

K.L. TAYLOR LANE

Winn

Swallows and Savages
book 1

RUIN

SWALLOWS AND SAVAGES

BOOK ONE

K.L. TAYLOR-LANE

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Charlie Swallow is a savage.

After killing his brother to save his soulmate, someone who wasn't even his to keep. He is lost.

With nothing left to fight for, he finds himself back in the arms of his enemy. A man who is just as brutal, just as sinister, just as savage, but understands Charlie in a way that no one else ever has.

Until something turns up in one of Charlie's shipping yards. Something that changes everything.

A girl in a cage.

PLAYLIST

Today I Saw The Whole World (Acoustic Version) – Pierce
The Veil

barely bleeding – nothing.nowhere

Kiss Me Again – Henry

SILENCE – Siickbrain

That's All – Skitz Kraven

Closer – Nine Inch Nails

We're All Gonna Die – Underoath

Dead From The Start – Kill The Lights

It Was Skitz – Skitz Kraven

Animal I Have Become – Three Days Grace

Heathens – Twenty One Pilots

Nightmares In Paradise – Palaye Royale

break me! – Maggie Lindemann

Sick Like Me – In This Moment

Hurts Like Hell – Tommee Profitt

Puppet – Stain the Canvas

Come Home – OneRepublic

(sic) – Slipknot

The Virus of Life – Slipknot

Constant – The Haunt

ROC SH!T – UnityTX

A Girl Like You – Machine Gun Kelly

Get A Life – Limp Bizkit

Prisoner - Raphael Lake

Enough, Enough Now – Bad Omens

Eyes Closed – Halsey

*If you've ever dreamed of being collared, caged, and fucked in
blood...*

This one's for you.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is book one in a trilogy. It **does** end on a cliffhanger.

Please be aware this book contains **many** dark themes and subjects that may be uncomfortable/unsuitable for some readers. This book contains **very** heavy themes throughout so please heed the warning and go into this with your eyes wide open.

For more detailed information, please see pinned posts on the author's socials.

The characters in this story all deal with trauma and problems differently, the resolutions and methods they use are not always traditional and therefore may not be for everyone.

This book is written in British English. Therefore, some spellings, words, grammar and punctuation may be used differently than what you are used to. If you find anything you think is a genuine error, please do not report, instead, please contact the author or one of her team to correct it. Thank you!

This book and its contents are entirely a work of fiction. Any resemblance or similarities to names, characters, organisations, places, events, incidents, or real people is entirely coincidental or used fictitiously.

*Ruin is a dark, mafia, captive, gothic, MMF romance. Please read with caution, the characters in this book do not and will

not conform to society's standards or normalities. This trilogy
will have a *happy ever after*.*

See full content listing in the back of this book.

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A few Russian words and their translation used within this
book -

Spasibo - Thank you

Malysh - baby boy, baby, little one

Yebat' - fuck

Duraki - fools

Dyadya - Uncle

PROLOGUE

BEFORE

Chains clinking drills into my eardrums, carving away fragments of bone as the drill bit twists its way into my skull.

It is constant.

It is haunting.

It is death.

His movements are slowing now. Muscles likely burning. Bones aching. Tired, after being kept awake for five long days.

Forced sleep deprivation is known to drive its victims insane. Slowly. We have time. We wait. We will not rush in continuing our torment. It is better when it is drawn out. It pleases my father.

The suffering.

The wall at my back, beneath the pressed palms of my hands, curled points of my fingertips, is damp. Cold concrete coated in a fine layer of mildew, moisture seeping into my clothes where I am flush against it. It fills my lungs, the mouldy scent. It is unpleasant, but it is a welcome reprieve above the swirling smell of vomit, shit, and piss permeating the icy air.

Strip bulbs illuminate the black painted corridor, emitting a cool blue hue; it makes the temperature of the space feel even

colder. There is no warmth down here, regardless of how close we exist to Hell.

My shoulder blades grate against the rough concrete through my thin cotton t-shirt. I welcome the distraction of it, the snagging of the fabric, it detracts a little from the pain lower down. Bloody lashes over the base of my spine, split skin sticking to the white fabric from my father's lashings. It felt wrong to clean them up. Knowing that I *can*. Unlike *him*.

I hear it again, *him*, the clanking of his chains against the bars of his cage.

I stay pressed against the wall for hours, listening to him.

The rasp of his shallow breath, the clanging of his chains, the whimpers he tries to hide lodging in his shackled throat. And then finally, there is silence and I pray it is his death.

CHAPTER I

CHARLIE

Grey-green eyes pierce mine across the expanse of wet tarmac. A curl to one corner of her wicked mouth, a flash of white teeth bright in the dark, beneath the dim orange glow of a street lamp.

