

A Fake
Marriage Mafia
Romance

Reckless
Bride

BB HAMMEL

Reckless Bride

BB Hamel

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Preview: Marriage of Sin
Also by BB Hamel

Chapter 1

Alisa

I'm about to marry my sister's husband.
Worst of all, she'd hate this wedding.

It's drab, serious, stuffy. None of it was my choice—nobody asked my opinion on anything, from the dress to the flowers to the location. I'm stashed away in a corner room at the top of my future husband's mansion, and I'm pretty sure everyone's forgotten about me except for the women he hired to do my hair and makeup. That's what I mean to this little ceremony. I'm a body with a last name, and that's pretty much it. Might as well kill me, stuff me, and toss me out there on strings, so long as my corpse smiles, nods, and looks pretty. I doubt my sister's husband would mind.

I dab at my eyes. The bathroom door's locked. It's the only way to get some privacy. I don't care if the makeup ladies hear me crying in here, let them judge for all I care. They don't have to marry their dead sister's husband against their will. They don't have to go through this nightmarish charade, parading myself around this hellish estate like I'm happy to be here, smiling and waving and greeting guests. They don't have to die inside, bit by bit.

No, that's only me.

"I miss you, Liliya." Saying her name almost makes me start sobbing again. "Is this how you felt on your wedding day? At least you looked so perfect. Are you going to be angry with me when I have to give that monster babies?" I choke back another sob. "I don't want him to touch me."

A knock at the door. I jump, sniffing and rubbing my face.

“Miss Alisa? They’re waiting and your hair isn’t finished. If you’re feeling sick—”

I laugh once, sharply. “Tell them I’m puking my guts out. Will they call off the wedding?”

A short silence. “I’m sorry, miss, but—”

“It’s fine.” I stand, composing myself. No reason to take it out on this woman. She’s probably uncomfortable enough. Chin up, back straight. The perfect Bratva daughter. I can do this, even if it feels like a rot’s growing inside my belly, threatening to swallow me up. “I’m coming out.”

Once, I was my father’s favorite daughter. He never said it out loud, but he also didn’t have to. Liliya knew it, but she didn’t seem to mind. Nothing ever fazed my older sister. “Papa loves you best because you climb trees,” she said to me once while we were out in the woods surrounding my family’s home. “He thinks you’re almost a boy.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that,” I said at the time, but really, I was pleased. I wanted Papa to be proud of me. He was always larger than life when I was a girl—a big man with a loud laugh, bushy eyebrows, a quick temper, and a sharp wit. He spoiled me and my sister, but he spent the most time with me.

He taught me how to dance, how to throw a baseball, how to tell a joke. He taught me how to control my emotions. He taught me to wear a mask, to never let them see how I was feeling. “That way, they can’t use it against you,” he said back when I was barely a teenager.

Long before he decided to force me to marry Liliya’s husband.

Now, I’m embodying all of those lessons. All those nights and days spent drilling etiquette, learning history, talking tactics and strategy. Playing war games on big maps with tiny tin soldiers. Papa liked to pretend like he was a great general, but he just liked to read war books. He used to smoke a cigar, drink a whiskey, and read to me while I lounged on the couch in his study and drank too much soda.

Now I'm the one heading into battle.

A real battle against myself, my family, and the man I'm pretty sure murdered my sister.

The man I'm about to marry.

I wave away the hair and makeup ladies, only pausing to glance at myself in the mirror. My hands tremble as I fix the pins keeping my braids in place. I'm terrified of going through with this.

I remember the way Liliya sounded the last time I spoke with her, only days before she was found dead in the bathtub, allegedly of an overdose. Even though my sister never once did drugs and hated the stuff. She sounded scared, terrified, and refused to speak above a whisper. I could barely hear her—wind kept whipping into the receiver. I was annoyed at the time because she wouldn't talk louder and I could barely understand half of what she said, but now I'd give anything to go back to that conversation. She was babbling about something, a secret she found in Rustik's house and how she was afraid of what he'd do if he realized she knew, but she wouldn't give me any more details and hung up abruptly.

She didn't respond to calls or texts after that.

It was like my sister died the moment the phone disconnected.

Sickness fills my guts. I keep thinking about my sister, my poor sister, my best friend, the nicest person I ever met in my life, dead in a bathtub. I keep hearing the fear in her voice and imagining how she must've felt.

Murdered by her own husband.

The man I'm about to marry.

And the man that's going to kill me too.

I grab my phone from the end table and shove it down between my breasts, lodging it in the bra I insisted on wearing even though it doesn't really work with this dress, because fuck everyone, that's why. Then I step up to the bedroom door, steadying my nerves, and turn the knob. I pull it open, step into the hall, prepared to march to my own doom, when I stop abruptly, my

mouth falling open.

He's standing there, staring at me, barely five feet away.

Rustik Aslan.

The Russian Lion.

Leader of the Aslan Bratva.

My sister's killer.

And my future husband.

Rustik's big, broad, with a square jaw and a hooked nose that looks like someone beat it into submission. His brows are blond, his hair thinning and buzzed short. He's bursting out of his suit, like someone made it two sizes too small. His arms are like fire hydrants. His legs are like skyscrapers. The man stares at me with a vicious, terrifying energy, and I hear the women in the room behind me start to whisper.

I shut the door with my foot, cutting off my own escape.

Better to face him with my chin up.

I school my expression, the way Papa showed me.

"You're late." Rustik's voice is a low growl. He's an American, no hint of a Russian accent, though I've heard his father barely spoke any English. Only the old tongue. "Everyone is waiting."

"They'll wait as long as it takes, won't they? You're the great Russian Lion, after all."

Is that the hint of a smile? No, of course not, Rustik Aslan doesn't smile. He only stares. "I want you downstairs. I want you walking down that aisle. No more delay."

"Are you going to drag me yourself? I bet the guests would love that. Why don't we put on a show for them?"

He takes a step forward. My hands come up to my throat involuntarily, like I'm protecting myself. His voice drops lower. "Don't test me, Alisa. Don't be

like your sister.”

I open my mouth. I can't find any words. Horror rings through me, crystal clear like a frozen waterfall. I hate this man, hate him with every inch of my body, and I would do anything to kill him with my bare hands if I could.

But he's a hulking brute.

And he'll break me, the same as he broke my sister.

Maybe not right away. Not even the Lion could get away with killing two sisters in the same year.

But day by day, week by week, he'll make sure I don't live to see the children he forces into my belly grown.

“How did she die?” The words come out whispered, choked.

“You know how.” Another ghost of a smirk. This time, his eyes are twinkling. Knowing, mocking. “Do you want the details? Do you want to know about all the pills your sister swallowed? I can tell you. I can count them all, from her throat down to her stomach.”

“Stop it.”

“Liliya wasn't the saint you like to pretend she was. That girl didn't know when to keep her mouth shut. She snooped, she asked questions, and now that she's dead, the world's a better place. If you can't learn to mind your manners the way Liliya never did, you might end up just like her. High on pills, dead in a bathtub.”

“You bastard.” Tears well into my eyes again. I hate myself for this weakness, these emotions, but I can't handle listening to him talk about my sister like that. Liliya was a lot of things—clever, beautiful, outgoing, a bit of a troublemaker, good at heart—but she was *not* an addict, and the world's a darker, more terrible place without her in it.

“You can insult me all you want for now, but once you're my wife, I will not tolerate that sort of behavior. You will learn to bow your head and do as you're told, or I will happily break your toes and bruise your body until you learn.” He leans in, showing teeth. “Or maybe I'll shove some pills down

your fat gullet, just like Liliya.” He holds my gaze for an agonizing second. I want to scream in his face, but I’m petrified. “Get yourself together. It’s pathetic. Be downstairs in ten minutes or I really will drag you down by your fucking hair. I hope our children don’t get your disgusting weakness.”

He turns and strides off. I gasp when he’s gone, leaning up against the wall, my heart hammering into my guts and sweat tingling down my back and under my arms. I cover my mouth with both hands, trying to shove the sobs away, but I can’t stop them.

Rustik’s going to kill me.

Just like he killed Liliya.

And if I go downstairs, down to where my father’s waiting with the rest of my family, with all the heads of the powerful American Bratva organizations, several senators and congressmen, and more than a few mafia dons and other organized crime bosses, I will be nailing my own coffin shut.

The people down there, they *believe* him. It’s convenient to close their eyes and trust in the Lion, so long as he keeps making them obscene amounts of money. No, it’s easier to accept that Liliya was an addict, and it was her drugs that killed her.

Not her sick husband.

There won’t be any saving me, not from Rustik.

Not once he owns me.

Which means I have a choice.

Die, or do something drastic.

The door behind me opens. The same older woman that fetched me from the bathroom steps out, looking pale. She’s got big, blonde hair, fake nails, bright red lips. I think her name’s Cathy, or Nancy, or something like that.

“You okay, hon?” she asks. “We can fix your makeup real fast, okay? Then you can—”

I interrupt her before she can finish. “Which way takes me to an exit?”

She looks confused for only a moment then her eyes go wide. I stare at her, my crying gone, my sobs swallowed now that I've made up my mind.

There's steel inside me. I have to grab on to it.

"I don't—" She starts, but clears her throat.

"Which way takes me outside?" I ask with all the force I can muster, a harsh whisper.

She pales, but she raises one trembling finger and points to the left.

My expression softens. Poor Cathy/Nancy. If Rustik learns she helped me, I'm sure he'll kill her.

"Thank you," I say, touching her arm.

"Good luck," she says, glancing over her shoulder, voice dropping to almost nothing. "There are guards. Be careful."

I nod, then start running.

Chapter 2

Alisa

Every step feels like a thunderclap. Even barefoot, my heels discarded at the far end of the hall, it's like each step is loud enough to wake the dead.

I'm shocked Rustik can't hear my heart racing. It's pounding in my ear, painfully loud and fast.

I reach a staircase and listen. The sounds of the wedding party murmur up toward me, but they're distant. I hear the clattering of dishes, a few shouts, a stressed conversation in Spanish.

With a deep breath, I take the stairs, going as fast as I dare.

It leads me into a back hallway. Straight ahead is a kitchen. Men and women dart around in black and white jackets, ferrying appetizer plates, cleaning glasses, ignoring everything but their tasks. To the left are a pair of doors, and beyond them is the party itself. I spot guests mingling nearby, older people I don't recognize.

To my left is another hall.

I hurry away from the party and the kitchen. The sounds recede when I turn the corner. Ahead, there's a heavy-looking door with a push-bar and a tinted window, dark enough that no light gets through. I run to it, a stab of excitement bursting into my chest.

This has to be an exit. I have no clue what I'm going to do once I'm outside, but at least I'll be free of the house. I can run off to the woods, or maybe I

can try to steal a car. There might even be a valet that takes pity on me, but that's doubtful. I have to remember that these are all Aslan employees, all of them members of the Bratva. They are loyal to the Lion, not to his pathetic future bride. I'm nothing to them, and if anyone spots me, I'm finished.

I shove the door open and stumble out into a bright late afternoon.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I'm in a side garden, in the shade of the building. The back yard stretches off to my left, and the front driveway is on my right. If I run straight for about fifty yards, I'll reach the edge of the woods. I won't get far barefoot, but I don't have a better plan.

I get about two steps before someone grabs me.

"Where do you think you're going?" The man's voice is low, menacing. He smells like cigarettes. I struggle, try to yank free, but his grip is like iron as he drags me toward him. "Oh, shit, you're the girl."

I don't recognize him. Dark hair, dark eyes, an uncertain scowl. He's wearing a black tux with an earpiece in his left ear. If he radios, I'm toast. Forget about having babies—Rustik will kill me this afternoon.

"Please," I say, panicking. "You don't have to do this. I was just going for a walk to clear my head—"

"Boss gave me strict orders," the thug cuts me off. "Nobody out through this door. You gotta get back in there." He looks uncomfortable, but he starts dragging me back.

"No, please," I say, struggling against him. "You don't understand. Rustik said this was okay, he said I can clear my head before the wedding, it's fine, please—"

"Sorry, orders are orders—"

"Please, you're making a huge mistake—" I look around wildly for anything, anyone, any way to escape as the door looms up and the thug prepares to pull me back inside.

When another person comes walking fast toward us from the back garden.

"Hey, you," he says, his voice like an ice pick, a sharpened command.

Rustik's goon even pauses, which is a shock in itself.

But what's more surprising is the man himself.

He's tall, athletic. Muscular in a lean and fit sort of way. He's in a gray suit, the color matching his eyes. No tie, top button of his shirt undone. Sharp nose, sharp cheekbones, beautiful trimmed beard. A low, resonant voice.

Handsome. Stunning, actually. He puts Rustik to shame. Hell, this guy puts everyone in this entire house to shame. He's so attractive it should be a freaking crime.

I'm shocked Rustik's goon isn't dropping down to his knees to worship this newcomer.

I certainly want to.

"You're not allowed over here," the goon says, evidently gathering himself. "Please, Mr. Crowley—"

Crowley? I know that name. It rings a gong somewhere deep in my awareness.

"Are you dragging the bride by her arm right now?" Crowley doesn't stop coming. "Are you so stupid, so idiotic, so thickheaded that you'd actually manhandle your own boss's future wife? You do realize she can make your life hell once this ceremony's over, don't you?"

That makes the thug pause. His grip slackens enough that I yank away, stumbling a few feet, before steadying myself against the wall.

The thug looks from me to Crowley, his mouth hanging open. "Uh, I wasn't, I mean, I've got orders, nobody leaves through this door, nobody comes in through this door, and if anyone spots the bride, we're supposed to take her back—"

I stifle a groan. Freaking Rustik had orders in case I tried to run already. That fucking bastard.

"Why don't you let me escort Ms. Rostova back to the party," Crowley says, putting a hand on my arm, but he doesn't grab on. "You can stay here."

The thug looks uncomfortable. “I really shouldn’t—”

“Tell Rustik that Liam said it was fine.”

It hits me like a truck.

Liam Crowley. Youngest son of the Crowley dynasty, the most powerful crime organization on the East Coast. I’d heard he was in Portland, but nobody was saying why. Even Papa seemed a little wary of the guy.

Now I can see why. Liam’s got a presence, like he’s a weight standing on my chest. Rustik’s goon clearly isn’t up to the challenge of defying him. Before the thug can say anything, Liam steers me away toward the back yard.

“Right inside!” the thug calls out.

Liam ignores him. I say nothing, only let him guide me away, toward the shrubs blocking the expansive yard from the side of the house. We slip down into a gap, but before we step out from between the greenery, he stops exactly where we can’t be seen by anyone and faces me.

“You’re trying to run away,” he says, leaning down to stare into my eyes.

Now he’s holding onto me tightly.

I don’t know what to say. He’s so damn handsome it’s distracting, and he smells like a mixture of whiskey and cinnamon. My throat bobs, I lick my lips, and try to get a hold of myself. This is a life-or-death situation, not a freaking frat party. I shouldn’t be thinking about how close Liam’s standing, how good he looks, and how nice it might be to sink my face into his chest and breath him deep.

“Why the hell does everyone know that?” I ask him.

And he grins, like the lights turning on. His exceedingly intense expression shifts, one moment terrifying, the next blinding and charming. I try to step back, but I’m penned in by the hedges, and he’s holding on tightly.

“You won’t make it out alone,” he says, speaking quickly and quietly. “Rustik’s got guards crawling all over this place. The second you step a toe out of line—” He glances down at my bare feet. “Is the second they drag you back.”

“What are you—I don’t mean—” I’m stuttering, trying to find something to say. “I’m not trying to, uh—”

“Don’t play dumb,” he says, his smile disappearing again, shifting back into that intense mask. “I can help you escape.”

My mouth drops open.

Liam Crowley is offering to save me.

I don’t know this guy. I’ve never met him before—I only know of him by reputation.

And it’s not a good one.

Liam’s supposed to be dangerous. Unpredictable, ruthless, clever but quick to violence. Papa spoke of him in hushed whispers, like saying his name out loud might draw his attention.

All I see is a beautiful man. Scary, intense, but beautiful, and still only a man.

He’s offering to help me, and I have a feeling he’s the only person in this entire house that might really do it.

Everyone else would gladly sell me out to Rustik to gain his favor.

But not Liam. The Crowley family can match the Aslan Bratva in strength and influence, maybe even outmuscle them, but the Crowleys’ base of operations are all on the East Coast, far from Portland.

I can’t imagine what he expects to get out of this.

“What do you want?” I whisper, heart racing into my throat. I look around, expecting a call to go out any second and for a dozen Aslan enforces to rush our position.

“Don’t worry about that just yet,” he says, head tilted, making very unnerving eye contact. “I’ll help you get away. Then you’ll listen to a proposal.”

“That’s it?” I ask, barely able to conceal my impatience. “You just want to pitch me on a business idea?”

“Exactly,” he says, not smiling.

The crazy guy isn't kidding.

"Fine," I say, desperation taking me over. "Sure, whatever, I'll listen to your proposal. Just get me out of here."

He nods, holding my gaze for another second. "Do exactly what I say. Do you understand?"

"But—"

"Come on." He yanks me from the bushes, and we're out into the back garden.

Chapter 3

Alisa

O ther guests mill about.

I recognize some of them. Papa's cousin Vladimir. A business partner that worked with Papa on one of his earliest dispensary projects. A congressman I've seen on TV a few times. Criminals, gangsters, worse. Liam leads me through the crowd, smiling and nodding, greeting people that stop to say hello. I do my best to smile through it, but inwardly I'm screaming.

"Shouldn't you be inside?" an older woman asks me. She's wearing so much jewelry, I'm honestly shocked she can stand under the weight. "Dear, weren't we told this was going to start soon?"

"Soon, Madame Pomfrey," Liam says soothingly and pulls me on.

We angle toward a bar. It's set up on the back patio. Music's playing, soft strings, background noise to the conversations. "Where are we going?" I hiss at him. "If Rustik sees me—"

"You're with me now." Liam glances down. "You'll be fine."

I let out a startled, disbelieving laugh. What the hell is with this guy? That sort of confidence is movie-theater bullshit. We're at my *wedding*, I'm the only woman in a freaking wedding dress, and everyone's staring. How does he expect to get me away when we're in the middle of everything?

But I don't have time to argue. He strides through the crowd like a shark parting a school of fish. We reach the bar but don't stop. He continues around to the side, past the bartender, and around to the other side of the house.

More bushes are ahead.

“We’re going to start running,” he murmurs, staring straight ahead.

“I’m sorry, what now?”

“Running. You can run, right?”

“Of course I can freaking—” I catch myself. “I’m barefoot.”

“We’re going for my car. It’s parked at the far end, unfortunately. I didn’t plan on stealing the bride.”

“You’re not stealing me.”

“Feels like stealing you.” He pulls me into the bushes again. Just like the other side, it’s a narrow gap. I’m pressed close, breathing in his smell, just like my fantasy from a few minutes ago. I shiver, trying to get a hold of myself, but this guy’s driving me crazy.

“You’re helping me.” I try to push him away, but I might as well try to bite through steel. “That’s all.”

“Let’s pretend it’s something more.” He’s talking to me, but he’s looking around like he’s waiting for something. “It’s more fun if I’m the dashing commoner stealing a princess out from under the nose of the evil, dastardly king.”

“What in the hell—”

“You can be my princess, can’t you?” He glances down, and now I realize he’s teasing me. “My little Russian Bratva princess?”

“You prick,” I hiss. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Can’t help myself. You look beautiful with your cheeks all flushed like that.”

“I don’t—” I blink at him, head reeling. “What are you even talking about? If you keep being an asshole, we’re going to get caught.”

He suddenly bends down, pushing me back against the bush. I grunt in surprise, but he grabs onto my dress down around my knees, and rips it. I try

pushing him back, but he ignores my protests, until the dress is ruined.

“Now you can run properly,” he says, moving back to study his handiwork. “If we get caught, you’re fucked, and I’ll have started a war.” He considers for a moment. “I may be starting a war either way.”

“Why are you doing this?” I sputter at him.

“You have nice legs.”

“I don’t—what the *hell* are you talking about? That’s why you’re helping me?”

“No. That’s just incidental. Only another few seconds.” He pull me tighter against him. I’m astonished by his sculpted chest, his spicy-sweet scent, the way my body tingles when I’m this close to him. “This is nice, isn’t it? Me and you, alone in nature?”

“You just ripped my dress to shreds and we’re crammed between two freaking bushes. This isn’t *nature* and there’s nothing *nice* about it. Also, I don’t even know you, but I’m pretty sure you’re a crazy person.”

A crazy person that smells fantastic and happens to be absurdly gorgeous.

A crazy person with a sculpted body and the power of a demi-god.

“Still, I like the smell of the greenery, and you do have some rather fetching assets.”

“Fetching—” I gape at him. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Three seconds,” he says. “And yes, I am.”

“Three seconds until what?” Dread fills my stomach. “Liam. Were you just distracting me so I wouldn’t be nervous?”

“Yes,” he says, grabbing onto my hand. “Now run like your fucking life depends on it, because it does.”

He pulls me, and we burst out from between the bushes.

I sprint wildly, breathing so hard it hurts my throat. He’s yanking me along, running faster but holding back so he doesn’t end up literally dragging me

behind him. Ahead is a line of cars parked along a massive driveway. There's a guard watching over a door to our left, the mirror image of the other side, but his back is turned. It takes me a second to understand—he's lighting a cigarette.

That's what Liam was timing.

We blow past him. I barely hear him shout in alarm. We burst out from the shadow of the house, down the line of cars. I catch a glimpse of the front stairs on my left, majestic and obscene, leading up to an enormous gold-framed door. Guests linger, sipping champagne. There's a fountain in the middle of the driveway where more guests are perched, talking happily, as guards and waiters move among them.

Liam keeps running. "Don't stop," he says through his teeth.

I couldn't even if I wanted to. He's like a train loosed from its tracks, barreling ahead, barely under control. I'm doing my best to stay on my feet. I step on something sharp and suck in a pained breath, but ignore the agony in my sole and push on. Adrenaline's fueling me now, dulling everything but the urgency of the escape.

Shouts ring out. I spot guards breaking from the guests and angling toward us. "Where's your car?" I say between breaths. "Where are we going?"

"Just ahead." A black Lexus at the very end of the row comes to life, the lights shining. Liam's got his key out, rapidly stabbing a button. The car's engine roars to life. "You're in the back."

"But what about—"

"The fucking back," he snarls as we get close.

I risk a look back over my shoulder. Four guards are chasing, two of them getting close.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit!" I keep on cursing, my lungs burning, my legs on fire. Twenty yards, then ten. Liam lets go of my hand and pulls ahead, reaching the car first and yanking the back door open.

"Get in," he shouts.

I throw myself at the back seat. It's not elegant and I'm pretty sure he gets a glimpse of my underwear as what's left of my dress rides up my ass, but the door slams before I can do anything about it. I sit up, staring out the window, as the two fast guards reach Liam before he can get into the car.

It happens so fast. Liam ducks a punch, knees the first thug in the guts, punches the second in the throat, and elbows the first in the back of the head. Both go down in an ugly heap as Liam throws open the front door of the car and gets behind the wheel.

"Did you kill them?" I ask, eyes wide, freaking out.

"Probably not." He guns the engine, car peeling out. "Does it really matter?"

I say nothing, only stare at the wreckage of my wedding as Liam fishtails onto the driveway then speeds toward the main road, leaving my life and everything I used to know behind.

Chapter 4

Alisa

I pace back and forth in Liam's hotel suite, staring at my phone as it explodes with calls and texts.

Mostly they're from Papa. The messages were confused and plaintive at first. He begged me to come back. Said he'd make sure everything was okay, that he'd take care of me no matter what. That Rustik would make a fine husband. That what happened to Liliya was a tragedy, but not Rustik's fault.

Then his messages got ugly. I could practically read the fear. He called me everything—spoiled, ugly, a bitch, a whore—said he regretted treating me so well, only for me to betray him. He demanded my return. He said he'd kill me if I didn't.

Then my cousins began calling. An uncle, some friends of Papa's that I've known for a while, even my godfather. Some tried to be kind. Some, not so much. All of them want me to go back to the Aslan mansion and go through with my marriage to Rustik.

I refused to answer. Only kept pacing, back and forth, staring at the phone on the coffee table as the screen blinked to life over and over displaying messages of doom. Proving that my life is totally over.

No matter what happens now, nothing will ever be the same.

I left it all behind when I ran away from that wedding.

Only now I wish I could change out of this dress. I have no clothes, no money, nothing to my name except the phone, and I have no clue what I'm

going to do.

“You’re getting blood all over the floor.” Liam’s watching me from the side of the room, leaning against the window sill and drinking something brown with ice.

“I’m what?” I blink at him, trying to make sense of what he said. My head feels fuzzy like I’ve been drinking all morning. The stress is cracking me to pieces. “Blood? What are you talking about?”

He gestures at my feet. I look down and realize he’s right. I hop over to a chair and look at the gash on the bottom of my foot, and the thing starts to ache the second I realize it’s there like my brain’s been holding back the pain until this moment.

“Oh, shit,” I say, looking around for something to use as bandage. “That’s way worse than I realized.”

“Don’t move.” He disappears into the bathroom and comes back with a first aid kit. “Stay still, this is going to hurt a little bit.”

“Can’t hurt worse than what I just did,” I say, sounding a little frantic. “I can’t believe we just did that. I mean, seriously, I just ran away from my wedding. I just ran away from freaking Rustik Aslan.”

“Yes, you did. Now imagine how I feel.” Though he doesn’t seem all that upset. Instead, he’s focusing on my foot. He pours some antiseptic on the cut, which stings, and gently cleans it with a large piece of gauze.

“I don’t get why you’re being so nice to me,” I say, watching him. Some of my panic eases when his fingers touch my skin. “People saw you save me. Rustik knows by now.”

“That’s fine. I don’t really care what Rustik thinks, that brainless little shit.”

I laugh sharply. I’ve never heard someone talk about Rustik like that before.

“You’re lucky, I don’t think this is going to need stitches.” Liam puts another clean piece of gauze over my cut then tapes it into place, being surprisingly tender.

“Did you mean it, what you said back there?” I ask, rubbing the bandage with

my fingertips.

“About a proposal?” He glances up into my eyes, leaning back on his heels. “Yes, I did.”

I’m suddenly very aware of how close he is to me, how he’s practically in between my legs, and how my wedding dress is now very short, thanks to him manhandling me back at the mansion.

“No,” I say, putting my foot back down on the floor to test it. Still painful, but not that bad. “About my legs.”

His eyes light up. Only briefly, but I spot the excitement. “I absolutely meant that.”

I limp away from him, glancing down at my phone again. I wish I could focus on this handsome, rich, powerful man flirting with me, but instead all I can see are the messages flashing on the screen. Each one spelling out my nightmare. Each one proof that I’ve gone too far, and I can’t ever go back.

“What do I do now?” I ask, more to myself than to him.

“You have some options, but I doubt you’ll like them.”

“Options? I just threw away my life. Running from that wedding was the worst thing I could do.”

“Why’d you run then?”

I stop and look at him. My body feels empty like I’ve been drained of all strength and emotion. “Because this is better than letting my sister’s murderer kill me too.”

He doesn’t seem surprised by that. Instead, he cleans up the first aid kit and returns to his drink by the window. “Do you want to hear your options now?”

“Sure, go ahead, give me the rundown. Might as well.” I laugh, hysterical. “You know, it just occurred to me that I ran from a wedding to a psychopathic killer, only to be saved by another dangerous criminal. Don’t I just have the worst luck?”

“You shouldn’t run in such seedy circles.” He sips his drink, staring at me,

eyes roaming to my legs, to my chest, to my lips. “Your first option is you can disappear.”

“Already did that,” I say, waving him off. “Wasn’t very fun.”

“I mean, you can run from Portland. Leave the West Coast. Head out to Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami. Even better, get a flight to Europe, go to Poland, go to the Netherlands. Somewhere they’d never think to look. Start a new life.”

I stop pacing and stare at him. “Are you kidding me? How am I supposed to do that?”

“You can get a ticket online.”

“I have no money.” I hold up my fingers, checking off the reasons why that plan won’t ever work. “I have no passport, so forget international travel. I have no clothes, no identification, no credit card, no driver’s license, no car, nothing at all. How am I supposed to go anywhere?”

He raises his glass. “I didn’t say it was an easy option, but if you’re intent on living a relatively normal life, this is your best bet. The first few years alone in a new place might be difficult, but—”

“I am *not* going to run from my sister’s killer.” Anger flares in me, hotter than I’ve ever felt before. My hands turn to fists and I square my shoulders toward him, jaw tightening, biting down like I want to crack my teeth. “I am *not* letting Rustik take my sister’s life, then ruin my own.”

Liam doesn’t seem fazed. Again, he only drinks. “Your next option is you give up and marry Rustik.”

“Fuck you,” I say, shaking my head. The anger narrows its focus. “Don’t even say that. You bastard.”

Shrug. Drink. “Next option. Find someone willing to help. Turn to your father, an uncle, a family friend.”

I point at my phone. “Those people are all begging me to marry Rustik. You think any of them will go against him? That man owns Portland. Hell, he owns the whole West Coast.”

“For now,” Liam murmurs, studying me. “You have one last option then.”

I take a step toward him. My anger’s dying down to embers, though it still glows. “Let me guess. Your proposal.”

“Exactly. My proposal. You’re clever and beautiful. I’m glad you didn’t let that shit-heel Rustik ruin you.”

I grunt, not sure how to take that compliment, too angry to process it. “I’m having a hard time feeling good about whatever you’re going to say.”

“I saved your life, remember? At considerable cost to myself.”

“True, but you’re also using this situation to your advantage. You know damn well I’m in a bad spot, and it’s going to be very difficult for me to say no to you.”

That ghostly smile again. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Lying bastard. You’re manipulating me.”

“I’m helping you.”

“All to get what you want in the end.”

“I’m also having fun. Does that matter?”

I make a face. “What do you want, exactly? What do you want from me, Liam? What could possibly be worth all this trouble?” I move toward him, trembling with rage. “What the hell do you *want* from me?”

He puts his glass down and closes the distance. We’re only feet away.

“I want to marry you,” he says, staring into my eyes with that cool expression like he’s reading the future in my face, and he likes what he sees. “And together, we can make Rustik pay.”

Chapter 5

Alisa

“**N**ow you’ve lost your mind.” I stalk away from him, trying to process what he just said. “You want to *marry* me? I don’t even understand why you’d want something like that.”

“You’re in a wedding dress already, which makes things easy.”

“That’s not funny.” I look down at my torn, dirt-stained clothes. “I look like a mannequin in a bombed-out Goodwill.”

“An extremely fuckable mannequin at least.”

“I didn’t know you were into making love to inanimate objects.”

“Don’t kink-shame.”

“Explain how marrying me is even remotely on your radar, crazy?”

“You’re perfect. That’s how.”

“And you’re a total stranger. Also, probably insane.” I turn to face him again now that there’s half a room between us. “Explain to me how the hell marrying you would be better than marrying Rustik, please? I might as well shove my hand in a wasp nest and wiggle it around.”

“For one, I didn’t kill your sister, and I have no reason to hurt you.”

“Great, that’s slightly better. That’s like the bare minimum to be in the same room with you, let alone pledge my undying fidelity. I still don’t see why marriage is even on your mind right now. And don’t mention the stupid dress

again.”

He pauses, watching me carefully like he’s formulating his thoughts. He speaks very carefully. “Going against Rustik will be costly and difficult. There will be violence, bribes, outright war. My family’s power base is across the country, and if I want to make inroads here, I need someone local to help me.”

“You think that person’s me?” I laugh, unable to believe what I’m hearing. “You’re making a huge mistake. Before my sister married Rustik, my family had nothing to do with the Bratvas.”

“Maybe that’s true, but your father owns the most profitable marijuana dispensary chain in the region, and I want a piece of that industry. That’s the whole reason I’m out here, scouting for new opportunities, new places to grow my family’s influence. Marijuana is going to be enormous, and I believe my organization needs to be at the ground floor sooner rather than later.”

I can hardly understand what I’m hearing. This guy wants to marry me because he’s interested in the weed business? “Why not just, I don’t know, buy a farm or something? Like a normal person? Hell, watch a few YouTube videos, learn about the freaking industry that way. Seems pretty extreme to, I don’t know, marry a stranger after helping her escape from a marriage to a psychopath.”

Liam shakes his head like he’s speaking to a schoolchild. It pisses me off beyond reason. “Rustik controls the farms. He controls the dispensaries, or at least he would have if he’d gotten his claws into you. Now, his relationship with your father will be rocky and fraught, and meanwhile, you can teach me everything you know about the business. If I’m going to have a real shot at dominating the marijuana trade, I need to find a way to push Rustik aside, or at least to rival him. I need a way into the inner circle, and a lever to pry Rustik out from his entrenched position. You’re both.”

I turn and pace away, limping slightly on my injured foot. I can see what Liam’s saying—even if he did try to go the legitimate route, Rustik would simply crush him before he had a chance to put in a solid effort. The marijuana farmers on the West Coast all owe him allegiances, and this is the

best region for growing with the best connections to the most popular retail locations. Liam could try opening farms in other legal states, but that's like starting a race a hundred yards behind everyone else.

And he also happens to be right that I know something about the industry. Before I got into this mess, I worked for my father for years. I got my MBA and even planned on moving up in the ranks, at least until Liliya died and I got shoved into her place. I had dreams of one day taking over from my father when he retired, but now those dreams are all shattered.

"I still don't see why you have to marry me," I say, arms crossed over my chest. "We could, I don't know, sit down and talk like normal humans. It's not like the second we get hitched, you can somehow download my knowledge into your brain."

He raises his glass in a small salute. "That's a good point. Lucky for you we can't link skulls, otherwise I suspect you wouldn't like the thoughts I'm having right about now."

"Is that a sexual comment?"

He's staring at my bare legs. "Yes."

"Stop it then."

He swirls his glass, smiling to himself. "Unfortunately, I'm leaving out one small but very important piece of information."

"Which is?"

"My family doesn't know I'm doing any of this."

I let out a sharp laugh. "Are you kidding me?"

"They're too busy doing the same old nothing in their ivory tower. My older brother isn't thinking long-term, he's not thinking expansion. That's been left to me."

"Again, still not seeing how this connects to marriage."

He takes a step closer. I take a step back. A little dance.

"Once you're my wife, they won't be able to deny me. Rustik will go berserk."

He'll come for you and for me, and my brother will be forced to send support. Even if it pisses Carson off to no end, he'd never let a member of our family get hurt, even a new member. As my wife, you'd be entitled to all the perks of the Crowley organization. Money, soldiers, whatever we need. Marrying you will drag my family into this situation, whether they like it or not."

I whistle, unable to believe the balls on this guy. It's actually impressive. "I think calling you insane was understating things a bit. You're a total maniac. I kind of like it, honestly."

"There's only one way to win big, my little Bratva princess, and that's to take big risks. So what do you say? Marry me, krasotka. We'll dominate your enemies together."

I wave him off. "Don't use Russian pet names, you prick. Sounds terrible coming from you." I rub my temples, trying to keep my throbbing brain in place. I feel like it's going to leak from my skull. This guy's got massive plans and far-reaching ideas, and there's no way he's telling me everything. As impressive as I find him, I don't trust him at all, and I don't particularly like him. "You realize what you're asking me to do, right?"

"I understand the magnitude of my request."

"I'll be starting a war with my own family on the other side."

"You mean the people working with the man that murdered your sister."

I glare at him. "Don't use Liliya against me. Don't you ever do that."

He softens slightly and nods his acknowledgment. "That's fair. But I'm also not wrong."

I start pacing again. His proposal does make a kind of sense. We need each other, or at least we can work together for a common goal. He wants to take Rustik down, and I want to rip out Rustik's balls and cook them for dinner. Then I also want to take him down. Liam's my only realistic chance at making that happen.

But marriage is enormous. This isn't some small deal—we're not agreeing to work together for a few weeks.

This is a long-term commitment. I can't imagine his family will accept this if there's any hint that what we're doing is going to end the moment Rustik's been deposed.

Which means playing the dutiful wife of an Irish gangster.

I glance over, and he's watching me, saying nothing. His drink is down to ice and dregs. The man's beautiful, but I can see the creature hiding behind his gorgeous gray-blue eyes, and I'm afraid if I decide to walk this path with him then I'll never see my old life again.

I might as well go on the run, disappear, live by my own terms, instead of by this man's whims.

Except running would mean letting Rustik win.

"You do realize marrying you isn't all that appealing," I say, trying to break some of the tension I feel building in my chest. "If I do this, I'd only do it to get revenge. Not for you."

It doesn't work. Liam's smirk only makes the strange, bubbling desire in my guts worse. "I respectfully disagree. I'd make a wonderful husband."

"How's that, exactly? You strike me as the kind of man to have unreasonable expectations. I'm not the cook and clean type. I won't be lying in your bed every night, ready to please you."

"I swept you off your feet once. Saved you from the big bad wolf. Imagine what else I can do."

"If Rustik's the big bad wolf, you're the swamp monster."

He laughs. "We both know I'm better looking than that."

"High opinion of yourself. From where I'm standing, you're not so great."

"Liar. You keep looking at me like you want to rip off the rest of that dress. And frankly, I'd love to watch you do it, so long as you went nice and slow."

I shiver, shaking my head. "How are you thinking about sex at a time like this? My life's falling apart."

"And yet you're still absolutely gorgeous. I mean, you're krasotka."

I roll my eyes. “Stop with the Russian.”

