



PRINCE OF
SIN

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

IVY WILD

PRINCE OF SIN
BOSTON BLOODLINES
BOOK THREE

IVY WILD



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Dedicated to those who dare to dance in the shadows of forbidden love, embracing the complexities of their hearts with courage and grace. May your spirits always find solace in the beauty of love's defiance.

PLAYLIST



[Listen on Spotify](#)

Hootie & The Blowfish - Only Wanna Be with You

Tal Bachman - She's So High

REM - Losing my Religion

Steal my Sunshine

Six Pence - Kiss Me

Matchbox Twenty - Unwell

Hinder - Lips of an Angel

Hoobastank - The Reason

Cranberries - Linger

Savage Garden - I want You

TLC - Waterfalls

Goo Goo Dolls - Iris

Tainted Love - Soft Cell

Semisonic - Closing Time

“Forbidden love: because regular love is just too mainstream. It’s like the hipster version of heartache.”

— TEDDY MALDONADO

SUP READERS,

PRETTY COOL THAT YOU WANT TO READ MY STORY. ISSUE IS, IVY TOLD ME THAT MY STORY COULD *TRIGGER* SOME OF YOU.

HONESTLY, I THINK SHE'S JUST A BIG SOFTY, BUT SHE'S ALSO A SCARY MF SOMETIMES SO, I'M JUST GONNA DO WHAT SHE SAYS AND PASS ALONG THE WARNING.

CLICKY-CLICKY THE LINK BELOW TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE NOT A BIG SOFTY TOO.

LATER!

TEDDY

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CHAPTER ONE



Teodoro Maldonado

“God, this is so boring,” I exclaim as I wait in the car next to Marco. I pump up the volume to R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion” and hum along.

“How much longer do you think, Marco?” I ask, stretching my hands over my head dramatically.

“I told you already, my name’s not Marco,” Marco replies.

I stare out at the desolate street. It’s 2 a.m. in Southie (or South Boston if you’re from out of town) and we are currently parked next to an Irish Catholic church.

“I’m choosing my confessions...” the song continues.

There aren’t any lights on as far as my eye can see. The group that is currently ruining my evening cut power to the block to make sure the city security cameras don’t make us easy targets.

Not that we don’t already have enough people on our payroll in the police department. But, we try not to make being a rat an even shittier job than it already is.

“You have to be Marco,” I say to Marco. “Marco is the person who comes with me on my clean-up jobs,” I reply to him.

“Marco was busy. I’m filling in,” Marco says.

“No, you don’t understand,” I reply, tapping the dashboard of the Lincoln Navigator we are currently sitting in. The rich leather thuds against my callused fingers, the sound reverberating through the car.

“Marco is my partner on jobs. I don’t give a fuck what you think your name is. For tonight, you’re Marco.”

“Whatever you say, boss,” Marco replies.

I bark out a laugh. “I’m just fucking with you. I know your name is Tony. Tony and Teddy waiting around for text messages.”

“...losing my religion...”

I can tell that Tony is growing uncomfortable, which only makes me want to mess with him more. Messing with people is in my nature, and it is one hell of a way to pass the time.

“So, Marco, I mean Tony,” I correct myself with a wink. “Tell me, how did you become a soldier for the Maldonado Family?”

“I grew up in Back Bay,” he says, referring to the North Side of Boston. “I’ve been doing this since I was a kid.”

“And you’re only a Marco-lookalike after all these years?” I goad.

His jaw twitches, and I can tell that I hit a nerve. “Sorry, sorry,” I laugh, holding up my hands. “That was a dick thing of me to say.”

He doesn't reply.

I'm not surprised. My brothers, Primo and Constantino, both took more of a "man in charge" attitude when it came to the family business. It kept people like Tony in line.

I, on the other hand, know I'm not "Don of the Mafia Crime Syndicate" material, and I'm okay with that. Up until recently, both of them wanted the job so badly I'm pretty sure if someone told them all they had to do was cut off their left nut for it, they'd willingly splice and dice.

Of course, now things have changed. My oldest brother, Primo, had to go and fall in love with his lawyer and knock her up. She made him promise to go legitimate or he'd never see the baby. So, of course, he agreed.

Then Giovanni took over, thinking he was going to take the family clean. He did for a while, but then he married a mob princess and is helping her run the Cuban mob down in South Florida. So, that was a bit of a 180.

In his infinite wisdom, he pissed off the Irish and then dumped the problem on me. Which has led to not-so-great consequences, because I don't really know what the hell I'm doing.

"...that's me in the spotlight..."

The actual Marco, the one that usually goes with me on these jobs, has been helping me try to run things, but even with his help, stuff is messed up. It almost makes me wish Constantino was around.

Almost.

He is sort of a rageaholic and did murder a made man. But, hey! It is the mob, so not like it hasn't happened before.

I clap Tony on the shoulder, and he visibly winces. “Loosen up, it’s just me,” I say to him. “Come on, you gotta tell me. What do people say about me when no one’s around?”

“Nothing,” he replies quickly.

“Nothing?” I repeat, squeezing his shoulder, perhaps a little too hard. He yelps, and I pull my hand back.

“That’s a little demoralizing, don’t you think?”

“I guess I don’t follow.”

“Wouldn’t you be sad if someone told you that no one cares to talk about you behind your back?”

“Are you sad?” he asks.

I twist my lips and look to my right at the church. “Actually, I’m sad about a lot of things, Tony,” I reply.

“...that brought me to my knees, failed...”

Just then, his phone screen lights up.

“That’s the signal,” he says to me.

I give him a face. “Marco usually says ‘Good to go,’” I say. “I kinda like it. Rolls off the tongue. ‘That’s the signal’ just doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Tony is somewhere between intimidated and frustrated. It’s a shame that I can’t poke at him anymore. I would like to see his true colors.

“Good to go, then,” he replies.

I scrunch my face and open the car door. The music shuts off. “It just doesn’t have the same feel to it when you say it.”

I shoulder my supply bag and run forward. Tony lets out a curse behind me as he tries to catch up. I hate working with

anyone, even Marco, but I also need a lookout.

Cleaning up a scene takes a lot of careful concentration. It isn't like how it was back in the old days. Today, even a stray hair can give away someone's presence at a crime scene. It's imperative for me to have someone who can concentrate on what is going on around me so that I can focus on my task.

Not to mention the fact that I never work without my music. I'm usually never without music.

I slip into the designated side door, not wanting to risk being seen going through the front entrance. Tony finally catches up to me, and I can tell he is out of breath.

"Tell them to flip the power back on to the block," I say to him.

He gives me a confused look. "Won't that attract attention?"

"You really should have at least talked to Marco before you agreed to take this assignment. What do you think it is I do here, exactly?"

He shrugs his shoulders.

"I dunno, clean up?"

I take a moment to square my shoulders in front of him.

"And how well do you think I'll be able to clean up if I can't see anything?"

I can tell Tony isn't one of the smartest soldiers in our ranks.

"I dunno. I guess I figured you brought a flashlight or something."

I sigh and put my hands on his shoulders. He flinches.

“No, Tony. I don’t just use a flashlight. Tell them to flip the power back on. The last thing we need is utility workers coming out to the scene.”

Tony nods and doesn’t argue this time.

The hallway we are in is clearly a back passage behind the sanctuary. The church is old. The stone floors combined with the worn wood feel cold and empty.

It feels like churches always feel to me. People always claim they can feel God’s presence in places like this. All I ever feel is a profound sense of loneliness.

I run my fingers against the yellow Sony Walkman that is clipped into my belt. I never clean a scene without it.

“Alright,” I say, turning to Tony. “Since you clearly haven’t talked to Marco about what it is you’re supposed to be doing here, I’ll give you a little instruction. Wait here and watch the door. No one goes in or out. Understood?”

“Yes, boss,” he says.

“Oh,” I say just before I’m about to enter the sanctuary. “And unless it’s an absolute emergency, don’t disturb me while I’m working.”

I don’t wait for his reply. I’m itching to get started.

I never let anyone give me the details of a scene before I’m there to clean it up. It ruffled some feathers at the beginning of my cleaning career. People were worried about the risk. What if I left a body somewhere by accident or some shit like that?

What they didn’t understand is that just by looking at the aftermath, the crime itself becomes clear to me. I can see how it all played out just from looking at where the bullets and bodies fell.

I fit my headphones into my ears, press the “Play” button on my Walkman, and push open the door to the sanctuary.

“Tainted Love” by Soft Cell fills my ears, and it is as if I am watching a movie of the crime play out the moment I take in the scene.

Our guy entered from the door I just went through, which meant the handle and likely the frame need cleaning. Starting from the back of the sanctuary, he walked up the center aisle between the pews. If he were smart, he wouldn’t have touched the pews, which means I need to clean the tops of the pews.

“...Sometimes I feel I’ve got to run away...”

Just before he got to the first row, he stopped. The target entered the sanctuary from the confessional that was off to the right. Upon seeing the target, he knelt down in the first pew, as if he were praying.

And that’s when the job got sloppy.

Instead of moving to the confessional like he was supposed to do, he tried to shoot the target from a kneeling position in the first pew.

Of course his first shot missed, along with the second and third, meaning there are stray casings and bullets that need to be located.

The target engaged him too, shooting into the pews twice. Two more casings. Two more bullet holes.

I approach the first pew and turn. Our guy’s fourth attempt finally hit its mark, but only in the shoulder.

“...now I run from you...”

I walk forward to see the target dead on the ground, blood seeping from his shoulder and his head. The fifth shot did

what one bullet in the confessional booth should have taken care of.

I smile.

“...oh, Tainted Love...”

It is a messed-up scene, that’s for sure, but that only makes my job that much more interesting.

Scenes play out from start to finish in my mind, but I clean them from finish to start. That way, if I happen to be interrupted, there hopefully won’t be any dead bodies or guns lying around.

I pull the plastic wrap from my bag and start the first job of wrapping the body.

As I wrap the plastic around the fifty-something-year-old, I wonder what his life was like and whether he ever expected to be gunned down in a church. Not only do I not want the details of the hit, I don’t want the details of anyone’s life or crimes. Feeling personally connected to anyone just makes my job that much harder.

“...now I’m gonna pack my things and go...”

The best way to approach this sort of thing is to remove yourself emotionally from the act. Bodies are the same as guns, are the same as fingerprints. It all just needs to be cleaned up.

By the time I reach the end of “Tainted Love,” the body is wrapped. I pause to rewind the tape. I only ever listen to one song during each clean. I actually don’t even remember jobs by their crimes or locations. I remember them by the songs I listen to while I’m cleaning.

For a brief second, I think I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn towards the confessional, but there is nothing there. I turn behind me to see Tony still standing watch in the doorway.

I return to my work and try to shake the feeling off me. Another run of “Tainted Love,” and the target is in a body bag and the blood stains are taken care of with my special combination of oxygenated bleach and UV light. A few more repeats, and I’ve located all of the bullets and their matching casings and have taken care of all the stray fingerprints.

As I heave the body bag over my shoulder and head to where Tony is, I still can’t shake the feeling that there is someone watching.

I know it isn’t God.

Mainly because he’s proven to me that he doesn’t exist.

“Tell them to cut the power,” I say to Tony, turning around once more. I cut my music off so I can hear better.

“Something the matter?” he asks as he pulls out his phone to send the message.

“You haven’t noticed any movement, have you?” I ask him.

He shakes his head as he presses send on the message.

“Nothing. Have you?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I reply, the uncertainty clear in my voice.

Just as the lights go out, a flash of silver moves in my periphery.

“Hold this!” I say, tossing the dead guy at Tony.

He catches the body with an “umph,” and I turn and bolt back into the sanctuary. The darkness makes it hard to see, but the lit candles on the altar are just bright enough to make out a bit of movement as someone or something runs past them.

“Gotcha,” I say, my adrenaline spiking as I sprint forward towards the new target.

As I round the corner of the sanctuary in pursuit, a side door I haven’t seen comes into view. I know if they close that door on me I’ll find it locked by the time I get to it.

I unsheathe a throwing knife from my pocket and hurl it towards the doorframe. As the target tries to close the door, it gets in the way of the door sitting flush, preventing the door from locking.

Their few seconds of struggle are enough for me to gain on them. I force the door open just as they decide it’s better to try and make a break for it.

“Not so fast,” I say, stepping on the bit of fabric I see trailing on the stone floor. The target goes toppling forward, landing with a thud and a strangled cry.

A high-pitched cry, actually.

It’s a woman, that much is clear.

I have to give her credit. She doesn’t give up easily. She starts trying to crawl using her elbows all the while kicking at me with her legs.

I crouch low, pinning more and more of the fabric from her skirt to the ground. In our skirmish, she turns over to try and push me off, but that gives me the ability to grab her wrists firmly and press them into the stone beneath us.

My eyes adjusted to the low light of the hallway around us.

Her breathing is labored.

Her hair is dark.

And her eyes are a beautiful hazel.

They are a color I haven't seen in over a decade, but it is one so beautiful I never could forget it.

She stills as I straddle her. Our eyes meet.

“Raven?”

CHAPTER TWO



Raven Kirkland

“And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who have trespassed against us,

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.”

I recite our Lord’s prayer just as I do every night. My knees hurt against the hard stone floor beneath me, but I embrace the discomfort.

I can never right the sins of my past. I’ve lived a life of opulence and decadence for far too long. However, by casting all of that off for a stone floor, a small bed, and my own prayers, I hope that I can at least atone.

Before I am able to complete my prayers, I hear a loud bang from somewhere in the church.

I make the sign of our Lord across my body and stand, hissing from the stiffness of having my knees against the floor for over an hour.

I should be the only one in the church this evening. Father Murphy, who is the priest who runs the church, had retired to the rectory. While close to the church, it is no longer attached after the renovations were completed some years ago.

I specifically asked for permission to stay in the one small room located behind the vestry that contains a small cot. Mother Superior had agreed despite some reservations.

This area of Boston hasn't been the quietest these days. There are rumors that the long-found peace that had existed between the various underworld factions in the city has become unstable.

Anyone who even stepped foot in Boston over the past year knew that Johnny Maldonado, head of the New England Crime Syndicate, had been arrested and sentenced to twenty years. Anyone who is paying attention also knows that there is no clear heir to take his place.

Random gun violence has become more frequent in the area, as well as break-ins and a few disappearances. In my own mind, there is no way it isn't connected to Johnny's arrest.

Either the gangs are starting to war or petty thieves aren't as afraid to tread on mob territory given the lack of clear leadership in the family.

I had assured the Mother Superior that I would be safe under God's protection and that no one would be so bold as to deface the church.

Despite my attestations and assurances, my heart nearly jumps out of my chest when I hear the noise in the sanctuary. It is a noise I've heard only a few times in my life, but I recognize it instantly.

A volley of gunfire, one of which is using a silencer.

A smart girl would have stayed put in the safety of her chambers.

I've never been a smart girl.

What I lack in brains I seem to make up for in courage. At least that's how I like to look at it.

My movements are slow and a bit labored as I make my way through the vestry and down the hallway that leads to the sanctuary. The hallway seems darker than normal, and that's when I realize the lights have been cut.

Probably for the better. I certainly do not want to be seen.

I inch along the hallway until I am finally at the door that leads to the sanctuary. I crack it open, all while whispering a prayer on repeat under my breath.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Just past the altar, illuminated only by the lit candles, is Father Murphy. Except he is laying face up, blood seeping from his body. The liquid reflects ominously against the flickering light of the candles.

I freeze, completely at a loss for what to do.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters."

The longer I wait there, the worse it gets. After a few minutes, a man wearing a black baseball cap comes into the sanctuary. I watch in a mix of horror and fascination as he wraps up the body in Saran wrap.

"He restores my soul."

My mind instantly goes back to the one event I had no control over. No matter how much I pray for the Lord to take the burden away from me, the scene always revisits me.

Usually, it comes to me in my dreams. It is odd for it to play out before me. It makes me wonder if this is all some twisted nightmare.

Another test from my Lord.

More penance for the heinous crimes I've committed.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.”

The lights cut back on. As he works, I start to question if I know him. Watching him now is like watching him clean up the worst and most shameful moment of my life.

He turns to start cleaning one of the pews, and that's when I see it.

A Sony Walkman.

There is no mistaking it. It's bright yellow and clipped to his belt. Wired Beats headphones are connected to the device, the cord tucked under his dark jacket.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

I have to get closer. I have to know for sure if it is him.

I keep to the edges of the sanctuary. The confessional is only a few feet away from my lookout. I know if I can just make it into the box, I will be in the clear.

The man looks to be almost done with his job. He picks up Father Murphy, hoisting him over his shoulder, and makes his way to the other side of the sanctuary.

I know that this is my only chance to get a closer look.

Step by careful step, I make my way to the confessional, but by the time I get there, he is once again too far to clearly make out his features.

Do I dare to go any further?

The lights cut back off, and impulse comes over me. I dash from the confessional to the altar, but that is my downfall. He turns, and I panic.

He's seen me.

I run towards the hallway. If I can just get to the door, I can lock him out and then call the police from the phone in the vestry.

My knees scream with each step that I take, but I push forward. I can feel him chasing me now.

A knife whirs past me and sticks into the frame of the door. He is close now; I can feel him. I turn to try and close and lock the door, but the knife is in the way.

I look up, and I can see the whites of his eyes now. He has a crazed look on his face and if I had the energy to scream, I would have.

My plan changes.

Hide.

I can hide in the vestry. He doesn't know these halls as well as I do.

I turn to run, but instead of propelling forward, I hit the solid stone floor.

I yelp in pain as my elbows hit the ground. I try to crawl forward but with each movement, he seems to gain more and

more control over me. I struggle against him. I know there is no use yelling for help. There is no one here.

It is just us and God.

I turn around, and he pins my wrists to the floor.

I see him clearly.

“Raven?”

“I will fear no evil.”

CHAPTER THREE



THIRTEEN YEARS AGO...

Teddy

“Where were you last night?” I hear my brother, Constantino, yell into the phone.

“Chill, man,” I say. I’m lying on his bed, tossing a small beanbag up into the air. It’s my junior year in high school, and things have become painfully boring.

When our father was warring with the Irish gangs in town, things were far more interesting. There was way more to spy on.

But ever since our family successfully put down the threat, things have gotten quiet. Everyone keeps saying how thankful they are for “peace,” but I find it an absolute drag.

Constantino, or Consty, as I like to call him, is a year ahead of me in school even though he’s two years older than me. Pretty sure he got held back a year or something, but it works out because he’s good entertainment. I started following him around when things got quiet. He always seems like he’s up to something. It’s probably because our father is always giving him secret stuff to do.

Once, when I asked him what he was doing, he launched into a long lecture about honor and family, and frankly, I lost interest after about five minutes.

That being said, he does provide a good deal of entertainment. He is pretty animated, and sitting around in his

room is better than sitting around alone.

“Don’t interrupt my phone calls,” he snaps at me.

He turns back to his call.

“I don’t care what your excuse is,” he nearly yells. “You completely stood me up. Do you know how bad that made me look?”

I wince. I enjoy listening in on Consty’s conversations, except for these ones.

Things with his girlfriend, Raven, have become rocky at best. Actually, that is being generous. He and Raven have never been good together.

It definitely isn’t Raven’s fault. I don’t really know her. She is actually in my class year, so she is a year younger than Consty, but she’s a good girl who does her homework. That means she and I don’t really have any classes together.

I know that Consty pursued her because she is at the top of our class. He likes being first and is all about appearances. Which is a pretty shitty reason to try and date someone, in my humble opinion.

But Consty thinks he is too smart to listen to anybody. The poor girl definitely has some serious daddy issues going on, because no one with any real self-esteem would put up with Consty’s shit.

“Dude, lay off her,” I say to him, ignoring his warning not to interrupt him.

He turns his anger on me, which is better than subjecting her to it.

“Out!” he yells, pointing his finger at the door.

“Nah,” I reply, bouncing the little ball back up into the air. “Think I’ll stick around and listen to how much more of a dick you’re going to be to your girlfriend. YOU DESERVE BETTER!” I shout, hoping she will hear me on the other side of the line.

“I’ll call you back,” he grumbles into his cell phone. “And you better pick up when I do.”

He hangs up the phone and bounds over to me. He grabs the scruff of my shirt, but I just laugh at him.

“Dude, your intimidation tricks don’t work on me.”

He lets go of my shirt, and his anger deflates.

“Can’t you go do something else other than annoy me?” he asks. “Why not concentrate on yourself? You still haven’t given Father your answer.”

Consty was not so subtly reminding me that I have yet to tell our father what job I’d like to do within his organization. The Maldonado boys weren’t slated to go to college. There was no need. We were all going to end up working for our father. He, at least, gave us the courtesy of letting us choose what sort of job we’d like to do within the organization.

Everyone else has already chosen. I am the last to pick.

“The fuck’s your deal? Why are you such a prick to her?” I ask him, ignoring his question and tossing the ball back up into the air.

“I don’t mean to be,” he sighs. “I just want things to happen a certain way. I want people to do what I tell them to do when I tell them to do it.”

“That’s not what a relationship is, Consty. That’s what a slave is.”

“Oh, like you’re the relationship expert,” he retorts. “Tell me, what’s your longest relationship been?”

I shrug. “I’m not a relationship sort of guy. I’m more of a spread-the-love sort of guy. No one has to get hurt that way.”

“Why does anyone have to get hurt in a relationship?”

“I dunno, man. Look at Pops. He’s on what number wife now? Did your mom get hurt in the divorce? Cause mine certainly did. And don’t sit there and try and tell me that you’re not hurting this girl you’re dating. Guaranteed she’s on the other side of town crying her eyes out right now.”

Consty balls his fists up. “I should probably just break up with her.”

I nod. “You should. She can do better.”

“Gee, thanks,” he replies.

“It’s the truth, and you know it, too,” I say. “You’re not treating her well. Clearly, you need some time to figure shit out. In the meantime, whack off to porn like the rest of us.”

“We haven’t been intimate,” he says.

I blanch. “Oh my God, intimate? Who says that? There are so many other words you could have chosen other than intimate.”

“Not all of us are as crass as you, Teddy.”

“Boned, banged, boinked.”

“Teddy.”

“Humped, porked, screwed.”

“Teddy!”

“Slam the ham, test the suspension, fill the donut.”

“TEDDY!”

I look up at Consty to see him completely red in the face.

“Awe, am I making you uncomfortable?” I drop my voice to a whisper. “Is it because you haven’t...ever been intimate?”

“Just leave, would you?”

I throw the ball over to him. He catches it and squeezes it so hard in his hand it bursts.

I sigh.

“Do the right thing,” I say before leaving his room and heading for the kitchen. “All this talk about slamming the ham has made me actually hungry.”

A week after my conversation with Consty finds me waiting for the gate at the end of the driveway to open. When you’re the child of the head crime family in New England, safety is sort of a concern. That means our house is more of a fortress in that; the entire property is fenced and guarded.

I rev the engine of my ‘69 Mustang. I could have had any car I wanted, but there’s something nice about the classics, and I enjoy working on it.

I have absolutely nowhere to go at the moment, but I feel stifled in the house and just want to get out. I guess I’m one of the odd teenagers who actually enjoys early mornings and sunrise drives.

But, instead of seeing the open road before me, I see one of the guards and a girl my age with jet black hair. Charlie, the gate guard, is a big fella and a little intimidating if you don’t know him personally.

Side note, if you know him personally, you would know that he owns a teacup-sized dog, loves cooking, and has two

daughters who regularly dress him up for tea time. He's also got a son my age, but Carmine doesn't participate in tea time (which is a shame, because I have, and it's a blast).

But, I digress. Seeing him in person for the first time certainly makes people think strongly about turning around. He is holding onto the girl's elbow, and I can see from here that she's distraught. She's rubbing her hands together and keeps looking from side to side, as if she's nervous someone is going to come out of the bushes.

As soon as I get close enough, I can tell who it is.

It's Raven.

Constantino's girlfriend.

I pull up to the scene and slow the car.

"Yo, Charlie boy," I call out to him.

He turns to look at me but doesn't take his hand off the girl.

"What's up, Teddy? You're out early."

"Oh, you know," I shrug. "Too tired to sleep." I nod to Raven. "Everything okay?"

"She said she's looking for Constantino, but I told her that he's out of town at the moment."

Father had taken Consty to some meeting in New York. They'd left together late last night.

I look around but don't see her car.

"Did you walk here?" I ask her.

She looks at me, and I can see from her eyes that she recognizes me. She really does have the prettiest black hair and the most gorgeous hazel eyes. Even from this distance, I

can tell that something is wrong. Worry, self-doubt, and something else are swimming in those hazel pools.

She does something between a nod and a shake of her head, which doesn't really answer the question.

I reach over and open the passenger door to my car.

"Come on," I say. "Hop in."

"I can get her a cab back," Charlie says.

Those hazel eyes widen in fear at Charlie's words. Yeah, something is obviously wrong. Maybe Charlie can't see it, but it's as clear as day to me. She doesn't want to go back to where she's just been. The very thought of it is obviously terrifying to her.

"No need," I reply quickly. "Come on," I say, gesturing to Raven.

Charlie lets go of her elbow, and it's when she walks up close to the car that I can see that she isn't even wearing any shoes. Her feet are all dirty and cut up from the pavement. As she climbs into the passenger seat, I take full stock of her.

Messy hair, bloodshot eyes, and dirty clothes are just the start. This Raven is nothing like the prim and perfect straight-A student Raven I see at school.

I wave to Charlie as I pull through the gate and drive off.

She doesn't say anything to me as we drive. She just stares out the window at the fall colors on the trees. I use her distraction as an opportunity to steal glances at her.

Something is seriously wrong, but I know she isn't just going to tell me. Her and I have barely ever interacted. I am just the brother to her borderline abusive boyfriend. As far as she knows, I'm just as bad, possibly worse.

“So, anywhere you’re just dying to go?” I pipe up.

She turns to look at me, her eyes wide, as if something I’ve said is triggering.

I try to give her a reassuring smile.

“I’m just saying, I don’t have anywhere in particular to be. Usually, I just drive around on Saturday mornings.”

“Oh,” she whispers, looking down at her hands bashfully. “No.”

“Nowhere you want to be and nowhere to go, huh?” I ask in an upbeat tone. “Well, no issue there. Sometimes it’s nice not to have a plan.”

Even over the hum of the engine, I can hear her stomach rumble. She tries to hide it. The embarrassment is written clearly across her face. It makes me sad to see her this way.

Even in her somewhat mangled state, she really is beautiful. I’ve always had a thing for girls with dark hair. I’m unique in that. Most guys swear up and down that they love blondes. I never understood why. The hair color is so garish.

Dark, long, soft hair is what I want to run my fingers through. I love seeing the contrast as I wrap it around my fist.

“Is your real name Raven or is that just a nickname?” I ask her as I turn towards where I know a Dunkin’ Donuts is located. This girl obviously hasn’t eaten in ... I look her up and down once more ... a year, maybe?

“My real name,” she whispers.

“That’s awesome!” I exclaim. “It’s a rad name. Suits you really well. Teddy is just a nickname, but I guess you probably knew that already.”

She does that little head bobble again where I'm not quite sure if it's a shake or a nod.

I turn into the parking lot for the Dunkin'.

"Whaddya want?" I ask her as I pull up to the drive-thru window.

Those big, beautiful eyes of hers widen again, and she shakes her head.

"Nothing," she whispers.

"Afraid 'nothing' isn't on the menu. Tell me or I'm ordering for you," I say to her, leaving no room for argument.

"I'm fine," she says in a meek tone, looking down at her hands.

"Okay," I say to the little metal box. "We're gonna do two hot coffees, two hot teas, a dozen donuts, two bagels with cream cheese, and two egg and cheese sandwiches."

I can see the shock written clear across her face.

"I told you I was going to order for you," I say with a wink.

"It's too much," she says.

"Well, that's what happens when I don't know what a girl wants," I reply, pulling up to the next window. "I go all out to make sure I've got all my bases covered."

"That'll be fifty-eight dollars," the woman at the window says.

I hand her the credit card and see Raven cringe out of the corner of my eye.

"Don't sweat it," I say to her. "I love spoiling girls."

She doesn't say anything. She just sits there quietly, looking a little dead inside.

"Okay, here, hold this," I say to her as the food starts flowing through the window. She seems overwhelmed as I continue to hand her bag after bag of treats.

In my experience, people show their true colors when they are at their most stressed. I know a lot of people disagree with me on this one, but too bad for them, because they're wrong.

If a person yells when they're stressed, deep down they harbor anger.

If a person blames others when they're stressed, deep down they harbor resentment.

If a person disassociates when they're stressed, deep down they're dissatisfied with their circumstances.

It's why I always like to push people to their limits. I love knowing what really lurked beneath the surface.

So, back to Raven. I'm pushing her to her limit, and I'm doing it on purpose. I don't know the girl, but I want to.

I know she's off-limits and all. Even if Consty did break up with her, she is still a no-go zone for at least a year. Not because I care about his fucking feelings.

Not in the slightest.

But, I don't want rumors about her springing up around school. And if she hops from one brother to another, there will definitely be rumors.

Okay, so again, back to Raven, for real this time. She's taking each bag, and I can see the stress collecting on her features. I max her out, handing her two cups of coffee when her lap is already overflowing with boxes and bags.

I almost lean in to see what sort of reaction she's going to give me.

Will she cry?

Will she yell?

She's a totally blank slate to me. A girl I can't really put my finger on.

And then she gives me a reaction I've never seen before.

A reaction that shows just how different, how amazing, how pure of a person she is deep down.

As she takes the coffee cups.

Her features break.

And she giggles.

CHAPTER FOUR



Teddy

The sound escapes her lips and I instantly want to hear it again. You know how certain sounds bring you back to certain memories?

Maybe the sound of jingle bells reminds you of Christmas mornings?

Or the sound of your Uncle's keys makes your butthole clench?

Was that too dark?

Okay, but my point is, the sound of Raven's giggle fills me with happy, warm, gooey feelings inside. Which doesn't make sense, because I've never heard her giggle before.

Hell, I've never even had a full blown conversation with the girl.

None of that matters, though.

What matters right now is her, and me getting to hear that giggle again.

"I do believe that's the first time I've ever seen you smile," I remark as we drive off. The girl is basically covered in bags

of food, desperately trying to hold onto multiple cups of tea and coffee because classic Mustangs don't have cupholders.

"Sorry," she whispers.

"For what?" I ask.

She doesn't respond to my question and her attitude seems to deflate.

I realize she's the sort of girl that doesn't do well under the spotlight. That's fine. I can adjust.

"I, on the other hand," I say, turning the attention on me, "tend to smile all the time."

She continues to stay quiet, so I continue.

"See, I'm the youngest of four brothers. My brothers were always bickering as kids. I never really wanted to get involved. Once you step out of a situation like that, you actually discover that their behavior is pretty silly. Since then, I've always found something to laugh at."

I pull the car up to an abandoned soccer field at the top of a hill and switch off the engine.

"Okay," I say. "We're here. I'll let you carry all the stuff."

She turns and fixes me with her beautiful eyes again, as if to say "*You can't be serious?*"

"Seems like you've got it all under control," I say to her. "I wouldn't want to mess up your system."

There's panic on her face. I stay quiet and then it happens again. The side of her lips quirk up and she lets out a small giggle as she breaks into a bigger smile than she just did the last time.

I have to hold myself back. Because what I actually want to do is to lean over, grab her, and drink that giggle down as I press my lips against hers.

But, I remind myself that she's off limits.

She's my brother's girlfriend.

Or was.

I'm not sure what the situation there is right now, but it doesn't matter.

She's off limits and clearly dealing with something.

I need to focus less on my growing hard-on for her and more on shoving my tongue down her throat.

Wait, no. That's not right.

I need to focus less on my growing hard-on for her and more on *not* shoving my tongue down her throat.

I give her a big grin in return. I reach forward, grab a few of the bags, and take some of the cups from her hands.

"Come on," I say to her. "I think you'll like the spot I picked out."

She gets out of the car and follows me over to a little picnic table that is next to the field. The table is worn and cracked, but I prefer things with history over things that are shiny and new.

The sun is already coming up by the time we sit down to eat, but there are still tendrils of orange and purple strewn across the sky.

I sit on the table itself, but she chooses to sit at the very edge of one of the benches. I watch her for a moment as she looks out at the sunrise.

Her features are gaunt, like she hasn't really been taking care of herself. I can't understand how people haven't noticed. It's probably because everyone is always so wrapped up in their own stupid so-called problems that they fail to see actual issues going on around them.

I've already finished an entire egg and cheese sandwich, but she hasn't made a move towards any of the food. I slink down onto the bench next to her, moving far too close on purpose.

She tries to edge herself further, but if she moves over anymore, she'll fall off the bench.

I slide the box of donuts over to us and pop open the top.

"You're not going to make me eat this entire box by myself, are you?" I ask her.

She looks at the contents of the box. I can see the hunger clear in her eyes.

"What's your favorite?" I ask her.

She doesn't respond.

"Mine's Boston Cream," I reply. "It's cliché, I know, but I can't help it. The stomach wants what the stomach wants."

I fish out the Boston Cream from the box and take a dramatic bite. Her eyes follow my movements, watching me eat the donut.

I pull the sweet treat down from my mouth. There's still half of it left in my hand.

"Wait a minute," I say to her, my eyes wide. "Open your mouth for a second. I thought I saw something."

She looks confused, but she complies.

As soon as she does, I shove the other half of the donut into her mouth. The chocolate frosting goes all over the corners of her lips. The shock is written all over her face, and it's priceless to watch.

"Don't fight it," I whisper to her with a big smile on my face. "Just give into it."

The sides of her lips quirk up and her mouth starts to move. Within seconds, the remnants of the donut are gone and she looks happier than I've ever seen her. That must have been enough to ignite her appetite, because there's no stopping her now.

She eats another two donuts plus a bagel and breakfast sandwich, downing it all with a cup of coffee. I just sit and watch her, happy to see her letting all of her inhibitions go.

This might be a good time to mention that she's giving me another hard-on, which is weird. See, I've never been a guy to get aroused from food porn.

I did stumble on a video once where the girl pretended to be a duck and it was sort of like this foie gras situation, but that jerk off was strictly for science. I needed to know if I could get off to it.

Mission accomplished.

Since I haven't ever gotten a stiffy from watching a girl eat before, I realize it has to do with *her* rather than the fact that she's eating.

Dammit, I really need to stop lusting after this girl.

"So," I say to her, trying to discreetly adjust myself. I grab my own cup of coffee and sip as the sun climbs further and further into the air. "We obviously are in the same grade, but none of the same classes."

“As far as I’ve heard, you never really go to class.” Her answer shocks the hell out of me. I guess all the eating loosened up her tongue a bit. She’s still acting shy, but that was the first time she’s said more than two words strung together.

“That’s because I’m smart,” I say to her, “and try to be efficient with my time.”

She gives me a confused look.

“Let me elaborate,” I say, turning to sit up on the tabletop again. “Why do people go to school?”

She shakes her head.

“Don’t overthink it,” I say.

“To learn things.”

“Okay, but why do people need to learn things?”

She thinks for a second before responding. “So that they can get a job?”

“Exactly!”

She looks relieved when I tell her she’s got the right answer. Like she almost thought she’d be punished for getting it wrong. I file that little piece of information into the back of my mind, but continue our question and answer game.

“So, if someone knew they didn’t need a job when they got older, would there be any point for them to go to classes?”

“You won’t need a job?”

“Not in the traditional sense,” I say, thinking about my father and the family business. “No.”

“I think it’s still good to learn things,” she says quietly.

“Yeah, but I’m not really interested in any of the things they’re teaching at school. Besides, I can teach myself those subjects. The important ones I already have.”

“What does interest you?” she asks.

I have to stop myself from saying “you do.”

Instead, I shrug. “People, and their motivations for why they do things.”

I look her up and down, daring to bring the spotlight back to her. It’s a risk, but I desperately want to know what it was that’s brought us to this moment.

“Like you,” I say. “Why did you come to the house today?”

“I was looking for Constantino,” she says softly.

“Why?” I reach for another donut. Dammit, it’s jelly filled.

“I was hoping he could help me with something.”

“Oh?” I reply. “And what’s that?”

She looks up at me and holds my gaze. I meet her stare, but she doesn’t flinch away. It’s like she’s trying to determine if she can trust me.

Fuck, I want to kiss this girl.

She obviously doesn’t get what she wants from me, because she looks away and brushes off the question. “It’s nothing.”

I don’t know why, but her answer angers me. I’m not the sort of guy to get angry. I’m the fun, happy, easy going Teddy.

Make jokes about everything.

Never take life too seriously.

These are the sayings I live by.

Except, when it feels like she doesn't want to share an intimate secret with me, it's no laughing matter.

I lean down and basically lift her from where she's sitting. She feels so small and frail, it's not even difficult.

"You *have* to tell me," I say to her.

For the first time, she doesn't look surprised, shocked, or scared. She's looking again into my eyes, as if she's searching for something.

I don't know why, but I desperately want her to find what she's looking for in me.

"I don't," she says to me.

I growl at her.

"I *want* you to tell me."

"Why?" she asks.

I don't have an answer for her. I just sit there silently, holding her gaze.

"Constantino broke up with me," she says.

"He's a fucking moron who doesn't deserve you," I say immediately. "You're better off without him."

"Better off with you?" she asks me.

"Yes," I say before I can stop myself.

"You don't even know me."

"I want to," I reply.

"No, you don't," she says, starting to look away.

I move so that she can't escape my gaze.

“Don’t you dare answer for me,” I almost yell at her.

“You don’t understand,” she says.

“Then help me to,” I reply desperately.

CHAPTER FIVE



Raven

I stare at the grade written across the top of my test in horror.

“95/100” is written next to the words “Great Job!” in the teacher’s handwriting.

The fact that someone thinks a 95% is a great job makes the entire situation that much harder on me.

There is no escaping my fate. I’ve tried keeping a bad test score from my parents once before. When they finally found out, the consequences had been even worse.

Ever since that time, they’ve demanded the syllabus from all of my teachers at the start of each semester. There is no escaping what I know is waiting for me at home.

The entire walk home I’m shaking. I wish I could just run away and become someone else’s daughter. But then, the moment I think something like that, I feel instantly guilty.

My parents pay a lot of money for my private education. I get to go to school with some of the richest families in New England.

Maybe they’re right.

Maybe I am just an ungrateful child.

I take the last few steps up to my house. Like pretty much everyone else I go to school with, I live in a gated neighborhood just outside of the city.

I wonder if people with less money harbor as many secrets as the wealthy. It seems as if big houses afford more closets for skeletons.

I have to put a lot of effort into pushing open one of the large oak front doors. I don't eat much these days. It makes some of the simplest tasks that much harder.

I had been looking forward to dinner this evening, but ever since I got that grade back, I knew I'd be going hungry.

My mother is standing in the front entrance, waiting for me to arrive. She looks beautiful with her blonde hair styled into perfect curls, wearing a soft blue, A-line dress that accentuates her perfect body. Some days I wonder if she really is the woman who gave birth to me. She and I look so different.

She puts a manicured hand out and I place the test into it. Her features are calm, almost emotionless as she looks at the grade on the front page.

"I'm disappointed," she says to me.

I don't say anything back. I learned a long time ago not to say anything back.

She turns around and walks further into the house. I push down every urge I have to run away and follow her instead. I shake more and more with each step. By the time we reach the basement steps, I'm not sure that I'll be able to descend them without losing my balance.

"Hurry up!" she barks at me when I take too long.

I do my best to go faster, losing my footing on the last few steps. I land on my knees, the cold concrete of the floor scraping against my pale skin.

I hiss in pain.

“Clumsy girl,” my mother says crossly.

She makes her way over to me and grabs me roughly by the elbow. “Not only are you stupid but you’re also a klutz. You’re an embarrassment, you know that?”

I can feel her fake nails digging into my skin. I don’t fight her, though. She all but drags me over to the back corner of the basement. It’s a place I know far too well.

I trip over myself as she forces me into the metal cage. It’s a large cage, but no cage is ever really large enough. Even with me still being shorter than a lot of the other girls at the school, I can’t move around freely in it.

She closes and locks the door and doesn’t say a word to me before turning to leave.

Time moves oddly in this place. In the past I’ve tried keeping track of how long I’ve been stuck inside this cage. It was always impossible.

Days can feel like minutes, and minutes can feel like hours.

True darkness swallows everything it touches.

My stomach growls and I lay on the floor, trying to transport myself somewhere else. Perhaps the only thing that’s ever grown in the darkness is someone’s imagination.

When I was very little, I used to cry and scream. I was afraid. I had hope then of being let out. But, over the years I

came to understand that hope is a delusion and my crying only makes the situation worse.

I started finding other ways to pass the time. Sleeping is far too difficult on the cold, cement floor. But, laying down and closing my eyes and imagining that I'm in a beautiful rainforest, or floating on a cloud gives me some comfort.

I used to dream about a handsome prince who might come to save me. That was until I got to high school and I became old enough to understand that I don't want to rely on anyone for anything.

After some amount of time, a bit of stray light from the basement door cuts through the darkness. I can hear my mother's voice from just above me as she descends the stairs.

There are two sets of footsteps this time. My father is with her.

"I don't know what to do with her, Jim," she laments. "You work so hard to support us both and she's so ungrateful. For all the money we spend on her education, she comes home with near failing grades. What else am I supposed to do?"

"I know, my love," he replies to my mother.

"And now I find out that she's been dating some boy at the school? No wonder her grades are so poor. He's called the house no less than three times since she's been home."

My stomach drops as I hear those words. In my worry over my test, I'd completely forgotten that I was supposed to meet Constantino tonight. He was throwing some special dinner and had specifically asked me to attend.

Dating was a strong word for what Constantino and I are. Everyone at the school says we are dating and he never contests it. He seems to really value competition and I am

currently ranked number one in my class as far as grades are concerned.

But, he and I have never even kissed.

“She’s such a problem child,” my mother says as she and my father stand in front of my cage.

I feel so weak. I haven’t eaten in over 12 hours. I know I should sit up when my parents approach, but I just don’t have the strength. I continue to lay on the floor with my eyes closed.

For the first time in a really long time, I feel like I might cry. Not only have I let down my parents, but I’ve also let down Constantino.

I can’t seem to do anything right.

Maybe when I’m let out this evening, I can call him and come up with some excuse for why I couldn’t make it. My mother never keeps me down here overnight.

As expected, she fishes the key out of her pocket and unlocks the door.

“Come on,” she says to me. “Your father is home. The least you could do is greet the man who gives you everything you own.”

I force myself up to a seated position and then crawl out of the cage. I find the strength somewhere to stand and address my father.

“Hello, sir,” I say to him, not looking him in the eye.

“Your mother tells me you’ve been misbehaving again,” he says. “And that some boy has been calling non stop since you’ve gotten home.”

I don't say anything. There's nothing that I can say to make this better. I just wait patiently for it to be over, like I always do.

"You see?" my mother scoffs. "She can't even respond to you when you speak to her. Honestly, Jim, I never understood why you made me keep her. When we found out it was a girl you should have let me go through with the abortion like I wanted to. She ruined my ability to give you a son and then goes around behaving like a spoiled brat. I honestly don't think she deserves to sleep in her room tonight."

My father sighs and shrugs his shoulders. "Whatever you think is best."

I look between my father and mother in horror. I've never been forced to sleep in the cage before. At the very least they always let me out before they go to bed.

My stomach pains are worse now, reminding me that if I go back into the cage, I won't be able to sneak something from the kitchen for dinner.

"No, you can't," I manage to stammer out.

"What was that?" my mother nearly spits out in anger.

I swallow thickly. "Please, I..." The words die on my lips.

"You horrible, ungrateful spoiled brat. After all we do for you, you have the audacity to sit there and argue with us?"

"No, I," I start to say. The whole situation feels so out of control now. My mother is reaching for me and my body is moving on instinct. I don't mean to dodge out of her grasp, but I do.

She loses her balance, her ankle twisting in her perfect stiletto heels and she falls to the floor, just at the entrance of

the cage.

I've never seen her this way before. She's kneeling on the ground. Her knee is scraped and her hands are pressed against the cold cement I know all too well. She's no longer this perfect, beautiful woman who can do no wrong. For the first time, I am seeing her for what she really is.

A cold, cruel, and heartless woman.

Something inside of me breaks. Before she can get up I press my foot onto her back and kick her inside of the cage.

My father yells her name, pushing me out of the way in his rush to get to her. He's crawling inside, trying to grab her.

"Jim," she's screaming out. He's holding her but the cage is too small for them to move around. My father struggles to help her and in doing so climbs further and further into the cage himself.

I stand there, watching the entire scene. That's when a small bit of light catches the door. I close my fingers around it and in one swift movement, I slam it shut on them.

They both turn around and look at me in horror. I pull the key from the lock quickly before they can grab at it.

"You wretched child!" my mother screams. "You let us out this instance!"

"No," I say to her.

"Raven," my father says in a stern voice. "Open this door right now!"

I take a step back.

At first their demands are forceful. With each outburst, I refuse and take another step away from the cage.

But then their tone softens. They start pleading with me.

By the time I'm at the top of the basement steps, they're begging me to let them out.

I take the final step onto the landing and close the door behind me.

Darkness swallows everything.

Even the desperate screams of parents.

CHAPTER SIX



Teddy

“You don’t understand,” she says.

“Then help me to,” I reply back desperately.

She’s quiet for what feels like an eternity. I don’t move away from her. It feels like I want her

to trust me more than I’ve wanted anything in my life.

“Okay,” she finally says.

