. Because I think it’s your given right.”

He stills at this, studying me for several seconds, and a dangerous light enters his gray eyes. “I hate liars, Octavius. Whoever lies to me deserves no respect and usually ends up dead.” He gets up, and I do so right along with him while the energy changes swiftly, becoming wicked and dark, ready to erupt in rage. “I forgive you this once but don’t ever try to summon me to your city under false pretenses again.”

“You don’t dish out orders in my territory,” I warn him, and more tension cracks in the air. I showed him generosity by inviting him here, and instead of appreciating it, the fucker issues threats and establishes dominance.

His face darkens. “I wouldn’t be so brave if I were you, Octavius. I don’t see your best friends having your back right now. Remember your motto. Only in unity you survive.” We stare at one another, and he grins, although right now it serves more as a warning than anything else. “This conversation is over. You should have been honest if you wanted my help with your shit.”

He spins around and marches toward the door. “Diego,” I address him for the first time, and he looks over his shoulder, halting his movements. “Have you seen my wife?” I already know the answer to my question because if he had, he would have come to me a long time ago.

Without waiting for him to reply, I take out Isla’s photo from my drawer and place it on my desk.

Diego’s gaze drops to it, and he freezes, and for the first time, I see an emotion in his usually dead eyes while he swallows hard.

Because Isla is the spitting image of their mother, except their signature gray eyes were inherited from their father.

The Church Killer.

“Ella...” He turns back around to face me, his chest rising and falling while he picks up the photo. “She’s my sister?”

“Si.”

His fingers trail over her face, his focus on her almost absolute, and I think he forgets how to breathe while his hold on the photo tightens with each passing second. As a brother, I understand all his emotions.

He lived through hell; all my experiences pale in comparison to what he had to experience before his grandparents found him. And probably just imagining what his sister had to go through kills him.

He might not have a heart or a soul, but there is one truth no one can argue about Diego Alvarez.

He’s fiercely protective of his family and kills anyone who poses a threat to them.

Once upon a time, John kidnapped a little girl straight from a playground without knowing she was an heiress to one of the richest families in the world.

An only child.

Which means Diego and Isla are the only heirs to their grandparents’ fortune.

“He’s alive?” he asks, the photo at this point crumpled in his grip. “My mother’s rapist is alive?”

“Yes.”

That’s when Florian enters the office, swiping his gaze over us, and asks, “What the hell is going on? What are you doing here, Alvarez?”

“Fuck off, Price.”

I don’t get the chance to interfere as my phone vibrates on my desk, and I grab it, noticing an alert on the tracking device on Isla, and I grow still while fear sinks into me.

Because my beloved wife was kidnapped by her psycho of a father.

Panic swirls inside me, ready to erupt, but I push a lid on all my emotions, leaving only coldness and a burning desire for vengeance instead, ready to finish what's been more than a decade in the making.

This time around, everything will be different.

This time around, he won't win.

As this time around, we're together, and no one hurts my wife.

Absolutely fucking no one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“On the path of revenge, be careful.

As those who you try to avenge might not deserve such an honor in the first place.”

Isla

*I*sla

I land on the hard ground with a loud thud, pain ricocheting through me while the harsh wind slips under my T-shirt and jeans. “You’re right. She looks just like her mother.” The voice speaks up as I sit on my ass, my bare feet digging into what seems to be soil. “A grown-up version of her.” He sounds displeased with the fact, and the air hitches in my throat because I’ve heard this voice countless times in my head over the years as I’ve mourned my parents’ death. “Gloria was prettier, though.” I feel his leather shoes touching me while he must hover above me as his disgusting cologne twitches my nose. He removes the blindfold so the light streaming from above blinds me.

Blinking several times, I wait for my vision to clear, only to gasp in disgust when their faces come to my view.

Uncle Grayson and...my father, John, alive and well, stand in front of me wearing all white as they grin at me. “Hello, daughter.” He opens his arms wide. “Daddy’s home.”

Maybe I should yell at him and demand answers, trying to believe that it’s a happy coincidence he’s alive and well. Maybe I should give the hopeful part of me full rein to soak up this feeling since one of my parents is here with me.

I'm not delusional, though, and the minute I saw his eyes, I knew.

I knew my life had been a lie because on the way here, I had the time to think, and the puzzle that didn't make sense before finally clicked and created a full picture.

My father is the Church Killer, and his best friend is his accomplice, a cop who covered up all his crimes, and that's why he was able to get away with so much back in the day. In my shocked and hazy mind during the wedding, I didn't recognize his voice because he put something in his mouth that distorted it.

The truth might set one free, but fuck, does it hurt.

I won't cry. I'll do it later in the arms of my husband, who'll hold me tight and fill me with his strength so I can put all this behind me.

I only need to focus on surviving right now and wait for Octavius to come.

"She missed you, John." Grayson sweeps his gaze over me, and shivers run down my spine at how he licks his lips. A weird excitement fills his eyes, so unfamiliar from what I'm used to. Can a person really hide his nature so well? How could I have missed it all?

Easy.

Serial killers, rapists, or any other people like them are perfect manipulators and can fool anyone. Their loved ones and friends cannot be blamed for not seeing the signs because sometimes the signs don't exist.

The first rule of survival? Get to know your environment.

I look around me, noticing I'm inside a spacious barn with several rusty cages smeared in dried blood and weapons lying on various tables. One bulb flickers above me, coating this place in a rather hideous energy that's so different from Octavius's dungeon.

This one seems dirty and rotten. I swallow the bitter taste in my mouth, and my tied hands fist. There seems to be no

way out besides the wide open doors behind them, and it'll be hard to get up from this position to rush for a knife.

Unless I can break my thumb and free my hands, but I decide to see what they intend to do next.

“You're alive.” I'm surprised how indifferent I sound to the fact. “You're a murderer.”

John removes his jacket and leans on the table while Grayson continues to stare at me, his eyes darkening by the second. “I knew you'd put all the dots together. I'm the Church Killer.” So much pride laces his voice it makes me sick. “My greatest achievement in this life was getting that title.” He grabs Grayson's shoulder, squeezing it. “Thanks to my best friend who supported me along the way.”

“Who covered up your tracks, you mean.” I focus my stare on him, and John shrugs. “What do you want from me?” I have thousands of questions, yet oddly, I don't want an answer to any of them.

He's a murderer, and I don't care what made him one, or why he felt the need to kill his own family and my mother during his last sadistic act before his disappearance.

He frowns. “A little more respect. You're still my child.” I barely hold back my hollow laughter at this. “We've given you freedom long enough. The time has come to pay all your debts. Our generosity only lasts for so long.” What does he mean? “You should thank Uncle Grayson for being so patient with you.” He can wait for my thanks until hell freezes over. “You should fulfill your purpose.”

“My only purpose in life is to kill you,” I tell him, and his face sours at this, displeasure written all over him as Grayson licks his lips again. “And I'll fulfill it, don't you worry, John.”

His frown deepens, and he walks back to me, slapping me across the face. My head swings to the side while hurt travels all over my jaw. For a second, I can't even move it and wonder if he broke it. “Watch your tone, Isla.” He fists my hair so hard he probably rips some out. I struggle in his hold when he tilts

my head and leans closer. “Even your mother knew how to behave.”

“Don’t talk about my mother. You killed her!” I spit in his face, and another slap comes, this one harder, and the ringing in my ear is almost deafening.

“Silence. When men speak, you keep your mouth shut.” He pulls at my hair one more time before letting go and straightening up. “I wasn’t talking about Suzanne anyway.” What? “The bitch was stupid enough to tell on me to the prosecutor and thought I wouldn’t know. Guess she shouldn’t have written all these diaries, huh?” He laughs. “Killing my entire family was an experience. Their screams and blood gave a weird high that’s incomparable to anything else.”

“Ah, I think you’re mistaken, John.” Grayson speaks up, and they share a long look where he winks at John. “Something was better than the mass murders.”

Their laughter fills the air, and I glance around again, noticing a shard of glass on the floor. I shift a little, hoping they won’t notice while I listen to them. The more evidence of their crimes I have, the easier it will be to seek justice in the future. “Yes. The little girls.” I freeze at this, my heartbeat speeding up while horrified shivers make me tremble all over, and John sighs in pleasure. “Kidnapping them, loving them, and then finally killing them was bliss.”

Dear God.

They’re child rapists?

How in the hell is that possible? Serial killers usually have one victimology, and while he had no style or preferences when it came to victims, his main agenda was killing them. He never raped anyone.

Is there a limit to his cruelty?