“You’re in luck, since that’s the only word I know. Learned it from a very talkative ballerina I once met.”

“Spare me the details.” I rub the bridge of my nose. “I can’t just go from marrying one stranger to marrying another. I just can’t. I risked everything to get away from that wedding.”

“True, and yet I’m offering you a chance to take what you really want. Big risks, big rewards.”

I look at him slowly. He’s staring back, his face serious. “Which is what? What, exactly, will you give me?”

“Revenge. Money. Power. Rustik Aslan dead. Proof that he killed your sister. Everything you want and more.”

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. God, what would Liliya have done in this situation? Would she have married another killer if it meant getting what she wanted? If it meant getting revenge for her sister’s murderer? I wouldn’t want her to do it, but I think she would’ve anyway.

Before I can ask him more questions, the room’s phone rings.

I jump in surprise, staring at the black receiver as Liam walks over and answers.

“Hello?” His expression tightens, his eyes narrowing. “How many? When? Thank you. I’ll make sure you’re compensated.” He hangs up and turns to me.

“What?” I ask, feeling like my skin might melt from the anxiety.

“Rustik’s men are coming for us.” He sighs like this is a minor inconvenience. “We need to run. Again.”

Chapter 6

Alisa

“Can’t you just like, I don’t know, fight them?” He drags me into the hall, walking fast toward the elevators. He’s got one hand on my wrist and the other in his jacket like he’s gripping a gun. “Fight them like you did back at the wedding?” I shove the phone back down into my bra since that’s the only spot where it won’t fall out. I really wish I had pockets right about now. And shoes.

“I can, but there’s no guarantee I’ll win. Getting away and regrouping is smarter.” He curses softly to himself. “I don’t know how they figured out I’m here. Unless Rustik’s been keeping tabs on me from the start. Knowing that clever bastard, that’s exactly what he’s been doing. Luckily, I paid the front desk to keep an eye out.”

“You’re going to get me killed.” My heart’s racing, my palms are sweating. “But this is probably better than letting Rustik do it.”

“Quicker at least.” He doesn’t smile, and I’m not sure if I’m joking. “At least we’re having fun, right? Running around together, driving in fast cars. I bet this is the most excitement you’ve had in your life. Hold on.” Up ahead, the elevator numbers light up. My skin crawls as they climb and climb, getting higher and higher.

“It’s coming toward us,” I say, barely keeping my tone steady. “Liam. This isn’t fun. It’s not fun at all. Tennis is fun. Pickleball is fun. This is the opposite of fun. This is like jabbing needles in my thigh.”

“You babble when you’re nervous,” he says, taking a step back.

“Liam,” I groan as the numbers begin to slow.

“Oh, say that again.” He stares intently at the elevator doors. “I like the sound of my name on your lips.”

“Stop flirting with me. At least wait until we’re not about to die.”

The elevator reaches our floor and stops. Then makes a very pleasant ding.

“Run,” he says, turning and dragging me the opposite direction.

I glance over my shoulder as I sprint after him. The doors slide open to reveal five men, all of them enormous and packed into the elevator like sardines. They spill out, tangling with each other briefly. “Stop!” one shouts as they start to chase.

“This way,” Liam says, flinging me around a corner. I careen, hit a wall, keep going.

“My fucking foot,” I gasp as the pain flares up. “I really need some goddamn shoes!”

“No time,” he says through gritted teeth. He’s going flat out now, and I’m barely keeping up. Doors flit past, and if someone steps from their room, we’ll smash right into them.

“Crowley! Rostova!” The thugs behind us start shouting. “Stop them! Thieves!”

“Fuckers,” Liam growls. “This way, down here.” We reach the end of the hall and he shoves open an unmarked door leading into a concrete-lined staircase.

“Fuck,” I gasp, panting for air as we throw ourselves down. I barely stay on my feet and keep running into the walls at the bottom of each flight. “Oh, fuck, Liam.”

Above us, the door to our floor opens. “Got you now,” the lead thug says, a man that looks like a thumb.

“Don’t, you fucking idiot,” another voice shouts with an edge of panic, then a gunshot rings out.

It’s so loud I scream in surprise, throwing my hands over my ears. The echo

in the stairwell magnifies the sound tenfold. Everything's ringing and I nearly fall on my face, and the only reason I don't go tumbling down the concrete steps is Liam sweeping me up into his arms.

He says something, but I can't hear him. There's the muffled sound of shouting behind us. Liam runs on, carrying me now like a bride being ushered over the threshold of her home. I'm shocked at his strength, at the solidity of his chest and his arms, and how fast he can move now that he's not trying to let me keep pace.

We fly down the stairs. It's like he's out of control and only just keeping on his feet. I lean against him, holding on tightly and supporting as much of my weight as I can. Sweat's dripping down his forehead, his face creased in effort and concentration as we reach the bottom, and he bursts out another door.

Into blinding sunlight.

"Hold on," he says and I'm surprised I can hear him. "Don't let go."

"I won't." I stare at his face, his handsome face, marveling at his power and his intensity. He springs around the side of the building, barrels through the parking lot, and finds his car.

"I can get in myself," I say before he shoves me in like luggage.

"Don't look back," he says as I buckle myself into the passenger seat. He starts the engine and peels out, driving fast to the exit.

I make the mistake of not listening.

Six men stand staring at us. Five of them are bent over, breathing hard. One punches another, the thumb-guy, right in the shoulder. They're arguing about something.

But I don't care about any of them.

Only the sixth one matters. The one that wasn't in the hotel chasing after us and must've been waiting in the parking lot.

It's my father, still dressed for a wedding.

Chapter 7

Alisa

The next hotel room isn't as nice as the first. "Best we can do for now," Liam says, unlocking the door to a dingy motel suite. We've got the corner spot, furthest from the parking lot. There's a sitting room with a separate bedroom, but it's all rundown and ugly. "Rustik won't come looking for me here."

"I suspect Rustik's familiar with this side of town." We're in a bad neighborhood, one of the worst in Portland, but there are dispensaries even in this area. Which means the Aslan Bratva's got contacts and control.

"He thinks I'm a fancy Crowley, like I'm afraid to get my hands dirty." Liam strips off his jacket, tossing it aside. "He's very wrong about that." A phone appears in his hands. He unbuttons his shirt without looking at me. "I have some calls to make."

"Who?" I ask, voice shaking. I keep thinking about the gunshot in the stairwell and my father standing with the thugs that tried to kill me.

Has it really gotten so bad?

"We need clothes. You need shoes." He glances down at my feet then back up, expression grim. "And I need muscle."

"I thought your family didn't know you were doing this."

"I have my own resources. Enough for us to survive this situation, at least. But yes, for an actual war, I'll need more. A lot more. Plus, political contacts." He turns to me and I stare at his muscular chest and abs. "Don't go

anywhere. Don't leave this room, no matter what. I can't protect you if you decide to do something stupid. I'll be in there." He disappears into the bedroom area, shutting the door behind him.

I collapse onto the couch. I groan, squeezing my eyes shut, fighting back tears.

Everything hurts. My ears ache, my foot is killing me, my legs are heavy from the run. I have a dozen bruises from banging into walls.

But none of that matters, not compared to seeing my father's face in that parking lot. The fear, the anger. The disappointment. He wasn't with the thugs in the hotel, which means he might not have known they tried to kill us, but how could he have gone along with something like that to begin with?

He's not a stupid man. He's aware of what Rustik does.

I don't understand what Papa's thinking.

Slowly, I raise my phone. There are more messages from him. Back to pleading again.

This time, I call him back.

"Hello?" He answers on the first ring like he was staring at the screen waiting for my call. "Alisa? Is that you?"

"Papa." I have to fight against the tears. Hearing his voice is both an enormous relief and more painful than I ever imagined. I love this man—I loved him at least—and I can't understand why he's doing this to me.

"Alisa," he says, sounding exasperated. "My little girl. What were you thinking, running away from your wedding? Did that Crowley man force you to do it? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, staring at the ceiling. What am I supposed to tell him? What could make him understand? "Liam didn't force me to do anything."

Silence for a beat.

"Why would you run?" he asks, voice soft. Like he doesn't want to be overheard.

“Papa, you know why. I never wanted to marry Rustik to begin with. And Liliya—”

“I don’t want to hear your silly stories anymore,” he says. “We know what happened to Liliya. You think that doesn’t kill me every day? You think I don’t miss my oldest daughter?”

“Papa,” I say and have to clear my throat. “If I marry Rustik, he’s going to kill me too.”

“No, you’re wrong. Rustik is a hard man, yes, that’s true, but he needs a wife to soften him up and give him children. If you marry Rustik, maybe things will be hard at first, but your life will be so much better.”

“Why? Because I’ll have babies?”

“Sweetness—”

“No, tell me, Papa. How will my life be better?”

He sounds frustrated. “You won’t have to work ever again. Everything will be provided for you.”

“I *want* to work. I wanted to be a part of your business. Why do you think I went back to school?”

“Alisa—”

“I agreed to marry Rustik because I was terrified he’d hurt you if I didn’t. But standing in the house, it was obvious he’d hurt me if I did. I’m sorry if running made things worse, Papa, but if I married Rustik, I’d be dead in a few years.”

Another silence. This one strained. “Please come back.” His voice is weak, like he doesn’t even believe himself. “We can figure this out. Speak with Rustik. A longer engagement—”

“Listen to yourself—”

“You can get to know the man—”

“He’s a monster! He killed Liliya!”

“You don’t know that,” Papa roars, his anger slipping. “You don’t know that, and you’d be smart to watch your mouth. What did I teach you? Did you learn anything from me?”

I sit, ears ringing like the gunshot from earlier. Tears leak down my face. “I learned a lot from you.”

“Then come back. Rustik is a reasonable man. He understands these circumstances are stressful—” Papa keeps talking, but I tune him out.

All I can see is Rustik’s face in the hallway. His ugly sneers. His horrible words. Whatever Papa thinks of the Bratva boss, he doesn’t know the truth.

Rustik is an empty shell. He’s a devourer, a killer. He’ll consume, and consume, and kill anything that gets in his way.

I cut my father off mid-sentence. “Papa, tell me what really happened to Liliya. Tell me the truth and maybe I’ll come back. I know you’re hiding something.”

I can hear him breathing. “There’s nothing to say.”

“Tell me the truth. If you ever loved her, and if you ever loved me, tell me what you really know.”

“Enough, Alisa.”

“Tell me, you selfish bastard! Tell me the truth!” I’m shouting now. Hysterical, out of control. The bathroom door opens and Liam appears. He’s shirtless, staring at me.

“Get ahold of yourself.”

“No, you fucker. You fucker. I hate you!” I stand, hands trembling. “You tried to sell me to Rustik like you sold Liliya. All for what, for money? You’re disgusting.”

“Watch your tone. I know you’re upset—”

“I’m going to hurt you. I promise, Papa. I’m going to hurt you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” he snarls. “Come back to Rustik’s home by midnight tonight, or I’m going to kill you myself.”

“Good luck.”

I hang up the phone and throw it as hard as I can at the floor.

It bounces, tumbles, rolls, and comes to a stop at Liam’s feet.

I’m breathing hard. Sucking in air. Head tight, dizzy, hands into fists, feet planted. I can’t think, can’t breathe, can’t do anything. I feel like I’m choking.

“It’s okay,” Liam says, coming toward me. “You’re okay.”

“I’m not,” I manage. “I’m not.” Fear starts to replace the rage. “I can’t breathe.”

“You can breathe. You’re doing it right now.”

“I feel dizzy. I feel—”

He catches me as I stumble away, holding me tight to his bare skin. “Panic attack. Just breathe with me. Come on, princess. Breathe with me.”

The nickname pisses me off, but maybe that’s what snaps me back into my body. I breathe with him, falling into rhythm, my face pressed against his chest. I can hear his heart racing like he’s excited to have me this close. I stay like that, breathing his smell, that cinnamon and spice, before I finally pull away. My hands tremble, my lips are numb, but I’m under control again.

“This has been a very stressful day,” I say, walking a few feet away.

“I agree,” he says. “Not the most ideal afternoon.”

“Why are you shirtless?” I glance at him. “It’s a bit much.”

“I was sweaty from our run. Wanted to shower.” He cocks his head. “Do you mind?”

“Yes. I mean, no, it’s not—” I shut my mouth. “Do whatever you want.”

“You can join me if you like. I have other ways to ease your tension.”

“I am absolutely not going to shower with you.” Though a tight excitement spirals into my guts at the thought. Liam’s body, his chiseled and magnificent

chest, drenched in water as he pins me against the wall, his mouth doing unspeakable things, his fingers—

I shake my head to force the image away.

Liam's smirk suggests he knows exactly what I was thinking. And that he's thinking it too.

“Are you sure? You look like you need a release.”

I rub my face. “You're unbelievable. I was just having a panic attack. I'm at my lowest. And you're trying to fuck me?”

“I never said anything about fucking you, princess. I can get you off plenty of ways.”

“My god. You're sick.”

“Only an offer.” He turns away. “I'll be in the shower if you change your mind.”

I watch him go. There's a broken part of me that's tempted by the offer. Let his lips roam my skin. Let him make me feel good, feel anything but this miserable wreck.

Except it's all part of his game.

His manipulation.

This is what he wants. He needs me drilled down into the floor, smashed down to little bits, so he can pick me back up. And when he does, he'll get what he wants from me.

He'll make me his wife. He'll drag everything I know about my father's business from my skull.

Then once this is all over?

I'll be left with nothing.

And yet.

What my father said rolls on a loop in my skull.

I'll kill you myself.

My own Papa, my flesh and blood, the man that raised me, that treated me like his favorite precious daughter, threatened to murder me.

And I think he meant it.

All for that bastard Rustik Aslan. All for money, power, connections. I'm not sure if he believes his own bullshit, but he's sick.

Liam's my only chance.

If I try this on my own, I'm screwed. Rustik will catch me and my life will be a living hell.

But if I take Liam up on his proposal, I'll have some measure of power. I can get revenge on my father, on Rustik, on anyone that hurt my sister.

The shower water starts running. I picture Liam standing under it.

If I'm going to do this, then I'll make sure I get what I want, even if it means making a deal with that beautiful monster.

Chapter 8

Alisa

Liam comes out wearing only his slacks, his chest still damp, a towel around his shoulders. He's drying his hair and stops short when he spots me sitting on the bed, my legs crossed, the ruin of my wedding dress hiked so far up it's almost scandalous.

I like the hunger in his eyes. Even if I don't like him.

"I want to make a deal," I say, letting him stare. Two can play his game. If he wants to prance around using sex against me, I'll do the same thing. I shift slowly, letting him catch a glimpse of my ass, before recrossing my legs. He reacts slightly, eyes flicking to my skin. His tongue wets his lips.

He tilts his head. "Now you're thinking rationally."

"You're right. I don't have any other choice. I can either play ball with you or I can let Rustik and my father screw me over. And I am *not* about to let them murder my sister and get away with it."

"What sort of deal do you want to make?" He grips either end of the towel, leaving it around his shoulders. His biceps and forearms bulge, surprisingly erotic.

Get it together, Alisa. I'm supposed to be the one distracting him with my body, not the other way around.

But the man's a specimen. It's honestly not fair. It's obscene, the way he looks without a shirt, and I'm salivating at the idea of seeing him in nothing at all.

I clear my throat, sitting up straight, pressing my breasts out. A little gratified thrill hits my belly when his eyes flick to my chest.

“First, I want you to swear we’ll get revenge for my sister,” I say firmly.

“Easy. Done.”

“I want revenge against Rustik and against my father.”

He hesitates. Head tilts to the side. “Your father?”

“It was his idea for Liliya to marry Rustik. Now he refuses to admit that Rustik’s the one who killed her. But worst of all, he threatened to murder me if I didn’t go along with what he wants. I want to hurt him for that.”

Liam nods slowly. His expression darkens. “You’re right. I want to hurt him for that, too.”

I shift myself again, surprised by his reaction. Does Liam actually give a shit about me? But no, this is all part of his game.

I adjust my legs, letting him look.

I should be ashamed of using my body like this, but I’m tired of playing nice. I’m not the type of person to roll over and do nothing. I have to take a little charge and fight back.

“Next, if we’re married, I want money.” I pause here, letting it sink in. “*Lots* of money.”

Might as well be smart about this if I’m selling myself anyway. I don’t feel good, asking for cash straight out like that, but I need to start making long-term plans.

His eyebrows raise. “As the wife of a Crowley, you’ll have whatever you want.”

“No, not only as your wife. I want a guarantee that if and when our marriage ends, you will provide for me for the rest of my life. If I do this, it’s one and done, and I never have to worry about anything again. Understand me?”

“That’s very smart,” he says, nodding slowly. “We can do that.”

“I want it in writing. I want a contract. I want it branded onto your lower back.”

“I’ll call my lawyer and my brander.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking, but that’s exactly what I want you to do. Well, minus the actual brand. We’ll stick to legally binding paper and avoid physical mutilation.”

“Your loss,” he says, releases the towel, and tosses it aside. The man’s a specimen, and he walks toward me, stalking like a lion on the prowl. I shiver, suddenly worried that I’m in way over my head, like a toddler lighting matches next to a can of gasoline. “We’ll agree on a reasonable monthly allowance in perpetuity, regardless of your marital status as a Crowley. That way, if and when we divorce, you won’t have to worry.”

“No. Lump sum.”

“You’ll waste it all on something foolish. Like a timeshare.”

“I’m not a beach girl.”

“There are mountain timeshares.”

“I want it straight up, in cash.”

He sighs, but gestures asset with one hand. “We’ll set up a trust then, but I won’t have you make stupid financial decisions.”

“When I’m not longer your wife, I can do whatever I damn well please with *my* money.”

“We’ll see. You might miss being mine at the end.”

I lick my lips, nodding slightly. He’s getting close, too close, and it forces me to back away from him, shimmying onto the bed.

He puts one knee up where my crotch was only seconds earlier.

“I want, um—” I suddenly can’t think straight, thinking about his thigh between my own. Thinking about wanting him, even after all this is over. Thinking about what he might do to make me feel that way.

“Yes?” He tilts his head.

My mouth waters as I stare at his shoulders. “I want safety. I have, uh, friends —”

“Rustik won’t hurt anyone you care about. You have my word. Give me a list of names, and I’ll provide protection for them.”

“Right.” I lick my lips again. “Uhm—”

“What else? I’ll give you anything you want, princess. *Anything.*” The emphasis on that last word is obscene. The implications make my core clench. I’m soaking wet and it’s embarrassing. He’s turning the tables on me so easily, it’s pathetic. “You seem distracted. What’s wrong?”

“You’re in bed with me.”

“Not quite.” He shifts forward, coming closer. Shirtless, dangerous. Beautiful. “Now I am.”

“Can you give me some space, please? You’re looking at me like I’m a prime rib.”

“I prefer lobster. I like to break the shells.”

“That’s just weird.”

His lips part in something resembling a smile. But it’s more like what a wolf might do, aping human behavior. “I have demands now, princess. My own conditions I expect you to obey.”

“Sorry, what now?” I shuffle back until I hit the headboard. He keeps coming. “We never said anything about *obeying*. This is a partnership.”

“You gave me rules to follow. Conditions to meet. I have my own needs.”

That word, *needs*. It drives a spike of desire between my legs. I can’t help but glance at his attractive face, his muscular body. I lick my lips again, afraid I might be drooling. “What do you want exactly?”

And give me some filthy details, dirty man.

“You. Completely. Without hesitation.”

“I don’t—” I stare at him, my mouth hanging open. What does he mean, *completely*, and why is he on this damn bed with me right now? It’s like the guy can read my freaking mind. “I can’t just, uh, promise we’re going to, you know—”

“Fuck?” His smirk is infuriating and attractive all at once, the arrogant prick. “If we’re going to do this, if we’re going to force my brother’s hand and drag my family into a painful conflict, what we have must seem real. Even if it’s an arrangement, anyone outside of this room has to think we’re actually together.”

“Even if I can’t stand you?” I whisper, breathing hard.

“We both know that isn’t true.”

“Except that’s the problem, you don’t know me at all.”

“Go on, fight me, argue all you want, but we both know I’m right.”

I close my mouth, glaring at him. “I don’t think I’m a good enough actress to convince anyone that I’m in love with you.”

“Nobody said anything about love. Men in my family marry for many reasons. Convenience. Obligation. *Lust*.”

“I’m not in lust with you either,” I blurt out, which is patently not true, and he’s got to know it by now.

I’m very much in lust with this man.

Which is sick, given the circumstances.

“All that matters is we act as though what we have is for the long run. My family cannot know that you plan on divorcing me the moment our partnership has run its course. Do you understand? It doesn’t matter if you hate me, so long as you’re not going to leave.”

I nod slowly. It makes a lot of sense. “I can do that.”

“Good. That means we do certain things.” He puts a hand on my calf, slowly moving it up to my thigh.

I let out an involuntary whimper that lights his expression like an atomic

bomb.

“You shouldn’t,” I say, my lips trembling, nearly numb with tension. “I mean, what things are you talking about?”

“We’ll share a life. We’ll share a house, a bedroom, a shower, a bed. We’ll live like husband and wife.”

I close my eyes. His hand stays on my thigh only inches from my aching core. He’s kneeling over me now, blocking out the ceiling lights. When I look at him again, his face is in shadow, his mouth open, his eyes locked on mine. Shirtless, gorgeous. Muscles flexed and powerful. I think of his arms wrapped around me as he carried me from the hotel earlier today. That seems like forever ago. But I remember what those arms can do.

“You’re going to cross the line, aren’t you?” I say it in a strangled whisper. “The second you get me into your bed, you’re not going to play nice.”

“No, princess. I promise I won’t play nice.”

“I want boundaries. I want space. We pretend for everyone else, but in the privacy of our own home—”

“In the privacy of our own home, you will be *mine*.” The way he says it, so fierce and sure, it’s the most attractive thing I’ve ever heard. “You said yourself that you’re a bad actress. If I give you a single inch of space to fuck this up—”

I try to wriggle away, but he keeps me there, now leaning forward to pin one of my wrists up above my head. I gasp, back arching, my chest rubbing against his.

I wish I didn’t have this stupid wedding dress on still.

Though at least it’s getting some good use.

“I *won’t* fuck anything up, you asshole.”

“I won’t let you,” he says, his face so close to mine it’s killing me. “We’ll live as husband and wife because that’s what we’ll be. Do you understand me, princess? If you’re mine, then you’re all mine.”

“What about when this is over? You’ll let me go? I can leave you?”

He nods slowly. “You can leave me. I don’t keep what wants to be free.”

“Convenient. And what about right now? I would love to be free right now.”

“Liar.”

“Even more convenient.”

“We both know what you want.” His lips move down to my neck. I groan, biting my lip to stop another whimper, as my free hand wraps into his hair. He kisses my throat, moves up to my chin.

“This is a bad idea.” I say the words. I know they’re true. I’m not going to do anything about them.

And apparently, neither is he.

Because he pulls back slightly.

Then he presses his lips to mine and kisses me.

Chapter 9

Alisa

That kiss. That stupid, perfect, amazing, incredible kiss.

I thought I liked his smell. But his taste is even better. Yes, there's some whiskey, but there's also lemon, and mint, and something deeper than that, a darkness, a need underpinning everything.

He holds onto my hair, fisting it tight as he kisses me, pinning me back against the headboard of the bed.

I sink into his lips. Into the way they move against mine. Into his breathing, the pattern of his inhales.

His fingers slide through my hair, stroke my cheek, grip my wrists and arch them above my head. My hips move, grinding into him. I feel his hardness, digging back against me. He's devouring me, and I'm tumbling down into this moment despite knowing it's a terrible idea. If I can't find a way to halt this freefall, I never will.

But I don't want to stop.

He moves to the side, dragging me onto his lap. I shiver as he unzips my dress, and together, we finally get the damn thing off. It's an immediate relief, as his lips find my neck, my throat, kissing, biting back up to my mouth.

"That's so much better," he purrs, chewing on my lower lip. "I hated doing this with you in another man's wedding dress."

“I feel like it was always yours,” I say, grinding my hips back. My panties are soaked through as I drag myself along his hard length through his slacks. I bite my lip hard to keep from moaning my delight. “You got more use out of it, anyway.”

“I ripped it to pieces,” he says, grabbing my ass. “Like I’ll do to you.”

“Prove it.”

He shoves me back, lifts my hips, takes off my panties. He kisses my inner thigh, doing it slow, making me watch. My mouth’s open, salivating, pleasure pulsing into me like gunshots. I gasp when his lips find my soaking clit, lapping me slowly in little circles.

I grab his hair tightly.

“Pretty girl,” he says, lapping me up and down. “Delicious girl. I knew you’d taste good, but to have a wife like this? That tastes like this?”

“You’d better learn how to keep your hands to yourself.”

“Strange time to say that, considering my mouth is between your legs.”

“That’s fine. So long as it isn’t your hands.”

His laughs and sinks his fingers deep into my pussy. My eyes widen as pleasure flares and my back arches. In response, I pull his hair.

“You like that,” he says, fucking me with his fingers.

“God, I do,” I moan, my eyes rolling back. “How the hell are you so good at this?”

“I’ve been saving myself for you all my life, princess.” He drives his fingers deeper, curling them, teasing me as he licks my clit. Pressure builds, growing, tightening in my core, the pressure that’s been there since the wedding but finally reaching an explosive peak.

I start to writhe my hips into his mouth, matching his rhythm. “I don’t want you to lie to me,” I moan, losing my mind. “But I also don’t mind it when you tell me nice things.”

“Such as how fucking good you look riding my fingers right now? How

lovely you taste on my tongue?”

“Keep going.”

“But I never imagined I’d take a wife, let alone a beautiful wife like you. A wife full of fire and sex, a wife I want to break and rebuild. A wife I want to sleep beside, pleasure, argue with, fuck nice and deep and rough. A wife I could get off a thousand times and never lose interest.”

“Yes,” I gasp, muscles clenching. “Fuck, god damn it, yes.” My fingers dig into the covers as I come against his mouth. He doesn’t stop, the monster, he licks and fucks me with his fingers, and I keep on coming, harder and deeper, my eyes rolled back, my brain a total blank lost to ecstasy.

Until finally, I collapse back, breathing hard. Sweat trickles down between my breasts. He kisses me, making me taste my pussy on his tongue, then removes my strapless bra. He licks my nipples slowly, enjoying himself. “Lovely,” he murmurs. “I don’t know how I got this lucky.”

“I hope you’re liking this,” I say, grinning my stupid face off. That was the best orgasm of my freaking life. “Because it’s never happening again.”

“I doubt that.” He unbuckles his belt and takes off his pants. I stare, heart racing.

“We’re not done?”

“Why would we be? I’m not finished with you. Not even close.”

I start to back away as he takes off his boxer-briefs. The man’s cock is long and thick and hard as all hell.

“Maybe I’m finished with you. Ever consider that?”

“Tell me to stop and I will.”

I bite my lip. “I don’t think so.”

“Good girl.” He grabs my ankle before I can turn to run. I yelp as he drags me back on my belly, pinning me down on the bed. He spreads my ass, lifts my hips, holds me down with his other hand, and licks my pussy from behind.

“Oh, my fuck,” I moan, hands gripping the sheets. “That’s so fucking good.”

“You are so fucking good, my soon-to-be wife,” he murmurs as he leans back. I look over my shoulder, my hips still in the air, as his tip presses against my aching, soaking pussy. He moves it up and down, getting it nice and wet, before pushing it against my entrance. “*Mine*,” he whispers, before plunging himself inside of me.

My back arches. Everything goes black for half a second. He’s massive, thick, splits me in half in all the best ways.

Then he’s fucking me. Slowly, gently at first, gliding in and out of my absolutely drenched pussy. I look back and he kisses me, grabbing my hair, squeezing my ass, gripping my hips.

“Incredible,” he groans. “Every inch of you feels like heaven.”

“Same to you,” I whimper as he starts to fuck me faster. “But this is *still* a one-time thing.”

He laughs, going deeper, fucking me harder until I’m lost in the movements, in the motions and the moment, grinding our bodies together in that perfect dance. He pulls me against him, hands exploring my breasts, mouth nibbling my neck, until he moves back and drags me down on top of him.

I straddle him and slide back, whispering his name as I ride, grinding my hips back and down into him, hands on his chest. He thrusts into me, and all I can hear is breathing, moans, gasps, the sound of his palm against my ass, until the pleasure’s growing again.

This time, it’s a glow. Slow and sensual. Not a tension, not an explosion, but something better. It builds from deep inside my core until I can’t stop it anymore. I lean down, burying his mouth with mine, and I come as he keeps fucking me. I come, and he doesn’t stop, fucking me deeper, faster, until I feel his heat fill between my legs, his moans echoing down my throat.

We finish in tangled sheets. He pulls me against him, one strong arm wrapped around my back. His heart’s hammering and I let myself drift, shocked at the sudden wave of exhaustion that threatens to overwhelm me.

“What do we do now?” I whisper, shivering as a sudden wave of tingles rolls

down my spine. He's stroking my back with his fingertips.

"Wait until we're ready do that again."

I grin but try to hide it. "I told you. One-time thing."

"And I told you, you're lying."

"Test me. Find out."

"You tried to get away once already. Think you'll do better this time?"

"Fair point. I am pretty exhausted. Turns out nearly getting killed really takes it out of you."

"You get used to it eventually." His mouth nuzzles against my neck. "We'll stay here tonight."

"Tomorrow?"

"I have a plane at a nearby airport. We'll take that back to Boston."

"Boston?" I adjust so I can see his face. "Why Boston?"

"I need to present you to the family."

"But we aren't married yet."

"We'll fill out the contract and the paperwork on the plane. A friendly judge in the city will file it, and a few days from now, it'll be official."

"Right. We'll be husband and wife." I stare at the line of his jaw before turning my back to him again. He doesn't let me go. "You haven't even gotten me a ring."

"Do you want one?"

"No. Not really." I close my eyes, yawning. "Would've been nice though. A big proposal. A huge wedding. The works."

His breath presses against the back of my neck. "If that's what you want, we can make it happen."

"Nah, I'm kidding. I ran away from one big wedding already, remember?"

Let's not make it a habit."

"Fair point." He squeezes me tight against him. "Go to sleep, princess. Tomorrow, you're getting married."

"That's what I thought about today. See how that worked out?" I feel myself drifting. My thoughts getting heavy. I should shower, brush my teeth, do something. But I have no toiletries, no toothbrush, not even a clean pair of underwear to change into.

"You'll find I'm a whole different beast from Rustik, my princess," he whispers as I fall deeper, afraid that he's right.

Chapter 10

Liam

The plane lands in Boston at noon the next day.

Alisa's wearing all black, like the opposite of a wedding. I'd say she did it on purpose, except I'm the one that bought all her clothes.

"I never thought I'd be so happy to have shoes on," she mutters as we disembark onto the runway. She thanks the captain and the flight attendant as she heads toward the terminal, looking a little dazed. "Where are we right now anyway?"

"Private terminal near Logan International." I pause, looking over my shoulder, as the last member of our flight ambles out. My West Coast lawyer is a balding man in his early forties with a spare tire around the middle and a cheap gray suit, but his legal work is rock solid. If I could've avoided having him on our long flight, I would have. That four hours would've been much nicer with only my new wife as company. "Eugene, papers please."

Eugene hands me a dossier. Inside is the contract we drew up with the legally binding rules for my relationship with Alisa along with the marriage documents. "I have copies I'll deliver to Judge Peterson personally."

"Thank you. Good work."

He hesitates, peering at me. "Can I ask you something?"

I glance over my shoulder. Alisa's waiting nearby, watching curiously, but out of earshot. "Go ahead."

“The girl. Are you sure she’s a good idea? I did a background check, and her family—”

“I’m aware of her unsavory connections.” I turn my back on Eugene. He’s overstepping his bounds, but sometimes that’s useful. In this instance, it’s only worthless. “That’s why I married her.”

He doesn’t argue. Eugene knows my business, and he knows I sometimes make decisions that don’t make sense on the face of them.

There are always multiple levels at every action. I’ve been so successful over the years because I don’t focus on what’s obvious. Too many men in my business can only see one step, maybe two ahead, but I strive to work as deeply into the game as I can.

Alisa is one such strategy.

I stride off and join my wife, offering her my arm. She hesitates, clearly wondering if she can blow me off, but accepts after a moment. The girl is still getting used to the idea of being mine, but she’s starting to make better decisions. Besides, I like the way she challenges me. “Good choice,” I murmur, leading her inside.

“I guess it’s starting now,” she says, looking around. The private terminal at Logan’s decent enough, but still plain. “You know, the whole marriage thing.”

“Considering the paperwork we did on the plane, yes, that’s the idea. Now that we’re in my home city, you need to start playing the role.”

“When do I meet your family? I mean, are they here spying on us or something?”

“I think you overestimate my brother’s competence.” We take the stairs down to the street level. A car’s waiting nearby, a black sedan with two loyal Crowley soldiers up front.

“That’s the second time you’ve made a comment about your brother. He’s the leader of your family, right?”

“Yes, he took over for my father.” I glance at her, eyes narrowed. She doesn’t

understand the significance of that and the turmoil his leadership caused the organization, but it's not relevant now. Things have settled and the soldiers have all fallen in line. Those that resisted are either retired or dead. Which is the same thing in our line of work.

"You don't trust him?"

"It's not that." I pause at the car door, holding the handle. "We have different visions for the future."

"What's your vision? You want to be the weed king of the West Coast?"

I press my lips together in a tight smile. She has no clue the extent of my ambitions. "If I could have my wildest dream, I'd be the king of everything, my sweet princess." I open the door and usher her inside. "But for now, all you need to understand is how we're going to play this."

"I thought we were telling everyone we're happily married."

"Which we are." I put a hand on top of hers. "But I'm also going to tell my family a version of the truth."

Her eyebrows raise. "Which version?" She moves her hand away.

"I'm telling them that we married for political reasons. We aren't in love. You aren't fawning over me. I figure you won't be able to pull that off anyway."

"Damn right."

"Which leaves us with a half-truth. We're married for convenience. What we're going to leave out is the duration of that marriage." She chews her lip, glancing at the two soldiers up front, but I wave off her unspoken concern. "They're loyal to me."

She nods, taking a breath, and blows it out. "Right, so we're telling them we're together forever, when that's not the case."

"Yes, more or less. Though if the subject of *how long* our relationship will last is never broached, that would be ideal."

"Understood."

“If you’re ever unsure, say nothing and leave it to me. Keep things vague if pressed alone. Try not to outright lie.”

She turns away, looking uncomfortable, and I let the subject drop.

We ride in silence. I stare out the window at my city flashing past. Back in Boston, back in the place I was born, the streets where I was molded, the city that I escaped.

It’s been a couple years. Aside from sporadic, short-lived visits, I’ve been traveling the country. Texas, Florida, California, Oregon. Searching for new business opportunities, taking any that I found, growing the organization and spreading our power. Carson hasn’t always been happy with my decisions, but in the long-term, everyone’s been better off.

Alisa’s another one of those long-term gambles.

But as we get closer to the Crowley mansion, something’s nagging at me. In all my time making deals, some of them at the end of the barrel of a gun, I’ve always been emotionally distant from the methods I used to achieve my victory. So long as I won, the ends always justified the means.

Now I find myself caught in a strange position.

Taking over the weed business from the Aslan Bratva is my ultimate goal, but my life’s been tangled up tightly with Alisa. I can’t simply use her however I want, even if that would be the most expedient path. I made promises to her, and I’m the kind of man that keeps his promises, even when it’s difficult, even when others might give up and turn back on their word.

Alisa’s needs are my own now.

My wife’s desires are my desires.

Which is strange, given how solitary I’ve been up to this point.

The marriage makes sense. My logic is solid, and I don’t regret this course of action at all.

Only I wish I didn’t feel this strange, impossible pull toward her.

“Did you seriously grow up here?” she asks, staring out the window as we

roll down the private driveway toward the mansion.

It's an enormous house. Ostentatious, obscene. "My great-grandfather built this place to project the family's power," I tell her as the sedan parks near the side entrance. The private doorway is for close members of the organization only. "But yes, I grew up here."

"I can't even imagine," she says, a strange laugh in the back of her throat. "And it's not like I came from nothing. But this..." She trails off, at a loss for words.

It's hard to see this house through her eyes. This building and the accompanying power dynamics are woven into my very existence. The columns, the tiles on the roof, the multiple wings, manicured landscaping, multiple cars, the armed guards, they're all a part of my life, etched deeply into my childhood. The dim rooms, the twisting passages, the secret staircases, libraries, music halls, and billiards rooms, they're the veins through which my memories flow. This house is everything to me, but it's also a monolith, a representation of the family that binds me to its will. No matter what I do, I will always be a Crowley. Like this mansion will always be the Crowley mansion.

"We'll see my brother first," I say as we head inside. She's staring around, her jaw hanging open at the paintings, the statues. There are some new antiques I've never seen before. Carson's making the place his own, it seems. "Then we'll visit my mother."

She clears her throat, looking overwhelmed. "Your mother?"

"I can't have a wife without presenting her to my mother."

"Too late for that. Pretty sure we signed all the papers. What if she doesn't accept me?"

"Those can be destroyed if my mother so chooses." I try to bury a smile, though I'm only slightly kidding.

She looks uncomfortable. "Now I wish I'd dressed nicer."

"You look perfect," I say, meaning it. Alisa's gorgeous: thick, auburn hair, full red lips, a lovely figure. Small, slender features. Russian, extremely

Russian, but in a good way.