“Okay?” I ask, not sure I believe what she’s saying.

“Okay,” she repeats.

She turns around and walks to the car. She stands at the door and looks at me.

I grab the trash and throw it into the bin next to us. I run to the car and unlock the door. Butterflies like I’ve never felt before are flapping around in my stomach.

I have absolutely no clue what is going on as I start up the engine. I just know that this girl has a secret and she’s about to share it with me.

She could have chosen any other schmuck to help her. Hell, she was looking for Consty when I ran into her. Instead,

she's choosing me.

"Where are we going?" I ask her as I pull away from the soccer field.

"I'll direct you," she says. Her voice is firmer and more confident now. In some ways she feels like a different person than the meek little girl at the gate from just a few hours ago.

We both stay quiet for the rest of the drive. She has me weave in and out of neighborhoods until we finally end up on a back road behind what appears to be a gated community.

"Park here," she says, pointing to the side of the road.

"What exactly are we doing?" I ask her. It's not that I'm nervous. Far from it. I'm more excited than I've ever been in my life. I'm just interested in what I'm about to walk into.

"You're about to see who I really am," she says.

"Are we breaking into someone's house?" I ask as I park the car.

She opens the door and looks up at the hill in front of us. I do the same, curious as to what we're about to do.

"Not really," she says. She starts climbing the dusty hill in front of us, holding onto tree branches as she goes. I watch her for about a minute before I start to follow. Now I understand why her feet are so cut up and her clothes are so filthy.

After about ten minutes we're scaling a fence and are in someone's backyard.

"Shouldn't we be doing this after dark?" I ask her, starting to wonder whether we might get caught.

"No need," she replies. "No one's home." She pauses. "Well, sort of."

At this point I'm completely consumed by this girl. She's got me on edge in a way I've never been before. And I've edged myself for a full blown hour before.

Raven approaches the back door and opens it. I'm standing next to her, but she doesn't take a step inside.

"What's the matter?" I ask her.

That's when I look down and see that she's trembling. I reach out for her hand and thread my fingers through hers.

"Is this your house?" I ask her.

"Yes," she says.

"Did something bad happen here?" I ask her.

"Yes," she says.

I squeeze her hand.

"I told you I would help you. I told you I wanted to know you. To understand you. I still mean that."

"We'll see," she says. "Constantino broke up with me. Maybe when you get to know me, you'll dump me too."

I squeeze her hand even harder. "He and I are not the same."

"We'll see," she says before taking a step inside.

I follow her, not letting go of her hand. She leads me through the richly decorated halls. It's obvious that she comes from wealth. Perhaps not the wealth of the ruling mob family in the area, but still a pretty good amount of money.

We weave through the long hallways. The house has a sad feeling to it. As we walk through, I notice that there are no pictures of her on the walls.

She says it's her home, but it's almost as if she doesn't belong here. There are a few pictures of an adult couple scattered about. The woman has bright blonde hair, but the man looks a bit more like Raven. Those must be her parents.

"How long have you lived here?" I ask her, wondering if perhaps they had just moved in and hadn't gotten to putting up her photos yet.

"All my life," she replies immediately.

I don't know what to say back to her. I don't think there's anything to say back to her. It feels like a sad existence here, even just at first glance.

She stops in front of what appears to be the door to the basement and takes a deep breath.

"You sure you don't want to turn back?" she asks me.

"I'm sure," I reply, giving another squeeze to her hand.

She opens the door and we begin to descend down the steps. There's a rancid, putrid stench that grows in strength with each step.

When we finally get to the bottom step the smell is so bad that I can barely breathe. I pull my t-shirt up over my nose and breathe through the material. I look over at Raven. Somehow she doesn't seem bothered.

We walk to the corner of the basement and Raven flips on the light.

I stare at the scene with a mix of horror and gruesome fascination.

The man and woman from the photos are barely recognizable. They're curled together in the corner of a small

metal cage. I'm no stranger to death, and I can tell that they've been dead for at least three days now.

Their bodies are bloated and have a greenish hue. It's obvious that this is where the smell is coming from.

"Are they your parents?" I ask her.

"They were my parents," she corrects.

"What happened to them?"

"Me," she says. "I happened to them."

"Come on," I say, taking her hand and pulling her back up the stairs. I switch off the light and close the door behind us. What's downstairs can wait for a few more minutes.

A girl like Raven doesn't just murder her parents.

I know there's more to the story and I need her to explain.

I sit her down at the dining room table. The room is lavish, with fancy printed silk on the wall and expensive china on display. It feels like a showroom, not a place where people would gather to eat and share stories.

"What happened, Raven?" I ask her.

She turns her head away from me, looking down and refusing to meet my gaze. The tiny bit of confidence that had surfaced just moments before is gone. She's back to the meek little runaway by the gate.

I reach my hand out and take hers in mine.

"Please," I say. "I'm not upset, and I'm not going to tell anyone. But, if I'm to properly help you, I need you to tell me what happened."

She closes her eyes and after a few moments of silence finally starts to talk.

“That’s not their cage down there,” she says. “It’s mine. It’s why I missed Constantino’s dinner. It’s why I look the way I do.”

“Look the way you do?” I ask.

“Thin, pale,” she says.

“Did they lock you up in that cage?” I ask her.

“All the time,” she says. “Mother told me I was an ungrateful child. That my grades weren’t good enough. That I ruined her body during pregnancy so she couldn’t give my father a boy. That my father works so hard to send me to a good school.”

For the first time all morning tears start to fall from her eyes.

“Maybe she was right. Maybe I am just an ungrateful, horrible child.”

I’m out of my seat in a moment. I kneel on the ground in front of her. My movement is enough to startle her so that she opens her eyes and looks at me.

“Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that,” I say. “They had no right to lock you in that cage. Not once and definitely not repeatedly. I know evil, Raven. I’ve seen bad, bad men. There’s no evil behind your eyes.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” she snuffles.

I stay right where I am in front of her. I don’t break my gaze. She’s the only thing in the world right now. There’s a deep burning desire inside of me to protect her. I can’t explain it or why it’s there.

It’s just that she seems so fragile and the world has clearly been so cruel to her. I can hardly bear it.

“That’s okay,” I reply. “Start from the beginning. The first time it happened. Keep going until today. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I think I was five,” she says. “When I first realized that my mom wasn’t like other moms. You start to see parents and their kids in school. How they interact.

“Their moms seemed to love them. Seemed to be proud of them.

“My mom was never that way with me. She only ever thought I was a bad child. That I was ungrateful. No matter how hard I tried to do what she wanted, it was never enough.

“That year, my parents adopted a dog. It was a little corgi. They bought that cage for him. They never let me play with him, though. No one played with him. They just put him out in the yard or in that cage. All he did was bark and bark so eventually they gave him to the pound.

“I didn’t want them to take him, though. Even though I couldn’t ever play with him, I still loved him. He was the only thing in this house that didn’t seem to hate me. He used to lick me through the cage and I would sit down next to him in the dark just to be with him.

“When they finally gave him up, I was so upset that I crawled into his cage just to try and connect with him. I guess I cried too much over it, because the first time my mother ever locked me in that cage was when they came home from the pound.

“I can’t remember too much about it. I was so young at the time. I just remember being so scared and so hungry. Time works differently in the dark. You never really know how long you’re down there for.

“Ever since that day she would lock me in that cage whenever she was upset with me. At first it wasn’t that often. Maybe once a month. But then, the older I got the more frequent it became. And the longer it became. I knew I was missing meals frequently. All the other kids started gaining muscle and shape and I started to thin out and become like I am now.

“The dog was the lucky one, honestly. He’d been given a chance at another family. A chance to find happiness.”

I can tell just getting through that much had taken an incredible emotional toll on her.

“Did you tell anyone what was happening?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “Who was there to tell? And who would believe that a prominent and respected family was locking their daughter up in a dog cage?”

“Surely your father wasn’t okay with this, was he?” I ask.

She looks pensive. “He never could stand up to my mother.”

“Are you okay to keep going?” I ask her. “We can take a break if you need to.”

She shakes her head. “It’s okay. I want to just be done with it.”

“Okay,” I say, giving her hand another squeeze.

“A week ago I came home from school with a bad test score.”

“When you say ‘bad,’ what do you mean?”

“Less than a 100,” she says.

“Okay,” I say, confirming my suspicions.

“She was very angry about it. I mean, she’s right, right? My father worked very hard to pay to put me into our school. I don’t have a scholarship or anything like that. For me to get less than perfect grades is disrespectful.”

“Let’s put a pin in that to unpack later,” I say to her. I get the feeling that trying to convince her that she’s not a bad child or responsible for her parents’ actions towards her is going to take legitimate and professional help. “Just know that you are not at fault here. I know it’s hard to believe, but just trust me on this one, okay?”

She nods her head, but I can tell she isn’t fully convinced.

“It all happened so fast,” she says. “My father came home and my mother let me out like she always does. I was so hungry. I hadn’t eaten for so long. I always managed to sneak something to eat when they’d gone to bed. They’d never kept me locked up overnight.”

“But this time they did?” I ask.

“This time they tried,” she says. “It’s all a blur. I think she was trying to put me back in the cage, but she fell. My father went to help her.”

Tears start falling rapidly from her eyes.

“It’s my fault,” she says. “I pushed them in there and locked the door.”

“You didn’t give them anything to eat or drink, did you?” I ask her.

“I wanted to,” she sobs. She puts her face in her hands, but the tears are flowing through her fingers. “But every time I went down there, they would scream at me or try and grab me. I was scared.”

“And then, two days ago I went downstairs and they were silent. I thought they were sleeping. I put some water and food there, but they never ate it. Because they weren’t sleeping.”

I can barely make out the last of her words through her sobs. I can’t stop myself. I stand up and pull her into me. I’m squeezing her tightly.

I want to take away the pain that this girl has gone through. She’s been literally traumatized since she was a small child, and none of it has been her fault.

Sometimes good children are born to bad parents.

And sometimes the best of us fall victim to the worst of us.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say against her dirty hair. “I’m going to help you.”

“Why?” she says against my shirt.

I don’t have an answer for her. I don’t fully understand why I want to help her or why I feel so drawn to her.

I just know that I do.

And that’s what I’m going to do.

“It doesn’t matter now,” I say to her. “What matters is that now, you’re safe and I’m not going to let anyone hurt you again.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Raven

“Come on,” he says to me, standing up and practically lifting me with him.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he starts leading me toward the back door.

“Somewhere safe where you can get cleaned up.”

“But what about my parents?” I ask him. “We can’t just leave them here like this.”

“I don’t want you to worry about any of that,” he says. “I’m going to take care of everything.”

He helps me scale the fence in our backyard and then stops, turning to look at me.

“Go on,” he says. “Climb on.” He’s crouched down, pointing at his back.

“What? Why?”

“Because I don’t want your feet getting any more cut up than they already are.”

“It’s okay,” I start to say, but before I can finish the sentence, he’s turned around and has his hands on my

shoulders.

“No, it’s not. None of this is okay. It’s not okay that you’ve been starved, tortured, or neglected. I know it’s going to be hard for you, but it’s okay to let someone do something nice for you. You don’t have to continue punishing yourself anymore.”

He doesn’t give me a second to process because he turns around and all but drapes me over his back. My will to fight, to insist that I’m a bad child, to refuse help snuffs out, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

His big hands grip my thighs and hold me tight. I can feel how strong he is beneath his shirt. His back muscles flex as he descends the slope back to the car with easy strides. He’s wearing some sort of musky cologne, and I allow myself to lean into him.

As he carries me down the hill, I feel safe. My world goes dark, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I fall into a blissful sleep.



Teddy

She’s asleep before I even reach the car. I carefully place her in the passenger seat; it’s obvious that she’s completely out.

I buckle her seatbelt and close the door softly. I look back up the hill. Her house sits at the top like some deranged castle in the

clouds. The beautiful white siding of the house gleams against the sunlight, a perfect prison for the darkness it's concealed for all these years.

As I climb into the car, I contemplate what to do with her. She's exhausted, malnourished, and filthy. I'd like to bring her home, but I can't risk that.

I don't know Father and Constantino's schedule. My brother just broke up with her. Me showing up with his ex-girlfriend would look pretty bad.

Besides, Constantino has never been one to put his neck on the line for someone else. I'm immensely relieved that I intercepted her at the gate. Had she asked him for help, it is very possible that she would be sitting in a police cell right now.

I scoff. And he'd probably tell the cops he was doing them a favor so he could cash in on it later for his own benefit.

No, I can't bring her home. But I can't just leave her in the car. That scene needs some serious work. As does the entire house. Not to mention potential street and other surveillance cameras. It's going to take me some time to get things sorted, and I'm going to need to rely on a few selected and trusted people for help.

I end up driving her to a hotel near the airport. Nothing fancy that would attract attention, one with doors that open right to the outside so that I don't have to walk her through a lobby. The place is quiet and clean. There aren't too many cars in the parking lot, but that makes sense. There's really nothing going on in the city right now.

The front desk is just a little room. I walk through the door to find a bright reception desk on one side and a table with

some coffee pots on the other.

“One room, please,” I say to the woman. I hand her my credit card and a matching fake ID that says my name is Thomas Jeffries and that I’m 25 years old.

We exchange pleasantries, and she hands me back a key card, none the wiser.

The room is on the second floor, and I park and make my way around the Mustang to where Raven is still sleeping. I lift her out of the car and bring her up the concrete steps. It’s far too easy to lift this girl. I do enough to maintain my physique, but I’m by no means an Arnold Wannabe. I should at least break a sweat after carrying an entire human being up a flight of stairs.

It really shows me just how bad things have been for her. I can feel her body beneath the loose clothing she has on. She’s far too skinny, even by today’s standards.

I open the door to the hotel room. The hotel is more like little efficiencies than standard rooms. There’s a sitting room with a television. Further back is a bathroom and off to the left is a bedroom. I walk straight to the bedroom and place her gently on the bed. I take my time to look through the rooms, pull closed the drapes, and lock the door. When I’m satisfied that everything is safe for her, I make my way back to the bedroom.

She’s awake and staring up at the ceiling.

“Hey,” I say to her.

“Hey,” she replies back. “Where are we?”

“We’re at a hotel just outside the city,” I reply.

“Why?”

“I needed you to be able to rest and stay safe while I take care of things back at your house.”

She rolls over onto her side, moving away from me. “I’m sorry I dragged you into all of this,” she says. I can hear the sadness drip from each of her words.

I lay down on the bed next to her and look up at the ceiling.

“I’m the youngest of four brothers,” I say to her. “You wouldn’t know this because you’re an only child, but it can be sort of tough being the youngest child sometimes. You’re never really old enough to be doing what everyone else is doing, but you always want to be included.

“I remember when I was five, Primo and Consty decided that they were going to go fishing. I didn’t really care about fishing and still don’t to this day. What I cared about was being included,” I explain.

“My mother told me that I was too young to go, but I didn’t care. I knew the car they were going to be driven in and I snuck into the trunk an hour before they were scheduled to leave.

“After about three hours in the trunk of a car that hadn’t gone anywhere, I realized that something wasn’t right.

“Turns out their fishing trip had gotten canceled.”

I chuckle to myself as I remember the story.

She turns over and looks at me with bloodshot eyes. “I don’t understand,” she says.

“My point is,” I say, turning over to look at her. “You didn’t drag me into anything. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve had a way of inserting myself into things.

“Charlie was pretty mad when he smelled what I did to the trunk of his car, though.”

I laugh at her expression.

“Don’t worry. I promise not to pee in the trunk of your car.”

She can’t stop the giggle that escapes her mouth. If I wasn’t worried about breaking her, I would roll on top of her and kiss her.

Instead, I roll off the bed and jump to my feet. She watches me as she brushes away the last of the tears from her eyes.

“I want you to rest here,” I say.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“Back to the house,” I reply.

“I should go with you,” she says. “I should help.”

“Absolutely not,” I say to her. “I want you to stay here. I want you to rest. Here,” I say, tossing her my credit card. “I want you to order food.

“Eat. Watch television. Do things a normal teenage girl is supposed to do.”

“How can I do any of that while you’re cleaning up my mess?” she protests. She tries to get off the bed, but I’m on her in a second. My legs are on either side of her, and I’m careful not to put any weight on her frail frame.

“It’s not your mess,” I correct. “It’s their own damn mess. And you can do all those things by just doing them. Don’t think about it too much. Try and put it behind you.”

“I’m not sure that I can,” she admits, the will to protest leaving her body. I can feel her relax into the sheets and force

myself to climb off of her.

“Just try,” I say. “All any of us can ever do is try.”

I make my way to the door, and she follows me. I toss her the remote to the television.

“Do you know how to work one of these?” I jest.

The corners of her mouth twitch up into another soft smile. “Yes,” she says, a little bit of sass breaking through her shy exterior.

“Cool,” I say. I open the door but quickly turn back around. “And whatever you do, do not leave the room,” I say to her. “It’s very important. Don’t answer the door for anyone. Not even for the food delivery. Have them leave it outside. I have my own key so no one should be knocking.”

She doesn’t answer me, so I close the door and walk over to her. I stand in front of her and place my hands on her shoulders.

“Please tell me you understand this.”

“I do,” she says.

“And that you won’t try and run away,” I reiterate.

“Okay.”

I hold up my pinky finger.

“Pinky promise?”

“You don’t really think that means anything, do you?”

“I think it means everything,” I say back to her, not putting my finger down.

“Okay,” she says, looping her own pinky with mine.

“Seal it with a kiss,” I reply back to her.

Those beautiful hazel eyes of hers open in shock. It's obvious she doesn't understand what I mean. I bring my face forward and press my lips to my thumb. I hold myself there and wait for her to do the same.

She watches me closely and then tries it, bringing her face and those beautiful lips of hers just inches from my own.

I press my forehead to hers and breathe in her scent for just a few seconds longer than I probably should. She smells like the first blooms of Spring.

"A pinky promise is for a lifetime," I say to her. "A sealed one is eternity."

"I understand," she whispers.

"Okay," I say to her, forcing myself to move back. I raise my voice back to its normal level. "Then chill out and I'll be back in a few hours. Lock the door when I close it."

"Okay," she whispers, and I force myself to leave.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Teddy

“I need a favor,” I say into the phone as I pull my car out of the hotel parking lot. I toss the thing onto the passenger seat in speaker mode so that I can shift gears.

“You realize that you owe me favors, not the other way around, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m the boss’s kid,” I retort in a lighthearted tone. “Doesn’t that mean you have to do what I say?”

“Not in the slightest,” Charlie replies back with a genuine chuckle. “You’re still a shit kid in my eyes.”

“Well, this shit kid is trying to do right by someone and could use your help.”

“Ah, fuck,” Charlie says. “Why you gotta go and pull at the heartstrings?”

“Everyone’s got a weakness,” I say. “Just so happens that that’s yours. Well, that and salami.”

“Pick up salami on your way to pick me up and you gotta deal.”

I laugh. “Fine. I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

“That’s not enough time for you to go to the butcher’s shop,” Charlie notes. “I don’t want no Market Basket salami.”

“Stop getting your panties in a wad,” I say to him. “I’ll get you your meat.”

“The good meat.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I reply. “Just wait at the gate for me. Be there soon.”

I press “Play” on the mixed tape that’s sitting in the Mustang’s cassette player. I’m sort of a pop music junkie. Mostly ’80s and ’90s before stuff got weird and sad in the 2000s. A little Madonna, maybe some A-ha, definitely some Spice Girls. Fuck me, they were hot. Still are, really.

“One Week” by Barenaked Ladies starts playing, and I jam out on the drive back. Music helps me clear my mind, and I definitely need a fucking mind wipe after the morning I’ve had.

I know I’m going to need it even more after what Charlie and I are about to do.

“Yo,” I say to him as I pull up to the gate.

“Salami,” he says, holding out his hand.

I hold up a finger, indicating he needs to wait. Then I reach into the glove compartment and pretend to search for something. When he finally gets impatient, I pull my hand out and give him the middle finger.

“You little fucker,” he laughs as he gets in the car. Charlie’s a big dude, and his weight certainly tests the suspension.

I match his laughter as he closes the door.

“You feel how much the car is shaking? You don’t need salami, Charlie. You need a treadmill.”

“I’m big boned,” he says, and we both laugh.

I pull out of the driveway and make my way back towards Raven’s house.

“So, what the fuck am I about to walk into?” Charlie asks.

“It’s a doozy,” I say to him.

“It always is with you,” he replies.

“This one actually isn’t my fault,” I say. “And it’s not her fault, either.”

“Her, who?” Charlie asks. “Her, the girl from this morning?”

“Yeah,” I reply.

“She was looking for your brother.”

“And it’s a good thing she didn’t find him.”

“Where is she now?” Charlie asks.

“At a hotel outside the city,” I reply.

“And why’s that?”

“Because you and I are going to be doing a little clean-up job at her house.”

“Awe, fuck me, Teddy, really?”

“Yes,” I say. “And, please, don’t offer that if you don’t really mean it. You know how in love with you I already am. My heart,” I put my hand to my chest and feign sadness. “Can’t take it.”

“You’re a bleeding heart, that’s for sure,” Charlie replies.

“No better than you,” I point out.

Charlie doesn't say anything, but he nods his head like he agrees.

I don't bother parking the Mustang out behind the house. There's no way that Charlie is going to be able to haul his fat ass up the hill and over their six-foot privacy fence. Besides, Charlie and I will take care of any security footage that needs to be deleted with the local police department.

We both get out of the car. Charlie looks up at the white mansion with its large marble columns climbing up to the sky. He lets out a whistle.

“Dark secrets hide behind white walls,” he says.

“Who said that?”

“What do you mean, ‘Who said that?’ I just said that.”

“No,” I roll my eyes at him. “I mean like who said that originally?”

“What? Me. Just now.”

I give him an exasperated look. “You're telling me you just came up with that. That's some sage shit.”

“Some what shit?”

“Sage,” I say. “You know, like wise and stuff.”

“Pretty sure sage is like a spice. Or a witchy thing.”

“Shit, really? I thought it meant smart.”

“Now I'm not so sure,” Charlie says.

“Alright well, come on, loser,” I say, making my way towards the front door. “We can look it up later.”

I flip out my switchblade and press myself against the front door. There's a shaded front porch, and I take a moment to note whether there are any security cameras. The place looks clean, which is good. I pop the lock on the door, and we're inside.

The smell hits us

immediately, and I realize that I hadn't fully closed the basement door.

"Awe, fuck," Charlie says.

"Did you think I was joking about why we were here?" I ask him as I bring my T-shirt up over my face again.

He does the same.

"No. I just hoped that you were."

I lead him downstairs to the basement, and we both just stand in front of the bodies in the cage.

"Did they deserve it?" he asks me.

"They deserved worse," I say.

"Alright, then," Charlie replies. "You ever clean up this sort of thing before?"

I shake my head. "No."

"You're gonna listen and do as I say," he replies. "Ask questions, but don't argue."

"Okay."

He flips out his phone and dials a number. "Hey. Bring around the van to my location."

I follow him back upstairs while we wait for whatever this van is. He tosses me a pair of gloves from his back pocket.

“Put these on,” he says as I look down at the cracked leather. He does the same with another pair.

Charlie and I both take the opportunity to walk the house to pass the time. There’s definitely no love in the place. Some houses feel like houses, and some houses feel like homes. This place felt more like a model house than a place where three people lived.

I make my way upstairs and down the hall to finally find what must be Raven’s room. The room is pretty barren. A small writing desk is off to one side with a few papers on it. A twin-sized bed with a dull-looking comforter is tucked away in the corner.

I enter the room and open the closet. A few outfits are up on hangers, and a small duffle bag is on the floor. I grab the bag and stuff as many clothes as I can into it.

Chances are that neither of us will be coming back here. I want her to have as many of her things as possible. I scour the room for any more belongings, but the place is pretty empty.

Before I exit the room, I decide to pull the one small drawer to the writing desk. Tucked all the way in the back is a little pink journal. Its color is almost blinding compared to the bleakness of the room.

I grab it, but I don’t stuff it into the bag. Instead, I stuff it into my pocket.

“Teddy!” I hear Charlie’s voice from near the front door. I hike the duffle bag over my shoulder and make my way back downstairs.

“Yeah?” I ask him. I notice there’s a carpet cleaning van in the driveway. It’s been backed up so that it’s as close to the

house as possible. The doors are open, and two guys in navy blue coveralls are climbing out.

“Neighbors,” he says, pointing to the woman across the street not so inconspicuously checking her mailbox.

“I’ll handle it,” I reply, taking off the leather gloves and stashing them in my pocket. I take note of the company name on the van as I walk by and wave to the woman. “Hello!” I call out to her.

She acts like she’s surprised at first, turning around as if she was just seeing the van for the first time.

“Oh,” she fakes. “Hello.”

I meet her in the middle of the cul-de-sac. I reach my hand out to shake hers. “Steven,” I say, introducing myself.

“Penny,” she replies.

“Nice to meet you, Penny. You wouldn’t happen to need carpet cleaning services at your house, would you?”

“Oh, um, I think we’re all set.”

“Are you sure? You don’t sound sure,” I push. “But what I can assure you of is that nobody in town is going to beat our prices or our quality. You’ve got my word on that. That’s the Steven Steaming guarantee.”

“You own the company?” she asks. “But, you look so young.”

“Not young, ma’am,” I reply. “Young at heart. It’s amazing what a vegan diet, eight hours of sleep a night, and two liters of water per day can do for your body. Believe it or not, I’m nearly 40!”

Her eyes widen, and I can see her trying to make sense of what I'm saying. I don't give her any time to come up for air. I want the conversation to be uncomfortable for her so that she backs off.

"But, back to your home and the dirt that I know is trapped underneath your carpets. If you agree to a cleaning right now, I'll give you 20% off."

"I need to think about it," she says, taking a step back.

"Are you sure, ma'am?" I say, taking a step toward her. "I can only offer this discount because we're already in the area."

"I'm sorry," she says. "But, I'd need to check with my husband first."

I love a good "check with my husband" excuse from a woman. I wonder how many times she's said that while out shopping.

"Maybe you can leave me with your card?"

"No cards, ma'am. I work on little to no overhead. That's why we can keep prices so low."

"Okay, well, I'll just remember the name then," she says, taking another step back.

This time I don't follow. I just put my hand up as if to wave at her. "Steven's Steaming!" I say.

"Yes, right," she says and almost bolts back inside her house.

I make my way back over to Charlie, who is standing there chuckling softly. "You've always had a way with people," he says.

"You just have to know what buttons to push and when."

“Not everyone knows how to do that.”

I shrug. “It’s not hard. You just have to be patient, watch, and listen.”

Charlie nods.

“I think I’m going to go see what the guys do,” I say to him.

He gives me a confused look.

“That’s not really the sort of work the boss’s kid should be doing.”

I shrug. “As you said before, I’m just the boss’s kid. That doesn’t afford me any special treatment.”

I make my way to the basement, pulling my leather gloves back on as I descend. By the time I’m downstairs, they’ve already got both bodies out of the cage and wrapped in plastic wrap.

“What’s the wrap for?” I ask one guy. He’s gruff looking, with a fair bit of stubble for a beard and hard, dark eyes. Even through the coveralls, I can tell he’s got a good deal of muscle on him.

“Seals in gases, keeps out bugs,” he replies.

I nod in understanding and then stand back and watch what the guys are doing. They’re methodical in the way they clean up the scene. The cage gets disassembled so that it can easily be brought up to the van. The bodies are put into black bags and then rolled into utility tubes so it’s not obvious when they’re brought upstairs.

I’m pretty mesmerized by the way they go about the task. Each action has a purpose. Their movements are planned and careful, to ensure that nothing extra needs to be cleaned up.

Within an hour, the basement looks ready to film a Lysol commercial. It certainly didn't look like two people were left to die in the corner. The bodies and the deconstructed cage are packed away in the van, and the house is ready to close up.

Charlie pats the van after closing the back door, and it rolls out of the driveway.

“Where are they going now?” I ask.

“To get rid of things,” he says.

“How?”

He gives me the side eye, as if trying to decide whether it's really worth his time to explain things to me.

“Let's talk in the car.”

We climb in, and I pull out of the neighborhood. My cassette player turns on automatically, and “Waterfalls” by TLC starts to play.

“Okay, so?” I ask. “What do the guys do with the bodies now?”

“One of the things your father did right when he got into this business was to diversify,” Charlie starts to explain. “While a good deal of businesses are purely for laundering money, a few of them are a tad more valuable.

“One such business is a funeral home, which has a crematory. It's a pretty convenient thing when you're in the business of painting houses.”

“Painting houses?” I ask.

Charlie rolls his eyes. “When you shoot someone, what happens to the blood?”

I shrug. “I dunno. I guess it sprays out sometimes.”

“And where does it land?”

“I feel like you want me to say on the walls.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Hence, we paint houses.”

“I dunno,” I say. “Feels like a stretch.”

Charlie gives me a look.

“Right,” I say. “Okay, so what do they do with the ashes?”

“Your father also has a concrete business.”

I grimace. That was a little dark to think about, even for the Mob. But I suppose mixing ashes in with concrete was a pretty good way of ensuring they never turn up where you didn't want them.

“Well, thanks for explaining,” I say to Charlie. “And for helping out with everything. I'll take you back to the house now.”

“We need to make one stop, first,” he says.

“Okay, where's that?”

“The damn butcher. You're going to get me that salami.”

CHAPTER NINE



Raven

It's an odd thing to hang out in a hotel room while a guy you barely know cleans up the fact that you murdered both of your parents.

I alternate between being completely overwhelmed with sadness and feeling strangely calm about the entire thing. On the one hand, I'm wracked with guilt over the fact that my parents are dead. The idea that I will never see them again isn't something I'm having an easy time processing. While they were never as loving as other parents seemed, they were still my parents.

On the other hand, a more logical voice is kicking in and telling me that I don't have to feel sad or sorry for myself. It tells me that I didn't actually kill my parents. They were the ones to fall into the cage. All I did was fail to give them food or water.

"And close the door," a little voice in the back of my head whispers to me.

I flip on the television to try and drown it out, but a tear leaks from my eye and down my cheek. It's getting pretty late into the evening. I had a few fitful naps over the course of the

day, but I really hate the feeling of being alone in a strange place.

I flip through the channels, not really committing to anything.

The front door rattles and my heart starts to race. The door opens and I breathe a sigh of relief as I see Teddy on the other side.

He looks bone tired, but as he turns to see me, he smiles. Seeing him look at me like that spreads a feeling of calm through my heart that I'm not used to.

"Hiya," he says. He shuts the door behind him and it's then that I see he's holding a pizza box and a duffle bag under his arm. "I brought us dinner."

"I ate something earlier," I say bashfully. I feel guilty for how much money this man is spending on me.

"Yes, that's called lunch," he says. "Believe it or not, people actually eat more than once per day." He looks me up and down. "And, as nice as you look now, you certainly could eat more."

"What are you talking about?" I say quietly, looking down at my feet. "I don't look nice."

He drops the pizza onto the coffee table and takes three large steps over to me. He holds me by the shoulders and then he's looking into my eyes again.

"I don't want to hear you talk down to yourself," he says.

I can't meet his gaze. It's too intense. He's too sure of himself and I feel like crumbling under the pressure.

"It's not talking down to myself if it's true," I reply. "It's just stating the facts."

He guides me gently into the bathroom and stands me in front of the full length mirror.

“Let me tell you the facts as far as I see them,” he says.

He crouches down next to me and I can feel my face blush all the way to my toes.

He places a single finger on one of my calves. “I see shapely calves,” before sliding his hand up my leg. “And toned thighs.”

He stands up a little taller now. His finger slides up, just barely touching me.

“A trim waist.”

A little more and his hand stops just next to my breasts. “A shapely figure,” he says.

His finger starts to touch the exposed skin on my neck and I begin to tremble under his touch.

“A beautiful jawline,” he says before moving his finger to my face.

“Pouty lips.”

More movement and more trembling.

“The cutest button nose, and-”

He stops and looks into my eyes, standing tall and facing me now.

“Beautiful eyes I willingly get lost in.”

He holds my gaze and I stare into his crystal blue eyes. I don't quite understand what's happening between us. It doesn't make sense to me that a boy like Teddy would have any real interest in me, especially after what he had to spend the entire day doing.

And yet, still, he is here.

Standing in front of me.

Looking into my eyes.

Acting like he wants to kiss me.

“All of that,” he says, his voice just a whisper. “Looks very nice to me.”

His breath smells like spearmint gum and I lean in just a little closer to inhale. He’s so close to me now. Our breaths mingle and all either of us needs to do is just move that last inch.

Except, he doesn’t do that. Instead, he pulls back and clears his throat.

“The pizza is probably getting cold.”

“Oh,” I reply. I instantly clam up, feeling somehow rejected, even though I’m not sure that there was even anything being offered. “Right.”

I follow him back into the living room and he takes a heavy seat on the couch and flips on the television. “Did you find anything to watch?” he asks me.

I shake my head and sit on the very edge of the sofa next to him. He reaches forward and grabs a slice of pizza. I’m fixated on the way he moves and the way his muscles flex beneath his shirt. I close my eyes and think back to when he lifted me down the hill on his back. It may have been the first time in my entire life that I felt safe.

I can’t help but crave that feeling again.

“Here,” he says, picking up a slice. “Open.”

“What?” I reply, leaning back a little from him.

He's holding the slice up and there's a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "You're not eating, so I'm gonna feed it to you."

"I'll eat," I say, trying to take the slice from him.

"Nope. I've made up my mind," he says. "And, once my mind's made up, there's absolutely no turning back. Now, say 'ah.'"

I open my mouth up just the tiniest bit.

"No way," he says. "Wider."

I open my mouth all the way up and as soon as I do, he shoves as much as the pizza into my mouth as he possibly can. He starts to laugh and after I'm over the initial shock, I begin to laugh along with him.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask through the food. I try and cover my mouth but there's no helping it. I'm sure my face is a mess.

He shrugs. "I like watching you laugh."

I shake my head, not fully understanding his words. "Why? That makes no sense."

He just looks at me with a small smile. "It does to me." The moment passes between us as we hold one another's gaze again. Just like before he breaks it and flips the television to another channel.

"Oh!" he exclaims. "I Love Lucy!" He turns to me expectantly. "Tell me you've seen this show?"

I shake my head. "No. Never."

"Never even heard of it?"

I shake my head again.

"Okay. I Love Lucy reruns and pizza it is," he says to me.

We spend the entire evening together, neither of us mentioning what I'd shown him earlier in the day or what he had spent his entire afternoon doing. By the time we finally get to the third episode and the pizza is done, I'm laying on the floor on my stomach, using my elbows to prop up my head, and not even thinking about my dead parents.

We're watching an episode about Lucy going deep sea fishing. She starts struggling with the pole in her unique fashion. I'm laughing out loud at the situation. For the first time in my life, I feel safe, full, and carefree.

I turn back around to look at Teddy and find him completely asleep on the edge of the couch.

I sit up and grab the remote off the coffee table to switch off the television. I make my way over to him quietly, but he cracks an eye open anyway.

"I wasn't sleeping," he says. "I was just resting my eyes."

"I don't think you should drive," I say to him. "I think you're too tired."

"Are you okay if I sleep here?"

I nod my head. "Yes."

"Cool," he says, closing his eyes again. "I'll sleep here."

"No," I say and he opens his eyes.

"No?"

I hesitate, not sure how to ask him what I really want. "Will you?" I start to say.

"Are you sure you're okay with me sleeping next to you?" he asks, correctly guessing what it is that I want from him.

"Yes," I say. "I think it may help with the nightmares."

“Okay,” he says, getting up off the couch. “Go on and get in bed. There’s clean clothes for you in the bag over there,” he says, pointing to the front door. “I’m just going to grab a shower and then I’ll be right in.”

“Okay,” I say, grabbing the bag. The door to the bathroom closes and I hear the shower turn on. I walk into the bedroom and turn to look at myself in the mirror on the wall.

I still see the same sad, skinny girl that I saw before, but for the first time, I start to notice the little things that Teddy pointed out to me.

As I change clothes and climb into bed, I close my eyes and try to stop my tears from messing up the bedsheets. It’s really unfair to him that I’m starting to feel things for him.

Deep down I know that he deserves more than I could ever give to him.

CHAPTER TEN



Teddy

I close the door to the bathroom and lean against the sink heavily. I look up at myself in the mirror and take a deep breath.

I almost kissed the girl.

Of all the shitty things a guy like me could do to a girl, it would be to take advantage of her when she was clearly emotionally unstable. Today was not the day to go kissing Raven.

Even though I want to.

So fucking bad.

It's honestly unfair for her to be so damn cute and also so unaware of that fact. Her charm is the equivalent of a toddler running around with a very sharp sword. It's fucking dangerous.

And here my dumb ass is, willingly stepping right into her line of sight. If anything, I'm encouraging the behavior. But, I can't help myself around her.

I move to turn on the shower, hoping that the water will help wash away not only the day's events, but also this unhealthy fascination I am starting to have for the girl.

Deep down, I know she deserves so much better than a guy like me. What am I ever going to be able to give her? A life in the Mafia? Constantly followed around by bodyguards? Not able to go into certain areas of the city because she might be kidnapped and used for ransom?

Nah. I can't do that to her.

I want to.

But I can't.

Shouldn't.

The hot water scalds me as I step in, but that's good. I need something to bring me back to the present. Especially considering that I am about to go and lay down next to her in that big king bed one room over.

I also know it's a bad idea to agree to her request. I hadn't even let her make the request. Chances are if I had just shut my big mouth, she wouldn't have been able to ask me to stay, and I would have been able to make it out of here for the night with my sanity intact.

Instead, I jumped at the chance to lay down next to her.

I'm the fucking Katniss Everdeen of this romance novel.

I might as well have just shouted "I VOLUNTEER AS TRIBUTE" the moment she started to ask her question.

It's not like I'm desperate for pussy. I don't do the whole "girlfriend" thing the way Constantino does. But, that doesn't mean that I don't do really well for myself. It's amazing how often a guy can get laid when he goes to enough parties.

But, that's not even what I want from Raven.

Hell, if she told me we would never be intimate ever, I would still want to marry her.

Wait, what? Who said anything about marriage?

And why am I using a word as cringey as intimate?

Maybe all the steam from the shower was starting to confuse my already Raven-addled brain.

I switch off the water and grab a towel from the rack. I run it over my hair and my face. As I move it further down my body, I realize that I'm standing at full mast. Literally the idea of marrying this girl and *not* having sex is getting me hard.

Fuck, I am so fucking screwed.

I take a deep breath and wrap the towel around my waist. I look around the bathroom and that's when I realize that while I'd brought clean clothes for Raven, I'd not brought anything back for myself.

I look at my clothes in a heap in the corner of the bathroom and grimace. The idea of putting them back on is almost nauseating.

"Fuck," I moan as I drag my fingers down my face.

As if behaving myself around her isn't going to be hard enough.

No pun intended.

There's no helping it. I open the door to the bathroom and make my way into the bedroom. She's already in bed and I can see instantly that she's been crying. Even in just this short amount of time, she can't hide things from me.

"You okay?" I ask her as I come around to her side of the bed. I sit down next to her, using my fingers to brush away

some of the tears that have fallen and wet her cheeks.

“Yeah,” she says. “Thanks to you.”

Awe, fuck. There she goes again. Looking at me with those big eyes. Telling me things that make me feel fucking special. And she’s completely oblivious to all of it.

She looks down at my towel and then up at me. The cutest blush creeps up onto her cheeks.

“Sorry,” I say, wincing a little. “I forgot to bring a change of clothes with me. If you want, I can leave.”

Her hand reaches out suddenly, grasping at my arm. “No!” she says and I can hear the panic in her voice. “Please, don’t go.”

I place my hand on top of hers and squeeze. My heart squeezes at the same time. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

She relaxes and gives me a small smile. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“What for?” I ask her.

“For everything. For what I’ve put you through. For the fact that you happened to come across me this morning. If it weren’t for the fact that,” she starts to say, but I place a finger to her lips.

“Shh. It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize. Not to me. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

She closes her eyes and tears start to fall again. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“Keep those eyes closed,” I say to her as I get up. I make my way around to the other side of the bed and drop my towel

before climbing in.

I move over to her as her eyes are still closed. On instinct, I reach out and brush away some more tears that fell. She blinks her eyes open and looks at me.

Considering that I'm literally naked in the bed with her, I really need to control myself. She'd totally noticed if I went mission ready right next to her. Pretty sure the sheets would even lift, too.

I force myself to look away and instead wrap my arm around her body. I look up at the ceiling fan as it makes its slow, circular path.

"I think you should tell me what you're feeling," I say to her. "It's not good to keep things bottled up. Speaking from experience."

"Feeling?" she asks, as if she doesn't understand what that means.

It makes sense.

A girl forced into continuously horrible situations may learn to repress her feelings, lest confront the heinous nature of her circumstances.

I can tell that she is going to need a lot of time to build up her confidence.

"Yeah," I say in an encouraging tone. "Just go ahead and tell me the thoughts that are running through your mind. They don't need to make sense, even. Just start talking. Let it all out. I want to listen."

She takes a deep breath and then, to my surprise, starts talking.

“I wasn’t sure how to feel today. This morning I felt really panicked. Then you drove up in your car and just fixed everything. More than anything I feel grateful to you. If you hadn’t been there, I don’t know what would have happened. I would like to think Constantino would have helped me but-”

I interrupt her.

“He wouldn’t have,” I say. I hate putting my brother down like this, but I need to be truthful with her. “He doesn’t go out of his way to help others, only himself. I’m surprised you didn’t already know that about him. You two were dating, after all.”

“I guess you could call it that,” she says. “But, it was more for appearances than anything else.”

“Yeah, that sort of makes sense with my brother. Well, half-brother.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize you were half-brothers.”

“Dad got around,” I say with a laugh. “You said you were an only child?”

“Yeah,” she says. “And my parents were really angry about that.”

“Why?”

She lets out a big sigh. “They really wanted a boy.”

“So, why not just try for another? How is that your fault?”

“My mother had complications during childbirth. Apparently, the doctors told her that as a result of delivering me she couldn’t have any more children.”

“How is that your fault?” I wonder out loud.

“Because, if it weren’t for me, maybe she could have had more children. Maybe she would have had a boy.”

“Again, not seeing how that’s your fault. It’s not like you had any choice in the matter. Each and every one of us is literally dragged into this world kicking and screaming.”

“They always said it was my fault,” she whispers softly.

“Yeah, sounds like they said a lot of shit that wasn’t true.”

“They’re my parents. I’m supposed to respect them and what they say.”

“Nah,” I reply. “Parents are just people. They can be good or they can be shitty. Just because they’re your parents doesn’t mean you should automatically respect what they say.”

She lays there quietly for a moment, as if contemplating what I’m saying. Finally, she pipes up again.

“Can you tell me what happened to them?”

“You sure you want to know?” I ask.

She nods her head softly before closing her eyes. “If I don’t know, I’ll always wonder.”

“They’ve been cremated,” I say. “We cleaned up the scene. There’s nothing left that would ever indicate what happened. No cage. No nothing.”

“What happens to their ashes?”

“One of the guys buried them beneath a tree somewhere deep in the woods,” I lie. I don’t think it’s all that important for her to know that they were actually going to be mixed into concrete. I secretly hoped that their batch of concrete is used to make bathrooms, so that people can shit on them for the rest of eternity.

But again, she doesn't need to know any of this.

"I'm sorry," she says after a moment, her eyes still closed.

"Stop saying that," I reply.

"Sorry," she repeats.

I turn over in bed and jostle her a bit. Her eyes fly open and she looks at me.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You're the victim in all of this. Don't you understand that?"

"Even if that's true," she says. "That doesn't mean that I'm automatically worthy of being helped."

I look at her in disbelief.

"Everyone is worthy of being helped."

"I'm not so sure that's true," she replies.

"Well, it doesn't matter," I say. "What matters is that *you're* worthy of being helped."

She opens her mouth to protest.

"Stop arguing," I say immediately before she can get another word out. "You're never going to convince me otherwise."

She curls onto her side and I can feel the bed shake a little with her sobs. They're silent, but they still wrack her body.

"Hey, hey," I say, curling my body around hers. I stroke her hair and wipe the tears away as they fall. "It's going to be okay," I say to her. "You're safe now."

She turns back around and looks into my eyes. She starts doing that thing again where she looks at me like she really

understands me and it makes me want to kiss her all over again.

“You’ve had a long day,” I say instead. “You should get some sleep.”

“What if I don’t want to sleep?” she asks.

She turns all the way around now and her hand presses against my chest. It starts to meander its way lower and lower until finally there’s no hiding the fact that I’m hard for her because her delicate fingers are wrapped around my cock.

She starts to stroke me and my eyes close involuntarily at how good it feels. I know if I let her continue I’m going to come and fast. I also know that letting her do this right now would probably be one of the shittier things I’ve ever done in my life and I really, really should make her stop.

Just one more stroke.

Okay, two.

Three?

“Fuck,” I say, reaching down for her hand and stopping her right before I blow my load all over the sheets.

“Am I doing it wrong?” she asks, her anxiety dripping from her words.

I’m breathing heavily, trying to clear the near-orgasm induced fog I’m in.

“No, no, it’s not that, sweets,” I say to her. “I just think we’ll regret it.”

I open my eyes and look at her. Another tear travels across her cheek and I brush it away.

“It’s not you, I promise. It would just be a really shitty thing for me to take advantage of you in such a vulnerable moment.”

“I was the one taking the advantage,” she whispers.

I think about it for a second.