“We’ve had so many little girls over the years here, haven’t we, Grayson?”

“Yes. You enjoyed them all.” He sounds bored answering that, indicating he gets no high from reminiscing about their past, which points to one thing. He wasn’t the one hurting the

girls. How many girls did they kidnap? “None of them were perfect, though. Not like Gloria.”

“Yes. She was our princess.” John goes to a nearby table, grabbing a picture from it and throwing it on the floor as I see a beautiful girl smiling into the camera while she plays on the swing. “The minute my eyes landed on her, I knew she was the one. Grayson told me so in a second.”

“We picked them up on the playground. An endless number to choose from.” I can’t stop from gagging at this information and just imagining their activities. Two predators ready to pounce on children hiding their true self underneath the mask of perfect citizens.

“You’re sick,” I whisper, barely stopping myself from barfing on the floor while I find the strength to shift a bit once again, moving closer toward the object. “Sick.”

“Yet my sickness is what brought you into this world.” Our gazes clash. “You were created in this barn.” He swirls a finger in the air. “I still remember how she cried when she found out about the pregnancy. The devastation on her face rivaled our joy.” What in the hell is he talking about? I’d seen all the pictures from my childhood, and Mom seemed happy in all of them.

Grayson must read the confusion on my face because he elaborates, and his words serve akin to a metallic whip hitting me hard, “Gloria was your biological mother, Isla.” For a second, I stop even breathing, refusing to process this information because it’s sad, and...and it takes away one more parent from me because my mother was a liar too.

My whole childhood was just an illusion of their creation, an illusion that drove me to avenge them when, in truth, none of them deserved it.

None sans the girl on the picture.

I’m listening to their explanation as if in a trance, their voices coming from far away as I stare into the distance, breathing heavily.

I'm a product of rape and, worse...I grew up loving my mother's rapist and called him Dad.

"She was the epitome of perfection. I enjoyed her till she was fifteen." He winces. "The minute she started growing up, though, I hated her. My interest decreased. Gloria was special, but it was inevitable."

"Is this how you killed her? She gave birth to me, and you decided you no longer needed her?" I hear myself asking, hating to engage in any conversation with them, but at the same time needing to know something about this girl whose life got ruined.

"No. It was our agreement with Grayson." He pats Grayson on the back again. "I get her childhood, and he gets her adulthood. You see, Grayson loves a struggle, but he prefers grown women." In other words, he prefers to rape women. Fucking sick bastards. "That's why there was never a competition between us."

"John had a perfect plan. He'll keep the baby as his because Suzanne wanted a child desperately, and we'd keep Gloria, getting her pregnant again. A new child to sample." He laughs. "Our own little fabric of pretty little girls." My God, how delusional and monstrous do you have to be to come up with something so hideous? "However, the little bitch had different plans. She ran away when I let down my guard, but luckily"—he motions with his head—"John was around these parts and caught her. Sadly, Suzanne was with him. So the only thing he could do was convince her to take one of the babies and raise it as their own."

Everything inside me freezes. "One of the babies?"

"Yes. Gloria was pregnant with fraternal twins. I allowed her to keep the boy because we have no use for boys. I hoped the baby would die, but that little fucker was a tough cookie." Oh my God. I have a twin brother out there? "Gloria managed to escape us and ran away to another state, but at this point we didn't give a shit. Because you were our definition of perfect."

Grayson nods. "We knew you'd grow up looking just like her, so why would we chase Gloria? It wasn't as interesting

anymore. Better to raise a girl who loves us as her own and then give her a different kind of attention.” These men deserve only death. “Suzanne couldn’t let it go and had to meet Gloria by accident.” His cold laughter echoes through the space. “She signed that girl’s warrant.”

“We tracked her down and had to kill her. She begged us to spare the boy, but oh well. We didn’t need a witness-slash-evidence of our crimes.”

All this turns me numb. I think I’ve reached my capacity to experience any emotions in the moment for how devastating this is.

“What do you want from me?” I repeat, stalling for time and shifting once again, coming closer to the glass while concentrating only on survival. Otherwise, all this will break me.

“I have to pay a debt to Grayson.” He kicks my feet, and a hiss escapes me. “He never got to fuck Gloria, and you’re the spitting image of her. So he’ll fuck you, and you’ll be his little toy.” A man who watched me grow up? A man who supposedly protected me? They are not even human at this point! “And once you both have a child, I’ll enjoy it. I can wait. After Gloria, it was so hard to find anyone suitable, so I sustained my cravings with mass murders. They gave me almost the same pleasure.” Oh, so that’s why he started killing people. “That’s why we kept you alive. Like I said, you haven’t served your purpose.”

These men are demonic and insane if they think I will comply with their plans. “So, get up.” I have barely enough time to react before he drags me up, standing straight, and the sadistic grin is back on his face. “Now, darling. We don’t have time to waste.” He cups my cheek, and I jerk away, only to bite back a painful groan when he delivers another slap, not appreciating my behavior. “Now you go in the field and run. Just like your mother used to.” I want to punch him for how eager he sounds while assessing my surroundings once again. “We’ll give you a head start.” He looks at Grayson. “How many minutes do you think we should give her?”

“Maybe five minutes. We gave Gloria ten, but she was just ten, so her tiny feet needed more work.” My poor, poor mother who deserved better than the nightmare this life has granted her. However, I don’t allow myself to think about it much. Right now, nothing matters but my survival.

Because my survival ensures their downfall.

“Five minutes it is.” He pushes me toward the door as I stumble, my hands still tied together. “Now there are some rules, Isla. You have to follow them.” I resist laughing in his face because fuck him and his rules. “The field leads to a forest, and there will be traps along the way. They might hurt you or not, but remember, you’re our prey, and half the fun is in the chase. The minute we catch you, it’s game over.” Our eyes meet again, and I wonder why someone like him is still alive. Couldn’t nature help out, and I don’t know, strike him with lightning? “And don’t hope, Isla. No one will find us here. It’s our secret place. Even Gloria’s powerful family couldn’t do it.” Powerful family? “Come on, Isla. Make Daddy proud.”

“Go to hell,” I tell him as Grayson picks up a gun and removes the safety, the click alerting all my instincts as John pushes me again until we finally get outside. Thunder booms in the air, the dark clouds covering the bright blue sky and threatening to pour rain. Mother Nature creates an even grimmer atmosphere.

“The time starts clicking in three, two, one, and go!” he exclaims giddily.

I gaze ahead of me at the endless field that leads to a green forest with massive trees promising better protection from these monsters as they have a better chance of getting me out in the open.

I’ve never been the best runner even back in the academy. However, I’m resilient, so I start running toward my destination, mentally counting how much time I have left before they chase after me.

Turning to the right, I rush to the edge of the forest, only to gasp in shock when I barely miss a trap splayed open on the

field. Tears stream down my face just thinking about Gloria having to live through it all, and God knows how many other little girls.

Pain shoots through me when a broken glass digs into my bare feet and I leave bloody imprints on the grass. I continue to run with all my might while my lungs beg me to slow down, but that's not an option.

Octavius will find me.

I hear someone shooting a gun three times, it means my time is up and they're after me now.

The forest is still far away, and it's hard to run with my hands tied, but I add more speed, ignoring the various torture devices and wounds on my feet because focusing on the pain will be a distraction I can't afford.

Thunder echoes in the sky again, followed by lightning, and the rain starts to drop, the salty water only adding hurt to my injuries as his disgusting voice shouts, "No matter how fast you run, we will catch you." I dart to the left, noticing heavy bushes getting closer and closer to the forest, and I'm almost there when I step into another trap.

My cry rings in the air, mixing with another boom of thunder as the metallic sharp edges dig into my skin, squeezing my foot. The bear trap closes around me, the blood seeping all around, and I whisper, "No." I try to pull at my leg and lean down to open the trap up, but it's useless. "No." I try to walk around with it but fall on the ground, biting hard on my lip as the pounding pain in my foot only grows. I see them rapidly moving toward me in the distance, holding knives as excitement practically pours from them.

Think, Isla, think.

If there is a way to take that knife away from them and use it to free my hands, I have at least a fighting chance, but with my foot trapped, it's almost impossible to move.

The closer they come, the more my pulse speeds up, nervousness washing along with fury that demands an outlet,

and I wish to scream in frustration, but once again, emotions are privileges I don't have right now.

“Ah, caught in the trap,” John hisses through his teeth while Grayson grins. “Just like your mother.” My soul bleeds for Gloria, but she was a survivor.

No matter what, I will survive as well, just like my biological mother.

“Grayson, have at it.”