We reach my brother's study. My father's former office. I don't miss the old man. I knock once then enter, not waiting for Carson to call out. I know he's here—I sent word ahead to confirm—and I've never bothered with ceremony. If Carson doesn't like it, he can try to make me change. Though we both know that won't happen.

My brother looks up from his desk, annoyed, but says nothing. He's in the middle of looking through a ledger, one of half a dozen splayed all over the place. Businesses, probably local. Checking to make sure their profits and losses align. Part of the job of being the boss, making sure everything's earning money. Despite how powerful our family becomes, cash keeps everything going.

“Liam,” Carson says, not sounding at all excited to see me. The feeling's mutual. “You brought a guest.”

“Carson, this is Alisa Rostova. As of this morning, she's Alisa Crowley.”

No reason to fuck around.

Carson's mouth drops open. He stares at her, obviously stunned.

Alisa clears her throat, clearly not comfortable with the last name yet, and approaches the desk. “It's nice to meet you. Liam's told me lots—”

“We met yesterday,” I tell him, interrupting her. She grimaces, then turns and glares at me. I ignore her and continue. “She was going to marry Rustik Aslan. Now she's married to me instead.”

Carson sits back like I punched him in the face. He looks from Alisa to me and back again, shaking his head. “I'm sorry, Alisa? It's nice to meet you, but can I speak with my brother alone?”

“Of course.” She turns to leave.

“Stay.” I pin her with a stare. “You're part of this family now whether Carson likes it or not. Don't go anywhere.”

“Uh, sorry, I don't want to get in the middle—” she starts, but it's much too late for that.

“Fine, let her stay.” Carson rubs his temple. “What the fuck is this about, Liam? Are you being serious right now?”

I sit down on the chair facing his desk. After a moment’s hesitation, Alisa joins me, looking pretty pissed off.

“Extremely,” I say. “She comes from a good family. It’s a worthwhile match.”

Carson looks at me like my skull’s on fire. “I don’t give a shit about her *family*, Liam. Was she really about to marry Rustik Aslan? What the hell is that all about?”

“Yes, she was.” I glance at her and her face is a stone mask. Only a hint of tension remains around her eyes and mouth. “I met her at their wedding, but she decided to run away. I decided to help her, and in the course of escaping, realized we had a lot in common. We fell madly in love.”

Carson nearly gags. “Are you joking?”

“Yes,” I say, straight-faced. He can’t tell whether I’m serious or not. They never can. “This is real, Carson. Our marriage is serious, even if it’s based on business.”

“Mother’s going to have a heart attack,” he says, leaning forward on his elbows. “Seriously, Liam, I honestly wondered if you were even, you know —” He gestures at me.

“Capable of human emotion?”

“Interested in getting married,” he says, exasperated. “But fine, you married this girl, and now I’m guessing the Aslan Bratva wants to kill you? Considering you stole her out from under their leader.”

“More or less, that’s correct.”

“Which means you just came in here with a wife I’ve never heard of before and dumped an enormous pile of shit on my desk. Is that about everything?”

“That’s accurate, yes.”

He groans, leaning back in his chair. “Welcome home. You fucking asshole.”

“Thank you.” I stand up and hold out a hand for Alisa. No reason to drag this out. Carson knows, and that’s all I wanted. We’ll discuss strategy and next steps later, but for now, he needs to process and make some calls. I’m sure he’ll want to check up on my story. “Come on, let’s go speak with my mother.”

“It was, uh, nice to meet you?” She looks bewildered as I lead her from the room.

“Don’t let him drag you into his bullshit,” Carson calls out as I close the door behind us.

“That went well,” I say, smiling to myself as I walk toward my mother’s wing of the house.

“That went *well*?” She stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. That’s possible. Though I’m not sure I ever had it to begin with. “He’s livid. And we were in there for like ten seconds.”

“Is he?” I tilt my head. “Hadn’t noticed.”

“Are you sure he’s going to commit resources to this fight? Honestly, based on how annoyed he looked, I’m not going to be surprised if he lets Rustik kill you.”

“Carson may be angry now, but he has too much pride and he cares too much about this family to back away from a challenge.” I pick up my pace, enjoying myself. It’s not every day I get to come home and toss a live grenade into the middle of this stuffy place. “Don’t worry about him for now.”

“Right, sure, I should worry more about your mother.” She chews on her lip. Nervous, which is adorable. “What’s she like?”

“Smart. Strong. Difficult. She’s going to love you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she’s convinced I’m never going to settle down. You’re here to prove her wrong.”

“Good for me.” She stops mid-stride. “Liam. How much trouble are we in?”

Seriously.”

I look back her, trying not to smile. But it’s so damn hard. “A lot. But don’t worry. We’ll have some fun too.”

She groans, but once I start walking again, she follows.

Chapter 11

Liam

The meeting with my mother goes surprisingly well. Alisa's intimidated and quiet at first, but Mother draws her out, and they end up chatting for a couple of hours. When it's over, as a condition of her acceptance and blessing, Mother makes me promise to do one horrible thing: have dinner with my brothers and their wives.

Which is how I end up sitting at the bar of a Crowley-owned restaurant in the center of Boston's historic Beacon Hill, flanked by Finn and Nolan.

"Going to be honest with you, Liam. I never imagined you'd get married." Finn salutes me with his glass of whiskey. "Out of the four of us, I assumed you'd be a bachelor for life."

"He's right about that," Nolan agrees.

It's only the three of us. Carson claimed he was too busy, which I assume really means he's pissed at me for getting the family involved in a war on the other side of the continent. Oh, well.

"My relationship with Alisa is only a business expedience," I say, not ashamed of that fact.

Finn and Nolan exchange a look. "Yeah, right, sure bro," Nolan says, trying not to smile. "Just business."

"That's what we all say at first." Finn sighs, glancing back at the table behind us. His wife, Dara's sitting with Nolan's wife, Keely, and Alisa, all three women dressed in designer clothes and sipping expensive wine. I'm

impressed how quickly Alisa acclimated to having unlimited money, though she was never exactly poor.

“If the two of you are implying that what happened to you will happen to me —” I give them a flat stare. “Disabuse yourselves of that notion.”

“It’s funny,” Finn muses, staring at his whiskey as he rolls the ice against the glass. “We always think we’re too busy for love. Too hardened against it.”

“Then love comes and fucking batters you over the head with a sledgehammer.” Nolan mimes smashing something. “Then boom, you’re married, you got kids—”

“I’m not interested in children,” I say, barely managing my temper.

Again, my brothers share a look. “Kids are great,” Nolan says.

“Helps when you have money and unlimited nannies,” Finn adds. He has two: a four-year-old girl named Chloe and a two-year-old boy named Patrick.

Nolan has only one, a little boy named Cillian, though I hear there’s talk of him expanding his little brood.

The idea of reproducing isn’t repulsive in itself. I understand how important making children is to growing the Crowley organization and cementing our control over the East Coast underworld for generations to come. Only, the thought of myself as a father is terrifying.

I’m not an emotional man. I know my reputation—hardened Liam, strange Liam. They think I’m a robot running around following my programming to further the interests of the family above everything else. I do things my way, but I never get attached, not to friends or to women.

Children could change that.

No, I’m not so naive; I *know* children would change that.

I’d love my kids, whether I wanted to or not.

And that’s a risk I don’t want to take.

Though the more I watch Alisa laughing with Dara and Keely, the more I’m impressed by her. I keep thinking about our night together, about that sweaty,

beautiful sex we had, fucking like we'd never fucked before, grinding and moaning, getting her off over and over, leaving her sore and wanting more in the morning. *That* was more than business. I can't pretend as though getting her off does anything but complicate our arrangement.

And yet I'm already thinking about doing it again.

"Look, Liam, we believe you when you say this thing with Alisa is purely business. Obviously, we both understand how marriages and business can align in our world." Nolan clears his throat, leaning closer. "But I've known you my whole life, and I've *never* seen you look at a woman the way you look at her."

I narrow my eyes at him. "And how's that?"

"Like you actually give a shit about another human behind for the first time in your life." He lets out a startled laugh. "My god, it's unthinkable. Liam Crowley, caring about a person."

"The girl's worthwhile, that's all." I grind my jaw, glaring at my brothers. If my mother hadn't all but forced this little social outing down my throat, there's no way I'd be putting up with this garbage right now. I have plans to make, contacts to tap, soldiers to gather. I don't need to hear my brothers talk about *emotions* as if their pathetic *love* means anything.

Except I look over my shoulder again, and this time Alisa's looking back. She tilts her head, her thick hair falling over one shoulder, and she smiles at me.

It's simple, a nothing gesture. She probably doesn't even realize she's doing it.

But it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life.

She sparkles. She somehow glows like the room was built with her as its lighting. Everything around me fades, and there's only Alisa, her white teeth, her startling eyes, and that laugh of hers.

Everything about her, drawing me in closer.

"Come on, let's rejoin the girls before they start talking too much shit," Finn

says with a groan as he gets up from his stool. “If you’re not careful, Keely and Dara are going to scare Alisa away.”

“Nothing is going to scare that girl,” I say. “She’s got too much invested in what we do next.”

Finn’s jovial smile fades away and I sit back down in my chair beside Alisa. The girls keep on chatting away about family politics, about all the different captains and lieutenants, while Alisa mostly smiles and nods politely. Keely drives the conversation while Dara adds the color. Finn and Nolan both get involved, adding their own opinions to the mix, while I stay silent.

I can’t keep my eyes off Alisa. I wish it weren’t like this, but I can’t help myself. Finn’s already noticed, and the others will soon enough. Not that it matters—finding my wife attractive should be a good thing.

But I know it’s only a problem if what we have really is only for the short-term.

All the others, they understand that my marriage to Alisa came about for expediency reasons. It’s an arrangement, nothing more. But I haven’t told anyone that Alisa plans on divorcing me the moment our fight against Rustik is over and she gets her revenge. For all my family knows, we’re in this for the long haul, even if there’s no love between us. It wouldn’t be the first Crowley marriage like that, and it won’t be the last.

“I have an important question to ask.” Keely leans forward, grinning slightly as she catches Alisa’s eye. “Now that you’re a Crowley, when’s the first baby coming?”

“Uh,” Alisa says, panicking. She looks over at me.

“There won’t be any babies,” I say flatly.

“Come on, we all know your mother’s not going for that,” Keely says, leaning back in her chair with a smirk. “There’s *always* a baby. That’s just how this family works.”

“That isn’t our relationship.” I refuse to give an inch to this.

“Oh, come on, Keels,” Dara says, holding up her hands. “They’ve been

married for a day. No need to start pressuring them into reproducing yet.”

Keely shrugs, swirling her wine. “If it’s not me, it’ll be someone else. I don’t personally care whether you guys pump out a bunch of kids or not, but this family does.”

“I never really thought about kids,” Alisa says, her voice small.

“All right, enough.” Nolan waves over the waitress. “Let’s order food.”

The rest of the meal goes well enough. I don’t engage the others if I don’t have to. Dara and Keely carry the conversation, though Alisa and my brothers both participate. When the night’s over, I drag my wife away from that restaurant as fast as I can, eager to be done with that farce.

“What’s the matter with you?” Alisa says once we’re far enough away that we won’t be overheard. She yanks her hand away, glaring at me.

“I don’t understand the question,” I say, already in the process of texting my driver our location.

“You were a prick that whole meal,” she says, looking at me like she wants to strangle me. “It wouldn’t have killed you to be nice for a couple hours.”

I point back the way we’d just walked. “That was a waste of our time,” I say. “The only reason we had that meal is my mother asked us to. We should be on my plane, heading back to Portland. Every minute spent not taking advantage of this situation is a minute Rustik had to plan his counter-move.”

She scoffs, shaking her head. “You’re unbelievable. Do you have any clue what just happened back there?”

Now it’s my turn to be annoyed. “My brothers and my sisters-in-law decided to be pushy about our relationship. Nothing important beyond that.”

She rubs her temples. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Explain to me why you’re so annoyed. It isn’t like you’ll be seeing much of those people. The moment our job is done—”

“That’s just it though, don’t you get it? They *want you to be happy.*”

I stare at her, trying to comprehend that absurd sentiment, but failing. “They

want us to have children to further solidify the Crowley position.”

“All that baby talk, all those questions about you and me, it was all because they care. And because you don’t tell them anything.”

“That’s a convenient interpretation.”

“No, Liam. God, you’re so frustrating. It’s *not* convenient at *all*. They’re going to be hurt when we divorce. They think you’re being normal for once in your life and they’re excited.”

I step toward her. “Why do you care what they want?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. “They were nice.”

“My gangster brothers are *nice*? That’s a first.”

“Their wives are at least. Keely and Dara are both normal people, at least compared to your family. They kept asking me—” She opens her mouth to keep talking, then snaps it shut. “You know what? Forget it.”

She tries to walk away. I catch her wrist before she can escape, holding on tight. “Tell me what you were going to say.”

“No. It doesn’t matter. You won’t care.” She struggles to pull free.

“Tell me, Alisa.”

She stands, glaring at me in silence for a beat. Then says, “They kept asking if you were okay. They’re worried about you, since you’re never home. And both your brothers came up to me separately and said they’re really excited that I’m in the family, and they hope I can make you happy.”

I let that sink in. My sisters-in-law checking up on my well-being? My brothers worried about my happiness? It’s hard to imagine any of them caring about me. I assumed they thought about me as often as I thought about them—which is not at all.

“It doesn’t matter.” I release her. She rubs her wrist. “What they want isn’t relevant. You and I have a job to do, princess, and what’s going to be our focus.”

“Right. Naturally. Better to shut it all down and ignore the fact that your

family's worried about you.”

“I already told you.” I turn away as a black sedan pulls up. “It’s not that they care about me. It’s that they care about this family.”

She looks at me like she can’t believe what I’m saying, but I’m finished arguing. I open the door for her, and she climbs into the back.

I pause before getting in beside her. For all that, I have to admit that it’s nice being back in Boston, being around my brothers. I’ve always been an outsider, no matter where I go, but at least here they accept me for what I am.

Though that doesn’t change a thing. My marriage to Alisa has an expiration date; the others don’t realize that yet. Once they figure it out, everything will go back to normal. I’ll return to being the man without emotions, and they’ll go back to their babies and their vacations, blissfully unaware of the man lurking beneath all of that.

Chapter 12

Alisa

Liam is relentless on the flight back to Portland.

He drills me, over and over, from every conceivable angle, until my head's aching and I'm exhausted.

"Tell me again the suppliers your father prefers," he says, flipping through a notebook filled with his tight, neat handwriting. "Start from the top."

"I can't do it anymore," I complain, spreading my legs out and leaning back. "We've been talking for three hours straight. Please, I need a break."

"You'll have a break when Rustik's dead and I own the marijuana business on the West Coast."

"Maybe I'd be better off dead then. I think I married the wrong guy."

"We're very high up in the sky, you know." His face is utterly deadpan as he speaks. "If you'd rather get off the plane, we can arrange that."

I wave him away. "Don't tempt me."

"Tell me the suppliers."

"Doctor Seuss. Donald Duck. Magic Johnson."

"Wife." He says the word like a growl in his throat.

I laugh sharply at him. "Oh, now you're going to play the marriage card? I thought you were the emotionless robot that doesn't care about family,

babies, or any of that crap?”

“I care about what’s important. Right now, *this* is important.” He jabs his pen at the book. “Suppliers. Now.”

“I’ve never met someone so disconnected from reality in my life. Seriously, you were like a totally different person out at dinner with your family.”

“I don’t want to talk about them anymore,” he says through his teeth. “I want to talk about the suppliers your father uses.”

“I tell you that your brothers are interested in your happiness, and that it’s going to break their hearts when you and I split up, and your response is basically, *so fucking what*. Who the hell thinks like that?”

“Alisa,” he says, tone warning now. “Enough.”

“I know you’re not exactly running around emoting all the time, and that’s totally fine. But the guy I know has at least some—” I hesitate, not sure how to describe it. “You have feelings. They’re there.”

I saw them. Hell, I felt them, just the night before. The man I slept with was passionate, starving for me. Maybe that’s not the normal, day-to-day Liam, that’s only the night-time Liam, the ravenous animal Liam feeding on his pretty wife-slash-prey, but even still.

He was so strange at that dinner. Like he turned off all his outward expressions and let the meal happen around him. When I tried to push back afterward, tried to get him to see that his family cares about him and maybe he should care about them too, he all but blew me off.

At least I pissed him off. Anger’s annoying, but it’s an emotion at least.

“My relationship with my family is complicated,” he says after a long pause. “I would very much appreciate getting back to the job.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “No thanks. We’ve got about an hour left. Wake me up when we land.”

I expect him to fight me. He’s done nothing but impose his will on everything I’ve wanted since we got married. This time, he says nothing, and when I peek at him, I find he’s reading over his notes and ignoring me the best he

can.

Which I consider a small victory.



“FROM NOW ON, THIS WILL BE HOME.” LIAM UNLOCKS THE DOOR TO AN incredible turn-of-the-century house right in the middle of the Alphabet District. Tall, wrought-iron fence draped with greenery and vines separate the gorgeous brown-and-tan facade from the city. I stare at the original hardwood floors, at the details that have to be at least a century old. Fireplaces with ancient tiles, an updated kitchen alongside a narrow living area, and more rooms and hallways than any modern house.

“Since when did you have a place like *this*?” I laugh stupidly as I help myself to a little tour. “Last I saw, you were living out of a suitcase in a rundown motel.”

“I had my people in the city purchase this for me.” He says it as if buying a multi-million-dollar home in a day is no big deal.

Which it probably isn’t for a guy like him.

“You realize this place is obscene? You could’ve gotten, like, a condo or something. It’s not like we’ll be raising a family here. We don’t need all this space.”

“Did you want a condo?” He walks up the stairs. “It’s not too late. I can buy one of those as well.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say quickly, not too proud to backtrack. “This place is amazing. Seriously, it’s almost a little too amazing.”

He shows me the large master bedroom. There’s only one piece of furniture: a large, four-poster bed, already with crisp dark sheets. There’s a big closet, an updated bathroom, and a lovely bay window overlooking the street.

“We sleep here,” he says, gesturing to the bed. “Which side do you prefer?”

“That’s it? You’re just going to grunt it at me like a caveman? I could always

take a different room, you know.”

“No, you can’t. Don’t forget our contract.”

“Did you really put in language about what bed I’d sleep in?”

“Absolutely. Yes.”

“Great. You’re a dream.” I walk to the window and look out. Down below, people walk past, going about their lives, unaware of the enormous change happening inside of me. “It’s weird being in here, you know.”

“How’s that?”

“Portland’s my city. I grew up in this place. My father’s business is here, my life used to be here. But now it’s like I’m an invading stranger.”

“I’m the stranger. You’re the local. That’s why I married you.”

I resist the urge to tell him off, which is a first. I must be growing. “You know what I’m saying.”

“You’re concerned,” he says, the understatement of a century. “This is difficult for you.”

“Are you doing your robot thing again?”

His eyes narrow. “I’m trying to empathize.”

“You’re terrible at it.”

“Don’t be difficult for no reason. I’ll drag you over here, lay you across my knee—”

“And what?” I say, glaring now. “You’re going to spank me?”

“Damn right I am.” He slowly stands up.

I back away, heart racing. Based on the look he’s giving me, I’m pretty sure he’ll do it.

And the sick part? I might actually want him to.

“Let’s skip the corporal punishment,” I say quickly, turning away to look out

the window again. I really need to get myself together. If I'm going to freak every time he says something vaguely menacing and sexual, I'm going to be on edge a whole lot. "What do we do now that we're back?"

"First, we need to meet with your father and find out where he stands."

I let out a sharp, surprised laugh. "We both know where that is. He stands with a bunch of thugs that tried to murder us."

"That was a day ago. Things change. I've already learned that there's tension between your father and Rustik."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"I haven't been sitting around biding my time. I built a network."

"A network." I press my forehead against the glass. It's cold and smooth. "Great. A network."

"This is going to work, princess, but we have to act fast."

"I don't want to see my father."

"Too damn bad. I've already set the meeting for later today."

I whirl on him. "Without asking me?"

"I knew you'd react like this." His face shows me nothing. The man can really shut it down when he wants to, which is beyond infuriating.

I advance on him. "I'm not going."

"You absolutely are."

"No, Liam. You're not springing big meetings with my own damn family on me out of the blue without discussing things first. We're *partners* in this."

"Actually, that's where you're wrong." He meets me halfway, grabbing me roughly by the lower back as he pulls me into him. I release a surprised whimper. I expected him to keep his distance, but instead, he's grabbing onto me like he's about to do something *very* filthy. Like follow through with that spanking threat.

“Is that how this is going to go? You do whatever you want and I’m expected to follow along? I thought you were offering me revenge. Not letting me watch while you took care of everything.”

He makes a small noise in the back of his throat as his thumb brushes down my cheek. “Tell me something, and please, be honest. If I had Rustik here in this room down on his knees, and I gave you a gun, would you be able to pull the trigger? Could you take the man’s life?”

I try to squirm away, but he doesn’t release me. “That’s a stupid scenario.”

“That’s what we’re doing.” His voice hardens. “I’m not putting you in that position, princess. I’m taking the burden away. I’m the trigger and the gun. All you have to do is help point me in the right direction.”

I stop fighting and look into his face. I think there’s a glimmer of something beneath the mask, a painful emotion, like a tension’s underpinning everything. I cock my head, trying to find another glimpse, but he’s under control a second later, and I’m not sure if there was ever something at all.

“All right,” I say after a tense moment.

“All right, what?”

“We’ll meet with my father.”

He releases me. “That was never in question.”

“Prick.” I put space between us. “I need things. Clothes, toiletries, that stuff.”

“Make a list. I’ll pass it along to my people.”

“You keep mentioning people, a network, whatever. Where was all that when we ran from the wedding?”

“Busy. You do recall we met on a whim.”

“Good point.” I rub my face. “This is all so messed up.”

“I’m sure it seems that way from your perspective. From where I’m standing, this is just another job.” He moves to the bedroom door. “You have an hour. We’re meeting your father at a cafe in the middle of downtown.”

“Where are you going?”

“To scout out the location and start hiring more muscle. We have the Crowley family backing us now, my pretty little wife. It’s time to start tearing this city to pieces.”

He leaves me standing alone in the bedroom. I cross my arms around myself, looking away. “Dramatic,” I mutter, but chew on my lip.

My emotions are still frayed and seeing my father won’t make anything better, but Liam’s right. We need to know the situation, and if there’s anyone involved in this city that might possibly be willing to help, Papa’s still our best shot. And even if he’s not interested, I suspect Liam can get what he wants out of him, and there’s a part of me that wants to see it happen.

“Now, to make this place look less like a haunted prison and more like a home,” I say with a sigh, and start on that list.

Chapter 13

Alisa

I keep jostling my knee on the car ride to the cafe.

Liam notices, but doesn't say anything. If he cares that I'm nervous and afraid, he makes no outward sign of it. Not that I expected anything—the man's about as emotionally in-tune as a ripe potato.

Still, this is my husband, at least for a while. I don't know how long this thing with Rustik's going to last—it would be a few days, or it could be a few years. Either way, I'm stuck with Liam, and it'd be nice if he could at least acknowledge my discomfort.

It's probably better this way. He'd make some comment, some cocky innuendo, and it would only make things worse.

I rub my forehead, trying to get it under control. I shouldn't start getting annoyed with Liam for something he hasn't even done yet—I'm just on edge.

I don't know what's going to happen. Last I heard, my father wants me to return to Rustik—and if I don't, he's going to kill me with his own bare hands.

Maybe he said that in the heat of the moment, maybe he's under some serious stress too, but threatening to murder his own daughter is too far, even for him.

Worst of all, I don't know what I want from him.

I don't know if I want him to beg me for forgiveness, or at least an apology,

or maybe just an admission that he never should have married Liliya to Rustik in the first place, and never shouldn't tried to do the same thing to me.

Only I doubt he regrets it. Papa's many things, but he isn't sentimental. I may be his favorite daughter, but I'm also his *only* daughter now, and I betrayed him. To my father, that's worse than anything else.

"Let me take the lead," Liam says as we're dropped off in front of a modern-looking cafe called Beyond Downtown. The interior looks like a dozen other similar places all over the city: lots of wood, metal, and copper.

"Why am I even here again?" I look back at the car, tempted to get inside, but I'm being a coward. I wish I could tap into my anger, but instead I feel like a child all over again.

"To make your father uncomfortable enough to make a mistake."

My eyes widen as he lingers on the threshold. "You're joking, right? You brought me as a prop?"

"A very beautiful prop." His eyes scan the room until he spots Papa sitting in the back corner at a table all alone.

My jaw tightens. Fucking Liam. I'm tempted to turn and walk out of here, but who knows what's waiting for us outside. If Papa told Rustik about this meeting, there could be half-a-dozen Aslan soldiers waiting to ambush us.

Except as I walk over, I can see the fear in Papa's eye, and I doubt he brought backup.

"Alisa," he says with some minor relief in his tone. I didn't expect that. "You disappeared, and I was afraid—"

"Ignore her," Liam says, leaning forward to block my father's view. Papa jerks back with surprise and some trepidation. "Pretend as though your daughter isn't here. You're dealing with me now."

"But, Alisa, she's safe?"

"She's a Crowley wife now. She's the safest woman in the world."

Papa relaxes somewhat. Which surprises me—why would he care if I was

safe? Didn't he just get done threatening to kill me?

"When you two got on a plane and flew away, I was worried—" He stops and clears his throat.

"Worried what?" Liam prompts.

"Worried you might not come back." Papa gives me a meaningful look.

"If you're implying that I'd hurt my wife, you should rethink that position. That was your *other* daughter's husband."

I don't like the way he's talking about Liliya so casually, but he's not wrong.

"You keep saying *wife*." Papa stares at Liam. "Did you really get married?"

"We did."

"You're not wearing rings."

"Rings are symbols. They're outward signs, nothing more. Paperwork means something." Liam sits back in his chair. "Where do things stand with Rustik and the Aslan family?"

"They stand nowhere." Papa looks away toward the window. The city crawls past outside, a thousand little lives, each a hero of their own story. "Rustik hasn't spoken to me since the pair of you left the city. I'm afraid my life's in danger now."

"It's very hard for me to feel sorry for you," I say suddenly, which earns a glare from Liam.

"Alisa, please," Papa says. "You have to know what this is going to mean for me. Marrying a Crowley like this, running away from Rustik—"

"He's going to kill you," Liam says simply.

Papa nods. He looks pale and drawn, like he's sick with something. I wish it was regret, but I know it's fear for his own life. "He hasn't said as much but I know how that man operates. It's a matter of time."

"Then I'm your only option."

That surprises me. I expected Liam to bully my father into helping us or at least to threaten him into submission.

Instead, this is a much subtler tactic.

“What do you mean?” Papa glances at me again. “How are you an option?”

“You’re dead if I don’t win the war that’s coming. You’re likely dead before it ends, but if you come to my side, I have no reason to end your life. Actually, I have plenty of incentive to save it.”

Papa’s frown deepens. “Explain, please.”

“I married your daughter.” Liam gestures at me. “That’s my first incentive. My next is your string of dispensaries. You and Rustik were going into business together, but you can easily make that same deal with me.”

“Rustik has productive farms.” Papa looks confused. “You don’t have anything like that.”

Liam waves the concern away. “I have money, resources, and willpower. Everything else will come in time.”

“Even if I wanted to make that deal with you, Rustik would never allow it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. What Rustik wants is no longer important. I have more muscle and more experience waging wars like this than that upstart ever will. He will lose.”

Papa looks thoughtful. I want to scream at Liam, tell him to stop this insanity, that my father is the enemy, but I understand what he’s doing. If he can turn Papa to his cause, that’ll be a powerful ally both in business and in violence. Papa knows this town better than anyone, and he knows Rustik’s organization. Papa can help Liam win faster and more securely.

But my old man seems to shrivel. I never thought of him as a coward, but now that he has a choice to make it’s like he can’t sit up straight. The pressure of what he should choose weighs on him, forcing him down. Where I made up my mind and committed to my course of action despite the long odds, it’s like Papa doesn’t have the spine to go against Rustik.

I almost feel sorry for him, but I can’t let myself go soft. I have to keep

thinking of Liliya and how Papa wanted to do the same thing to me that he did to her.

“I don’t know,” Papa murmurs at last, shaking his head. “It’s a good offer. I just don’t know.”

“Rustik’s going to kill you. I have no real reason to. That should be all the logic you need to make the right choice.”

“It isn’t that simple.” Papa sounds miserable. “I’m already entangled with Rustik.”

“Then detangle yourself. I won’t make this offer again.”

Papa nods, looking miserable. “I understand.” Then he glances at me. “Alisa, darling, you can see how dangerous things are for me right now, but if you were to go back to Rustik and apologize—”

Liam cuts him off. “If you speak to my wife like that one more time, I will kill you.” He makes his threat as if he’s ordering steak at a restaurant. There’s only hard truth in his voice. “She is not going anywhere.”

“Yes, very well.” He takes a deep breath and slowly blows it out. “I’ll have to think.”

“In the meantime, send Rustik a message for me. I’m open to working out a negotiated settlement to our current predicament, assuming he’s ready to cede control of half his grow operations for fair market value.”

Papa looks aghast. “You’re insane. He’ll never do that.”

“Then it’ll be war.” Liam pushes his chair back and stands. “You have a lot to think about, Bogdan. Think fast, because I can’t promise how long you have to keep drawing breath.”

He walks off, only pausing to glance back at me.

I don’t stand right away. Papa turns to me, looking deflated, like Liam strangled half the life out of him. I should feel something—victory, excitement, joy—since Papa deserves this and more.

Only I can’t manage to enjoy watching my vibrant father wither away.

Despite everything, he's still my father, and I can feel myself getting angry and hardening and hating the world. If I keep letting bitterness dig its claws into me, I'll be as lost as he is.

"Liam's not the enemy," I say, keeping my face composed. I want to scream, shout, kick him in the face. Instead, I keep it together. "Rustik's the one that killed your daughter."

"You don't know that."

"Who else could have done it?" I feel my nerves starting to fray. "Just think, please. I know you're in deep, but don't be stupid."

"When did you get like this?" A hint of anger ignites in his expression. "When did you get so willfully blind?"

"Enough." Liam returns to the table, takes me by the arm and drags me to my feet. People stare, surprised that he'd manhandle me in public, but nobody dares to approach. Not that I can blame them. Liam's terrifying. "Think about my offer." He pulls me away.

I wrench my arm out of his grip. "I can walk on my own." I push past him out onto the sidewalk, pacing back and forth. "That asshole. That stupid asshole."

"I'm not sure who you're talking about," Liam says, watching me with an utterly cool expression.

"My father," I say, throwing my hands up. "Also, you a little bit."

"I figured as much."

"What is with him in there? Seriously, does he want to get himself killed?"

"He's not telling us something." Liam gestures toward where his black sedan's parked. "Come on. We have to get off the street."

I grind my teeth but follow him. No need to keep taking risks. Once in the safety of his back seat, he puts a hand on my leg. I try to brush him aside, but he doesn't budge.

"I'm not in the mood for you to pretend like you give a damn."

His left eye tics slightly. “I do care.”

“I doubt that very much. Business arrangement, right? And don’t give me that look. Yes, I’m being stupid and emotional right now, I’m aware of that, but my papa’s going to get himself murdered. I’m a bit stressed.”

“Alisa.” He leans closer. “Do you want me to save your father’s life?”

The question makes me pause. He’s staring at me intently, Liam’s gorgeous face inches from mine, his strong hand on my leg, and I begin to calm down. I’m safe in here with him, my husband, with two of his soldiers sitting up front. Now he’s offering to give my father a way out, and suddenly Papa’s life is in my hands.

What do I really want? There’s a part of me that hates Papa for siding with the man that killed Liliya. I still don’t understand how he could possibly want to work with Rustik after all this.

But he’s still my father. It’s not exactly *easy*, letting him get killed.

“I want him to do the right thing.”

“That’s asking a lot from most people.”

“Yeah, well, here I am, expecting the world.”

“If you want me to keep your father alive, all you have to do is ask, and I’ll try my hardest.”

I chew on my lip, surprised by his earnest expression. “Why? What do you get out of it?”

“Aside from making my wife happy? Nothing at all.”

“I’m not really your wife. I mean, not your *real* wife. You shouldn’t care about making me happy, only making good on our deal.”

He’s quiet for a long moment as the car heads back toward our house. He continues looking at me, like he’s studying my face, and his maddening hand remains on my leg.

“I find myself wanting to provide for you.” His face twitches again as if he’s not happy with the way he phrased that. “I want to make you happy for no

other reason than to make you feel good.”

I hesitate, surprised by his answer. “Well, uh, I guess that’s not the worst thing in the world.”

“No, but it’s strange. For me, at least.”

“Strange for me too. Imagine being married to a man that actually gives a shit about you? Hard for me to picture.”

I get another one of his tight smiles as he removes his hand. “I wouldn’t go that far. Making you happy is one thing. Giving a shit about you is another.”

I snort, unable to help it, as he turns and looks out the window.

Liam’s not the enemy. I have to keep that in mind.

Yes, he’s using me to get what he really wants—but I’m using him, too.

That man drives me crazy. Hot one moment, cold the next. But despite everything, a strange flutter rolls through my guts, and I don’t mind the idea of him trying to make me feel good.

Chapter 14

Alisa

Liam disappears after dropping me back at the house with only a cryptic *I have more work* as an explanation before driving off. I mutter to myself as I head back into the beautiful but empty house, and I'm about to give myself another tour when I find a young man standing in the kitchen, idly humming to himself and wiping down the refrigerator.

I let out a little surprised yelp. He grimaces and looks over, holding up the sponge like a shield.

"Sorry," he says quickly. "I didn't mean to startle you. I wasn't aware you'd be back so soon. Liam told me—"

"Wait, hold on. Who are you?" I put a hand on my rapidly beating heart. "I wasn't expecting anyone to be in here."

The young man straightens. He's got dirty-blond hair, tan skin, surprisingly white teeth, and a slender frame, and he's wearing a business-casual outfit of a button-down tucked into slim khaki pants. He reminds me of a fashionable tech-bro. "My name's Orin and I'm Liam's assistant."

It takes a second to process. "Liam has an assistant? How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine," he says with a strange bit of defensiveness. "How old are you?"

"Huh. You're older than I am. Sorry, you just look so young, and I just—" I shake my head. "I'm being rude."

“If rudeness bothered me, I wouldn’t be working for Liam.”

I laugh lightly. “Good point.”

“He instructed me to meet you here. I understand you have some lists of items you might need?” He glances around the sparse kitchen. “I have a few shopping ideas if you wouldn’t mind a little initiative.”

“I’d *love* that. I’m not picky when it comes to plates and stuff.”

“Perfect, then I’ll take care of the kitchen. Anything else?”

I pull up my phone and start reading to him what I’ll need, but I end up texting him a document instead. “And it would be nice if I could get some furniture for this place. It’s a little bit...” I trail off, waving my hands in the air.

“Empty?” he supplies.

“Depressing as hell.”

He grins. “I can help with that as well. Got a style in mind?”

Suddenly, an idea hits me. It’s a little bit childish, but I can’t help myself. “Liam told you to get me anything I want, correct? No matter what?”

“That’s right. Price is no object. Go nuts.”

“Perfect.” I start flipping through pictures on my phone. “Exactly how quickly can we get some of this stuff? I have a theme in mind.”

“A theme?” His eyebrows raise.

“Liam *loves* a theme.” I grin wickedly, unable to help myself. “Shall we get to work?”

He claps once, looking delighted. “I’m going to like you.”



FIVE HOURS LATER, LIAM COMES HOME TO A COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED house.

I'm sitting in the living room sipping a mocktail and watching the fireplace crackle away. Fortunately, I'm fast enough to hop to my feet as he comes into the room, and I'm treated the expression on his face as he takes in the new decor.

"What is this?" he asks, staring.

"You told me to make this place my home. What do you think?"

His frown deepens. "It looks like..." He trails off, shaking his head slowly.

"The inside of a Romanov toilet? Yeah, that was my intention."

I give him a little curtsy and look around the space.

It's *gold*. Like, obscenely gold. Everything is a shade of gold, cream, or white, from the carpet to the walls. Gold couch, gold end table, gold light fixtures. Some of them are real gold, some is only painted, but everything *sparkles*.

The place is absurd. It's an astonishingly tacky display of wealth, the sort of excess old-money guys like Liam love to frown at. I was going for something that would make a Russian tsar blush, and based on the look on Liam's face, I succeeded.

"This has to change."

"Absolutely not." I pick up a golden elephant statue. "I love my decorations."

"You did this to annoy me."

"You said to make it feel like home. Well, instead, I wanted it to feel like I'm living inside of a palace."

"I can't have people enter this place. It's just..." His nose wrinkles. "Unseemly."

"I think anyone you bring over will be impressed by our wonderful taste."

"You have to change it." He picks up a fake Fabergé egg, entirely gold. "And this should be smashed into a million little pieces. This travesty is a crime against good taste and the Russian people."

“That is a lovely piece of art—” I walk over and pluck it from his hands. “And it cost us ten thousand dollars.”

He grunts like I punched him in the chest. “You’re lying.”

“I most certainly am not. Everything cost ten times the usual amount when you factor in rush delivery and the labor it took to get this set up in the time you were out.”