“That is true,” I reason. “But, I’m not sure everyone else would see it that way.”

“Are you going to tell everyone else?” She looks panicked.

“Oh, no. No!” I say, realizing I am completely botching this whole conversation. “Your secret is safe,” I say. “All of your secrets.”

“Okay.”

We’re quiet for a few minutes and I almost manage to drift off to sleep, but she says something muffled against my chest.

“What was that?” I ask her.

She pulls away just enough so that I can make out the words.

“I’m not sure I like the nickname,” she says in barely more than a whisper.

“What nickname?”

“You called me ‘sweets.’”

“Oh,” I reply. “Sorry. It’s just a thing I say to girls sometimes.”

“I don’t want to just be another girl,” she whispers and my heart does a weird, clenched thing.

“What is it you want, Raven?”

“To feel special to somebody.”

“You’re special to me,” I can’t help but say back to her.

“Then I don’t want to be just another ‘sweets,’” she replies, closing her eyes.

I dare to roll on top of her and she opens her eyes. I’m looking at her, brushing my fingers along her beautiful black hair.

“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing.”

“Edgar Allen Poe,” she says.

I nod my head.

“You’re right,” I say to her. “You’re not just another ‘sweets.’” I trail my fingers along her midnight hair again. “You are my one and only darkness.”

And then, I’m kissing her.



When light breaks the next morning, she’s gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



PRESENT DAY

Teddy

“Raven?”

She knees me in the balls and tries to make a run for it.

“Holy mother,” I curse as I push through the pain to grab at her ankles as she tries to get up.

“I don’t think so. You’re not getting away that easy.”

We’re wrestling on the hard stone floor and it’s such a contrast to the soft bed we laid in the last time I ever saw her. I want to ask her a million questions.

Why did she leave?

Where did she go?

Where has she been?

Why did she leave?

Oh, I said that last one already. Well, it’s because I really wanted to know the answer to that one in particular.

Toby (*is that his name? I honestly cannot remember after all of the backstory that we just went through*) rushes over from the other side of the church to help.

The two of us manage to get control of her. All three of us are panting and I’m keeled over, trying to determine whether my balls are currently still lodged in my throat.

“Okay,” I say through labored breaths. “Let’s all just take a breather.”

“You murdered Father Murphy,” she says.

Toby’s got his arms around her and he shakes her a little.

“Shut up!” he says.

I frown.

“That’s no way to speak to a lady, Toby,” I say to him.

“Who the fuck is Toby?” Toby asks.

I point at him. “You! You’re Toby!”

“Are you shitting me?” he says. “I told you, I’m Tony!”

“Ah, fuck,” I say. “Well, look, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that you shouldn’t speak to a lady that way. Now,” I say as I turn my attention back to Raven. “To address your last statement. Incorrect. Neither myself nor,” I pause and give him a smile and a nod, “Tony, murdered your Father Murphy.”

“Well, someone murdered him,” she says.

“Now, that is a correct statement,” I say back to her. “But, it wasn’t us.”

“We should just kill her,” Tony says, pulling out his gun and holding it to her head. “She’s obviously seen too much and can’t keep her mouth shut.”

The situation escalates immediately. The moment I see Tony pull his gun on her, I’m pulling my gun and aiming at him.

Raven starts reciting the Lord’s Prayer, and I’m about to blow his fucking brains out.

“The fuck you doing?” he asks me as he realizes I have my gun trained right on him.

“Lower it slowly,” I say to him. “I am not fucking around on this one.”

He rolls his eyes and takes his gun down from her head.

She’s on the part about daily carbs—err bread—and I take a step to close the distance between us.

“Hey,” I say to her quietly. “Hey,” I repeat again. Her words begin to slow and she opens her eyes before she finishes the prayer. “There she is,” I say to her.

“Teddy.”

Tears are welling up in those hazel pools of hers and even after all these years I want to do everything I can to dry them up.

I know that sounded weird, but my brain’s a total mess right now.

“It’s okay,” I say to her. “No one’s going to kill you.”

“What *are* we going to do with her, then?” Tony asks. “You can’t leave her here.”

“Tito,” I say in an annoyed voice. “Could you please?”

“My name—” he starts to protest and I snap. I can’t get the image of him pushing his gun into Raven’s beautiful dark hair out of my head. I decide he needs to learn some manners.

“YOUR NAME IS WHATEVER THE FUCK I SAY IT IS,” I yell at him, pressing my gun right into his temple.

“Okay,” he says, throwing his hands up.

“I’m just fucking with you man,” I say with a laugh, lowering my gun. “But seriously, stop being such a douche.”

We both turn at the sound of footsteps down the hall.

“Awe, fuck,” I curse as I realize he let go of Raven and she’s run off again.

Another 90 seconds of chasing her through the back hallways of the cathedral and we’re back to the same situation again. Except, this time, I make sure that I’m the one to hold onto her.

It’d been 13 years since I’d last touched her, and the moment I do, I realize just how much I’ve been craving the feeling of her body pressed up against mine. I lean my head down and that beautiful, dark hair of hers smells like crisp, night air.

“Okay, so if you’re not going to kill her, then what?” Tony asks.

“If today is the day that our Lord calls me back, then so be it.”

Raven can’t see me, but I give her a look full of disdain. I don’t like the idea that she’s so ready to die.

“No one’s calling anyone to go anywhere,” I say, shaking her slightly.

“So, then what?” Tony asks.

I grimace as I try and think of a solution.

He’s right.

I cannot leave her here. I haven’t seen her in over a decade, but something tells me this version of Raven wouldn’t keep quiet about the murder of a priest, even if she found out that he was running guns and drugs for a rival mob.

Even if I could blackmail her into silence, there’s no way that I ever would. I’ve kept her secret safe with me for more

than a decade. I could never betray her that way, even if she did run away from me all those years ago.

My eyes sweep her up and down and I take stock of her outfit. She's wearing a white dress made out of thick material and her hair is cut much shorter than I remembered it.

I put two and two together.

She's a nun.

I announce the only possible solution to this situation.

"She's coming with us."

"What?!" both her and Tony say at the same time.

"I don't need arguments," I say. "I need action. Let's go." She turns her head up to look at me. I can see the disbelief in her pretty eyes.

"You can't be serious," Tony mutters.

I force myself to break away from her gaze and stare at him. "What did I say? Get going."

All three of us shuffle to the other side of the sanctuary. Tony picks up the body bag that contains Father Murphy. Raven says a prayer and makes the Sign of the Cross.

"Alright, alright," I say as all four of us pile into the Escalade. I sit in the back with Raven and instruct Tony to turn the child locks on.

"Please don't make me bind your hands," I say to her. "I'd rather not."

She shakes her head. "I've accepted my fate."

"And what fate would that be?" I ask.

Tony chimes in with a bad joke. “Sitting with you in the backseat,” he laughs to himself.

“Drive the damn car, Tony,” I say to him.

“There’s obviously a reason as to why our Father has chosen for me to be here in this very moment. I will not fight His Will,” she says reverently.

“Okay,” I say, trying my best not to make a face at her words. “You and I can unpack all of that later on. Tony,” I say up to the front of the car.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Drop us off at the mansion. I trust you can handle taking the body to the crematory?”

“Sure thing,” he says.

The rest of the drive transpires in relative silence. Not even Father Murphy can think of anything to say.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Teddy

I usher her into the mansion. I never really thought I would be back to living here full-time. However, first our father got arrested and sentenced to legitimate jail time. Then, after arguing over it for what felt like an eternity, Primo and Giovanni ended up dumping the leadership of the family onto me so they could go off and get married.

Which was an idiotic thing to do, considering that I've never involved myself in the family business. But, pussy makes you do crazy things.

I mean, love makes you do crazy things.

Being the head of the New England Crime Syndicate came with a special level of "Someone Might Try and Murder Me in my Home." My normal spot was definitely not set up for that, so the only other place to go was the mansion. Primo and Giovanni had since moved out of it, chasing their respective lives and women.

And Consty? Well, his whereabouts were a little more fluid since he killed dear old Charlie. I'd been encouraged by a few of the more senior members of the leadership to move

somewhere more secure. They claimed that the mansion wasn't as defensible as it needed to be given the current situation.

The current situation, of course, being increasing violence among mobs and our family's position in question.

Anyway, back to me escorting Raven into the mansion. My hand is on the small of her back, leading her forward through the large oak door. My fingers ache to touch more of her, hating the fact that she's wearing a thick dress made out of thicker fabric.

"You'll be safe here," I say to her as we walk through the big and mostly empty hallways.

As we walk through the lofty corridors, I realize that the mansion feels a lot like the cathedral. The hallways are mostly empty. They're dark. There's nothing to really bring warmth to the place.

Our footsteps echo against the cold floor. It feels like there's a mile between us as I walk next to her. I hate the feeling.

She doesn't respond, and I note her silence.

We walk past the kitchen, and I stop. The kitchen is probably my favorite room in the entire mansion. There's an oversized refrigerator and freezer on the far wall. Shiny stainless steel appliances brighten the space, and a large island with a wooden butcher's block sits in the middle.

There are always plenty of chairs around the island, but I'm usually the only one here eating. My heart does a weird skip in my chest cavity about the thought of her and me sharing a meal together.

"Are you hungry?"

“No,” she says, but I don’t believe her. Either that or I am unable to face her rejection of an idea I haven’t yet voiced.

“Are you sure?” I goad.

“Yes,” she replies, her voice even. She’s not even looking up at me.

I may have only spent about 24 hours with her as teenagers, but in that short amount of time, I really felt like I got to know her. It’s what let me know that she’s not happy with her current situation, even if she wants to pretend like it’s God’s Plan (an actual plan, not the Drake song).

I decide that it’s best to just let her adjust before I start trying to make her feel better. I walk her down the rest of the hallway and into a guestroom. It just so happens to be the guestroom that is right next to my own bedroom, but that’s just a weird coincidence.

I watch her look around the room. I guarantee that it’s better appointed than wherever she was sleeping in the cathedral.

There’s a plush red carpet that covers the floor and brings warmth to the otherwise cold mansion. A king bed is on the far wall. There’s a media center with a television opposite the bed, and dressers and chairs scattered about the room.

I know that there’s an adjoining bathroom through a side door tucked around the corner that has a jacuzzi tub, shower, and every grooming product one can think of, let alone need.

“Whatever you want, please just let me or one of the staff members know,” I say to her. “I’ll have someone visit you tomorrow to help size you for a new wardrobe.”

She doesn’t turn around to face me. She just stares straight ahead. “No need. What I have on me will suffice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say to her. “You’re going to be staying here for some time. You’re going to need more than one...” I hesitate, looking at her dress, “outfit.”

“How long do you intend to keep me here?” she asks.

I sigh.

I hate to admit it, but I’d dreamed about seeing Raven again. She was one of those girls who never really left my mind. Whenever I dated, nothing seemed quite right with the girl. My therapist told me it was because none of the girls were Raven.

He also told me that I’d built her up in my mind to be something she probably wasn’t, but honestly, what does he know? He’s not even a real doctor.

“As long as necessary to make sure you’re not in harm’s way,” I finally respond.

“It’s interesting that you don’t think keeping me locked up as your prisoner is a form of harm,” she remarks. She says it in a completely flat tone, as if accusing me of harming her isn’t the most painful thing for me to hear.

“Maybe you can’t see it now,” I say to her. “But, I’m only doing this so that I can keep you safe.”

I’m about to say something else, but she cuts me off.

“Or, are you doing it to keep me?”

Her questions are too pointed and I’m way too emotional to try and think through this situation right now.

“You’re tired. I’m tired. We should both get some rest. Goodnight, Raven,” I say, sadness coating my voice.

“You should know,” she says as I am about to close her bedroom door behind me. “That I don’t go by that name anymore.”

“Oh?” I ask. “Then what name do you go by?”

“Sister Neriah.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Light of the Lord,” she replies.

“In that case, goodnight, Darkness,” I say and close the door behind me, locking her inside.



I sit in the kitchen eating whatever I can find in the fridge. It probably belongs to someone working at the mansion, but I don’t really care.

My brother, Primo, and the firstborn among the four of us, walks into the kitchen. He sits down opposite me and steeps his fingers.

When Giovanni all but flung the reins of the family onto me, Primo promised he would act as an advisor for me, but only until the time his wife, Isabella, gives birth. When the baby comes, he said he’s out of the business for good.

I always wished us brothers were better friends. The older three were always at one another’s throats growing up, which made it hard. All of my brothers look like they are related. Just like Primo, they have dark, almost black, hair, Roman-looking

nose, and stern features. Primo's eyes are so brown they almost look black in some lights.

He can be a scary motherfucker when he wants to be.

I, on the other hand, did not pop out the same way. Photographic evidence of my youth suggests that I used to have bright blond hair, but it has dinged somewhat to the more dirty blond situation I have going on now. I still have bright blue eyes, though, which is always a winner with women.

"I heard there's a visitor in the mansion," he says.

I'm currently stuffing my face with a burger that one of the guards was clearly saving for tomorrow. I get why they'd want to save it. It's really good.

I shrug as I chew my food, not opening my mouth to respond.

"Teddy," he says in a chastising tone.

"Yes," I finally respond, crumbs falling out of my mouth.

"Care to tell me a little bit more about this new addition?"

Before I can respond, Carmine walks into the kitchen.

"Hey!" I say to him with my mouth open. "I didn't know you were stopping by!"

"I came to visit my father," he says somberly.

Carmine and I have been friends since we were kids. He was Charlie's kid and my age, and since Charlie and I were so close, it made sense that me and him developed a friendship. He looks a lot like a thinned-down version of his dad, too.

I always sort of wondered why Carmine and I got along so well when I didn't have the best of relationships with my brothers. He and I are pretty opposite in terms of personalities.

He's pretty uptight, even more so since his dad died, but I get that.

It really sucks that Constantino murdered Charlie. I would have really loved to talk to him right now. When Charlie died, I also felt like I lost a father.

Charlie loved the gardens on this property. When he died, Primo made sure to bury him there out of respect. We all had a special place in our hearts for Charlie.

My relationship with Carmine hasn't been quite the same since that day, either. I'm hoping that once he has enough time to grieve, he'll be back to his old self.

"Her name is Raven Kirkland, but she currently goes by the name Sister Neriah," he says, ignoring my question. "She disappeared during her junior year of high school under auspicious circumstances. Her parents also went missing, and there was speculation that the entire family was murdered.

"She popped up first in Vegas, Nevada, then California, and various other locations along the West Coast about three years later and started getting in trouble with the law. She has a rap sheet that's about as long as your hair, Teddy."

I grumble and look at him.

"My hair's not that long."

Carmine doesn't acknowledge my comment. He just keeps going with his dossier on the girl.

"Following a somewhat longer jail sentence for a breaking and entering, Ms. Kirkland seems to have renounced her criminal ways and joined a church out West. Thereafter, she traveled back to the East Coast, where she joined the Carmelite Nuns of Boston. She has been a Sister within the convent ever since."

I finish my hamburger just in time to lean back and start clapping my hands.

Primo glares at me.

“What?” I asked. “It was impressive. I couldn’t even memorize the first five Presidents, and our Carmine here has managed to memorize and recite the entire life story of a woman he doesn’t even know!”

Carmine gives me a look and shakes his head. “When in charge, one should always know as much as possible about the people around them. Overlooking a single detail could, at times, be a fatal mistake.”

I reach forward for the slice of cake I’d found next to the burger and start eating. I give Carmine a wide grin. “Sorry I failed the quiz, Professor. Surely there’s something I can do to make it up to you?” I waggle my eyebrows at him, and Carmine sighs.

“This isn’t a game, Teddy,” he says. “You need to step up to your current position.”

I give him a salute, and he exits the kitchen without saying anything else.

“When did he become such a-”

“A twat?” I finish for Primo.

He looks up, and the smallest of smiles forms on his lips.

“Yeah, that.”

I shrug. “I mean, he’s always been a little cunt, but I think Charlie’s death hit him really hard.”

“I don’t think you should let him talk to you that way,” Primo says. “You are supposed to be the head of the family. If

anyone else sees ... “

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “I’ve always been this way, Primo,” I say. “I don’t think people are going to think anything of it.”

“I disagree,” he says, “but all that aside, you still brought a stranger into the mansion. At a time when loyalties are already precarious.”

“She’s not a stranger,” I say immediately. “I’ve known her since high school.”

“Not according to Carmine.”

“Oh, so now you take his side,” I scoff lightheartedly.

“I’m just saying, you know the Old Ways. You should have called Council. She should have been approved before being brought here. Even Giovanni had to do that with Lulu.”

“Well,” I say, pushing myself back from the table. “I don’t know what you would have me do now. Because, there’s really no other option.”

“Why is she here, Teddy?” Primo asks.

I’ve never been one to try and hide the truth. “Because, she witnessed Father Murphy’s murder. Or, at least, she witnessed me and ... fuck, I still cannot remember his name.” I snap my fingers. “Doesn’t matter. She witnessed me cleaning it up.”

Primo gives me a terse stare.

“You know the rules for that.”

“No one’s to touch her,” I immediately say, matching his tone.

“Teddy, are you seriously trying to-”

I cut him off.

“Yes.”

“You know you only get to claim one person as untouchable. One person for your entire life. Most use it for a wife or a child. You’re going to use it on this girl?”

“Yes,” I say to him.

“Why?”

It’s a valid question. I understand why he’s asking it. Decades ago a former boss’s wife was murdered after she’d witnessed something she shouldn’t have seen. People always thought that the family members of those who were high up were safe, but that just isn’t the case.

In fact, it’s usually the loved ones who are the most at risk. They are the easiest targets and the best sources of blackmail.

Ever since then, a new rule was voted in.

Every person in the family, no matter what rank, gets to designate one person as “Untouchable.” The designation lasts for that person’s natural life, and it doesn’t matter what they’ve seen; within the family, they cannot be killed for it.

Primo is right. Most people use it for their spouses or their children.

I have neither.

I just have Raven, and I’m not going to lose her so quickly after getting her back. Witnessing the murder of a rival mob’s gun-running operation would certainly be grounds for a hit. Especially right now, because tensions are already high as the families in the city test the limits of their positions. A lot of loyalties are being called into question.

“Okay,” Primo says. “But, she’ll need to take the oath. Seems like it might conflict with another oath she’s already

taken.”

He stands and makes his way towards the door to the kitchen.

“Tomorrow,” he says over his shoulder. “And, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



EIGHT YEARS AGO

Raven

Ropes of cum land on my face and, of course, some of it goes into my eye.

“Hey!” I exclaim in irritation. I would look at him, but my eye is basically sealed shut. Probably

for the best, anyway. I don’t even remember this guy’s name, but I do remember that he wasn’t auditioning for any modeling gigs anytime soon.

He just grunts before I hear him zip up his pants. I bristle as I feel my way over to the motel bathroom, closing the door behind me. I want to cry as I wipe his disgusting cum off my face, except it’s been a long time since I was able to feel anything other than guilt, really.

I look at myself in the mirror as my vision finally clears. My eyes are completely bloodshot, the dirt-stained clothing I’m wearing is falling off my malnourished frame, and my hair is so knotted it likely needs to be shaved off at this point.

It’s been five years since I ran away from Teddy after he helped me cover up my parents’ deaths and I’ve been running ever since.

Even still, I can’t seem to escape them.

Every time I close my eyes, I see them.

It makes sense, though. I should be punished for what I did. I literally got away with murder, but the mark it’s placed on my heart is something that never seems to fade.

A banging on the door startles me out of my thoughts.

“Hey!” the guy on the other side yells. “Time for you to leave!”

I throw the cloth into the sink and nearly rip the door off its hinges with how hard I yank on it.

“Leave?” I exclaim. “You told me that I could sleep here! That’s the only reason that I’m even here!”

I really need this guy to not throw me out. I don’t care what he does to me. I’ve already fucked him and let him blow his load on me. I just really, really need to not spend another night on the streets.

At least this way I choose who’s violating me. I also know that this guy, as gross as he is, isn’t going to murder me.

When you sleep on the streets, you really don’t know who might come up behind you or what they might do to you. I’d willingly take another load to the face from this guy than spend another night on the streets; that’s about how bad my situation is at the moment.

“I’m not sleeping next to you so you can rob me or worse in the night,” he says. “Leave.”

There’s no argument in his voice.

“This is absolute bullshit!” I nearly scream. I make a big scene huffing around the motel room, acting like I’m gathering my things. In reality I’m hoping that he will turn his eyes away from me for just one minute so that I can steal his wallet.

“If you’re looking for this,” he says, holding up the exact thing I’m looking for, “better luck next time.”

I make a gargled scream before grabbing an oversized hoodie, which is the only thing that I currently own other than

the clothes on my back and walk out the door.

“Fucking bastard,” I mutter, pulling the hoodie on.

I’ve got literally no money to my name and nowhere to go. Mother Nature doesn’t seem to care that I’m down on my luck, either, because within ten minutes of me wandering down some random street, it starts to rain.

It starts out as a sprinkle and then within minutes it’s a downpour. The streetlights flicker on as I desperately search for somewhere to take shelter.

I’m in some rundown, right-off-the-highway town in the middle of nowhere, California. The sidewalks where I’m walking are deserted, which makes sense because most people have actual homes or at least a place to take shelter from rainstorms.

The streetlight just ahead of me flickers on and illuminates what’s behind it. It’s a large, but rather rundown, looking church. I walk up to it and put my hand on one of the big wrought-iron handles. The doors look like they had a lot of graffiti on them at one time that someone’s tried to scrub off.

My heart pounds as I pull on the handle. If this doesn’t work, I really will be sleeping on the streets tonight.

The big door starts to budge and the faintest bit of something I haven’t felt in years flits through my soul.

Hope.

I tug harder, and the door finally gives. I almost go tumbling inside at how fast it swings open, but I manage to catch myself. I push the door closed to keep the rain out and try and shake the water from my clothing.

I turn around to look at my surroundings. The place is dark, with just a few lit sconces on the stone walls and a number of flickering candles at the altar straight in front of me. I keep to the shadows, making my way around the edge of the sanctuary. The pews look dusty, as if no one really comes to sit in the church these days.

The whole place has a somewhat sad feel to it, despite it being my only hope for refuge.

I figure that whoever is in charge of this place won't be too happy with me sleeping over, so I try to find a place to stash myself for the night.

In the middle of the far right wall is a confessional. It's perfect, because I seriously doubt that anyone is going to be showing up to confess their sins at three in the morning. Even if they are, it's even less likely for a priest to be there to hear them.

I try to take silent steps to the little booth, grabbing a pillow off one of the pews on my way. My heart is beating really fast as I pull the door to the little wooden box open. I don't know who or what I'm going to find inside.

It's empty, thank goodness.

As I close myself in, my heart starts to race again. The darkness starts to consume me and my breathing starts to increase. I realize I haven't been locked in a small cage like this since ...

I try to take a deep breath and tell myself to calm down.

I am not in a cage.

My parents are dead.

I can get out of this box anytime I want.

I need somewhere safe to sleep tonight and this is the only place.

I say these things to myself over and over again, like a mantra, until I fall into an uneasy sleep, huddled in the corner with the pillow tucked under my head.



Light from somewhere above me is what finally wakes me up in the morning. I rub my eyes groggily and look around. I'm still in the confessional and it was the first real night of sleep I've had in a while.

My stomach growls and I start to wonder whether this church has a kitchen somewhere. I'd gladly eat communion bread and grape juice if it got something into my stomach.

Movement next to me startles me. My hand is on the door to the booth in a flash, but the calming voice makes me pause.

"There's no need to be afraid, child. I mean you no harm." It's a deep, male voice, but its tone is very kind.

"I, I should go," I stammer, starting to push open the door again.

"Go where?" the voice from the other side of the divider asks.

I hesitate.

He's right.

I have nowhere to go.

"I ... I don't know," I finally admit.

“If you have nowhere to go, then you’re in no rush,” he says. “So, why not sit for a minute and talk to me? I could use the company.”

“Okay,” I say quietly, letting go of the handle and moving back into the corner to hug the seat cushion.

“I appreciate it,” said the voice on the other side. “Believe it or not, I actually have very few visitors these days. It’s nice to have someone to talk to.”

“Yeah,” I reply in nothing more than a whisper.

“I’m not from here originally,” the man says. “I was actually born to a rather wealthy family and grew up just outside of San Diego. They were pretty disappointed when I became a priest, but there was never any questioning the calling for me.”

He pauses for a second when I don’t respond.

“Do you have any family nearby?” he asks.

“I don’t have any family,” I say bluntly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he says. “My blood relatives are somewhat close, but I made a new family within the church. Your family doesn’t always mean those you’re born into.”

I don’t respond. I don’t even know what to say. If this man knew what I did to my “family,” he would surely banish me from his church.

And he would be right to do so.

Even still, he seems like a nice man. And I’ve been carrying the burden of my guilt for so long. Sometimes I wished that I could tell just one other person what I did.

“You did tell one other person,” a voice inside of me chides. *“And you left him behind.”*

“Are you from this area?” he asks me.

“No,” I say. “I’m from the East coast.”

“That’s a far way to travel,” he remarks.

I shrug. “I hitchhiked my way across.”

“A little dangerous these days, but I also think there is good in each of us.”

I shrug again. There’s no way this man knows, but I’ve seen the true bad in people. For the most part, even when you desperately try to look for the good, it’s the bad that you get.

“Seems more like when you give men certain things without a fight, they’re less likely to hurt you.” I rub a couple of burns on my right arm out of habit. They’re all healed now, but it took ages for the stinging to go away. “For the most part,” I qualify.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he says to me.

“What’s done is done.”

“I suppose. I guess the question is whether you want it to continue that way.”

“Who would ever want their life to continue this way?” I suddenly blurt out.

“What is it you want for yourself?” he asks me.

I’m quiet for a long time, but he doesn’t push me to answer.

What *do* I even want for myself?

It takes me a while, but I finally have an answer.

“A warm place to sleep, clothes that are clean, and ... “

Do I dare admit this to him?

“Forgiveness,” I finally say.

“All you need to do to earn forgiveness is to truly seek it,” he says to me. “Our Lord is merciful.”

“Not even God could forgive me for what I’ve done,” I say. I don’t want to say these things to him, but I feel helpless to stop myself. I feel as if I’m a river that has been dammed up for years and someone is finally starting to break through the stone.

“God forgives all sins for those who truly ask for forgiveness,” he says.

I hesitate.

“How do I truly ask?” I finally say.

“Have you ever heard the story about the prodigal son?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head.

“A wealthy man had two sons. One of the sons was impatient and asked his father for his share of his inheritance. His father, being generous as he was, granted this request. This son took his money and traveled, spending his wealth on luxury and frivolity. However, the money did not last and he soon found himself destitute and living in poverty.

“While working in terrible conditions, he decided to return home and beg his father to allow him to work for him. At the very least, he figured, he would not have to work in such deplorable conditions.

“So, this long lost son made his way home and upon seeing him return, his father rushed to greet him. He was

overjoyed that his son had returned. His son tried to ask his father for forgiveness for his sins and request a job working as a servant in his fields, but his father did not even let him finish. Instead he dressed him in the finest of robes and threw a lavish party to celebrate his return.”

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“The father always had forgiveness in his heart. He always hoped for his son to return to him. But, the forgiveness never came until the son had changed his disposition.

“In the same way God always has forgiveness in his heart. He is ready and wanting to give it to us. However, you must be of the right mind to ask for it and be ready to receive it.”

“I don’t see how anyone could forgive what I’ve done,” I say, my words full of remorse.

“Because you are still like the prodigal son. You have not yet changed your outlook. So long as you hold onto this evil, forgiveness is not possible. The Gospel of Mark says that if you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

“I still don’t understand,” I say with a sigh.

“It seems to me like you’ve not yet forgiven yourself for your actions,” he says. “So then, forgiveness is not yet available to you.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling deflated.

“But, this should not be cause for despair. Remember, forgiveness is always available to you. Through penance, you will surely come to find it.”

“Can you help me?” I ask, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears that threaten to leak out.

“Yes,” he says immediately.

“How?”

“Let’s start with confessing your sins,” he says.

I take a deep breath and begin to tell this stranger everything that happened.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Now

Raven

I wake up the next morning in this strange place. As I lay awake looking at the ceiling above me, I begin to wonder why God had me dream of my introduction to the church.

I'd never really had a dream about that first day I spent with Father Patrick. I'd spent the better part of an entire day sitting in that confessional with him. I worked my way backward, confessing first the crimes that I had committed most recently.

It wasn't until the late afternoon that I was able to finally bring myself to admit what happened to me in high school. He didn't judge me, though. He listened calmly as I told him how I had murdered my parents and how a boy I barely knew helped me cover it up.

His response to that situation always shocked me.

He never took fault with my actions. He did, however, fault Teddy for his role. It was a drastic shift from how I had always seen Teddy.

Until that moment, Teddy had always been my savior.

Father Patrick showed me that Teddy had actually been my Satan.

He showed me that I had sought to make reparations for what I'd done from the beginning. That I had never asked for

the crime to be covered up. That I would have willingly gone to prison and paid the price for my sins.

It was Teddy who took over the situation and cleaned up the scene, guaranteeing that I would never be caught.

It was because of him that I was putting myself through daily hell trying to find some form of absolution for my most heinous of sins.

Yet, Father Patrick showed me that I would never find it through punishing myself. I could only find the absolution I so desperately sought through the opposite. I needed to do good in the world, rather than harm to myself.

Why, after all these years, did the Lord see fit to remind me of these teachings?

I climb out of bed. My knees touch the soft carpet. It is another reminder that the luxuries around me were bought with the blood of innocents. Teddy and his family are members of a prolific crime family.

Just as they killed Father Murphy, they surely killed others. This carpet and the other extravagances around me were bought with sin.

Before I can even bow my head to ask for clarity on why the Lord gave me such a dream, the answer comes to me.

It is a reminder of who Teddy is.

He is not my Savior.

Jesus is my Savior.

Teddy is my Satan.

My heart squeezes in pain as I say this to myself.

At the time Father Patrick spoke to me, it had been years since I'd seen Teddy. Perhaps the Lord understood that I would struggle with this.

Teddy doesn't look like a devil. He certainly doesn't act like one. If anything, seeing him again made me start to question everything that Father Patrick told me. When Teddy is around me my body responds to him. More than just my body, it's as if my heart reaches out for him, too.

When he held me in the cathedral as I tried to escape my body ached for him. His touch felt too good against my skin. I find myself craving it again, even now.

Was Father Patrick right? Could he really be some demon sent to help me cover up my sin? Some evil force to lure me away from the light?

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"He is not my Savior," I say aloud. "Jesus is my Savior."

"Who's not your Savior?"

His voice behind me causes me to jump. I fall from my knees onto the floor. My eyes open and he's rushing forward, clearly distraught over the fact that he's startled me.

"Are you okay?" he asks, concern dripping from his voice, causing me, once again, to question everything that has grounded me for the past eight years.

I back away from him as if he is a leper.

"Don't touch me!" I nearly shout, knowing that I can't handle the feeling of his hands on me again.

He puts his hands up and backs away slowly.

"Okay," he says. "No problem."

I swallow thickly and stand, brushing imaginary dust off my dress. “Thank you,” I say.

He just nods his head, looking like a puppy dog that just got hit with a newspaper.

Temptation.

That is what Teddy is.

He tempted me into sin ten years ago. I know he will do it again if I don't steel myself against him.

I am just months away from the end of my “formation,” as it's called. I was hoping to take my final and lifelong vows in the coming months. However, there were some questions about whether I was ready and whether I had truly discerned what God was asking of me in this life.

Perhaps this is God's final test to see whether I am truly ready.

“Is there something I can do for you?” I ask him, my tone somewhat curt.

He lifts his arm up and scratches the back of his neck. He's wearing a black t-shirt that hugs his frame a little too tight. It lets me see how his muscles flex in the low glow of the morning light.

I remember the feeling of those muscles flexing against me as he carried me down that hill, as he held me in that bed...

My mouth goes dry as I once again try to remind myself that Teddy is temptation.

A temptation I am clearly having trouble resisting.

“There's going to be a ceremony tonight,” Teddy says to me.

“A ceremony?” I ask, clearing my throat. “And what, exactly, will be expected of me?”

Teddy holds up his hands. “No, nothing that would be expected of you,” he says to me. “You simply need to be there. It’s actually something I’m doing.”

“Oh,” I say. “Well, I don’t feel as if I have much choice in anything right now.”

Teddy twists his lips. He’s obviously uncomfortable with what I’ve just said.

“I don’t want you to feel like a prisoner,” he says to me.

“Is that not what I am?”

“Of course not!” he replies, before looking a tad bit crestfallen. “I mean, you can’t leave, but it’s only for your own safety.”

“Is that so true?” I ask. “Or, is it because I’ve seen something I’m not supposed to see? So, it’s actually for *your* safety.”

“Raven,” he says.

“Neriah,” I correct.

He clears his throat, but doesn’t say the name.

“Someone will come to fetch you at nine o’clock.”

I give him a hard stare back. “I’ll be here, then. Waiting to be fetched.”

He stands there looking at me. Looking sad. Looking hurt. Looking like the Teddy that I regretted leaving for so many years.

But the snake tricked Eve into biting the apple.

And Teddy tricked me into doing the same.

I stand firm and resist the urge to apologize to him or to run to him or to do any of the things I *desperately want* to do with him.

He is temptation.

He turns and leaves.

“Resist the Devil and he will flee from you,” I say to myself.



There's a knock on my door at nine on the dot.

“Come in,” I say. There's no use in trying to be difficult in this situation. While it doesn't seem like my life is in danger, I know that can change in an instant. I also don't know how far Teddy's reach actually extends these days. It's quite possible that he cannot protect me if someone higher up decides I need to be silenced.

I try and remind myself of the resolve I had when I was first taken here. I felt assured that my Lord would protect me. But now, inside these stone walls, so far from His light, I feel as if my faith is being tested.

I feel weaker than I once did.

The door opens and the person I see on the other side surprises me. It's a priest, or at least a man who is dressed as a priest. It's hard to know what is real and what is fake within these walls.

“Sister Neriah?” he asks me.

“Yes?” I reply.

“My name is Father James and I’ll be escorting you to the ceremony this evening.”

I stand and brush the wrinkles of my gown away. I’ve been provided with a few fancy outfits while the rest of my wardrobe is apparently “in the works,” but I’ve chosen not to change from my own attire.

I take slow, measured steps towards him.

“Thank you,” I say to him as I reach the threshold to my room. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he responds.

“How did you find yourself here? Working for men such as these?”

“All of us need the Lord,” he replies. “Perhaps men such as these need Him more than those who have already found Him. Surely you know of the prodigal son?”

“Yes, very well,” I reply.

“I have seen it as my calling to assist such runaways.”

“Do you not feel in danger?”

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil.”

I nod my head, understanding what he is telling me. I can tell that his faith is strong.

A pang of jealousy hits me, which surprises me. Jealousy is not something I am used to feeling these days.

“This way,” he says and turns down one of the dark corridors.

“May I ask what this ceremony is?” I say as I follow him.

“I wish I could give you more information,” he says. “Teddy only asked that I come and get you. He thought knowing that another member of the church was here might give you some comfort.”

“He is right in that,” I sigh, not knowing how to feel about Teddy’s kind gesture.

“I sense that you are distraught,” Father James says. “I live on the other side of the mansion,” he says. “Next to the chapel.”

“There’s a chapel?” I wonder.

“Yes,” he says. “There’s a small chapel on the property. It’s been vacant for a number of years, however with your arrival, he specifically asked that I return and revive it. I arrived this morning. Has no one given you a tour?”

I shake my head. “No.” I reflect on my behavior in the last 24 hours. “Although, I am not sure that is their failing. It is probably my own.”

“I am sure you could ask Teddy to show you around. I know the circumstances under which you arrived are not ideal. However, I will say that he has been a bit different since your advent.”

“Different?” I find myself asking. “Different how?”

Father James stops in front of two large oak doors. He turns and smiles at me. “A conversation for another time, Sister,” he replies. “For now, I must leave you. May the Lord be with you,” he says to me.

“And also with you,” I reply as he turns and walks away.

I turn around to follow him with my eyes, but I cannot wonder at our brief conversation and its meaning for too long. The doors in front of me open and I’m beckoned inside.

The room is dark, lit only by a multitude of candles on an altar at the front. There’s a large, circular table in the center of the room. In the darkness I cannot make out everyone’s faces, but every seat at the table is filled.

I can, however, make out one face.

Teddy is sitting at the head of the table, looking far more somber than I’ve ever seen him.

The man who opened one of the big oak doors instructs me to come further into the room. The doors close behind me and I feel the darkness of the space creep further into my soul.

As my eyes adjust, I can start to make out the faces of the men at the table. The one opposite Teddy stands.

I’m so interested in trying to figure out what is going on, that I don’t even object to whoever takes me by the elbow and leads me to where Teddy is sitting. I’m told to stand behind him and follow any instructions he gives to me.

He doesn’t turn around like I expect him to. He sits as still as can be at the table, staring at the man who is standing.

“Teodoro Maldonado,” the standing man says in a booming voice. I look over at him. He’s got jet black hair and strong, square features. He’s stunning in a dark, handsome way. “You have called this meeting tonight. Stand and state your purpose.”

The man sits and Teddy stands instead. Still, he does not turn around to look at me. I find myself wanting to see his

face, almost as if I'm that teenage girl again, and I need his reassurance.

"I invoke the protection of the family," he says in a stern voice. I've never heard him speak this way before. I always remembered him as upbeat and carefree. This is a completely different side of him.

"You invoke it for whom?" the other man asks.

"For Raven Kirkland," he says.

My eyes go wide and my heart rate spikes. I want to say something, but I get the sense that me interrupting would not go over well right now.

"You understand that you may only invoke the protection of the family one time?"

"I do," Teddy replies.

I feel panicked. He can only invoke whatever this is one time? And he's doing this for me? I desperately want to know what's going on.

"Then proceed," the man on the other side of the table says.

I watch as Teddy takes out a small card from his pocket. On the card is a small likeness of Saint Theodore, who is the patron Saint of soldiers.

Teddy takes the card and hands it to the man to his right along with a needle. This man takes the needle and pricks his finger before pressing a bloody thumbprint onto the back of the card. This ritual is repeated around the circle until the card is returned to Teddy.

With absolutely no hesitation, I watch as Teddy takes a knife from his pocket and slashes his palm straight down the

middle. I gasp out whereas he does not even flinch. He presses his blood-soaked hand to the front of the card, completely obscuring the picture that's there.

He then steps back from the table and leads me to sit where he was sitting. I'm in some state of shock from watching this entire ceremony and being the odd subject of it, that I don't even fight with him.

I drop heavily into the seat and allow the rest of the ceremony to play out.

The first man addresses me now. "Raven Kirkland, you are to come under the protection of the family. Swear to us that you will do it no harm."

Time stands still as I look around the table. The faces are shrouded in darkness, but I can feel each of their eyes on me. I start to panic, but then I feel a strong hand on my shoulder. I don't even have to look up to know it's Teddy's.

I could never forget the feeling of his hands on me.

The comfort they gave me.

The reassurance.

The peace.

"I swear." The words leave my lips before I even realize what I've done.

I've already broken one promise to Teddy. And now, I've set myself up to break another.

One by one each of the men from the table stand and place their hand on my shoulder, the blood from their pricked finger soaking into my gown. Each then returns to his seat until Teddy is the last man standing.

He steps forward and places his palm on my shoulder. I can feel the blood from his cut seep through the cloth and touch my skin. He squeezes my shoulder and I breathe a sigh of relief as I finally get the reassurance from him that I've been craving.

“Raven Kirkland,” the man sitting opposite of me says. “You are now under the protection of the Maldonado Family. You shall suffer no harm by our orders and you shall be protected as one of our own, so long as you keep your oath.”

No one says anything else. The men at the table all stand and exit the room, leaving Teddy and me alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Raven

The men are gone, and I'm left sitting with Teddy behind me. His blood-soaked hand is still on my shoulder. I turn around to look at him, and he is as somber as ever.

“What just—” I start to ask, but he shakes his head.

“Not here,” he replies.

I understand that this place is not for conversations. He peels his hand from me, the fabric of my dress sticking to him, a makeshift bandage for his cut. He waits for me to stand, and I do, anxious to leave this room that is giving me chills.

I follow him out of the room, waiting as he closes the doors carefully behind us. We walk in silence down the empty corridors despite the fact that I have so much to say.

Something happened in that room.

Something with true and real significance.

I need to know what that is.

We barely make it back into my quarters before I'm turning around and pointing a finger at Teddy. I'm not used to

the torrent of emotions I'm currently feeling, and I seem unable to keep control of myself.

"What just happened in there?" I ask him, my tone a little harsher than I intended.

He leans against the wall, and his easygoing manner seems to return.

"I made sure that you'll be safe now," he says.

"You say that as if we didn't just sit through a blood ceremony and I'm not currently covered in the blood of ten other men I don't even know," I scoff.

"What is it you want to know?" he asks me, pushing off the wall and making his way over to the little writing desk. He pulls the chair out with his cut hand, and for the first time, I see him wince.

My anger dissipates at seeing him in pain. I rush over to his side.

"Please," I say, reaching out for his hand. "Let me take a look at it."

He turns his palm up and lets me hold it. I take it gently in my own hand. I try and keep my fingers steady. I remember the feel of his hands on me even all these years later. They were strong then too, keeping me from harm.

I try and remind myself that I'm falling for his trap. That his hands didn't keep me from harm. Rather, they had led me into sin. But, as I look at the deep gash on his palm, I no longer feel those words in my heart.

"Come this way," I say to him, leading him into the attached bathroom.

He follows me without question. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as we walk in. I see my previously pure white gown for the first time. It's covered in bloody handprints, the majority of the red coming from Teddy.

I kneel down and pull the first aid kit from beneath the sink. "This might sting a little," I say to him as I start to pull out all of the disinfectant solutions and gauze to wrap him up.

"That's okay," he says. Our eyes meet, and we both hold the moment for a little too long. I look down and pour the iodine on his palm. His gasp of pain breaks what was between us, bringing us both back to the present.

"Sorry," I say, fumbling for the bandage so I can wrap his hand up.

"Nah," he says. "It's nothing."

His eyes follow my movements as I circle the cloth around and around his hand. I finally complete my task by tying it off and tucking the loose strands into the folds of the fabric.

"There," I say, pushing his hand back towards him so I can't be tempted to hold onto it. "All done."

"Thank you," he replies, looking at it first, then at me.

There's another moment of silence.

"Raven."

"Teddy," we both say at the same time. I blush and look down at my feet.

"You start," he offers.

I lift my gaze but avoid looking him in the eyes. I feel as if I lose a little piece of my control every time that I do.

“Can you explain to me what happened tonight? What all of it means? Why it required such a serious ceremony?”

He nods his head and beckons me to follow him out of the bathroom. “Come on,” he says. “It’s sort of a longer explanation.”

I sit down on the bed gingerly, and he pulls a chair from the writing desk so he’s facing me. He leans forward, his elbows on his knees, and looks down at the floor. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the picture of the Saint that was passed around the table.

“When you’re initiated into the Mafia, at least as far as my family’s traditions go, you make your oath to your patron Saint. Mine is Saint Theodore, obviously,” he says. “You’re supposed to carry this,” he says, holding up the bloodstained picture, “around with you as a reminder of your vows.

“Back in the day, there was a boss whose wife was killed for something she saw. It really tore the family apart, and it was decided that every made man should be given one person to bring under the protection of the family.”

“One at a time?” I ask, fearing the answer already. “Or, one for your entire life?”

He looks up at me, and just like I expect, another little piece of my control seems to melt away. There’s no evil in his eyes. There never has been.

“Just one for your life,” he says.

I close my eyes, knowing already where this is going.

“Anyways, you can probably figure out now what that ceremony was for. The blood from the others is to represent their vow to me. The blood from me is to represent my vow to you.”

I put my face in my hands. “Teddy, why?”

“Why, what?” he asks.

I look up at him with tears in my eyes. “Why me? You don’t know what your life may be. You could have a wife, a daughter, a son. Why throw something so important away for a girl you don’t even know anymore?”

“Who says I don’t know you?” he asks.

“I do!” I exclaim. “You knew me for all of twelve hours before I ran away from you for a decade.”

“So?”

“So! I should be no one to you.”

“Please don’t tell me who should or should not be valuable to me in my life,” he says. “It was my choice. I made it. I don’t regret it.” He licks his lips. I can see that they’re dry.

“I think you will,” I say.

He brings his injured hand up to the side of my face. Slowly, he traces the contour of my lower lip, just barely touching me. I try not to breathe. I try not to let him know just how much his touch affects me.

“Would you rather me let them kill you?” he asks, his voice a little harsher now. He pulls his hand away, leaving me wanting so much more from him.

I’m quiet for a second as I consider his question. “Maybe,” I finally whisper.

It was the wrong answer. Teddy leaps up from his chair and is on me. His arms are on either side of me, pressing into the bed. I can feel his warm breath on my face, and this time, there’s no escaping his eyes.

I try and move back.

I need to move away from him.

Remind myself of my calling.

Of the vows I intend to take.

But, with every inch I try and move away, he gets closer by two. There's finally nowhere left for me to go. I'm lying down on the bed, and he's holding his body on top of me.

We don't touch.

Our breathing is tense.

Neither of us move.

"Don't be stupid," he finally whispers.

"If it was God's will," I start to say.

"I don't give a *fuck* about God's will," he scoffs. "I'd die before I let anyone lay a hand on my Darkness."