He steps toward me while I scoot backward, dragging the trap with me and stilling. I let out another cry as the hurtful sensations envelop my whole leg at this point. “I've waited decades for this.” He throws away his knife and starts to unbutton his shirt. “Years to feel Gloria's flesh against mine.”

Bile rises in my throat again as I scoot even farther, only to bump into a tree while John takes out a phone and points it at me. “I'll add her pictures to our collection. Despair is the most beautiful look on women.”

“You both can go fuck yourselves,” I tell them, spitting in their direction, and anger glistens in their eyes. “Cowards and sick perverts who deserve to rot in prison for years where everyone tortures you every single day.”

“Grayson, it seems you need to teach her obedience.”

“I will.”

I prepare myself for all sorts of torture while I fight him off, but before he can reach me, Octavius jumps from the forest, lunging straight toward John, grabbing him by the throat, and they tumble to the ground. And another unknown man jumps right after him, stopping Grayson, and they all start to fight. Despite being in their fifties, these two monsters have good stamina.

Someone touches me and I jerk, only to see Florian kneeling beside me, cutting off the rope and disengaging the trap. I cry out and cover my mouth so Octavius won't get distracted as he and John now stand opposite each other, John holding a knife while they circle each other. “So the husband dearest shows.” He flips the knife through his fingers. “You

think you can save her twice?” He laughs as Grayson whimpers in pain when I see the newcomer twist his arm so much, it just sways from side to side. He keeps him up, though, and delivers a blow straight to Grayson’s stomach, then bends forward only for his head to fly backward when the man hits him with his knee, the cracking sound echoing through the space. “She’s mine. My flesh and blood, born to sustain my desires.”

“She’s mine and always has been mine,” Octavius replies, delivering his own blow to John, and he jumps back before the knife can pierce him. “You’re a coward. The Church Killer was always a coward.” John screams, powering toward Octavius with his knife, and I gasp before sighing in relief when Octavius knocks it away and punches him straight in the face. “You’re powerful only against someone weaker than you.” *Punch.* “You’re a coward who deserves no mercy.” He grabs his elbow, spins John around, and pushes him to the ground. Holding him by the nape, he hits him against the ground several times until his face is just a bloody mess. “You touched what is mine. Killing you should be my prerogative.” Another blow and then he drags him on his knees. He barely breathes while Grayson joins him. Octavius finally meets my eyes. “But it’s not my right.” With this, I feel Florian place something in my hands.

A gun.

I freeze, my hands automatically closing around it while everyone stares at me. “Fulfill your promise, Isla.”

I made a promise to kill him, didn’t I?

A man who destroyed my whole family, a family that was nothing but a figment of my imagination.

A man who cut my mother’s throat right in front of me, a mother who lied to me and stole me. No matter her intentions or love, she still participated in his crimes. How could you take a child from a vulnerable girl instead of trying to help her?

A man who raped my biological mother for years, stripping her of her childhood and life.

A man who murdered countless people and deserves eternal agony for what he has done.

I might be his daughter...but I'm nothing like him, so I shake my head. "No," I whisper.

Because I'm my mother's daughter.

Octavius kicks Grayson as well. "It's your call, Diego."

Finally, I focus my attention on the stranger as he glances at me, our gray eyes colliding, identical to the monster who sired us.

My twin.

He's my twin, isn't he?

"I don't want them dead. I want them to suffer." He cocks his head to the side. "They have a lot of debts to pay. Prison is only the beginning." He snaps their necks, and I gasp but still see them breathing. Whatever trick he used on them must have just knocked them unconscious.

However, all thoughts fly from my mind when Octavius rushes to me, and I wrap my arms around him, breathing in his scent while he hugs me tight. And finally, the pressure in my chest, along with the bottled-up emotions, becomes too strong. "I'm here, kitten. I'm here," he whispers.

I cry as my husband holds me in his arms, because it's over.

My nightmare is finally over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“If there is any light in the darkness, then she’s mine.”

Octavius

*I*sla

“You’re very lucky, Mrs. Reed,” the doctor says, grabbing the tablet next to my hospital bed and scanning through the information. “The bear trap could have seriously damaged your foot.” He makes several clicks and then raises his gaze to me, smiling. “Thankfully, it was only badly bruised, and while we need to give you a course of antibiotics and a tetanus shot, you should be free to go tomorrow.” He places his palm on my bandaged foot. “How do you feel now?”

Sipping water through the straw, I shrug and plaster a grin on my face, despite the throbbing pain all over my foot that travels to my calf. “It hurts, but that’s to be expected, right?”

The body next to me grows tense, and my husband’s hold on me tightens as he hugs me closer, and I rest my cheek on his chest. “Give her some painkillers,” he orders, and the doctor’s brows shoot up while amusement flashes in his eyes. He clearly doesn’t hear orders often because he’s one of the most sought-after surgeons in the country. Octavius summoned his friend to help me out even though I told him there was no need.

That's my man, though, and I sigh, curling into him, appreciating being alive and well to enjoy this moment with him.

All the pain pales in comparison to what could have been.

The guys arrived in two cars, so Octavius rushed me to the hospital while Florian and Diego took John and Grayson to God knows where. As my husband raced through the roads of Chicago while my foot bled all over his expensive leather, I wondered about my brother. Octavius filled me in on some of the blank pages of my past.

A twin brother.

The knowledge alone is surreal because we don't look anything alike and the thought is scary... What if I met him randomly?

Whoever knowingly separates twins is a cruel person, and my heart pangs thinking about my mother. Maybe that's why they say it's dangerous to idolize your parents. Both of them fell from the pedestal and crushed all my childhood memories into nothingness.

Suzanne did the right thing in the end. However, it doesn't wipe away the past. When she saw a girl who was so afraid... she should have helped her and not stolen her child, consoling herself with the knowledge she still had another.

My life has been a lie, and that's hard to accept, but I'll get there.

I have my own family now, which soothes the emotional and physical pain when they blanket me with their love.

"We've already given her some. They should kick in soon, and I want to keep her for observation due to the bruise on her head." The doctor comes closer, touching my forehead lightly, and I wince. "The scans were clear, but I prefer to be on the safe side."

"Thank you," I tell him, and he nods, saluting Octavius before leaving us alone. "How is Braiden?" I shift a little on the bed, rolling onto my side, and place my hand on his scarred cheek, tracing my thumb over the tissue. He closes his

eyes, kissing my palm. “I’m surprised the whole family isn’t here.”

“No one knows what happened. I called Antonio, and he says our boy went to bed after playing some video games and eating cookies.” He smiles. “I think he convinced the cook to bake more than he originally planned.” We share a laugh because Braiden’s expressive blue eyes can be very persuasive. “I don’t want to worry anyone or make them feel like shit.”

And by that, he means Santiago and Remi, who probably didn’t come to my rescue because no one called them. No matter what happened between them, I know they would have showed up if Octavius asked, and this alone tells me they will be all right.

At least I hope so for all their sakes, as the dark four have a hard time dealing with separation.

“They will find out eventually.”

“Yeah,” he says and looks at me as I continue to caress his cheek, our gazes clashing, and warmth spreads through me at the love filling his brown eyes. “You scared me today,” he whispers, bringing me even closer to him, our lips inches apart.

“I got scared too,” I whisper, resting my forehead against his. “But I knew you’d save me.”

His hold on me tightens, and a raspy breath escapes him. “I should say something poetic and beautiful right now to explain what I feel deep down in my heart.” He leans back, tipping my chin up as a serious expression crosses his face. “However, poetic speeches were never one of my strong suits. I’m a cruel beast, after all.”

I frown. “You’re not.”

He gives me a lighter kiss on the mouth. “I’m a selfish villain, kitten, who captured a princess deserving of a prince. But you’re mine, and I will never allow anyone to take you away.” Another kiss. “I love you, Isla. Everything that I am belongs to you, and you light up my dark world in ways I

never thought possible.” He wipes away the tears sliding down my cheeks. “We didn’t come into this marriage with perfect parents who adore us would help us raise our children. I’m sorry, kitten, that I can’t give you what Santiago gave to Briseis or Penelope gave to Remi. We came into this marriage as orphans, and we’ll stay orphans.” He removes the wayward strand of hair from my face. “I promise you, though, we’ll have our own perfect family.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” I say, clearing my throat. “We have each other and everyone else. It’s more than enough.” For a girl who lost everything, finding the one man who accepted me the way he did and surrounded me with so much love and attention...is a dream come true. “I love you too, Octavius. I’m afraid I’m not much of a poet either,” I tease, and we share a laugh right as he threads his fingers in my hair, pulling me toward him and locking us in a deep and passionate kiss.