“Why?” he asks. He levels that intense gaze and I feel my spine shiver. But no, I’m not going to give up now, just because my scary husband’s giving me his murder-stare.

“I want you to come home every day to a reminder that I am *not* some passive observer in this relationship.” I tilt my chin up, meeting his glare for glare.

Yes, it’s childish. I am very much aware. But I was also reminded during our meeting with my father how little control I have over this situation.

Liam’s doing all the work. Sure, I’m giving him information, making a few contacts, but otherwise it’s all him.

I’m here to piss everyone off and nothing more.

This is my tiny way of taking control of my life.

We stay like that for several beats. I understand that I’m playing with fire. I know he’s a cobra ready to strike and I’m poking him with a stick. But I can’t help myself. This is the kind of person I am—not willing to roll over, not willing to play dead. I climb trees, I get muddy, I learn about the art of war, get bruises, muddy knees, ripped jeans.

I take my life into my own hands.

So far, Liam’s done nothing but whisk me around.

Now I’ve gotten a bit of revenge.

“Is the whole house like this?” he asks.

“Yes. Well, mostly. Some of the rooms are still empty.”

“Hm.” He looks around. “I can live with it.”

“You can—hold on, what now?” My eyebrows raise. “I thought you’d fight more. I had this whole speech prepared.”

“It’s fine. I’ll survive.” He turns to leave.

“No, wait, listen to the speech. *When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume—*”

“That’s the Declaration of Independence,” Liam interrupts.

“Come on, it’s just getting good. —*and to assume, among the power of the earth—*”

“If you keep quoting the Declaration of Independence at me, I swear to god, Alisa, I am going to spank you. This absurd little temper tantrum of a decorative wreck is bad enough, but if you keep going—”

“—*the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect—*” He comes at me with a snarl and I yelp, laughing as I run away. My heart’s racing, my head a little dizzy, but Liam doesn’t stop. “I can do more!” I shout, dodging around his lunge, heading for the steps. “—*to the options of mankind requires that they should declare—*”

“I am going to spank you raw, little princess,” he snarls, and I genuinely can’t tell if he’s mad for real.

I screech, laughing, as I careen into our bedroom. He stops at the doorway, breathing hard, and stares around him.

I gesture, catching my breath. “Well?”

He groans, closing his eyes. “You’ve got to be fucking be kidding me.”

“You don’t like it?”

The place is draped in purple.

Absolutely *drenched* in a dozen shades of purple like a Teletubby got murdered.

Rugs, paintings, even the lampshade, all purple. Purple star-covered tulle hangs around the four-poster bed, which is done up in purple silk.

“You’re worse than I am. You’re deranged.”

“It’s royal,” I say defensively. “Purple’s a great color.”

“Come here.” He chases after me. I’m laughing hard, too hard to put up much of a fight, and he catches me by the ankle as I try to get away over the bed.

“You can’t really spank me!” I protest as he drags me over. I squirm, trying to get away, but his grip’s like iron and his face is twisted into a mask of determination.

“Damn right I can.”

“Liam!” He unbuttons my pants and starts to peel them down. “I thought that was a figure of speech. You’re not really spanking me!”

He grunts in response, ignoring my protests. No matter how hard I twist or thrash, he keeps me pinned in his lap, my ass up, my pants down around my thighs. When he peels my panties off, my bare skin’s available for him, and I feel heat growing between my legs.

This is without a doubt the most exposed I’ve ever been.

And the most turned-on I’ve ever felt in my life.

“What in the freaking hell—” I start to say.

Until his palm silences me with a loud crack.

He whacks my ass so hard the sting’s like a lightning strike. I gasp, back arching in pure shock, but it quickly passes. I lay there panting, surprised by how much that hurt, but truly shocked by the sudden and intense desire growing between my legs.

I’m wet, and in about ten seconds, he’s going to feel it.

“I don’t joke about punishments,” he says slowly, enunciating each word. “I most certainly do *not* joke about spankings.”

“I see that,” I say, breathing hard as a sheen of sweat breaks out down my

spine. “You did it. You spanked me. Time to let me go.”

“You’re far from finished, my sweet princess. You want to tease me? You want to make our room purple? All right, then I will spank your ass until it matches the sheets.”

“Liam—” But he spanks me again before I can protest. Another two hard whacks right on my bare ass, and this time, he gently massages my cheeks, blending the sharp pain with a little bit of soothing pleasure. “Oh, fuck,” I say, groaning despite myself. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of making me actually enjoy this, except I can’t control myself, not with his strong hands holding me down.

“You like it,” he says, not sounding surprised at all. “And now you will learn the extent of my tolerance.”

“Okay, I get it, you spanked me, you’re big and scary, can you just—”

Another spank. Another, and this time, my back’s arching as these whimpers escape my lips.

“Good girl,” he whispers. “Oh, very good girl.” Another spank. Another. And when I think I can’t take more, he spanks me one last time—

Then buries his hand between my legs, cupping my soaking wet, burning hot pussy.

It’s too much. I melt in his lap. I moan, writhing my hips. My brain’s on autopilot, my body’s on lockdown. I can’t do anything but give myself over to this beast of a man.

This is not what I expected when I renovated our house.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan. “Oh my god, Liam.”

“You’re dripping down my fingers, my beautiful wife,” he says, sounding truly delighted. “You’re so wet it’s obscene.”

“Fuck you,” I gasp as his fingers tease me. “This is your fault. I try to do something nice—”

“Don’t pretend like the decorations are for any other reason than to piss me

off.” His fingers slowly sink inside of me and I gasp. “You feel stifled and trapped. You blame me for that. This is your way of lashing out.”

“Maybe,” I say, sucking in short, quick breaths between moans as his fingers fuck me, the pleasure mixing with the pain of my spanking, still hot on my cheeks. “But you also—fuck, god damn it—you also deserve it.”

“Just like you deserve this.” His fingers sink deeper, curling to tease my G-spot, and it throws me right against the edge of orgasm.

I push back against him, wanting more. I’m a mess of need and pleasure, and my brain’s barely working. “You’re a monster. You’re a beast.”

“Tell me to stop then. Ask me to stop fucking your lovely, tight, beautiful, wet pussy with my big fingers. Tell me to stop.”

“Keep going,” I moan, losing my mind. “I’m so fucking close.”

“Come for me then, princess,” he coaxes, fingers going faster. “Come for me and call me your husband. Say it, princess.”

“Husband,” I gasp, back arching, hips working. “You’re my husband, you bastard.”

And I come, a blinding explosion of pleasure. My muscles tense and spasm as sweat rolls down my spine, and god, it feels so perfect. I moan, saying it over and over, *husband, husband*, which only makes him work my pussy faster, until I can’t take anymore.

I roll off him, onto the purple bed. He watches as I curl into a ball, twitching as the orgasm aftereffects slowly fade away.

“Good girl,” he whispers, patting my bare, raw ass. “Now, come into the bathroom and let me soothe you. Hot water helps.”

“You’re insane.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “You’re truly insane.” And I think I like it.

Will I get punished like this every time I act out?

He has to realize he’s only encouraging more bad behavior.

“Maybe, but it felt good, didn’t it?”

I nod, still not looking at him.

He doesn't speak. I feel him get up off the bed, then I hear the bath water run. When I open my eyes, he's standing and staring down at me with a strangely loving expression in his eyes.

"I'm not changing the colors," I say, meeting his gaze.

"Good." His smile is wicked. "It'll give me more excuses to spank you. Soak in the tub. I promise it will help with the pain." With that, he turns and leaves.

Chapter 15

Alisa

After the bath, I crawl into my purple bed and fall asleep. If he gets in with me, I don't notice, and in the morning his side is already cold and empty, though his pillow's been used.

I pull on some new sweats and head downstairs.

"Good morning." I jump, yelping again. Orin's standing in the kitchen at the island cutting fruit. "I wasn't sure what you like for breakfast so I went all out." He gestures at some eggs, a little yogurt, the fruit, a bagel, and toast.

"You have to stop doing that." I clutch my chest. "Your boss is going to be pissed if you give me a heart attack."

"Doing what?" He looks genuinely confused. "Liam told me to get you something to eat. He said you'd be hungry."

If there's an implication in that statement, it doesn't reach his tone. I refuse to let myself blush. "I'm fine with coffee and fruit, thanks."

Orin nods and brings me over something to eat as I sit at the table. He lingers for a moment but says nothing. I sip my coffee, trying to act like he's not there, unsure of how to process this strange turn of events.

I'm not used to having an assistant around the house, and I'm sure as hell not used to getting spanked until climax by my bossy new husband.

"I'm sorry," Orin says, breaking the silence. "There's one more thing."

“Can it wait? I’m guessing Liam instructed you to make my morning uncomfortable, but I’d like to enjoy myself for a few minutes first.”

Orin shifts from side to side. “Uh, well, uh—”

“Okay, fine, go ahead. What did the lord and master tell you to say?”

He looks relieved. “Just that he’ll be home in a little while, and he requests that you abstain from more decorating in the meantime. Also that he went easy on you last night, and he won’t be so accommodating next time.”

I stare, trying not to let myself blush, but my cheeks turn bright red. “Anything else?”

“That’s it.” Orin sounds chipper. “Can I get you something else? Freshly squeezed orange juice maybe?”

“Just a coffin. Because I might die of embarrassment.”

He laughs, waving me off. “Don’t worry, Liam’s just like this. You’ll get used to it.”

“I doubt that.” I give him a look before deciding that if he can pretend like this is normal then I can too. “How long have you worked for him?”

“A few years.” He remains standing passively. “We’ve been traveling around that whole time.”

“Where are you from?”

“Boston,” he says, shrugging. “Of course.”

“Is everyone in the Crowley family from Boston?”

“Not at all, but the inner circle is almost entirely made up of locals.” He clears his throat. “Are you sure I can’t get you anything? Liam told me to be at your beck and call.”

“No, that’s fine, thank you.” I turn back to my breakfast, feeling miserable. Do I have this to look forward to? My husband is going to torture me with sexual favors and his strange assistant is going to know all about it. That’s just my life now apparently.

“Well, if you need anything, don’t hesitate.”

“Honestly, I’m not super comfortable with this whole thing.” I gesture at him vaguely. “I’ve never had an assistant before.”

He laughs, rubbing the back of his head. “If it helps, Liam’s probably asked me to do things you’d never even dream of requesting. And he pays me really well.”

“That... actually kind of does help.” I pause, frowning. “What has he asked you to do, Orin? Do *you* need help?”

“Nothing worth calling the authorities over, don’t worry.” He laughs again, looking delighted by my reaction. “Anyway, enjoy your breakfast. I’ll be in the other room. Shout if you need me.”

He walks off at a brisk pace, and I picture him standing alone in one of the dark, empty corners of the house and powering down like a robot until needed. Except that’s not fair—Orin’s a person, with thoughts and feelings and all that stuff. I decide to make getting to know him better a priority, especially if we’ll be working together for the foreseeable future.

After a nice, leisurely breakfast and some light reading on my phone, I decide it’s time to get some exercise. I can’t stay cooped up indoors all afternoon, and besides, it’s nice out. I head into my room, change into running clothes, slip on jogging sneakers, then make my way to the door whistling to myself.

Except Orin’s already standing in my way. “Hey there,” he says, sounding way too cheerful.

“Hey there yourself.” I pause, taking out an earbud. “I’m just going out for a run. Do, uh, you need anything?”

“I’m supposed to ask *you* that question. But hey, listen, this is super awkward and I’m so sorry to have to do this, but orders are orders.”

“You have to do... what?” I ask, looking around. The place is empty except for the two of us. “I’m just headed out for a run around the block.”

“Right. About that. Liam made it very explicitly clear that you are *not* to leave the house.” He has the good sense to look sheepish. “I’m sorry. I really

am.”

I take a deep breath through my nose and slowly let it out. “When did he tell you that?”

“This morning before he left.”

“And did he say why?”

“Liam’s not really big on explaining himself.”

“Big shock.” I step forward. “Look. Orin. I like you. We had fun yesterday.”

“We did,” he agrees.

“There’s no way in hell I’m going to stay locked up in this house without an explanation. Did Liam say you need to physically restrain me?”

He looks uncomfortable. “Well, no.”

“Then let’s just say I kneed you in the balls and sprinted out the door.”

“Please, Ms. Alisa—”

“Just Alisa.”

“Okay. Alisa.” He glances to the side, looking worried. His voice falls to an urgent whisper. “Liam wouldn’t give me an order like this unless it was important. I understand you have a certain image of him—”

“My image of him isn’t the problem.”

“Right. Understood. I’m just saying that he doesn’t give orders like this for nothing. Maybe wait until he’s home and ask him for an explanation yourself?”

I feel my impatience simmering. I step forward, and Orin moves aside, clearly not willing to get in my way beyond acting persistent. “I don’t blame you for this, okay? You’re just doing your job. I want us to have a good relationship, but I’m not a prisoner in this house. I’m Liam’s wife. Got it?”

“Sure,” he says. “Loud and clear.”

“Great.” I yank open the door, feeling guilty for storming past him, fully

aware that he might get in trouble with Liam for this later, but also unwilling to sit around inside without so much as an explanation. “I’ll take the heat if Liam gets pissed, all right?”

Orin only shrugs like he’s not sure that’s a real option.

I head down the steps, cursing to myself.

Freaking Orin.

No, freaking Liam. He’s the one putting us in this awkward position with his controlling bullshit.

I’m about to head out, psyching myself up for a few solid miles, when a black sedan pulls up next to the curb.

I recognize that car. I pop out my headphones again as Orin stands in the doorway, looking bashful. “You called him,” I say.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I just know I couldn’t stop you, and he was *very* emphatic.”

“Orin, you sly devil.” I shake my head, smiling at him. “You stalled me too.”

“What can I say.” He spreads his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “I have to do my job.”

Liam climbs out of the car. He looks harried and annoyed, and he gazes at me like he’s going to walk over, bend me over his knee right here in the street, and spank me raw again.

Orin disappears into the house, the coward.

“What are you doing?” Liam crosses his arms, glaring. The sedan doesn’t move, the engine still running.

“Going for a jog.” I shove an earbud back in. “Want to come?”

“You couldn’t keep up with me even in dress shoes.” His jaw tics. “I’ll ask again. What are you doing?”

“Liam, skip the macho controlling asshole routine, please, and skip to why I can’t leave my own damn house when I am *not* a prisoner.”

He stares coolly for another few seconds before nodding as if to himself. “Things are dangerous right now. Rustik hasn’t made his move yet. There hasn’t been a response from him, and until he does *something*, I can’t be sure he won’t come after you.”

I hesitate, glancing to my left and my right as if the big Russian boss might come barreling at me any second, frothing at the mouth.

“You mean you’re waiting for him to take revenge?”

“Yes. It’s a matter of time. He’ll do something, and once that happens, the game’s on. Until then, I’m consolidating power and making deals. Speaking of which, I left a meeting to have this conversation, so I’ll ask you nicely once, and only once. Stay indoors until I have a better idea of how Rustik is going to respond. Your life may depend on it, and I don’t want a dead wife on my hands.”

I grind my jaw. I *hate* being stuck in that house alone while Liam’s out running around town making deals and whatever without me. I was working my way up through my father’s business; I have a freaking MBA from a good college. I could be useful to him.

Except I can’t leave the house.

I’m tempted to fight this. I could throw a fit, argue, make his life harder, maybe even get what I want.

But there’s something in his expression. It’s not just that he’s a controlling prick—he looks like he’s worried.

Genuinely worried for my safety.

I let out a breath. “I know I can be unreasonable sometimes. This has been very stressful for me lately,” I tell him.

“Does that mean you’ll listen.”

“Yes. This once. But I want a treadmill.”

“Tell Orin to get you a dozen. I don’t give a damn.” He pauses and a smile crosses his lips. “Only please don’t make it purple.”

“You’ll be lucky if it’s not bright pink.” I press my lips together then shake my head. “All right, fine, get back to your meeting. I’ll stay indoors.”

“Thank you. When Rustik makes his move, we’ll reassess this situation.”

“He better try something soon.”

I turn to leave, but Liam steps forward. He catches my wrist, pulling me toward him. I’m surprised as he presses me against his chest, his hand on my lower back, and presses his lips to mine.

It’s a small kiss. A chaste kiss even. No tongue, nothing like that. Except it sends my heart into overdrive, and I release a shocked whimper.

He pulls back slightly, though he’s still a bit too close. “Careful what you wish for,” he whispers. “When Rustik hits, he’ll hit hard, and we won’t like it.”

Without more explanation, he gets back into the car and leaves.

I watch him go until I notice Orin back on the stoop giving me a worried stare. “Don’t gloat,” I say as I head inside.

“I’d never.”

“I need a home gym.”

“Already made the calls when I saw you getting ready to work out.”

“Really?” I pause inside the house as he closes the front door.

“Treadmill should be here in a half hour.” He checks his watch, frowning. “Lazy assholes.”

“Thank you,” I say, and really mean it. “I’ve never had someone actually anticipate my needs.”

“It’s my job. Having endless money to throw at problems makes things easy.” He beams at me.

I laugh and head back up to my room, not sure how I feel about this situation, but willing to give Liam the benefit of the doubt for now.

Chapter 16

Liam

Riker Corgan is sweating as he shakes my hand. “I’d say you overpaid, but, uh—” He clears his throat. Corgan’s a heavysset man, bald, middle-aged, wearing a polo shirt and khaki pants. “I suspect you already know.”

“Consider the excess a friendly gesture. I’m aware of the risk you’re taking by selling to me.” I walk with him toward the conference room door. We’re in a nondescript office I rented right in downtown. Bottles of water gleam in the middle of the table. I have the entire twenty-first floor, although only two rooms are furnished. “Do you need anything else?”

“A drink,” he says, not smiling. “Something strong. And a plane ticket to Mexico.”

“I could help with both, but I suspect you have them well in hand.”

Corgan chuckles as I escort him to the elevators. We pass empty space for cubicles, empty offices, empty halls. “Can I offer some advice?” he asks, and he doesn’t look like he cares whether I agree or not. I definitely don’t give a damn what he has to say. He goes on anyway. “Rustik Aslan’s not the kind of man to take any of this lightly. The Russian’s got an iron fist. You know what I’m saying?”

“I’m aware of the Aslan organization’s disposition.” Violence and fear first. Those methods have their place—but a real leader has more tools than just a hammer.

“Sure, sure, you would.” Corgan rubs the top of his head. “I just mean, uh, ah, there are employees at all my dispensaries—”

I stop walking and force him to stop as well. “You have my word that I won’t let anything bad happen to anyone under my employ.”

I don’t add: that would be very bad for business.

He looks somewhat relieved. “Good. That’s good. I just don’t want anyone to get hurt, you know? When two elephants fight, flies tend to get crushed, you know what I mean?”

“Your people are mine now, and I treat my employees well.”

We make more small talk, shake hands when the elevator arrives, and I watch as the doors slide shut. I doubt I’ll ever see Riker Corgan again—he seems smart enough to run far, far away from here—though I almost feel bad for him.

“Now you’re in the game for real.” My top lieutenant, Sean McTafferty, watches me from the door back into the main office space. “He just sold you, what, the fourth largest dispensary chain on the West Coast?”

“Third,” I correct with a shrug. “And it’s only a start.”

“Rustik’s going to be livid.” Sean checks his nails. He’s older, in his mid-forties, with reddish-brown hair beginning to turn gray at the edges and a grizzled, weather-beaten face. Generally, I work alone, but I’ll need a real army if I’m going to take on Rustik, which includes bringing out experienced soldiers from the home city. Sean’s one of the best.

“That’s the idea.” I turn toward the windows. “I need him to make the first move. I suspect now he won’t be able to help himself.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll keep on buying up every small dispensary business until I’m too entrenched to stop. It helps that I’m working with Crowley money now, which means it’s essentially unlimited. From there, I’ll use the contacts my wife can provide to start building my marijuana growing empire. In a few years, I’ll take down Rustik the legal way, by stealing all his customers.”

“You sure about that?” Sean doesn’t look convinced, but he’s a soldier, not a businessman.

“I can afford to take losses on all my businesses, thanks to the Crowley fortune. I’ll undercut him until he’s squeezed out of the industry, then I’ll reap enormous profits once I’m the only man left standing.”

“Ah, yes, the Uber theory.” Sean taps a finger against his lips. “Heard a podcast about them. Sorry, are they profitable yet?”

“I’m more like Amazon. Big and inevitable.”

He shrugs, grinning. I keep looking out the window, thinking about poor Riker Corgan. As the first man to sell to me, he’s painting a target right on his chest, one that I hope Rustik is smart enough to ignore. Corgan’s not the real enemy. Though men like Rustik can’t always tell the difference.

As I turn back to the office, the door to the emergency stairwell bangs open. One of my soldiers stands at the top of the staircase, hands on his knees, sweating and breathing hard. The kid’s gasping like he’s about to go into cardiac arrest. Sean looks bewildered as he walks over to the young man. “What the hell? Did you run up twenty floors?”

“Yes,” he wheezes. “I think I’m going to die.”

Sean steers the poor bastard to a chair. “What were you thinking?”

“There’s... a man downstairs... elevator’s full...” He groans, leaning his head back against the wall, pouring sweat. “Wanted to move.”

“Hey, don’t pass out before you tell us why this was so important you nearly killed yourself running up here.” Sean lightly slaps the soldier’s face.

“Right, he’s one of Rustik’s men... he says the big boss... wants a meeting.” He sighs, slumping sideways out of the chair. Still alive, only lying on the cool tile floor.

Sean gives me a look. “Is this the move you’re waiting for?”

I shake my head, feeling unnerved. My meeting with Corgan only just finished; it’s either incredible timing or Rustik is keeping closer tabs than I guessed. “No. It’s not. I didn’t expect to hear from him yet.”

“What should we do?”

I call the elevator without answering. Sean shrugs and falls into line. I glance back at the soldier as he rolls onto his back, groaning. An elevator comes after a few seconds of waiting and we ride it down to the main building lobby where a very blond man’s sitting surrounded by several of my guards. They all try to look casual as other business folks bustle through the busy office structure’s front room, but everyone keeps looking over at the very obviously dangerous group of suit-wearing thugs.

“You look like a cliché from a gangster movie,” I growl at them. “Disperse. Except you.” I stare at Rustik’s man. “You have a message.”

He nods placidly. “My boss would like to set up a meeting.”

“Where and when?”

“Tomorrow at noon. There’s the Waterfront Park. Public and crowded.”

I nod once. “Acceptable.”

“He has only one demand.” The man has the good sense to look sheepish. “You have to bring Alisa Rostova.”

My jaw tics. I stare at the man, tempted to dig my fingers into his windpipe until he turns purple, but he’s not the one making the rules. Killing the messenger is frowned upon, and all that.

“No, I can’t do that.”

“Then I was instructed to say the meeting won’t happen.” He stands up. “I’m sorry. That’s what I was told.”

“Tell Rustik I’ll consider his offer.”

He nods and hurries off. I watch him go with a sense of deep unease.

“What’s the plan?” Sean asks.

“We’ll lock the park down. I want every soldier we have within spitting distance. If Rustik so much as twitches wrong, he dies.”

Killing him wouldn’t be the worst thing, but it would make my life harder.

The Aslan Bratva would go into full-on revenge mode as some other captain or lieutenant took over, and they'd leverage all their considerable power and political connections against me. I think I could win, but I'm not sure there'd be anything worthwhile left over if this war turns hot that suddenly.

"And the girl?" Sean asks. I give him a sharp look that makes him grimace. "I mean, your wife?"

"She'll come, mainly because she's more useful to me there than she is sitting at home." I turn away. I don't want him to see the deep unease I feel about putting Alisa anywhere near danger. She's much, *much* too precious to risk on a foolish meeting such as this, but it may be my only chance to speak with Rustik directly, and I can't pass it up.

At least I have a feeling she'll be elated to have something to do, if only to annoy me to no end.

Chapter 17

Alisa

“**W**hen I picture a nice walk in the park with my husband, this isn’t really how I thought it’d go down.” I lean up against Liam, grinning up at him and batting my eyes. He gives me a hard look, not in the mood to play around. The Waterfront Park presses up against the river, and while the cherry blossoms aren’t in bloom, it’s still a beautiful stretch of grass and concrete. Groups of people jog, ride bikes, roller skate, and stroll in the sunshine.

Nearby, about two dozen heavily armed men lurk around the trees and bushes looking absurdly out of place.

“Did you want to have that sort of relationship with me?” he asks, putting an arm across my shoulders. “I assumed you were more into the fighting and spanking.”

“It’s nice to be treated like a regular girl once in a while, you know.”

“Should we plan a honeymoon then?”

“I won’t complain. I could use a vacation for once.”

“Where would you want to go?”

“Paris,” I answer immediately.

His eyebrows raise. “Really?”

“I’ve never been out of the country before,” I admit, feeling a little

embarrassed about it. “I know it’s a cliché, going to Paris or whatever, but I’ve always wanted to visit.”

“You’d like it,” he says softly. “It’s a beautiful city. Lots of things to do.”

“You’ve been?”

“I traveled in my youth.”

“What, like, you backpacked through Europe?”

His smile is distant as he looks out at the water. “Not exactly. I stayed in five-star hotels.”

“Ah, yes, you’re a Crowley. I almost forgot.”

“Better remind yourself then.” He slows as we approach a bend set midway down the walking path. A lone man’s sitting there, a big man with broad shoulders, practically taking up the whole bench with his bulk.

It’s Rustik Aslan, all alone.

“I’m surprised he’s here,” I say, staring at the man I nearly married. A dozen conflicting emotions press through my mind. I’m afraid, of course I’m afraid, but I’m also angry and a little bit curious. Who is this man, really? Where does he come from and what does he want? Why did he kill my sister? What did she find out that was worth murdering her to cover it up? I realize I know almost nothing about him personally. None of this makes sense, and now seeing Rustik again only dredges all those emotions to the surface. I can see him on our wedding day again, giving me that disgusted, disdainful stare, his lips curled.

“Try to stay calm,” Liam says, guiding me toward the bench. “He might try to bait you into getting emotional. Don’t take it. This is all one elaborate game, and we’re going to win it.”

“I can handle myself,” I murmur, though I’m not sure it’s true, and I resolve to follow his advice.

Rustik stares as we approach. He’s a hard man, his eyes narrowed, and he stands. Liam’s about his same height, though where Liam’s athletic and toned, Rustik’s like a bear. Burly, massive, bulging against his clothing.

“You came,” he says, sneering. “I half expected you to ignore my request.” He inclines his head toward me. “And you brought my former fiancée as requested.”

“I was never really your fiancée,” I say despite Liam’s warning.

“How is married life treating you?” Rustik asks. His smile is needling, goading me into rage. “I see you enjoy going from one strange man to another. An unusual pattern.”

“We’re not here to discuss our relationship.” Liam moves forward, standing slightly in front of me. “Why did you want to meet, Rustik? You’re taking an interesting risk, coming here alone.”

The Russian surveys Liam for a moment. His lips pull back, not impressed. “You’re the famous Crowley boy. You and your big, bad family. I invited you to my wedding, and what did you do? You stole my wife. That was a shameful thing you did, running around through bushes like a child.”

“She chose to get herself out of a very ugly situation. I merely facilitated her exit.” Liam doesn’t show anything. His face is an impassive mask. “Is that all you want? You want to go over grievances? You can complain, but meanwhile I’m buying up your competition. Once I’ve consolidated all their power, I’m going to pick you apart, bit by bit, until there’s nothing left of you.”

“It’s a good plan,” Rustik says, gesturing in the air. “It might even work, except I can do things you cannot in this city. Such as, I can convince people not to talk to you.”

“Good luck with that. You might be intimidating, but money has a way of motivating even the most terrified cowards.”

Rustik laughs. It’s low and throaty and ugly. I sink back, suddenly feeling exposed. Liam doesn’t move.

“We’ll see about that. I’m happy you came. I really am. Even if you brought your entire army with you. You want to speak of cowards?” He gestures around himself at the soldiers. I can tell Liam doesn’t like that. “I wanted the measure of this man that thinks he can challenge me, and I now have it. I also wanted to pass along a message to the woman that would have been my

wife.” He stares at me, his face hard. “I did not kill your sister. But I will kill you.”

Liam steps forward. “Enough threats. Are we going to discuss business?”

“Oh, no, we are not.” Rustik looks at his watch. “I think that’s time enough.”

“For what?” Liam’s eyes narrow. He tenses, expecting an ambush.

Except Rustik only turns away. “There was a point when we could have worked together, Liam Crowley. Together, we would have been a force. But then you embarrassed me at my own wedding, and now there’s no chance at reconciliation. Remember that when your men die and your money burns. You chose this.” He begins to walk away.

Liam says nothing. I step forward, grabbing onto my husband’s arm. “What’s going on?” I whisper sharply, uncomfortable. I don’t understand why Rustik would draw us out for a meeting like that only to make vague threats.

“I don’t know.” Liam still doesn’t move. I want to start running. Rustik’s acting like he just pulled off some enormous victory, the way he’s swaggering down the walking path, but I don’t understand what it could be.

At least until a middle-aged man with graying reddish-brown hair comes walking fast from the trees.

Liam looks over. “Sean,” he says. Rustik’s barely out of sight. “What’s going on?”

“Just got a call.” This guy Sean looks pale. His eyes dart to Rustik as the Russian boss disappears around a corner. “It’s about Corgan.”

I look between them, confused. “Who’s Corgan?”

“Riker Corgan,” Liam says, his face hard.

That name’s extremely familiar. “My father’s biggest rival?”

“Former rival,” Liam amends. “He sold his company to me yesterday.”

“Except Orin called,” Sean says. “He found a box at the house.” He glances again to where Rustik disappeared. “It had Corgan’s head in it.”

I take a step back. My mouth opens in shock. Horror pulses into my guts, picturing poor Orin opening a package only to find a severed human head inside.

Liam's expression tightens as he takes in the news. "Now we know why Rustik seemed so confident."

This can't be happening. I've met Riker Corgan a few times. Despite being my father's biggest competition, he was always cordial, even charming. I liked him. And now he's dead.

Decapitated. His head chopped off by Rustik Aslan. Mutilated by a Bratva monster.

"How are you acting so casual about this?" I ask, staring at Liam. I feel like I might throw up.

"This is his move," Liam says, looking thoughtful, as if we weren't discussing the brutal murder of a human being. "Rustik's opening salvo. He's going to scare anyone that comes near me. The message is obvious: sell your company to the Crowley family and get your head chopped off."

"It's not a bad move," Sean admits.

I back away from the men. I feel dizzy, lightheaded. "Riker's been *murdered*," I say through my teeth. "Shouldn't we... I mean, the cops..." I hold up my hands as if I could pull threads from the air to make this all make sense.

Liam comes toward me. "This is only the beginning, my princess," he says, keeping his voice calm and low. I try to move away, but he catches my wrist then holds my arm tightly, pulling me close. I look around, but none of the people out for their midday stroll seem to notice my distress. "Pull yourself together, wife. There's going to be more violence very soon. Look at it this way—now you can go for a run."

"You're insane."

"I'm pragmatic." He steers me back the way we came with Sean ghosting behind us. "You want revenge, don't you?"

“Yes,” I say grudgingly. “That hasn’t changed.”

“Good. Now things can get interesting.” He holds me tighter. “You did well back there. Aside from the panic you’re feeling now, which is understandable, you did very well. You should be proud.”

I want to close my eyes. I want to scream.

Instead, my husband steers me away from the meeting we just had with a murderer, and I’m fairly sure there’s more death coming.

Chapter 18

Alisa

I stare at the ceiling and try to remember the last time I spoke with Riker Corgan.

It was probably at some industry thing, a party or a charity auction or something like that. But I can't seem to recall exactly when.

Which is terrible. The man's dead—at least partially because of me—and I can't even recall what we last spoke about.

Probably some inconsequential nothing.

He was a business rival, but he was still a man. Now he's gone, murdered horrifically for selling to my husband.

Sleep won't come. It's the middle of the night, a little past ten. My purple bed doesn't seem funny anymore now that the reality of my situation's become clear. Dead bodies, headless corpses, murdered businessmen. Corgan wasn't exactly a saint, but he also didn't deserve to get mutilated.

"You can't sleep." Liam's voice drifts in from his side of the bed.

I try not to look at him. I swear, he must hear my heart racing. "It was a stressful day."

"You're not used to this. I understand."

"You do? Doesn't this bother you at all?"

"Not exactly, no." He's breathing steadily and slowly. "It's what I do."

“How can you live this way?” I turn to look at him. He’s staring back at me, his eyes glinting in the half-light. “With all this violence?”

“I was born in this world.” His voice is soft. Smooth. Velvety. “My family taught me from a young age that life is both precious and cheap, and we have enough money to pay for whatever we want. Murder, arson, whatever you can imagine, we can make it happen. I knew Corgan was in danger when he accepted my offer, but I hoped he’d get away before Rustik made a move.”

“Did he understand how bad it could get?”

“I assume so.” He shifts slightly, looking at me. “Why do you care so much about that man? He’s nothing to you.”

I let out a sharp, surprised laugh. “It’s not that I care about *him*, it’s more that... someone I know got their head cut off, and I’m partially responsible.”

“More people are going to die. You knew that coming into this. And you are *not* responsible.”

“I know. I know. Liliya’s dead because of Rustik. Now Corgan. That monster won’t stop until we make him. It’s just...” I trail off, not sure what to say. “If I hadn’t married you, would any of this happened? Corgan might still be alive.”

I value human life for its own sake. I can see Liam’s been jaded by his worldview, by his family and everything that comes along with growing up inside of a notorious and powerful criminal organization, but I’m not there yet. People still matter to me.

I’m not sure they matter to Liam.

“You didn’t do this,” he whispers. “Corgan understood the risks. This was Rustik’s decision.”

“It doesn’t matter. I still... I feel sick over it. I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“I like that,” he says, shifting closer.

“You like... what?” I stare at him. This man has to be crazier than I realized.

“I like that you care about Corgan. I’m surprised it’s affecting you so much, but I like it.”

“That’s so bizarre.” I rub the bridge of my nose.

“I find it attractive. You still want to save people.”

“You find it attractive that I have basic human emotions?”

“Yes,” he whispers. “Is that strange?”

“Uh, yeah, extremely.”

“You’re still soft. You’re unspoiled.”

“I really don’t like it when you compare me to old milk.”

“You know what I’m saying.” He shifts closer again. There’s not much room between us. I could move, but I don’t. Instead, I relish his heat, the warmth of him. Part of me wants him closer. “My experiences have left me hardened, but it’s nice to have something so... soft in my bed.”

“Now I have a feeling you’re not talking about emotions anymore.”

“I’m talking about my wife.” His hand brushes up my flank in the darkness, moving up the back of my hand, up my arm, toward my cheek. “You’re stressed.”

“Can you blame me?” I lean into his touch. “You’re right. I’m not used to this. When I married you, I was just...”

“Filled with righteous anger. You wanted revenge.”

“I still do.”

“Only reality is much harsher than you pictured.”

“A man’s dead, Liam. An innocent man.”

“Dead, yes. Innocent? I don’t know about that.” He moves closer. Now he’s pressed against me. “What can I do for you?”

“I don’t know.” I close my eyes, breathing fast. “I’m not sure there’s anything you can do.”

“I can do a lot of things, my wife. I am a man of many talents. I’m here in the darkness of our marriage bed, begging you to let me give you what you need. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“I need...” I trail off, turning to look at him. “I don’t know what I need.”

“Let me help.” He leans forward, brushing his lips against my neck. Fuck, that’s so goddamn sexy. The strange pleading, his firm body covered only by a thin t-shirt. “Let me make you feel better.”

This can’t happen.

Sex with this man is only going to make *everything* more complicated.

But on a night like this when I feel like the world is on the edge of tipping over into something awful, I can’t help myself. He’s offering me an escape.

No, he’s offering something better, and I want to take him up on it.

I want *him*.

As terrible as he might be, and as painful as this entanglement might become, I want him.

“Kiss me,” I whisper into the darkness, knowing full well what’s going to happen next and inviting that sweet disaster to take me.

His lips taste like mint and whiskey. I drink him in as he presses me down into the bed, his hands roaming my body, over my breasts, between my legs. I’m whimpering into his mouth, his tongue lapping against mine, my back arching into his muscular chest. My top comes off as his lips find my nipples, sucking and licking them, biting down gently. They’re so stiff it feels like they might crack. My heart’s racing and heat’s pooling between my legs like wildfire.

“I meant it when I said I’d give you anything,” he whispers as he slowly takes off my shorts and my panties. Soon, I’m naked, and he’s in nothing but a pair of boxer-briefs, barely holding back his stiff cock. “Whatever you asked me for, I’d give it to you.” He kisses me, grinding himself between my legs before moving down my body. He tastes me like he can’t help himself.

“What if I told you to stop? Would you stop?”

“Almost anything then.” His mouth lingers on my inner thigh as one finger rolls down my pussy, getting slick. “I can only give you what’s possible.”

“And you couldn’t possibly hold yourself back? I thought you had better self-control.”

“Oh, princess, you think I can control this? No, my sweet wife, when you look at me with those fuck-me eyes and you grind your gorgeous pussy against my body, there’s no way I can stop.”

“Guess you’re not as controlling—” He cuts me off by sliding two fingers deep into my pussy and leaning forward to press his forehead to mine. I curse, moaning as he bites my lower lip, fucking me slowly with those thick fingers. He grabs my hair, kissing me deep.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” he growls into my lips. “Just because you wake something in me doesn’t mean you’re in control here.”