And then, he's kissing me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Teddy

I need to not be doing this.

I need to NOT be doing this.

I NEED TO NOT BE DOING
THIS.

I force myself to pull away from her lips. She feels like air when I've been living in a vacuum for years. Putting myself back in that vacuum feels even worse now that I've taken a breath.

As much as I want her, I know it's not fair to her. She's taken vows to the church. Even if I don't believe in God, she clearly does.

I'm not going to pull her away from something she loves so dearly. Even if ...

I can't finish that thought.

It's too painful of a thing to admit and have to live with to say it out loud, even to myself.

I'm off the bed in a second. I can see the shock on her face.

Despite my decision, which I know is the right thing to do, I can still see the indecision in her eyes. More than that, I could feel it in her lips.

We'll never discuss it, but for a brief moment, she kissed me back.

I'm out of the room in seconds, closing the doors behind me and all but sprinting down the hall. Now that I know she's safe, maybe the best thing for the both of us is to just stay away from one another. I sort of doubt she's going to want to see me after what just happened between us, anyway.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts that I'm not paying attention to where I'm going. I barrel right into someone and we both land on the floor.

"Sorry," I say, offering a hand to my counterpart. His face comes into view and I instantly relax. Even though I'm technically in charge these days, there's a lot of top brass floating around the mansion right now because of the ceremony. I'd rather not knock over certain people.

I don't mind knocking over this fucker, though.

Marco is my normal partner. The guy I usually clean up with. He would have been there with me at the Cathedral instead of Toto, but he called out sick that night.

Marco is a lot like the rest of us Mafia boys. Dark hair, strong nose, and an irreverent yet dangerous attitude.

"What's got into you?" Marco asks me as he takes my hand and stands.

"Everything and nothing all at once," I say to him. "Are you over the runs?" I ask him.

"Over the what?"

I shrug. "The runs. When you called out sick, I figured that's what you had."

“Oh,” he says. “Right. Yeah, doing better. Heard about the girl.”

I nod my head a little and my lips pull into a straight line.

“I know that face,” he says to me.

“No face,” I say back.

“We’ve been working together for a long time, Teddy,” he says. “I’ve known you since we were kids. I know that face.”

“I knew her back when we were kids is all.”

“Heard you and Constantino both knew her.”

“Yeah,” I say slowly. “Good thing he’s not around these days. He never forgave me for all that.”

“Wanna go get a drink?” Marco asks.

“Do I?” I laugh and follow him willingly.

“I’ll drive,” he says as we walk out to the parking lot of the mansion.

“Alright,” I say. “But that means that I’m getting plastered.”

“Sounds about right,” Marco replies. He shakes his head and we both climb into the car. He heads towards a local hangout just outside the mansion that is generally considered safe. These days, you really can’t afford to be going to places that may not be friendly.

“So, what happened with Consty?” he asks.

“You know how he gets,” I say, adjusting the seat so that I’m leaning way back. I put my hands beneath my head and close my eyes. “He assumes things and gets his panties in a wad before he’s even got the entire story.”

“Well, what did he assume?”

“He assumed that I stole his girl.”

“The girl that’s currently living in the mansion now? The girl that you just brought under your protection? Yeah, doesn’t sound like you stole her at all.”

I grimace. He’s got a point when it’s put like that. “There’s more to it than what it seems on the surface.”

“You ever tell him that?”

“Have I ever been able to have a legit conversation with,” I pause, “any of my brothers?”

Marco lets out a deep laugh. “I guess not. Think he’ll be pissed when he finds out she’s here?”

I blow out some air, letting the gush brush aside some of the hair that’s fallen into my eyes. I probably need a haircut one of these days. “I dunno,” I say. “He can’t really return. His life is forfeit if he does. If someone else doesn’t kill him, Carmine will immediately. Besides, I think he just likes being pissy about stuff. I can’t imagine that he’s actually still mad at me for what happened with a girl that he was barely dating back in high school.”

“What *did* happen?”

“I can’t really say.”

“That’s gonna make it hard to talk to him about it.”

“Yeah,” I say with a small chuckle. “It certainly is.”

“We’re here,” Marco says as he turns off the engine. I sit up and open my eyes.

The neon sign for “La Tavola Nostra,” which means “Our Table,” flashes in the darkness. I follow Marco into the place

and we take a seat in the back. A waitress brings us drinks without us having to ask.

She smiles at me.

“Hey Teddy,” she says.

“Hey, Frankie,” I reply back to her. She’s a bubbly blonde who I just so happen to fuck in the back room of this very establishment on occasion.

“Haven’t seen you around for a while,” she says, rocking her petite frame back and forth.

“Been busy and all,” I say.

“Sorta thought you forgot about me,” she pouts.

I can see she’s wearing on Marco’s patience. He’s far less of a ladies’ man than I am. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him with a woman in all the years I’ve known him.

“We’ve sort of got some business to discuss,” he says to her in a harsh tone, ending the conversation.

“Oh, okay,” she says, seeming a little crestfallen. “Well, my shift ends in two hours,” she says to me with a wink before walking away.

“That’s hilarious that she thinks we’d need to wait until her shift is over,” I laugh into my drink.

“Have you slept with every waitress at this bar?” Marco asks me.

“Nah,” I say. “Only most of them.”

“And yet the girl you’re really in love with is a full-blown nun,” he says. I can see the smirk on his face, even in the dim lighting.

“No one said anything about me loving anyone,” I reply.

“Okay, sure. Made men always use their one election to bring a random girl they have no feelings for under the family’s protection.”

“Let’s change the subject,” I say to him. “When’s the last time you’ve had any pussy?”

He nearly chokes on his drink.

“Awe, come on,” I say when he doesn’t answer the question. “I can’t remember you dating even one girl in all the time I’ve known you.”

“I like to keep my personal life away from my business life. Unlike some people I know,” he says, nodding his head toward me.

“Sounds to me like that’s the excuse of a man who has a lame personal life.”

“Alright,” he says, putting his drink down. “I didn’t actually invite you here just to shoot the shit.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” I say taking another swig of my drink. “And here I thought I was finally going to get some time off from more serious matters. After the night I’ve had,” I say, holding up my cut hand, “I sorta just wanted to relax.”

“I get that,” Marco says, “but I do think there are some things you should be aware of.”

I signal to a different waitress to bring me another drink, hoping to avoid another awkward confrontation with Frankie.

“You know I’m not really involved in the business side of things, Marco,” I say, nodding to the waitress that puts another drink in front of me. “That’s more Primo and to a certain extent Giovanni’s, cup of tea.”

Marco makes a face. “That *was* their cup of tea. Or, did you forget that they handed that particular job off to you when they finished warring over it.”

“Awe, fuck,” I say, taking a long swig from my drink. “I was trying to just will it back into existence.”

“Never gonna happen, Teddy,” he says. “It’s on your shoulders now.”

I nod my head. “Yeah, yeah. So everyone’s been telling me.”

“Who else has been telling you?”

“Primo, Carmine,” I roll my eyes.

Marco grimaces at the mention of Carmine. The two never really got along, but I never knew why.

“Yeah, well, they are right.”

I sigh. I really want to just put my entire face into my second drink, but instead I try and act like an adult.

“Okay, Marco. Tell me what’s going on.”

“As you know there have been some threats to your family’s position given both your father’s arrest and questions surrounding your lineage.”

I roll my eyes. “The arrest I sort of get. Sort of,” I say pointing my finger at nothing in particular. “Because, it’s not like our line of work is entirely on the right side of the law. But, the lineage? That’s been addressed so many times. It’s not like we’ve ever tried to hide our surname. It’s not the most Italian sounding.”

“Yes, but this time your father isn’t around to snuff out the opposition. Your brothers have both stepped down. It’s the

perfect opportunity to launch questions into whether your family's explanations are really sufficient."

"Seems more like excuses," I scoff.

"Whatever you want to call it," Marco says.

"Our lineage has been traced back to before the 1500s, when our forefathers changed their surname during the unification of Italy to avoid persecution. Royalty wasn't exactly popular during the European revolutions."

"I don't need the history lesson," Marco says. "I know it as well as anyone. I'm just saying that your father's not around to silence any questioning voices. Voices that will use whatever leverage they can to dislodge your family's position."

"That and it didn't look too good to find out that your father was keeping in touch with other Maldonados in South America. Sort of looks like your family's explanation is a made up thing."

"I can't speak to that," I respond. "My father is the sort of man to exploit whatever opportunities are made available to him. If our surname gave him an advantage in other markets, I'm sure he would use it."

"But, again," I say to my friend. "I'm not really sure what I can do about any of this."

"I just think you should be aware of what's going on."

"I am," I reply. "As you know, I'm the person called in to clean most things up. It means that I pretty much know the comings and goings of what goes down on the streets."

"And you're not concerned about what you've seen recently?"

I shrug and finish the last of my second drink. “Not sure why I should be concerned. Seems like things are being handled.”

“Okay,” Marco says but I can hear the uncertainty in his voice.

I can feel the effects of the alcohol mixing with the exhaustion of the night. I put my hand up to his face and give him a few friendly smacks.

“Just relax a little,” I say. “I’m sure everything’s going to be okay.”

He nods. “I think I’m going to head back. You want a ride back?”

“Nah,” I say. “I think I’m going to have one more drink and then maybe I’ll see if Frankie waited around for me.”

Marco shakes his head and stands. “Alright. See you tomorrow.”

He walks off but before I’m able to think about getting a third drink, Primo sits down in front of me.

“Jesus, man,” I say to him. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to hear most of what you and Marco were talking about.”

“Okay,” I say. “And?”

“And, why is he talking to you about that stuff at all?”

“Fuck if I know,” I reply, motioning for another drink. “If you heard the conversation, then you heard my answer.”

“Yes, I know,” Primo replies. “Do the Irish know that we were behind Father Murphy’s death?” he asks.

“No, and it needs to stay that way,” I say. “Because, you and Giovanni fucked the situation up with the Westies so bad and then handed it off to me. The fact that there’s not already been an all-out war between us is a miracle.”

“Yes, I know,” Primo says. “But, we have to be careful in today’s environment. If they know for a fact that it was us, that’ll give them the final justification they need to formally revoke our tentative alliance. Let them wonder whether it was another family. It keeps the peace for a little bit longer while we can plan our next defensive move.”

“You mean while *I* can plan our next defensive move. Giovanni all but bailed on the family. I mean, I get it, but still. And you’re present less and less every day. When are you going to just stop helping altogether?”

Primo doesn’t answer my question. “Call a cab, Teddy,” he says as he takes the third drink I’m being handed away from me. “Get some sleep. You’ve had a long day.”

“Okay, Dad,” I respond dramatically.

Primo leaves the table. I’m surprised he’s out so late with Isabella as pregnant as she is.

I look around the bar for Frankie. I decide to head toward the back to see if she’s there waiting for me. I make my way down the dimly lit hallway. I open the utility closet door, and just like I figured, she’s there waiting for me.

“I knew you couldn’t resist me,” she says as I close the door behind me.

I make a shushing sound as I back her up to the wall. She giggles as she begins to pull her shirt over her head. I lean in to kiss her, thinking this is going to be a quick and dirty fuck like it always is with her.

But, I have to stop.

I break the kiss and back away from her.

“What?” she asks confused. “What is it?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to face my new reality. I force myself forward and try and kiss her again.

And, it happens again and I’m backing away even faster this time.

“Teddy?” she huffs. “What the heck is going on.”

“I ... I don’t know,” I say. “I’m sorry, but, I can’t.”

“You can’t?” I can see the hurt on her face. I don’t mean to make her feel bad.

I put my hands up to try and comfort her. “I promise, it’s not you,” I say, but she’s already grabbing her shirt and trying to cover herself. “Maybe I’ve had too much to drink,” I try and explain.

She scoffs. “That’s never stopped you before.”

She’s right about that. I’ve fucked Frankie and a host of other people in this closet while I was too drunk to even see.

“I’m sorry,” I say to her. “But, I’ve got to go.”

She’s calling after me, but I’m already out of the closet and out the back door of the bar. I know it’s not safe for me to walk the two miles back to the mansion, but the crisp night air feels too good.

As the steps add up under my feet, my mind starts to clear. With each step I take, my situation becomes clearer and clearer.

I couldn’t kiss Frankie in that closet.

Not because she isn't hot or wasn't willing.

But, because she isn't Raven.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Raven

It takes me the better part of an hour of wandering around the property to find the chapel. I barely slept last night. I'd like to think that my lack of rest came from the ceremony, but I know that's a lie.

It was because of his kiss.

My mind is a jumbled mess of emotions, and even my prayers this morning didn't help. I haven't felt this distraught in some time.

I was reminded of Father James' invitation and decided I would take the risk of being caught wandering where I shouldn't in order to go and see him.

I feel a sense of relief the moment I step into the chapel. Like many of the rooms in this place, it's hidden behind two large oak doors. I push the doors closed behind me and take in the sight.

There are a few paintings on the walls of biblical scenes and an altar at the front of the room covered in lit candles. There's a window above it that gives the place a little bit of

natural light. I look around for a confessional, but there isn't one. A few wooden pews are all I see in front of me.

A small door off to the right opens, and Father James walks in.

“Sister,” he says in a warm tone, “I’m glad to see you.”

In the light of the day, I can make out Father James’ features a bit better. He’s a little heavy set under his robes. His dark hair has thinned somewhat, but his face is kind and welcoming.

“And I, you,” I reply. “I was hoping to confess my sins and seek some guidance from you, Father.”

“Of course,” he says, inviting me to sit down on a pew with him.

I hesitate, not used to such a setup.

“When you deal with men who so often commit their sins behind closed doors,” he says, clearly catching onto my confusion, “I find it better for them to admit their sins in the open.”

I nod my head in understanding and sit next to him.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” I say to him.

“What are your sins, child?”

“I have been unfaithful to my vows,” I reply. “I have had impure thoughts regarding a man. I worry that he is again leading me down a path of temptation. One that he led me down so many years ago.”

“Please explain further,” he says. “Nothing you say to me will ever be shared. Maybe start from the beginning,” he suggests.

I wring my hands in my lap. As far as I know, there are only two people in this world that know what happened to my parents. Teddy and Father Patrick. I briefly consider whether to tell Father James. Part of me wants to keep it a secret, but the logical side of my mind assures me that he's heard far worse from the men in this chapel.

"Teddy and I have a history," I say to him. "We met in high school. I was dating his brother at the time, or at least, around that time."

Father James listens to me recount the tale of how I met Teddy and what he helped me clean up. He doesn't react at all. He just sits still and listens.

"It was Father Patrick who really helped me understand that Teddy led me down a path of true evil. For years, I tortured myself because I sought forgiveness for this ultimate sin. Had Teddy never helped me, I would have gotten the punishment I deserved.

"I was only weeks away from taking my vows before I was brought here," I say to him. "I have prayed on why the Lord has seen fit to bring me to this place and put this man back in front of me. The only answer that I have is that He is testing me further.

"And, last night I failed His test. Because, Teddy kissed me and I kissed him back."

I put my head in my hands as I utter my confession, tears swimming in my eyes.

Father James' hands wrap around my back. I'm shocked at the motion. I've never been given comfort like this during a confession. There's always been a screen up between me and

the priest who listens. This is a completely new experience for me.

I look up at him, and his features are soft and reassuring.

“I’m sorry to say, dear Sister, but I disagree with your original Father Patrick’s logic.”

“You do?”

He nods his head.

“I am sure he meant you well. We are all, at the end of the day, imperfect humans trying only to interpret the Word of God through a flawed lens. But, I do not think Teddy is some devil on your shoulder.”

“But, he enabled me to commit sin,” I exclaim.

“Is that so true?” he asks me. “Or, was the sin already committed?”

“His actions allowed me to escape punishment.”

“Is that also true? Or were you not looking for someone to assist you when he found you that morning.”

I’m silent as I think about what Father James is saying. I feel like my world has been completely upended.

“Let me ask you this,” he continues when I don’t respond. “Have you ever missed your parents?”

“Missed them?”

“Yes,” Father James says. “Have you ever longed for their presence in your life. Not the presence of parents in general, but the presence of your specific parents?”

“No,” I admit. “Never. It’s not easy to miss people who would do you harm.”

“Now,” Father James says. “Have you ever missed Teddy? All those years you were on your own. Did you ever regret leaving him that day?”

“All the time,” I reply immediately. There was no sense in hiding anything from Father James. I came to him seeking counsel. He was only going to be able to help me as much as I let him.

“Have you considered that you were not seeking punishment for what happened to your parents, but rather, trying to find solace for running from the one man that helped you in your time of need?”

I feel sick to my stomach, probably because his words resonate.

“But, he is to blame! God is testing me with him. He has put him in my path to see if I can overcome his temptation. Why else would He bring me here?” I blurt out, repeating the things that I’ve lived the past five years believing.

“Assuming for a moment that Teddy is some form of devil for you,” he says. “Is the Devil to blame when people give into temptation? Or is it the Devil’s nature to tempt people away from God?”

I sit in silence, not sure how to answer.

“You said you were weeks away from taking your vows, yes?” Father James asks.

I nod my head.

“I believe you’ve been a novitiate for more than the required time. What’s prevented you from taking them?”

My breathing is somewhat heavy. “The Sisters felt that I had not yet discerned what God is asking of me.”

“Okay. That’s what they believe. Is that what you also believe?”

“Yes,” I admit. “I have felt confused and unsure of what God wants of me since coming to the church.”

“It sounds to me like you have not broken your vows then,” Father James says.

“What?” I ask, not following his line of thinking.

“When you confessed to me, you said that you acted impurely and broke your vows.” He shakes his head. “No sin has been committed.”

We sit in further silence as I process his words.

“Also,” he adds. “I think you should know that Teddy believes you have taken your vows.”

“He does?” I ask, lifting my head up. “How do you know?”

Father James just smiles at me in response.

I put my head back down. That obviously explains why he all but ran out of my room yesterday evening.

“I’ll admit that I feel even more confused now than I did when I arrived here, Father,” I say.

Father James lets out a gentle laugh. “Confused is okay, child. But, tell me, do you feel calmer than when you arrived?”

I think on his question. He’s right. When I got here, I felt very anxious. Now, I feel renewed in my need to pray on my beliefs and actions.

“Yes,” I reply. “Thank you.”

Father James stands. “I’ll give you some time,” he says. “If you need me, you can knock on that door there,” he says, pointing to the door to our right.

“Thank you, Father.”

He leaves, and I take another few minutes to sit on the pew and stare into the candles, trying to make sense of everything he just said to me.

It was as if my entire world had been flipped upside down.

I just wasn’t sure if that meant that I was finally seeing things the right way now.



I begin the slow walk back to my quarters. I don’t know how exactly I got to the chapel, so I don’t know the most direct route back, either.

The halls are empty. Despite the long walk back, I pass no one. I stop on occasion to look at the tapestries on the walls.

Interestingly enough, some of them are Bible scenes, some of them are paintings of family members, and some of them are photos of people eating and laughing at restaurants. Those last photos almost give this place a feeling of normalcy.

“That’s my Granddad along with his three brothers.”

The voice comes up beside me, and I jump.

“Sorry,” Teddy says, lifting his hand up to rub the back of his neck. He always does that when he’s regretful about something. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay,” I reply, not turning to look at him.

“About last night,” he starts to say, but then I turn to him and grasp his hand.

He looks down at where I’ve touched him. I shouldn’t have done it because the spark that shoots through me from just that one point of contact is almost too much to handle.

Then he looks back up at me, and we’re holding one another’s gaze again.

“Let’s not talk about it here,” I say to him.

“Where?” he asks.

“Somewhere private?” I suggest.

His cheeks flush with a bit of red. For the first time, I feel like I’m really looking at him as a man again.

Not as some demon.

Not as Satan trying to tempt me.

But, as a man who has only ever tried to do the best for the people around him.

“Okay,” he says to me. “You lead.”

I nod and don’t let go of his hand. I start to walk down the hallway and then admit, “I just don’t really know where I’m going.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Teddy

My heart damn near pounds out of my chest as she takes me by the hand and starts leading me down the hallway. I don't know where she's going, and I don't really care.

I don't even know what I think is going to happen. She's basically married to God (*pretty sure that's how that works*), and I care about her too much to put her in a situation that would make her break her vows.

I already took things way too far last night. I know I'm never going to do that to her again.

Still, there's a sense of excitement as she holds my hand and leads me through the dark hallways of the mansion. It's only after a few minutes that I realize we're not anywhere near her quarters.

"Raven," I say her name out of habit before wincing and realizing that's not what she goes by anymore. She still answers to the name. This time when she turns, she doesn't look upset with me for my mistake.

I'm about to ask her where we're going when something super irritating happens.

“Teddy!”

I hear my brother Primo’s voice from a little ways off. I groan, but I shouldn’t have because the sound of my annoyance bounces off the stone, clear for everyone to hear.

“Jeesh, don’t act too happy to see me,” he says as he approaches us both.

“What do you want, Primo?” I ask him, impatient to get to whatever is about to happen with Raven. He approaches and I frown. “I thought you were giving up this life.”

“I am,” he replies.

“Then, why are you here?”

Raven looks like she’s about to drop my hand, but I squeeze her fingers, not letting her go. She looks from Primo to me, and I can see the reassurance on her features.

“Because I promised Giovanni I would help him when he took over, and I feel as if I owe it to you somewhat to do the same.”

I sigh. “Where and what is the job?”

“Not that,” he responds.

I give him a look. “Then what? That’s the sort of thing I handle. You know I don’t like going outside of my comfort zone.”

“Listen,” Primo says, pulling me aside, forcing me to separate from Raven.

“Stay right there,” I say to her when I see her look like she’s about to move. She freezes in place, and I turn back to Primo. “What?” I say, my tone impatient.

“The Irish want to meet.”

“And? What’s that got to do with me?”

“Come on, Teddy. Embrace it already. You’re the head of the family now.”

“No,” I say immediately. “You and Giovanni were the heads of the family. You pushed that job on me, and I never wanted it or accepted it.”

My brother sighs, and I can see that his features are full of remorse. “I know. I know what we did to you isn’t fair.”

“Damn right,” I say.

“But life isn’t fair.”

I make a loud dramatic groan. “Oh my God, can you get any more cliché?”

“What do you want me to say, Teddy?” Primo asks. “I’ll say it, but it doesn’t change the situation that we’re in.”

“That *you’re* in,” I correct. “I never wanted this life. You and Giovanni both knew that.”

Primo closes his eyes and lets out a long breath. “Yes, I do. And, I’m sorry that it’s fallen on you. Even if Isabella would let me go, I can’t. Not after the last meeting Gio and I had with the Irish. Tensions are too high between us.”

“Why don’t I get to just say, ‘nah, not for me, thanks!’ like you and Gio did?”

Primo doesn’t answer my question, which means he doesn’t have an answer.

I squeeze my eyes shut and crane my head back. I take a deep breath, and then I open my eyes and look back at Primo. “I seriously want to punch you right now,” I say.

“I know,” he replies.

“Alright, where’s the meeting?”

“Neutral territory. Dinner at the Public House.”

I grumble. “I hate that restaurant.”

“I know,” Primo says. “Listen to what they have to say. Say as little as possible. Deny everything. Look nice. Bring a date.”

He starts to walk off but I call after him.

“Bring a date? Why do I need to bring a date?”

“Because it discourages business talk and while I do trust you, I’d rather you talk business as little as possible when you’re on your own.”

“That actually makes sense,” I say.

“Bring someone you can trust. We’ll talk about it after.”

Primo walks off, and I turn back to look at Raven. She’s giving me the sort of stare that means she knows what I’m about to ask.

“Please?” I say to her.

She shakes her head. “Teddy, I don’t think I’m the right person.”

“Of course you are!” I say immediately. “In fact, you’re the *only* person that I would want by my side for something like this.”

I can see the uncertainty on her face.

“Do this, and when we get back, I promise I’ll answer any questions you have for me.”

“Any questions?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“You would trust me like that?”

I give her a confused look. “What do you mean? I already trust you like that.”

“Then, okay,” she says, and I smile at her.

“Mind if I lead you back to your rooms?” I ask her. “Honestly, I’m not sure you know where you’re going.”

She laughs, and the sound is like a melody after a lifetime of noise. “I told you I had no idea where I was going.”

I take her hand again, and she lets me. I pull her along, and within two minutes, we’re back in her rooms. For some reason, we’re both breathing heavily as we look at one another.

I don’t understand this change in her. Yesterday she was rigid to a point where she almost felt standoffish. Today it’s like some big walls within her came crashing down, but I don’t understand why.

I’d like to think it has something to do with me. That maybe she doesn’t think I’m such a danger to her anymore, but I also know that’s not entirely true.

Like it or not, she’s in my world now. My world is unfortunately dangerous. Not only that, but *I* present a clear and present danger to her. I proved that much when I shoved my tongue down her throat yesterday.

I’m proving it now by wanting to do the same thing again.

Plus more.

I take a step back, not trusting my self-control around her.

“Did you receive any new clothes?” I ask her.

She looks a little confused at why I'm walking away from her.

"Yes," she answers slowly.

"Good," I reply. "Do you need any help picking something out?"

She shakes her head. "I'll manage."

"Okay," I say. The silence fills the space between us. There are so many things I'm dying to tell her. So many things I want her to tell me. Instead, we're both quiet. "I should probably go and get changed myself."

"Okay," she replies.

"I'll come back for you," I say.

"I know," is what she says by the time I'm closing the door behind me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Teddy

I'm distracted the entire dinner. Not because I'm currently sitting opposite the second in command of the Irish mob, but because Raven decided to wear something I definitely did not anticipate a nun wearing in public, let alone at all.

It was hard to know what her figure was under her thick gown over the past few days. It's incredibly easy to tell that she has an absolutely stunning one in the dress she currently has on.

Maybe it's not as scandalous as I'm making it out to be. But it's tight and short, showing off her curves and long legs. The neckline plunges low enough to make me want to drag her back to the mansion as soon as possible. It's a miracle we actually made it here at all. Somehow I was able to control myself for the drive over, but just barely.

I clear my throat, trying to focus on the matter at hand.

The Irish mob's second in command, Declan O'Leary, is seated across from me. He's a burly man with a thick beard and piercing blue eyes. He's been eyeing me up and down since we arrived, sizing me up as a potential threat.

I try not to let it show, but I can feel the sweat accumulating on my forehead. I'm not used to these sorts of meetings and I generally end up saying something that pisses everyone off.

"So, Teddy," Declan says, taking a sip of his whiskey. "Care to tell me why you're here instead of your brother?"

"Not really," I reply honestly. He gives me a look that tells me he's not fucking around.

I sigh. "He was called away for an important meeting." I don't really want to share with Declan that I'm supposedly taking charge of the family these days. Besides, with the power struggle between Primo, Giovanni, and to a certain extent, Constantino, it sort of makes us look weak.

"More important than this meeting?" I can tell that I hit a nerve there.

"Of course not," I reply. "That's why he sent me. Am I not good enough for you?" I decide to see if I can tease this man just a little, which I know is sort of a bad call. "You'll hurt my feelings if you say I'm not your type."

Declan clears his throat and leans back. He crosses his broad arms across his broader chest. "You're not," he says. "But, she is."

He points at Raven and I have to stop myself from jumping up and punching the guy. I remind myself that we're here for business and that all I'm supposed to be doing is stalling, not starting a mob war.

I look over at Raven. She's sitting quietly but she's fidgeting with the napkin in her lap, clearly uncomfortable with the attention being directed at her. I place a hand on her thigh, hoping to offer her some sort of comfort.

Instead, I find myself completely swept away by the softness of her skin against my calloused fingers.

I look up at Declan. “She’s with me,” I say, my voice low and dangerous. “And she’s not available.”

Declan chuckles, but the tension in the air is thick. I can feel the weight of his stare on us.

“I’m just teasing, Teddy,” he says, waving his hand dismissively. “You know I wouldn’t cross your family like that.”

“I hope not,” I reply. “Because you know what happens to those who cross my family.”

Declan nods. “Interesting that you should say that.”

I wait, already knowing what he’s about to say.

“It seems a certain member of our own family has gone missing.”

“Missing?” I ask. “How so?”

“Father Murphy,” Declan says. He leans forward and keeps his voice low. “A few nights ago. He was at the church in Southie, and then he wasn’t.”

“So? Why come to us about that?” I really hate Primo for pinning me with this of all dinners.

Declan and I lock eyes, neither of us wanting to give an inch. “Because, we have reason to believe that your family may have had something to do with it.”

I try and keep my composure. I really do not want to give off any signs that I know exactly what happened to Father Murphy and Declan is spot-fucking-on.

“What reason?” I ask.

“I’m afraid I can’t say at the moment,” Declan responds. “Let’s just say that a few weeks ago a demand was made to your brothers Primo and Giovanni. A demand for funds to reimburse the Westies for the money lost as your family,” he smirks, “recalibrates. We never received a formal response. And then Father Murphy goes missing. So, we have a pretty good feeling.”

“I’d be careful about going around and accusing people, especially my people, based on feelings.”

My heart rate is spiking. If the Irish mob does connect Father Murphy’s murder to us, we’re in pretty deep shit.

It would mean a mob war for sure. “Maybe you’re right,” Declan says. “Maybe you had nothing to do with it at all.”

“I’m telling you we didn’t,” I reply, bluffing as hard as I ever have.

“Well, if that’s the case, then our family would call on our alliance with yours. Blood must be paid for in blood.”

“You said he was missing,” I reply. “You never said he was dead.”

Declan leans back and I can see the disappointment on his face. He was definitely trying to catch me in a trap there.

“Ah, yes,” Declan says. “My mistake.”

“If your family does need assistance locating your priest, that is something we can help with.”

Declan nods. “For now, we’ll see if he turns up.”

His eyes slide over to Raven. I can feel the anger rising up inside of me. She fidgets under his gaze and I hate that he’s making her even a little bit uncomfortable.

When Primo said to bring a date, he made me think that my counterpart would also be bringing someone. This entire evening has turned into an accident waiting to happen.

“So,” he says. “You say she’s with you?” His eyes slide up and down her body and I start to imagine what it would feel like to clean up his dead corpse, because it’s the only thing keeping me from decking this guy.

Raven shifts in her seat and pulls the hem of her dress down, trying to cover up more of her legs. I tighten my grip on her thigh, trying to keep myself in check. The anger is boiling inside of me, ready to explode at a moment’s notice.

“Yes, she’s with me,” I say through gritted teeth. “And I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your eyes and hands off of her.”

Declan chuckles, but the sound lacks any humor. “You think you’re the only one who can appreciate a beautiful woman like her?”

Raven’s becoming increasingly tense under my hand and I know I need to start winding down this dinner.

“I’m sure you have plenty of women to appreciate, Declan,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “Yes, but it’s not every day that I get to experience a pretty little virgin like this one.”

I’m basically seeing red at this point. Like bright, murderous, blood and guts on the floor red. Somehow, I manage to keep it together.

“Not sure what you mean,” I say to him. “But, it’s getting late. If there’s nothing else,” I start to say, getting up out of the booth.

“What I mean,” Declan says, reaching his hand out and wrapping it around Raven’s arm. “Is that it’s not every day I get to see a woman of the church baring her tits and ass for the world to see. I think I’d like to experience a piece of that for myself. Maybe get a little closer to heaven.”

I’m ready to explode. My hands ball into fists and I take a step forward, ready to unleash all of my pent-up rage from the evening. I’m so angry that I don’t even connect the dots that Declan seems to know Raven’s true identity. Or, rather, her connection to the church and to Father Murphy. Strictly speaking, I’m not sure what her true identity is these days.

But, before I can do anything, Raven speaks up. Her voice is strong and clear as she grabs Declan’s hand with her own and pushes it away from her body.

“You must have me confused with someone else,” she says. “And, I’m not here for your entertainment,” she says firmly.

Declan looks taken aback by her sudden display of strength, but he recovers quickly and laughs.

“You got yourself a little spitfire here, Teddy,” he says, his eyes sparkling with something that could almost be admiration. He glances at me and adds, “You should be proud of your little nun.”

I can feel the tension in the air dissipate as everyone relaxes a bit. The corner of my mouth quirks up into a small smile as I look over at Raven admiringly.

“Again,” she says, showing her strength once more. “You must have me confused with someone else.”

“Oh, right, right,” Declan responds, waving his hand dismissively. “My mistake.”

“Is there anything else?” I say, not wanting to sit back down in the booth but also not wanting to escalate things further.

Declan turns to look at me. “No,” he replies. “Maybe it’s all just a big misunderstanding and Father Murphy will show up.”

“Maybe,” is all I can manage to say in response.

“And, maybe your brothers will give us an answer to our demand before we start to feel offended by their silence,” he adds.

“Maybe,” I say again.

“You two go,” Declan says, leaning back and taking his final sip of whiskey. “We’ll see each other in a few days’ time anyway.”

I nod and turn to look at Raven. She slides out of the booth and takes my hand in hers, pulling me away from the table and towards the exit. We make our way out of the restaurant without looking back.

The air outside is cool and fresh. We stand there for a moment, both seemingly taken aback by what just happened. I can feel my heart racing in my chest, the adrenaline from the confrontation still coursing through me.

I look over at Raven and see her eyes twinkling in the moonlight. She looks beautiful and so full of life. I can feel her grip on my hand still. It makes me want to take her in my arms and never let go.

She turns to look at me and I feel myself falling into her beautiful hazel eyes again. The electricity between us is palpable, like a living thing begging us to act upon it. She stares back up at me and I am completely enamored with her.

Before either of us can say anything, I take hold of her shoulders and push her gently against the brick wall behind us.

We stand there for what feels like an eternity, lost in each other's gazes, unable to break away from one another.

"You were incredible," I finally manage to say to her.

My breath is labored. It feels like I've run a marathon, but the effort comes from the fact that I'm desperately trying to hold myself back from fucking her against this very wall.

Her own chest is heaving. Her beautiful cleavage rising and falling with each inhale and exhale. Clearly she doesn't know what she's doing to me.

"That guy's a dick," she says to me, surprising the hell out of me.

"How did he know you?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. I've seen him with Father Murphy in passing. He must have recognized me."

"He wants you," I say to her.

She nods her head. "Yes."

"I'd kill him before I let him ever touch you again," I find myself saying, which is so out of character for me. I'm the cleaner. I clean things. I've never liked killing things. That's why I do what I do and not what others in the organization do.

"Yes."

Her acknowledgement hangs thick in the air between us. I move in closer to her, pressing my body against hers. Her curves compress against my harder frame and she really does feel like Heaven on Earth.

"I want you," I say to her.

“Yes.” Her response is breathless and full of promise.

My fingers start to trail against her exposed thigh, touching the skin that Declan was staring at all night. I move slowly. With every inch further that I ascend, my soul drops 1,000 feet closer to Hell.

My fingers are finally between her thighs, grazing the outside of her lace panties. She’s wet and warm and full of promise. My fingers pull aside her panties. We’re both breathing heavily, our breaths mingling together, but neither of us can seem to move the final inch to seal the kiss.

I start to touch her and she arches her head back. She’s so unbelievably sensitive.

“How long has it been?” I whisper against her cheek as I continue to caress her lightly.

“Years,” she says to me.

“Even by yourself?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says.

My finger is dangerously close to entering her. My cock is hard in a way that almost hurts. The devil inside of me is telling me to turn her around and give her the fucking she’s clearly longing for out in public against this brick wall.

I want to claim her.

Fuck her.

Own her.

Body and soul.

Just as I’m about to sink one finger into her beautiful pussy, I find myself pulling away. Guilt washes over me like a

tidal wave for what I'm doing. I don't give a shit about my own soul. That's already long gone.

What I do care about is hers. I can't be the person that makes her break her vows.

"I can't do this," I say. "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER TWENTY



Raven

I stand motionless, utterly shocked by what just happened. I've spent almost a decade trying to get Teddy out of my system. Sinful fantasies of us kissing, revisiting the passion we once shared together, were something I frequently prayed over. I feel torn between my desire and my shame.

"I'm sorry," Teddy says to me again.

His hands are still touching me, but he's still. His fingers remain between my thighs. I can feel his touch against my wetness, but he's not moving.

"I don't know what you're doing to me," he says and I can hear the pain in his voice.

It breaks my heart in a way I'm not expecting.

I always saw Teddy as my own temptation.

I never realized that perhaps I was his, too.

He starts to move away, but I grab his shoulders, holding him still.

I'm aroused. I'm still incredibly wet. I want to beg him to touch me. To bring me back into the sin I experienced with him so long ago.

"You want me," I say to him. It's not a question, because I already know his statement.

"Yes," he nods.

"Then, why not take me?"

He shakes his head. "I can't," he whispers.

I want to stomp my feet in frustration. Why would he take me this far only to stop?

"But, you want to?"

"No," he tells me.

"No? A moment ago it was yes!"

He pushes me against the wall now. I gasp in surprise. He grips my shoulders tightly, holding me in place. His eyes bore into mine and I can see the lust in them, like coals burning in the darkness.

"I'm not going to do this to you."

"Do what?"

"Make you break your vows," he says. "No matter how bad I fucking want you, Raven, I'm not going to take something like that away from you. Just know," he leans in and whispers, "that you will *always* be my Darkness."

He pushes off the wall and grabs my hand, tugging me to the car. I'm stunned into silence again, and I follow him without a fight.

The majority of the ride back to the mansion is silent. There are so many things I want to say to him, but I can't force

myself to speak. More than anything, I want to admit to him that I haven't taken any vows yet. Except, every time I'm about to open my mouth, the words stall in my throat.

I can't understand why.

Maybe it's because it gives me the out.

Maybe it's because I'm nervous.

Maybe it's because deep down I still think he'd be better off without me.

That last one feels a little too close to home and I push the feelings of doubt down into the darkness within me.

"You really impressed me back there," Teddy says after clearing his throat.

The sound against the silence almost startles me.

"Oh," I say. "Thank you."

"What did he mean that he'll see you in a few days?" I ask.

Teddy pulls the car up to the gate of the mansion. The man outside sees him from the gatehouse and waves as the oversized gate opens for us.

"Our family throws a goodwill dinner once a year," he explains. "The one for this year is this weekend."

"What's a goodwill dinner?" I ask.

"It's a chance for all of the families to come together in public. Publicly, it's a social event for a charity. But, when there's so much that goes on in the darkness in this industry, sometimes it's good for the bosses to get together in the light. It's a chance for small grievances to be aired. My father found that it really helped keep the peace over the years."

"So, it's still dirty money?" I ask.

“All money is dirty if you dig deep enough,” Teddy says.

“What’s this year’s fundraiser for?”

“Orphans,” he says. “One of the legitimate businesses our family runs loans money out to orphanages throughout New England. This year the proceeds from the dinner will be donated to a few of them.”

“Oh,” I say, a little bit surprised. “I didn’t realize that your family did things like that.”

Teddy shrugs. “No one is ever all bad. We all have the capacity for good and evil inside of us. It’s just what we choose to act on.”

“Maybe,” I say, not sure if I agree with his statement.

He turns the car off and I realize that we’re sitting in the darkness of the garage.

We sit in silence again, neither of us moving to exit the vehicle. There’s an undercurrent of tension between us. It’s like both of us want the same thing, but neither of us are able to take the final step to get it.

I move to open the door, but Teddy suddenly puts his hand behind my neck. He’s pulling me into him and slamming his lips on mine.

“I’m sorry,” he says as he pulls back briefly. “But, I fucking *need* you.”

His lips are back on mine and my head is swimming with the words he just said.

He doesn’t just *want* me.

He *needs* me.

I try and push him away, but the attempt is feeble and he knows it. I try to say his name, but as I open my mouth, he tangles his tongue with mine. I feel the last of my own willpower give way as I descend into sin with him. The warmth of his body is under my hands and the desire for him that I've resisted for years breaks free.

"Tell me to stop," he says as I watch him spit on his hand. His fingers trail against my thighs before he's pulling my dress up and moving my panties aside. I'm absolutely drenched for him to the point where I'm worried I might slide right off the leather seat of the car.

"Don't," I say to him as his fingers graze my lips.

His movements pause and I feel desperate. "No," I say to him. "Don't stop, I mean. Please," I beg him. "Please keep going."

"Anything for my Darkness," he says.

I close my eyes and lean back. I feel his fingers against my lips. He's tracing my folds, increasing my desire and it's driving me wild.

I feel a brief second of shame before he plunges his fingers into my body. I push past my self doubt. He works me until I'm nearly mindless with the need to come.

I raise my hips up, trying to get him deeper inside of me. I feel my orgasm approaching and I push back against his hand. He's not touching me where I need it, though. He's teasing me with his fingers, but I want him to stimulate me directly.

"Yes," he gasps as he watches me.

I start to move my hips, rocking them back and forth, matching his movements as he works me closer and closer to a high I haven't experienced in years.

“I want this,” I start to say, almost as if I’m reminding myself of this truth.

His thumb starts to circle my clit and I squeeze my eyes further.

“That’s it, Darkness,” he says. “Ride my hand. Show me what you want.”

I thrust back against his hand again and he finally gives me what I need. I cry out in relief as pleasure floods my body. The warmth spreads out from my fingers to my toes. It feels almost too good and the sinful part of me asks how something that feels so good could really be bad.

“Jesus,” Teddy curses. “You’re fucking drenched,” he says as he pulls his fingers out of me.

I crack my eyes open and watch in a mix of embarrassment and lust as he licks my juices off his hand.

I try and say something, but my voice is hoarse and I realize I’m gasping for air.

“Just relax,” he says, putting a reassuring hand against my face. My mind is pure white noise right now as my body continues to pulse in mini waves of pleasure.

“I don’t think I can,” I say to him, trying to catch my breath.

“Then just stay here with me,” he says.

I nod my head and smile a bit. I know I should feel guilty for what I just let him do, but the way he’s looking at me is keeping it at bay. I slide my hand into his and enjoy the sensation of being close to him.

He gives my hand a squeeze. “Stay right here,” he says. “I’ll be right back.”

“Huh?” I say in a confused tone as he gets out of the car.

I watch him walk to the trunk and grab a blanket. He gets back into the car, rights my clothing and spreads the blanket out over my body. I feel a blush spread across my face.

“Can I do something for you?” I ask him.

He shakes his head and holds a finger up to his lips. “No, no,” he says. “It’s okay. What you did was something for me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

I can’t really make out his face in the darkness, but I can tell that he’s leaned his head against the headrest. “I’m absolutely addicted to you,” he says. “Being anywhere near you is like being intoxicated.”

I’m happy for the darkness, because I’m blushing even more now.

“Teddy,” I say. “You don’t have to lie to me.” I brush off his comment, probably because I can’t process it. It feels odd to say those words, considering all that I’m keeping from him.

“Fuck,” he says, turning his head to look at me. I can see the whites of his eyes gleaming in the low light. “I would never fucking lie to you, Raven. Never.”

His words are so full of passion and conviction. It’s almost as if what he just said was some sort of prayer.

“Okay,” I respond, not sure what else to say. Guilt surges within me. I suddenly have the urge not to lie to him. I want to tell him the truth.

That I haven’t taken my vows.

That I’m not sure whether I’m going to.

“Come on,” he says, robbing me of the opportunity. “It’s been a long day. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

“Okay,” I say, hoping I’ll still have the courage to admit my truth to him tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Teddy

I say goodnight to Raven and make my way back to my own room. I'd sell my soul to the devil for the chance to spend the night with her, but let's be honest, Satan wouldn't want a soul like

mine.

She seemed okay when she bid me goodnight and closed the door. I was more than a little worried about her. I also wasn't completely clear on the rules of nun-ship, but I was pretty sure letting a sinner like me finger fuck you in a car would be frowned upon.

But then again, Father Murphy was running guns for the Irish mob, so maybe church is different than the way I remembered it.

I was about to close the door to my own room and rub out what was sure to be the biggest load of my life, but a hand pushing against my bedroom door stopped me.

I wish I could say it was the beautiful, graceful hand of Raven, come to finish the night in my bed (*hey, a guy can dream, right?*) but it was quite the opposite.

“Heard you went to dinner.”

It was Carmine and my cock pretty instantly deflates.

“What are you still doing here?” I say to him.

“Let’s stay on topic, Teddy,” he replies.

“Why do you get to pick the topic?” I ask. “Seems extremely one-sided.”

“Teddy,” he says, his voice stern.

“Man, you really know how to ruin a good thing.” I open my door up a little bit further. “Alright, come on,” I say to him. “Let’s get this over with.”

He walks into my room and sits down on my sofa. But, he does it in Carmine fashion, meaning he’s sitting mostly upright and on the edge of the sofa. Basically, he’s the only person I know who can make sitting on a sofa look uncomfortable.

I lean against the wall and let out a big yawn. “What do you want, Carmine?” I finally say to him.

“Why were you at dinner with Declan O’Leary?”

“Because Primo asked me to go,” I reply. Carmine’s always had an affinity for what goes on among the family, but lately he’s stepped a little further than makes me comfortable.

“What was the purpose of the dinner?” he asks.

“To cover for Primo,” I say, making a “duh” face.

I can see the frustration on Carmine’s face. He’s usually pretty reserved, but I’ve known him since we were kids and I also know how to push his buttons real good.

“Yes. We’ve established that, Teodoro,” he says.

“Teddy,” I interrupt. “Like the bear, please.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath. “Teddy, what did you and Declan O’Leary discuss at this dinner?”

“He tried to accuse us of murdering Father Murphy.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I reply. “Which, of course, we did do. But, I obviously didn’t tell him that.”

Carmine shakes his head at my antics. “How did you leave it with him?”