Our tongues stroke each other’s, and he claims my mouth anew with each brush of his lips, reminding me that we belong to each other and nothing matters as long as we’re together.

My man is a warrior, even if he believes otherwise, and I’m so happy I might burst right now.

Three knocks echo in the space, and we separate, gulping for breath. He winks at my protesting groan. “I promise you, kitten. Once we’re back home, I’ll own this body until you can’t think straight.” Warmth rushes through me, and I roll my tongue at him, earning me another kiss before he calls out, “Come in.”

“Do you own this hospital or something?” Granted, this spacious room with a huge window and a view of the Chicago nightlife speaks for itself. There is an expensive TV hanging on the wall, a couch with chairs, and even a coffee machine. Jazz music comes from the small radio and somehow manages to wipe away the hospital aesthetic.

If it wasn’t for the throbbing in my foot and the distinctive scents twitching my nose every other second, I could almost pretend I was in a hotel room.

He shrugs. “We have some shares in it, yes.”

“So you’re *rich* rich.” I sigh dramatically. “Every day, I discover new things about your wealth.” I don’t really care either way, though, and we both know it.

“We’re rich, kitten.”

I don’t have time to show my appreciation for his comment as the door opens, and I freeze because Diego enters.

He changed into jeans and a sweater, and while the clothes should soften his look or the dominance emitting from him in spades, it only adds to his dark aura, creating a rather suffocating environment around me.

I sit up on the bed, propping my back against the pillows while Octavius gets up, serving as a shield in front of me. “Diego,” he greets him. “Everything all right?”

“We handled the situation. That’s all you need to know.” His words leave no doubt that whatever happens with John and Grayson is none of our business from here on out, but I know he’ll punish them.

My twin brother must have had a fucked-up life as well if he does the shit the dark four do.

“Where is Florian?”

“He’s in the hallway.” A beat passes. “I’d like to speak to Isla alone, if you don’t mind.” I’m not sure how I’m supposed to feel at this moment because he’s asking my husband if it’s okay and not me.

What kind of logic is that?

Octavius turns to me and waits for my reply, and I nod. “I’ll be outside. You have ten minutes, Alvarez. Don’t upset my wife.”

The warning is loud and clear.

The minute the door shuts behind him, Diego focuses on me. His gray eyes drill into me, and I resist the urge to avoid his gaze because I don’t know how to act in his company or what to say.

This man...this man is my twin. We shared a womb together.

Yet he's a stranger because I know nothing about him.

Seconds trickle by as we just stare at one another without uttering a word, and finally, he breaks the silence. "There are a lot of rumors about the Four Dark Horsemen. One of them being they force their wives into marriages." His tone is emotionless, and I blink in surprise as it's the last thing I expected to hear. "Were you forced into this marriage, Isla?"

I'm so confused because, of all things, that's what he asks me first? "No. I love him. I wanted to marry him." Somehow I still detect traces of fury in his voice, so I prefer to slightly omit the truth as it doesn't matter now anyway.

We married for love even when we both thought otherwise.

Some tension eases off him, and he nods. "I'm happy to hear that. You need to sign these documents." Only then I notice a red folder in his hands, and he places it on the bed next to me. "We need to divide some shares equally, so put your signature on it, and I'll start the process."

"I don't understand." I flip it open, and my eyes widen at the figure in there. "Alvarez." I've heard of them over the years.

The family-operated conglomerate opened more than fifty years ago by two brothers who ended up having more wealth than they anticipated. "Yes. We have a big family, and our grandparents are still alive." A gasp slips past my lips as realization hits me. That's my biological mom's family. "They'd like to meet you once you're ready. They're very happy." He looks into the distance. "They might be emotional." He places something else on the bed, and I pick it up, swallowing hard.

Because I'm looking at my mom's picture where she stares into the camera and holds what must be five-year-old Diego. She hugs him close and kisses him on the cheek while permanent sadness exists in her eyes.

So young yet already so broken.

“What happened to her, Diego?”

He stays silent for so long I don't expect him to answer, but he does. “I'm not sure. I know she didn't go back to her parents after she ran away. She raised me in love. We didn't have much, but God, did she try for me.” I trace my fingers over her image. “One day, John and Grayson showed up in the middle of the night ready to kill me and take her away. Grayson cut my throat so she could watch and then he killed her. He couldn't stand the fact she hated him.” A humorless chuckle slips past his lips. “Oh, how happy I am to finally find them.” His voice promises them endless torture and...good. May they rot in hell for eternity. “They wore masks so I didn't remember their faces.”

“And then our grandparents found you?”

“No. They found me years later.”

“So—”

“Enough.” One word yet it warns me to stay away from his past because he won't share it. “Just sign it.”

“I'm not going to sign it. I have nothing to do with this inheritance. You clearly work for the company, so it's yours.”

“It was our mother's, and as her daughter, you deserve half of it. If you don't want to get involved in the business, I'll just give you access to the bank accounts and credit cards so you can use the money freely.” I shake my head in disbelief. “You're not broke, Isla Evans. In fact, you need to change all your paperwork that still has this name on it. You are Isla Alvarez, an heiress, and that's how the world will know you.”

All of this sounds so ridiculous! Who cares what people think? And discovering my mother's family hardly erases my whole life and experiences. “I married Octavius, so I'm a Reed now. What's the point in—”

I jerk when he snaps, his tone harsh and scary, “You will not carry our mother's rapist name in any shape or form.” He exhales heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose, and coldness sweeps over me.

I rub my arms as I didn't think about it. "I grew up with them, you know." He stills at this as I look away, my life flashing like a horrible movie that I wish to forget. "I grew up with our mother's rapist and a man who almost killed you." I finish on a hushed whisper, wiping away the tears at the unfairness of it all, "You can change my name, Diego, but you can't change my past."

That's what he wishes to do, right? Erase John as if he never existed, except I can't do it. I'll have to live forever with this heavy burden.

"True monsters know how to hide their rotten nature well. That's why people like Octavius and I are needed. We don't see masks. We see what's inside and destroy it before it harms anyone else." An odd note laces his tone, and our stares lock again. "Change your name. It'll give you status, protection, and a sense of belonging. Not to mention our grandparents. They'd want you to have our name."

He softens whenever he mentions them, so they must be good people. Still, is there a point in changing my name when I won't use it anyway? "I think the Reed name can give me all those things."

He huffs, and I see him tying his hair in a man bun. "Then you don't know our world very well. You'll always be an outsider who scored big by marrying a Reed." I frown at this and hate that idea because I don't want anyone thinking I married my man for any reason other than being foolishly in love with him. "Trust me. Our family name will give you a true status, and no one will treat you as a lucky nobody who snagged a rich man."

Underneath all these logical reasons, though, I detect something else. "He won't hurt me." He raises his brow. "Octavius. He won't ever hurt me. You don't have to worry about that."

"I don't worry, Isla. It's not in my nature." He points at the folder. "Sign it and I'll be on my way. I have things to do."

Disappointment fills me at this. "So soon? We have a son, Braiden. He's five years old. You're an uncle." Surprise

flickers in his eyes, and I probably sound like an idiot to him because, really, what else is there to say?

It's not like we have any attachment to each other, so why would he care about Braiden? He might not even be involved in my life in any way, just sending me checks or whatever else he has in mind.

And no matter how much I'm curious about the man who's my twin brother, I won't push or stalk him like I did with Octavius. I'm a painful reminder of our past, about these men and the people who hurt Gloria and him. I don't want to add to his trauma that still rocks him. Otherwise, he wouldn't do what he does.

“My engagement party is tomorrow.”

“Oh. I won't keep you any longer then.” Since he says nothing else like, ‘Hey, want to come or whatever?’ I pick up the pen and quickly put my signature on it. “Here.” He takes it, and I plaster a smile on my face, experiencing a sense of loss, which is strange because how can you grieve over a relationship you never knew anyway? “Congratulations.”

“Gracias.”

Silence falls around us, and once again, I look away, giving him an opportunity to leave silently while my chest hurts and internal pain trumps the physical one.

I guess the hopeful part that still exists within me wants to grow a bond or be a family. What's the point in meeting my grandparents if my own twin can't stand me?

I hear his footsteps and close my eyes, accepting this inevitable outcome, only to feel his hand on my nape as he presses his lips against my forehead. *“Beinvenido a mi vida, hermana.”*

Welcome to my life, sister.

Before I can open my eyes and react, he's gone, and I just see his back as the door shuts behind him.

And I smile this time for real.