“I’d believe that if you weren’t looking at me like you’re about to lose your mind.”

“It’s only because you look so fucking good.” He moves down again and this time his mouth finds my pussy. I groan, grabbing his hair as his tongue does his lovely work. His fingers slide back into me as he teases my clit with the tip of his tongue. “You taste so fucking good too. I didn’t realize I was marrying a woman capable of breaking all my boundaries, but here we are.”

“You have boundaries? Here I was thinking you’d do just about anything.”

“Oh, no, princess. Far from it.” He sucks my clit, licking me faster. I gasp as pleasure slams into my guts, building in my core. “I don’t let myself get intimate with anyone that matters. It’s easier when things are professional. When we aren’t entangled.”

“We seem pretty tangled right about now.”

“That’s the problem.” He licks me again, fucks me with his fingers again. “You keep making me want this.”

“I’m the one at fault here? You’re the one begging to make me feel good.”

“I want to please my wife. Is that wrong?”

“Says the guy complaining about entanglements.”

He growls his displeasure and takes it out on my pussy. Which I don't mind, frankly, because it feels good as hell. He's incredible with that tongue of his, licking and sucking me, not shy about making these gorgeously obscene noises. My back's arching, and I don't know how much more I can take, before he pulls back and slides off his boxer-briefs.

I get up on my hands and knees. I'm trembling with need as he slides his cock into my mouth, grabbing me by the hair, pushing his shaft between my lips. I moan, tasting his precum, sucking his shaft. Spit rolls down as I go as deep as I can, but he stretches my lips apart and barely fits in my throat.

I pull back, gasping for air as he drags me up and kisses me. “I can't decide what I love more. This filthy mouth or that delicious pussy.”

“You want me to say something like, ‘why decide,’ but I'm not going to.”

“Too late. You already did.” He smirks as he pushes me back and pins me down, spreading my legs.

I struggle slightly, but we both know it's bullshit. He holds my wrists above my head as my legs wrap around his hips. Slowly, his cock presses against my entrance, and I'm breathing hard, sweat rolling down my body, as he fills me with an agonizing thrust that drives me wild, sending twin spears of bliss and pain through my skin.

He purrs as he kisses my neck. We move together, slowly grinding our hips, his cock deep inside. “There you are,” he whispers. “I've been dreaming about this fit.”

“Here I am, dreaming about escape.”

“Don't forget revenge. And the taste of my cock.”

Then he's fucking me faster, and all thoughts of clever quips and comebacks are forgotten in the slick, gorgeous pleasure of him. We fuck like that, lost in the moment, as he fills me over and over, taking me deep, fucking me mercilessly, our bodies writhing and pressing together. I forget about the dead, I forget about the living, and there's only Liam between my legs pushing deeper and deeper, driving me closer to the edge.

He bites my shoulder. “You feel perfect,” he moans in my ear. “You feel like what I’ve always dreamed of. Something good.”

I gasp, back arching. We’re in sync, driving and pushing, and I can’t take much more. He goes deeper, raising my hips slightly, and that little pressure slams a jolt of pure bliss straight down my spine hot enough to burst the orgasm building in my core. I come, legs shaking, but he’s not finished with me. He keeps going, taking me deeper, rolling me onto my belly and fucking me from behind.

He spans my ass and I think of lying in his lap, letting him manhandle me as he grips my hips. He kisses me over my shoulder, one hand in my hair. “Tell me you won’t ever run from me,” he whispers as he fucks me. “Say you won’t ever run from me, my little wife.”

“I won’t,” I gasp, panting, ready to say whatever he wants to hear so long as he keeps fucking me.

“Say you’re mine. Say you’re all mine.”

“I’m yours. I’m your wife. Fuck me, husband.”

He roars, drives harder, and I come for a second time. He moans as he stiffens, and I feel him spill deep between my legs, and together we collapse onto the bed with his arms wrapped around me.

“That was—” I start to say, but I realize I have no words.

“Good,” he supplies with a small smile.

“Better than good.” I stretch with a sigh. “Maybe you were right and I did just need a release.”

“One hell of a release.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

His smile fades slightly. “I won’t.”

I open my mouth to speak again but stop myself. There’s a distant look in his eyes and I’m not sure what it means.

But it doesn’t matter. This is now, and tomorrow is tomorrow. I can worry

about what's going to happen with him when the time comes—but for now, I'll let myself stay in his arms, I'll indulge myself in a little pleasure.

In the coming days and weeks, I suspect there won't be much left.

Chapter 19

Alisa

After that night, we fall into a comfortable rhythm.

Liam's almost never home. There's always a guard on the front door and another lurking in a car out front, but they rarely speak to me. When I go for a run, the car's following as close as it can. I stick to main streets where it's easier for them to keep close tabs.

Orin's always in the house. He's busy, constantly running errands for Liam, but available whenever I need something. Which isn't very often—as it turns out, being Liam's wife in the middle of a war for the marijuana trade on the West Coast is actually kind of boring.

I sleep in most mornings. I don't even notice Liam getting into bed at night, and he sneaks out before I'm up. We run into each other like strangers passing in a darkened alley, wary and uncertain. The memory of that sex still lingers, lighting me up whenever I need something to think about in the loneliness of having nothing to do and nowhere to go, but the intimacy we felt fades away.

“What's he doing all day?” I ask Orin about three weeks into my marriage. By now I've redecorated the house twice, just to have something to do. Currently, it's beach-chic with lots of driftwood and seashell motifs. Still a theme, but not as obscenely over the top.

“Working,” Orin says with a shrug. “Got any threes?”

“Go fish.” He grunts at the card he picks up. “Seriously, what's working?”

When we started this, he made it sound like he needed my expertise.”

“I shouldn’t say.”

I look at my card, barely paying attention to the game. “Got any kings?”

“Rats.” He gives me one.

“But you know, that means he’s doing *something*. Come on, I barely see the guy anymore. What’s going down?”

He hesitates and looks around before leaning in. “He keeps trying to buy the competition, but nobody wants to sell. He’s busy all the time because they keep stringing him along.”

“That’s it? Why don’t you tell him I can help?”

“Tell him yourself. Got any eights?”

I toss one to him. “As if I see the guy.”

“Don’t you share a bed with him?”

“I swear he waits until I’m asleep before he comes home. I think he developed an allergy to me.”

Orin laughs once and shakes his head. “I doubt that. I’ve never seen Liam so interested in a person before. He definitely likes you.”

A strange little thrill runs into my guts. “He *likes me* likes me?” I waggle my eyebrows, grinning.

“Don’t be childish,” Orin says, raising his chin. He lays down four eights. “I’m good at this game.”

“I’m just tired of sitting around, that’s all. Tell Liam his wife is feeling a little lonely and ignored.”

“I’m sure he’ll care.” Orin gives me a look.

I flip him off. “Got any fours?”

“Go fish.”



ANOTHER COUPLE WEEKS PASS. I HAVE AT MOST FIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH Liam in all that time, partially because he travels back to Boston twice. I keep thinking about that first night—not just about the sex, but what he said before it, about getting too close to each other. Part of me thinks that’s why he’s doing this, and it isn’t only because he’s busy. He’s avoiding me on purpose, and I should be okay with it, since I’m aware that getting more attached to him than necessary is a really bad idea.

But I find myself wishing he’d come home earlier, at least so we can talk a little before going to sleep.

When he’s out of the state, security at the house goes through the roof—multiple guards, soldiers all down the block, like he’s expecting a small militia to invade. It makes me feel a little less lonely, since some of the guys are friendly. When I ask Orin about all the muscle, he only shrugs, like he doesn’t know what Liam’s thinking.

Nobody ever seems to know, or at least they won’t tell me.

Things finally change when I wake up feeling queasy one morning. It’s a regular day, and my big plans involve a five-mile run and a ton of online shopping, but I feel off the moment I get out of bed. I head downstairs and Orin frets over me. “Want some breakfast?” he asks.

“Just coffee,” I say, curling up at the table near the window.

Orin frowns. “You okay?”

“Stomach is off. I’ll be fine though.”

“You drank too much?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t had anything to drink in weeks.”

“Huh, that’s right. I forgot you were boring.”

“Hey now, that’s a low blow. I don’t need alcohol to be the life of the party.”

“Sure you don’t.” He comes back with light tan coffee and a dash of sugar.

“Seriously, if you’re not feeling good, go back to bed.”

“Not like I have anything else to do,” I mumble.

Orin pats my shoulder and goes back to doing whatever the heck he does when he’s not making pithy comments at my expense and getting me things.

It takes a few hours before I realize my period’s a week late.

And another half hour before I connect the two things.

Which sets me into panic mode.

I lock myself in the games room and pace back and forth, rolling pool balls down the felt and back again, slamming them around. All the motion and clacking helps me process as I try to do the math, thinking about the last times I had sex with Liam.

We didn’t use protection, which in retrospect is probably the stupidest thing I could’ve ever done with my life, but there’s no changing it now.

I try to tell myself everything’s going to be just fine, except it’s not.

I grab my things, throw on a pair of big sunglasses, and head to the front door.

Only to be intercepted by Orin. “Where are you going looking like you’re trying to hide?” he asks as I pause with my hand on the knob.

“Out,” I say, lifting my chin. “Uh—”

His frown deepens. “If you have any errands you need me to run, I’d be happy to do it for you.”

“No, no, that’s not it, it’s just—”

“Because you know Liam wants you to stay in the house as much as possible.”

“It’d be nice if *he* told me that.”

“Come on. He’s away in Boston, which means a ton of extra manpower watching over you. Which means if you go anywhere, that’s a ton of extra

guys on your tail. That's more overtime, more payroll—"

"I get it, I need to worry about paying his soldiers just so I can go out and buy some freaking tampons."

Orin softens. "If that's what you need, it's no problem. I have two sisters."

"Really?" I grimace slightly. "But that's not really it. My period's late."

I regret it immediately. I should've kept that stupid comment to myself, but I just blurted it out instead. Orin stares at me like he doesn't really understand yet, then suddenly it visibly clicks. He covers his mouth with both hands as his eyes go wide.

"No," he whispers. "You're not."

"Will you stop it?" I get away from the door, cursing myself for being such an idiot, and steer him into a side hallway. "Be quiet, okay? I don't know if I am or not. I need some tests."

"Alisa, this is crazy! You haven't, uh, you know—"

I punch him in the arm. Hard. "Don't be a massive fucking dick right now. No, I haven't slept with anyone else."

"Okay, okay, geez." He rubs the spot I punched, but doesn't seem upset. He must actually have sisters. "I'll get you some tests. Discreetly."

"Thank you." I'm totally mortified, but kind of relieved that Orin's in on the secret now. Before it was like the weight of all this was crushing me. Now I can share it with him a little bit.

"I'll be back in a little while. You just, uh, wait."

"And try not to like smoke crack or something? Yeah, I can handle that."

He looks a little aggrieved as he hurries away.

I wait out back in the shade for him to return. It's the longest half hour of my life—I keep thinking about what I'm going to do if I'm actually pregnant with Liam's baby. Obviously, I can't have it. But I also don't want to get an abortion. Keeping the baby is out of the question, but *not* keeping the baby is even worse. It's like I'm being crushed by a slowly closing trash compactor

with two equally horrific decisions on either side, and no matter which way I choose to turn I'll be crushed into pulp.

Orin returns with the tests. "I'll sit with you," he says.

"Uh, no, you won't. I have to pee on them, remember?"

He hesitates. "Right. Good point. I'll be down here, waiting."

I grab the bag and hurry up to the bathroom.

Four big glasses of water and four tests later, I have my results.

Chapter 20

Alisa

“**A** lisa, you’ve been hiding in there for two *hours*,” Orin hisses through my bedroom door. “Open up and talk to me. I’m freaking out!”

I almost feel bad for him. I really do. Except I’m also freaking out and I have a really good reason for it.

The tests sit on the edge of the tub. I can see the little blue marks through the doorway.

All four are positive.

And I’m spiraling into panic mode.

No, I’m hurtling past panic into something worse.

I’m firmly into desperation territory.

“*Alisa!* I can hear you walking around. Will you just talk to me, please?”

I don’t respond. Even though Orin’s my only friend here, I’m also very aware that he’s Liam’s personal assistant, and ultimately his loyalty is with the Crowley family.

My life is over. When Liam finds out about this baby, he’s going to freak. The guy’s been avoiding me like the plague for weeks now, and when he realizes that he’s stuck with me, that I’ve trapped him into this marriage with a baby, I’m terrified of what he’ll do.

I don't know who I can turn to for help. I have friends, but I've been keeping them at arm's length for the last month, making up excuse after excuse for why I can't hang out. I'm already pushing them away, but that's for their own good. I don't want to get anyone involved in this mess.

Which leaves me with nothing. I don't know a single person that's aware of my situation and who knows Liam and Rustik, or at least is aware of what they can do.

I'm trapped in this house at the mercy of my husband.

At least until I realize there's one person I can call.

It's a huge mistake. I know it the second I huddle in the shower with my phone pressed to my ear, getting as far from the door as I can to be sure Orin won't overhear. If I weren't so desperate and terrified, I would never, *ever* make this call, but I don't see how I have any other choice.

"Hello? Alisa?"

"Papa." I say the name and feel so small and defenseless, like a little girl again.

"Are you okay?" He sounds relieved. I halfway expected him not to answer. We didn't exactly leave things in a good place the last time we spoke in that cafe.

"I'm okay. I mean, I think I'm okay. I just—can we meet up and talk?"

He pauses and I hear him let out a long breath. "Yes, of course we can. Where are you?"

"I'm at Liam's place. I can meet you at the same cafe like last time?"

He grunts his assent. "When?"

"An hour. Can you meet me?"

"I'll be there. But are you safe? Is he hurting you?"

"No," I say quickly. "It's not like that. Just meet me at the cafe." I hang up the phone.

This is a mistake. But I pull on my running clothes anyway, still trying to think of someone that could possibly help me. Papa is the only one short of Rustik, and I'd never turn to that psychopath for anything. I don't care how desperate I feel, Rustik murdered my sister.

I push past Orin as I storm out of the bedroom.

"Well?" he asks, keeping pace, practically fluttering around me like a moth. "What did it say?"

"I'm going for a run."

"A run? Alisa, are you insane? Liam's away and you might be—" He snaps his mouth shut when I stare at him. "A run's a bad idea. What did the tests say?"

"I'll be back in a little while, okay?"

"Alisa!"

I shove the front door open and hop down the stoop. I halfway expect Orin to chase after me, but instead I sprint off, heading in the opposite direction of where I need to go.

Losing the cars isn't that hard. They tend to circle around me since they can't crawl along at my pace. I wait for them to get out of sight before ducking into a shoe store. I wait a while, sprint a few blocks, duck into a stationary store, wait a little while, and repeat that for a half hour. Then I double back, take alleys and side streets, before finally reaching the cafe right on time.

Papa's sitting up front near the windows this time. He looks skinny and haggard, but more or less healthy as I head inside, feeling like a sweaty mess. He gives me a quick hug, which I don't feel great about, and ushers me to a seat.

"I was very surprised when you called," he says. "You sounded like you're in trouble."

"That's not it," I say, trying to find a way to break the news, but now that I'm sitting across from him in this cafe all over again, I find I can't make myself speak the words. "I've just been thinking about things."

“About what?” he asks, glancing at the door. He seems nervous. Slightly agitated.

“When you learned that you were going to be a father, how did you feel?”

He looks surprised by the question and sits still for a moment. His face goes distant as he recalls the past, and he shrugs. “It was the happiest day of my life. Your mother and I had been trying for a while, and when Liliya came along—” He stops himself. Papa rarely ever talks about Mama. She died when I was only seven from breast cancer that spread into her lungs. He was a mess after it happened. I have a distinct memory of him sitting on her side of the bed, weeping into her pillow.

“You were a good father,” I tell him, which is true. He was a good father. Attentive, dutiful, mostly kind. He could be strict and impatient, but he made sure we knew he loved us. “What happened?”

He stares down at his hands. “Nothing changed.”

“Something did. You made Liliya marry Rustik. The Papa we grew up with never would’ve done something like that. Looking back, I can almost remember the day you came home and were different.”

His expression hardens. “You wouldn’t understand. Liliya was difficult, but she accepted the arrangement.”

“Why?” I press. “Why didn’t she fight it? Why didn’t she run away? I don’t remember her saying much, only that arranged marriages happen all the time. She was optimistic it could work out. Why did she do it?” My sister was never the sentimental type, but I’ve still always wondered why she went through with the marriage, and now that I’m sitting here with a baby growing in me, I feel like I need answers more than ever.

“She did it to help me,” he admits, sounding morose. But it hits me like a truck.

“What do you mean, to help you?”

Papa wilts slightly. He stares at his hands. I don’t know why he’s telling me this now, after everything. Maybe it’s because I made him remember that he actually used to love me and Liliya, once upon a time.

“I owe Rustik a lot of money.” His voice comes out soft. Shame drips off him like wilting flower petals. “There were some bad business decisions. When I purchased CashOut Limited, I did it with borrowed money.”

My eyebrows raise. CashOut was a small vaping company that specialized in marijuana equipment. Turns out, their technology was trash, and the purchase was a terrible loss. Papa’s company survived it, but barely. I remember how stressful that was for him, and it happened only a couple years before Liliya married Rustik.

“That’s why?” I ask, leaning back in my chair. “She did it to pay your debts?”

“Yes,” he says, unable to look me in the eye. “She understood what it would mean to me. And to you. She kept saying you were the future of the business, and if she took care of it, she’d be taking care of you.”

I blink at him rapidly. Tears form in my throat. Liliya married Rustik for me? To pay off the company’s debts? She never said anything about it, only kept insisting that Rustik was an acceptable match.

But now it made so much more sense. She wasn’t marrying Rustik because she wanted to be a Bratva wife; she did it to help her family.

That was Liliya, always putting others first, always sacrificing.

Anger swells in me. I lean forward, glaring at my father. “How could you let her do that?”

“I didn’t know what would happen,” he says, glaring back. “It made sense at the time. Rustik wanted our families to move closer together, to bring the whole supply chain in sync, and erasing my debt was a beneficial side product of the match. I had no clue—”

“You should have.” All of a sudden, I remember why I’ve been so angry with Papa. My pregnancy is forgotten, or at least diminished, as my anger flares up again. “You knew what Rustik was and you got involved with him anyway. Then you let your daughter clean up your mess. You sold Liliya. You got her killed.”

“I made a match,” he says through his teeth. “I didn’t have any idea—” But

he stops talking abruptly. His face goes pale as he stares over my shoulder toward the door.

I want to scream at him. I want to punch him in the face. How could he do that to Liliya? It's so much worse than I ever pictured. The selfish bastard—he made the match, and he did it for *money*.

A hand squeezes my shoulder, and a cold jolt of fear runs down my spine.

I look back, expecting Rustik.

Instead, Liam stands by my side, staring at my father.

“Alisa,” Liam says softly. “We’re leaving.”

“Liam. I thought—”

“I came home early.” He glances at me. “Get up. We’re going.”

I slowly rise to my feet.

Papa doesn't move. He looks horrified. “Liam. My daughter. She called, and I just—”

“If you say one more word, I'll have your ankles broken.”

Papa's mouth shuts with a click.

I move away from the table. Liam steers me to the door. I move like I'm dragging myself underwater, digging my feet into the silty bottom of the ocean. Once we're outside, his grip on my arm tightens, and his lips move closer to my ear.

“You should've hidden the tests.”

Chapter 21

Alisa

There they are, the pregnancy tests, lined up on the kitchen island like sandbags stacked against a storm. Except this time, the hurricane is Liam, and I'm the poor beach about to get battered.

He paces across the living room, hands behind his back. He won't look at me, and I'm terrified of what he's thinking. I didn't ask for this pregnancy—if I could go back, I'd make him put on a stupid condom. Better yet, I'd never sleep with him to begin with.

I can't change what happened. I'm carrying his baby, and even if this was never a part of our agreement, I'm keeping this child.

Liam isn't the father type. He's made that obvious.

Anything that restricts his freedom has to be annihilated.

He's the sort of man that would rather run away than risk getting tethered in one place, even if it means turning his back on his family.

Only he's caught in this war and there's no way he could escape now.

Which means he's going to force me to make the most horrible decision imaginable.

And when I refuse? I'm terrified of what he's going to do.

He continues to pace. I can't handle this silence anymore. I feel like I'm going to explode, like I'm going to crack into a thousand pieces.

“Say something.”

He still doesn't look over. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I don't know,” I admit. “Will you just stop it and talk to me?”

“Like you talked to your father behind my back?”

“Yes, Liam, I talked to my father. Mostly I grilled him about Liliya, and I found out that he owes Rustik money. That's why my sister married that asshole to being with.”

Liam pauses. “Interesting,” he says, looking thoughtful for half a second, then restarts his pacing. “But that doesn't change anything.”

“What do you think was going on in that I?”

“I don't know, but your father is the enemy now. I assumed you understood that.”

“I'm desperate, okay?” I throw up my hands. “You acting like a caged freaking animal isn't helping anything.”

He lets out an annoyed breath, but at least he stops moving. “What would you prefer?”

“I don't know, maybe a civil conversation? You are a human being in there, aren't you?”

“Mostly.”

“Then act like one. Talk to me.” I'm pleading with him. I hate it, but I need him to tell me what he's thinking.

“You're pregnant.” He finally meets my gaze. His gray-blue eyes are striking, how cool they are, how frozen. “When did you find out?”

“This morning.”

“Why did you reach out to your father?”

“I was panicking. I got the positive pregnancy tests and I needed to talk to someone. Papa's the only person already involved in this mess, so I figured I

couldn't make things worse for him by telling him."

"Does he know?" Liam steps forward. His sudden intensity scares me, and I move back.

"No," I say quickly. "I didn't end up saying anything. We got into talking about my sister and I just—I didn't want to tell him anymore."

He deflates slightly. "Good. That's good."

"I didn't want this," I say as if he could possibly understand how I'm feeling. "You and me? I didn't want any of it. And this baby—" I stop, choking the words back.

His head shakes slowly. "It doesn't matter what you wanted. All that matters is the truth."

"Okay, you want the truth? I'm pregnant. It's your baby. And I'm scared. How's that? I'm scared of my fucking husband because he's acting like a freak instead of a sympathetic person."

Liam's jaw twitches. "If you wanted *sympathetic*, you never should have married me."

"God, you're unbelievable. I'm outright telling you that I need some basic human decency from you and instead you're just telling me to fuck off?"

"I am what I am," he says, his voice a low growl. "I am not going to change."

"Then what do I do? This baby is happening. I can't stop it any more than you can."

He doesn't speak for a moment. I want to start crying, but I refuse to give him that satisfaction. I keep my chin up, meeting his stare with my own hard gaze, summoning every bit of strength I have at my reserve. I'm strong, or at least I'm stubborn as hell, and I will fight him tooth and nail before I let him bully me into getting rid of my child.

"Who said I wanted to stop it?"

I open my mouth to tell him off—but stop. "Excuse me, what?"

"I never said I wanted to stop this baby from coming." His heads cocks like a

predatory bird. “Did you think I was going to ask you to have an abortion?”

“I don’t—I figured you might—” I shake my head, at a loss. “You mean, you’re not?”

He takes a long, visibly rage-filled breath, and slowly lets it out. His eyes pinch shut, and he rubs the spot between his eyes for a few seconds before gathering himself.

“You must have the lowest opinion possible of me.”

“I just—you don’t want this baby. I mean, we’re not really together, and you do realize what a child’s going to mean? It’s late-night feedings, it’s spit-ups, changing diapers, all that stuff. It’s a lifelong responsibility. You don’t strike me as the kind of man that wants anything resembling a traditional family.”

“Nobody said anything about traditional. I’m a Crowley, princess. We’ll have a fleet of nannies, night nurses, pediatricians, and whatever else we need.”

I let out a confused laugh, unable to help it. “We will? What are you even talking about? This relationship has an expiration date. We’re not actually married. Remember?”

He takes me in for several long, tense moments. I don’t know what he’s thinking, but I’m totally thrown off. This isn’t anywhere *near* how I assumed this conversation would go.

I figured he’d be yelling at me by now. Maybe even his thugs would be dragging me off to the nearest clinic to have this little *problem* taken care of. Instead, he looks annoyed that I’d even suggest such a thing.

The man’s a killer. He’s a mobster with a violent, bloody past—why would I ever think he’d want a baby in his life?

“I understand the nature of our relationship,” he replies, his tone sounding strained. “But things have changed. There’s a new complication.”

I laugh again, sharply. “Complication? No kidding.”

“The Crowley family is a lot of things, my princess. We are violent. We are ruthless. We are power hungry and we will do anything to further our interests.”

“Great, you’re really selling me on family life.”

“I’m not finished.” He steps closer, staring into my eyes with a sudden, heart-stopping intensity. “But above all, we’re dedicated to each other. My brothers, their wives, their children. No matter what, we take care of our own, and for better or worse, you’re one of us now.”

I blink, shaking my head. “No, no, that’s not right. I mean, we’re fake married, but—”

“It’s the marriage. It’s you in my wedding bed. But most of all, it’s my baby in your belly.”

“Liam, this is nuts.” I stride away, trying to come to grips with what he’s saying. “Do you actually want me to keep this baby?”

“We take care of our own,” he says again, watching me. “I never imagined I’d be a father. I still find the idea hard to swallow. But now that it’s happening, I will not stop it.”

“Great, wonderful, so my husband and the father of my baby won’t *stop it*, that’s what every girl wants to hear.” I know I’m being irrational. Ten minutes ago, I was convinced Liam was about to dangle me out a window. Now I’m annoyed he’s not sufficiently effusive about my pregnancy.

It’s just I’m having a lot of trouble keeping up with this conversation. I’m updating my assumptions on the fly, but it’s like everything I thought I understood about Liam is suddenly worthless.

And thinking back, I can understand why.

He’s cold, yes, but there’s also a fire inside of him that only comes out when he’s at his most vulnerable. Alone with me, in my arms, in between my legs, it’s like he’s a different man. I catch a glimpse of the Liam lurking beneath his frozen, heartless exterior, and while I won’t pretend like he’s some cuddly teddy bear, at least there’s a sense that he feels, that he needs, that he yearns for something more than himself, that he wants human companionship.

Now I’m trying assimilate that Liam with the man standing before me, and I’m beginning to understand that they’re one and the same.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t like what I’m saying.” He crosses his arms as if he just came to a decision. “From here on out, our contract is null and void.”

I throw my hands up. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“All the promises, all the legally binding stipulations, it’s all finished. Forget about the contract. Forget about what you thought this relationship was going to be.”

“Liam,” I say through my teeth. “We had a deal.”

“Fuck the deal. My wife’s pregnant. That’s all I care about now.”

I back away until I bump into the wall, but he remains across the room. “You can’t do this.”

“I can. I’m a Crowley, remember? You are my wife, you’re carrying my child, and I am not letting you go when this war is over. You are *mine* now, just like that baby is mine.”

I flex my jaw, trying to find words, and coming up short. All I can think is a blindingly white-hot anger as it burns into my core. How dare this guy act like he can own me now? How dare he ignore me for weeks, disappear all day long, barely speak to me, then act as though I’m his property?

“That is *not* how this is going to work.”

“From now on, forevermore, you are all mine, whether you like it or not.”

Chapter 22

Alisa

I move out of our bedroom. By now, the purple sheets are gone, replaced by muted grays.

Instead, I gather all my stuff and ferry it all into a guest room.

“Liam’s not going to like this,” Orin says, fretting the whole time as he helps.

“I don’t give a shit what that controlling dickhead likes or doesn’t like.”

“I take it your conversation didn’t go great?”

“Gee, what gave you that impression? Me moving from our room, or maybe the way I keep telling you what a piece of shit he is?”

“Both, mostly.” He sighs as he puts my toiletries in the bathroom. “He means well. You realize that, right?”

“I don’t care what he means.” I sit on the edge of the bed, feeling more scared and alone than I’ve ever felt before. “He’s not the pregnant one. All he gets to do is make big proclamations while I have to actually, you know, go through with all these changes.”

Orin lingers near the doorway, looking uncomfortable. “Look, uh, I don’t know anything about being a pregnant woman, but—”

I grimace, holding up a hand. “*Please* don’t start giving me advice.”

“I was just going to say, I can help find you a good OB/GYN. One that’ll make house calls.”

I soften a bit. “Thanks. Yeah. I mean, I guess, yeah, I should do that.”

“I know you’re afraid. I can’t imagine what you feel, but I can guess that much. I just want you to know that I’ll do whatever I can to help make this process as easy as it can be.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I pause for a second. “Can you maybe make Liam less of a bastard?”

“Sweetie, no god in heaven could pull off a miracle like that.” He shakes his head as he leaves.

Liam doesn’t come for me that night. I think of him while alone in my big bed, surrounded by a bunch of seashells and anchors—I kept the beach theme in this room for whatever reason—and some stupid voice in my head wishes he’d crawl under these blankets with me and wrap his arms around my body.

Not that I really crave him, but more that I could use some human comfort at my lowest.

I wonder if this is how Liliya felt. Alone, trapped in a marriage to a man she didn’t love, afraid she’d never escape, no longer in control of her own life. I can’t stop thinking about my poor sister and those last days, about the drugs she took, about climbing into that bathtub. Did she know she was going to die before she got in? Or did she feel tired and slip under? Did Rustik force them on her, or did he trick her into swallowing them?

I get up early the next morning, exhausted. I barely got any sleep. Too many thoughts swirl in my head, fighting for dominance. I put on running clothes, tighten my shoes, and head downstairs ready to get in a few miles. I need to release some of this stress or I’m going to explode.

But the moment I go near the door, Orin’s there, blocking my way.

“Morning,” he says, sounding cheery. “How are you feeling? Do you want some toast? Coffee? We’ll go easy on the caffeine now that you’re pregnant. I made half-caff today. Want some?”

“No, thanks. I’m going for a run.” I reach out for the knob, but he doesn’t move. “Where the hell do you sleep?”

“In a room in the basement,” he says quickly. “Sorry, hold on, I can’t let you do that.”

“You sleep—” I shake my head in confusion. “Wait, you’re not letting me leave?”

“Sorry. Liam left strict orders. Now that you’re pregnant, it’s back to lockdown for the foreseeable future.”

My hands curl into fists. “Orin. If you value your life, you will move.”

“While you’re terrifying, I can’t do that.” I groan as Orin flicks the top bolt and slams it closed. “Sorry,” he says, looking sheepish. “I like you a lot, Alisa, but you don’t pay my salary.”

“You’re really going to keep me locked up in here for *money*?”

“I have a sick grandmom!”

I give him a steady glare. “Don’t you *dare* make up some sick grandmom. Are you lying to me right now?”

He rubs the back of his neck, glancing away. “Well, she’s not sick, but she’s in a retirement home.”

“Orin! Do you pay her bills?”

“Uh, I mean, well, no, but—”

“You’re unbelievable! You’re choosing money over a person!” I throw up my hands. “You seriously think he can keep me locked up in this house for nine freaking months?”

“I’m choosing loyalty to the Crowley family,” he says, looking miserable. “Also, I didn’t go to college. Do you really think I can get a decent job in this economy without an advanced degree? It won’t be all nine months. I’m sure he’ll working something out. Liam can be very reasonable.”

“Reasonable is not the word I’d use to describe that man. Try: douchebag. Try: asshole. Try: motherfucking piece of shit.”

“That was more than one word.”

“Orin! I’m going to kick you in the face!”

“I’d be very impressed if you pulled that little maneuver off.” He sighs and gestures into the house. “Come on, I made you breakfast. You can work out in the gym for now and later today you can talk to Liam.”

I shove my finger in his face. “I swear, if that coffee sucks, I’m going to freak out.”

“It’s really good,” he says brightly. “Spent half the night finding a solid roaster that does half-caff. You’re gonna love it.”

“I better.” I storm to the kitchen, already thinking about escape.

Chapter 23

Alisa

I have no choice but to pound the treadmill for an hour.

Escape isn't a real option. I might be able to send Orin out on some wild-goose chase errand to keep him busy, but the moment I step out of the house, I'll be swarmed by one of the dozen men Liam has guarding the place.

I can see his goons lingering on the sidewalk outside.

People give our house a wide berth.

They're even in the back yard, keeping an eye on the garden.

If I slip out a window, or sneak through a door, those goons will drag me back inside before I can get more than a few feet.

Although I can make a lot of noise. We're in a popular, crowded city area, which means a screaming girl's going to draw a ton of attention.

Liam definitely doesn't want that.

But it's not like I know where Liam's at. I could call him, but that's not enough. I could ask Orin, but I'm kind of sick of Orin right now, and anyway, I'm not sure he'd tell me. Liam's mysterious office is somewhere in downtown Portland, but beyond that, I've got no clue.

Which means I'm forced to wait.

Patience is not one of my virtues. Actually, if I'm being honest with myself, I'm not sure I *have* any virtues. But hey, I've got a ton of stubbornness,

which is just as good.

I run, and I plan, and I think about all the ways I can get out of this terrible situation without ending up dead.

Liam shows up around ten at night, right around when I'm ready to give up and go to sleep.

I hear the front door close. Muffled voices drift up the stairs. I wait for him in our former bedroom, my legs crossed. Seething with rage, but keeping it contained. Losing my temper won't do any good.

He appears in the doorway and looks surprised to see me. "Did you decide to come back to bed?" he asks. "I had a feeling you wouldn't stay away for long."

I stand, crossing my arms. He's in slacks and a button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up, while I'm in sweats. I figure the baggy outfit is like armor against his stupid piercing sexiness.

"I want my freedom back," I say, which is like an ant asking a mountain to move, but it's a good start.

"Ah, we're having this conversation." He tosses his jacket onto the chair in the corner. "Can we wait until after I've showered?"

"No, we can't, and don't dismiss how I'm feeling like I'm some sort of annoying, unruly child."

"You're right. I shouldn't do that. But I'm going to anyway." He heads for the bathroom.

Yep, there's the good old anger again. I leap in front of him, holding out my hands. He stops just before my fingertips jab into his chest. "If you go into that bathroom, I swear I'll run all the hot water in this place and smoke you out of there."

His eyebrows raise. "That's diabolical. But why not just dump ice water over the glass?"

"Great suggestion. I'll do that instead."

“Be reasonable, Alisa.”

“I could say the same thing to you! Actually, that’s exactly what I’m doing. *You* be reasonable. You can’t seriously expect me to stay hidden all day.”

He cocks his head. “You’re my pregnant wife and I’m in the middle of a war. You think I’m going to let you go anywhere near danger?”

“You seemed fine with it before.”

“You weren’t pregnant before.”

“Actually, I was. We just didn’t know about it until now.”

“And now that I know, I can’t act as if I don’t. You are precious to me. You and that baby—”

“No,” I say, shaking my head rapidly. “No, no, no, don’t do that. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Hear what?” he asks, his calm exterior cracking slightly. Exasperation shows through.

“This whole precious crap. I am *not* precious to you. We barely know each other! We’re supposed to be working as a team to hurt Rustik and that’s it, end of relationship. You can’t spring this whole *precious* thing on me out of nowhere. It’s absurd.”

“You think I don’t know you?” he asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

“Where did I go to high school?”

“Carl Sandberg.”

I frown slightly. “Okay, that’s correct. Lucky guess. Where did I go to college?”

“The University of Portland where you earned a degree in Business Economics and went on to achieve an MBA.”

“Fine, that’s right, but—”

“Go ahead, ask me anything you want. Your favorite color is green. You

loathe purple which is why you draped it all over our room. You're loving and gentle, but you have an angry streak wider than the Amazon river. You like The Beatles, think the Rolling Stones would be better without Mick Jagger, and you're a Swiftie but also hate the term *Swiftie*. You like that god-awful show *Supernatural* because you think that Jensen actor has beautiful eyelashes. You kept a LiveJournal for years longer than it was cool. Now you update your Tumblr almost every day. You're obsessed with dark academia. You like crystals, but not in a witchy, new age sort of way, you just think they're pretty. How am I doing so far?"

I stare at him, my mouth hanging open. Because everything he's saying is absolutely true.

And I don't understand how he knows any of it.

We've barely spoken about ourselves. I mean, there was some idle chatter, some post-sex pillow talk about ourselves, but I don't remember saying any of that.

He barely asks me questions. Most of the time, he acts like I don't exist. And now to find out that he's been paying that close attention, it's like I've tumbled off a cliff, and I'm still spinning mid-air.

"*Supernatural* isn't *that* bad," I whisper.

"Here's what you don't understand," he says, moving closer to me until my fingers brush against his muscular abdomen. "It's all here, all deep in here." He moves my hand up until it's touching his chest. "I don't show it. I don't let it out. But I'm holding it all inside, and it's always there."

"What is?" I manage.

"How much I care."

His words feel like fireworks blowing up in my skull. How much Liam Crowley cares? I didn't know he was capable of that emotion. I always assumed Liam drifted through the world, bending it to his iron will, not giving a damn about anything around him so long as he got what he wanted. I figured I'm a useful little asset, but nothing more. Something to be discarded.

But he knows me. He feels me.

“Since when?” I ask, trying to understand.

“At first, I was intrigued by you.” He tightens his grip on my wrist, pressing my hand tighter against his chest. “You fascinated me. I desired you in a way I shouldn’t have. Then I wanted more, but that was dangerous. Instead of letting myself be around you, instead of indulging my weakness for you, I studied you instead from afar. I kept my distance, but I also fell deeper.”