“Well, he tried to hit on my date,” I start to say.

“You brought a date with you?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Who and why?”

“Raven and because Primo told me to.”

“The nun?”

“Yes,” I say.

“How can you confirm that she’s trustworthy?” he asks.

I give him an incredulous look. “She’s a nun.”

“All the more reason for her to rat us out. We don’t exactly deal in the currency of our Lord and Savior.”

I’m usually pretty tolerant of Carmine, but I can feel my anger build at his comment.

“I told you she can be trusted. That should be the end of it,” I say.

“You picked this girl up where?” Carmine asks.

“Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to,” I say.

“At Father Murphy’s church. And now, we have Declan O’Leary, second in command of the Irish mafia, accusing the family of his murder. Am I misstating anything?”

“Just get out,” I say to him.

He stands. “Watch what you say around this girl,” he says to me.

“Watch what you say about her around me,” I say through gritted teeth.

Carmine doesn’t say anything. He leaves my bedroom and I slam the door behind him.

“Fucking prick,” I say under my breath. Not only is he an asshole, but he completely ruined the boner Raven gave me. I was so looking forward to tugging on it real good.

I sigh and walk into the bathroom. I turn on the shower, keeping the water cold.

This evening’s been far too hot in a number of ways and I need to cool off.



I have absolutely zero reason to go to Raven’s room. In fact, I have every reason *not* to go to her room. She’s a temptation that I cannot seem to pass up and every time I go to her, I end up pushing us into something I regret.

Still, my steps carry me down to her quarters with a lightness in my step. But, before I get there, Enzo stops me in the hallway.

“Teddy,” he says, calling out my name.

“Heya, Enzo,” I say, covering up the fact that I’d much rather not be talking to him. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

Enzo Rossi is one of the highest ranking members of the head table. He was pretty much one of my father’s right hand men. It was obvious he was the sort of man that was a looker when he was younger, but these days he’s a little heavier and a little more grey than I reckon he’d like to be.

“Been wrapped up in head table stuff,” he says.

I cringe. “Sounds pretty terrible. Honestly, I’m happier to not be involved in any of that.”

Enzo gives me a bit of a disappointed look. “I know that’s your preference, but you do know what your last name is,” he says. “It does carry weight and responsibility.”

I shrug. “No one’s ever wanted me involved in the business side of things before.”

“That was before your father was scheduled to be in prison for the next twenty years and your brothers found new lives for themselves.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess that’s true. Well, things seem to be moving along as well as ever, so I’ll continue to fly under the radar as much as I can.”

Enzo sighs and nods his head.

“Will you be at the fundraiser this weekend?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say.

“You seem anxious about something?”

I try and brush it off. “Anxious? Who, me?”

Enzo raises a bushy white eyebrow. “I’ve known you for a long time, Teddy. Care to share what’s really going on?”

I look towards the direction of Raven’s rooms with a bit of desperation. “Not really,” I admit honestly.

“That’s too bad,” Enzo says to me. “You should keep those close to you informed. Your father always talked to me about what was going on, and I always let him in on the discussions of the head table, especially when he wasn’t present.”

I want to groan out loud, but I keep it contained. I’m really not liking this whole “Be the Head of the Family” thing. I seriously cannot understand why my brothers fought so hard for it.

“Uh, right, yes, fine,” I finally say to Enzo. “Maybe it would be a good idea for us to talk.”

Enzo claps me on the shoulder and leads me away from where I truly want to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Teddy

I'm sitting with Enzo, struggling to keep my eyes from glazing over as he drones on about the latest shipment of whatever-the-hell. I nod and grunt in all the right places, but really, I'd rather

be anywhere else. Preferably with Raven.

"Alright, Enzo. Thanks for the update," I say, cutting him off mid-sentence. His bushy eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn't say anything.

Good man.

I push away from the table, wincing as the chair screeches across the floor. A discordant melody that feels far too fitting for this life.

As I walk toward Raven's room, my mind drifts to her. I can almost feel her warmth, hear her gentle voice. Her hazel eyes that seem to pierce through my soul. But then, a familiar tune interrupts my thoughts. My phone vibrates in my pocket, playing the opening notes of "O Fortuna" – Primo's obnoxious ringtone.

"Whhhhaaat?" I groan as I answer the call.

“Nice to talk to you too, little brother,” Primo says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Is it too much to ask for you to work on that attitude?”

“Is that all? Great, consider it done. Have a nice day,” I say dismissively, already moving to end the call.

“Wait!” Primo commands, his tone turning serious. “We need to talk about the Irish.”

“Can’t it wait?” I sigh, impatient to get back to Raven.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Fine,” I acquiesce, leaning against a nearby wall. “What’s up?”

“How did the dinner with Declan go?” Primo asks, his voice tense.

“Uneventful, mostly,” I reply, remembering the uneasy atmosphere around the table.

“Mostly?” he presses.

“Alright, fine. He recognized Raven,” I admit, the memory still fresh in my mind. “She was at the Irish cathedral where Father Murphy was murdered.”

“Shit,” Primo hisses through clenched teeth. “That’s not good.”

“Tell me about it,” I snap back. “But we handled it.”

“Handled it?” Primo scoffs. “You know that just makes me more nervous, right?”

“Look, everything’s under control,” I insist, feeling the weight of responsibility bearing down on me. I still wonder how the hell I ended up in this position.

“Fine, but be careful,” Primo warns. “We can’t afford any more complications with the Irish.”

“Speaking of, Declan mentioned an offer we haven’t responded to yet. What’s that about?” I ask, my voice edged with irritation.

Primo hesitates for a moment before replying, “The Irish made a monetary demand on us. It’s astronomical, Teddy. They claim it’s what we owe them for not running the guns anymore.”

“Either we pay up or ... ?” I press him, sensing his discomfort.

“Or,” Primo reluctantly continues, “they proposed a compromise.”

“Which is?” I growl, my patience wearing thin.

“They want one of us brothers to marry the daughter of the head of the Westies.” Primo’s words hit me like a ton of bricks. “They feel it would give them legitimacy they could leverage and that’s valuable to them.”

“Are you kidding me? When were you planning on telling me this?” I demand, my anger flaring.

“Look, Teddy,” Primo says defensively, “it never really seemed like an option, you know? That’s why we tried to take out key members of their operation, like Father Murphy.”

I sigh. “I should have known about this, Primo. If I’m gonna lead, I need to know what’s going on.”

“Teddy, you’ve never really embraced being the leader,” Primo counters, his tone laced with frustration.

“Maybe not, but we’re here now, aren’t we?” I snap back. The cold floor beneath my feet seems to mirror the chill

growing between us. “Speaking of which,” I continue, “Carmin’s been asking questions about the Irish. It’s making me uncomfortable.”

“Teddy,” Primo replies, sounding more sympathetic now, “he’s probably just trying to keep himself occupied since his father died. He doesn’t want to deal with the grief.”

“Huh?” I say to him. “You’re the one that made me anxious about him in the first place. And now you’re saying what I was saying all along!”

“I guess I thought about what you said,” Primo tries to explain. “Just keep an eye on him, okay?” Primo suggests, his lack of concern evident in his voice.

“Sure,” I agree halfheartedly, my mind racing with the possibilities of what could go wrong.

“Are you gonna be at the fundraiser?” I ask, trying to shift the focus of our conversation.

“Sorry, Teddy. I can’t,” Primo says, his voice weighed down with regret. “Isabella’s close to going into labor, and I promised her I wouldn’t have anything to do with mob business once she delivered.”

“Really?” I spit out, anger flaring in my chest. “You promised Giovanni you’d help him with the family, and now you’re not gonna help me?”

“Teddy, I’m sorry. I truly am. I’m doing everything I can for as long as I can. But I don’t have a choice,” he replies, sounding genuinely apologetic.

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes, irritation simmering beneath my skin. The cold marble floor of the mansion seems to seep through the soles of my shoes, sending shivers up my spine.

“Take care, brother. And good luck with everything,” Primo says before hanging up.

“Thanks for nothing,” I mutter to myself, feeling abandoned and more anxious than ever. Darkness creeps in from the corners of the room as if to swallow me whole. This anxiety is new to me – and I hate it. I wish I had someone I could trust to talk to about all this shit. Someone who wouldn’t turn their back on me when things got tough.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes with a new notification.

I stare at the sender in disbelief a number of times. Finally, I open it.

It’s a text message from Constantino.

Let’s talk.

A part of me feels relieved, but another part tenses, knowing that talking to him can be like playing with fire. His volatile nature and ambition often put us at odds, but despite that, there’s always been something that keeps us connected – a deep bond that can’t be easily broken.

Alright. Let’s talk.

I take a deep breath and brace myself for whatever storm may come.

This world I’ve been thrust into is cold and unforgiving, but it’s the only one I’ve got. And if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that I’ll need every ally I can find if I’m gonna survive it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Raven

A knock on my bedroom door shatters the silence, pulling me back to reality. I open it, and there's Teddy, his blond hair catching the dim light in the hallway. He looks a little nervous, a little bashful.

"Hey, can I come in?" he asks, his blue eyes searching mine.

"Of course," I reply, stepping aside to let him enter. The air feels heavy between us, thick with unspoken words. I can tell he wants to touch me, and part of me craves his touch too, but at the same time, I don't. I'm uncertain, lost in a maze of conflicting emotions.

"How are you feeling?" he asks gently as he studies my face.

"Okay, I guess." My voice is barely above a whisper. He reaches out for me, but instinctively, I pull back a little. He recoils, his face a mixture of hurt and understanding.

"Sorry," he says softly. "Anyway, I wanted to ask if you'd like to come to the fundraiser tonight."

“I’m not sure,” I admit, chewing on my lower lip. “What’s it like?”

He smiles reassuringly. “It’s technically a masquerade ball, but you don’t have to dress up if you don’t want to. If you decide to go, there are some dresses in your closet.”

“Are you going in costume?” I ask, curiosity piqued.

“Yeah, I sort of need to play and look the part. The whole thing is for appearances, you know?” His smile fades a little, and I can see the weight of his family’s expectations pressing down on him.

“What are you going as?”

Teddy grins, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I’m going as Lucifer.”

“Like, the Devil?” I raise an eyebrow, surprised by his choice.

He shakes his head. “No, Lucifer before he fell.”

“Interesting choice,” I say, genuinely intrigued.

He smiles. “Anyway, I need to leave early. If you decide to go, just head to the foyer at the right time, and someone will take you.” He steps closer, hesitating for a moment before giving me an awkward hug. We part ways, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the lingering warmth of his embrace.

Standing before the bedroom mirror, I stare at my reflection, the nun’s dress suddenly feeling almost foreign on my body. It’s suffocating, like an iron grip around my chest, and I want nothing more than to tear it off. My thoughts race as I try and make sense of my shift in emotions.

It felt odd taking the dress off when I changed for the dinner date. Then, it felt odd putting it back on when I

returned.

I think back to Teddy, his touch, and the electrifying sensations coursing through my veins when we were in the car together. He was so gentle, so caring, never demanding anything from me.

Could he really be some demon sent to tempt me? Maybe Father James is right. Maybe Father Patrick was wrong all along, and I've just been demonizing someone who only wanted to help me.

"Ugh, get it together," I mutter under my breath, shaking my head.

But I can't face these doubts alone. God's been silent since I stepped foot in this mansion, leaving me to navigate this mess by myself. Maybe Father James can offer some guidance. I need something to hold onto amidst this chaos.

I make my way to the chapel, lost in thought as I traverse the opulent hallways. The sound of hurried footsteps catches my attention, and I glance up just in time to see Carmine scurrying past. He looks like a man with secrets, eager to avoid detection. I can't help but wonder what he's been up to.

Upon arriving at Father James' door, I knock hesitantly, unsure of what kind of reception I'll receive. Will he judge me for my feelings for Teddy? Or will he provide the support I desperately crave?

"Come in," Father James calls, his voice warm and inviting.

"Father, I...I need your help," I blurt out, barely able to contain my emotions. "I just...I don't know what to do anymore."

The door creaks open, and Father James' kind eyes meet mine. "Raven, my child," he says gently, gesturing for me to enter. I step inside the small chapel, my heart heavy with the turmoil inside of me.

"Father, I...I'm struggling," I admit, my voice shaky. The words spill from my lips like water from a broken dam. "I'm torn between my feelings for Teddy and my desire to be a nun. With what happened between us already, I'm scared that I may be falling in love with him. How can that be when I'm supposed to love God and Jesus only?"

Father James folds his hands together and studies me for a moment before speaking. "Just because you love Teddy does not mean you don't have space in your heart for God. Think of it this way: mothers have many children but love all of them equally."

His words bring a new perspective to my dilemma, and I feel the knot in my chest loosen slightly. He continues, "It's important to forgive yourself and understand that it's possible to care deeply for more than one person without diminishing your love for God."

I nod, taking in his advice as I consider the path laid out before me. My thoughts gravitate towards Teddy, wondering how he'll react when I tell him the truth about not taking my vows yet. A newfound determination fills me, urging me to face the situation head-on.

"Thank you, Father James," I murmur, my gratitude evident in my voice. "You've given me a lot to think about."

"Always here for you, Raven," he replies, his eyes warm.

With a final nod, I leave the chapel and make my way back to my quarters. As I walk, I mull over Father James' words,

feeling a sense of clarity wash over me. Upon reaching my room, I open the closet and smile at the array of dresses inside. The fundraiser is a costume masquerade, and I fully intend to dress the part.

My fingers brush against the luxurious fabrics as I select my outfit, anticipation building for the night ahead. No one will know who I've chosen to portray, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm ready to face the truth and move forward.

I stand in my room, the soft light from the vanity mirror casting a warm glow around me. My hands tremble slightly as I pick up the makeup brush and begin applying eyeshadow, the colors dark and dramatic. One stroke at a time, my reflection transforms into someone I barely recognize. Someone strong, confident, and ready to face what's been haunting her for far too long.

"Okay, Raven," I mutter to myself, curling my hair into loose waves that cascade around my face. "You got this. You can do this."

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips, small but genuine. It's been so long since I've felt anything close to happiness, and I relish in the sensation. It's like a melody playing softly in the background, harmonizing with my newfound determination.

As I fasten the last accessory onto my dress, I can't help but marvel at how it's all come together. The silk feels cool against my skin, a stark contrast to the oppressive fabric of my usual attire. I inhale deeply, the scent of perfume filling my lungs and adding to the sense of transformation that's swept over me.

I admire my reflection in the mirror. “Who would’ve thought?”

My mind wanders back to my past, to the life I’d left behind when I sought refuge in the church. What if things had been different? What if I’d grown up in a loving home, free to pursue my dreams and ambitions?

“Maybe it’s not too late,” I whisper, suddenly struck by the realization that I’m still young. That there’s still time to change my life and become the person I was meant to be.

With one last glance in the mirror, I steel my resolve and take a deep breath. Tonight, I’ll face the truth head-on and confront Teddy. Whether our paths continue together or diverge, I refuse to let the church be my hiding place any longer. The guilt and pain that have consumed me for so long will no longer dictate my life.

“Let’s do this,” I say, closing my eyes briefly before stepping out of my room and into the unknown.

Glancing at the clock, I realize Teddy’s long gone by now. My heels click against the marble floor as I make my way through the foyer, the sound echoing through the large, empty space. I approach the soldier waiting for me, and he can’t help but let a hint of shock cross his face.

“Hey, I need a ride to the ball,” I say, trying to sound casual despite feeling a thousand butterflies in my stomach.

“Of course,” he replies, quickly recovering his composure. We walk to the car parked outside, and the ride is filled with heavy silence, but I focus on what’s ahead, my resolve growing stronger with each passing moment.

As we arrive at the private castle hosting the fundraiser, I can’t help but be awed. It’s like the mansion all over again –

but more so. It was clearly an old structure bought by some rich person, gutted, and turned into a modern marvel. As I step out of the car, my eyes take in every detail of the eerie beauty before me.

Moss creeps up the ancient stone walls, vines twisting around turrets and towers as if they're trying to reclaim the place for nature. The air is heavy with the scent of damp earth and decay, contrasting sharply with the glamorous scene unfolding before me. Guests in elaborate costumes ascend the steps, their faces hidden behind intricate masks.

I adjust the mask covering my own features and begin my climb, scanning the crowd for any sign of Teddy. But it's impossible to pick him out among the sea of mysterious faces. Anxiety knots in my chest, but I push it aside, knowing I have to stay focused.

"Alright, girl, you got this," I mutter under my breath, trying to pump myself up. I'm not here to hide anymore, or to lose myself in guilt. I'm here to face Teddy and whatever comes next, even if it scares the hell out of me.

Stepping through the double doors, I'm greeted by a breathtaking scene. A live band plays in the corner, their haunting melodies adding to the surreal atmosphere. Rich fabrics drape from the high ceilings, and candlelight flickers, casting dancing shadows on the walls. It's like stepping into another world altogether, one where anything could happen.

"Find Teddy, tell him the truth, and face whatever comes," I repeat my mantra in my head, steeling myself for the confrontation ahead. I take a deep breath and plunge into the crowd, ready to confront my fears and embrace the uncertain future that awaits.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Teddy

The doors to the fundraiser swing open with a flourish, revealing Raven, clad in an intricate black costume, the very embodiment of Lilith. Her makeup is dramatic, accentuating her hazel eyes, while her raven-black hair falls in loose waves down her back. A silver upside-down cross dangles around her neck, drawing whispers and stares from the crowd. The black lace mask obscuring her face only adds to the air of mystery surrounding her.

As soon as I see her, my heart skips a beat, making it damn near impossible to focus on anything else. Enzo's voice fades into the background, along with the Russian Bratva guy he's been chatting with. I want—no, I *need*—to get to Raven.

“What are your thoughts on the matter?” Enzo asks me, nodding towards the Bratva man. But I'm not listening, my gaze locked on Raven as she hesitates at the top of the stairs, scanning the room.

“Teddy, did you hear me?” Enzo presses, his bushy eyebrows furrowing in annoyance.

“Uh, yeah. Sure,” I mumble, tearing my eyes away from the vision that is Raven for just a second, trying to refocus on the conversation. But it’s useless; all I can think about is her, the way the curve of her lips seems to call out to me, the way her eyes seem to pierce through the darkness of the room.

“Excuse us,” Enzo says, pulling us away from Bratva-man. He grabs me by the elbow and forces me to take my eyes off Raven. “Are you even listening at all?” Enzo snaps, clearly irritated by my lack of attention.

“Sorry, Enzo. It’s just...” I trail off, gesturing vaguely in Raven’s direction, unable to find the words to describe the magnetic pull she has on me.

“Christ, Teddy. Get your head out of the gutter and focus,” Enzo grumbles, his mustache twitching with impatience. “You know we’ve got business to attend to tonight.”

“Of course,” I say, forcing a smile. “I’ll be right back.” Without waiting for his response, I make my way through the crowd toward Raven, my heart pounding in my chest as if it’s trying to escape.

“Hey,” I say softly when I reach her side, drinking in every detail of her up close. The delicate lace of her mask, the glint of the silver cross against her dark costume, the warmth of her presence—it all feels like a dream, one that I don’t want to wake up from.

Up close, she’s even more breathtaking. The way her dark hair cascades in loose waves over her shoulders, framing the delicate mask that conceals her identity—she’s a vision straight out of a Gothic novel. The silver upside-down cross around her neck only adds to the allure, drawing my eyes down to the curve of her throat.

“Hi,” she replies, her voice barely audible above the din of the fundraiser. Her eyes dart nervously around the room, and I can’t help but wonder what secrets she’s hiding behind that mask. What made her choose such a daring costume? Especially considering her current occupation.

“Can we talk? Somewhere more private?” Raven asks, her voice quivering slightly. I glance back at Enzo, watching him from across the room, but the pull of Raven is too strong to resist.

“Sure. Let’s go,” I agree before leading her away from the prying eyes of the crowd, my mind racing with possibilities and questions.

As we weave through the guests, I can’t help but think about how much I desire her, how every inch of my being craves to be closer to her. I know I’m shirking on my responsibilities, and I know that could threaten everything in the family business, but right now, she’s all that matters.

We retreat to the corner of the ballroom, hoping for some semblance of privacy amid the raucous atmosphere. But as we try to speak, our voices are swallowed by the noise of the presentations. A group walks by us, their laughter spiking my anxiety. I don’t want anyone to overhear our conversation—whatever it’s going to be about.

“Follow me,” I say, grabbing her hand and feeling a thrill of excitement at the contact. We slip through the throng of people and make our way outside into the gardens. The night air is crisp and biting, but as I glance at Raven, she’s smiling too, as if the anticipation of what might happen between us is contagious.

We find a hidden spot with a bench and sit down, the shadows enveloping us like a cloak. Raven looks at me, her

eyes studying my outfit. “You really went all out, huh? Just be careful not to get that white tux dirty.”

I smirk, glancing down at the pristine fabric. As Lucifer, I’m decked out in an entirely white tuxedo, complete with tiny angel wings and a cross necklace—a playful nod to my role in this twisted game of ours. We’re like complete opposites: her as Lilith, dark and mysterious, and me as Lucifer, the fallen angel bathed in white.

“Can’t make any promises,” I reply, reaching over to lightly finger her silver upside-down cross necklace. “So, you’re dressed as Lilith, huh? Interesting choice, considering your line of work.”

Raven blushes, looking away for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “Well, I figured since you’re playing the Devil, I might as well be his first love, right?” She tries to laugh it off, but there’s a nervous energy surrounding her.

“Right,” I say, my mind racing with thoughts of our past and the undeniable chemistry that crackles between us. This entire night has been a whirlwind, and I desperately want to know what fate has in store for us.

“Look,” Raven starts, her voice shaky, “I need to tell you something, Teddy.”

“Anything,” I say, my heart pounding in my chest.

I glance down at Raven’s hands, trembling ever so slightly in her lap. Concerned, I cover them with my own, trying to reassure her. “Hey, relax. It’s just me,” I say, my voice soft and comforting. “There’s no reason to be anxious.”

“Okay,” she whispers, taking a deep breath as if trying to steady herself. Her eyes meet mine, and I can see the vulnerability there, hidden beneath her dark makeup.

She hesitates for a moment before finally speaking the words that send my world spinning. “I’m not a nun. I haven’t taken my vows yet.”

The shock is so profound it feels like I’ve been sucker-punched. Everything goes blurry for a second, and I wonder if I’ve blacked out. “What?” I stammer, unable to process the information. “Say that again.”

“I’m not a nun,” she repeats, her voice barely audible. “I haven’t taken any vows yet.”

A torrent of questions floods my mind, and they all spill out at once. “How? When? Why not? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Her eyes widen, and I realize I’m overwhelming her. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. “Never mind,” I say, shaking my head. “Just tell me at your own pace.”

“Alright,” she says, swallowing hard. “When you took me after that night at the church, you assumed I was a nun.”

“Actually, Carmine told me you were,” I interject.

“Wait, what do you mean?” she asks, confusion evident on her face.

“Never mind,” I say, dismissing the thought. “Just keep going.”

“Okay, well, after that night at the church, you assumed I was a nun, and...I never corrected you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Raven hesitates for a moment before finally speaking. “I don’t know. Maybe...maybe I did it because I was afraid to admit my feelings for you. With you assuming I was a nun, it gave me an out.”

“Wait, what feelings?” I ask, genuinely surprised by her revelation.

Her cheeks flush a deep crimson, and I can't help but want to see more of that beautiful blush on her face. Unthinkingly, I reach up and remove her mask, allowing me to fully take in her stunning features. As I brush my fingers gently along her flushed cheeks, I ask again, “What feelings?”

She doesn't say anything, but her eyes seem to plead with me to understand. And suddenly, I do. I lean forward slowly, giving her every opportunity to pull away if she wants to. But she doesn't. Our lips meet in a tender, almost desperate kiss, as if we're both trying to communicate everything we've been holding back for so long.

As our lips move together, the world around us fades away – the noise from the fundraiser, the biting cold of the night air, even the looming threat of discovery. All that matters now is this moment, this connection between us that feels like coming home after a lifetime spent wandering in the dark.

My hands find their way into her loose waves, tangling themselves in the soft strands of her hair, while hers rest lightly on my chest. We pour everything into this kiss – all our fears, our doubts, our desires – knowing that once we break apart, reality will come crashing down on us once more. But for now, we allow ourselves to get lost in each other, finding solace in the warmth and tenderness of our shared embrace.

Eventually, we pull away from each other, our breaths heavy and our eyes locked on one another. The weight of what has just transpired settles upon us, but there's also a sense of hope that lingers in the air.

“Teddy,” she whispers, her voice filled with emotion, “I don't know what happens next, but I know I want to face it

with you.”

“Whatever comes our way, we’ll figure it out together,” I promise her, my voice barely audible as the sound of applause drifts towards us from the ballroom. And for the first time in a long while, I dare to believe that maybe – just maybe – we can find a way to navigate this twisted, dangerous world and come out unbroken on the other side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Teddy

I'm kissing her again and for the first time, I don't feel guilty about it. It feels right and good and pure, like a sip of fresh water after wandering through burning desert sands. I want to drink her

down, lose myself in her. I move in to deepen the kiss, but the sounds of people walking among the gardens come closer. Damn it.

I pull back and she looks at me in confusion, her hazel eyes clouded with desire. She's lost in the kiss and I know she feels it too – that sense of finally being able to just be with one another. "Let's go somewhere more private," I murmur to her, my voice hoarse.

"Where?" she asks, her breath still ragged from our embrace.

I stand up, holding onto her hand like she might disappear if I don't squeeze her tight enough. The presentations are starting to wind down, and people are spilling into the gardens like ants invading a picnic. I get an idea.

"This way," I say. Then we're running through the gardens and then the castle, dodging people going in the opposite

direction.

“Teddy!” Enzo calls out to me. He’s standing with Carmine, and both of them look upset. Shit, this can’t be good.

I briefly look back at him and wave.

“Can’t right now!” I shout over my shoulder. He turns to say something to Carmine, and I know I should care. Deep down, I know I’m not putting on the show I need to as the leader of the family, but I can’t bring myself to give a damn. I never wanted to take over the family business; it was thrust upon me. So, I’m doing my best, but what I have with Raven, or what I’m about to have, is worth so much more to me than any of that.

She pulls on my hand, and I look at her.

“Do you need to go to them?” she asks.

I pull her into my arms, whispering into her ear. “Absolutely nothing and no one is more important to me than you and this moment.”

She smiles. “Okay.” And then we’re running through the rest of the crowd and out to the valet.

The valet raises an eyebrow at me, clearly puzzled by my presence. I toss him my ticket and say, “Just give me the keys; I’ll be faster.” He doesn’t argue – good man. I shoot a glance back at Raven and tell her to wait where she is.

I jog back to my car, and my Mustang roars like a beast when I fire it up. The engine hums beneath me as I rev it, pulling around to the front of the castle. But as I approach, I see Raven talking to someone. My eyes narrow as I recognize Declan, that brutish second-in-command of the Westies. I don’t want to waste any time.

“Raven!” I call out to her.

She turns and smiles at me, instantly lifting my spirits. She says something else to Declan, but I can’t hear it over the hum of my engine. With one last stare down between Declan and me, she gets into the car. I peel away from the castle, leaving him in the dust.

“What was that about?” I ask her, my curiosity piqued.

She shakes her head, her hazel eyes telling me not to worry. “It’s nothing,” she says over the rumble of the engine. “Where are you taking me?”

I realize that if this is going to work, I need to trust her. So I put the whole thing with Declan out of my mind and flash her a wide grin. “Somewhere private,” I say, my heart pounding with anticipation.

“Are we going back to the mansion?” she asks, excitement lacing her voice.

“Nah, that place will be swarming with people after the fundraiser,” I reply. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Okay,” she says, leaning back against the seat, watching the scenery pass by.

I steal glances at her as we drive, the moonlight dancing across her face. Her nickname, Darkness, suits her so well – a mysterious beauty that draws me in. She looks at me and blushes.

“What are you staring at?” she asks softly.

“Just admiring how beautiful you are.”

She smiles but tries to hide it, and I let her, for now.

We pull up to our destination, a place far away from prying eyes. I jump out of the car and hurry around to help her out. She looks up at the building, curiosity etched on her face. “Where are we?”

“Somewhere no one will find us,” I reply cryptically, grabbing a few things from the trunk of the car and leading her inside.

“Welcome to our little hideaway,” I say, motioning around the warehouse. The place is massive, with a high, vaulted ceiling that seems to stretch on forever. Wooden crates and boxes form towering columns as they reach towards the rafters, casting long shadows in the dim light that filters through the dusty windows. The air smells of old wood and faint traces of rust, a testament to the many years this place has stood.

Raven gives me a skeptical look. “These things...are they illegal?”

“Technically, yes,” I admit, rubbing the back of my neck. “But we’re doing our best to get rid of them responsibly.” The last thing I want is for her to think I’m just another thug.

She nods, seemingly satisfied with my answer. “I like that.”

Smiling, I lay a blanket out on the ground and pat the spot between my legs, inviting her to sit. She does so, her lavish costume pooling black fabric around her like a dark ocean. It’s such a stark contrast to the bright whites I’m wearing. As she settles in, I begin to massage her shoulders, feeling her relax into my touch.

“Are you worried about getting your costume dirty?” she asks, her voice soft and teasing.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I doubt I’ll wear it again,” I reply, grinning at her. She giggles softly, and my heart swells. That sound will never get old.

“That’s too bad,” she says, still smiling. “I liked it on you, especially the wings.”

I laugh, remembering how I left them behind in the car. “Well, technically, I’m a fallen angel now.”

Her hazel eyes lock onto mine, and I can’t help but get lost in their depths. “You know, Gabriel is actually a very misunderstood story.”

“Really?” I say, genuinely curious. “I want to hear all about it, but...later. Right now, all I want to do is kiss you. Would that be okay?”

She nods her head yes, but I need more than just a silent affirmation. “I need to hear you say it.”

Her voice is barely above a whisper, but it’s enough. “Yes, right now, more than anything, I want you to kiss me.”

I lean in, our lips meeting softly at first. The taste of her is intoxicating – a mix of the sweet champagne we’d been drinking earlier and something uniquely her own. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this close to her, and the sensation sends a shiver down my spine.

“Teddy,” she murmurs against my lips, and the sound of my name on her tongue ignites a fire within me. I kiss her harder, unable to hold back any longer. She responds eagerly, her hands tangling in my hair as she presses herself closer to me.

The air around us is thick with the scent of old wood and dust from the warehouse, but all I can focus on is her. The feel of her body pressed against mine, the way her breath hitches

when I deepen the kiss, and the soft sounds she makes as we lose ourselves in one another.

“Raven,” I gasp, pulling away for a moment just to look at her. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes dark with desire, and she’s never looked more beautiful to me. “Are you sure about this?” I ask, needing to know that she wants this as much as I do.

“More than anything,” she whispers, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest as she gazes into my eyes. “I want you, Teddy. I always have.”

My heart swells with emotion, and I pull her close again, sealing my lips over hers. Our tongues dance together, exploring and tasting, as if trying to make up for all the lost time between us. My hands slide down her sides, feeling the curves of her body beneath the layers of black fabric.

“God, I love you,” I murmur against her lips, swallowing her moan. The words feel like both a confession and a prayer, spoken in a sacred, hidden place where only the two of us exist.

The world outside this warehouse – the crime, the violence, and the obligations that weigh on our shoulders – fades away as we surrender to the passion between us. It’s a stolen moment in time, but right now, it’s all that matters.

“Teddy,” she whispers, her breath hot against my ear as our kisses grow more desperate. “I love you too.”

And with those words, the last of my restraint crumbles, and I give myself over entirely to the love and desire that has been building for so long.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Raven

Teddy's lips press against mine, and I swear it feels as if the heavens have opened up just for this moment. Every nerve in my body tingles with electricity, and yet, I can't help but feel a gnawing guilt deep in my chest.

Shouldn't I be ashamed? I think to myself as Teddy's kisses grow more insistent. *I was going to take vows. Isn't this betraying everything I once thought to be true?*

But then Father James' words echo in my mind, reminding me that there's enough room in my heart to love both Teddy and God. I don't need to wear a habit to prove my devotion.

Teddy must sense my hesitance because he pulls back, his blue eyes clouded with concern. "What's wrong?" he asks softly, cradling my face in his warm hands.

"Nothing," I lie, shaking my head. But Teddy sees right through me, as always.

"Tell me what you're feeling, Darkness. Don't hold back." His voice is gentle, coaxing me to share my insecurities.

“I’m just...nervous,” I admit, my cheeks flushing under his intense gaze. “I want to be with you, Teddy, but I’m scared too.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” he reassures me, his thumb brushing away a stray tear. “I’m nervous too, you know.”

“Really?” I ask, genuinely surprised. “But you’ve been with so many women before.”

“Sure,” he chuckles, “but none of them are you.”

My heart swells at his words, and I lean in to press my lips to his once more, allowing myself to fall into his embrace. The darkness that surrounds Teddy has always been terrifying, but now, as he holds me close, it seems almost comforting.

As his hands roam over my body, setting my skin ablaze, I realize that Teddy isn’t pushing things further. Taking matters into my own hands, I slowly unzip my dress, the fabric pooling around me like midnight against the moonlight of my skin.

“Teddy,” I whisper, feeling both powerful and exposed in this moment. “This darkness we’re in...it’s not so scary when you’re here with me. I...I need you to touch me.”

“Are you sure?” He looks at me, his blue eyes filled with both desire and concern.

“More than anything,” I reply, biting my lip.

He reaches out hesitantly, his fingers trailing along my jawline in a feather-light caress that sends shivers down my spine and warmth pooling low in my belly. His touch is gentle, almost reverent, and it’s clear he’s trying to give me the control I crave even as we navigate this unfamiliar territory together.

As Teddy continues to explore my body, our positions shift so that I'm lying beneath him, cradled in his strong arms. The fabric of his white shirt presses against my skin, a stark contrast to the darkness surrounding us and making me question who the true fallen angel is in this scenario.

"Teddy," I breathe, my hands running over the hard planes of his chest. "I want to feel your skin on mine."

Wordlessly, he pulls back just enough to pull his shirt off, revealing the toned muscles I'd felt when he carried me to safety all those years ago. It seems like he's always been there for me, even when I didn't realize it myself.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, his gaze drinking me in as if he can't quite believe this is real. His hands resume their exploration, and I moan his name in response, encouraging him to continue.

"God, you're so amazing," Teddy breathes into my ear, nipping gently at the lobe as his hands roam lower.

"Please," I beg, unable to form any other words as desire threatens to overwhelm me. "I need more."

"Anything for you, Darkness," he replies, his voice thick with lust. He pushes his pants down, leaving him in nothing but a pair of white boxers that do little to hide his arousal. He lays down next to me, pulling me close so that my back is flush with his front.

"Is this okay?" he asks, giving me one more chance to change my mind.

"More than okay," I assure him, already lost in the feel of his body against mine. "I want this, Teddy."

"Me too," he admits, his breath hot on my neck as he nips and kisses his way along the sensitive skin there. His

movements are slow and deliberate, as if he's savoring every moment – and giving me ample opportunity to stop things if I need to.

But I don't want to stop. No, I want this, and so much more from him. So I give in to the pleasure coursing through me and moan his name again, letting him know just how much I need him. And as our bodies move together in the darkness, I start to think that the salvation I've always sought was in his arms all along.

The heat between us intensifies as I reach behind me, feeling Teddy's hardness through his boxers. The moment I touch him, he groans – a delicious sound that sends shivers down my spine. I've been longing for this, to experience the passion we shared on our first night together at the hotel again. My body craves it.

"Raven," he breathes, rocking his hips into me. I turn my head to meet his lips, hungry for more, and he kisses me hard – as if he can't get enough. "I want you so bad," he confesses, his voice thick with desire.

"Teddy," I whisper back, my heart racing. "I want you too." With trembling fingers, I push down his boxers, and he helps me slide them off. Now we are both bare, vulnerable in each other's embrace.

I hear him break open a wrapper with his teeth, but he doesn't make me wait long. He lifts my leg, his bicep strong against my skin, and then he's pushing into me. It's been so many years since I've felt anything like this – the sensation of being filled, claimed by another person. He must know, because I'm moaning as he stretches me, his length pressing deep inside. As he adjusts, he kisses my neck, soothing and arousing me all at once.

“Are you okay?” he asks, concern etched into his voice.

“Yes,” I assure him, my tears betraying the storm of emotions within me. A single tear escapes, but he brushes it away, symbolically caring for me and reassuring me that I’m not alone in this moment.

When he’s fully seated inside me, he starts to rock his hips ever so slightly, stirring an indescribable pleasure within me. As we move together, I can’t help but think of how different this is from the life I’ve chosen – training to be a nun, devoting myself to God. Yet, as Teddy touches me with such tenderness and passion, I wonder if maybe this is where I truly belong – in the arms of a man who loves me, despite our complicated past and the darkness that surrounds us.

“Teddy,” I whisper, clinging to him. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Darkness,” he murmurs against my skin, his devotion shining through every touch, every kiss.

“Teddy, faster,” I gasp, my chest heaving. He obliges, his hips rocking into me with more urgency now. The sensation is dizzying, almost too much for my starved senses. As each thrust deepens our connection, I feel myself slipping farther from the world I’ve known, drawn deeper into Teddy’s intoxicating embrace.

“Raven, I need you to know...” His voice trembles as he speaks between ragged breaths, “I love you. I’ve always loved you. You’re the only one I’ve ever wanted.”

His words wash over me like a warm tidal wave, filling the empty spaces in my heart. How could I have ever believed that devotion to a higher power could compare to the fierce love I feel for this man?

“Teddy, I’m here now,” I whisper, and he nods, his eyes full of emotion.

“God, you drive me crazy,” he murmurs, his hand moving around to the front of me, fingers deftly caressing my clit. A jolt of pleasure shoots through me, and I bite back a moan. At the same time, his other hand slips around my neck, gently pressing down. The mix of sensations is overwhelming – pleasure and pain, vulnerability and trust, all tangled together in a way that makes it impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins.

“Teddy, I... I think I’m gonna come,” I warn him, feeling the heat rise within me.

“Let go, Darkness. I want to feel you,” he urges me, his grip on my neck tightening just enough to send me spiraling over the edge.

“Teddy!” My cry echoes through the room as the waves crash over me, pleasure so intense it’s almost painful. It’s only him, only Teddy who can make me feel this way – alive and seen, loved in a way I never thought possible.

As I shudder against him, the warmth flooding through my veins, he continues to hold me close, whispering words of love and devotion that I know in my heart are true.

“Teddy, don’t hold back,” I urge him, feeling the tension in his body as he continues to rock into me. The room is filled with our labored breathing and the sound of skin against skin, creating a rhythm that’s almost like a dark, seductive song.

“Raven... I can’t...” His voice is thick with need, and I know he’s close. We’re both teetering on the edge, lost in this moment of complete surrender.

“Let go, Teddy. It’s okay,” I whisper, feeling the shudders of his body as he finally releases, coming deep inside of me. Our heartbeats seem to sync, pounding out the same primal beat as we ride the waves of pleasure together.

As we start to come down from the high, Teddy kisses me tenderly, his love for me evident in every touch. “I love you so much, Raven,” he murmurs between kisses, and I believe him with every fiber of my being.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Raven

The sound of rain beating against the warehouse roof fills the space, its rhythm a steady, soothing backdrop to our quiet intimacy. Teddy grabs one of the blankets from the floor and drapes it over us, his warmth seeping into my bones as he pulls me close. I nestle into his arms, feeling like I belong there, like I never want to leave.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, concern lacing his voice.

“Okay,” I mumble, the word barely audible. It’s obvious he knows that I’m not really okay, but he doesn’t press.

“Anything you wanna talk about?” he asks, running his fingers through my hair.

I shake my head. “Nah, I just like being with you.”

He holds me tighter, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “I like it too. If I had it my way, we would’ve been together all along.” His words feel like something solid that I can cling to amidst the chaos inside me.

We fall silent for what feels like hours. Then, he finally asks the question that I know has been haunting him. “Why

did you leave?"

I try to find the right words, opening and closing my mouth like some stupid fish out of water. But when they come, they spill out like blood from a wound. "I didn't leave. I ran away."

"Ran away?" he echoes, confusion etched on his face. "Why?"

"Because I was scared," I admit, my voice cracking. "I was scared of hurting you, or anyone else. I never wanted to hurt anyone."

Teddy's grip on me tightens, and the vulnerability in his eyes speaks volumes. "But why run away? What were you trying to accomplish by cutting yourself off from everyone who cared about you?"

"No one cared about me," I say, sadness coating my words.

"Bullshit!" Teddy exclaims. "You knew I cared about you. How could you not?"

"It was one night," I say, my eyes filling with the start of tears.

"When you have what we have, Darkness, one night is all it takes."

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly feeling dry. I know he's right. I knew the moment I stepped out of that hotel room that I was going to break his heart, but I convinced myself that it was for the best. That he would be better off without me. "I thought if I ran away and kept away from people, that maybe I could keep everyone safe."

"Safe?" He looks at me like I've lost my mind, and maybe I have. But in this moment, with him holding me close and the

storm raging outside, it's the only truth I know.

The rain continues to tap against the roof, creating an eerie rhythm as it mixes with the distant rumble of thunder. The room feels heavy with emotion and my chest constricts as I try to process everything I'm feeling. Despite the storm outside, there's a strange sense of comfort in being held by him – like the world could fall apart around us and we'd still be safe within each other's arms.

“I just never wanted to hurt you,” I repeat.

His grip on me tightens, and he starts to gently run his fingers through my hair. “We all hurt people,” he says softly, almost like he's talking to himself as much as he's talking to me. “You can never not hurt someone.”

I frown, not really understanding what he means. “What are you talking about?”

“Think about it,” he continues, his voice barely above a whisper. “Literally our first act in this world is to hurt someone. Every baby that is born hurts their mother through the delivery. That's just the way of nature. In fact, we have to *learn* how to smile and laugh and see the positive in things.”

I've never thought about it that way before, and it makes me wonder if maybe I've been too hard on myself. “Is that why you're always laughing and smiling?” I ask, genuinely curious.

He smiles at my question, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. “In a way, yeah. I live in a world full of hurt and sadness, and I never wanted to let it consume me. My smile is my coat of armor, and my jokes are my shield.”

I can't help but feel a pang of envy. “I never had anything like that. I never learned how to protect myself from the

cruelties of the outside world.”

Teddy’s expression softens, and his thumb brushes away a tear that’s managed to escape from the corner of my eye. “That’s okay, you know? You can learn. And in the meantime, I’ll be that for you.”

As he says those words, a sense of warmth and security washes over me. It’s like a blanket being draped around my shoulders, shielding me from the cold and the chaos outside. For the first time in a long time, I feel truly safe, and it’s all because of him.

“Thank you,” I whisper, burying my face into his chest as another peal of thunder echoes through the room.

“Always,” he murmurs back, holding me close as the storm continues to rage outside.

I feel safe in his arms, but there’s something gnawing at me, a question I can’t keep bottled up any longer.

“Teddy,” I begin hesitantly, “why are you doing all this for me?”

He turns to look at me, his blue eyes sincere and unwavering. “Because I love you.”

I frown, not understanding. “But what does that even mean? ‘Love’?”

“There’s nothing to understand,” he says softly, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. “It’s just a truth.”

“I guess I don’t really understand love, but I want to.” It’s an unfair thing of me to say, considering I confessed it to him just moments earlier. But, maybe there’s a difference between feeling something and understanding something.

He tilts his head, considering. “What about your faith? Don’t you love God?”

I glance away, feeling a knot form in my chest. Images from my past flicker in my mind, memories I’d buried deep within me, hoping never to unearth again. “I... I think I was using faith as a way to escape my past because I couldn’t process it. I don’t really know what I believe right now.”

Teddy nods, his face full of understanding. “It’s okay to take time to find out who you are and what you believe.”

“Then what do you believe?” I ask him, curiosity getting the better of me. “Do you believe in God?”

“No, I don’t,” he replies, a hint of sadness in his voice. “I’ve seen too much cruelty in this world to believe that there could be a God. And if there is one, if I’m wrong, I wouldn’t want anything to do with an omnipotent being that allows such things to happen.”

“Isn’t that the cost of free will?” I counter.

Teddy smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Seems like a pretty shitty thing to do for eating one piece of fruit. To condemn the entire human race to cruelty and atrocities just because a talking snake, who God put there by the way, asked us to eat an apple.”

I can’t help but chuckle at his blunt summary of the biblical story. I’ve never really thought about it that way before, but now that he mentions it, it does seem a bit absurd.

“Y’know, I never really thought about it that way,” I admit to Teddy, feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he reassures me, his voice gentle. “You’re emotionally vulnerable right now, and that’s completely

normal. Don't feel like you have to make any decisions just yet."

I look into his eyes, searching for a hint of judgment or impatience, but all I see is warmth and understanding. "So, what happens now?" I ask, my voice barely audible over the sound of the rain.

Teddy smiles softly, pulling me closer. "We snuggle, duh."

I go to open my mouth, but he stops me with a gentle "shh." He wraps his arms around me, The steady beat of his heart against my back soothes me, and I relax into him.

We sit in silence as I contemplate my beliefs and what they mean to me.

As Teddy's arms tighten around me, I realize that even though I may not know what I believe right now, I know one thing for certain: I trust him. And maybe that's enough.

"Ever since I left you, I've had nightmares when I slept," I confess, swallowing the lump in my throat. "It's like my past won't leave me alone, even in my dreams."