Because I don't know how we will do it or how long it will take us to build a bond but...

I have a brother.

For a girl who had no one, I have a husband I adore, my precious little son, and a brother who seems protective over me already.

I think about Gloria, whose strength allowed her to withstand brutal things, and whisper, "Thank you."

She must be my guardian angel.

Otherwise, what explains all my blessings?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Sometimes if you’re lucky or God’s favorite, you get an amazing family who loves you.

They stand with you through anything and support you during the most devastating times.

They are the first to call you when you’re happy and the first to rush to you when you’re sad.

That’s the beauty of life, isn’t it?

You don’t have to be related by blood to create a family like this.”

Octavius

Octavius

The sun shines brightly, casting a magnificent glow all around me as I get out of my car and breathe in the fresh air, welcoming the cold wind whooshing over me.

Endless neatly cut grass along with heavy trees surround me, pointing toward a shimmering lake in the distance. It’s so blue and clear it invites you to dip your toes into it and wash away all your sins, finding solace in nature’s beauty.

“It’s so pretty,” Isla says as she joins me and rests her head on my shoulder. “No wonder you spoke so fondly about it.”

“Yeah. I think Braiden will like it.” I half turn and wink at my son who sits in the car, waving at me as he continues to play with his toy. “Perfect weather for a picnic.”

“We have a basket full of food and a very active five-year-old. It won’t be boring, that’s for sure.”

I palm her head, my thumbs rubbing over her cheeks as I give her a light kiss. Her touches, as always, soothe me. “I love you.”

“I love you too. And I think it’s a great idea.” She motions with her head in the distance. “He’s pacing back and forth. You scared him.” She chuckles. “Poor Florian.”

“Yeah.” After one more kiss, I step back. “Would you like to go with me?”

She shakes her head. “No. Just call us when you’re ready.” She taps on the car’s roof. “We’ll be right here.”

Yes, they will because they are mine.

Sending her a grin, I walk to my best friend. “Florian.” He halts his movements and looks at me, his brow raised in a silent question. “You came.”

He runs his fingers through his blond locks. “Well, you called me in the middle of the night informing me that I should haul my ass here.” He frowns at me. “What the fuck was so important that you dragged me out of bed this early?” He glances behind my back and waves at my family. “You even brought the kid! My godson deserves better.” Warmth slides through me at this as we still didn’t get the chance to make that title official, but Florian doesn’t care. To him, Braiden is also his, and he’s protective over him.

I understand.

In my mind, his unborn child is already my godchild and part of my family no matter what the Cortez dynasty wants to claim.

“Do you remember this place? We used to come here a lot as kids.”

“Yes. We stopped when Santiago got kidnapped, and my parents eventually sold the property.” He rubs his chin. “Aren’t we trespassing?”

“No.” I take out the keys from the pocket of my jeans and shake them. “I bought it a week ago.”

He whistles. “Congrats, and why? It’s far away from the city, and you hate swimming.”

“Because this place was my haven away from Wayne and my mother growing up. My only sanctuary, with my friends by my side.” He must think I’ve lost my mind for being this sentimental over some land. However, the more I thought about it...the more I wanted for my family to own it, so I bought it.

“I see,” he mutters, and his face darkens. “This reminds me about something. You don’t need to pick sides. The Cortez family is your family too. *Padrino* kept your empire for you all these years, and Santiago, he’s just angry with me, and their fury has merit. You don’t have to face it with me, though.” He chuckles, although it lacks any humor. “Each passing day, our friend becomes more vicious, and I don’t want him to turn on you too, because we both know when a Cortez gets hurt—”

“They retaliate,” I finish for him, and he nods. “So you want me to do, what?”

“Step away from the conflict. Choose what Remi chose. You’re not involved.”

“You’re offering me to stop being friends with you, Florian?” I clarify, needing to know all the facts before I react to his words.

“No. I’m saying if he spews bullshit, you don’t have to defend me. If I need to do something in order to get Jimena, you don’t have to help me. Choose the neutral position. I screwed up, but why should we both pay for my mistake?” His voice drops a few octaves. “It’s enough that my entire dynasty faces scrutiny with me.”

The wind whooshes over us, and I move closer to the lake, lifting my chin to the sun as countless flashbacks play on a loop in my head from my childhood.

The good, the bad, and the devastating flashbacks are a kaleidoscope of my life.

“Pamela has been calling me for the past two months,” I say, and Florian comes to me, a snarl escaping him at the mention of my mother. “She found therapy and begged me for a chance to explain.”

“Explain what? Her behavior?”

“She wants atonement and a new beginning with her children and grandchildren.” She never acted like a mother in her goddamn life and now expects to get all the benefits the title provides. “She thinks most of us have a selective memory like she does.”

Florian rolls his eyes. “Tell her to go to hell.” Disgust laces his tone, and I understand. If we have one thing in common compared to our other friends, our biological mothers are awful people whose indifference inflicted pain.

Everyone says to forgive and forget, but how can you do that?

We carry the scars forever, and they can’t be healed just because someone feels sorry. Because our younger selves still shy away in fear of being hurt.

My younger self would have loved to hear my mother’s reasons for behaving the way she did. So he could justify her and maybe...find a way to connect with her.

But the man in me?

He doesn’t need shit from that woman. I never understood her even before adopting Braiden, but after...

How can you watch your child being hurt and not do a thing? Stay silent? Stay cold?

So no, I don’t forgive or forget.

I do want to move on, though.

“Estella asked me if I crave some kind of closure to move on. After all, she’s my mother, isn’t she?” I cross my arms and turn to face Florian again. He watches me warily, a crease forming between his brows. “Maybe I’d see my past in a different light.”

“And is this what you want?” Judging by his voice, I know he’s against the idea. “To allow her back into your life because she’s sorry? Whatever she went through, Octavius, doesn’t excuse what she did. When you’re a parent, you don’t have the privilege to hide behind your traumas. Learn to love the child instead of hurting them like you were hurt.” He locks his hands on the back of his head. “I fucking hate her.”

Yeah. Which brings me to my point.

“People tend to want closure with their parents. Because parents are supposed to take care of you, make sure you have everything to thrive, and protect you no matter what. They hate those who hurt you more than you do. But more importantly? They surround you with love and acceptance, creating a safe environment, and children never doubt their parents’ love. It’s solid.” I shrug. “That’s how it’s supposed to be. It’s not always like that.” I kick a rock into the lake with a loud splash. “I don’t need closure. She’s never been a mother to me in any way. Sometimes even abandoning your child is showing him or her love. In her case, though, she was just selfish.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.” Florian takes out a cigarette, ready to ignite his lighter, but he freezes when I continue talking, needing to get it all off my chest so I can move on.

I refuse to give Wayne, Pamela, and my fucked-up past any more power.

“I don’t need closure from her because she never acted like my parent. You did.” Our gazes clash, and a myriad of emotions flashes in his emerald eyes as he listens to me while everything seems to stand still around us. “Twenty-five years ago, you took my hand right under that tree.” I point at the oak tree where we used to splay our blankets once upon a time. “And you never let go.” He swallows hard, clenching the cigarette in his fist. “I have an empire, I have a family, and I have a woman I love because you decided to be my best friend on that fateful day, Florian.” I exhale a heavy breath. “My childhood was hell, and I would have never made it through it if it wasn’t for you. You loved me. You fed me. You held my hand and pulled me out of the darkness every single time.” I

laugh despite the tightness in my chest. “I was a dick to you on many occasions, trying to push you away because the thought of you doing that to me was devastating. But you never did.” My voice turns into a whisper. “You never did, Florian.” A beat passes. “Thank you for being the best friend a person could ask for.”

“Stop it,” he says, his voice gruff while his body tenses. “Don’t thank me for that, Octavius. Our friendship is not a hardship that I endured.” He taps on his chest. “I should thank you for being the great friend who accepts me the way I am. No one else does.”

Isla is the love of my life. Loving her is a miracle and a gift from the gods, as imagining my existence without her is torture. However, I would have never had the opportunity to experience all these emotions if it wasn’t for Florian.

My platonic soulmate, my best friend, my brother.

“So that’s why I brought you here.” I place my hand on his and clasp it, squeezing it as thunder echoes in the air, making me grin. “The time has come for me to hold your hand. I won’t let go. I won’t ever choose a neutral position in any conflicts that involve you. I am and always will be on your side, brother.” I motion with my head to the car. “My family is on your side as well. That includes the whole MacAlister clan.”

“Fuck,” he mutters. His eyes water, and he looks away, probably needing a minute to gather his emotions. “This is not what we do.”