“Studied me?” I lift my chin. “Like a test in school?”

“Like an obsession.”

“You researched me. You learned about me. But why?”

“Because it was like taking methadone for a heroin addiction. It eased the desire. It didn’t replace the need—it wouldn’t replace the pure *want* I felt—but it took the edge away. Made my days manageable.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“To help you understand.” He raises my hand up to his cheek. I hold it there for only a moment before pulling away. He doesn’t try to stop me. “When I say that you are mine, I mean that you are mine.”

“This is too much.” I push past him, feeling trapped, and head to the door. He lets me go, doesn’t try to stop me. “You’re telling me that all this time you’ve been feeling this way, and you never said anything to me?”

“I know this may be hard for you to understand, but I keep my promises. I swore to you that you’d get your revenge, and when this was all over, you could leave me. If I had let myself taste further, keep tasting you, keep having you—” He stops, but he doesn’t need to keep talking.

It would’ve been feeding the addiction. Sooner or later, he would’ve gotten so deeply attached that he never would’ve been able to let me go. Or at least that was his fear.

It’s crazy. I can’t picture it. Yes, Liam’s intense, and yes, the couple times we slept together was great. But he’s been ignoring me for weeks, acting like I don’t exist.

Can I really believe this explanation?

“I need to think,” I say, rubbing my face. “I don’t know what to feel right now.”

“You don’t have to feel anything,” he says, his voice gentle. “You’re my wife now. You’re carrying my first child. You’re a Crowley. That’s all.”

“I never agreed to that.”

“And it doesn’t matter what you agreed to. Not anymore.” He turns to the bathroom. “Now, I’m going to shower. If my wife wants to be in my bed waiting for when I get out, that would please me.”

I let out an ugly laugh. “You think I care about *pleasing* you right now? You just told me you’re like obsessed with me, and also that I’m trapped with you. Kind of still processing here.”

He shrugs slightly. “I can wait if that’s what it takes.”

“I want my contract back. I want our old deal.”

“The old deal is gone. If you want to be in our bed—”

“Your bed. I’m sleeping in the other room.”

He tilts his head. “You keep on making the wrong choice.”

“Oh, go to hell, you arrogant bastard.” I let my temper flare up again and immediately regret it, but Liam doesn’t seem to mind. I turn and storm out, heading back to the guest room and leaving him alone.

Liam says he’s obsessed. He says it’s like a drug. He kept his distance so that he didn’t make things worse—all with the idea that he’d let me go once our deal was done.

But now that deal’s finished.

What does that mean for me?

Once I’m alone, and my anger slowly fades, it’s replaced with a helplessness I’ve never experienced before.

Rustik was bad, but at least I knew what I was getting into with him.

Liam's totally different.

I have no clue what that man's thinking. Cold one second, burning hot the next.

It's like he's doing this on purpose, trying to keep me off balance.

But I know one thing: no matter what, I'm not giving up on Liliya. I'm not letting go of my revenge, even if Liam's talking like he's going to keep me forever.

I only have to figure out how I'll convince Liam to let me help.

Chapter 24

Liam

I step out of my empty bedroom wearing my normal business suit. It's barely past five in the morning. Alisa tends to sleep past eight. I move downstairs quietly and head toward the kitchen. Orin will have some coffee and toast ready for me, then I'll take my car to the office—

“Good morning, husband. What time do you usually head out?”

I stop in the kitchen door and stare.

Alisa's sitting at the island. She's in a black pantsuit and black heels, her legs crossed, coffee and cereal in front of her. A paper's open and halfway folded to the business section.

I look over at Orin, who shrugs helplessly.

“I'm leaving shortly.” I walk to the island and accept my breakfast. Usually, I'd eat in the car. Instead, I stare at my wife.

She puts down the paper. “Good. I'm ready when you are.”

“I think you might be confused. Did our conversation last night give you the impression that you'd be joining me today?”

“No,” she says, snapping the paper. “But I decided that you need my help.”

I take that in. I see what she's doing, and I don't like it. “You aren't needed today.”

“That's the wrong answer, buddy.” She hops to her feet. “I'm coming with

you to the office.”

“Alisa—”

“You want me to be safe, right? You can protect me yourself if you let me tag along. What’s safer than right next to you?”

I work my jaw. “Here, in this secure house, surrounded by a dozen men. That’s much safer. I’m a target.”

“And I am too, especially when I repeatedly try to escape.”

“You wouldn’t be so self-destructive.”

“I will,” she says, giving me a seductive smile. I should be pissed, but I like this aspect of her. This stubborn, confident side, the businesswoman, the take-no-bullshit, kill-all-enemies warrior. “Unless you let me come and work by your side, I’ll make it so that you have no other choice. I’m pregnant with your child, so I doubt you’ll lock me up in some basement dungeon.”

I cock my head. “Are you sure I wouldn’t?”

She glances at Orin and clears her throat. “Yes. I am.”

I let the silence fill the room. I let her picture all manner of uncomfortable positions I could force her into. Chains, shackles, ropes, bars on the windows, big metal steel doors—

But she’s right.

I wouldn’t do any of that to my pregnant wife.

There are ways I could punish her that wouldn’t endanger the baby—but none of those ways are a powerful deterrent.

It’s an unfortunate position. She’s right that it will be bad if she keeps trying to escape. It’ll draw unwanted attention to the house, and she might actually succeed one of these days. I don’t know how closely her father and Rustik are watching this place, and I don’t want to find out.

My main goal, from here until forever, is to keep her safe and take care of our child.

Which includes winning this war as quickly and as bloodlessly as possible.

“There has been violence.” I let the words slide from my tongue. Her eyes widen. “I haven’t told you. I’ve shielded you from the worst of it. But Rustik did not stop with Corgan.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She’s talking too fast. I don’t believe her at all.

“But it does. You think he’d spare you? He’d revel in killing my wife.”

“He’d kill me here, or right out front, or down the block. I’ll give him the chance, too.”

I try not to smile. I believe she really would.

It’s foolish, of course.

She’s threatening to risk her own life, and for what?

But it’s also what I admire about her.

She has one single weapon to use against me, and that’s the baby.

“There are dead on both sides now,” I say, trying to scare sense into her with the truth. “Grudges are forming. There will be more blood. Do you really want to be a part of that?”

“I can help.” She doesn’t sound so sure anymore. For all her bluster, Alisa is not a killer. “I helped run my father’s business for years. Let me help you now. Let me be useful, Liam. Please.”

It’s a strong pitch.

And I know she could help, genuinely help. I’ve been avoiding using her to this point, mainly because I don’t want to incriminate her now that serious violence is brewing.

But if she really wants this, I can use her.

After a long pause, I finally nod my assent. “You can join me.”

She claps, looking delighted. “Great. I’ll grab my bag.”

“But not because of this little blackmail. I’ll let you join me because it means

getting closer to you. Spending more time with you. Feeding my need.”

She pales. “I don’t really love that.”

“Too bad, princess. Orin, call for my car, and tell the men we’ll need extra muscle at the office. My wife will be joining me.”

“Right away, sir.” Orin hurries from the room.

I smile, already looking forward to this. “We’ll have fun.”

But Alisa’s clearly regretting her decision. “I doubt it,” she says, and follows me outside.

Chapter 25

Alisa

Liam makes me do paperwork.

We reach his office that morning, and the place is crawling with thugs. Guys in dark suits roam the halls, not even pretending to be anything other than armed guards. They treat me very respectfully as Liam dumps me in an office next to the conference room where he works, but I can tell they're keeping a close eye on me.

"Permits," Liam says about ten minutes after we arrive. "Make sure they're correct."

"Permits for what?"

"New locations. We're expanding." He turns to leave.

"Hold on." I jump to my feet, gesturing at the pathetic room. "There's barely any furniture in here."

"This is the only office with a desk." His jawline twitches. It's obvious he's annoyed.

"How in the world are you running a business from here?"

"It isn't difficult."

I roll my eyes, making an annoyed gesture around me. "Liam. This office looks like a freaking hostage situation."

"And?" He cocks his head as if he doesn't understand.

“Businesses are about perception.”

“I thought they were about selling things.”

His smug little grin pisses me off. “We both know that’s part of it, but there’s way more to selling things than just... making stuff available. You need to create an image.”

“Are you trying to brand my company, little wife?”

“I’m trying to make it so anyone you bring in here for a prospective meeting isn’t scared shitless. Liam, you realize people know who you are, right? They know your reputation. You should be doing everything you can to downplay it.”

He hesitates, clearly considering. “That’s not a terrible point.”

“You want potential partners to come in here, look around, and be amazed at how professional and put together the place looks. Even if it’s all bullshit. Get your goons to carry around folders. Put a few at desks, if only for when you have guests. Hire a freaking receptionist for out front.”

Liam clasps his hands behind his back. He watches me for a moment, and I try not to let my frustration show. I’m right about this—the office is totally creepy, and anyone that comes in here is going to be freaked out. It’s a small miracle he managed even one deal in a place like this.

But I know men like him. I’ve dealt with them my whole life. He can barely admit to being wrong, much less able to take reasonable advice from his wife.

“I will... consider it.” He clears his throat and I could roll my eyes. Instead, I keep it professional.

“Thank you. Also, along those lines, I’m going to decorate this office and order some supplies.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Oh, actually, it’s extremely necessary. I’m paying for it out of my own personal expense account, which you freely said is unlimited, so it’s not like you mind, right?”

He looks annoyed again. “You’d better be careful, princess.”

“Or else what? You’ll keep on pushing me around?”

“That’s right. I’ll push, and I’ll push, and I’ll push again until you’re down on the ground getting spanked.”

I finally do roll my eyes. “No, thanks. Is there anything else?”

He turns sharply. “Nothing. Though I suggest you remember the hierarchy here.”

“Noted. Forgotten already.”

He shakes his head and leaves. I plop back down in my ancient, uncomfortable office chair, flip open my laptop, and start shopping for something better to sit on that isn’t going to kill my back. Once that’s ordered, I dive into the paperwork.

Everything’s in order. There are only a few minor details to update—addresses to correct, phone numbers to change—but otherwise, things look good. It’s tedious, though, and kills about an hour. By the time I’m done, it’s already after lunch.

I head out into the main office, looking around. Liam’s still in the conference room, looking at his phone like he wants it to explode. I hesitate, thinking I’d head out and get something to eat at one of the nearby delis, but decide to check in on my husband.

“You look unhappy,” I say, leaning against the doorframe.

He glances over. “Explain to me why these little bullshit nothing dispensary chain owners think they can simply ignore my calls?”

I try not to smile, but there’s something satisfying about seeing him knocked down a peg. “Who did you reach out to?”

“Jonathan Jeffers, owns the—”

“Happy Buddies Dispensaries. Sure, I know Jonny.”

Liam’s face darkens. “Jonny?”

“Everyone calls him Jonny.” I waltz into the office and sit down across from him.

“Let me guess. You’ve met him once or twice?”

“Try a dozen times. He’s really friendly.” I try not to smirk at the look he gives me. “He’s also in his sixties and knows my dad.”

“Of course,” he murmurs. “Could you get me a meeting?”

“Probably,” I admit. “But if you’re trying to get him to sell, I doubt he will. Happy Buddies is his baby. I don’t think it’s even profitable.”

“You said he’s in his sixties? Then he’s thinking about retirement. I can make sure he’s comfortable for the rest of his life.”

I tap my fingers on the table. “That might actually work. He’s got grandkids he’ll want to put through college. If you throw a ton of cash at him and frame it that way...” I trail off, already thinking about how I’d try to nudge Jonny toward selling. He’s an older guy, really affable, big family, the sort of crunchy northwest ex-hippie that would’ve rather cut his own fingers off than deal with a man like Liam Crowley, but now that generation’s getting older and the reality of retirement’s looming.

As I’m working on a strategy in my head, Liam stands, walks to the windows, and closes the blinds. One after the other. Click, click, click, until we’re suddenly very alone. I frown at him as he finishes.

“You overstepped your boundaries today.” He turns to me, arms crossed over his chest.

I fight back a wave of annoyed frustration. “Get over it. I’m already being helpful.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t like the idea of you thinking you have free rein now that I allowed you to work in this office.”

“Great, you need to put me in my place. What a big, strong man.”

“That’s exactly right.” He comes around the table toward me. “Stand up.”

“Liam—”

“Stand up, Alisa, or I will drag you to your feet.”

Trembling, both angry and strangely aroused, I rise to face him. Liam stands over me like he’s looking down a cliff. There’s a strange, intense concentration in his expression.

“Is this what gets you off?” I whisper, meeting that gaze. “Putting me in my place?”

“Yes,” he says, and I don’t think he’s kidding.

“Liam—”

“Turn around.”

“Absolutely not. We’re at work.”

“We both know this isn’t a fucking business. Turn around, Alisa, or I will turn you.”

Shivering, knees trembling, I turn around.

“Palms flat on the table,” he commands.

“You’re being insane,” I say, but I do it.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his hands moving up my shoulders, his lips neck my neck.

I fight back a whimper. I don’t want him to realize how much his commanding attitude arouses me, how much I love this—not until I can’t hold it back any longer.

“Can you give me the email for HR? I think they’ll want to hear about this.”

“Orin is HR. Do you want to give him the details of what I am about to do with you?”

“Probably not,” I murmur, chin tilted down. He grabs my hair and pulls me head back. I gasp as his lips find my throat.

“You delight in making my life more difficult.” He tightens his grip. “But I will admit, you’ve already been helpful.”

“Liam Crowley, admitting that he was wrong?”

“No, princess. I always knew you could make my business run more smoothly. I simply didn’t want to put you in any danger by allowing you anywhere near this.”

“Now that I’m here, you can’t help yourself, can you?”

“That’s exactly right.” His hands slowly move down my chest, over my breasts, down to my thin belt. He unbuckles it, pulls it off, tosses it aside. I’m breathing hard, a pulse of pure desire running up my throat. His fingers unbutton my slacks, zip them down—

Then he drops to his knees and slowly pulls them off.

“Liam,” I say, sucking in a breath. “What’s the goal here?”

“The goal is to punish you then to fuck you until you understand your place in all this.”

“You asshole—” But my rage dies on my lips as he stands, one hand back in my hair, pulling it so my chin’s straight up. He buries my mouth with his own as his other hand slides down the front of my panties, and I’m moaning into his lips, moaning against his tongue, and I’m pretty sure I’m about to let my boss manhandle me into submission because it feels too damn good to stop.

Chapter 26

Alisa

“**A**re you still happy you came to work for me?”

I pant into his mouth as his fingers do their filthy work. “Yes. Totally. Ecstatic.”

“That’s nice to hear.” He pulls his hand back and I let out an annoyed groan, but before I can complain, he forces me forward onto my elbows.

“Liam—” I start because I know what’s coming next, but it’s too late.

His palm whacks against my ass so hard I suck in a breath.

“There you are,” he murmurs, rubbing my stinging skin. “You know you start moaning the moment I spank you, don’t you?”

“No,” I groan, trying to turn around to glare at him, but he’s got me by the hair. “I do not—”

Another whack on the ass. I grunt, biting my lip to keep from doing exactly what he says I will.

The filthy bastard knows I like this. I wiggle my hips, pressing back against his firm grip. He spanks me again, and again, and soon the pain’s beginning to overwhelm my brain when he finally cups my pussy with his palm, holding me steady, before sinking his fingers deep inside.

“Fuck,” I moan, releasing the pent-up pleasure I’d been stifling. “If you didn’t own this place, I’d go ahead and complain to your manager.”

“For what? Making you drip all over my palm?”

“For teasing me, you asshole.”

He chuckles, kissing my neck, fucking me with his fingers. “What do you want me to do to you, princess?” he whispers in my ear. “I want you to say it.”

“Please,” I whimper, my eyes rolling back in my head it feels so damn good.

“Say the word. Tell me what you want.”

“You inside of me.”

“No, darling. Be more explicit. Tell me.”

“I want your cock inside of my pussy,” I say, moaning out the words. I feel so dirty, but that only intensifies my excitement. “I want you to fuck me.”

“How hard? Right here?”

“Right here. Right now. Fuck me hard until I scream your name.”

“You’re my favorite employee right now, did you know that?”

“Liam,” I groan, ready to lose my mind.

But he doesn’t tease me any longer. His belt buckle jingles, and when I look back, he’s stroking his thick cock before pressing it against my soaked-through opening. I shiver, and he kisses me, then slowly begins to fill me, letting my slick pussy coat every inch of his shaft.

“Good girl,” he groans, sliding deeper. “My perfect girl.”

“I’m your only girl,” I whisper back, not sure why I’m saying it.

“My wife.” He fucks me slowly at first, grinding deep, but soon we’re moving together in rhythm. He takes me fast, deep, no more teasing, no more halfway. His cock fills me to the brim and then some, and I feel like I might explode.

It feels like something I never dared let myself dream about. It’s pleasure, pure bliss, but there’s also a strange and perfect comfort with him, like we’ve

been doing this for years. He kisses me, his hands caress me, he fills me to the brim and whispers in my ear, and it all feels like the first time and the thousandth time, that perfect mix between excitement and familiarity.

I don't remember when this happened. I don't know when Liam went from being a violent means to an end to something I can revel in, something that makes me feel right. I've had so few of those over the years, so few boyfriends, so little real joy. And just when it felt as though I've lost it all, there's Liam, showing me a new level I never thought could exist.

"I want you to come for me," he says, spanking my ass as he fucks me deeply. "I want you to come and call me your husband as you do it. Can you come for me, lovely girl?"

"Yes," I pant as sweat beads down my back.

"I'm going to put my hand over your mouth. Will you scream into my palm?"

"Please," I groan, so fucking close.

"That's my girl." He does what he threatened, blocking my mouth, and as he strokes faster and rolls a thumb around my clit, it's like the pleasure peaks and slams into my skull all at once. Even if he hadn't asked for it, I'd still borderline scream into his hand, simply because I can't do anything else.

I come, deeply, viscerally, and vocally, as he continues to fuck me harder, growling like a beast. We're rocking together, moving in harmony, and my mind goes totally blank as the orgasm rips down my spine and into my core. Then he's moaning too, and I feel him stiffen as he fills me, and we're coming together like that until nothing else matters but Liam between my legs.

We finish, breathing hard. I stay bent over the table, unable to move. He grunts and leans next to me, laughing softly, kissing my neck. He brushes the hair from my face.

"I think I'm going to enjoy having you around at work," he says. "You're right, you are very useful."

"Don't be a dick," I say, pushing him playfully. "I can do a lot more than have sex."

“I know that.” His expression is pensive. “Why don’t you follow through with your suggestion from earlier? Make this place look like an actual office.”

“That’s a very good idea.”

“You’re right. I have a bad reputation already, no need to scare people even more by leading them into the set from a slasher film.”

I grin at him. “Now you’re getting it.”

“Life is all perception, right? Then why don’t you change mine.”

“I already did.”

“When you’re finished ordering new office supplies, reach out to that Jonny for me.”

My eyebrows arch. “You sure?”

“I’m positive. If he’s friendly with you, then I could use you at the meeting.”

“Look at you,” I say, leaning forward to kiss him without thinking. “You’re getting smarter and smarter.”

“Only utilizing the assets I’ve been given.” He sighs and begins to adjust himself. I take that as a cue to do the same. Once we’re somewhat presentable, he walks me back to my office.

If his goons heard anything, they give no sign. Only nod to him respectfully.

“I want you back in our bedroom tonight,” he says from my doorway as I settle back in behind my desk.

“We’ll see.”

“I mean it.” His tone darkens. “I don’t like the idea of my pregnant wife sleeping alone.”

“I think I can handle it, considering I’ve been sleeping alone my whole life.”

“You don’t seem to understand yet.” He watches me carefully. “You’re different now. Your old life is over. You’re carrying my child—a Crowley

child—and that means you’re a part of our family.”

“I never asked for that,” I say, keeping my tone as level as I can. I don’t want to start a fight right now. I’m still in a good mood from that lovely sex and I’d like to keep it that way.

“I didn’t either, but here we are. This is the situation we’re in. I need you to understand that, to accept it.”

I take a slow, deep breath. “We’re going to go back and forth on this forever,” I say after a pause long enough for me to get myself together. “You’re going to keep saying, I’m a Crowley, I’m a Crowley, and I’m going to keep telling you that I’m not. Can we just skip that whole dance and stick to our agreement?”

“No,” he says, turning away. “I told you. The old contract is dead. The only contract left is your marriage certificate, and good luck getting rid of that.”

He walks off before I can answer. I glare at the far wall, ready to start throwing stuff, but I pull myself together.

Today’s going well. Sex aside, he’s bringing me deeper into his operation. Even if it’s still fairly basic and surface-level, just a single meeting and some decorating, at least I’m not stuck at home anymore. If I can keep going, he might start trusting me with more important stuff.

And I’ll find a way to work out everything else. He can’t possibly think that just because I got pregnant, suddenly he owns me. Actually, he probably does, but it’s not reality.

I never promised him more, and I don’t plan on overdelivering.

Chapter 27

Alisa

It takes a few back-and-forth phone calls, but Jonny Jeffers finally agrees to meet in person. We set a date for the following day, and when the time arrives, Liam's on edge.

"I don't like this situation," he says, glaring out the car window. We're being driven by his second-in-command, Sean, and another of their trusted enforcers while two more cars, one in front and one behind, are packed to the brim with armed men. I can't imagine how we could get any safer short of hiding away in a nuclear bunker.

"I told you, Jonny's an old hippie," I say, trying to put him at ease. "It's not really all that surprising."

"This should've been straightforward, and we should be meeting at our office. Instead, we're doing... this." He scowls, shaking his head.

Jonny had been cagey about where he wanted to meet. Liam felt he was being suspicious, while I only assumed he was acting like his normal goofy self. Eventually, we landed on an old vegan place that isn't even listed online anymore—it allegedly went out of business—but Jonny claims to have bought the location. It's in a strip mall on the edge of town.

"I bet he's trying to show off his new investment," I say.

"Why would he want us to visit him at a decrepit restaurant?" Liam asks. "I should be insulted."

"This is just the kind of guy he is. I bet he's got the place renovated already

and he wants to test the food on us or something like that.”

“Somehow I doubt it.” Liam taps his fingers against his knee. “How well do you know this man again?”

“Not that well,” I admit, although I’m feeling slightly defensive. It isn’t my fault Jonny’s a weirdo. “Mainly by reputation. We’ve met a few times though.”

“Have you exchanged more than vague pleasantries with him?”

I hesitate, not liking where this is going. “No, but—”

“Then you don’t know the man at all. Could he be working with Rustik?”

“I don’t think so,” I say carefully, but I can’t be sure. If I tell him that, he’ll turn this car around, and we’ll lose any chance we have at winning Jonny’s chain.

And we need Jonny’s chain. Now that I’m on the inside, it’s obvious that Liam’s struggling to find anyone willing to do business with him. Rustik’s got the whole city terrified and on edge, which means Liam’s having trouble getting people to so much as take his calls.

“I did my research,” he says, his voice quiet and solid. “Jonathan Jeffers has a clean record. No outstanding debts. No arrest warrants, no prior trouble with the law. Grandchildren in high school, children in professional jobs. Lawyer, doctors, that sort of thing. His family is in good shape.”

“Then why would he need to work with a man like Rustik? See, you’re being paranoid.”

He glances at me. “It’s always the clean ones I worry about most.”

“Convenient.”

“Everyone has some dirt. If I dug hard enough, I could find something on almost anyone. Including you, little wife. But Jeffers is clean. He’s too damn clean, and I don’t like it.”

“You’re being paranoid. This is just a business meeting, okay? You’ll wow him with your massive offer, and I’ll charm him with my... well, my massive

charm. We're a great team."

He doesn't seem convinced, but at least he stops arguing. There's not much else to say—we're doing this. We reach the strip mall, and I'm surprised to find it nearly empty. Only a few other cars are parked in front of a dollar store, but everything looks abandoned. The retail apocalypse really hit this place hard, it seems. Cardboard's covering most of the shop windows, and weeds grow in cracks in the pavement. The grass looks like it hasn't been cut in a few weeks.

The vegan spot is at the end of the row on the far side. All that's left of the original advertising are a few faded window decals of sad-looking cucumbers. Liam's cars approach and park. It seems dead: no sign of Jonny or anyone else. Hell, there's no sign out front at all. If he really did buy this location and he does plan on renovating, he definitely hasn't started yet.

"I want you to remain in the car," Liam says. He's sitting at attention, scanning the area.

"That's not what we discussed."

"My men will sweep the interior to make sure it's safe. Once I'm sure this isn't a trap, you may enter."

"Liam—"

"Don't argue with me," he says firmly, turning to stare into my eyes. His expression is hard, and there's a hint of worry in his tone. "For once, do as I say."

I shut my mouth, work my jaw, but I nod. I hate giving in to him, but I can't keep on fighting for no reason. And besides, he's right—it can't hurt to check the place first. It'll turn up nothing and Liam will relax enough to let this meeting happen.

Which it desperately needs to if he has any hope of competing with Rustik legitimately.

His men get out of the cars and head toward the building. I watch anxiously as they file inside, six big guys with hands on guns. Liam's waiting nearby, leaning up against the front bumper and speaking with Sean in hushed tones.

Nobody looks happy. I wish I could hear what was going on, but after a surprisingly long time, one of Liam's men comes back out from the building and jogs over. He looks grim.

An ugly feeling fills my stomach.

Could this really be some kind of trick? Jonny Jeffers has never been anything but a legitimate businessman—but maybe he got mixed up with Rustik after all. That or Rustik somehow threatened him.

Liam follows the soldier inside. Another long time passes. Each second is an agony. It's obvious something's wrong, but nobody's bothering to tell me anything, like I've been forgotten. I can't sit still and finally unclick my seatbelt. Sean's still out front, keeping an eye on the parking lot, when I step out of the SUV.

"What's going on in there?" I ask him.

He looks uncomfortable. "Please wait in the car. I know it's boring—"

"Is he going through with this meeting without me?" It's an irrational fear, but I wouldn't put it past Liam. "Is that what this is all about?"

"No," Sean says, shaking his head. "It's not safe right now. Please, just stay in the car. We're almost done."

"Done with what?" I'm about to go storming into the building to demand some answers when the door opens and Liam comes out.

His face is hard. He spots me standing outside of the SUV and I swear a vein pops out of his forehead. Sean turns white as he ushers me into the back seat. "Just stay here for both our sakes," Sean whispers, looking anxious, before he closes the door.

Liam comes over and the two men talk. I'm on the verge of panic. I have no clue what's going on here, but it can't be good. Based on their expressions and body language, something very wrong has happened.

Finally, Liam climbs back into the car beside me and shuts the door.

We're quiet. I say nothing. He's staring straight ahead. He smells like mold, musty and dank, like he waded into an ancient swimming pool. "Jonny's

dead,” he says. “It’s a mess in there.”

I stare at him. The words make no sense. “Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m not. We found his body inside.”

“I don’t believe you. We didn’t even get a meeting with him. I mean, why would he be dead now? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Rustik must’ve heard.” But Liam doesn’t seem convinced. “I don’t know how it happened, but Jonny’s gone.”

I sit back, stunned. Jonny Jeffers was a Portland lifer, practically a tourist attraction in his own right. How could that old man be gone? He was like a piece of the city itself, and now he’s gone, all because he took our call and agreed to a meeting.

“What happened?” My voice is soft. It trembles with the strain. “Are you sure it was Rustik?”

“Jonny was shot in the forehead.” He stares down into his lap. “Both of his hands were cut off. His tongue was removed. His heart—”

“I don’t want to hear more,” I say, squeezing my eyes shut. I feel sick, stifled. Sweat drips down my back. “Was there... is there a note?”

“No note. No sign of struggle. That’s the strange part.” Liam turns to face me. “When you set the meeting with him, did he say anything?”

“He seemed anxious, but nothing that made me pause.”

“Anxious, how?”

“The way everyone’s anxious to get anywhere near you.”

Liam grunts. “You think that was it?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“Was there more? Could there have been—”

He doesn’t finish that sentence.

The roar of an engine draws our attention.

Sean's shouting, and Liam's suddenly on top of me.

There's a loud explosion, and the world flips upside down.

Chapter 28

Alisa

I slam down against the window. My shoulder's pinned, painfully digging into broken glass. My face is pressed against something cold and hard—the door, concrete, I can't really tell—and Liam's still on top of me, still covering my body with his own. He weighs a thousand pounds. I'm dizzy and can't tell which way is up.

I hear my name. "Alisa. Hey, Alisa, look at me." Liam's dragging me up, shaking me slightly. Everything's ringing and whining, and the light's far too bright.

"Liam," I mumble. "I'm okay. I'm okay." But am I okay? I don't know what happened, why the whole car seems like it exploded, or why Liam sounds angry.

"Hold on." His arms wrap around me and he's lifting me up, up, across the car—how are we moving *up* through the car?—until Sean's pulling me from the opposite window.

Loud explosions break out all around us. Sean curses, and he drags me over the side of the car, landing in a heap on the parking lot.

It takes a beat to understand that the SUV is on its side, flipped so my door was pinned against the ground.

Liam drops down beside us, a gun in his hand, as more explosions go off.

The explosions are bullets.

“Get her to safety,” Liam commands, firing his gun over the top. “Get moving!”

The world restarts like I’ve come back online.

The scene focuses, almost too sharp. Gunfire rings out like rapid thunderclaps, like a storm so violent it’s going to rip the world to shreds. Liam’s men near the restaurant get into cover behind big pillars and their SUVs, while Sean grabs my wrist and pulls me with him toward the SUV that had been parked behind us.

We sprint the very short gap between the two cars, and I spot trucks nearby, their windows facing us.

“Inside.” Sean yanks open a door and shoves me into it. From my vantage, I can see that another truck rammed the side of the SUV we’d just been in, flipping it over. I have blood on my clothes, on my hands, and I touch myself all over. There’s a cut on my forehead, and another in my scalp, but mostly I’m okay. I don’t think anything’s broken, which is lucky. Sean shoves me onto the floor. “Stay.”

I don’t listen.

I peek out the window and watch Liam battling our attackers. Rustik’s men, no doubt in my mind. So many bullets fly through the air, the molten-hot metal bursting against the SUV’s doors. It must be bulletproof because nothing gets through, though each direct hit sounds like a battering ram trying to break through. I swallow scream after scream as pure terror suffuses me.

One of Liam’s men lies dead on the ground. An attacker hangs halfway out a window. There’s blood, and shouting, and gunshots. I can’t think, can barely breathe. Through it, I’m distinctly worried about Liam, afraid that he won’t make it most of all.

After what feels like forever, the trucks suddenly peel out, and the attackers escape. Liam’s men take a few more shots, but the explosive noise stops as quickly as it started, and I’m left with ringing ears and a pounding headache.

The next time I look up, Liam’s in the car, and Sean’s up front behind the wheel.

“Get her home,” Liam says, pulling me into his lap. “Let me look at you.”

“I’m fine. I’m okay. What happened?”

“Ambush. We’re lucky these SUVs are military-grade. Otherwise we would’ve been crushed in that ramming attempt.” He gently touches the cuts on my head. “You need a doctor.”

“I’m fine. Really, I’m fine.” Cold realization spikes into my chest. He’s already making a phone call. Liam will never let me around his business again, any bit of freedom I might’ve won by proving how helpful I can be just evaporated in a storm of bullets.



THE DOCTOR’S A THIN MIDDLE-AGED MAN THAT DOESN’T ASK ANY QUESTIONS. He looks me over, makes sure I don’t have a concussion, and applies gauze to my cuts. “They don’t need stitches,” he says to Liam as if I’m not in the room. “Head wounds tend to bleed, they’re very dramatic. I cleaned any excess glass out and she should be fine.”

“Thank you, doctor. You’re sure she’s okay? She’s pregnant and I want to make sure the baby’s not in danger.”

Something warm suffuses me. I like the way Liam’s worried about the baby, even if he’s fussing a little too much. There’s a tenderness to his tone, a softness that I hadn’t seen from him until now.

“We can do some more tests to monitor the baby’s condition, but I don’t think it’ll be a problem.” The doctor frowns at me. “Do you have an OB?”

“Er, uh, not yet, uh—” I stammer, feeling foolish, but this baby thing only just happened and I’m barely past processing.

“She’s using my family doctor,” Liam says. “I’ll provide her name.”

“All right.” The doctor closes his kit. “Keep the wounds clean. If you experience any lightheadedness, any dizziness, any spotting or bleeding, you reach out to my personal phone. Understood?”

“Thank you, doctor.” Liam leads him from the room.

I’ve never felt like such a child before in my life, but it’s also kind of comforting. Liam wants to take care of me. He’s looking out for my health in his own way, which I can appreciate, even if it’s not something I ever wanted.

I curl up on the couch in sweats, staring at the fireplace crackling away. When Liam returns, he sits down at my feet, and takes them into his lap.

He says nothing at first, only begins to give me a foot rub. I watch him work, stare at his fingernails covered in dirt, at the stains on his clothes. Some of that might be blood. Some might even be his own. He hasn’t complained once, and didn’t even bother letting the doctor look him over, only insisted that I get checked out thoroughly.

“What happened?” I finally ask. “I mean, *how* did that happen? I’m still trying to piece it all together.”

“Rustik,” he says, closing his eyes. “I don’t know if he was aware you’d be there or not, but I’m guessing he was gunning for both of us.”

“How?” I feel cold and empty. Liam tried to warn me away, and I just had to get involved anyway.

“Jonny, most likely. I don’t know why Rustik killed him, but I suppose it was to send a message. Do not take my calls. Do not speak with me.”

“Could it have been someone in your organization?” I ask, trying to find any alternate suggestions. If it really was Jonny, then I sort of got the old man killed. Though he’d deserve it since he betrayed us to Rustik.

Liam glances at me. I can tell the question bothers him. “I’m looking into that.”

I sigh, leaning my head against the padded armrest. “What a nightmare.”

“The police are all over this. My contacts in the PPD are livid. They’re out for blood. Which means we need to lie low for a while.”

“How aren’t they coming after Rustik? He’s the one that started shooting. We were there trying to have a legitimate business meeting.”

“Rustik is much more entrenched in this city than I am. While I have connections, he currently has more. They’re protecting him. For now, at least. I suspect that won’t last long if he keeps shooting in broad daylight.”

Frustration oozes through me. I wish I could do something, but I’m totally helpless, and there’s no way in hell Liam’s ever going to let me get anywhere near the action anymore. So much for renovating and decorating his office.

“I didn’t do this,” I say, watching his reaction. “It’s not my fault. Right? It’s not my fault? I mean, I was just trying to set up a meeting with the guy. I didn’t want him to get killed. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

He gives me nothing. Only keeps rubbing my foot, which admittedly feels great.

“I know that,” he says after a long silence. “You couldn’t have predicted the way Jeffers would react.”

“Why would he even go to Rustik in the first place?”

“Fear,” Liam muses. “Everyone in this city’s terrified of Rustik right now. They’ll be even worse once news of what happened to Jeffers gets out.”

“God, that’s so frustrating. Isn’t there something we can do?”

“Yes and no.” He considers, head tilted. “There’s always a limit.”

“Explain what you mean.”

“People will be afraid, and they’ll act out of fear and self-preservation, but only to a point. Eventually, they’ll get sick of being terrorized, and some might even fight back. I’m curious how close we are to that point. The men and women Rustik’s been bullying aren’t gangsters and thugs—they’re regular people, not used to this kind of treatment.”

“You mean like, the industry rising up against him?”

“Something like that.” Liam shrugs glancing at me. “It’s hard for me to judge.”

An idea strikes. I pull my foot away and sit up, leaning toward him. “I can talk to people.”

“Alisa—”

“No, hear me out. I don’t need to leave the house to do it either. I can make phone calls, send emails, that sort of thing.”

He hesitates, considering. I can tell he’s not happy, but he nods slowly. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“But I need you to do something for me first.”

His expression softens. He seems genuinely delighted. “Now you’re starting to understand how the game’s played.”

I poke him in the ribs. “I’ve known since the start.”

“Okay then, wife of mine. What do you want?”

“I told you. I want revenge for Liliya. I want to know what really happened to her, and before I start to lobby on your behalf, I need you to find the truth for me.”

Liam considers that. I can tell he doesn’t like it. But eventually he grunts and nods again. “I’ll dig deeper, but it might end up that only Rustik knows the truth.”

“I don’t think it’s only him.” I stand, pacing away. “I think my father knows more than he’s letting on.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The last time I saw him. Something was wrong. He seemed... nervous. Worse than usual. And every time I mention Rustik in connection with Liliya’s death, he’s so quick to defend the guy, as if he’s not the most obvious killer in the world.”

“I’ll speak with your father then.” Liam stands and comes over to me. He puts his hands on my shoulder. I ache all over, my body bruised and battered from the truck ramming our SUV. “Come upstairs with me.”

“I’m not sure I can handle a spanking right now.”

“No, not that. You need a warm bath. Then you need to sleep.”

“And food?”

He kisses my neck. “And food. But tonight, you’re in my room. In my bed. I am going to keep a very close eye on you from now on. No more danger. No more foolishness.”

I close my eyes. I’m exhausted, worn down by the excitement of the day, and hurting like hell. Getting some much-needed pampering sounds incredibly good, even if it’s coming from Liam.

“All right, fine.” I turn to face him. “But don’t get any ideas.”

“Too late for that.”

I try not to smile as I follow him upstairs.

Chapter 29

Liam

The pungent scent of burning marijuana fills the air.