"Raven," he says, squeezing me tighter, "I'll sleep next to you tonight, and every night if you want me to. I'll fight off those nightmares for you, I promise."

Hearing him say that, the tension in my body begins to dissipate. As I start drifting off, Teddy begins reciting lines from the poem 'The Raven.' His voice, deep and melodic, lulls me further into slumber.

"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary..."

The familiar words wrap around me like a comforting blanket, and I fall into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Teddy

The weight of Raven's body against my chest is delicate yet heavy with emotion. Her breathing – the rise and fall of her chest – feels like a symphony, so peaceful in this chaos. I tuck her

into the passenger seat, wrapped in the softest damn blanket I could find in the warehouse. It seems as if I'm always wrapping her in blankets and putting her into my car. Funny how things turn out.

I plant a gentle kiss on her forehead before closing the door. The engine purrs to life as I start the car, driving away from the warehouse.

My thoughts drift to that conversation with Primo earlier. The Irish bastards want a ridiculous sum or one of us to marry into their clan. As if I'd ever let them take over what my family built. I may not be interested in the business, but that doesn't mean I don't feel a sense of loyalty to my family.

And marrying someone else? Hell no. Raven's the only one who's ever made me feel anything real.

But would she even consider something like that with me? It seems impossible, like some sick joke life is playing on me.

But miracles don't exist, not for people like us.

Cruising down the empty streets, I pass just one lonely car before pulling up to the mansion. The sky's starting to lighten – dawn ain't far off. As I step inside, cradling Raven in my arms, Carmine and Enzo stand there, looking like they're about to burst a vein.

“Leaving the fundraiser early, Teddy?” Enzo spits out, his bushy eyebrows furrowed.

“Shut it,” I hiss, nodding at the sleeping woman in my arms. “I don't want you waking her.”

Carmine scoffs. “Couldn't give a shit about waking the little nuisance.”

My blood boils, but I keep my cool. For Raven. “What the hell are you two even doing here? This is my home, not your personal hangout.”

“Maybe if you ran things right,” Carmine sneers, “we wouldn't have to babysit you all the damn time.”

“Get out.” The words are ice as I stare them down.

Raven stirs in my arms, her hazel eyes fluttering open. “What's going on?”

“Nothing,” I reassure her. “Go back to sleep.”

My anger flares up, and I struggle to keep my voice low. “I'm sick of your shit. If you don't like the way I'm running things, then you can leave any damn time. Your invitation to this mansion is revoked. If you want to visit, you can contact my assistant.”

“Your assistant?” Carmine drawls. “You don't have one.”

“Exactly,” I snap. “So good luck with that.”

They mutter something about me needing to take things seriously and do a better job leading, but I don't bother responding. I watch them leave, slamming the door behind them and locking it.

"Teddy," Raven murmurs, her eyes fluttering open as she stirs in my arms.

I kiss her forehead and lull her back to sleep.

As I carry her up the stairs to my room, I take a moment to appreciate the space that used to be my refuge. I never changed it much from when I used to live here as a kid.

The walls are covered in a mix of abstract paintings and concert posters, a testament to my love for music. A vintage record player sits on a shelf, surrounded by stacks of vinyl records – my attempt at holding onto the past, I guess.

The king-sized bed dominates the room, its dark wood frame contrasting against the white sheets and pillowcases. A plush gray carpet covers the floor, softening my footsteps as I walk across the room.

I gently lay Raven down on the bed, tucking the blanket around her. Her breathing evens out as she drifts back to sleep, and for the first time in a long while, I feel a sense of peace wash over me. I slide into bed next to her, curling my body around hers protectively.

With Raven in my arms, I allow myself to forget – just for a moment – all the bullshit surrounding me. The Irish, Enzo, and Carmine fade into the background, as if they're nothing more than a distant memory.

As I close my eyes, I let myself be lulled into a peaceful sleep by the sound of Raven's gentle breathing. For once, the loneliness and violence that have always been a part of my life

seem to disappear, replaced by the warmth of the woman I love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Teddy

The morning sun streams through the curtains, casting warm golden rays across the room. I blink awake and find Raven lying next to me, her black hair splayed on the pillow like a dark halo, her delicate eyelashes fluttering as she stirs. Man, it feels so damn good to have her here, like it's the most natural thing in the world. I never want to wake up without her again.

“Hey,” I whisper, my voice husky from sleep.

“Hey,” she murmurs, blushing when she sees me staring. Her hazel eyes, always so full of mystery, meet mine.

“Want to go exploring?” I ask her with a grin.

“Exploring?” She raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “Life's felt stressful lately. Let's just have a random day around town. No plans, just see where the universe takes us. That's how I met you, after all.”

“Okay.” She smiles, and I can't help but roll over on top of her, kissing her softly before moving down to her neck. I start to tickle her, and she bursts into laughter, trying to tell me to

stop between gasps for breath. I join her in laughter, kissing her again.

“Alright, alright!” she exclaims, finally wriggling out of bed. But I’m not done – I grab her, wrapping my hands around the front of her thighs, and pull her back, playfully nipping at her ass.

“Ouch!” she yelps, spinning around to face me. I give her a wicked grin. “You’re crazy.”

“Only for you,” I admit, and she shakes her head, laughing again.

“But... I don’t have anything to wear,” she says, glancing around the room. “And I don’t wanna walk through the mansion naked with everyone around.”

“Hey, don’t worry,” I assure her. “I kicked everyone out.”

“Really?” She looks surprised.

“Yep. They were seriously pissing me off, so out they went.” I stand up, completely naked, and stride confidently to the bedroom door, flinging it open. “See? All ten thousand square feet just for us.”

She laughs, but still clutches the sheet tightly around her as she follows me into the hallway. It’s cute how shy she can be sometimes, even after everything we’ve been through.

“Trust me,” I tell her, my voice softening. “There’s no one here but us.”

As Raven approaches me nervously, I admire her beauty. Her black hair frames her face perfectly, even in its “just woken up” state, and those hazel eyes seem to pierce into my very soul. With a quick motion, I grab her and pull her into

me. She lets out the cutest yelp, and I immediately press my lips against hers in a passionate kiss.

“Still worried about someone seeing us?” I tease, pulling back from the kiss just enough to speak. To prove my point, I turn my head and yell at the top of my lungs. The sound echoes around the empty mansion, bouncing off the walls and high ceilings. No one comes running, no one even stirs. Grinning, I turn back to face her. “See? We’re alone. No staff. No soldiers. Just us.”

I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and kiss her again. It’s so easy to kiss Raven. She really is like darkness – she consumes me, envelopes me, and fills my every thought. Her body relaxes, and as the sheet falls away, my hands roam her soft skin once more. I hadn’t meant to start this with her right now, but it seems my desire for her is stronger than my self-control.

Breaking the kiss, I turn her around in my arms, pressing my chest against her back. I lick my palm before sliding it down her body until I find her already wet pussy. Groaning softly into her ear, I kiss her neck and whisper, “You’re so deliciously wet for me.”

“Are we really going to do this here?” she asks hesitantly, her voice breathless. “Out in the open like this?”

“Absolutely,” I reply without hesitation, my fingers teasing her clit while my other hand toys with a nipple. “It’s even hotter this way. I’d want to take you like this even if there were people around, just so everyone can see that you belong to me and me alone.”

Her knees start to shake as I work her higher and higher. “Do you like the idea of that?” I ask. “Being seen like this?”

“Yes,” she breathes, her voice barely audible over her own moans. “I want to explore everything with you.”

“Me too,” I agree, feeling her walls clench around my fingers as she comes with a moan of my name. The sound sends shivers down my spine, and for a brief moment, all I can think about is how much I want her – how much I need her.

My heart races with the thought of bending Raven over a random piece of furniture in the mansion and fucking her senseless, but I decide not to. She turns around after she’s recovered from her orgasm, her eyes meeting mine. “Can I make you feel good?” she asks, her voice soft and sultry.

“Raven,” I say, the sound of her name on my lips sending shivers down my spine, “you always make me feel good just by being around you. And as much as I want to take you right now and hear you screaming my name as I rock my cock in and out of you, I actually want to be hard for you as we go throughout the day.” I pause, grinning, then add, “Edge myself to the thought of burying my cock in your warm heat again.”

She furrows her brow, clearly not understanding what I mean. I raise an eyebrow and grab her hand, leading her to the kitchen, both of us still naked. She sits down gingerly on one of the barstools as I start cooking breakfast, the sizzle of the frying eggs filling the air.

“Hey,” I ask her, trying to keep the conversation light, “what were your sexual experiences like after we were together in high school?”

Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, and she looks down at her hands. “I... I don’t really want to talk about it,” she admits.

I walk over to her, kneeling in front of her, my eyes locked on hers. “You shouldn’t be embarrassed, Darkness. Tell you what: for every thing you tell me, I’ll tell you something embarrassing I’ve done in return.”

Her lips curve into a small smile, and the sight lights me up inside. “Okay,” she agrees hesitantly. “You start.”

I stand up and walk back over to the stove, flipping the eggs with a flick of my wrist.

“Alright, here’s one for you,” I say as I plate the eggs. “Once when I was super drunk, I fell asleep on top of a poor girl when I was trying to get her off.” Raven laughs, the sound filling the room like music. I laugh at the memory, but I do still feel a little guilty since she got me off first.

Raven’s smile fades, and she hesitates before speaking. “Things were pretty bad after I ran away. I hitchhiked across the country, and the people I met... they weren’t always the nicest.”

I glance over at her, concerned. “What do you mean, ‘not the nicest’?”

She fidgets in her seat, her eyes downcast. I walk over to her, cupping her face in my hands. “Hey, you don’t need to worry about being embarrassed. I want to know you, Raven. Your life, who you are, where you’ve been. None of it is going to change how I feel about you.”

Taking a deep breath, she finally opens up. “I was raped a few times while I traveled. The first time, I tried to fight back, but I just got hurt worse. I was lucky to escape with my life. After that, I didn’t fight. I just gave them what they wanted so I wouldn’t get beaten up... at least, not usually.”

My blood boils at her words. “Do you know who any of these guys are? Their names?”

She shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. “No, I don’t know.”

It pains me to hear this. I’m not the kind of guy to go around killing people, but for Raven, I’d do it in a heartbeat and not even feel guilty. My chest tightens as I hold back my rage, focusing on her instead.

“Raven,” I say softly, wiping away a tear that escapes down her cheek, “I’m so sorry you had to go through that. But I’m here now, and I’ll do everything I can to make sure you never have to experience anything like that again.”

Her eyes meet mine, and she nods, offering me a small, grateful smile. In this moment, I swear to myself, I’ll protect her – no matter what it takes.

“I’ve never been with someone that I truly wanted to be with,” she admits, her eyes locked on mine, “except for you.” Hearing her say that makes my heart swell with happiness, but also fills me with a seething anger at the thought of those who hurt her.

“Alright, let’s start something new together then,” I say, bringing a plate of food over to her and sitting down next to her. I take her hands in mine, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine. “I’m going to erase the touch of every man that ever hurt you or used you. I want to show you how good things can be when you’re with someone you choose to be with. How much fun two people can have exploring their bodies and their interests together.”

Her eyes light up, filling with hope. “I’d really like that, Teddy.”

“Great, we’ll start right now.” I grin at her.

CHAPTER THIRTY



Raven

“Starting right now” echoes through my mind as I wonder what Teddy means by that. But it doesn’t take long to find out. We’re still sitting in the kitchen, completely naked, not wearing a stitch of clothing. It feels vulnerable but arousing at the same time. There’s a thrill in the idea of being caught like this, and it makes everything even more exciting.

“Relax and just breathe,” he whispers into my ear as his strong arms wrap around me. His fingers press into my shoulders, massaging away any lingering tension. I let out a shaky breath and nod, trying to focus on his touch instead of our exposed state.

“Okay.” My voice trembles slightly.

As his hands move down my body, Teddy tells me he’s going to edge me, making me tilt my head back with confusion. “What does that mean?” I ask, feeling vulnerable with my ignorance.

His fingers slide from my shoulders to my breasts, massaging them gently before tweaking my nipples. A sudden

heat pools low in my core, making me bite down on my lip. He grins devilishly as he explains, “It means I’ll get you aroused, but I won’t let you come.”

“Spread your legs for me, Darkness,” he orders softly, and I comply without hesitation. His fingers trace around my pussy, teasing me to the brink of madness. I find myself begging him to touch where I want him most, leaning back into his strong body, writhing with pleasure.

“What do you want?” he asks with a sly smile, his breath hot against my ear.

“For you to touch...my clit...” I moan, losing myself in his skilled touch.

“Of course,” he says, finally moving his finger to touch it. “But, you might regret that.” His words send a shiver down my spine, but the sensation of his finger circling my clit, already soaked for him, makes any questions or doubts disappear from my mind.

“Teddy,” I gasp as my entire body trembles under his touch. The rules of his game might be torturous, but I’m not one to back down from a challenge. And neither is he.

“More, please,” I beg him, my voice breathless and needy. His fingers slide inside me, pumping rhythmically as I cling to him, feeling my breasts move with each thrust. My body is trembling, the pressure building up within me as I approach the precipice of an orgasm.

“I’m about to come,” I warn him, desperate for release.

But then he says something I never expected to hear. “Don’t.”

His hand pulls away, leaving me gasping and whimpering in disbelief. I twist around to face him, and the sight of his grin

sends a shiver down my spine.

“I told you I was going to edge you,” he reminds me, smirking at my shock. His gaze drifts downward, and I follow it to find that he’s rock solid and standing at attention. “I’m edging with you.”

“Seriously?” I ask, incredulous. “We’re going to be like this the whole day?”

Teddy plants a heated kiss on my lips before responding, “Oh, we’re going to edge each other all day. By the time tonight happens, it’ll be the biggest orgasm of your life.” He grabs my hand, and we run through the mansion, laughter bubbling from our throats as we make our way back to his bedroom.

After hastily throwing on some clothes, we hop into Teddy’s car, his energy infectious as he peels away from the mansion. Curiosity gnaws at me, and I pester him to share where we’re going. He just grins mischievously and shakes his head. Finally, after relentless questioning, he gives in.

“I’ll tell you,” he says, “but only if you do exactly as I say.”

I give him a skeptical look.

“Trust me, it’ll be fun.”

I nod. “Okay then.”

“Lift your shirt,” he says.

“What? Here?” I say, looking around at all of the cars on the highway that could peer into our very low to the ground vehicle.

“Yeah,” he says, his grin still wide as ever. “That just makes it more exciting. Just try,” he says. “If you don’t like it,

we will stop immediately.”

I take a deep breath and say okay. I do want to try and the idea does arouse me. So, I give in, lifting my shirt and bra, exposing myself as I recline my seat all the way back.

“Spread your legs,” he commands, and I comply. As he drives, his free hand reaches over to caress my breasts.

“Can I touch myself?” I moan as I close my eyes and concentrate on the feel of him on my body.

“No, but keep them spread and that pussy wide open for me.”

The risk of being seen by passing cars only adds to the intoxicating mix of arousal and vulnerability coursing through me. His fingers tease my nipples mercilessly, making it harder and harder for me to resist touching myself. But he remains firm, denying me every time I beg.

I decide I’ve had enough of being the only one put through this torture. Reaching my hand over, I start to rub him through his pants. He moans as he drives, and I start to wonder if this is safe. But then he thrusts his hips into my hand, and we’re both driving each other wild.

The car slows and his hands move away from my body as he pulls my shirt down. I open my eyes and look at our surroundings. He’s leaned his head against the headrest, breathing deeply, clearly trying to get control of himself. He looks at me and grins.

“Quite wicked, aren’t you?” he says with a chuckle.

“Not as much as you,” I retort, albeit playfully.

I glance around while I right my clothing, trying to figure out where we are. He gets out of the car, and grabs my hand. I

feel like I'm almost running to catch up with him. We walk into a building, and I look around in a weird mixture of shock and awe. We're at a trampoline park.

The place is filled with vibrant colors, from the bright red and blue trampolines to the neon yellow safety padding. The high ceilings echo with the laughter and shrieks of excited kids and adults alike, bouncing and flipping through the air. Pop music blasts from hidden speakers, adding to the energetic atmosphere. The scent of sweat and rubber mats fills my nostrils, and the constant sounds of feet hitting the trampolines create an oddly rhythmic beat in the background.

"Welcome to the land of endless fun," Teddy says with a smirk, as if reading my thoughts.

"Teddy, why did you bring me here?" I ask as I take in the sight of children and adults laughing and bouncing around us.

"Because," he says, a soft smile playing on his lips, "I know you didn't really have much of a childhood. So, might as well use the day to do things you never got to do and have some fun."

I raise an eyebrow. "Aren't we a little old for this place?"

"Nobody's too old to have fun, Raven," he replies, that mischievous glint in his eyes returning. I can't help but smile back.

With that, Teddy takes my hand, pays our entrance fee, and we make our way to the first trampoline. We hold hands as we jump high into the air, laughter bubbling out of both of us.

The world seems to melt away as I lose myself in the feeling of weightlessness and pure joy, Teddy chasing me from trampoline to trampoline, showing off by doing flips and other

acrobatic tricks. I forget about all the darkness and pain in my life, if only for a moment.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I tell Teddy, trying to catch my breath.

“Okay, I’ll wait for you here,” he says, still grinning.

As I’m about to leave the restroom, the door swings open and Teddy pushes me back inside, locking it behind us.

“What are you doing?” I demand, but the look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know.

“God, I want you so bad right now, Raven,” he says, his voice rough with desire. “You have no idea how beautiful you are, all carefree like that.”

He pins me against the cold tile wall, kissing me deeply as his hands roam over my body. The thrill of possibly getting caught only adds fuel to the fire that’s been smoldering between us all morning.

“Teddy,” I moan, unable to resist any longer, “please.”

He drops his pants and pushes his fingers inside of me, making me gasp. I want my release so badly, but there’s something exhilarating about the danger of this situation.

“Let’s see if we can keep this our little secret,” he whispers in my ear, his breath hot against my skin. And in that moment, I’m willing to risk it all for him.

Teddy’s fingers grip my leg as he hikes it over the crook of his elbow, giving him the leverage he needs. He pushes my shirt and bra up, exposing my breasts to the cool air of the bathroom. I can feel the tile wall against my back, hard and unforgiving, but all I care about is Teddy inside me.

“God, you’re so wet for me,” he breathes into my ear as he enters me. The sound sends shivers down my spine.

“Please, Teddy,” I beg as he rocks into me. “I need this.”

“Are you sure?” His voice is teasing, but there’s a hint of something else in it too – vulnerability maybe? It’s strange how even in a moment like this, we can still be uncertain with each other.

“More than anything,” I whisper, feeling the pressure building inside me. I know I’m not going to last much longer.

But then, just as I’m about to explode, Teddy slows his movements. I whimper, my body aching with unfulfilled desire.

“Please don’t stop,” I plead, desperation coloring my voice. “I need you, Teddy. Keep fucking me, please.”

He leans his forehead against mine, his blue eyes searching my face. There’s a battle raging within him, I can tell. But he shakes his head, regret etched in his features.

“Soon,” he promises, his voice soft and full of longing. “I need you too. But we promised we’d play this game a little longer.”

“Damn this game,” I think bitterly, my heart pounding and frustration mounting. But I know he’s right. We agreed to this, to push each other to the edge and see how far we could go before breaking. And as much as I hate it, I can’t deny that there’s something thrilling about it too.

“Fine,” I manage to choke out, trying to steady my breathing. “But you better make it worth my while when this is all over.”

“Trust me,” Teddy says with a wicked grin, grabbing my hand as he pulls away. “I will.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Raven

I've never felt arousal quite like this. To be fair, except for my experiences with Teddy, I've never felt aroused during sex at all. But there's something about the way he touches me, the way his blue eyes lock onto mine with a mixture of desire and adoration that makes me feel alive in ways I never have before.

It's like he's opening up my world and showing me that there are so many possibilities. Something I thought I could give up for the rest of my life suddenly I am craving from him over and over and over again. He seems to know it too, or at least feel it, because he keeps looking at me and smiling. I feel genuinely happy and like I might have a future with him.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmurs, his fingers tracing patterns on my skin as the fading sunlight casts a warm glow around us. The attraction I feel for Teddy goes beyond just his lean build and handsome face; it's the way he listens to me, the way he makes me laugh, the way he accepts me, flaws and all. My heart swells with affection for him, body and soul.

The entire day was something I'll never forget. It's not that we did anything particularly special. It's just that doing it all with Teddy made it special. Not to mention the fact that I am beyond soaked for him right now. He never gave me a break, stealing touches and more whenever he could.

When he pulls the car to a stop, I look around and ask, "Where are we?"

"Do you recognize it?" he asks, a playful glint in his eyes.

I look at our surroundings a bit more and get out of the car. The sunset is painting vibrant colors across the sky—red, orange, and purple bleeding together like spilled ink. The crisp night air hits me, carrying the scent of damp grass and dewy leaves. I can hear the distant sound of a dog barking somewhere in the neighborhood. There's a picnic table against a simple park, and I realize where he's brought me.

"Teddy... this is where we first had breakfast together," I say, my voice awash with nostalgia. "Where I told you my deepest secret."

He nods, his eyes filled with warmth. "It's where I fell in love with you too."

With a soft smile, he sits on the picnic table, his feet on the bench just like he did all those years ago. I can't stop myself; I run to him, and he catches me in his arms. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I look up at him, but I'm smiling. "I love you, Teddy. And I'm sorry for running away. I was just a stupid girl who didn't know what she was doing."

He hushes me with a gentle, yet passionate, kiss that sends shivers down my spine. He pulls back and says, "None of that matters now. What matters is that we're together."

As I straddle him, confidence surges through me. My love for Teddy has never felt stronger. I may not understand it, but I know that I feel it. All this time, I thought I was running from him, but I was wrong—I was running away from myself. And he's always been here, waiting for me to come back to him. Tears flow down my cheeks, and I realize that to Teddy, I'm the prodigal child.

He wraps his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me into a deep kiss. Our tongues tangle, and I can't imagine kissing anyone else other than Teddy for the rest of my life. His hands roam my body, exploring every inch of me as if memorizing my very being. I pull back, looking into his eyes and whisper, "Please, Teddy. This time, please let me go over the edge with you. I don't think I can take it anymore."

His eyes darken with desire, and I can almost taste the anticipation in the air. This moment, right here, is where I finally feel alive—where I feel like I belong.

Teddy grins and nods his head, pulling me into another searing kiss. As our lips meet, he lifts my shirt up and over my head, my bra following suit. The night air kisses my exposed skin, but I couldn't care less about anyone potentially seeing us. All I can think about is being with Teddy—coming together, becoming one.

"Teddy," I moan as his hands find my breasts, twisting and teasing my nipples. He chuckles against my neck, causing shivers to dance down my spine.

"You sound so sweet saying my name like that."

As if in a trance, my hands reach for his shirt, tugging it off him. My fingers roam the strong planes of his chest, feeling his biceps flex beneath my touch. His lips move from my mouth down my neck, nipping and sucking the delicate

skin there, marking me as his own. He's claiming me, and I couldn't be happier. I rock my hips into him, desperate for more contact.

"Teddy, let me taste you," I plead, but he shakes his head. Instead, he gently flips me over, laying me down on the table, my legs hanging over the edge.

"Later, Darkness. Right now, I want to taste you even more."

My heart races as he pulls my leggings and panties off in one swift motion, leaving me completely exposed. I feel vulnerable, nervous even, and try to sit up, but he gently pushes me back down.

"Relax," he murmurs, sensing my uncertainty.

"I've never done this before," I admit to him.

"That's okay," he replies. "I love the idea of getting another one of your firsts."

Teddy always knows how to make everything feel right, even when it's new and unfamiliar territory.

"God, your skin is so soft," he whispers, nipping at my thighs. Inch by agonizing inch, his mouth travels up toward my heat. I can feel him gauging my tension, silently urging me to let go and trust him. A finger finds my clit, rubbing slow circles that make me squirm in anticipation. And then his tongue joins the fray, licking and sucking, driving me absolutely wild.

"Fuck, Teddy" is all I can manage as I thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer. I can tell he's grinning against me—proud, maybe even a little smug—as he doubles his efforts. My body trembles, teetering on the edge of release. I want it so badly, I'm practically begging for it.

“Please, Teddy... Can I come?”

But my pleas seem to fall on deaf ears. Instead of granting me the release I crave, he pulls his mouth away from me. The loss of contact leaves me aching, desperate for more.

Teddy stands, dropping his pants to the ground, and I can't help but be entranced by the sight of him. His cock is thick and hard, an undeniable testament to the passion between us. “Yes,” he says, his voice dripping with desire as he rolls a condom onto himself, “You're going to come, but we're going to come together.”

I prop myself up on my elbows, feeling a sudden rush of boldness. “I want to feel you in my mouth first,” I tell him, my eyes locked on his.

He shakes his head with a grin that's equal parts playful and wicked. “Later. If you do that now, there's no way I'll make it.” His determination is clear; he wants this moment to be shared, our bodies melding together as one.

“Fuck, I love you,” Teddy whispers as he lines himself up, his blue eyes piercing into mine. “My Darkness, my everything.”

With those words, he thrusts into me, and it feels like my entire world has narrowed down to this single moment. Every sensation is amplified – the pressure of his length filling me, the friction as he moves within me, the heat of our bodies pressed together. It's overwhelming, and yet, there's nothing else I'd rather experience.

As Teddy fucks me, it's almost like we're dancing to a song only we can hear. There's a rhythm to our movements, a harmony that speaks louder than words ever could. My hips

rise to meet his, our bodies moving in sync and building toward a crescendo that I know will leave us both breathless.

“Teddy...” I moan, my voice barely more than a whisper as I cling to him. His name becomes a mantra, punctuating each thrust, each gasp, each shiver that runs through me.

I can see it in Teddy’s eyes, too, that primal need that’s been building all day, the desire to reach that peak together. His thrusts grow more urgent, his breath ragged as our bodies strain and push against one another.

“Come for me,” he urges in a low growl, and I know he’s close too. “Let go with me.”

As if on cue, we both tumble over the edge, our bodies shaking and trembling as waves of pleasure crash through us. We cling to each other, riding out the aftershocks, the world outside forgotten in the wake of our shared ecstasy.

“Fuck,” Teddy pants, pressing his forehead to mine, our breaths mingling. “That was...incredible.”

“More than incredible,” I agree, feeling the full weight of what we’ve just shared. In this moment, we’ve transcended our pasts, our fears, and our doubts, finding solace in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Teddy

I'm lying next to her, listening to her breathing as she sleeps. It's a soft, steady rhythm that I find soothing. I've never been the sort of guy to have trouble sleeping.

That's more my brothers' gig – serious guys with too much on their minds. Nah, I've always been the sort who falls asleep pretty easily. But despite how tired I am from the day, I want to watch Raven sleep. I want to soak up as much of her as I can for as long as I can.

Later today, I'm gonna ask her to marry me. I just need to find a ring first. Guess I'm okay with being cliché sometimes.

My phone buzzes and I try very carefully to look at the screen without waking her. It's Constantino. Apparently, he's back in the area and wants to meet up. I know he's gotta be really careful; there are a lot of guys who would kill him on sight for taking Charlie's life. He's risking a lot by being here. But there's no way I can handle this situation with the Irish by myself. I need his knowledge and skill. It was dumb of Primo and Giovanni to just hand me the business. I told them I never wanted it, and I meant that.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath, staring at Consty’s message. I know I need him, but the whole sneaking around behind Primo and Giovanni’s backs doesn’t sit well with me.

“Teddy?” Raven stirs in her sleep, cracking an eye open to look at me. I smile at the sight of her, all sleepy and disheveled.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I tell her softly. “Go back to sleep.”

Instead, she stretches, yawns, and grins at me. God, that smile warms my heart like nothing else ever has.

“What time is it?” she asks, voice thick with sleep.

“About 6 am,” I reply, glancing at the clock on the nightstand.

She looks a little surprised. “In the convent, I was always up at 4. Sleeping ‘til 6 is like sleeping way in for me.”

“Sounds awful,” I say, chuckling. “I’m more of a sleep ‘til noon kinda guy.”

She giggles, and I swear I could listen to that sound for hours. “We’re such opposites.”

I tickle her gently. “That’s what makes it so great. We have so much to explore with each other and tons of stuff to argue about. It’ll take up a lot of time.”

She giggles again, and I feel my chest swell with love for this woman.

But after a moment, her expression grows pensive, and I know she’s retreating into her own thoughts. I can’t let her dwell on whatever’s bothering her, not when we’re finally getting some peace.

“Hey,” I say, nudging her. “What’s going on?”

She hesitates before answering. “I’m still thinking about what you said – that you don’t believe in God.”

“Ah.” Of course that didn’t sit quite right with her. “Don’t think too much about it.”

“I can’t help it,” she says, frowning. “It makes me sad that you don’t have anything to believe in.”

“Hey, I’ve got plenty to believe in,” I assure her. “I just don’t have faith in some omnipotent being.”

“Like what?” she asks, genuinely curious.

“Us,” I say without hesitation. “You and me, together. That’s something I can believe in.”

Her eyes soften, and I know I’ve said the right thing. “Okay, but what about some higher power?” she asks.

“Alright,” I say, deciding to engage her in the debate. “Why do you believe in God so strongly?”

“Because I’ve seen and felt His presence in my life,” Raven replies, her tone gentle but firm. “In my darkest moments, when I thought I had nothing left, I could feel something greater than myself guiding me.”

I snort. “Sounds like a convenient way to avoid taking responsibility for your own actions.”

“Teddy,” she chides, shaking her head. “It’s not about avoiding responsibility. It’s about recognizing that there is something more powerful and loving than we could ever comprehend.”

“Or maybe it’s just a coping mechanism,” I counter, my words laced with bitterness. “Something to cling to when life gets too hard.”

Raven sighs, clearly frustrated. But instead of snapping at me, she reaches out and takes my hand. “Even if you don’t believe in God, Teddy, I know He still loves you. He sees the good in you, even when you’re unsure of it yourself.”

“Is that right?” I laugh, trying to brush off the sincerity in her voice. “Well then, does God also believe in breakfast? Because we should go get some.”

“Sure,” she says, her smile returning. “Let’s go.”

We get up and make our way down the hall to the kitchen, hand in hand. As we enter the room, Enzo and Carmine are there, their faces somber. They both look up at Raven as we walk in, their eyes filled with suspicion.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask, trying to keep my anger in check because I distinctly remember throwing them both out of my house not too long ago.

“Teddy, we need to talk,” Enzo says, his voice heavy with concern. Carmine just nods in agreement.

“About what?” I press, my grip on Raven’s hand tightening instinctively.

“Later,” Carmine replies, his gaze still fixed on Raven. “For now, let’s just have breakfast.”

I exchange a worried glance with Raven before reluctantly taking a seat at the table. The tension in the air is thick as we all begin eating in silence. My thoughts race, wondering what could possibly have them so on edge.

“Look, if you guys have something to say, just say it,” I finally blurt out, unable to stand the suspense any longer. Enzo and Carmine exchange glances, then Enzo clears his throat.

“Teddy, we’ll discuss this later, okay? Just... enjoy your breakfast for now,” he says, his voice strained.

“Fuck no,” I finally say. “I’m in charge and I’ve had enough of the silent treatment,” I demand, slamming my fork down on the table. “What the hell is going on?”

Carmine steps forward, his somber face revealing the gravity of the situation. “Teddy, our munitions warehouse was raided earlier this morning and burned to the ground. There’s nothing left.”

I feel my heart drop into my stomach. “How is that even possible? No one outside the family knew about it. How could someone find it?”

Enzo pipes up, his eyes narrowing as he looks at Raven. “Well, no one except for her.” He nods in her direction, causing a cold shiver to run down my spine.

“Wait a second,” I snap, my anger rising as I realize what they’re implying. “Are you seriously accusing Raven of being a snitch? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Teddy, just listen—” Carmine tries to pull me aside, but I refuse to budge, my gaze locked on Raven. She looks nervous, her hands wringing the fabric of her robe.

“No! I won’t stand here and let you accuse her without any proof!” I shout, my chest heaving from the rage boiling inside me. “She’s been through hell, and I trust her more than anyone else in this goddamn room!”

“Teddy, we’re not trying to hurt her or you,” Enzo says, his voice softer now. “We’re just trying to figure out what happened. We need to consider every possibility. You have to admit, it’s quite a coincidence that she was there that night and now this happens.”

“Coincidence? Really?” I scoff, feeling the weight of their betrayal crushing me. “I don’t give a damn about your so-called coincidences. She would never do something like that.”

“Teddy, you’ve got to consider the facts,” Carmine insists, his voice low and urgent. “She’s the only one who could have given them the location.”

I shake my head, refusing to let doubt take hold of my heart. “No. You’re wrong. She’s not capable of doing that.”

“Are you really that blinded by love?” Carmine asks, a hint of frustration in his voice. “You barely know her, and yet you’re willing to put everything on the line for her?”

“Damn right I am,” I snap back. “And I don’t need you questioning my judgment.”

“Teddy,” he says softly, his tone shifting, “I understand how you feel, but Marco...he died in the explosion.”

My world comes crashing down around me. Marco – my best friend, my brother in all but blood – gone. I can feel my heart shattering into a million pieces, each one piercing me with unbearable pain.

“Marco?” I whisper, my voice cracking. “He’s...dead?” My vision blurs as hot tears threaten to spill from my eyes.

I’ve lost guys in this world before; we all have. But, except for Charlie, I’ve been lucky, so to say, that I’ve never really lost someone close to me. Until now, that is.

Carmine nods solemnly. “He was at the warehouse when it happened. He didn’t stand a chance.”

“Then we’ll find whoever’s responsible and make them pay,” I choke out, my fists clenched at my sides.

“Exactly,” Carmine agrees, his voice hardening once more. “And all evidence points to Raven.”

“Stop it!” I shout, turning on him. “Don’t you dare try to pin this on her!”

“Teddy, we’re not leading you down the wrong path,” he insists. “We’re trying to protect you, protect the family. You have to trust us.”

“Trust you?” I scoff, my bitterness and grief colliding in an explosive mix.

“Teddy,” Enzo interjects, his voice calm and steady despite the mounting tension, “we have the proof. She colluded with the Irish and gave them the location of the warehouse. We can’t afford to ignore this.”

My heart cracks at hearing his words. I turn to look at Raven, my Darkness, my everything, for reassurance. I want to look into her eyes and hear her tell me that it’s not true.

“That night at the fundraiser,” Carmine says, “she was talking to Declan, wasn’t she?”

I think back to his words. She was approached by O’Leary when I was getting the car. But, that couldn’t be anything, could it?

“And then Declan recognized her when you both went to dinner, didn’t he?” Carmine continues. “How could he know who she is? Why would he know who she is?”

“I…” The words falter on my lips as doubt begins to creep in around me. I’m looking at Raven, but she’s just looking at the floor, anxious and refusing to engage in the conversation.

“And you found her the night you cleaned up Father Murphy’s murder. Why else would she be at the church if she

wasn't part of the Irish operation?" Carmine asks.

"Raven?" I call out her name, but she doesn't look up at me. "Tell me it's not true," I say to her.

She continues to look down at the floor, tears streaming down her face.

"Raven?" I say her name again.

Finally, she speaks. "What do you think in your heart, Teddy?" She turns to look at me, her eyes swimming with tears. "Do you think I would do something like that?"

"If everything I've told you isn't enough," Carmine says, "we have video footage, Teddy. There's no escaping the truth. She conspired with the Irish, and she killed Marco."

I feel as if my world is splitting in two. The woman I love has betrayed me and my best friend has died all in the same moment. I sit down heavily on a bar stool, putting my head in my hands.

"We'll take her away," Enzo says, but I can barely hear him, I'm so caught up in my mind.

As Enzo approaches Raven, gently taking her arm to lead her away, she calls out to me, her voice laced with fear and desperation. "Teddy!"

But I'm too lost in my grief, too crippled by the thought of Marco's lifeless body, to respond. As she disappears from sight, doubt begins to take root, threatening to consume me entirely. And for the first time since we met, I find myself questioning whether I truly know the woman I love.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Raven

I wake up in a dark, damp dungeon. The air is thick with the smell of rot and mildew, every breath making my stomach churn. The only light comes from a single flickering bulb above me, casting eerie shadows across the room. The walls are made of cold, rough stone and I can hear water dripping somewhere in the distance.

My ankle throbs with pain, and I realize that a heavy metal cuff binds me to the wall. The chain it's attached to clanks against the stone as I shift uncomfortably on the flimsy cot beneath me. It's barely enough to keep me off the freezing floor, but at least it's something.

How long have I been here? A day? Maybe more? My mind races, trying to piece together the events that led me here. The panic attack from being locked in a cage again has already come and gone, and I'm left with a hollow feeling in my chest. This was never supposed to happen to me, not after everything I've been through. And definitely not from Teddy.

"Teddy..." I mutter under my breath, my voice cracking with emotion. I loved him, still do. I thought he loved me too.

So why didn't he stop them from doing this to me? His friend Marco was obviously important to him, but surely our love meant more than that?

The panic threatens to overtake me once more, and I struggle to keep it at bay. My breathing grows shallow as I focus on the drip-drip-drip of the water echoing around the room, trying to ground myself in the present. But it's hard to stay grounded when all I can think about is how much this feels like a betrayal.

"Why couldn't you see the truth?" The question hangs heavy in the air, unanswered and unforgiven. I can't help but wonder if there's any hope for us now, or if we're destined to be torn apart by the darkness that surrounds us.

I clench my fists, the anger and hurt fueling my resolve. I can't let this break me. I won't. I have to find a way out of here and make Teddy see that he's made a mistake.

"Help!" I shout into the void of the dungeon, my voice echoing back at me. The darkness seems to swallow my plea whole, and for a moment, I can almost convince myself that it'll reach Teddy's ears. But no one comes.

I think back to those men with Teddy, their cold eyes and cruel smirks as they dragged me down here. My heart clenches in my chest, torn between love and betrayal. How could he let them do this to me? I desperately cling to hope, praying that Teddy might come to his senses, even as the thought makes my head swim and my stomach churn.

"Maybe you should've fought harder," I whisper to myself, feeling the weight of my shattered trust in Teddy pressing down on me like a vise. "Told him you didn't do what they accused you of." But would he have believed me? Could he ever believe I'd betray him like that?

“Those bastards,” I mutter under my breath, thinking of the men who accused me of having relations with the Irish. Declan had merely left the fundraiser early, recognized me from the dinner, and struck up a conversation. Sure, he was cordial, but I kept my guard up, remaining distant and cold. It was nothing more than a brief exchange.

“Video footage?” I scoff at the absurdity, my anger rising like bile in my throat. “How the hell could they have that?”

The silence of the dungeon envelops me once again, offering no answers. Frustration gnaws at my insides, leaving me feeling raw and vulnerable. I can’t help but feel like I’m trapped in some twisted nightmare, haunted by the ghosts of my past.

“Teddy,” I whisper into the darkness, my voice barely audible even to myself. “Please, just listen to reason.”

As the hours drag on, the flicker of hope that Teddy will come to his senses grows dimmer and dimmer. And with each passing moment, I can feel myself slipping further away from the man I love, pulled inexorably into the cold embrace of despair.

“Raven?” The faint sound of my name pulls me from the depths, and I strain to hear it again.

“Father James?” I call out hesitantly, praying for a lifeline in this abyss of darkness. As his familiar figure emerges from the shadows, relief washes over me.

“Raven, what’s happened?” Father James asks, his kind eyes filled with concern. “Why are you here?”

“Teddy... he let those men take me down here,” I choke out, my voice cracking under the weight of everything.

“Are you hurt?” His gaze scans my body, searching for any signs of injury.

“I think I blacked out, but I don’t think anyone touched me.” I shudder at the thought.

“Raven, I thought things were going well between you and Teddy,” Father James says gently, confusion evident in his voice.

“They were. Until they convinced him I had something to do with the Irish. And then they told him Marco was killed.” My heart clenches as I reveal the twisted lies that have torn my world apart.

Father James looks worried, his brow furrowing as he processes the information. “I’ll try to talk to Teddy, see what’s going on. Maybe I can get through to him, make him see reason.”

“Please hurry,” I plead, desperation clawing at my insides. “I don’t think I can stay in this cage much longer.” He knows my history; he understands the trauma that lurks beneath the surface.

“Keep your faith, Raven,” he admonishes gently. “Remember the story of Jonah in the whale’s belly. Even during dark times, never lose hope.”

“I’m trying,” I whisper, feeling the last remnants of my faith slipping through my fingers like sand. “But it’s waning.”

“Pray,” he urges, his eyes imploring me to cling to the last vestiges of belief. “Hold on to your faith, even when it seems impossible.”

“Okay,” I agree, my voice barely audible. As Father James disappears into the darkness, I close my eyes and offer up a

silent prayer – a desperate plea for salvation in this cold, unforgiving hell.

“Please, God,” I pray, my heart heavy with fear and longing. “Help Teddy see the truth. And help me find the strength to survive.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Teddy

I sit in Primo's old office at the mansion, surrounded by leather-bound books and the faint scent of cigar smoke. The documents on the mahogany desk lay before me like a map to a life I never wanted. I sigh, rubbing my temples as I try to focus on the numbers and names swimming across the pages. But no matter how hard I try, I can't get Raven out of my mind.

The fact that she's down in the dungeon haunts me, trapped like an animal because of Carmine and Enzo's accusations. They showed me the proof they had – or what they claimed was proof. The video footage was grainy, making it difficult to discern who it really was. But Enzo's loyalty is unquestionable, and I have no reason to doubt him. Yet, the gnawing feeling in my gut tells me otherwise.

My phone rings, shattering the silence. I snatch it up, desperate for a distraction from my thoughts. "Yeah?"

"Teddy, we got a shipment coming in tonight," the voice on the other end says. "We need you to handle the distribution."

“Fine,” I grumble, rubbing my eyes. This is not how I want to spend my time, but Giovanni would’ve done it, and I’m supposed to be filling his shoes now. “Send me the details, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Will do, boss.” The line goes dead, leaving me with the echo of a life I never asked for.

Every fiber of my being screams against this new role, but I force myself to focus on the task at hand. I pull up the necessary files on the computer, trying to drown out the image of Raven’s face, etched with betrayal and pain. My love for her still burns bright despite everything, and it’s tearing me apart.

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath, clenching my fists at the weight of it all. This isn’t what I wanted, but now that I’m in it, there’s no turning back.

As I stare at the computer screen, trying to concentrate on the business item, my mind drifts to Marco. Why was he at that warehouse? It doesn’t make sense. Was he lured there by Raven? But when would she have had time to do that? Unless she was acting through the Irish?

“Fuck!” I roar, standing up abruptly and clenching my fists. The anger is a foreign feeling, but it consumes me. Frustration and confusion bubble up inside me until I can’t take it anymore.

My knuckles collide with the wall, creating a hole in the plaster. Pain shoots up my arm, but it’s nothing compared to the turmoil inside me.

“Anger is like holding onto a burning coal with the intent to throw it at someone else,” Father James says as he walks

into the room, his eyes filled with concern. “You’re the one who gets burned.”

“What do you want?” I snap at him, not in the mood for any of his profound bullshit.

“I want to talk about why the woman you love is locked away like an animal in the dungeons beneath this mansion,” he replies, his voice steady and calm.

“Because she betrayed me and the family,” I say, my voice trembling with anger and hurt. “Carmine and Enzo showed me the evidence, and there’s no questioning it.”

“Is that truly what you believe, Teodoro?” Father James asks, looking me straight in the eye. His gaze pierces through my defenses, forcing me to confront my own doubts.

“Enzo has been loyal to us for years, and Carmine...I don’t know what to think,” I admit, running a hand through my hair in frustration. “All I know is that I feel like I’m drowning, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Let your heart guide you,” Father James advises me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It knows the truth better than any evidence.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, my gaze drifting to the hole in the wall. But right now, all I can feel is the pain of betrayal and the weight of my family’s expectations. And that’s enough to make me question everything I thought I knew about love and loyalty.

“Have you considered talking to her?” Father James suggests, his voice low and steady. “Ask Raven what really happened.”

“Are you kidding?” I snap, my hands balling into fists. “She had her chance to speak up, and she stayed silent. That

says enough.”

“Teddy,” he pleads, his eyes filled with concern. “You know her better than anyone. Has Raven ever been the type of person to advocate for herself? You’re letting your anger cloud your judgment.”

His words gnaw at me like a starving dog on a bone, doubt creeping in like shadows at dusk. Before I can respond, though, the door swings open with a sharp crack, and Carmine strides in, his eyes narrowed and calculating.

“Father James,” he drawls, a disdainful smirk curling his thin lips. “What are you doing here?”

“Having a private conversation with Teddy,” Father James replies, not backing down an inch. Their gazes lock, and the tension between them is palpable.

“Well, if you’ve come to try and grow sympathy for Raven, then you’re wasting your time,” Carmine sneers, turning his gaze to me. “Teddy, you’ve seen the evidence. You don’t need any more distractions. You have a business to run and a family name to honor.

“Besides,” he continues, his tone dripping with false concern, “we’re meeting with the Irish to discuss their proposal in a day. You need time and clarity of mind to prepare.”

I feel torn, pulled in opposite directions by these two men who both seem so sure of their convictions. My head aches with the weight of it all, the pressure building like a too-tight band around my skull.

Father James turns towards the door, but not before casting a final, meaningful glance in my direction. “Listen to your heart, Teddy,” he says quietly. “Go and see her.”