Yes, we can kill for each other, but we never speak about our true emotions. Maybe we should start.

“Whatever you do, I’ll be right there with you.” I raise our joined hands. “It’s all of us or none of us.” I repeat the words we say as the dark four, and even though Santiago and Remi aren’t here right now...this statement is still true.

Angry or not...we’re bonded, and we will always choose each other over anyone else.

Either way, my friendship with Florian is unbreakable.

We stare at one another for a moment. He pulls me toward him, and we hug each other. I squeeze him hard because his hugs have cured my sadness over the years. “I love you, man,” he whispers. “Thank you for being on my side.”

“I love you too.”

We stand like this for a while in the place that started our friendship, and looking up at the sky, I grin.

Sometimes fate gives you hardships and shitty parents, and there is no making up with them. They are toxic to your peace, and the only thing you can do to move on...is to let go of what could have been and accept what happened.

We can't move forward if we're stuck in the past.

Maybe there is no happy ending when it comes to my parents, and the pain will never go away as it lives within me, but destiny gave me Isla, Braiden, Florian, and the dark four. My sister and her family.

And that's more than some get in a lifetime.

Once upon a time, a little boy thought no one would ever love him and that he'd be forever alone, for how could anyone love him if his parents refused to do so?

What he didn't know back then was this.

Along the way, if you're lucky enough, you can build your own family with people who choose to love you.

And finding these people...

It's one hell of a gift that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

“Once there was a brave and honorable warrior.

Whose life consisted of darkness and survival.

Until her.

She brought light to his world.

And with her he finally found the peace his soul craved.

Because only her love had the power to heal him.”

Octavius

*T*en years later

*O*ctavius

Thunder echoes in the sky, and dark clouds gather while the wind whirls around us. The trees shake under the force, and a smile shapes my mouth at the sight.

Ah, fall.

The most beautiful and perfect season because nature doesn't try to impress you, yet it's magnificent and hunting.

Wrapping my hand around my steaming coffee mug, ready to take a sip and enjoy the upcoming rain, I still when three voices echo in the air, one louder than the other, and judging by their tones, a fight is about to erupt.

“It's not fair!”

“How is it not fair?”

“Uncle Callum bought it for all of us, and you’re hogging it!” I go to the terrace and lean on the doorjamb, watching three identical seven-year-old girls glare at one another.

They all have dark hair and gray eyes, along with the ability to drive me insane with their antics.

Gloria taps her bare foot on the grass and crosses her arms, her ripped jeans and black T-shirt bringing attention to her tan skin and deadly expression. “I’m not hogging it. He said the oldest gets the flower.” She taps on her chest. “I’m the oldest.”

Ah, my little stubborn rebel who hates to be called the oldest because it comes with some responsibilities unless it benefits her. I guess, despite her looks, she took my cunning nature, and I couldn’t be more proud.

Even if her desire to compete in motorcycle sports one day might send me to an early grave.

“He said no such thing!” Catalina exclaims, placing her hands on her hips. Her pink dress skirts over her tiny legs when a gust of wind billows it. It’s smeared in soil and a bit wet, so she must have watered some plants recently. “Aunt Giselle said the one who can take care of it gets it.” She taps her foot. “That’s me.”

Sometimes I think my little princess was born loving the nature around her as she flourishes among flora and fauna, always chatting with Giselle about different plants and her dreams of becoming a landscape designer one day. I’ve lost count of how many books we have lying around about it and how she always buys or brings something to the house to grow in the garden and takes countless pictures. The first thing she does after coming home from school is check on her flowers, and I find it adorable, even if I hate how some people fail to see her caring and artistic nature.

While she’s usually shy and reserved, her stubbornness comes up in arguments, and she never backs down to Gloria.

They both open their mouths, ready to say something else, when a third girl stands between them, placing her hands on their chests, and sighs. “You need to stop arguing.” Valentina’s

softly-spoken words are so gentle one might listen to her voice for hours and not get tired. Her long, flowery dress wraps her whole body as her braided hair and endless bracelets give her this rather ethereal and fairy-like look that matches the happiness shining in her eyes. “This is not how we do things,” she reminds them, and her sisters hang their heads in shame.

The youngest among the three, Valentina is the peacemaker. She has her own ways of controlling her sisters’ tempers while never once raising her voice.

When she notices them arguing, that is. My girl loves to read books and imagine living far away and conquering different lands. She’s already writing stories in her small notebook and dreaming about becoming a writer one day.

All of them are unique in their own way and so very loved by us all.

“We can come up with some kind of plan for the plant.” She points at the potted twisted cactus their godmother brought during their visit earlier this year, and Callum joked it was a gift for all of them.

Big mistake because just like their father, my girls never liked to share.

“Okay.” Gloria agrees and draws a circle with her toe. “Maybe it can stay in Catalina’s room since she knows what it needs.”

Valentina glances at Catalina, awaiting her reply, and she sighs, nodding. “That sounds good. And Gloria can come and visit it whenever she wants. Maybe sometimes even keep it in her room.”

“Yay!” Valentina claps her hands, and I’m not surprised she doesn’t much care about the argument, considering she has no interest in plants or winning their fights. “Let’s get some cookies and turn on audiobooks. It’s about this girl—” Collective groans meet her suggestion, and she frowns. “It’s an interesting book!”

“Yeah, for you.” Gloria waves her hand. “I have no interest in that. Let’s watch bikes instead!” she says dreamily. She’s

already created a list of bikes she'd like me to gift her in the future, and when I told her no way in hell was I doing that... she went straight to her godfather, who promised to buy her whatever she wanted.

Florian has no boundaries when it comes to his godchildren, and I couldn't be more grateful or annoyed at the same time.

Catalina rolls her eyes. "I'm not doing any of this. I just got a new journal, and I need to write down some observations about my plants and take care of this." She leans down and gently pats the pot. "So how about cookies and tea, and then we can do whatever we want?"

They all share a high five, ready to dart to do their individual tasks at hand, when they spot me, and squeal in delight. "Daddy!" They start running toward me, their feet slapping against the grass, and I have a second to put my untouched coffee on the nearby table and get out on the terrace before they smack into my legs, wrapping their hands all around me and giving me a group hug. "You're here," they say in unison, and my heart pangs inside my chest, my soul so full of love for these three creatures I sometimes think it might burst.

One of the reasons I can never be stern with them.

After Diego took away John and Grayson to do whatever he wanted with them, we decided to enjoy our lives and soak up the happiness every single day as we raised Braiden who slowly came out of his shell.

We all learned sign language, adjusted to his school schedule, and he made tons of friends while thriving among them. Even though doctors confirmed that no surgery would help him, our son didn't seem to mind or feel excluded from anything. He found his love and joy in composing music and can spend hours in his studio playing the piano and living in his special world.

Whatever our son plans to accomplish in the future, we'll support him and be there for him every step of the way.

Isla enrolled in the local university to study history, something she'd always been passionate about, and somehow, during that time, we got carried away and got pregnant. I still remember the fear and excitement I felt when she showed me the positive pregnancy test. However, it was nothing compared to the panic I experienced when the doctor announced we were expecting triplets, and girls at that.

The idea of something so pure and innocent coming from a hideous creature like me unsettled me, and I wondered if I could give them what they deserved. So my darkness wouldn't swallow them too and somehow taint them, because all I wanted was love and happiness for my little angels.

The pregnancy was difficult, and they had to perform an early C-section in order to save Valentina, so after everything was said and done, we decided that four kids were enough for us.

My wife is too precious for me to risk her health and leave anything to chance.

"Daddy! How are you?" Catalina asks and exhales heavily. "I think I stained your white pants!"

"It's all right, darling. I have a lot of pants." She beams at me, hugging me even higher as if I ever give a shit about stains over having my girls close. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," they say in unison, and I grin.

Gloria and Catalina have some spectacular fights, but they never tattle on each other and get each other into trouble, covering all their bases. The triplets hang out together and are very protective of each other, never allowing anyone to hurt one without facing them all.

"We want to eat some cookies, Daddy. Do you want some?" Valentina motions with her head toward the house. "It's chocolate chip." She drops her voice to a barely audible whisper. "Antonio promised to ask the cook to bake extra just in case."

Despite some health issues, my family butler is alive and well, although he doesn't do much besides listen to the triplets

talking or directing the staff what to do around here. The girls adore him, though, which doesn't stop them from acting out. "Maybe a bit later."

"Daddy?"

I run my fingers through Gloria's hair. "Yes, darling?"