It's nearly choking. Thick plumes gust into the sky with each breeze. I can barely see the stars, and the full moon's a black circle. I stand well back from the flames with Sean at my elbow. Orange and red flames lick along perfect rows of plants, catching and spreading in the direction of the wind. Nearby, my men run around, throwing more Molotov cocktails into the field, starting more blazes.

Soon, the entire farm will burn to ashes.

And ten others just like it in northern Oregon will burn as well. Multiple farms hit, all in one coordinated attack on Rustik's suppliers. These are Rustik's closest business associates, and nobody will be confused about why they were attacked.

I tried to avoid this, but it's time.

"What are you thinking?" Sean asks as I walk away from the scene back to where we parked the cars a mile off the main road.

"Nobody's going to mistake this little revenge," I say, putting the stench of burning weed behind us.

"What do you mean?"

"They'll see it for what it is. Petty and desperate."

Sean grunts in response. “Why do it?”

“I couldn’t let an attack on my wife stand.” My hands curl into fists. I keep seeing her face moments after one of Rustik’s lieutenants rammed our SUV, dazed, terrified, pained. I pulled her from the accident myself and killed more than one of his soldiers that day, but it’s not enough.

No, not even these fires are enough.

Rustik hurt my wife. He hurt the mother of my child. Which means that now he has to die a horrible, painful death, one which will echo throughout the country as a warning.

The Crowley family is off limits.

“What happens now then?” Sean asks. “You said the cops are itching to come for us.”

“There will be investigations. We’ll be the top suspects. Most of the men here tonight will have to rotate back to Boston in the morning, and I’ll have new soldiers sent out to take their places. But at least Rustik’s suppliers will be livid. They’ll see that he can’t protect them, even if I’m also shooting myself in the foot.”

Sean grunts in reply. “You want their business, but they’re not going to give it to you now.”

“Some might still out of fear. Others might simply to recoup their losses, and I can afford to be extremely generous. But yes, that’s correct. I’ll have to adjust my strategy from now on.”

We continue back to the cars. The smoke drifts into the sky, thick and dark. Once I’m behind the wheel and heading toward home with Sean in the passenger seat, I make a call.

It rings and rings. Alisa’s father answers just before it goes to voicemail. He sounds groggy like he’d been asleep.

“Hello?”

“This is Liam Crowley.”

He's quiet for a moment. Then: "Hello, Mr. Crowley." Sounding more awake now.

"Call me Liam. I want to speak with you."

"You have my attention. Although I don't take many calls this late at night."

"A large number of farms will burn this evening. If you don't have messages about them yet, you will soon. Do you know why?"

Another silence. "Because of what Rustik did."

Everyone knows about the shootout. As well they should—I helped to spread the story.

I want them all to know what Rustik's really like.

"He nearly killed your daughter. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't feel good about it at all. Do you think I wanted any of this, Mr. Crowley? Do you really believe I wanted my daughter to die?"

"I'm not sure what I believe." I look into the rearview. In the distance, more thick, black smoke plumes to the sky. "Two things are bothering me. First, why are you still alive?"

Her father sputters. "What do you mean?"

"Rustik should've killed you by now, but he hasn't. You're useless to him in a war, so it must be some other reason."

"Our companies are tightly intertwined—"

"He doesn't give a damn about that. Your company will survive you." I'm silent for a moment, thinking. "It's some other reason then. Perhaps he's holding out hope that you will pay back what you owe him."

"Rustik keeps his own counsel. I'm not the man's conscience. Is there anything else you want?"

"The second thing bothering me. Alisa claims her sister Liliya found something right before she died. She already knew that you owed a debt to Rustik. I keep asking myself, what did she find that terrified her so much?"

He doesn't answer right away. "I couldn't begin to imagine. My daughter was deep into her addiction by then."

"Perhaps," I muse, glancing over at Sean. My second's acting like he's not listening, but it's obvious he's got one ear perked in my direction. "But the more logical thought is whatever Liliya found is what got her killed."

"Are you finished?" The bastard has the nerve to sound angry now, which only makes me feel like I touched on something important. "Did you call me in the middle of the night to speculate on my daughter's death?"

"Yes," I say. "That's exactly what I did. I wanted to see how you'd react, and you didn't disappoint."

"Listen to me, Mr. Crowley. You can push around my daughter—"

"Save the threats. You are nothing to me and you know it. Now, please, do us both a favor and tell me everything you know. It'll be easier this way."

Another silence. I can almost hear him shifting around in his bedroom, anxiously pacing back and forth. I smile to myself, enjoying his discomfort.

Alisa cares about this man. That's the only reason he isn't dead yet. But the moment I find out that he did something to hurt either of his daughters, I will strangle him with my own bare hands.

"I don't know what to tell you. My oldest daughter was a drug addict."

"That's the story you're going with? All right then. That's a choice. I hope you're right."

I hang up.

Silence fills the car. Sean's looking at me sidelong as I steer back toward the city.

"I'm trying to decide if you've lost your mind or if all of this has a purpose," Sean says after a while. "With all due respect."

"I think it's both," I tell him, smiling to myself. "But isn't this the most fun you've had in a long time?"

Chapter 30

Alisa

I wake to find Liam in bed with me. I blink against the bright morning sunlight, trying to decide if my husband is a mirage or not. I shift closer and touch his chest, making his eyelids flutter open. The man's cut from marble, and the still-sleeping look in his eyes only makes him that much more beautiful. I'm struck by this man, by how handsome he is, by how effortlessly he navigates the world. It's like I'm seeing him for the first time.

"Good morning," I say softly. "You smell like smoke."

"Good morning." He rolls onto his back and sighs. "I showered. Twice."

"What did you do last night?"

"Started my revenge." He shifts back to face me. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," I say, yawning.

"The baby? Any symptoms? The doctor said—"

"I'm fine." I touch his chest again, not thinking about how intimate the gesture is. I can't seem to keep my hands away from him. "Seriously. I feel totally fine. A little bit sore, but better than yesterday."

He looks visibly relieved. "I had trouble getting to sleep last night thinking there might be something wrong. I kept making sure you were breathing."

"Since when did the great and mighty Liam Crowley worry about an insignificant little ant like me?"

“The health of my wife and my child are the most important things to me right now.”

“I’m not really your wife,” I say, but I’m teasing him.

“Are we going to start the day having this argument again? You’re wearing my ring, sleeping in my bed, and carrying my baby. You are my wife.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes, but I’m smiling. “All right, fine. How should we start this lovely morning instead?”

He pulls me against him. I kick slightly, squirming to get away, but he doesn’t release me as his mouth finds mine in a crushing, hot kiss. The man’s iron mixed with lace, hard where he needs to be, but gentle enough to drive me wild. He really does smell like smoke, and he tastes like it too, but I kind of like that.

I let myself get manhandled by this big beast, let him take off my clothes, lick my nipples, suck them, get me nice and wet before sliding my panties off.

“I could get used to this,” I say, stifling a whimper as his mouth finds my pussy. “Except normally you’re gone so early. Did you stick around just to do this?”

“Yes,” he says, utterly devoid of irony. “Shall I wake you when I have to leave early? There’s no reason I can’t have my way with you every morning.”

“Tempting,” I admit as he keeps going, licking me faster. It feels so freaking good I can barely control myself. My breasts shake with each new heaving breath, and soon his fingers are fucking me too, sliding in and out, driving deeper and deeper until I come against his mouth in a back-breaking orgasm.

“Lovely,” he says when I’m lying on my back, cheeks flushed, breathing hard. He looms over me, muscular and glowing. So damn handsome it almost hurts.

“You didn’t waste any time getting me naked,” I point out, covering my breasts with one arm.

He shrugs and peels my arm away. His mouth finds my hard nipples again.

“Here’s the thing about having a wife. I get to wake up in bed with you. Why waste it?”

“Oh, you do? That’s assuming I haven’t locked myself away.”

“Locks are easy to pick. Doors are easy to break. I am not easy to resist.”

“What a gentleman.”

“I do what I can.” His kisses me and I taste myself on his lips. It’s dirty, but I find myself liking the way he casually treats me like I’m a gorgeous sex goddess. I’ve never felt that way before in my life, but when he looks at me, suddenly my body wakes up like never before.

I shimmy away from him just so I can get some breathing room. I feel flushed all over, dizzy with need. “Let me ask you something. Did you ever imagine what it would be like to be married? I mean seriously, in a real relationship.”

“No,” he says. “There have been women before you, and some of them were even decent matches, but I never considered settling down.”

“Liam Crowley, are you a heartbreaker?”

“Possibly,” he says, though this time he’s smiling. “But I always made it clear where I stood.”

“Which was where?”

“Nothing lasts forever.”

“Except now this. You think this is forever?”

He shrugs, kissing my breasts again. “I could get used to being around you all the time.”

“Wow, you’re really selling yourself.”

“Did you ever think about getting married?”

“Sure, all the time.” I feel silly saying that but it’s true. In my dreams, my husband was suave but kind, totally unlike Liam’s rough brutality. “I was a cliché little girl, looking at wedding magazines and imagining my dress.”

He seems surprised. “Do you want a real ceremony? We can arrange for that.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” I say, waving him off before he gets any ideas. The way he’s looking at me, I’m pretty sure he’ll give me whatever I ask for, which makes that warm spot between my legs tingle with excitement. This man *wants* me in a really visceral, animalistic way. “I just mean, when I was younger I thought about it. I grew out of that, but you know what I’m saying. It was like a game.”

“Did you think about what it would mean to be a wife, or was it just what it would be like to get married?”

“The latter. It was more like a princess fantasy, you know? Being the center of attention. Looking beautiful. Everything else after that, I didn’t think about it so much.”

“You always look beautiful,” he murmurs, kissing my neck.

“Oh, since when did you get so charming?”

“Always have been.” He rolls to the side, dragging me along with him. I end up straddling his hips, and his stiff cock presses against my naked, soaking pussy. Slowly, I begin to grind against his length, purring as I do it. He looks incredible beneath me, eyes burning into mine, muscular chest flexing with each movement, each time he squeezes his fingers into my flesh.

He holds onto my hips. I lean forward, eyes fluttering, hands on his warm body. I’m still sensitive from coming once, but it feels so fucking good, I don’t want to stop.

“From my perspective, you’ve mostly been a bossy, controlling dickhead.” I yelp when he slaps my ass. “See what I mean? You can’t take criticism.”

“I can take constructive criticism. You’re just being rude.”

“Maybe.” I move faster, digging my fingers into his muscle. He slaps my ass again, playfully. “But that’s not how a partnership’s supposed to work.”

“Then enlighten me, wife of mine.”

“We should be equals.”

“That won’t ever happen.”

“Try again.” I slow my pace, nearly stopping.

But he doesn’t like that. He pulls me up and down, forcing me to start moving again, and hell, it feels too good to resist him. The bastard.

“Look at you, grinding your soaking wet pussy all up and down my hard cock, telling me how you want to be my *equal*. It’s almost adorable.” He slaps my ass firmly again and I let out a whimper. Fuck, I should be mad, but this is pure erotic ecstasy. Otherwise, I might be annoyed. “The truth is, I’m going to take care of you. I will defer to you for many decisions, seek your council in even more, and treat you like my queen. But we will never be equals. Not in everything.”

“Then in most things.”

“We can work on that.”

“I want more say in the business.”

“Absolutely not.”

Well, it was worth a shot. “Then I need *something*,” I say, feeling desperate as the pleasure mounts. “You can’t just keep me here, locked up forever.”

“Not forever. Only for as long as you’re pregnant.”

“Then you’ll find some other excuse to keep me under your thumb. You’ll move the goalposts forever unless I stop you now.”

“Can you blame me? Look at you, beautiful girl. You’re so fucking sexy I could lose my mind. I want to keep you all to myself, locked in my room, ready to fuck at a moment’s notice.”

“Stop it. I’m trying to concentrate.”

Another ass slap. This time, he grips hard, and thrusts against me. I gasp in surprise, and when he pulls back, he yanks down his boxer-briefs.

I help get them off. Once I’m to the side of him, I take his cock in my mouth and start sucking. Up and down, into my throat, between my lips. I moan as I do it, until he’s got his boxer-briefs at the end of the bed, and I’m straddling

him again.

This time, I arch my back and slide down his shaft. He fills me for one agonizing, blissful moment. I shiver, enjoying the feeling of him buried deep.

“You will be free, my wife,” he murmurs as I start to ride him again, this time with his cock grinding inside me. It feels ten times better, and when he spanks my ass, the pleasure rockets deep into my bones. “Maybe it’s not the freedom you always envisioned, but you will have more than you could imagine.”

“Hard to believe when I can’t even leave the house.”

“Temporary. It’s only temporary. I’m giving you access to family... to wealth... to power. You don’t know the half of it out here. But back in Boston, you’ll be royalty.”

I moan as I grind against him faster. “I don’t live in Boston.”

He doesn’t answer.

Only thrusts into me, and the conversation’s lost to fucking, to sweat dripping down his muscular torso, to his incredible hands, his arms flexing and his chest muscles tightening as he thrusts into me, those beautiful lips pressed together in pure bliss, until I come for a second time.

He doesn’t hold back then—just keeps fucking me, over and over, until he comes too, filling me up to the brim.

Chapter 31

Alisa

Afterward, we shower together. He soaps me up, quietly cleaning every inch of my body. He even gently cleans my wounds, and when we're done, he replaces the bandages.

"Breakfast," he says, taking me downstairs.

"I was thinking a light workout first," I complain, but he's not having any of it.

"You got your workout," he says, the lewd bastard.

Orin's already cooking, whistling away, and gives me a wave as Liam sits me down at the kitchen table, pours me some coffee, gives me the paper, and starts to rub my shoulders.

"Relax," he says, kneading away the knots.

Where the hell did this man come from, and why does he have fingers like a professional musician?

"I'm working hard to understand why you're suddenly acting like you want to spoil me," I say, trying to swat his hands away halfheartedly.

"My pregnant wife was put in danger yesterday."

"Are you feeling guilty? I didn't realize you were capable."

"I didn't either," he mutters.

“You shouldn’t let it worry you. I made that decision. I don’t blame you one bit.”

“That’s good, but I blame myself regardless.”

Food comes. Bacon, eggs, toast. I nibble at the edges, eat a strip of bacon. Liam clearly doesn’t approve and wants me to eat more, but my appetite isn’t good in the mornings. I suspect it’s thanks to the baby.

“Are you staying here today?” I ask him once he’s settled across from me at the table and eating his own breakfast. “Normally, you’d be hustling out the door.”

“I’m taking the day off, yes.”

“You take days off?”

“I can leave if that’s what you’d prefer.”

“No, no, stay. It’s nice. I mean... stay. I’d like that.”

He watches me with a blank expression and only nods as he turns back to his half of the paper.

It’s normal. Strangely normal. We work out together, both of us sneaking glances at the other, and we end up fucking on the gym floor, unable to keep our hands off each other for long. That turns into another shower, and more sex, and soon we’re cuddling on the couch watching a movie.

I never imagined I’d have a day like this with Liam. We’re laughing, bantering, teasing, having some of the best sex of my life. He’s kind, attentive, gentle. It’s like if he could be this man every day, I might actually consider staying with him. This is the Liam I want, the Liam that isn’t obsessed with controlling me, but willing to lighten up slightly, able to let his guard down even a touch. His walls are normally as high as the sky—but today, I’m getting a glimpse of what’s behind them.

I like what I’m feeling.

But all the while there’s a voice in the back of my head: it’s an illusion, it’s not going to last, he wants something.

I keep thinking this is only a manifestation of his guilt and his need to keep me safe—and once that wears off, he'll return to his usual self.

This is only temporary.

Later that night, after dinner, we sit out back as the sun sets. I lean my head against his shoulder. "I'm going to admit something, okay?" I glance at him, trying to read his face, but he gives me nothing. "I'm being vulnerable here, so don't make me regret it."

"Go ahead. I'll behave."

"I liked today. I liked it a lot."

"I did too." He kisses my neck. "We can have this more often, you know."

"Can we? Before today, I thought all you wanted was to stomp around looking pissed off. I wasn't sure you could be... I don't know. Normal."

"I didn't either," he admits, staring up at the sky. "But when we're back in Boston, things will be easier."

I blink at him for a moment, trying to process. "Back in Boston? That's twice now you've mentioned that today. We don't live in Boston."

"For now."

I shift away, putting some space between us. "What are you talking about?"

"My family's home is in Boston. Even if we manage to win this war, that's where we belong. That's where our child will be raised, surrounded by cousins and uncles and aunts. By real family."

"Liam, I never agreed to moving across the country. We've never even discussed it."

"I understand. I know it's sudden—"

"What happened to equals?"

"I never said we were equals." His tone hardens. "I'm sending you back in a few days. Keely's coming to pick you up. She'll help you transition to the Crowley mansion until I can return and we can move into our own place."

We'll have the baby there in Boston surrounded by the best doctors in the world and my family, then we can discuss returning to Portland periodically to run the business."

I can barely hear him. My ears are ringing, and I'm stuck on that first part, the bit about sending me back in a few days. This is the first time I'm hearing about it, and he's talking like all of this is a done deal.

"Hold on," I say, forcing myself to my feet. I pace away from him, shaking with adrenaline. "You're sending me to Boston... in a few days? Do you really think I'm going to go?"

"That's why Keely's coming. I think she'll help you transition—"

Anger explodes into me. I knew this day couldn't last.

"I don't give a damn about Keely or your family or Boston. Portland is my home. I'm not leaving."

"Alisa—"

"No, no, don't you dare do this right now. We finally have a good day and I start thinking that maybe you can be a normal guy for a little while, that maybe we can have something good, and now you're saying I have to go back to Boston? Where will you be?"

"Here, finishing this ugly business."

"Great, good for you, that must be so nice having some agency in your own life."

"Alisa. This is for your protection. You have to understand that the war is reaching a fever pitch. Rustik will come after you again. You'll be perfectly safe in Boston."

"And you have to understand that you can't make unilateral decisions for me about where I live. I'm a person, Liam."

"This isn't a discussion." His expression hardens back into the husband I've known these last few weeks. "You will go to Boston. Don't give Keely trouble."

I stare at him, feeling so hurt, so damn betrayed, and unable to put it into words. He made today perfect—he pampered me, treated me like his princess, like his actual wife—he made me start to accept that it's okay to feel something for him.

Not perfect, not exactly ideal, but still good.

Then he dropped this.

It was all some act to get me to do his bidding.

“You're right. We're not equals and we never will be. I won't forget it.”

I turn and head inside before he can answer.

Chapter 32

Alisa

For one blissful afternoon, I wasn't thinking about escape.
Now I can't get it out of my head.

There are a thousand ways out of this house, but none of them would work, and I'm pretty sure Liam would chain me up in a bedroom if I made more noise.

But more than that, I keep thinking about the truck running into our SUV, about the gunshots, the bodies, the blood. I keep seeing the death all around me, and I'm terrified of what will happen if I let Rustik get anywhere near me.

Liam throws himself back into work the next day.

I mope around the house, feeling sorry for myself. Even Orin gives me space.

At least until Keely arrives.

She breezes into the house, looking glorious, dirty-blonde hair in thick ringlets, wearing designer everything from ears to toes. "Hello, hello," she says, kissing my cheek. "How are you, new sister?"

"Fine," I say, trying to be polite, but I can't let myself forget why she's here. "Liam sent you, huh?"

"Liam requested my help," she says, sounding cautious. She frowns at me, tilting her sunglasses down. "You don't want to go back to Boston, do you?"

“No,” I admit.

She groans. “He told me you were entirely on board. I don’t know why I’m freaking surprised, that asshole.”

“Seriously? He’s unbelievable.”

“They all are.” She shakes her head as she drops her stuff in the kitchen. “Nolan’s not much better. They think they own the world because their last name is Crowley.” She pauses, leaning up against the island. “They sort of do, and I actually find it very attractive, but *still*.”

I laugh and she grins at me. I like Keely—she’s got great energy, and she seems genuinely kind and so unlike all the other Crowley boys. But I have to remember that she’s the enemy.

“I’m sorry, I know this is going to be awkward, but I really don’t want to go to Boston.”

She takes me by the hand and leads me to the couch. “I hear you, I really do. I don’t want to make you do something you don’t want to do. But can we talk about it?”

“I really don’t want to. No offense, you’re very nice, but we’re total strangers.”

“True.” Her lips press together. “That’s the thing with this family. We all started as strangers. Well, I guess Ash and I didn’t, but you get what I’m saying. Once you’re in, you’re in for life.”

“That wasn’t supposed to be my deal with Liam.” I look away from her, feeling like I’m betraying something by admitting this. “We promised it wasn’t forever.”

She laughs loudly, leaning back against the pillows. “Oh, god, that’s hilarious.”

“I’m sorry, what’s so funny?”

“You really thought you weren’t signing up for life? That a Crowley man would marry you then let you go? That’s not how it works!”

I glare at her. “Is there an instruction manual on how to marry a Crowley man? Preferably one that doesn’t end with me killing him in his sleep.”

“No, but that’d be a fantastic idea. Look, okay, this is so weird, but we all pretty much have some version of your story. I think it might be an extremely specific fetish with these guys.”

“*What is a fetish?*”

“Marriage! I mean, making a contract marriage. Then turning it real through sheer force of sexy will.”

I hesitate, some of my anger disappearing. “That happened to you?”

“Yep. And to Ash, and to Dara. I’m betting Finn did it first then all the guys got together and were like, yo, bro, you can totally get chicks to wife up if you pretend it’s fake at first then give them amazing sex—”

“We are not—” I start, blushing bright red, which only makes Keely laugh.

“All I’m saying is, nobody’s surprised by that, okay? Liam told you it wasn’t forever. Fine, that’s not a big deal. Turns out you’re pregnant though, and that means he’s not going to let you go anywhere, not with the precious cargo on board.”

I slump back against the pillows, feeling exhausted, a headache pressing at my temples. “What do I do?”

“You come back to Boston.” She says it gently. Not needling. Not pressuring. Just matter-of-fact. “I’m not going to force you. I only came because Liam asked me, and because I could use a mini-vacation.”

“You might not, but he will.”

She shrugs. “I can’t control what Liam does and doesn’t do. My plan is so hang around here, sightsee, get to know my new sister-in-law, then head home. If you come with me, that’d be amazing, and I think it would be the right decision. But I’m not here to force you.”

Somehow that makes it worse. She sounds so reasonable—so unlike Liam—and it makes me want to trust her.

But she's a member of that family, and I can't let myself forget it.

"I'm staying here." I say. "Whether Liam likes it or not."

"That's your call." She sits up straight, smiling. "But for now, what do you want to do? I'm up for anything."

"Our options are limited considering I'm confined to the house."

She waves that away. "Forget the rules. I have my own little contingent of bodyguards waiting outside. We'll be fine. Show me around town."

I take a deep breath. Liam's going to be pissed when he finds out that Keely ignored his decree. Which makes it worth the risk. "All right, let's get going."

"I promise, we'll have some fun." She loops her arm through mine. "Now, what's there to do in this town, other than smoking weed?"

Chapter 33

Alisa

I try not to, but I end up having a really good time with Keely.

For the next few days, the rules are suspended. Although we're trailed by a small army of bodyguards, I show Keely around Portland, starting with all the big tourist areas and moving into my favorite local spots. We get lunch, go on a couple hikes, see a movie, grab some dinner, even go dancing when Keely practically begs me to take her somewhere. "I used to do this all the time with my bestie, Jamila," she says as she loses herself on the dance floor.

She's a lot of fun and really easy to get along with. And it helps that she makes me this unbelievable batch of homemade donuts on the morning of her last day. We both know she's getting on the plane later that afternoon, but we don't talk about it. Instead, I eat way too much, give myself a minor sugar hangover, and sit out back in the comfortable morning breeze.

"Still on the fence?" she asks, and I know what she means.

"Not on the fence," I say. "Just not going."

"Got it." She looks at her nails. "I don't blame you. Portland's a cool town."

"I had a lot of fun with you," I say and really mean it. "I wish I could get on that plane. I just can't."

She nods, quiet, and looks like she wants to say something—but she looks over my shoulder and tenses.

I follow her gaze. Liam's standing in the sliding door staring right at me. I

meet his eye and hold it, daring him to come out here. He only gestures for me to follow him back inside.

“Better go,” Keely whispers. “At least hear him out.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I’ve found that resisting them only makes it worse.”

I grunt, annoyed, but she’s right. I can’t ignore Liam forever and decide to head inside after him.

I find him standing at the kitchen, eating one of Keely’s donuts. “This is really good,” he says. “Did you try one?”

“She made twelve,” I say, gesturing at the two leftovers. “She ate one.”

“Impressive.” He puts the remains down. “I have something for you.”

“If it’s a ticket to Boston, don’t bother.”

“No, I think you’ll be much more interested in this.” He turns to the door. “Follow me.”

I hesitate, not in the mood for his mysterious bullshit, but end up ghosting along behind him anyway. We get into one of his big SUVs and head into the city. It takes me a few minutes to recognize where we’re going, but I don’t believe it until we’re parked out front.

I stare at the old house. It’s a Victorian-style home, the interior modernized about twenty years ago, though it’s beginning to show some wear around the edges. I know it intimately; I can still picture its smell, the rooms, the narrow staircases. It’s the house I grew up in.

“Why are we here?” I ask as a thousand memories of Liliya burst through my mind.

“Your father is currently driving two hours for a meeting that doesn’t exist. The house will be empty for a while. I was thinking we could look around and see if we find anything.”

I stare at him, eyes wide. “Are you serious?”

“Very serious. It took some work and planning to fool your father into leaving, and I don’t want to squander the opportunity. I promised you revenge, and I will make good. This is one step on that path.”

I stare back at the house. “But you’re sending me back to Boston.”

“Yes, you’ll get on the plane tonight. For now, though, let’s rip your father’s home to shreds.”

I don’t move. Tears fill my eyes. I blink them away, clearing my throat, swallowing against the lump. “Liliya’s room hasn’t changed much, you know. He kept it the same, even after she left the house. Same with my room.”

“He’s your father. He’s old and sentimental.”

“Yes, that, but he’s also lazy and doesn’t love throwing things away.” I give Liam a hard stare. “Let’s go find some dirt.”

Chapter 34

Alisa

Liam goes to pick the lock, but I brush him off, brandishing the key that's hidden under one of the downspouts. The interior is exactly the way I remembered, down to the paintings and the pictures on the end tables. My father hasn't made a single change since I last lived here not all that long ago, which doesn't surprise me. He's not the kind of man that cares much about how his house is decorated. I wouldn't be shocked to learn he's barely ever home.

"I'll look down here," Liam says. "Does he have an office?"

"I'll take that and his bedroom, they're both on the second floor." I glance at the staircase. A sudden memory hits me: jumping off the third step with Liliya, landing in a heap at the bottom, laughing our heads off, doing it again until Papa made us stop. "This isn't going to be easy for me."

"If you'd like, I can have my men do it. They'll be thorough. We're good at this sort of thing."

"No." I take a deep breath, steeling myself. "I can handle it."

I need to handle it.

I'm not sure if Liam brought me here because he knew it would be cathartic to face my past, but it's exactly what I need right now.

A heavy dose of what my life could've been.

If Liliya hadn't been pimped out to Rustik. If she hadn't gotten killed.

Maybe she, Papa and I might've been having dinner together this very night, if things had been different.

“Good luck,” Liam says.

We break apart. He drifts back toward the living room, and I head up the stairs.

Papa's bedroom is at the far end. His door calls, but I force myself to look away. I start with my own space, though I know there's nothing. I give it a quick, cursory search, smiling at my old yearbooks, my old photos, even the books I loved as a kid. But I don't let myself linger.

Next, I go to Liliya's room.

I stand in the doorway for what feels like an hour, but soon I'm moving through her stuff: checking her closet, pulling out drawers, rooting under the mattress. I try to make it as impersonal as I can, but by the time I'm halfway finished, tears roll down my face and drop like fat slugs onto the carpet.

It isn't fair. Liliya was so smart, so confident. She was everything I could ever want in a big sister—protective, kind, outgoing, genuine. We loved each other, fought with each other, were rivals and best friends. I wanted to be her when I was younger, and even when I got older, I found myself wishing I could have half her poise.

I find her old field hockey stick, her soccer uniform, the beading kit she used to make dozens of necklaces and bracelets for her friends, her CDs, her journals. I have to fight the urge to sit on her bed and read all her inner teenage angst. Instead, I find a better hiding place for them at the top of her closet. As I'm rooting around up there, I find a box I don't recognize and bring it down. Inside is a treasure trove of objects she shouldn't have—a weed pipe, matches, a lighter, notes from boys, a phone she must've snuck into the house. Evidence of her rebellious phase where she wore a lot of black but never committed to the whole goth lifestyle.

“I'm sorry, Liliya,” I whisper, standing in the middle of the room, crying freely now. “I should've done something to help. I just didn't know how.”

Nobody answers. The house is silent. Liliya's gone, and I can't fix what happened.

I turn away and force myself to leave her room.

Wiping my face on my sleeve, I head into the master bedroom.

It's fastidiously neat. Papa was always obsessive about clutter. I began to search in earnest, going through everything, all his drawers, even his underwear, looking for anything that might be of use. There's nothing, only the detritus of a long life. Old pens, broken watches, rubber bands, some cash forgotten under an old detective story paperback. Papa's ties are lined up neatly in the closet. His slacks are pressed and cleaned. His shoes are all shined. There's nothing out of the ordinary, not behind the rack of suits, not in the bottom corners, not hidden behind a loose board.

Which brings me to his office. It's located off his bedroom in the bonus space above the garage. It's hot, but Papa had a split AC system installed years back. I don't turn it on—he'd notice. Somehow the man can sense when someone turns on this stuff.

Instead, I hit the drawers. There's some interesting stuff regarding the business, old contracts, old ledger books. I flip through them but don't find anything good. As I dig, I can't help but think how strange this is, going through my father's things. If he found me doing this as a girl, he would've gone ballistic and thrown me out of the house. Now I don't care what he thinks about any of this, so long as I get some answers.

Liam appears in the doorway after a while. He watches me, not speaking, before he comes to help. We rifle through my father's storage cabinet, and Liam's hand appears on top of mine, lingering there for longer than necessary as he stares at me. "You're okay," he says. Not a question.

He's right. Even though my face is streaked by tears. "I'm okay," I agree.

"Your sister loved you. I can see it all over this place."

"You're right. We loved each other. It's just—" How can I explain to him? I feel guilty, yes, but also angry that she agreed to marry Rustik. I'm a conflicting mess of emotions. "I just want this to be done."

"We'll finish it then." He squeezes my hand, getting closer. "Together."

"Can't do that from Boston."

“We’ll find a way.”

I pull back, not ready to make up, and head to my father’s desk. Liam watches as I sit down behind the computer. Then without a word, he begins searching again, flipping through documents, scanning files, leafing through old books.

I crack my knuckles and unlock my father’s computer on the second try. “All he did was add an exclamation point at the end of his usual password,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s like he wanted me to log in.”

“Or he couldn’t imagine you ever trying.”

That makes more sense. My papa, arrogant, self-assured, so positive that his little daughter would never cross him.

Except here I am, going through his desktop, digging deep into his files.

It takes a while to go through everything. I even check his browser history, which brings up way more porn than I’m comfortable with. Idiot should use a private window next time. But finally, as I’m ready to give up, I pull open his email client and start skimming. Mostly spam, mostly work stuff—until I search Liliya’s name.

Dozens of messages appear. All from my sister’s address, all directed to my father. I break out into a giddy laugh. “He didn’t know the difference between deleting and archiving,” I say, breathless with excitement.

Liam drifts over and looks at the screen. “What are these?”

“They go back to... to before she got married.” I squint as I start to skim through. “Mostly it looks like she emailed him about work stuff. Some weekend plans... some dinner plans...” Then I reach the point where Liliya got sold off to Rustik and the first interesting message appears. “Look at this one.”

“Read it to me.”

I clear my throat. “*Dear Papa, Things aren’t going well so far. You asked me to be honest. So I’m being honest. Rustik is not a kind man. He does not treat me well. Does that upset you? I’m sorry if it does. I agreed to this marriage*”

to save the business for you and Alisa. So far, it's working. But he makes threats, Papa. He knows he has control here. I don't want you to do anything about it. I don't want you to say anything, that will only make it worse. Only please, keep me in your prayers."

I stare at the email. Her words play through my mind like a bombing campaign. Even from the beginning, Rustik was treating her poorly. My father's response is dull and meaningless, just a few platitudes about learning to please her husband, blah blah blah, total bullshit. It pisses me off reading how Papa didn't take her seriously.

The emails kept coming. Almost daily after that, complaining about Rustik, about how he emotionally manipulated her. He never got physical—he didn't need to, apparently—but he made her life hell. Message after message, and Papa did nothing about it.

Until about a month before her death. "Listen to this," I say, my voice cracked with tears again. *"Papa, I'm going to leave him. I'm sorry. I know this will be bad. But I have to leave him. I can't stand staying any longer. If I don't go, I am going to die. Maybe Rustik will kill me, maybe he won't, but I am going to die if I don't leave. I'm going to run away soon. I'm warning you now, so maybe you can do something to protect Alisa. I am doing it though. I am leaving him."* It takes me a moment to compose myself enough to continue. "God, Liam, she was going to leave him, but look at what Papa wrote back. *Liliya, do not be a silly child. I am begging you please from the bottom of my heart, do not leave that man, stay with him and provide as only a good wife should. Daughter of mine, I love you deeply but you must not leave him."*

It went on like that for a few days. Back and forth, Liliya threatening to leave, Papa begging her not to, until it hit a breaking point, and the emails abruptly stopped.

I sit back in silence, staring at the last message.

Papa, I have something you'll want to see. Maybe it'll help you after I'm gone. Come take a look. Love, your daughter.

Liam kneels down beside me. His hand on my knee. He reads my father's response out loud. *"Liliya, do not be stupid do not do anything rash I am*

coming to speak with you shortly and we will work this out only wait for me to come fix these problems with you and your husband trust in your Papa I know what's best." He stares at the screen. "Your father knew your sister was going to divorce Rustik or at least that she was going to run."

Everything clicks together. Like a pattern that only makes sense from a great distance, suddenly I can see its shape.

Papa couldn't let Liliya leave Rustik. If she did, Rustik would call in his debts and ruin my father. There was no other way out, no other options, no escape. Liliya couldn't handle anymore, and she was going to damn Papa to hell.

Then she died. Mysteriously from a drug overdose. When it's clear she never did drugs in her life.

"Rustik kept saying he didn't kill Liliya," I whisper, feeling empty and dry. A withered husk of myself. "What if he wasn't lying?"

"Who else had motive to kill your sister?" Liam asks, but he already knows the answer. I can see it in the way he stares at me. I can hear it in his voice. I feel it in the way his fingers dig into my thigh.

"This isn't possible." But I'm in denial trying to fight against the obvious truth.

"I found something else in the files." Liam stands suddenly. I latch on to his discovery, hoping whatever he's going to show me will exonerate my father. "They're papers showing transfers from a bunch of different accounts associated with the marijuana farms Rustik works with. The money's all getting dumped into a shell company, and I bet if we follow this trail, we'll find it all comes back to Rustik himself."

"Stealing from the farmers?"

"Skimming off the top." He shakes the papers. "I bet this is what Liliya found. Look at her last email. She had something that might help. She gave your father these documents."

"She hoped he could use them against Rustik."

“Instead, he buried it.” Liam looks hard. His eyes flash with rage. “The fucking coward.”

“No.” I lean forward, slamming the laptop lid shut. My hands tremble. “Papa wouldn’t.”

“We’ll find the truth.”

I look up slowly. “Together.”

He nods, his expression hard. “Together. And when it’s done, you will go to Boston.”

I stand. My knees shake. I feel as though I might collapse. Liam takes my hand, holding it tightly.

If I follow this to the end, if I devote myself to finding the truth about what happened to my sister, then I have to be prepared to weather anything.

Even if the truth breaks me.

Chapter 35

Liam

Keely returns to Boston empty-handed. “Sorry I couldn’t be more help, but you’ve got one hell of a wife,” she says before she goes.

“I appreciate your help.”

The house feels quiet once she’s gone. Alisa promises not to leave the premises and doesn’t try to test her boundaries. Instead, she’s depressed, staying in our room for long stretches at a time. I try to lure her out with good meals, but she’s not interested in anything. Watching her spiral like this is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.

But there’s one way to fix this. At least there’s a path, and I have to take the steps myself, because I’m afraid Alisa can’t do it herself.

It takes a week to set up the meeting. Orin, Sean, and I work tirelessly, making phone calls, begging, threatening, cajoling. I offer promises of safety, cash bonuses, whatever I need to say to get everyone to agree.

But come Monday, the ten owners of the ten largest marijuana-producing farms in the state are seated around a conference room table in my lawyer’s office. It’s a solid, neutral third-party, and there are maybe two dozen unaffiliated lawyers and interns in the cubicles beyond all but guaranteeing everyone’s safety. Even I’m not stupid enough to break the law in front of a bunch of litigious dickheads.

“Thank you all for coming,” I say, standing at the head of the table.

The people before me aren’t what I first imagined. Some are grizzled, older

farmers, but most are relatively young and see themselves more as entrepreneurs and businessmen.

The owner of the largest farm in the region goes by Mac McElvay. He's in his fifties, thick gray beard, currently wearing a sleek black suit. "I'm only here to demand reparations for the crop you ruined," he says, glaring daggers. "Don't think we don't know that shit was you, Crowley."