I want to break her jaw.

Extract those pretty, little pearls from her perfectly pink gums. Put them in a jar, set it on my shelf, smile at it under the glowing red bulbs in my basement room. Her jar would be the prettiest, beside other glass vials filled with pieces of her. Those eyes, too big for her face, I'd separate those into two containers, set them at different ends of the room, have them watch me wherever I go. She would never be able to get rid of me then. Always watching me as I am her.

My younger brother shifts beside me, making too much noise as he rustles around in one of his many trouser pockets for sweets. Slowly, I roll my eyes onto him, glancing down at his hand, his elbow brushing my jean-clad thigh as he dips forward to reach in further, trying to unearth something in the very bottom. Then I look to his face, tongue pinched between his teeth as he digs around for whatever it is he's trying to find.

And then he stops. Finding me watching him.

Slowly, bright emerald eyes still on mine, he lifts his hand from his pocket, straightening up as he retracts his hand, shifting until he's fully upright. Then he slaps his hand over his open mouth, the clinking of hard-shelled sweets rattling his

teeth. My eyes narrow on instinct, the noise he's making makes me grind my teeth in irritation. Eli swallows hard, flashing me a grin and extending his tongue, showing me he's done. I think about cutting it off, quickly deciding that he will make even more noise if I do. So reluctantly, I unclench my fingers from around the grip of my knife and turn my head away from him.

He huffs a laugh, making my fingers flex at my waistband, a multitude of sharp weaponry at my disposal, but movement catches my eye, pulling my attention to the real threat. My gaze flicks to the trespassing shadow creeping their way across my shipping port.

I glance up from our hiding spot behind a pile of wooden crates, the dock to my left, storage units stacked high on my right, cranes towering high above it all. I slip out into the shadows, the only thing noticeable about me is my white blonde hair, and despite my chest being bare, the dark ink covering my skin works well as a camouflage.

My footsteps are silent, black combat boots laced tightly around my ankles, black skinny jeans tucked inside. I stalk like a predator, following not more than three-feet away, yet the hooded figure feels nothing. Not my presence, not an instinctual desire to turn, check over their shoulder, search the shadows for a threat. They are almost too confident, the way in which I follow them as they stomp through murky puddles, their steps heavy, gait wide. There is nothing about their movements that makes me think they're trying to hide. It spikes the hair on the back of my neck. My skin prickling with awareness.

I stop as they reach a red shipping container, having followed them through a maze of pathways, they have direction, knew where they were heading. Not their first time here.

Concerning.

I wait until they unlock the padlock looped through a chain on the doors. And then I shift closer. Feeling *her* closing in on my back. I don't look. I stop almost flush with the figure

before me, their hands stilling, finally sensing the predator at their back.

I lean in, hands loose, “What are you doing?” I rasp, thick and rough, pressure on my vocal cords even with the whisper.

The hooded figure jumps, head attempting to turn, I slam the heel of my palm into the side of their jaw, smashing them with my full body into the metal container. An almighty crash sounds, echoing in the damp open space as I crush them to the doors. A man, I realise, as I press myself into them, bony shoulder blades digging into my chest. I inhale their scent, tobacco, sweat, sniff hard, and then whip them around to face me, slamming them into the doors as I widen my stance, tearing back the hood hiding them in shadow.

Wide brown eyes, sickly pale skin, *fear*. I inhale it deeper, my eyes blurring with the loss of focus.

Fear, fear, fear.

Like a chant it drills through my head.

Why so scared, little bird?

Fingers curling into the sweat-soaked hoodie, I tear the man forward, slamming him back into the metal, it groans and creaks with a whine as I do. And then *she* steps up beside me. The ghost-like touch of her shaking fingertips, razing over my bare spine. A nerve-damaged hand, white scars snake like vines over her long fingers, twisting over the back of her hand, up her wrist, inner forearm. I picture them perfectly inside my head.

Know her so well.

Mine.

“Who are you?” her voice, Kyla-Rose, cousin, the other half of me, *soulmate*, whispers over my shoulder to our trespasser, breath warm on the side of my neck.

My palm is flat to the stranger’s sternum, I have never seen him before. He quakes beneath my hand. Vibrating my fingers. *So scared*. Warmth flutters in my chest.

I do nothing. Holding him still. My head cocks, tongue licking quickly over my top lip. Eyes flaring wide for just a moment and then I scent one of *them*. *Her* lovers. Knocking the stranger once more into the corrugated steel at his back, I take a step back, separating myself.

Have to.

Survival.

I continue to unnerve the stranger my cousin questions, her boy Kacey at her side. Big, broad, muscular, gold hair, gold eyes, fighter. I think of fists. Of blood. Of screams. Teeth hitting the mat. Blood splatter, spray, spit.