"Braiden is in the alcoves listening to nature." I barely hold back a laugh at her confused expression because none of us hears sounds the way Braiden does. He has a talent and a gift. "Lamos is lying next to him." She sighs. "He loves him more than us." All the girls nod, and a collective sigh slips past their lips.

My leopard changed over the years. He grew older, his mobility was affected by it, and he lost almost all his teeth. While he still has some strength, he can't do much with it so we are fine with the girls hanging around him. He never showed his temper around them or so much as growled in their presence. However, his bond with Braiden is on another level.

"But we love Braiden, so it's okay," Catalina reassures me, and it's true. Their big brother is their favorite person, and sometimes that's exhausting to him—not that he ever says it. We control the girls, though, because our son is an introvert and all the attention can be draining for him. "Let's tell him about the cookies!"

"We love you, Daddy!" They dash toward the alcoves, leaving me behind.

Shaking my head, I follow them, when I notice a blonde girl wearing a white dress marching toward the alcoves, huffing and puffing as she carries a heavy notebook and a bag. "Isabella!"

She looks at me, and a smile flashes on her face, her father's family's signature green eyes lighting up in joy. "Hi, Uncle O!" She drops her bag on the ground and comes to me, hugging me. "How are you? I thought you were on a trip."

A trip.

My marriage didn't change me, which means I still hunt and kill those who deserve it. My monstrous nature feasts on

their flesh and welcomes their pain because only then does it sustain him. I toned it down a little bit after the girls were born and usually pick a specific week to deal with them, keeping it away from my house so it never touches my kids.

“I came back early.” I pinch her nose, making her laugh. “And it’s *Padrino* Octavius and not Uncle O.”

“I can’t call you *Padrino* often. It’ll be weird in the future.” The determination lacing her tone is both funny and concerning.

She stops by so often, I don’t even bother asking why she’s here.

We all know why.

Braiden.

The fact that my fifteen-year-old son pays zero attention to my ten-year-old goddaughter doesn’t sway her in the least. She enjoys watching him and periodically throws questions his way, which he ignores.

In fact, he acts as if the kid doesn’t exist whenever they’re alone, and while it’s painful to see her hurt over his behavior every single time, it might be better in the long run.

Although I seem to be the only one concerned with this crush of hers. They all think it will pass, but isn’t she living and breathing proof that some crushes just never go away? “Why is your bag so heavy?”

She taps on her notebook, flipping it open. “I’m designing new jewelry. See.” She points with her paint-smeared fingers to a specific pretty drawing. “Grandpa told me that it rocks, and I can have my own collection one day if I work hard enough.”

“You sure will, kid.”

“I want to be a famous designer. It’ll be an achievement.” She blows me a kiss. “I gotta go!” She runs back to her bag and grabs it, resuming her walk to the alcoves.

I guess being determined and striving for success and recognition is in her blood, although she’s already

accomplished a lot by being the first girl born in her father's dynasty.

All thoughts fly from my mind, though, when my gaze settles on a dark-haired beauty wearing a long gray dress, lifting her face to the sun as a smile graces her plump lips. Her skin practically glows.

Every possessive instinct inside me awakens, need shooting through my system.

My wife. Mine. The love of my life.

Reaching her in three long strides, I spin her around and her surprised gasp turns into a moan when my mouth lands on her. I lock us in a deep kiss while my arm traps her in my embrace, her curves molding against my chest as her familiar scent twitches my nose and sends lust flaring through my system. Everything in me screams to take my woman upstairs and stake my claim on her again.

The years only intensified my need for my wife, and any separation from her is unbearable.

She moans, her hands circling my neck, and she lifts on her tiptoes, her tongue entwining with mine while the kiss becomes more passionate and indecent. I wonder if I can steal her away and fuck her on the nearest flat surface while her whimpers echo in my ears.

She tears her lips away, though, gulping for breath, and chuckles when melodic laughter rings in the air, reminding me children surround us during broad daylight. "We can't be as reckless as we used to be, darling," she whispers, and I steal another kiss, earning myself one more moan. "Octavius!"

"I've missed you."

Her gaze softens. "Me too. Save that thought for tonight." A mischievous grin curves her mouth. "I might have a surprise for you." My growl lets her know that her husky voice along with the idea floating in my head after her words do little to help me with my desire. "Patience, darling, patience."

"The night will be long, kitten."

“I’m counting on it.” Her face grows serious, her fingers gently rubbing my neck, and she swallows hard before asking, “How was everything?”

Ah, my gentle kitten. She never asks for details, but I don’t hide anything from her. Yet I never feel her judging me for it, and she always welcomes me with warmth and love.

Something I starved for my whole life and only found with her.

I remove the stray lock of hair from her face. “It’s good. We’re all safe.” She nods because her main concern is that my deeds do not harm our family in any way. I’d sooner die before I allow that to happen. “How was your visit to Houston?”

After Diego’s engagement, their grandparents flew here right away to meet their granddaughter and new grandson, as they called me. They showered us with love and affection, crying most of the time, and spoiled Braiden rotten. They were overjoyed to find us and made us promise to visit them often and remember that we have our own family now as well, which was...a nice thing to have, to be honest.

We met the rest of the family during Diego’s wedding, and I still find that event the most hilarious thing I’d ever attended. Diego always flips me the finger whenever I remind him of that.

How can you not, though, with all the drama of that day?

So we travel to Houston once a month, and the kids sometimes stay there during the holidays while Diego visits us as well. Surprisingly, he’s a good uncle, even if he still has issues showing affection.

She rolls her eyes. “It was good. Diego panicked. As always.” Yeah, he doesn’t handle his wife’s pregnancies well. Not that I blame him. “I’m happy for him, though.”

Our heads swing to the alcoves when Gloria exclaims, “Braiden,” only to erupt in laughter when he lifts her and throws her in the air, catching her. She hugs him and sits down while the rest of the girls jump on him, kissing him on the cheek, and he just shakes his head.

“Do you have any regrets?” I ask my wife, and surprise flickers in her gray orbs. “About our marriage?”

“Yes, I do.” I frown at this. “You shouldn’t have wasted so much time stalking me and should have just married me right away.”

“Yes. I should have, shouldn’t I?” I press my forehead against hers and drink in her presence, while thinking back on all the wonderful things that have happened to us over the years. “I love you, Isla.”

“I love you too, Octavius.”

As a little boy, I made an oath.

To never marry or have children, because the idea of being vulnerable and subjecting myself to more harm was devastating.

And when I got the scar...I never believed anyone could look past it and see the real me, for the real me hid behind the darkness that saved me but also created a sense of loneliness within me.

The little boy didn’t know that the right kind of love could heal certain pain.

Sometimes, life gives us a lot of hardships with no explanations. We have to face those challenges, and most never seem fair.

We lose hope and faith, and are consumed by a pain that poisons our soul and mind.

As a man, I found a woman who made me break this oath, and in turn, she became my everything. She gave me a family that heals my heart and scars every single day.

And if all the cruelty I’d experienced led me to this moment? To my beloved wife and children who adore me and show me that no matter what happens, happiness is possible?

It was worth it, then.

Life has been cruel, but it gave me Isla.

A woman who is and always will be my everything till the day I die.

If you are curious about Callum and Giselle...

Turn the page to read an excerpt from [Callum's Hell](#).

CALLUM'S HELL EXCERPT

Giselle

“So, is Lucy coming to the party?” Isla asks, not even trying to hide the distaste in her voice, and I sigh heavily, adjusting my leather bag on my shoulder as I enter the lobby.

“Isla.” I give a little wave to Hendrick, the doorman, and he graces me with a grin, already having the elevator ready for me.

I step into it, pressing the button for the seventh floor while Isla continues to bitch through my phone. “Oh come on, girl! I wouldn’t have had the courage to face you after the stunt she pulled, but apparently your heart is all forgiving.”

“Her intentions were good,” I say, already exhausted with this conversation, because I know it will lead us nowhere.

Isla snorts into the phone, and I hear a box rattling. She must be going through old cases once again. Lately she’s been trying to find a certain serial killer but without much luck. “Please, she knew the consequences. If I were you, I’d cut her —”

“Isla.” Even though the only word to leave my mouth is her name, she pauses, knowing full well that some subjects in life are sacred.

Like my baby sister and me forgiving her for all the awful stuff she’s done through life. “Fine,” she finally replies and changes the subject. “Wear something sexy. I have crazy plans for you.”

“Do whatever you want, but no strippers,” I warn, but she’s already hung up on me, and I chuckle, because facing strippers tonight is probably a done deal.