As the door closes behind him, I'm left standing in the wreckage of my emotions, feeling like a ship caught between the jagged rocks of betrayal and the relentless waves of love.

"Teddy?" Carmine calls, snapping me from my thoughts. "We don't have time for this. We need to focus on what's important now."

"Right." I nod, my voice hollow. "The business."

But as I sit back down at my desk, trying to immerse myself in the cold, hard facts of our criminal empire, Raven's face haunts me – her hazel eyes filled with an unspeakable sadness that pierces my soul like a dagger.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, my resolve cracking like thin ice underfoot. Maybe Father James is right. Maybe I need to hear it straight from her – the truth, whatever it may be. And then, perhaps I can finally make sense of this chaos that my life has become.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Raven

The sound of footsteps on the stairs jolts me awake. I blink into the darkness, trying to shake off the fog of sleep. “Father James?” I call out, hoping for some comfort.

“It’s me,” comes Teddy’s voice, cold as steel. The words strike me like a punch to the gut. My heart races at the thought of seeing him again, but now that he’s here, I feel nothing but dread.

“Teddy...” I whisper, my throat dry and tight. “Please, I can’t stay here. You know why...” I try and say.

He steps into the dim light, his once warm blue eyes now icy and distant. He looks angry, lips pressed into a thin line, and the shadows under his eyes tell me he hasn’t been sleeping well either. Anger and exhaustion hang heavily on his usually playful features. This isn’t the Teddy I know and love.

“I came to talk about what happened, and I want to hear it from you.” His tone is accusatory, void of any warmth or sympathy.

“Okay,” I say, swallowing hard. “Ask me your questions.”

He doesn't waste any time, drilling me with one question after another. "What do you know about the explosion? Did you know Marco? How the hell were you on that video tape?"

With every question, I can feel the weight of his distrust pressing down on me. But I answer each one honestly, swearing to him over and over that I had nothing to do with any of it.

"Teddy, I swear, it wasn't me. I didn't do this," I plead, desperate for him to believe me.

His face remains cold, unmoved by my words. His disbelief cuts through me like a knife, leaving me feeling raw and exposed. I've always known that Teddy was fiercely loyal to his loved ones, but now I'm starting to wonder if that loyalty extends to me. How can I prove my innocence to him when he won't even give me a chance?

"Teddy, you have to believe me," I whisper, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. "I'd never hurt you or your family."

Frustration and desperation claw at my insides as Teddy's cold disbelief hangs heavy in the air. My mind races, searching for any way to make him understand the truth. I can't lose him, not when I've fought so hard to find myself again. It's like I'm drowning, sinking deeper into the abyss, and the only lifeline I have left is slipping through my fingers.

I can feel myself reverting back to my old ways, even though every fiber of my being screams against it. I always got what I wanted when I was on the streets. It only took a certain form of persuasion. It was old habit for me, even as I tried to find strength and solace in a different type of habit now.

Maybe that's the only way to reach Teddy, to prove my innocence by showing him the depths I'd sink to for him.

“Teddy,” I say softly, inching closer to him as far as the chain on my ankle allows. I swallow the knot of guilt forming in my throat and let my fingertips trace the contours of his body. His eyes close, and he takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I didn’t do it. Let me convince you.”

His voice is barely above a whisper, filled with pain and uncertainty. “Do what you want,” he says, not stopping me.

My heart breaks a little more with every movement, but I push forward. I kneel before him, hands shaking as I unbuckle his pants and pull out his cock. The guilt threatens to choke me, but I force myself to continue. In some twisted way, I hope this will save us both.

As I stroke him in my hand, my thoughts spiral into self-loathing and regret. Is this really the only way to make him believe me? To degrade myself like this? But no matter how much I want to stop, I can’t.

“Teddy,” I whisper, my voice shaking with emotion. “Please, believe me.”

I take him into my mouth, the taste of him bitter and foreign. The guilt and sadness overwhelm me as I realize this is how I choose to show my love for him for the first time. I work up and down his length, my throat constricting around him as he groans my name.

“Fuck,” he hisses through clenched teeth, gripping the back of my head. He takes control from me, thrusting into my mouth with a cruelty I’ve never seen in him before. “Why did you do it?” he demands, his voice strained and angry. I can’t respond, choking on my tears and his invasion. “You must be fucking guilty if you can’t even answer me.”

His harsh words cut deep, and I feel more powerless than ever. Teddy's always been gentle and kind, but now he's turned into someone I barely recognize.

"Is this the kind of shit you were doing for the Irish when you betrayed me?" he spits out, the venom in his tone stinging like acid. "Did you like Declan's dick more than mine?"

I try to shake my head, but the grip he has on me doesn't allow for much movement. The humiliation and pain are unbearable, but I force myself to focus on convincing him of my innocence.

"Did you fuck the entire Westies gang and then come back to sleep with me?" He continues relentlessly, face fucking me without mercy. "How many dicks have you taken into that whore pussy of yours?"

My chest tightens, hot tears streaming down my cheeks as I struggle to breathe. This isn't the Teddy I know and love, but I can't stop. I have to make him believe me, even if it means losing myself in the process.

"Please, Teddy," I think, praying that somehow he'll hear my thoughts and understand. *"I didn't do it. I never betrayed you."*

But the words remain unspoken, and I'm left at the mercy of a man driven by rage and heartache, praying for salvation that feels further away with each passing moment.

My tears blur my vision, but I can't escape the suffocating reality of his cruel words. It's as if he's trying to destroy every last shred of hope I cling to. The Teddy I know is slipping away, replaced by this cold and vengeful stranger.

"Please," I try and sob, feeling utterly broken. "I didn't do it."

He doesn't stop, though, not until he reaches his climax and fills my mouth with his bitterness. I swallow it down, tasting the acrid mix of hurt and betrayal that may forever taint our love.

Gasping for air, I choke on my own tears as he releases me and collapses on the floor next to me. I can hear him crying too, the sound tearing through my heart like a thousand knives. I want to crawl over to him, hold him close, and tell him that everything will be alright – but I can't. The violation I feel keeps me rooted in place, as if the cold stone floor has become a part of me.

“Teddy,” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the sound of our combined anguish. “I swear on everything I hold dear, I never betrayed you.”

For a moment, there's only silence, punctuated by our ragged breathing. Then, without a word, he pushes himself off the floor and staggers to his feet. I watch helplessly as he leaves the cell, the door slamming shut behind him and sealing me once more in darkness.

“Please, God,” I pray, my hands trembling as I wipe the tears from my face. “Help him see the truth. Help him find his way back to me.”

But as the minutes stretch into hours and the shadows lengthen around me, I can't shake the sinking feeling that I'm truly alone - abandoned not just by Teddy, but by any hope of redemption. And all that remains is the cold, unforgiving darkness that threatens to swallow me whole.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Teddy

As I climb the stairs back to my bedroom, my chest aches with regret and self-loathing. Every step feels like a lead weight, dragging me down into the depths of my own guilt. The image of Raven's tear-streaked face haunts me, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm no better than those who hurt her in the past.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, pushing open the door to my room. The familiar surroundings do nothing to comfort me; instead, they serve as a reminder of how far I've fallen.

My thoughts are consumed by Father James' words, urging me to trust in Raven's innocence. But the evidence Carmine and Enzo showed me gnaws at the edges of my mind, planting seeds of doubt that threaten to suffocate any faith I have left in her. "What the fuck am I supposed to believe?" I groan, pacing back and forth across the worn wooden floor.

The upcoming meeting with the Irish looms over me like a dark cloud, casting a shadow on any hope of a future with Raven. Tomorrow, I'm supposed to agree to their proposal, marry the daughter of the Westies' first in command, and put

Raven out of my mind for good. She'll be safe, at least; I'll make damn sure of that. But the thought of never seeing her again makes my heart twist painfully in my chest.

"Is this really what I have to do?" I ask myself, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "Am I just fucking doomed to live a life without love, like some sort of goddamn martyr?"

"Teddy, we need to talk," comes a voice from behind me, snapping me out of my self-pitying reverie. I turn to see Enzo standing in the doorway, his bushy eyebrows drawn together in concern.

"Can't you see I'm busy wallowing in my own misery here?" I shoot back sarcastically, but the truth is, I could use someone to talk to right now. "Fine, what is it?"

"Look, I know you're struggling with everything that's happening," Enzo says, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. "But we need to focus on the meeting with the Irish tomorrow. If we don't come to an agreement, things could get ugly."

"Ugly? You mean like how they are now?" I scoff, gesturing around me. "I've got Raven locked up in a fucking dungeon, and I'm supposed to marry some chick I've never even met just to keep the peace. How much worse can it get?"

"Believe me, Teddy, it can always get worse," Enzo replies solemnly. "We've seen it before, and we'll see it again if we don't handle this situation carefully."

"Right, because marrying off the boss' son is such a genius fucking strategy," I mutter bitterly.

"Teddy," Enzo says, his voice taking on a gentle tone that surprises me. "You know as well as I do that this life isn't fair.

Sometimes, we have to make sacrifices for the greater good. And sometimes, those sacrifices hurt like hell. But we do what needs to be done.”

“Even if it means giving up any chance at happiness for ourselves?” I ask quietly, feeling the weight of his words settle onto my shoulders. Enzo looks at me with a mixture of sadness and understanding.

“Especially then.”



Enzo left my room an hour ago and I’m still just pacing the floor. I can’t get Raven out of my head. I can’t get this whole damn situation out of my head.

I need someone to talk to about it. I wish Charlie were still alive. I could always talk to him.

I pick up my phone and call Primo. He answers immediately, concern lacing his voice. “Teddy, what’s wrong? I can hear it in your voice.”

“Primo, I need some guidance on the Irish situation,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Teddy, I’m sorry... Isabella is in labor, and we’re at the hospital. I can’t help you right now,” he replies, genuine regret in his tone.

“Give her a kiss for me,” I tell him, a bittersweet smile forming on my lips as I hang up the phone. My heart swells with happiness for my brother, but bitterness and resentment gnaw at me. Primo gets to be with the woman he loves,

escaping this life of crime and violence while I'm stuck here, drowning in it.

I dial Giovanni next, but there's no answer. Frustration grows inside me, making my chest tight. With no one else to turn to, I decide to search for Carmine in the mansion.

The halls of the mansion feel like an icy labyrinth, each step echoing through the emptiness. I feel alone, lost, and fucking confused. Every inch of this place reminds me that Raven is still locked away beneath my feet, a constant ache in my heart.

As I continue my aimless wandering, I run into Father James. His calm presence is a welcome relief, even though I know he can't provide all the answers I seek.

"Father," I greet him, trying to maintain some semblance of composure.

"Teddy," he responds, his eyes filled with understanding. "You look troubled."

"Is it that obvious?" I chuckle bitterly. "I just don't know what to do anymore. I'm supposed to marry some girl I've never met so our family can strike a deal with the Irish. Meanwhile, Raven's trapped in that godforsaken dungeon, and I can't even trust my own instincts about her."

Father James sighs, a heavy weight settling on his shoulders. "I know this is difficult for you, Teddy. But sometimes, the right path isn't always the easiest one to walk. You must trust yourself and make the decisions you believe are best for everyone involved."

"Father James, I'm just...lost," I admit, the weight of my confession pressing down on me. "I went to see Raven like you suggested, but I think I only made things worse."

Father James' eyes soften with sympathy. "It's a difficult situation, Teddy. You can't expect to have all the answers."

"Yeah, well, I tried to get some help from Primo, Giovanni, Enzo, and even Carmine, but nobody has anything useful to offer." I run a hand through my hair in frustration. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Perhaps you need to turn to the prodigal son of the family," Father James suggests, his words ringing with a sense of finality.

"Constantino?" I try and play it off, but I wonder if Father James already knows he's in the area. Other than our one text exchange, I haven't spoken to my brother. He said he wanted to talk, and I'd agreed. But, I figured he would let me know when and where.

My relationship with my older brother has always been strained, but if there's one thing that unites us, it's our shared desire to protect our family.

"As I said, the best decision may not be the easiest." My eyes follow Father James as he walks away. I really wish church people were less mystically sometimes. Like, it would be way easier if they could just tell me what their man in the sky wanted me to do.

Would save me a lot of time, actually.

With a deep breath, I pull out my phone and dial Consty's number.

"Hey, it's Teddy," I say when he picks up, trying to keep my voice steady. "I need your help."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Raven

The cold, damp dungeon has become a familiar place to me. The walls are slick with moisture, and the air hangs heavy with the scent of mildew. I can hear the constant drip-drip-drip of water echoing through the darkness.

There's something that happens to you when you're locked in a cage for long enough. Time seems to move at its own pace, and once you get past the terror and the panic attacks, you actually have a lot of time to sit and think about things in the dark.

I regret how I behaved with Teddy when he came to visit me. I could see that he was distraught, and I could feel it too. And rather than turn myself towards helping him in those moments, I tried to beg him in ways I used to use and am not proud of to let me go. I know better than that. No one ever truly does anything in this world based on the pleas of other people.

The other thing I had time to think about was those two men that were the ones who convinced Teddy to put me down here. Carmine and Enzo?

I remember that one time I passed Carmine in the hallway, he looked guilty. I think back to the fundraiser. I definitely saw them talking to Declan and a few other people that seemed to be with Declan. I don't know exactly what's going on here, but it seems like they're hiding something.

I know that Teddy isn't the type to ever want to get into the business side of things. He always said that about his family's business.

"Teddy, don't let them control you," I whisper into the darkness, though he's not here to hear me. "You're better than that."

In the silence that follows, I can't help but wonder if my words will ever reach him. Will Teddy be able to break free from the tangled web of lies and deceit that surrounds him?

As for me, I know one thing: if I ever make it out of this place, I won't let my past hold me captive any longer. I'll find a way to escape the darkness and forge my own path, whatever that may be.

I close my eyes and say a prayer, my voice barely audible in the damp dungeon. I'm not sure what I believe anymore. Father James says I need to keep my faith, but it's hard when you're trapped in a cage, surrounded by darkness.

"God, if you're out there..." I start, swallowing hard. "Help me find the strength I need right now."

As I pray, I continue to wonder whether I truly ever had faith. Maybe I only clung to it as a way to escape my troubles. To numb myself from the pain of my past.

"Teddy," I whisper, even though he can't hear me. "I want to forgive you for this. I know this can't really be your fault."

But, deep down, I know that the life I thought I might have with him may never materialize. We're both so damaged, so caught up in our own worlds of pain. Is there any hope for us? Or are we destined to walk separate paths, fighting our demons alone?

"Give Teddy the courage to do what's right," I murmur, tears streaming down my face. "And give me peace, whatever that may be."

As I finish my prayer, the sound of footsteps echoes through the dungeon. My heart races—could it be Teddy coming back to see me? Or is it someone else, someone dangerous?

"Raven?" a voice calls out softly. "It's Father James."

"Father," I reply hesitantly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm checking on you," he explains, his kind eyes meeting mine through the bars of my cage. "And I want to tell you about Teddy. He's really struggling."

"Is he?" I scoff somewhat bitterly, despite the prayers that still hang on my tongue. "I hope he's not uncomfortable."

"Raven, listen to me," Father James pleads. "Teddy's in over his head. There are forces at work here that he can't control."

"I know, Father. I'm praying to forgive him, but it's hard."

"Sometimes, the people we love make mistakes," Father James says gently. "But that doesn't mean they don't love us."

"Love?" I ask, my voice hollow. "What does love have to do with any of this?"

"Everything, Raven," he replies softly. "Love can save us from our darkest moments. But it can also blind us to the

truth.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I admit, wiping away my tears. “But what am I supposed to do now? How do I break free from this cage, both literally and figuratively?”

“Have faith, Raven,” Father James says, reaching through the bars to touch my hand reassuringly. “In yourself, in Teddy, and in the power of love to heal even the deepest wounds.”

As he turns to leave, I try and find a flicker of hope in my heart, but I can’t seem to find it. As I’m closed into the darkness once more, I know that Father James means well, but there’s no returning to the life I once had with Teddy.



Teddy

Carminе’s slicked-back hair glistens under the dim light as he paces back and forth, his voice a constant drone in my ear. “The Irish aren’t to be underestimated, Teddy. We need to be prepared,

we need to—”

I’m not even bothering to look at him, let alone listen. I know what he’s saying, but I just can’t focus on that right now. My mind keeps drifting back to Raven, her hazel eyes full of fear as they locked her up in the basement. How horrible this must be for her psyche. Betrayal or not, Marco’s death weighing on me, I’m not sure I can live with myself knowing that I put her back in a cage.

“Teddy, you listening?” Carmine stops pacing, his thin mustache twitching with irritation. I glance at him briefly before turning away, my fists clenching. It’s almost like they know what I’m about to do. Every time I think I might go down and get her, either Carmine or Enzo is there, pulling me into some other business discussion.

“Fine, don’t listen.” Carmine huffs, throwing his hands up in defeat. “Just remember, tomorrow’s meeting is crucial. Screw this up and the Maldonado family will—”

“Enough, Carmine!” I shout, slamming my fist on the table. The sound of shattering glass fills the room, shards scattering across the floor like tiny, glittering stars.

Enzo, sitting in the corner of the room, clears his throat. His greying bushy eyebrows furrow as he speaks softly, “Teddy, try to focus. We’re all mourning Marco, but we must keep our heads clear.”

“Sure, Enzo,” I mutter, feeling the exhaustion seeping into my bones. But my thoughts remain with Raven, locked up and alone.

By the time we’re done with the business side of things, I’m so beyond tired that I all but collapse into my bedroom. I want to go down to her, but I know that if I do, they’ll stop me. Just like they have every other time.

I glance at the bed, empty and inviting, but I refuse to sleep in it. Instead, I opt to sleep on the floor. If she’s down there in the dungeon, there’s no way I’m sleeping in a bed. The cold, hard ground digs into my skin as I drift into an uneasy sleep, full of nightmares and visions of Raven.

Her face haunts me in my dreams, twisted by pain and terror, begging for mercy that never comes. The sound of her

cries is drowned out by the harsh beat of drums, a cruel and relentless rhythm echoing through the darkness. My heart hammers in my chest, threatening to break free from its cage as I reach out to her, desperate to save her from this living nightmare.

But I can't. I'm trapped in my own hell, unable to escape the crushing weight of guilt and helplessness that threatens to consume me whole. And with each passing moment, the music grows louder, more discordant, until it's all I can hear— the deafening soundtrack of my own failure.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Teddy

A sharp pain jolts me awake, and I realize it's a kick to my ribs. Groaning, I rub the sleep from my eyes and squint up at the figure looming over me. "Get up," Constantino says, his voice as cold as ice. He tosses me a shirt, which I pull on quickly, still wincing from the pain.

"Fine, fine," I mutter, following him down the dimly lit hallway toward my father's old office. The room smells of stale cigars and aged whiskey, a scent that clings to every surface like a stubborn ghost. It's a subtle reminder of the power struggles and deals made in this space. A heavy wooden desk sits in the center, surrounded by leather chairs that have seen better days. The walls are lined with dark bookshelves, filled more with weapons than literature. A single window offers a sliver of light, casting shadows across the floor.

Constantino takes a seat behind the desk, his muscular frame filling the high-backed chair. His short, dark hair is slicked back, emphasizing his piercing green eyes. He exudes confidence and danger, an air of authority that demands respect – or fear. His jaw clenches as he studies me, as if

trying to decide whether I'm worth his time or just another problem to be dealt with.

"Alright, Teddy," he says, leaning back in the chair and steepling his fingers. "Let's hear it," Constantino demands, his eyes narrowed in impatience.

I can feel the weight of his gaze, heavy as a judgment. He's always been the more aggressive one, never afraid to take what he wants by force. And right now, he wants answers. But how do you explain something when you don't even understand it yourself?

I take a deep breath, trying to organize the messy web of information in my head. "Okay, so... Raven's here, and there's this whole thing with the Irish and Carmine and Enzo..." I trail off, realizing how convoluted it all sounds.

"Never mind," Constantino cuts me off, rubbing his temples in frustration. "Let's do this one question at a time. What happened to the warehouse?"

"It was blown up, and Marco was killed in the blast," I reply, my voice cracking slightly at the memory of my friend.

"Why was Marco there?" he asks, his tone sharp and unforgiving.

"I don't know," I admit, feeling the weight of my uncertainty settle heavily on my shoulders.

Constantino's gaze hardens as he continues interrogating me. "What do Carmine and Enzo have to do with all this?"

"They've been helping me run the business side of things," I explain, my stomach churning with unease as I think about their possible involvement in everything.

He sighs in disappointment. “And where are Primo and Giovanni when we need them?”

“Primo’s out for good ‘cause of his new baby, and Giovanni... Well, he followed some girl to Miami to help her run her own family business,” I say, knowing full well how ridiculous it sounds.

“Typical,” Constantino snorts, shaking his head. “Always chasing skirts instead of taking care of business.” His anger seems to fuel him as he pushes forward. “Now, why is Raven here?”

I hesitate, unsure of where to start. “It’s... complicated.”

“Then explain it,” he snaps. “I’d love to know why the girl you stole from me in high school is suddenly back in our lives.”

Taking a deep breath, I launch into Raven’s backstory. “She murdered her parents, but it wasn’t like I stole her in the traditional sense. I just helped her clean up the scene, and she ran away the next morning.”

Constantino looks thoughtful for a moment before nodding his head, accepting my explanation. “Alright. So why is she here now?”

“Because she saw me cleaning up a scene at an Irish cathedral,” I say, feeling the shame creep up my neck as I recall that night. “The option was to kill her or bring her here.”

“Under your protection, too, I heard,” he adds, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” I confirm, my voice barely above a whisper. “It was the only way to guarantee her safety.”

“That’s a bold move. One for life,” he states, his tone laced with both admiration and warning.

“I know,” I reply, not needing the reminder of the gravity of my decision.

“So, why is she in the basement dungeon?”

As the question hangs in the air, I can’t help but feel the weight of everything bearing down on me. The darkness of the room seems to close in around us, suffocating me with the very real possibility that I’ve made a terrible mistake.

“Enzo and Carmine came to me with evidence that Raven was working with the Irish to blow up the warehouse,” I explain, feeling my gut twist at the memory. “They said she knew the location of the warehouse, she was at the Irish church the night Father Murphy was killed, and I caught her talking to Declan at the fundraiser.”

Constantino just looks bored, like he’s heard this story a million times before. He shakes his head in disbelief, clearly unimpressed with my explanations.

“Go get your girl, Teddy. She didn’t do it,” he says, his voice firm and resolute.

I stare at him, dumbfounded. “What do you mean? How can you know that?”

“Because it’s so damn obvious that Carmine and Enzo set her up,” he retorts, annoyance flashing in his green eyes. “And Marco wasn’t killed in the blast. He was obviously killed beforehand and his body was moved there.”

“How can you possibly know that?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest as I try to digest this new information.

“Teddy, I’ve worked with the Irish for a long time. I know when someone got intel about raiding a warehouse and who they were working with,” he replies matter-of-factly, leaning back in his chair.

The realization of what he’s saying hits me like a ton of bricks. My blood turns icy, and I feel a mixture of relief that Raven might be innocent, but also fury at the thought that two people I trusted could betray me in such a way. The world around me seems to fade away as I focus on the implications of Constantino’s words.

“Go get her, Teddy,” he repeats, snapping me out of my thoughts. “You don’t have much time.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Alright,” I say, a rush of relief washing over me as the guilt clenches my chest. “But what are you going to do about Enzo and Carmine?”

“Let me handle them,” Constantino replies, his voice cold and menacing. “You just focus on getting Raven out.”

I can’t help but feel nervous, knowing that I’m leaving my brother to deal with two dangerous men. But he’s always been capable, and I have to trust him now.

“Tomorrow, I’m supposed to meet with the Irish,” I continue, my voice wavering slightly. “I was told I had to marry some daughter of the first in charge.”

Constantino barks out a laugh, shaking his head. “Teddy, Declan is the man in charge now, and he doesn’t have any daughters. You were being set up. The moment you showed up for that meeting, you would have been murdered.”

My stomach churns at the thought of walking blindly into my own death, and anger surges through me like a tidal wave.

How could I have been so naive?

“Consty,” I warn, my voice low and desperate. “Be careful. You killed Charlie just to get back at Primo, and there are a lot of people who would murder you on the spot for it.”

“Charlie?” He scoffs, his eyes narrowing. “I didn’t kill him to get back at Primo. Charlie was plotting with Carmine to take over the family. When his father died, Carmine turned to Enzo to do the same thing.”

The news hits me like a punch to the gut. Charlie, my lifelong friend, someone I trusted more than anyone else, was planning to betray us all. My heart feels heavy with the weight of this revelation.

“Why didn’t you say anything before?” I ask incredulously, getting caught up in my own denial.

“I was merely biding my time, Teddy,” he explains. “Letting everything fall into place. Which it has now.”

His words give me an eerie shiver. I know my brother and I know he’s capable of some pretty twisted things. Of all of us, he’s the one that scares me the most.

“Teddy,” Constantino says firmly, looking me dead in the eye. “There’s no such thing as friends or trust. Not in this life. Now go to Raven and get her out of the dungeon.”

His words echo in my head as I race through the dimly-lit hallways, the pounding of my heart drowning out the sound of my footsteps. My mind races with thoughts of how I’ll make things right with Raven, how I’ll protect her from any further harm.

As I approach the heavy door leading to the dungeon, I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what lies ahead. The

cold metal handle sends a shiver down my spine, and I know that once I step inside, there's no turning back.

“Raven,” I whisper to myself, determination burning within me like a flame. “I’m so sorry.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Teddy

I race down to the dungeon, my heart pounding in my chest like a jackhammer. The dimly lit staircase is steep and narrow, with each step cold and unforgiving beneath my feet. I

nearly slip on the damp stone, catching myself just in time. As I descend further, the air grows colder, heavier, filling with the oppressive stench of decay and despair. I can't help but think about how I listened to Carmine and Enzo, their poisonous words slithering through my mind. I should've trusted my gut, dammit.

“Will she ever forgive me for what I put her through?” I wonder aloud, my voice barely audible over the sound of my frantic footsteps. “Does she still love me after all this shit?” I wouldn't blame her if she didn't. But God, I hope she does. I love her more than anything, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I know that deep in my heart, even though Marco's death fucked me up and I let Enzo and Carmine manipulate me.

Finally reaching the bottom, I see her lying there, asleep on that flimsy excuse for a cot. Tears sting my eyes, and I hate myself—genuinely fucking hate myself—for what I've done.

Even if I believed she was guilty of what they accused her of, I never should have let them take her, especially not down here to another goddamn cage.

“Fuck,” I mutter, throwing open the door and grabbing the key from its hook on the wall. I rush over to her, my hands shaking as I unshackle her from the wall cuff. When it finally clicks open, I wrap her in my arms, holding her close.

Her body feels so frail and cold in my arms, like a porcelain doll that could shatter at any moment. I can't believe I've done this to her, reduced her to this fragile state because of my own goddamn stupidity. The guilt weighs heavy on my chest, suffocating me as I gently lift her up and carry her out of this hellhole.

“Raven, I'm so sorry,” I choke out between ragged breaths, my tears falling onto her face. She stirs slightly, her eyes fluttering open as she wakes. Her gaze meets mine, and the pain and sadness swimming in those beautiful hazel eyes tear me apart inside. I want to beg her forgiveness a thousand times over, but I know it'll never be enough.

“Teddy,” she whispers, her voice barely audible, hoarse from disuse. “It's okay.”

I shake my head, unable to accept what she's saying. How can she even look at me after what I've put her through? As I bring her back upstairs to her rooms, I try to apologize again, but she stays quiet the entire time. It's killing me, not knowing what she's thinking or if she'll ever forgive me.

“Please, just say something,” I plead, desperate to hear her voice. She looks at me for a long moment, her expression unreadable, before placing a hand on my arm.

“Teddy, it’s just...it’s been a lot,” she says softly, her touch gentle despite everything that’s happened. “I know you’re sorry, and I already forgave you.”

The relief I feel at her words consumes me, and I can’t help but pull her into a tight embrace. “Raven, I love you so much,” I tell her, my voice shaking with emotion. I swallow hard, trying to find the courage to say what I’ve been thinking for a long time. “Marry me. You’ve always been the only girl for me, and I’ve never wanted anyone else.”

Her smile is gentle as she takes my face in her hands, her touch warm and tender. My heart swells, thinking that this might actually be the beginning of our future together. But then she speaks, and her words shatter my hopes like fragile glass.

“Teddy, I love you too,” she says softly, her eyes filled with affection. “But you misunderstand my forgiveness. I do forgive you, but I can’t marry you.”

I blink, trying to process what she’s saying, but it’s like my brain has stopped working. She can’t marry me? Why not? I need her in my life, now more than ever.

“Wh-what do you mean?” I stammer, feeling my chest tighten with pain.

“Teddy,” she sighs, looking away for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “This experience has shown me that I can’t stay here. I’ve decided to return to the convent and take my vows.”

Her words hit me like a sucker punch, leaving me breathless and reeling. The thought of losing her to the convent, of never being able to hold her or kiss her or just talk to her again...it’s unbearable.

“Please, stay with me,” I beg her, gripping her hands in mine as if letting go would mean losing her forever. “I’ll do anything to make it up to you. I swear, I’ll never let anything like this happen to you again.”

Desperation seeps into my voice, and I can’t help but feel pathetic. How did I let Enzo and Carmine manipulate me like that? And it’s not even entirely their fault – I should’ve trusted my gut, known that something was off. But instead, I got caught up in the whirlwind of Marco’s death and their poisonous words.

“It’s no excuse,” I mutter, staring down at our entwined fingers. “I should’ve been there for you when you needed me most.”

She gives my hands a gentle squeeze, her touch warm and tender despite everything she’s been through. “Teddy, you don’t need to keep apologizing,” she says softly. “I understand why you did it. I love you. There’s nothing you can do to make it up to me, because I already forgive you.”

Her words bring both comfort and pain – comfort in knowing she loves me and forgives me, but pain in realizing that it isn’t enough to keep her here, with me. My heart twists in my chest as she continues.

“However, I can’t stay here, and I can’t be with you,” she admits, her eyes brimming with tears. “I need you to drive me to the convent.”

“Right now?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. The thought of losing her so soon is unbearable, but I know I can’t force her to stay.

“Yes,” she answers resolutely, and I see the determination in her gaze, the conviction that this is what she needs to do.

And as much as it kills me inside, I know I have to respect her decision.

“Alright,” I choke out, forcing a smile for her sake. “Let’s go.”

We make our way to the car in silence, the weight of our unspoken words and feelings growing heavier with each step. The engine roars to life as we pull away from the only home we’ve known together, the sound of it unable to drown out the thoughts consuming me.

For the first time in my life, I don’t turn music on as we drive.

And as the convent comes into view, its imposing walls and solemn atmosphere a stark contrast to the vibrant life we once shared, I can’t help but feel that the music of our love has reached its final note – a somber melody that will forever haunt the darkest corners of my heart.

CHAPTER FORTY



Teddy

“Come on,” Constantino says to me as I sit on one of the sofas in our father’s old office. He’s taken over the space since arriving at the mansion, and honestly, I’m just as happy to let him take things over. Without Raven, I’m nothing. I’m not even myself, and I’m certainly not able to lead the family.

“I know what will get you out of this pity party you’re throwing yourself,” he says, a sick grin plastered on his face.

“You got Raven to come back and give up being a nun to marry me?” I ask sarcastically, but deep down, I’m hoping for every word of it to be true.

“No,” Constantino says, his grin widening. “I’ve got Carmine and Enzo tied up downstairs, and I’m ready to torture them for what they did.”

“How is that supposed to make me feel better?” I ask, feeling my stomach churn at the thought.

“It’ll make me feel better. Besides, I’ll need you to clean up, so you might as well be there and have some fun with it.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s not really the type of fun I have.”

“Don’t be a pussy,” Constantino says. I roll my eyes and follow him.

We make our way down to the dungeon, and I can feel the darkness closing in around us. Constantino has a sick way about him – it’s like he revels in this stuff. He’s got Carmine and Enzo tied up in the same cell that Raven was held in, except this time there’s no cot, and they’re chained in a rather painful-looking manner to the wall.

Carmine’s wrists are shackled above his head, his body stretched out as far as it can go, while Enzo is bound in a more twisted position – one arm behind his back, the other pulled up and over his shoulder, straining the muscles in his torso. They both look like they’ve been through hell, and my stomach twists even more at the sight.

“Ready for some fun?” Constantino asks, rubbing his hands together. I don’t respond, but inside, I’m screaming. This isn’t what I want, but I’m trapped in this life, in this family.

“Let’s get started,” he says, and I brace myself for what’s to come.



“Please, Teddy, you know us! We wouldn’t betray the family! Don’t listen to him. He’s always wanted your brother’s position in the family. He’s trying to manipulate you.” Enzo pleads, his voice strained from the awkward position he’s in. Carmine, on the other hand, just sobs and begs for mercy.

“Enough!” Constantino snaps, clearly enjoying their desperation. He turns to Enzo first, picking up a pair of pliers from a nearby table. “Who were you working with from the Irish?”

“Never,” Enzo gasps out, his eyes filled with defiance.

“Wrong answer.” Constantino grabs one of Enzo’s fingers with the pliers and, with a sickening crunch, breaks it. I can’t help but wince at the sound, my stomach roiling.

“Okay, okay! It was O’Malley!” Enzo cries out, tears streaming down his face.

“Good boy,” Constantino sneers, moving on to Carmine. “And who was your contact?” he asks, brandishing a knife now.

“I don’t know! I swear!” Carmine’s voice trembles, and he tries to shrink away from the blade. He’s been holding onto this answer for some time, but I know his resolve is thinning.

“Fine,” Constantino says, unimpressed, and proceeds to slice shallow cuts into Carmine’s chest, making him scream in pain.

“It was Declan!” Carmine finally yells, tears mixing with sweat as they run down his face.

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Constantino grins wickedly. With a sudden, brutal movement, he slits Carmine’s throat, blood spraying everywhere. Enzo watches in horror, unable to tear his eyes away.

“Your turn,” Constantino tells Enzo, and despite everything, I feel a pang of sympathy for the man who once offered me guidance. My brother drives the knife deep into Enzo’s gut, twisting it mercilessly before ripping it back out. Enzo chokes on his own blood, dying a slow, agonizing death.

“Ah, that always gets me going,” Constantino says with a laugh, wiping his hands on a nearby cloth. “I need to find some girl to fuck. Meet you back here in an hour. Just get them down. I’ve got something special waiting for them.”

I can only imagine what that means. Guaranteed it’s something horrific knowing Consty. He doesn’t wait for an answer before leaving me alone with the butchered bodies of two men I once respected.

I sit down heavily, feeling numb and sickened. This is my life now – violence, betrayal, and loss. Killing them didn’t ease the pain of losing Raven. If anything, it only deepens the void she left behind. The music in my head, which used to be a comforting escape, now just feels like a mocking soundtrack to the horror show that is my reality.

Eventually, I force myself to stand up and face the gruesome task at hand. The smell of blood is thick in the air as I approach the bodies, trying not to think about how these men were once like family to me. My hands shake slightly as I begin to pull them down from their restraints.

“Sorry, fellas,” I mutter under my breath, feeling a pang of guilt that only adds to the weight on my shoulders. But I can’t afford to dwell on it, not when I have bigger problems consuming my thoughts.

Raven. God, I miss her. I’d give anything for just one more chance to make things right, even if she insists there’s no hope. But what could I possibly do to win her back? She’s chosen a life of piety and devotion, far removed from this world of violence and chaos.

“Think, Teddy. You’re not a complete dumbass,” I tell myself, wiping sweat from my brow. “There has to be something you can do.”

As I work, my mind races through countless scenarios, each more desperate than the last. What if I left the family behind, started fresh somewhere new? Would that be enough to prove my love for her? But the thought of abandoning my brothers makes my stomach churn with guilt. No, there has to be another way.

I just need to find it.

There has to be something I can do to win back the only woman who's ever truly understood me, even if it means risking everything in the process.



The smell of death clings to my nostrils as I finish wrapping up the lifeless bodies of Carmine and Enzo. It's not a pleasant scent, but it's one I've become all too familiar with in this screwed-up family business. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt as I stare down at their faces, covered in bruises and dried blood. As much as Constantino was the one to end their lives, I wonder if their deaths are ultimately on my hands.

"Ready to take these two out for a ride, Teddy?" Constantino's voice breaks me out of my thoughts. His smirk sends shivers down my spine; that damn grin always means trouble.

"Wait, take them where?" I ask, suddenly dreading the answer. I figured we'd go straight to the crematory, but with Constantino, things are never that simple.

“You’ll see,” is all he says, still smirking like the devil himself.

With a heavy sigh, I lug the bodies into the backseat of the van, trying my best to ignore the weight of their limp forms. How the hell did I end up here?

As Constantino drives, my uneasiness only grows. The silence in the car is thick, suffocating, like the darkness outside the window. My mind races with questions, but every time I open my mouth to ask, the words die on my lips. It’s not that I’m scared of Constantino—*okay, maybe I am a little*—but something about his demeanor tonight has me on edge.

“Spit it out, Teddy,” he finally snaps, his piercing green eyes flicking towards me for a moment before returning to the road. “What do you want to ask me?”

“Where are we taking the bodies?” I blurt out, unable to hold back any longer. “And why? What’s the plan?”

“Patience, little brother,” he says, his voice suddenly soft and almost gentle. “All will be revealed soon.”

I swallow hard, the taste of fear mixing with the stale air in my mouth. The radio plays “The Reason” by Hoobastank and it sets the mood perfectly for this twisted family outing. As the car speeds through the night, I can’t shake the feeling that Constantino’s taking us all down a path we won’t be able to escape from. And yet, here I am, in the damn passenger seat.

“Shit,” I whisper to myself, staring into the darkness outside. I try to keep my voice steady. “Can you at least tell me what your plans are for the family? It’s obvious that Primo and Giovanni don’t want the job anymore, so where does that leave us?”

Constantino smirks, focusing on the road as he speaks. “I do have every intention of taking control of the family, Teddy. But I’m not interested in turning it into some legitimate enterprise like our dear brothers wanted.”

“Could have guessed that.” My heart clenches at his words, fear and curiosity mingling together.

“Mob families exist for a reason, little brother. We’ve served a purpose for decades,” Constantino continues, his tone cold and calculating. “Our power has waned because of Primo’s and Giovanni’s foolish attempts to go legit. I plan to fix that. Starting now.”

“By doing...what exactly?” I ask hesitantly, unsure if I even want to know the answer.

“You’ll see,” he replies enigmatically, pulling the van to a stop outside a familiar cathedral. “Grab the bodies from the back, will you?”

The same cathedral where I found Raven. My stomach churns as I reluctantly comply, lugging the wrapped bodies out of the car one by one, their dead weight making my arms ache. Constantino helps me with the second body, and we drag them inside the dark, imposing building.

“Constantino, what are we doing here?” My voice echoes in the empty space, anxiety gnawing at me. “I’m supposed to clean up scenes, not make new ones.” He doesn’t answer, just stares at the crucifix looming over us, an inscrutable expression on his face.

“Come on,” he says, dragging the lifeless body of Carmine behind him. He lets it go unceremoniously and then grabs something out of his back pocket.

He pressed it into my hand and I look down to see what it is.

The weight of the cold metal spike in my hands sends a shiver down my spine. Constantino, his face set in steely determination, directs me to help him with Carmine's body first. As we work together, positioning the corpse against the empty cross to the left of the crucifix, one of the ones that belonged to the thieves that refused to repent. It dawns on me what my brother intends to do.

"Jesus Christ, Consty," I mutter under my breath. Crucifixion. That's some twisted shit, even for him. But I don't voice my concern; I know better than to question Constantino when he's in this state. And besides, Carmine and Enzo had me torture Raven, so maybe they deserve whatever sick fate my brother has planned for them.

"Keep your head in the game, Teddy," Constantino snaps as the sound of the hammer striking the spike rings out within the cathedral. The sharp, metallic scent of blood fills my nostrils as the spike pierces Carmine's lifeless hand, securing him to the cross.

Finishing up with Carmine, we move onto Enzo's body, repeating the gruesome process, but on the other cross. My stomach churns, but I force myself to keep focused, to block out the reality of what I'm doing.

Once both bodies are crucified, Constantino pulls two slips of paper from his pocket and pins one to each man's shirt. He steps back, allowing me to finally read the words printed on them: "Traitor" in bold black ink.

"Con, this is going to start a war with the Irish," I tell him, trying to keep my voice steady despite the sinking feeling in my gut.

His lips curl into a sinister smirk. “I know.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Teddy

I'm sitting in father's office again, that same dim room with the smell of stale cigarette smoke. It's like I'm trapped in some goddamn film noir. The only thing missing is a sultry femme fatale. But instead of some sexy broad in a tight red dress, I've got my brother glaring at me from behind father's giant desk.

"Alright," Consty says, finally turning to face me. "Let's do it. Let's have it out because your attitude about this whole thing is pissing me off."

I clench my jaw, feeling the anger simmer inside me. "What do you expect from me?" I ask him. "To go around acting like everything's okay when the woman I love is gone?"

Constantino rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Go on, Teddy. Just get it all out."

"Did you know her parents locked her in a dog cage when she was a kid? Yeah, that's right. A fucking dog cage. How the hell did you miss that when you were dating her?"

Constantino leans back in his chair, looking both shocked and annoyed. "How the fuck should I know? I can't be

expected to know every detail about every woman I've ever been with."

"Details? This isn't some minor shit, Consty." I can't help but think of how beautiful and broken Raven was when she showed up at our doorstep. "She came to the mansion looking for you, but I found her first. I helped her clean up her parents' murder. And yes, we spent that night together at the hotel, but she ran away from me the next morning. I didn't see her again until she caught me cleaning up that mess at the church."

"Jesus Christ," Constantino mutters, rubbing his temples. "This is one fucked up situation."

"You think?" I roll my eyes. "But you know what? Raven's been through hell and back, and she still manages to keep going."

Constantino stares at me for a moment, his eyes cold and calculating. I can practically see the gears turning in his head as he considers my words. But I don't care what he thinks. I'm done hiding. I'm done pretending that everything's fine when it's all falling apart around me.

"Raven deserves better," I say quietly, my voice raw with emotion. "Look, Consty," I say, struggling to get the words out. "After she left me at that damn hotel, Raven got herself into some serious shit. She was hitchhiking all over the country, and you can only imagine what kind of people she met along the way." I feel my stomach churn as I recall the things she told me about her time on the road. "She was raped, abused... it's a miracle she's even alive. But somehow, she found that church and they took her in."

"Teddy, listen to yourself. She's damaged goods. A liability. We got bigger fish to fry right now – like getting our legacy back. You need to let her go."

He takes a sip from his glass and continues, “Besides, there’s no shortage of pussy out there. It’s all the same in the end. Just a hole to shove your dick in and out of.” His green eyes narrow as he smirks, reveling in his own crude words.

“Take last week, for example,” he says, leaning forward again. “I saw this chick at the gas station? Tight little body, tits that could barely fit in my hands. Fucked her brains out in the bathroom.” He pauses, a twisted smile curling on his lips. “And then later that night, I fucked her friend too. Am I ever going to see either of them again? No. Do I even know their names? No. Did I shove my dick into them and make them scream, yes.”

“I’ve had my fair share of bathroom fucks, Consty,” I say rolling my eyes at him. “But, that’s not what this is about. This is Raven. She’s not some disposable piece of ass.”

“They’re all disposable pieces of ass, Teddy,” Constantino says, grabbing a cigar from the drawer and lighting it.

“Well, not to me,” I reply. “You don’t have to care about her. But I do. And I’m not giving up on her, no matter what you say.”

“Suit yourself,” he scoffs, puffing on his cigar. “But don’t come crying to me when this all blows up in your face.”

The room goes silent for a moment, the tension between us thick enough to choke on. I stare at my brother, my heart pounding in my chest. The man’s arrogance is infuriating, but I refuse to let him get to me. Instead, I focus on what matters most: Raven.

“Look,” I say, my voice surprisingly steady despite the anger simmering just below the surface. “I can’t just move on.

I've made up my mind. I'm going to visit Raven at the convent and try to talk to her."

Constantino snorts, finishing off his drink and slamming the glass onto the table. "You're wasting your time, Teddy. She's long gone – hidden away behind those walls, praying for forgiveness or some shit. She's chosen her path, and it doesn't include you."

My jaw clenches, but I force myself to stay calm. "Maybe she just needs someone to remind her that there's more to life than hiding from the past. Someone who cares about her."

"Whatever, man," he mutters, shaking his head. "It's your life. Go chase after that lost cause if you want."

I can feel his condescending gaze burning into me, but I refuse to back down. For once in my life, I'm going to follow my heart, even if it leads me straight into the unknown.

"Thanks for the pep talk," I reply, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "But I don't need your permission or your approval. I'm doing this for Raven, not for you."

"Suit yourself," he says, shrugging nonchalantly as he pours himself another drink.

As I leave the office, the sound of his laughter echoing behind me, I can't help but wonder what kind of man I'm becoming. But one thing is certain: I won't let Raven slip through my fingers again. This time, I'll be there for her – no matter what it takes.



Raven

The cold stone floor of the church presses against my knees, a reminder that I'm still tethered to this earth. My hands are clasped tightly in prayer, but it feels hollow. God seems so distant now, ever since Teddy entered my life.

“God, please guide me,” I whisper into the silence. But there's no reply, only the echoes of doubt bouncing off the walls of the empty church.