I don't bother to deny it. "We'll get to that shortly."

"You really did it?" Another farmer speaks up. This one's a younger woman in her thirties named Tess Shame. Sleek black hair, severe straight nose. "You do realize I'm recording this?"

"I haven't admitted to anything," I say and hold up my hands before the others can break in. "Please, this is about more than your grievances."

"You burned millions worth of weed that night," Mac says, sounding pissed. Not that I can blame him. His fields took a heavy hit, and he might've lost out the most. "You're gonna call that a fucking grievance?"

"He's right," another farmer calls out. "We want to make this right."

I feel the room slipping. Their anger's feeding off each other. "Rustik Aslan's been stealing from you all for years. What I may or may not have done isn't important right now."

That gets their attention. The calls for my head quiet down at least.

Tess leans forward. "That seems pretty convenient for you, Mr. Crowley. Do you have any proof?"

I gesture at Sean and he hands out the files we prepared. "In each of those folders are pages which were found by Liliya Aslan, Rustik's late wife. I came across them in her father's study. He attempted to bury this information in order to curry favor with Rustik."

I watch as the group pages through the files. Some don't know what they're looking at. Others, like Mac and Tess, are smart enough to figure it out right away.

"How do we know this is real?" Mac asks. He sounds thoughtful now. At

least he's not actively trying to cut off my head.

"Check your records. You'll find proof in your own files. Rustik's been skimming money for a long time now, hiding his theft as fees, taxes, and various business expenses. But all that money tumbles into a black hole of shell corporations, all of which lead directly into his personal pockets. You all have trusted Rustik for a long time now, and I understand this will be hard to swallow, but he's been more interested in making himself rich than in running a legitimate business, and you're all victims of his greed."

The room's silent. They're all staring at me with varying expressions. Tess breaks the tension. "No kidding," she says. "Nobody in this room thought the Aslan family gave a damn about any of us."

"I only work with them because I have no other choice," Mac grumbles.

"Same with me," Tess agrees, and a few voices rise up to echo that sentiment. "I can handle doing business with Rustik. I may not like him or his methods, but we've all been fairly successful. I can pay tribute. However, what I can't abide, is outright theft."

More grumbling. I let them rile each other up for a moment, skimming the documents again. Getting really outraged.

Then I speak.

"The Crowley family has been doing business for longer than the Aslan family's been in this country. We know how to treat our partners fairly. We know how to have a mutually beneficial relationship. We don't steal from the people we work with. If any of you doubt that, ask around. I suspect some of you already have."

"You've got a good reputation," Mac concedes. "Well, maybe not *you*, but your organization."

"That's who you'd be working with," I tell him, which is mostly true. The second I can hand this fiasco off to Carson, I'll throw it in his lap like a burning hot coal. "My family will do everything the Aslan family currently does, but we won't steal from you. We don't need to. We want long-term, prosperous relationships."

I notice a few dubious looks. “We get it, you’ve got reach, but Rustik owns this town,” Tess points out. “Even if we wanted to get rid of him—”

“You let me worry about that. I’ll ask for one favor, and one favor only. The rest will be for me to handle.”

She looks uncertain. “We could just stop Rustik from stealing.”

“True, you could. But I can give you access to the East Coast markets. Marijuana will be legalized throughout the northeast, it’s only a matter of time, and you all will be uniquely positioned to move in with your mature product. I can ensure a smooth, even prioritized transition.”

“All we gotta do is grant you one favor?” Mac asks. There’s more murmuring among the assembled.

“Only the one,” I say, giving them my most charming smile. Waiting for someone to ask. The silence is filling up the room, the suspense thick and tightening.

“Which is?” Tess finally prompts.

And I know I have them.

Chapter 36

Alisa

I can't do much these days.

Wake up, shuffle to the bathroom, shuffle back to the bed. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle. Sunlight hurts my eyes. Noise hurts my ears. It's safest under my covers.

I think about Liliya in her final moments.

Hoping for a way out.

Was Papa there in the room? I don't think so. Whatever Papa did, that happened before Liliya got in the bath.

Did she know she was dying? Did Papa tell her to take all those pills? Did he force her on them?

I see my sister terrified and alone. Abandoned by her own father. Abused by her husband.

I was the last person she tried to reach, and I didn't know how bad things had gotten.

How could I have known?

But I could have.

I'm stuck in a self-reinforcing loop. I couldn't have known. I should have known. Over and over. Shuffle, back and forth. Shuffle, shuffle. My mind feels like a deck of cards flipping back over itself, never in the same position

twice.

Liliya's dead. She can't come back to explain herself.

Those emails said too much, but left out even more.

After a while, days probably, the door to the room opens. He's standing there. He's always there, always nearby. Coming and going. Checking on me, trying to help me, but I can't do much more than shuffle.

He comes to the bed. Sits on the edge. He brushes the hair from my face. "Alisa," he says. His voice is deep. He's beautiful, that beast. "It's time."

I know what he means. I put my head in his lap and he strokes my cheek. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Are you ready?"

I want to close my eyes. Instead, I stare at Liam.

"I don't know," I say. "I'm afraid. Is it okay that I'm afraid? I should be angry."

"It's okay that you're afraid. It's what you do while you're afraid that matters. Are you going to stay here? I can do this on my own."

"No." I force myself to sit up. I can't keep shuffling. I can't keep looping. Liliya is dead. But even alive, she wouldn't have wanted this. "No, I'm coming. He's my father."

"And don't forget that," Liam says.



HE HELPS ME SHOWER AND DRESS. IT'S INTIMATE. I FEEL PATHETIC. BUT IF HE minds, he doesn't show it.

When we're finished, I feel like half a person again, which is better than I've been. I follow him to the car and he drives himself while I sit in the passenger seat. Sean's following behind in an SUV filled with soldiers, not that I think we'll need them.

“Do you remember what we discussed?” Liam asks as he parks out front of my father’s office.

This building is so familiar. I worked here for a long time, but now it feels strange, like it’s been twisted by everything that has happened.

“I remember.”

“Be strong. I know you can do this.”

I follow him inside. The front office secretary’s a nice girl named Rachel. She seems a little awkward when I brush past her without an appointment. “My father won’t mind,” I say, flashing the poor girl a smile.

She has no clue what’s about to happen.

I meet other employees that I used to be friends with. It feels like I’ve been gone for years, though it’s only been a few months. I stop and make small talk, chatting very briefly, catching a glimpse of what my life could’ve been like if none of this had happened. Instead, Liliya is dead, I ran away from my wedding, I married Liam, and now I’m going to murder my father.

Papa’s in his office. His personal secretary doesn’t look happy as I continue on past her. “He’s on the phone,” she says in a weak attempt at stopping me.

I find my father staring out the window. There’s no call, nothing to indicate that he’s even busy. I shut the door behind me, and Liam keeps it closed with his foot.

Papa looks over. His face goes through confusion, anger, fear. “Alisa, Liam,” he says. “What are you two doing here?”

“We need to talk.” I approach my father. I want to be sick. I feel dizzy like my head’s disconnected from my body. I can almost stare down at the scene from the ceiling.

Papa clears his throat, looking uncomfortable. “We could’ve set a meeting, or had a call, or—”

“I went through your email.”

He looks confused. “You did what? I’m sorry—”

“I saw the messages between you and Liliya.”

I let that linger. He squirms slightly, leaning forward. Confusion dances in his expression, but I can almost taste his anxiety. This is an act, all an act.

He knows I know.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, but I don’t—”

“How fast was it?” I ask him, head cocked. “Did you mean for her to die? Or were you just trying to shut her up for a little while? Just buying time?”

He sits back in his chair. “I have no clue what you mean.”

“Liliya was going to leave Rustik. If she did that, he would’ve called on your debt, isn’t that right? That’s why she was married to him. Then on top of everything, she comes to you with documents proving that Rustik was stealing from his farmer partners. That’s when you came up with the plan, isn’t it?”

His face hardens. There’s still steel in my old man. Papa read me *The Art of War* when I was a little girl, after all.

“I don’t know where you’re getting this fantasy from.”

“It must’ve seemed like a gift. Bury the documents for Rustik. Curry more favor. Squirm your way out from under his thumb. Except I don’t understand why Liliya had to die. You could’ve let her go.”

Papa’s jaw works. “I had nothing to do with her death.”

“You were there. I saw the messages. You went to that house to collect those documents, or at least that’s why she invited you. But then you did something. Did she know she was taking the pills? Did you force her to swallow them?”

“Alisa,” he says, tone strained. “Stop this now.”

I look back at Liam. He only nods at me, face a passive mask, and I take strength from that.

“It was an accident. That’s my guess. You’ve fallen so far, Papa, but I don’t think you’d kill Liliya on purpose. I think you gave her too much, many too

many sleeping pills, and you panicked. You carried her into the bathroom. Put her in the tub. Did you take off her clothes? Or maybe she got herself there on her own after you left. Did you think she was already dead? Were you surprised when you learned she'd survived for a little while longer?"

"Please," he whispers, eyes shut. "Please stop."

"Tell the truth, Papa. I already know it was you. Rustik wasn't lying when he said he didn't kill Liliya. I didn't want to believe him, but it's all there, it's all so obvious. Tell the truth for once in your life, damn it, please, tell the truth for your poor dead daughter's sake, just tell me—"

"She wasn't supposed to die," he says, voice choked with rage and sorrow. His face is red and veins pop out in his neck. "I gave her the pills to help calm her down. I gave her too many and she fell asleep. I didn't think she was dead, but I left the bottle, and she must've woken up at some point. She must've taken more." He leans forward, his face in his hands. "I don't think she would've done it if the pills weren't there already. I thought I was helping. I wanted... I wanted to fix things. I gave her the pills, but she's the one that decided to finish off the bottle after I was gone. She must've gotten in the tub, swallowed the whole thing—"

I can't hear anymore. I take a step back, heart racing. "You're lying."

"I'm sorry," Papa says, crying. I've never seen him cry in my life. Not even at Liliya's funeral. "I'm so, so sorry. I never should've made her marry that man. I never should've asked you to do it too. I'm sorry."

I back away, shaking my head. This can't be real. It can't be. But it makes more sense. Papa could've have forced the pills down her throat, and he would've staged her in the tub if he had.

Liliya took them herself.

"It's still your fault," I say as a cold wave washes through me.

"No," he says, looking miserable.

"If you hadn't made her marry that man—if you hadn't given her the pills—if you had just tried to help her when she begged you for help—she wouldn't have killed herself. She'd still be with us. You forced her to take the most

extreme step.”

“No,” Papa shouts, getting to his feet. “No, you’re wrong, I didn’t—”

Then Liam’s in front of me. A cold, horrible statue, standing in front of Papa radiating pure loathing and madness. His voice comes out smooth. “Sit down,” he says.

Papa drops back into his chair, chastened, all his rage diminished.

I cry quietly into my hands. This isn’t how I thought it would happen. I thought we’d confront Papa, he’d admit to the crime, and I’d get my revenge.

Instead, this is so much worse.

Liliya did it. She might’ve been pushed to the edge by everyone around her, but she’s the one that did it in the end.

Liam says something to my father. I don’t hear it. I think he’s trying to protect me now. Eventually, Liam wraps his arms around me and steers me out of the office. We leave father behind, and Liam hurries me through the halls. I feel the stares, but I don’t give a damn. I left that life behind already, and I can do it again.

“I’m sorry,” my husband says once we’re finally outside. He holds me tight next to the car. “I’m so, so sorry, Alisa. I didn’t think that’s how this would go. I never would’ve brought you if I’d known.”

“It’s okay,” I say, trying to get control of myself. “This doesn’t change anything.”

He pulls back to look into my eyes. I stare at him, reaching deep into myself to find the smallest bit of resolve left. His head tilts. “Are you sure?” he asks.

“Papa killed her. Whether he forced the pills into her mouth or not, he killed her, and I want him to pay. I need him to pay, Liam.”

“If you ask this of me, I will do it for you.”

“I know.”

“Are you sure it’s what you want? You should think on it.”

“It’s what I want.”

He nods slowly. “Then I’ll do this for you, because I love you, Alisa. I know it’s not the right time to say it, but the woman I saw back in that office is strong and beautiful. She’s the kind of woman I want by my side for the rest of my life. I will give you whatever you want, for as long as you want it, I swear to you.”

I stand on my toes and kiss him.

I’m still a mess of emotions. Maybe I’m too vulnerable right now from what happened in there. But I want Liam like I’ve never wanted before. He’s solid, he’s real, and he’s the only person in my life that has only ever tried to do what’s best for me. Even if he makes mistakes and does things his own way.

We break apart and I stroke his cheek. “Thank you,” I say. “Please, when you kill my father, make it quick.”

“Whatever you want,” he says.

And I kiss him again.

Chapter 37

Liam

Tess stands by my side overlooking a burned-out field. It's nearly midnight, the waning moon still casting a gray light over the wreckage, the sky spattered with stars. "I want to be long gone before it happens," she says, her face grim.

"I'm going to be honest with you. I'm surprised you're willing to play a part in this at all."

She wrinkles her nose. "I'm more pragmatic than the rest of them. Besides, I'm still young, I have to think about my future."

"I could give you a bunch of easy platitudes about the Crowley family's gratitude, but I suspect you won't care about that."

"No, I won't. I care about money and opportunity."

"Then we're in agreement."

She grunts as she turns away. "Just make sure you clean up after yourself."

"What, you don't want him left behind? It might makes good fertilizer."

She doesn't respond as she walks off. I watch her go, my smile slowly fading. She's going to be a problem—the fact that she's aware of this operation at all is a massive risk. However, we do have written and verbal proof of her complicity, which means the Crowley family now owns her, whether she realizes it or not.

I turn off the recorder once she's gone and hand it over to Orin. "Make sure this is kept safe."

"Got it, boss." He pauses, squinting in the dark. "You're sure he'll show?"

"He's in a bad spot right now. He won't be able to resist."

Orin nods, looking thoughtful. I leave him there and walk back toward the field. Sean falls in beside me. The ground crunches with remnants of old, charred weed plants, each step taking me deeper into the wrecked wasteland.

Nobody speaks. My soldiers are hidden all over, camouflaged with black blankets and half buried in the dirt. I crouch down once we reach the designated position, and Sean does the same. We're both in dark clothes, and I raise a pair of night-vision binoculars to my eyes, scanning the far side of the fields closest to the road.

Tension heightens. My heartrate remains slow and steady like always before a fight. This is a gamble and a massive risk, but I can't keep letting this war drag on and on. It's bleeding me, not killing me, but causing enough pain that I'm beginning to get uncomfortable.

Worst of all, it's hurting Alisa.

She doesn't want to hide away in Boston, and I can't blame her. If I were in her position, I'd rage too. Except this is what's best for her safety and for the baby, and we're at the point where I can't keep letting her put herself and our child at risk.

These are the sacrifices we have to make. Even if they hurt.

And there's more pain to come.

"There," I say, handing the binoculars to Sean.

Down on the road, headlights stab through the blackness. The cars rumble forward then stop, pulling off to park in the grass. Sean counts quietly. "Fourteen in total."

"He packed them in," I say. "How well armed?"

"Well enough." He hands the binoculars back to me.

Fourteen men are spread out around the cars, including Rustik. They begin toward the field, the bulk of his warriors splitting off from the main group to check for danger and screen their boss's arrival.

My fighters are out there. Forty in all, every man I could pull together on short notice, including some of my best. Tonight, I have to trust in them.

Rustik's entourage gets closer. They angle toward where Sean and I are crouched in the darkness. He can make us out, but I don't think he recognizes us yet. They slow before they get into range, obviously worried about a trap.

But there's nowhere for him to go now. They're too far from the cars to escape, and there are at least fifteen men between them and the road.

Slowly, I stand up, drawing myself to my full height. "Rustik," I call out. My voice sounds harsh in the otherwise cold silence.

Nobody moves. His men raise weapons, all of them aimed at me. If they open fire now, I might not make it. While I'm in a bullet-proof vest, one lucky headshot would end everything.

But instead, Rustik comes forward. "Liam," he says. "I thought I was here to meet with my unruly farmers."

"You're not."

He comes close enough that I can see his expression. It's grim, and his eyes dart around the dark. He knows what's happening, and he knows there's nothing he can do to stop it now.

"How did you turn them?"

"All I had to do was show them the truth of what you are, and offer them a better deal. That was enough."

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. I keep myself on my toes. Cornered animals are the most dangerous. "I knew this felt wrong. When that bitch said she wanted to show me what you did to her fields, but she wanted to do it in the middle of the night so we could safely discuss business without any prying eyes—" He stops himself. "She told me half the farmers in my stable would be here."

“She lied,” I say with a vague gesture. “And now you have a choice to make.”

Nobody moves. Rustik’s men look uncomfortable. If they haven’t figured out what’s going to happen, they will shortly.

“You’re alone out here,” he says. “I outnumber you.”

“Please, don’t be pathetic. We both know that isn’t true.”

Another silence. I feel every eye in the field locked on me, waiting for the signal.

“What do you want?” Rustik asks. “I’m more useful to you alive.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Maybe that would’ve been true a few weeks ago, but you made it abundantly clear that you aren’t interested in being a worthwhile partner.”

“That was before.”

“Before what? Before I outmaneuvered you? Here’s the thing, Rustik. If you had just tried to kill me, I could work with that. I understand how these things go. But you hurt my wife. You hurt the mother of my child. And that I cannot abide.”

His eyes widen. “She’s pregnant? You’re serious about her?”

“Unfortunately for you, yes, I am very serious about her.”

I raise my hand and drop it, and suddenly a dozen shapes appear in the darkness.

Hell breaks loose. I hit the ground the moment my men appear. Gunfire erupts, tearing into Rustik’s entourage. I fire at the man himself, catching him in the chest. He screams in rage, growling his frustration as he tries to level his weapon at me, but I fire again, again, again, and the bastard drops to the blackened earth.

The shooting continues. There are a few scattered pockets of resistance as Rustik’s scouting party gets caught one-by-one and murdered. But once they’re all down, I stalk through the field, checking on my men. I lost three,

and more are wounded, but overall, we came through as unscathed as possible.

Rustik's corpse lies at my feet. Sean joins me, holding a bloodied arm. When I gesture at it, he only waves me off and points at my rival's body. "What should we do with that?"

"Nothing special. Dispose of it."

"You don't want to make an example of him?"

"And do what, put it on a spike outside of my castle? No, toss him in a very deep pit with the rest of this trash and make sure nobody ever finds him. The city will know what happened."

"There's going to be heat."

"We'll weather it. Everyone here gets a bonus and a free trip back to Boston. Make the bonus very worth their risk."

"Understood." Sean turns away, heading out to speak with the men.

I drift back toward where we parked the cars on the far side of the farm, hidden behind the outbuildings. If Tess and the other farmers hadn't turned, there's no way I would've been able to lure Rustik into a trap like this. But that's the beautiful thing about leverage: find a little and amazing things can happen.

I survey the carnage. All the bodies, all the lost lives. The war is over—at least, more or less. The Aslan Bratva likely won't crumble, but their new leader won't be stupid enough to keep going down Rustik's doomed path. They'll come to the table, and I'll work out a truce that heavily favors me and my family. Perhaps I'll even make them vassals.

But most of all, Alisa is now safe.

In years past, winning a stunning and brutal victory like this would've fed my ego and soothed my anxiety for months to come. I would've reveled in defeating my foes and viciously taking what I sought to control.

Instead, all I can think of is my wife.

Keeping her home.

Giving her what she wants.

It's obscene, this sudden need I have for that girl.

But it's real, and despite my best efforts, I can't seem to make it stop.

And so, instead of drinking in the sweet scent of my enemy's blood on the ground, I walk back to my car and drive home.

Chapter 38

Alisa

“**Y**ou smell like smoke again.” I gaze at him across the bed, blinking sleep away.

“I really did shower twice.”

“I believe you.” I sit up, rubbing my face, then lean closer to him. I’m exhausted from staying up all night, sick with worry. He made the mistake of telling me what he planned on doing last night, and while it sort of comforted me knowing that Rustik was about to die, it also freaked me out. “I was pretty terrified, you know.”

“Of what?”

“Losing you.” I laugh at the absurdity of the words. “Which doesn’t make sense, since I’ve thought about strangling you myself maybe a hundred times since we met.”

“Ah, my sweet wife, you’re fond of me, aren’t you?”

“I would say that I’ve grown very tolerant.”

“And yet here I am, sick with want for you.” He comes closer, that beautiful man with his intense, lovely eyes, and those lips. Those amazing lips. He kisses me gently. “Does that bother you?”

“No,” I say. “Not really.”

“Not really?” His smirk is like a velvet whip. “Come now, princess. Tell me

you like when I tease you.”

“And let you win? Absolutely not.” He laughs as he pins me back down on the bed. “What happened last night?”

“Rustik is no longer a problem.”

I stare up into his eyes then push against his grip so I can kiss him. He returns that kiss greedily, happily. Anxiety and fear slowly melts away as Liam’s lips move back to my neck.

“Does this mean I can stay?” I whisper, shivering with ecstasy.

“Yes, it does.”

“And you’ll let me help you build this business?”

“Yes, I will. I suspect I’ll need you. The easy part is over.”

I laugh, dizzy with excitement. Suddenly, my world is shifting again. I thought he was going to keep me locked away in a strange city surrounded by strange people, but instead I get to stay in my home and work, finally work.

“How was that easy?”

“Killing men is simple. Building alliances, balancing politics, this is going to be the complicated part. And we’ll have to do it while the police breathe down our necks for a while. They won’t like it when a dozen Aslan Bratva members disappear so suddenly.”

“You’d think the police would be happy that a bunch of criminals are gone.”

“Only to be replaced with new ones.” He kisses me softly, biting my bottom lip. “But we can talk business later. I feel like I haven’t properly had my wife in too long.”

“You *had* me yesterday.”

“Like I said, too long.”

I laugh as he pulls me on top of him, and I submit to his desires.



THREE WEEKS LATER, THE FIRST DELIVERY SHOWS UP. “IF YOU CAN PUT THE desks in each of the offices, that’d be great,” I tell the furniture guys. “And that desk in the corner is for my husband.”

The guys get to work. I stand back, watching as the space begins to fill, turning what was once a murder-scene-movie-set into a proper work area. Now, when business associates come in for a meeting, they’ll be less likely to wonder if we’re about to duct tape them to the ceiling and torture them to death.

Though there hasn’t been any killing since the night Rustik died.

“Okay, wife, you convinced me.” Liam leans into my office, a sly smile on his face.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say, batting my eyelashes at him.

“I saw your gift.”

“Gift?”

“The desk.” He drifts closer, arms crossed. “It’s a nice desk.”

“It’s more than *nice*. It’s a vintage executive desk, once used by GE’s Jack Welch himself.”

Liam’s eyebrows raise. “How’d you manage that?”

“Unlimited Crowley money. Also got lucky and saw it go up for auction at Christie’s. I got the rest of this stuff in the same lot.”

“You are nothing if not thrifty.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you saw the bill.”

He laughs and comes over, bending down to kiss me. “What, are you trying to turn this into some sort of legitimate operation?”

“That would involve having a legitimate boss. Unfortunately, we’re stuck with you.”

“You should consider yourself lucky, my darling.”

“But seriously, we do need some employees. Things are starting to move.”

“Thank to our favorite farmer, Ms. Tess.” He sits down on the edge of my desk.

“Once she fell into line, the others followed. What did you say to make her so amenable, by the way?”

He shrugs, looking at his nails. “I made her an offer she couldn’t refuse.”

“What a lovely mobster you are.” I stand, draping my arms around his neck. He holds me by the hips. “I want ten new members of our team. And we’re going to need accountants.”

“Anything you desire.”

“My favorite words.” I kiss him gently.

“Only I have one thing I need in return.” He tightens his grip. “We need to return to Boston.”

“For what?” I ask. We’ve already been back once to visit with his mother and his brother. Carson was unhappy about how things played out, but couldn’t argue with the results.

“Our wedding.”

I stare at him, not sure if he’s joking. “We’re already married.”

“You said you wanted a ceremony. You wanted to feel like a princess. Well, I’m going to give you the biggest, most elaborate day imaginable, and you really will feel like royalty as the most important people in the country bow down at your feet. At least for a day.”

I stare at him, not sure what to say. My lips move, but nothing comes out. He looks a little worried, so I kiss him hard.

“You like it,” he whispers when I pull back.

“I love it,” I say, fighting tears. “You’re really serious about this?”

“I’m already making plans. You have a month to get everything together, then we’re going to Boston and getting married for real.”

“Do you want my input?”

“If you want to be involved, but I hired a team of obscenely expensive wedding planners to make sure everything is perfect.”

I grin at him, my stomach bubbling with excitement.

This is more than I ever dreamed possible.

More than I ever thought I'd have.

“I love you,” I whisper. “I'd love you even without the wedding planners.”

“I know.”

I kiss him again and hold him tight, hugging his broad chest, feeling his steady heartbeat against my cheek.

Chapter 39

Alisa

I stand outside the venue watching Boston traffic pass. Orin's next to me, looking anxious. "We should be inside," he says, shifting from foot to foot, but doesn't argue when I wave him off.

Orin's my personal secretary now. Also a very good friend.

It's confusing, but it works.

"I just want to enjoy this for a second," I say, breathing in deep.

I feel beautiful. It's weird, but I've never really *felt* this before, but today it's like everything has conspired to make me perfect. Hair, makeup, the dress—the freaking *dress*, this beautiful tulle-and-lace dress from a rising-star French designer—everything's exactly how I pictured it when I was a little girl.

"Not many people get this, you know," I say. I turn, expecting to see Orin—

But instead, Liam's standing there.

He looks incredible. Suit impeccably tailored, shoes shined, hair slicked back just so. I laugh, putting my hand to my chest.

"You deserve it," he says. "After what the world's put you through? You deserve a thousand nights like this."

"And are you going to provide them?"

"I'll sure as hell try." He steps up to my side. Behind us, an enormous hotel in downtown Boston is completely empty right now, the *entire structure*

rented out by the Crowley family. Guests include senators, pop stars, police chiefs, everyone I know from back home, and all the other Crowley wives. Keely, Dara, Ash. My new sisters.

I lean against his shoulder. Behind us, the hotel's full of happy guests just beginning the night's festivities. We did a beautiful private ceremony earlier in the day at the oldest church in Boston, and now it's time to cut loose. I won't be drinking, for obvious reasons, but I can already tell this is going to be one crazy party.

And I'm the center of attention.

But for right now, I want to enjoy the relative quiet, the deep breath before running a marathon.

"We can leave, you know," he whispers, sounding sly. "I have the nicest room in the best hotel in the city reserved for the next week. We can go get the honeymoon started."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Only if it would make you happy."

I shake my head, smiling. "We can't disappoint the guests. Besides, Keely would murder me if I didn't dance with her."

"I suspect all the girls feel that way."

"I like them, you know. Keely and Ash and Dara, but also your brothers and your mother. I think they're good people."

He's quiet for a moment. I can tell what he's thinking.

Good and *Crowley* are not words that get mixed up often, unless someone's saying how skilled his organization is at killing.

But he seems contemplative. When he speaks, it's like his voice is far away. "Are we good? We take care of our family, protect the people we love, defend those in our organization. I would murder a man for you, Alisa. Does that make me good? My brothers would do the same for their wives. Are they good? I don't think the word has meaning when it comes to people like us. To be good requires more than self-preservation. More than I can offer at

least. No, I think the word falls short. We aren't good. But we are Crowleys, and we protect our own."

I take his hand, squeezing it. "That's good enough for me."

"I meant to tell you earlier, but I suppose now is a good time. I took care of your father."

I don't reply right away. I know what he means. My father is gone. I should feel something: relief, joy, sadness. Instead, my father is only a cold emptiness in my guts. "Do I want to know the details?"

"No, but I'll tell you, if you ask."

I raise his hand to my lips and kiss it. "No. Thank you."

"That's what I mean when I say I'm not a good person. But I do love you very much." He looks down, the corners of his lips pulling into a slight smile. A rare sight from Liam. "Should we go inside before I get even more introspective?"

"Please, this philosophizing is bumming me out."

"Wouldn't want to damper your big day."

I get on my toes and kiss him. "Thank you. And I love you. And if you're not good, at least you're mine."

"That's all I need."

We hold hands as we head back into the party.

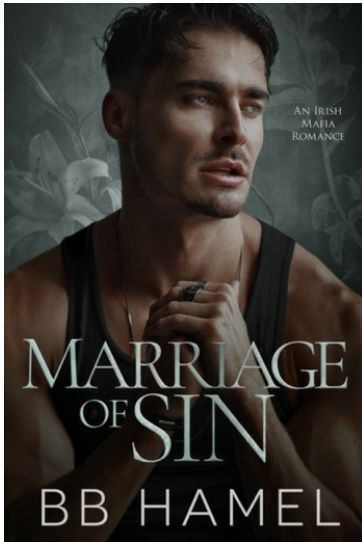
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Preview: Marriage of Sin



Chapter One: Dara

There is no way in the world I can face my bank account sober.

But I also need to make sure I can afford to drink before I go into this bar and drown all my problems in overpriced wine.

I take a deep breath as I thumb through my phone. Around me, traffic buzzes along Boylston Street in downtown Boston, kicking up fumes. Young couples sit outside of bars talking in the early evening shade cast by enormous office and apartment buildings, dads push strollers, old people walk dogs, and here I am a few blocks away from where I work sitting on a bench beside a scraggly tree about to find out just how bad my life's gotten.

Is this rock bottom? Let's find out.

I unlock my banking app, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open them again.

Zero dollars stare back. Zero in checking, zero in savings.

My heart sinks into my feet. Zero, zero, zero. Nothing across the board. I knew it would be bad—but this is so much worse than I ever could've

imagined.

“Lucas, you motherfucker,” I whisper, horror and anger warring against sorrow.

I really wish I bought that drink first.

But at least I didn’t sit through the indignity of my card getting declined.

This wasn’t how I thought today would end. I figured it wouldn’t be great—getting woken up at six in the morning by my roommate and the man I thought I was going to marry, only to find out that they’ve been sleeping together behind my back, and oh, yeah, they’re in love, that’s not easy.

That was a pretty spectacularly horrendous way to start the day.

But it somehow took a nosedive at five-thirty when I was leaving the office, only to get a text.

Lucas: I’m so sorry about this morning.

Lucas: And I’m so sorry about the money and your things.

Lucas: It’s just, I’m in love with Christine, but we’re both broke. You’ll be OK, right? You have that amazing job. You’ll be fine.

I stared at my phone for the five-block walk to a local bar called Trevi’s before I finally worked up the nerve to find out what he meant by *the money*.

Which is why I’m staring at a bunch of big, fat zeroes.

I open the messages app and start texting furiously.

Dara: You emptied my bank account???

Dara: And what do you mean my things????

Dara: Lucas, you piece of shit, what did you do????????

I’m in full-on panic mode. I knew Lucas was a monster, but I never imagined he would sink this low. When we met in school, he was a lovable dork, a guy that loved cheap beer, football, and bad horror movies. I fell for him when he rubbed my feet during a marathon of Halloween movies.

I thought he was the one. Lucas isn't anything exciting, but he's been dependable, always there for me, always asking how my day went, always offering those lovely foot rubs of his.

So what if there weren't fireworks? There weren't nuclear bombs? It was steady. Comfortable.

Now it's like my skin's been peeled off, leaving me raw.

I'm about to call my ex when I hear my name called out. I flinch, look up, and find my manager, Johnnie, standing a few feet away flanked by a couple of Patagonia Bros in matching vests I don't recognize.

"What are you doing all alone out here?" Johnnie asks, flashing me his patented Country Club Smile. He runs a hand through his wavy hair. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you outside of work, Dar."

I grimace at the nickname. Nobody calls me Dar except for Lucas, even though I've asked him not to half a dozen times. "I was about to get a drink actually," I say quickly, glancing down at my phone. The screen remains dead and quiet. No reply from the piece of crap that ruined my life. I'm thinking about calling the police, about getting the FBI involved, but mostly about tracking him down myself and killing him with my bare hands.

But I know it won't help.

Because whether I catch Lucas and strangle the life from him or not, my heart's still broken.

And my bank account's still empty.

"You should come with me, Patagonia Bro 1, and Patagonia Bro 2 over to McNally's. Come on, Dar, you seem fun. Let's have a good time, yeah?"

He doesn't actually say *Patagonia Bro*, but I blank out their names on purpose. I don't have time for this, but Johnnie's my manager at a heavily male dominated accounting firm, which means I have to smile, bat my eyelashes, and play nice. Otherwise, they call me a bitch behind my back, and I don't get promotions or raises.

"Sorry, I'm meeting a friend," I lie, shifting uncomfortably. "Otherwise, I'd

totally come.”

“A guy friend?” Johnnie sits next to me while his Patagonia Cronies leer at me, both of them grinning, like this is totally normal behavior. Johnnie’s breath reeks like liquor. Did he cut out early and start drinking or something? “What’s his name? Actually, don’t worry, it’s fine. I just figured, you know, since there’s a vibe here, it might be fun to explore it outside of a professional setting.”

His eyes are glassy as he glances down at my tits. Yep, definitely shitfaced.

“I’m sorry,” I say, blinking rapidly. “A vibe? What are you talking about?”

“Ah, damn, don’t get all feminist on me, okay, Dar? It’s just, I notice the way you look at me when you come into my office. I notice the blouses with the top two buttons undone? You’re pretty hot, you know? A solid six, but you could be an eight if you worked out more. You wear some borderline inappropriate attire, but nobody cares because you have absolutely *fantastic* tits.”

I feel like my head’s about to explode.

Johnnie’s always been a prick. He’s one of those Nantucket Assholes with a trust fund the size of Georgia and a yacht to match. He only has this job because his uncle’s a founding partner. Johnnie’s got fewer brain cells than my bank account has dollars, which is still zero, by the way.

“There’s absolutely no vibe,” I say quickly, standing up. “And you have to be absolutely fucking batshit *insane* to talk about my clothes and my fucking tits right now.”

Under normal circumstances, I’d never talk to a vindictive little prick like Johnnie like that, but I’m way past my last nerve, basically working on reserve nerves at this point, and I’m lashing out.

Johnnie’s face falls. His Patagonia Cronies stare at him like they’re about to laugh—which makes his face turn a disturbing shade of pink.

“You fucking bitch,” he says, standing up to stare down at me. “You do realize I’m your manager, right?”

There it is. I was waiting for that. The threat in his tone is clear.

“I’m not in the mood for this,” I say, shaking my head. “Just leave me alone, okay? I’ll pretend you didn’t just say the most asinine, sexist thing in the world, and you can swallow your pride for once in your life.”

“Fuck that,” he says quietly. “You can’t talk to me that way.”

In all my time at Bankman Associates, I’ve held my tongue. I’ve kept my head down, smiled politely, nodded at inane comments, laughed at inappropriate jokes. I’ve done all the things women have to do in a toxic workplace environment. I’ve done it, because the job pays exceedingly well, and I was raised to value money more than anything else.

More than my own self-esteem, apparently.

But this is too far.

Ten hours ago, I had a boyfriend.

A nice boyfriend. Nothing spectacular, but still. A guy I thought was going to propose soon. We had plans, long-term plans. We were merging financial assets. I had a lot of hard-earned money saved in the bank, ready to be spent on a wedding, or a down payment for a house, or maybe on baby clothes and a crib.

Now, I’m twenty-four years old, and I have none of that.

Instead, a white-hot rage (admittedly pointless and impotent) burns in my belly.

I jab a finger at Johnnie. “Listen to me, you walking stock option. I need you to apologize right now. I need you to accept the consequences of your actions, because other people have feelings. You realize that, right? You can’t go around saying whatever you want, fucking whatever moves, stealing whatever you need, throwing away whatever you don’t care about, cheating on me with my fucking roommate, all because you’re a selfish piece of fucking *trash*.”

I’m projecting here.

A little bit, anyway.

Johnnie's gaze darkens. "You just crossed a line, Dar," he says through his teeth. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but you're *not* going to get away with embarrassing me in front of my bros."

He grabs my arm. I stare as his fingers dig into my flesh, biting down hard. I yelp, more from shock than from pain, but he doesn't let me go.

I start to freak out.

Johnnie's a big guy, easily over six feet. His Patagonia Cronies are also tall, both of them looking like they're from Abercrombie catalogues, like they're one step away from the polo club, and neither seem to mind that their friend is publicly manhandling a girl.

This is getting out of control very quickly.

At least until a shadow appears at Johnnie's side.

"You should let her go." The voice is low and resonant with malice.

A man's standing there. Stubble on his chin. Big hands balled into fists. A pristine suit, slim fitting.

I stare at the stranger, at the tall, broad, athletically built man, as a terrified pulse shivers down my spine.

He's handsome. Sinful, absurdly handsome. Like, beyond inappropriately handsome. Dark, wavy hair pushed back in a lazy sweep. High cheekbones, tanned skin, blue eyes like early morning frost. A reddish beard clings to his cheeks, trimmed, but somehow still unruly. He's in a suit, black and tailored to his muscular frame.

Holy hell, this guy is *hot*.

Stupidly hot. Like he's a very unnecessary distraction.

Johnnie's eyes bulge. For a second, I don't think he's going to release me. I imagine he'll use me as a human shield.

Instead, his grip slackens, then disappears. "Who the fuck are you?" Johnnie snaps.

The stranger looks at me for a beat before saying, "I'm her boyfriend."

Oh my god.

What the *hell* is this guy doing?

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