The elevator arrives on my floor, and I quickly rush to my apartment, excitement building inside me at the prospect of having two more hours to have a nap and be ready for my bachelorette party. I stop near the door, grinning like a fool.

In two weeks, I’ll be married to the most perfect man on this planet.

With this thought in mind, I twist the lock of the door and barge inside, pondering if I need to call Kevin and check on his plans for tonight. I know some of his friends wanted to go to Vegas, but he refused, claiming to be too busy to have wild parties before the wedding.

He has been working a lot lately, which resulted in him barely being home. We haven’t lived together, so we’ve rarely seen each other this past month. Maybe he’ll have time to see me before the party tonight?

I’m searching for my cell in my bag, when weird sounds from within the apartment snap my attention, and I still while my heartbeat speeds up.

Nobody should be home.

My brows furrow and I listen carefully, hoping it’s only my imagination, but the strange, whimpering sound comes again, and this time I know it echoes from the guest room.

Is Lucy home and watching TV? That’ll be a first for her.

Or did she bring over some strange dude she met just hours ago to have wild sex? Considering she’s been licking her wounds since her last breakup, I wouldn’t be surprised if that was it.

With dread filling my heart, I grab the nearby vase just in case there are strangers inside and slowly walk toward the room, while the sounds become louder and clearer with each step and remind me nothing of whimpering anymore.

More like the satisfied moans a woman makes while having sex.

Finally I reach the door, which is slightly ajar, and although I recognize the other voice and realization slams into me with such force that I need to lean on the doorjamb... I power through it and place my hand on the wood, pushing it wide open.

A shocked gasp slips past my lips while instant pain slices through my system, and the ringing in my ears almost blocks the outside world away.

Blinking rapidly, I pray all this is just a nightmare and I'll wake up soon. But the seconds pass by, and the image still stays the same.

They haven't even noticed me. Lucy continues to pump her hips up and down accompanied by Kevin's groans with her thrusts. She rests her hands on her breasts and moans loudly.

"Fuck, nothing better than your tight pussy, babe," he grits through his teeth, nipping on the index finger she pushes into his mouth.

"No one's? Even Giselle's?" she asks breathlessly, and my stomach flips from the prospect of his answer.

"The best I ever had, Lucy." He closes his eyes as they roll back, and he digs his heels into the bed, probably on the verge of coming as he squeezes her hips, making her ride him harder.

How would he know about my pussy, if he never had it? That last thought runs through my mind, when the vase slips from my grip, shattering into tiny little pieces.

I find my voice and speak up. "My last class was cancelled." My voice is dead, completely lacking emotion while I process this information.

My fiancé is cheating on me with my little sister, a sister who I consider my friend. Despite her occasional outbursts, she is still one of the closest people to my heart.

How can she hurt me like this?

They both freeze, their heads turning to me as if on command, while shock is reflected on their faces. “Oh my God!” Lucy shouts, as she disconnects from his body, making him wince. She quickly covers herself with the white Egyptian cotton sheets I bought for her so she’d be more comfortable in my house.

How ironic, really. She clearly had Kevin to use as a blanket.

Kevin jumps up swiftly, muttering, “Fuck.” His erect cock bobs in front of him as he puts on his pants with lightning speed. “This isn’t what it looks like,” he finally says, threading his fingers through his hair.

A humorless laugh escapes my mouth. “Really? Because it looks like you’ve been fucking my little sister behind my back.”

He takes a step toward me. “Giselle.” His eyes plead with me to listen to him, but is he insane?

There is nothing to explain here. I saw the living proof just seconds ago.

Shaking my head, I inch back as it becomes harder and harder for me to breathe, and I long to gulp for air, but hold back... barely.

They don’t get to see my turmoil, the devastation they both have cast on me with their deception.

Of all people, I never expected Kevin to be the one to betray me.

Perfect guys, my ass.

Guess even the most perfect guy can’t be trusted when it comes to my sister. “Giselle.” Lucy’s lips tremble as tears slide down her cheeks. “We never meant to hurt you.” She sighs heavily, her thumbs jerking. “It’s just happened.”

Just happened? Give me a fucking break!

“So you accidentally fell on his dick and decided to ride the hell out of it?” She winces at my words and opens her mouth to add something, but my raised, splayed hand stops

her. “I don’t care about any explanation. Both of you, get out of my house. You better not be here when I get back or I’ll call the cops.” Then for a brief second my gaze shifts to Lucy, to her flawless beauty, while her emerald-green eyes water, but it doesn’t move me.

I’m afraid nothing else ever will. “And call your parents.”

She whimpers, but I’ve had enough of this scene and spin around, darting toward the exit while tears threaten to escape and the pain skirting on the edge wants to erupt in a loud scream of betrayal.

With clarity in this moment, I understand that even though I’ve dreamed about happily ever after my whole life, it’s not in the cards for me.

Once in the hallway, I don’t control my tears anymore and allow them to fall freely, probably leaving black mascara smears in their wake. My heels click loudly on the marble, with each tap alerting me to the painful loneliness that slowly sinks deeper and deeper into my heart.

“Giselle, please listen to me!” Kevin calls somewhere behind, and I hear heavy footsteps, but he must be still inside the apartment.

I ignore him, hurriedly reaching the elevator, pressing several times on the button, and willing it to come faster to take me away from this hell I’ve encountered.

How could they have done it to me? How can you deceive someone so much that you are willing to marry them in order to be with someone else?

Just remembering them entwined on the bed raises the bile in my throat while my body shakes with fury and anguish, my nails digging harshly into my palms as I sob.

I don’t want them to know I shed a single tear because of them.

I rest my forehead against the wall, and then on wobbly legs step inside the elevator the minute it signals its arrival. Through my blurry vision, I press for the ground floor, all while wiping away my tears.

“We can’t be anything but perfect, Giselle. We have a family name to uphold.”

Even though I’m no longer the nine-year-old girl who accidentally threw up during the dinner party of a senator, I can still hear my grandfather’s voice ringing in my ears and immediately straighten up as if he stands next to me.

Showing weakness to outsiders is beneath Walkers.

My mind travels back to upstairs, as if wanting to rub more salt on the wound, and no matter how much I shake my head, the images seem permanently imprinted in my brain. And with them comes deep humiliation, which awakens old nightmares that have the capacity to destroy my carefully placed façade.

I need to run away.

I need to escape before I collapse on this floor.

At last, the dzing sound echoes through the space and the doors slide open, allowing me to exit, only to bump against a hard chest. I stumble and my heel sticks in the elevator crack. A loud yelp slips past my lips, and I almost fall, except strong hands wrap tightly around my waist, snatching me up so that I come face-to-face with a stranger.

Gasping for breath, I lean back to see a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing sport clothes and a hoodie. His eyes are covered by black sunglasses that mirror my reflection.

A very disastrous one, I might add—not that I care much about it. At this point, I should be grateful I didn’t face-plant on the freaking floor, or I’d have a bruise as a memorable souvenir from this day.

His muscled body feels almost like granite under my palm, and that’s when I realize my hands are splayed on his chest! “I’m so sorry,” I mumble, shifting back, and his arms, albeit slowly, allow me to slip from his hold. “Thank you for helping me.” Music blasts from his headphones hooked over his neck, so I’m not even sure he heard me.

We stare at one another for a second, or maybe a minute, before he walks past me into the elevator and presses the button.

I finally snap out of my stupor and resume my walk, dialing Isla's number, but the stranger's presence doesn't go away. A tremble rushes through me, and I don't know if it's a good one or bad.

What kind of man whom I've never met can evoke such a reaction?

If I only knew.

Callum

I turn on the TV to watch the latest footage, and my mouth curves in a smile when she enters right on time to catch her *perfect* fiancé and her sister fucking.

The pain in her face, the devastation in her words, and finally the look of utter horror she has... they bring me pleasure that no other victim could.

It's funny how people are played like chess pawns without realizing it, just like rag dolls who are 100 percent controlled by another.

Everything goes according to plan.

First, you destroy her life.

Then you make what is left a living hell, so she'll burn in the fire of your creation.

My beautiful Persephone is about to fall through the gates of Hades.

Some might think my greatest desire is to kill her.

But no... my greatest desire is to possess her in ways that are considered a crime for normal people.

They say obsessions and insanity go hand-in-hand, but I have another theory.

Possession and desire go hand-in-hand, because they create such deep insanity a man is willing to eliminate everything and everyone in his way to get to what he wants.

I flick my fingers and knock two pawns from the chessboard, ready to strike again.

By the time this is done, there will be no one but the queen left standing.

Click [here](#) for Callum's Hell.

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