My mind races to Father Patrick's words from years ago – his warnings about Teddy being some demonic force sent to tempt me away from my path. I can still feel the heat of his glare and the chill of his words: “You must resist, Raven. You must be strong.”

But then there's Father James, his kind eyes offering solace. He told me Teddy was just a man who loved me deeply, and that I hadn't done anything wrong. The two conflicting opinions weigh heavily on me, making it hard to breathe.

“Sister Neriah,” Sister Mary calls softly as she approaches, her habit rustling gently with each step. “We're all glad you've decided to return to us. Have you thought more about your vows?”

“Yes. I intend to take them,” I reply without conviction, my voice wavering.

“God will show you the way, dear,” she says reassuringly, placing a hand on my shoulder. I wish I could believe her.

I think back to the first time I met Teddy, those blue eyes filled with a warmth I'd never known before. And the night we spent together, our bodies entwined, feeling alive and free. But then, there's the darkness – the violence that follows him like a shadow, threatening to consume us both.

I take a deep, shaky breath, trying to find clarity amidst the chaos of my thoughts. My decision to take my vows feels uncertain, but I don't know how else to process what happened between Teddy and me. This was supposed to be my escape, my sanctuary.

“Lord, please help me,” I plead once more, my voice barely audible. But the silence remains deafening – no divine guidance, no celestial comfort to be found.

“Sister,” Sister Mary says gently, a note of concern in her voice. “God is always with you. Trust in his love, and he will guide your way.”

But as I rise from my knees, my heart heavy with unanswered questions and lingering doubt, I can't help but wonder if God has forsaken me, or if I've simply lost the ability to hear his voice against the turbulence of my own soul.

“I'm ready,” I say to her. Sister Mary nods her head and then my feet are carrying me towards a fate I still feel uncertain about.

“Come, let us speak with Mother Superior, then,” Sister Mary says.

The cold stone floor beneath my feet is a stark reminder of the life I've chosen. A life of solitude and penance, far removed from the chaotic world outside these walls. The scent of incense still lingers in the air, mingling with the prayers of my sisters and the echoes of our hymns.

“Sisters,” Sister Agnes says, her soft voice breaking through my thoughts as we approach her. “There’s a man asking for Sister Neriah.”

My heart skips a beat, and I try to swallow the sudden lump in my throat. “Who?” I ask, attempting to sound indifferent.

“Teodoro Maldonado,” she replies, her brow furrowing with concern.

The name sends a shiver down my spine. Even at just the mention of it I remember the feel of his lips on mine and the warmth of his embrace. I tighten my grip on the rosary beads in my hand, seeking strength from their familiar texture.

“Tell him ... tell him I don’t wish to see him,” I say, my voice cracking.

Sister Agnes hesitates, her eyes searching mine for answers. “Are you sure, dear? It is not our place to turn away those who seek us out.”

I nod, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “Yes, I’m sure. Thank you, Sister.”

As she turns to leave, I watch the other nuns exchange glances, their whispered conversations hanging heavy in the air. They’ve noticed my turmoil, and though they don’t know the full extent of my past, they can sense the storm brewing within me.

“Lord, please give me strength,” I pray silently, clutching the rosary beads tighter. “Help me resist temptation, to stay true to the path I’ve chosen.”

But even as I mouth the words, I can feel the pull of Teddy’s presence. The music of our past plays in my mind, a haunting melody that refuses to be silenced. And I’m left

wondering if I'll ever truly escape the darkness that binds us together, or if it's destined to consume us both.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



Teddy

As I scrub the bloodstained floor, my mind's a blank canvas. No music, no mental play-by-play of the gruesome scene that unfolded here just hours ago. Everything feels different, like I'm detached

from reality, and it scares the shit out of me. Tito - or whatever his name is - watches me warily, probably wondering if I've completely lost it.

"What's going on with you?" he asks, breaking the unbearable silence.

"Nothing," I lie, but Tito ain't buying it. He's no Marco, but he ain't stupid either. And speaking of Marco... damn, I miss him. The usual banter and laughter we'd share during these cleanups are now just echoes in my head.

"Teddy, seriously, man. You look like you've seen a ghost," Tito says, concern creeping into his voice.

"Alright, fine. You want the truth?" I sigh, realizing there's no point in hiding it anymore. "It's about that girl we decided not to kill on our first job together. I fell in love with her, but she left to take her vows."

“Damn, that’s rough, man. I’m sorry,” Tito says, sympathy filling his eyes. I can tell he means it, even though we barely know each other.

“Thanks,” I mutter. “It is what it is. I just gotta find a way to move on, y’know? I keep trying to see her, but she won’t give me the time of day. Can’t think of any other way to win her back.”

I continue scrubbing, trying to drown my thoughts in the repetitive motion, but it ain’t working. My heart aches for her, for the life we could’ve had together. But maybe that’s the problem. Maybe I was never meant to have a life filled with love and happiness, not in this line of work. Maybe the best thing I can do for her is let her go.

“Look, Teddy,” Tito says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “You gotta do what’s right for you, man. You never know, maybe love will find its way back to you.”

“Maybe,” I say, forcing a smile. But deep down, I’m not so sure.

“Alright, I think we’re done here,” I announce, stepping back to survey the now spotless room. The lingering smell of bleach mixes with the metallic scent of blood that still hangs in the air.

Tito glances around, raising an eyebrow. “You sure about that?” he asks, nodding toward a corner where I completely missed a whole blood splatter.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks. My focus has been shit lately. I quickly clean up the mess and join Tito at the door. “Let’s get outta here.”

We head out to the van, our footsteps echoing through the empty building. The silence is unsettling, but it’s better than

the screams that likely filled this place not too long ago.

As we drive, the city lights blur together like a smear of watercolor outside the window. I can't help but think about how the people living their lives out there have no idea what goes on behind closed doors – the violence, the pain. And yet, they all got their own shit to deal with, right?

“Hey, Tito,” I say, breaking the silence. “You got anyone in your life that you love?”

He shrugs, his eyes fixed on the road. “I dunno. There was this one girl, but it didn't work out.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I say, genuinely feeling for the guy.

“Thanks, but it's okay. It doesn't really matter anyway.” His voice is flat, devoid of emotion. Guess he's had time to come to terms with it.

“Ever wonder if love is truly in the cards for us?” I ask, thinking about Primo and Giovanni, who managed to find love despite our line of work. “I mean, my brothers both got to marry the women they love, so who knows, right?”

“Maybe,” Tito says, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “But it's hard to tell in our world.”

I nod, my gaze returning to the window and the lives passing by outside. Deep down, a part of me still hopes that one day I'll find my own happiness – a life away from the blood and violence. But for now, all I can do is go through the motions, trying to hold onto whatever pieces of myself I have left.

The van pulls up to the mansion, and I can't help but notice how eerily silent it is these days. It's like stepping into a damn mausoleum. With Constantino back in charge and Carmine and Enzo six feet under, there's no one coming or

going anymore. And that's just the way it has to be – if anyone found Constantino, he'd be worm food in a heartbeat.

“See ya around,” Tito says as we part ways at the entrance.

“Later,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. I step inside, feeling the weight of the silence crushing me. I hate it, but I know Constantino's still working things out in his head, trying to figure out what to do next.

Dragging myself upstairs, I let out a sigh of relief when I finally reach my room. Collapsing onto the bed, I think about how glad I am that Constantino's taking over the business again. He always wanted it, even when we were kids. If things go back to the way they were before, so be it.

But even though I try to push it from my mind, I can't stop worrying about the situation with the Irish. I don't know what their response was when they found Carmine and Enzo crucified in their church, but I'm sure I'll be hearing about it soon. And it won't be pretty.

“Fuck,” I mutter, rubbing my eyes. The silence in the mansion is deafening. No music, no laughter – nothing but the ghosts of memories echoing through the halls. It's suffocating, and I want nothing more than to break free from it.

As I lay there, staring up at the ceiling, I try to drown out the silence with thoughts of better times. But all that comes to mind is the blood and violence that's consumed my life. Is this really all there is for me?

My phone ringing shatters the oppressive silence in my room, and I snatch it up. “Hello?” I answer, desperate for any distraction.

“Mr. Maldonado? This is Sister Maria from St. Agnes Orphanage,” says a timid voice on the other end. My family

has loans out to orphanages across the state at very low interest rates – it’s our way of giving back, I guess. But this call reminds me of Raven, since the orphanage is run by a convent, just not the one she’s a part of.

“Hey, Sister Maria. What can I do for you?” I ask, trying to keep the heaviness out of my voice.

“Um, well... we won’t be able to make our payment this month, and I’m so sorry about that. I promise we’re doing our best to come up with the money,” she stammers, her anxiety palpable.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” I say, surprised by the genuine concern in my voice. “Why are you so worried?”

“Your brother, Giovanni... he was always... um, more difficult when it came to these situations,” she confesses, her voice trembling slightly.

“Ah, yeah, Gio could be tough,” I admit, rubbing a hand through my hair. “But look, I’m running things now, and I don’t want you stressing over this. Just make the payment when you can, all right?”

“Really?” Relief washes over her voice. “Thank you so much, Mr. Maldonado. You have no idea what this means to us.”

“No problem, sister. Take care of those kids, okay?” I say, and we end the call.

As I lay the phone down, I can’t help but think about how different things are now. The silence is still suffocating, but for a moment, I was able to do something good. And maybe that’s what it takes to find some kind of balance in this messed-up life.

I flop back onto my bed, the springs creaking beneath me as I stare up at the ceiling. The cracks in the plaster form a pattern that reminds me of Raven's face – her hazel eyes, the curve of her lips. Which is dumb, but everything reminds me of her now. God, I miss her. But who am I kidding? A girl like that, with her soul as pure as freshly fallen snow, and me, neck-deep in blood and filth – we were never meant to be together.

“Raven,” I whisper, as if saying her name out loud might somehow summon her. But deep down, I know she's made her choice. She wants to be a nun, and I have to respect that. If she can find peace and solace away from this life, then maybe it's for the best.

Still, the thought of her locked away in that convent, praying for redemption while I wallow in my sins... It eats away at me. I should've protected her better. I should've stopped Carmine and Enzo from dragging her into that goddamn dungeon. There's got to be something I can do to make it right.

And then it hits me – the phone call from earlier, the sister from the orphanage. My family's been helping these places out for years, but what if I could do more? What if I could use our resources, our connections, to make a real difference for these kids?

“Shit,” I mutter, sitting up. “Maybe I can actually do some good in this world.”

My heart races as the idea takes shape in my mind. It won't erase my past, and it won't bring Raven back. But maybe, just maybe, it'll help me find some kind of balance in this messed-up life. And in some small way, I'd be honoring her and her decision to dedicate her life to others.

“Alright, Teddy,” I say to myself, a newfound determination settling in. “Time to put those Maldonado connections to work for something good.”

I grab my phone again, my fingers hovering over the screen as I start making plans. If I can't have Raven by my side, at least I can try to make the world a better place in her name. And who knows? Maybe one day, she'll forgive me for all the wrongs I've done and see that there's still a sliver of light left in this darkness.

“Raven,” I whisper once more, feeling her presence like a distant melody. “This one's for you.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



Raven

The scent of incense clings to the air, but I can't let it lull me into a false sense of safety. I'm still on edge, even within these hallowed walls, and nothing will change that.

"Sister Neriah," Sister Agnes calls out as she slips into my room. "You have a visitor."

"Tell them to go away," I snap without looking up from the worn Bible in my lap. I don't mean to speak unkindly to my sister, but I'm finding it hard to regulate my emotions.

"Maybe you'll make an exception for me?" A soft-spoken voice comes from behind Sister Agnes, and I glance up to see a woman standing there, her warm eyes searching mine.

"Who are you?" I ask, my defenses rising.

"Evelyn. Primo's sister-in-law. I'm a doctor." She pauses and adds, "Teddy asked me to come check on you, health-wise."

"I'm fine," I say, closing the Bible with a sigh.

"I know you feel fine. But, maybe you wouldn't mind if I just sat with you a bit and we can double check?"

I want to turn Evelyn away. I don't want to be bothered, but as I look up and see Sister Agnes' true concern, I realize that my stubbornness might be hurting those around me. So, reluctantly, I agree to the exam.

As Evelyn begins her work, her hands gentle and precise, she talks about Teddy. "I don't know him too well, but he seems like a kind person at heart. When my sister, Isabella married Primo, she made him give up the business, and everything fell to Teddy."

"Yeah, I know," I mutter, my stomach twisting at the mention of his name. "But I still can't be with him."

"Look, I'm not here to convince you to go back to Teddy," Evelyn says, her voice tinged with sadness. "I just wanted you to know how remorseful he is, how he's not himself."

"What am I supposed to do about that?" I ask, my voice cracking.

"Nothing, I guess," she sighs. "But you both seem pretty miserable without each other."

As she finishes her examination, Evelyn gives me a small smile. "You're in good health, Raven. If you need anything, don't hesitate to contact me." She hands me her card before slipping out the door.

I'm still holding Evelyn's card when another knock startles me. I shove the card into a pocket before opening the door to find Mother Superior standing there, her face set in a stern expression.

"Sister, you have another visitor," she says, eyeing me carefully.

"Who is it?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“The man who comes to see you every single day.”

“Tell him to go away,” I say, bitterness seeping into my voice. “He shouldn’t be here.”

Mother Superior studies me for a moment, her eyes searching mine. “I don’t think you’re ready to truly take your vows and commit yourself to the life of a pensive nun.”

“Excuse me?” I bristle, feeling the anger rise within me. “Why not?”

“Because you’re running from this man,” she says gently, but with authority. “God cannot be a way to run away from something; He should be something to run to.”

“I can’t trust Teddy after what happened between us,” I argue, my hands balling into fists at my sides.

“Consider the story of the prodigal son,” Mother Superior suggests, her voice softening. “Did the father distrust his child when he returned after running from his family? Or did he rejoice that his son had come back and repented?”

Her words sink in, stirring up a whirlwind of conflicting emotions within me. I feel like I’m standing on a precipice, unsure whether to leap or retreat. But Mother Superior holds my gaze, her eyes filled with wisdom and understanding.

“Follow your heart,” she advises, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

The decision feels heavy, like I’m making a choice that will change the course of my life.

“Will you truly not support me taking vows?” I ask meekly.

Mother Superior sighs. “I think that you should see this man. God brings him to your doorstep each day, and you turn

him away. See him, confront your demons. Then if you still feel sure that you want to proceed with your vows, I will support that decision.”

Her words linger in the air as she leaves, the click of the door shutting echoing around me. I stand there and my breathing goes shallow and rapid. I know she’s right. I need to see Teddy. I just hope I have the courage to do it.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



Teddy

I spot Evelyn in the parking lot of the convent as I pull in. Her presence is a goddamn beacon in this dreary place. “Evelyn!” I shout, rolling my window down and waving her over. She walks toward me, concern etched on her face.

“Is Raven okay?” I ask, my voice laced with worry.

“Physically, she’s fine,” she says, pausing for a moment before continuing, “but it’s clear you two are dealing with something much deeper.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. “I don’t know what to do if she keeps pushing me away.”

Evelyn places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Just be yourself, Teddy.”

“Who even am I anymore?” I mutter, feeling lost in the chaos of my own life.

“Find out who you are before trying to be with someone else,” she advises with a gentle smile. “And remember, you can call me anytime.”

“Thanks, Evie,” I say, nodding at her as I step out of the car.

The convent looms before me like a specter from another age. The old stone walls are weathered and worn, shadows dancing across them as clouds pass overhead. The sound of distant church bells reaches my ears, only adding to the eerie atmosphere. I can’t help but feel skeptical; how could a place like this bring peace to anyone, let alone Raven?

As I walk up to the heavy wooden doors, I take a deep breath and knock. Every time I’ve come here, I’m greeted by a new set of nuns, each one more pious than the last. It’s like they’re trying to outdo each other in holiness or something.

“Come on, Teddy” I think to myself, “Just get through this and maybe you’ll find some answers.”

The door creaks open, and a stern-looking woman with graying hair appears. She’s got this air of authority that makes me feel like I’ve just been caught stealing cookies in the kitchen. “Uh, hi,” I stammer, trying to sound more confident than I feel. “I’m Teddy.”

She doesn’t smile, which only adds to my discomfort. I brace myself for another rejection, but instead, she steps aside, gesturing for me to enter. I blink in surprise before stepping into the convent.

We walk through the cold stone hallways, and I can’t help but notice how the place feels more like a tomb than a sanctuary. The walls are lined with faded religious paintings, their eyes seeming to follow me as we pass by. The flickering candles cast eerie shadows, and every footstep echoes, making me hyper-aware of my own presence. It’s enough to make a guy question if he’s made some terrible mistake in a past life.

“Right this way,” the high-ranking nun says, her voice echoing through the hallway as she leads me to a small room. She closes the door behind us, and I fight back the urge to crack a joke about being locked up. Now’s not the time, Teddy.

“Please sit down,” she says, gesturing to a chair. “I am Mother Superior, the head of this convent.”

“Uh, nice to meet you.” I bow awkwardly, unsure of what the proper protocol is here. A hint of a smile tugs at the corner of her lips, and my nerves ease ever so slightly.

“Thank you,” I mumble, taking a seat across from her as we face each other in the dimly lit room. My mind races, wondering what she wants to talk about. Is it Raven? Does she know about my family’s business? Or maybe she’s just here to tell me that I’m really, really bad at bowing.

I jump the gun, spilling my reasons for being here in a jumbled mess. “Mother Superior, I’m here to see Raven,” I say, struggling to keep the desperation out of my voice. “I just... I love her. Deeply. But if she wants to take her vows, I won’t stand in her way.”

She looks at me for a moment, her eyes piercing through me like steel. Then she speaks, her voice steady and calm. “To be honest with you, Teddy, I’ve never truly believed that Raven would take her vows.”

My heart leaps at her words, but then guilt slams into me like a sucker punch. As much as I want Raven with me, this path is important to her. It’s selfish of me to hope that she’ll abandon it.

“I just want to see her,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

Mother Superior nods, understanding the weight of my request. “Wait in the office,” she says, standing up. As she heads towards the door, she pauses and adds, “Please don’t touch anything.”

“Of course,” I mumble, feeling like a chastised child. She leaves, and I find myself alone in the small room. The silence is suffocating, so I try to distract myself by glancing around the space. A wooden cross adorns one wall, its surface smooth and polished, beckoning me to reach out and touch it.

I make my way to it and just as my fingertips brush against the cool wood, the door swings open. My hand snaps back, narrowly avoiding being caught. I turn to see Raven standing there, clad in her thick nun habit. She looks beautiful – ethereal, even – but the sight of her in that outfit twists something inside me.

“Raven,” I breathe, taking a step toward her before stopping short. I can’t bring myself to hug her; I don’t deserve to touch her. “You look nice.”

Her lips remain a tight line, and she doesn’t smile. Instead, she settles into one of the chairs, her eyes never leaving mine. I sit across from her, my heart racing in my chest, wondering how the hell we ended up here.

“Raven,” I say, the words heavy in my throat, “I’m truly sorry for everything. I understand your decision to take your vows, and I will respect and honor it.”

Her gaze remains locked on mine, her hazel eyes clouded with a mix of emotions I can’t quite decipher. My heart feels like it’s being squeezed by an invisible hand as I continue.

“Since I’m still in charge of the family business... I’ve decided to do something to express my remorse.” I pause,

drawing in a shaky breath. “I’m going to forgive every loan made to orphanages across New England, all in a fund set up in your name.”

Raven gasps, and tears well up in her eyes. They spill over, tracing shimmering paths down her cheeks, and seeing her like this – so raw, so vulnerable – shatters me. I dare to stand up, kneeling before her, feeling the cold floor seep through my pants and into my bones.

I reach into my back pocket and pull something out of it, placing it in her hands. It’s the little pink journal that I’d stolen out of her room all those years ago. Did I read every single page of it? Absolutely.

Do I really want to give it back to her and give up the last thing I have of her in this world? Nope.

But, it’s not mine, and I shouldn’t have held onto it as long as I did.

“This is yours,” I say. She takes the journal with shaky fingers and I can see the recognition light up in her eyes.

“Teddy...” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

“Raven, I love you,” I tell her, my own voice cracking with emotion. “I just want you to be happy.” I take her hand gently, pressing a soft kiss to its back. The feel of her skin against my lips is electric, but I know I have to let her go.

Before she has a chance to respond, I stand and make my way to the door, feeling the weight of our shared pain bearing down on me. Mother Superior walks me back to the entrance of the convent.

“Thank you,” I say to her. She doesn’t say anything back. Instead, she just looks into my eyes and then nods.

I leave the convent, the cold air outside biting at my face as I walk to my car. The massive figure becomes smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror as I drive away, my heart heavy with the knowledge that I may never see Raven again.

All I can do now is hope – hope that she finds peace and happiness, even if it means a life without me. As I head back to the mansion, the low hum of the car’s engine is drowned out by the music on the radio, Linger by the Cranberries. It’s mournful melody echoes the emptiness in my chest.

“I’m in love, and always will be.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



Teddy

“You’re completely useless right now,” Consty growls, glaring at the mess I was supposed to be cleaning up. I’m slumped on the cold, concrete floor of the warehouse, clutching a blood-soaked sponge like it’s a teddy bear. I squint up at him, trying to blink away the haze clouding my vision. “Why are you here?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“Because your partner told me we had a problem,” he snaps, his dark eyes narrowing. “And you’re the problem.” I sigh, feeling the weight of defeat press down on my chest. Normally, I’d give my partner hell for ratting me out, but I can’t even remember who’s on this job with me tonight. It’s 3 in the morning, my Walkman’s sitting useless in the van, and the emptiness around me is a perfect reflection of the void swallowing my heart.

“Alright, get up,” Consty orders, his voice grating on my nerves. He motions to someone else in the room - I guess he brought backup. “Go ahead and finish the job.”

“Alright boss,” the random guy says, stepping forward with an obnoxious grin plastered on his face. I hate him

already. Consty hauls me to my feet, steadying me as my legs threaten to buckle beneath me. He guides me out of the warehouse and shoves me into his car like I'm some sort of inconvenience.

"I can do it, I can finish the job," I protest weakly, desperate for something to focus on other than the pain ripping through my chest. Consty laughs, a bitter sound that makes me flinch.

"I don't want you anywhere near a crime scene right now," he says, turning the ignition key. "We absolutely cannot have any indication of our involvement otherwise we're fucked."

I find myself not caring about the consequences, consumed by the ache left in Raven's absence. I know Constantino's started a full-blown war amongst the families in the city - us Italians and the Irish at the center of it.

"Don't worry about it," he says, driving down the empty streets.

"Where are we going?" I demand, too exhausted to keep up the facade of indifference.

"I'm dropping you back at the house because you need sleep and you need to get your shit in order." The thought of returning to the place where Raven and I were happy once, and where I ruined everything, makes me physically ill.

"Don't do that," I beg him, my voice barely above a whisper. "I don't want to be alone."

"Oh God, stop being such a pussy," Consty snaps, his patience wearing thin. He reaches into the backseat and grabs a handle of whiskey, shoving it into my hands. "Here." My fingers wrap around the cold glass.

“Nah,” I say, eyeing the whiskey in my hand as if it has the power to mend my broken heart. Consty pops the top off and shoves it back into my hands. “Drink,” he orders. “It’ll help.”

I take a swig, my throat burning from the liquid fire, and cough. “There’s no helping this,” I mutter, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Tino rolls his eyes, clearly annoyed by my self-pity. “It’s a girl,” he says dismissively. “There’ll be another one.”

“Not like her,” I insist, images of Raven’s beautiful face haunting me.

He shakes his head, exasperated. “Yes, like her. And you know what?” He adds, gripping the steering wheel tightly, “I hope there’s not another one like her because you fucking lost your mind over this girl.”

“She’s all I ever wanted,” I say, feeling the weight of my words deep in my chest.

“You just don’t know what’s out there,” Consty replies, his voice cold and detached. “I’ve been all over. Trust me. You’ll get over her. Move on. And forget she ever existed.”

“Is that what happened to you?” I ask.

He barks out a laugh. “No. Thank fuck I’ve never fallen under the influence of that specific drug.” As he pulls into the driveway of the mansion, he hits the button to unlock the doors. “Get out. Go sleep. Get your shit together.”

“Gee, thanks for the pep talk,” I say sarcastically, my hand still clutching the bottle of whiskey.

“If you want a hand job, hire a prostitute,” he laughs cruelly. “I’m not here to make you feel good.”

I close the car door, and he zooms off, leaving me standing in the cold morning air. I make my way back into the mansion, the whiskey bottle my only companion. Swig after swig, I drown myself in the golden poison, losing track of time and how much I've consumed. Pretty sure I've blacked out a few times.

The sun's coming up, casting a weak light through the mansion windows. It must have been hours that I've just been drinking and wandering around, consumed by my thoughts and unable to sleep. I finally find a room with a bed and crash down onto it, the alcohol spilling from the bottle onto my clothes. I should care, but there's no energy left for that these days.

Just as the sweet black bliss is about to consume me, something vibrates in my pocket. Fumbling, I manage to pull my phone out and put it to my ear. "Ello?" I slur.

"Teddy. It's Mother Superior," the voice on the other end of the line says, her tone soft yet stern. "I have something important to tell you."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Raven

I sit at the little table in my room, the low light casting a somber glow over everything. The pink journal trembles in my hands as I struggle to understand how Teddy came to have it. He must've grabbed it when he was cleaning up the house years ago, but why would he keep it all this time?

"Damn you, Teddy," I mutter under my breath, trying to suppress the emotions welling up inside me. This relic from my past was the one thing I had cherished as a child, the one thing I could keep hidden from my parents. It was my escape, my sanctuary from the nightmare that was my life. And now it's back, just like that, looking almost untouched by time.

With shaking hands, I gently open the notebook and find the inscription I wrote so long ago: "A place to dream for a girl living a nightmare." God, I didn't mean for it to sound so depressing at the time, but reading it now, knowing that teenage me wrote those words... A tear escapes and rolls down my cheek.

"Get a grip," I tell myself, wiping away the tear and taking a deep breath. I remember bits and pieces of what I wrote in

these pages – mostly hopes and dreams. Sometimes I'd recount the day's events, but I'd change them into happy memories. A lot of times, I'd write about loving parents, hoping that if I put those words on paper enough times, maybe mine would turn into that too. Funny how that never worked out.

A lump forms in my throat as I flip to the next page. Seeing my old handwriting brings back memories, and it's almost too much to bear. Instead of reading, I just start flipping through the pages, not really seeing the words as much as feeling the weight of them. It feels like a lifetime ago, but the emotions still cut deep.

“Shit, why am I doing this to myself?” I mutter under my breath.

Finally, I stop at my very last entry. It's different from all the others. There's no hope here, no pretending that things could be better. The ink is blotted with dried tears and the page wrinkles from the water that fell from my eyes. My hands tremble as I read the words out loud, “All I wanted in this world was for someone to love me, but I've never been enough.”

I slam the book shut. My heart pounds in my chest as I close my eyes, trying to hold back the flood of tears threatening to escape. Teddy... he was the one who showed me love when I didn't think it was possible. I can't help but think about the way his blue eyes held so much pain when I told him to bring me here.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I say, pounding my fist on the table.

I press my palms against my eyes, willing the tears away. I know deep down that Teddy still loves me, even though he

pretends otherwise. Heartbreak doesn't exist without love, and I saw the heartbreak in his eyes when we parted ways.

“Get yourself together,” I tell myself firmly. “You’re stronger than this.”

But am I? The truth is, I don’t know anymore. All I know is that I feel lost without Teddy now, and the thought of never being with him... well, it’s a pain I can barely stand.

“God, I’m such a mess,” I say, wiping away the tears and taking a shaky breath.

A gentle knock on my door pulls me back to reality. “Come in,” I say, wiping away the last of my tears.

The door creaks open and one of the sisters appears. “Prayer is beginning soon. Everyone is looking for you.”

“Thanks,” I mumble, tucking the little pink journal into the drawer of the desk, as if hiding away a piece of my soul. It feels both comforting and painful, a reminder of the child I once was. I rise from the chair, the weight of my decision pressing down on me like a hundred bricks.

“Lead the way,” I tell the sister, forcing a tight-lipped smile. She nods and turns. As we walk through the corridors, I try to focus on the sound of our footsteps echoing on the cold stone floor. Anything to keep my thoughts from spiraling back to Teddy.

“Are you alright, dear?” she asks in a hushed tone, casting a sideways glance at me. Her eyes are filled with concern, but also something else – a hint of curiosity, maybe? It’s hard to tell with these sisters; they’ve always been a bit enigmatic to me.

“Fine,” I lie, the word tasting like ash in my mouth. “Just lost in thought, that’s all.”

She nods, accepting my answer without question. A part of me wishes she'd pry more, ask about what's really going on in my heart. But then again, what good would it do? No amount of talking can change the fact that I chose this life over Teddy, even if it breaks my heart a little more each day.

We reach the chapel, and the sisters are gathered in their usual spots, heads bowed in silent prayer. I take a deep breath and follow the sister to my place, filling my lungs with the familiar smells of wax and old wood.

"May God grant you peace," she whispers before leaving me to join the others.

"Peace," I mutter under my breath, the word feeling like a cruel joke. My heart is anything but peaceful, tangled up in thoughts of Teddy and the life we could have had together. As I kneel down and bow my head, I can't help but wonder if I'll ever find that elusive sense of tranquility I've been searching for.

"Raven, focus," I chide myself, forcing my thoughts back to the present moment. But even as I try to concentrate on the prayers, my mind keeps drifting back to the little pink journal and the girl who dreamed of love – a love that, in the end, she couldn't hold on to.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



Raven

Time moves at an odd pace inside these walls. In a way, it feels similar to the time spent in cages. I often lose track of what day it is or what time it is.

But today I very clearly know. Today, I intend to take my final vows. I walk into the sanctuary, my footsteps echoing against the solemn walls. The air is heavy with the scent of old wood and incense. Soft music plays in the background, a haunting melody that fills the space with an almost ethereal quality. Stained glass windows cast vibrant colors across the polished pews, the images of saints gazing down at me as if they know what's hidden in my heart.

My sisters surround me, their faces glowing with pride as they watch me prepare to take my final vows. Their dark habits rustle softly as they whisper prayers for me beneath their breaths. I can feel their love and support, but deep inside, I also know that if they could see the doubt festering within me, they might not be so eager to stand by my side.

I slide into a pew near the front, the cold wood pressing against my knees as I kneel down. I close my eyes, attempting to focus on prayer, but instead, my thoughts drift to Teddy.

The quiet laughter we shared, the warmth of his arms around me, the safety I once felt in his presence.

“God, I’m such a mess,” I whisper, not to any higher power, but to myself. I try to convince myself that this is the right thing to do - that all this time, I thought I was better off without Teddy, but in reality, he’s better off without me in his life. I blink back the tears threatening to spill from my eyes, but it’s no use; they flood down my cheeks like a dam breaking loose.

“Get it together,” I scold myself, wiping at my face with trembling fingers. “This should be joyful. You’re devoting your life to something greater.” But the more I try to picture a life without Teddy, the more the fear and dread claw at my insides, and I can’t stop the tears that continue to leak from my eyes.

“Lord, give me strength,” I murmur, finally letting my whispered words drift upwards in a plea for help. But as the music swells around me, its melody intertwined with the sound of my own ragged breathing, I can’t shake the feeling that maybe I’m making the wrong choice. Maybe Teddy is the one I should be clinging to, instead of trying to push him away. And as the weight of that realization crashes down upon me, I can’t help but wonder if it’s already too late to change my mind.

The opening prayer comes to an end, and we all rise as one. The organist strikes the first note of “Amazing Grace” and my gut twists. It’s like the universe is mocking me, trying to remind me of the grace that I’m about to turn my back on. My voice wavers as I attempt to sing along, barely able to form the words while my sisters sway beside me, their smiles serene.

Their happiness only makes my heart ache more. The hymn finally ends, and we kneel again, our heads bowed in reverence. The litany of the saints begins, each name echoing through the sanctuary, a reminder of those who have come before me, who have answered the call I now question.

One by one, Mother Superior calls the sisters forward. When a novitiate takes their vows, it's an opportunity for the others to reaffirm their own commitment, and they approach the altar with a joy that seems utterly foreign to me. They've found their purpose, their true calling, and in this moment, I feel a pang of jealousy.

"Is it even real? Did God ever really speak to me?" I wonder, my hands clasped tightly together as I kneel in the pew. Maybe it was just my circumstances playing tricks on me, my mind conjuring up something to cling to because I couldn't face what my parents had done to me – or what I'd done to them.

As another sister steps forward and renews her vows, the sound of their joyful voices fills the air, leaving me feeling more alone than ever.

"Teddy," I whisper under my breath, his name a prayer in itself. "Please forgive me for what I'm about to do."

It's too late now. The choice has been made, and all that's left is to see where this path will lead – whether it brings me closer to God or further from the love I've left behind.

"Raven," Mother Superior calls my name, and a chill runs down my spine. It's time. I stand up, my legs feeling like they're made of gelatin, barely able to support my weight. As I walk towards the altar, I can feel the weight of everyone's eyes on me, but all I can think about is Teddy – his laughter, his

warmth, and the way he could make me forget about everything else for a little while.

Mother Superior looks at me with a mix of concern and curiosity as I approach her. She places her hands on my shoulders, her touch gentle yet firm, and begins to pray.

“Gracious and Eternal God, We come before You in awe and reverence, acknowledging Your sovereignty over all creation. As we stand, Your humble servant approaches to consecrate her life; we humbly offer this prayer of consecration.”

Her words echo through the sanctuary, bouncing off the high, vaulted ceilings, and something within me shatters. Tears spring to my eyes, cascading down my cheeks as my body is wracked with sobs. The vows that are meant to bring me closer to God, to a life of service and devotion, only serve to remind me of what I’m leaving behind – of what I’ve already lost.

By the time Mother Superior finishes reading the vows, my vision is blurred by the tears streaming down my face. I can barely make out her figure as she turns to present the ring and habit, symbols of my commitment to this new life. She kneels before me, and I sense that something has shifted in her presence.

Suddenly, fingers swipe at my tears, gently clearing away the wet streaks that obscure my vision. One by one, the details of the world around me come back into focus, and I see the last person I ever expected: Teddy. His blue eyes shimmer with unshed tears as he kneels before me, holding an engagement ring with hands that are damp from wiping away my tears.

“Teddy?” I stammer, my voice choked with emotion. “What... how?” Confusion and disbelief war within me as I look up at Mother Superior, then around at my sisters, all of whom are smiling warmly, as though they’ve been in on this secret from the beginning.

“Raven,” Teddy says, his voice trembling with the weight of his confession. “I’ve lied to you.”

My heart feels like it’s being squeezed in a vice as I stare at him, my face wet with tears. He’s lied to me? The sanctuary seems to close in around us, the air thick and heavy, as he continues.

“I told you I’d be happy for you to find peace and live out your life here. The truth is, that was a lie. Maybe it’s selfish. Maybe I’m taking you away from something that would give you a life of peace but right now, I can’t imagine a life without you. So, I have to ask you. I have to know. Will you leave all this behind? Marry me? Take my name and be my wife and start anew with me?”

“Teddy... after everything?” I sob, my hazel eyes searching his blue ones for any sign of doubt or hesitation. “You still want me?”

He shakes his head, and my heart clenches even tighter. “No, I don’t want you, Raven.” For a brief moment, my world threatens to crumble around me, but then he goes on. “Want is such an insufficient word for what you mean to me. You’re not just a want. You’re not even a need. You are a compulsion. You consume my every thought. My every step. My every moment. When I’m with you, I never feel alone. When I’m with you, I’m home. When I’m with you, I’m at peace.”

The intensity of his words sends shivers down my spine, and I fall into his arms, letting the ring he’s holding drop to the

ground with a dull clatter. He doesn't seem to care; he just holds me so tight that I can't breathe, and the only thing I can feel is him – the solid warmth of his body, the beating of his heart against my own.

I let go of everything else around me and fall into his embrace. His arms wrapped around me feel like heaven, squeezing out the last bit of air from my lungs.

“I lied too,” I admit, my voice barely audible. “Because, I can't do this whole life thing without you, either.” My words hang heavy in the air between us. “I know I said I could, but it was a lie.” Over Teddy's shoulder, I catch Mother Superior's gaze.

“I'm sorry, Mother,” I tell her. “But I can't take my vows.”

Her warm smile catches me off guard. She bows her head and speaks softly, “Just because you don't take your vows doesn't mean you can't honor God in other ways, my dear. Sometimes it takes going to a place to find out you don't belong there. But you'd never know until you went there.”

She places her hands on both me and Teddy, her touch gentle and reassuring. “I think God has other plans for you both. The bloodshed in this city is increasing. Perhaps you can both work towards putting an end to that together.”

Teddy pulls back to look at me, his blue eyes shimmering with tears. “I don't care what I do as long as I'm doing it with you,” he says before kissing me tenderly. Our tears intermingle, salty and sweet, as our lips meet.

My gaze darts to the floor, searching for the fallen ring. When I spot it, I pick it up. Teddy holds out his hand, but hesitates. “You don't need to decide now,” he tells me. “I'll always be waiting for you. However long it takes.”

I smile, slipping the ring onto my finger. “Thank you,” I whisper as his familiar grin spreads across his face.

Suddenly, I’m lifted into the air—Teddy cradling me like a precious treasure. We leave the church together, waving goodbye to my sisters who cheer us on with bittersweet smiles.

Teddy settles me into his car, the memory of our first encounter surging back. He starts the engine and looks at me, his eyes searching mine.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks.

“Anywhere,” I tell him. “Because being with you means I’m already home.”

He smiles and a tear drops from his eye. He brushes it aside and pops a cassette tape into the stereo. The opening notes of “Closing Time” by Semisonic fill the car, and I can’t help but feel a sense of closure.

“I know who I want to take me home...”

As he drives us down the winding roads, the weight of the world lifts off my shoulders, and for the first time since I can remember, I fall into a blissful sleep.

EPILOGUE



Teddy

I stand at the threshold of the large room, watching Raven sitting in a circle on the floor with a few other children. It's hard not to smile as I see her – she's absolutely radiant. It didn't take me long to figure out that Raven was gonna need some purpose when she left the convent, and it just so happens I knew the perfect one.

Found this foundation, right? Its purpose is to help kids who've suffered abuse, and Raven's been volunteering there while she's in school to become a clinical social worker. Every damn day, she grows brighter and more vibrant, and my heart swells just looking at her. She hugs each kid in turn, and another volunteer takes over.

As she makes her way over to me, I can't help but marvel at how much shit can change in such a short time. I had this long-ass discussion with Constantino, telling him straight up I couldn't be part of this war he was starting. He griped about it pretty hard, claiming I was abandoning the family and him. But I told him it was my decision, and I had never wanted any part of the family biz from the get-go.

He eventually accepted my decision, not like he had much choice. But he still called me as much of a sellout as Primo and Giovanni. I know he's pissed, but I also know there's no stopping what he's started, and I can't be part of it, especially if innocents are gonna get hurt.

"Hey," Raven says softly as she reaches me, her hazel eyes filled with warmth.

"Hi," I reply, pulling her into a tight embrace. "How was it today?"

"Amazing, as always," she answers, her voice muffled against my chest. "These kids... they're so strong, you know? They've been through so much."

"Like you," I say, and I can feel her smile against me. "You've got a lotta love to give, and they need it."

"Thank you for finding this place for me," she says, pulling back to look into my eyes. "It's helped me heal too, in ways I never thought possible."

"Anything for you, Darkness," I say, and I mean it. We may be surrounded by darkness, but we're determined to carve out our own little corner of light. And I'll be damned if I let anything or anyone hurt her again.

"Thanks for picking me up," Raven says, her eyes sparkling as I open the car door for her.

"Of course, baby," I reply with a grin. We slide into the car, and she shoots me a curious look. "Got something special planned for us today."

"Really?" she asks, raising an eyebrow. I just smile, switch on the radio, and hit the gas. As we drive, *Steal my Sunshine* by Len starts playing, and I can't help but sing along.

I know it's up for me...

Glancing over at Raven, I give her a playful nudge. "C'mon, I wanna hear you sing too."

She shakes her head, laughing. "No way, you know I don't sing."

"Ah, but you're about to," I say, turning up the volume so loud that it drowns out everything else. "See? Now you can sing without anyone hearing you!"

Raven smiles and laughs, finally joining in.

If you steal my sunshine...

We belt out the lyrics together, not caring how ridiculous we might sound. Song after song plays as we cruise down the road, losing ourselves in the music and each other's company.

I pull onto a gravel driveway, surrounded by thick forest. The anticipation builds as I stop the car in front of a small stone cottage, nestled among the trees. The cottage itself is charming, with ivy creeping up its walls, and a thatched roof that seems to blend seamlessly with the surrounding greenery. It looks like something straight out of a fairy tale.

Her hazel eyes widen, taking in the scene before her. "Teddy... where are we?"

"Somewhere special," I tell her, smiling as I watch her reaction. "A little piece of heaven, just for us."

"Wow..." she breathes, unable to take her eyes off the cottage. "It's... it's beautiful."

I can't help but grin, a swell of pride rising in my chest. "Well, I've been thinking, babe. Maybe it's time for us to get out of that stuffy mansion and find a place of our own. Somewhere like... this."

“Here?” Her hazel eyes flick to mine, searching for answers. “You mean this place?”

“Yep,” I nod, my hand finding hers as we stand by the car. “Bought it a while back, just as a place to escape to. Never was much for the city life, unlike Giovanni. Always preferred being close to nature, y’know?”

Raven smiles softly, squeezing my hand. “I love it, Teddy. It’s perfect.”

“Let me show you inside,” I say, opening the front door and gesturing for her to enter. The warmth of the cottage envelops us as we step over the threshold, its cozy atmosphere an instant comfort in contrast to the chaos we’ve left behind.

The interior is homey and inviting, with wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling and plush rugs covering the flagstone floors. A small fire crackles in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the walls. We wander from room to room, taking in every detail—the well-stocked bookshelves, the rustic kitchen, and finally, the bedroom.

“Wow,” Raven murmurs, her eyes widening as she takes in the space. The room is bathed in soft light from the windows, and the large, canopy bed beckons us with its plush pillows and thick blankets. It’s the epitome of comfort and intimacy.

“Teddy, this is... amazing,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “I can’t believe you did all this.”

“Only the best for my girl,” I reply, cupping her face in my hands and leaning down to kiss her tenderly. She wraps her arms around my neck, deepening the kiss, and I lose myself in the sensation of her soft lips against mine.

Pulling back reluctantly, I look into her eyes, filled with love and trust. “Raven, I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life

with you. You saved me from a lifetime of sadness. And I'll do anything to make sure we have the brightest future possible, together."

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears as she smiles up at me, her happiness radiating like the sun breaking through clouds. "I love you too, Teddy. More than words can say."

The warmth of Raven's body pressed against mine sends shivers down my spine, a contrast to the cool air of the room. Every touch feels electric, like we're two forces drawn together by destiny, or maybe just lust.

"Teddy," she whispers, her voice breathy and filled with want. "Please, I need you."

I catch her lips in another searing kiss, letting my hands roam over the curves of her body, memorizing each dip and swell. Her clothes smooth beneath my fingertips, but it isn't enough. I need to feel her skin on mine.

"Are you sure?" I ask, pausing for a moment to search her eyes for any hesitation.

Nothing.

Just pure desire mirrored back at me.

"More than anything," she breathes out, her eyes never leaving mine.

My heart hammers in my chest as I peel away the fabric from her body, leaving her bare before me. I can't help but marvel at the goddess laying beneath me, so vulnerable and yet so incredibly strong. She's the one who holds the power here, and she knows it.

Our bodies entwine, moving in harmony as we explore each other's most intimate places. I lose myself in the

sensation of her hands on my skin, her sweet moans filling the room like music that only we can hear. It's a symphony of passion, and I'm addicted to the sound.

"Raven," I gasp, my voice strained as I cling to the last threads of control. "I love you so much."

"I love you, Teddy," she whispers back, her eyes locked onto mine as if nothing else in the world exists outside this moment.

Our rhythm quickens, our bodies pushing closer and closer to the edge. Time seems to slow, each second feeling like an eternity as we cling to one another. And then, with a shudder that shakes us both to our very core, we tumble over the edge together.

Breathless and spent, I collapse onto the bed beside her, still feeling the aftershocks of our passion coursing through me. Our legs tangled together, Raven's head finds its place on my chest, her breath warm and steady against my skin.

"Raven," I say softly, my fingers gently stroking her raven-black hair. "I can't imagine my life without you in it. I know I call you Darkness, but it's because you're the force that makes me see the light."

She lifts her head, looking at me with those hazel eyes that seem to see right into my soul. "Teddy, I don't ever want to be apart from you either. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone."

As we lay there, wrapped in each other's arms and basking in the afterglow, I know that this is what happiness truly feels like. The world outside might be dark and filled with danger, but here, in this stone cottage, we've found our peace.

The End.



Or is it?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today and a Top 15 Amazon bestselling author, Ivy Wild writes angsty, sometimes dark, contemporary romance with guaranteed happily-ever-afters. As a practicing corporate attorney for a global law firm, Ivy loves combining her real world experiences with her fictional worlds.

When she's not working—who are we kidding?—she's never not working. She currently lives just outside of Washington, D.C. with her husband, her German Shepherd, and a sassy rescue cat named Cobalt.

Ivy loves connecting with her readers and is as active as possible on the following platforms:



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