I blink.

I'm not listening. Don't care about reasons. Trespassers mean death. At my hands. Blood. Bones. Break them.

Such a violent little bird.

Eli's hand plants on my shoulder, eyes that mirror my own stare back at me, glistening emeralds in the dark.

"You good, bro?" I nod, silently, glancing left as the sound of footsteps disappearing finally hits my ears. "They're taking them back to the house." A statement, fingers tightening on my shoulder. *I want to cut them off.* "Warehouse holding?" I nod again, and he finally releases me, stepping back and following.

I stare at the unlocked doors, chain and padlock still looped through them. I step forward, pulling one end of them, the metal slithering as they slip free, coiling as the links hit the ground makes my insides knot. I can hear them now, the clanking, the memory echoing, metallic taste on my tongue. I swallow, curl my tattooed fingers around the handle of the door and wrench it open.

The smell makes me cough, splutter almost, and memories assault me one by one as they tear through my mind. Everything goes black. My knees hit the floor. *His* blue eyes sparkle in my head and I choke up bile. Spitting blindly as my fingers curl into wet tarmac. I grit my teeth so hard they squeak. Eyes wide open, I see nothing. Hear nothing. Sirens

bolt through my skull, panic floods my chest, my lungs seize and I rip my nails as I scrape them into the ground.

Then I feel her.

Light.

Warmth.

Her body curling over my back. I tremble. The smell hits again, lesser than before. I'm ready for it this time. Shit. Piss. Blood. Rot. I wrinkle my nose. Blink.

“Off.”

She slides away, tentative steps taking her back. No one else is around when I look.

“Nobody saw,” Kyla-Rose’s big grey eyes stare up into mine, scar licking up her face into her hairline. “No one else came back with me.” I nod, swallowing. Then I turn back to the half open door. “Charl,” she whispers against the bare skin of my back, tattoos of us inked into my skin, skeletal swallows, roses, eyeballs, thorns. “Smells like decay,” she mutters, and I know without looking back that she’s wincing.

“Smells like your son’s nappies, Lala,” I rasp, a curl to my lips as she swats at my back, he’s almost five now, he’s not in them anymore, but I do enjoy getting under her skin.

“Funny.”

I step closer, her warmth at my spine, close but not touching.

“Actually, Charl, I need to talk to you about someth-” she starts but she doesn’t finish because I tear the door back, the smell making us both hack a cough.

My eyes water, burning, but I push forward, into the darkness, I blink, eyes already somewhat adjusted to the dark. My steps are silent on the tin floor, stacks of boxes I have no interest in searching piled high. Hiding something. Strategic placement, but there’s a pathway through. Someone has been here. The trespasser. I’ll find out.

I step around a tower of crates. The smell growing stronger and stronger the further I venture inside the container. I hear nothing but the sound of my own heartbeat pulsing in my ears, the tips of them surely red. I stop. Still. Dead in my tracks. Kyla-Rose steps in beside me after a moment, back of her hand to her nostrils, I hear her gag, contained in her throat, then a flare of light from her other hand.

“Holy. *Fuck.*” she splutters out on a choked whisper, but I hardly hear it, my throat burning, my neck itching, hot and irritated. “Is that...” she trails off, not really a question because we can both see it.

What it is. Revealed beneath the torchlight.

A person.

In a cage.

The beam of light is blinding to look at, but Lala roves it slowly from the body’s head down. Tangled, matted hair, dark brown maybe, maybe lighter, might be dirt. Pale skin. Covered in filth. Their own. Could be someone else’s too. Bones, everything sticking out. Skin on a skeleton. Their spine is curved, the way they are lying, back to us, I can count every disc of it. Coccyx bone protruding almost like it is trying to escape its flesh confines. Their backside is hardly noticeable as it morphs into thighs, bones sharp. I calculate it in my brain. The decomposition. I don’t think long. The smell is more waste than death. My eyes run over the backs of their legs, down to the prominent point of their ankle bones. I can’t even tell if they’re male or female.

“Are they...?” Lala rasps, something like dead emotion in her throat.

“Get the tarp.”

CHAPTER 2

CHARLIE

Lala moves fast, out of the container, but I can't shift my feet to move away, only closer. Eyes locked in on the skeleton. I watch their back, waiting, squinting, wondering. How long have they been in there? Where did they come from? How did someone smuggle this shit into *my* fucking territory?

I stare at the bars, thick, round, the gaps between them deceptively large. You can't get out. I would know. It doesn't matter how many bones you break, trying to contort your way out of your prison. There's no escape from something like this.

I step closer, running my hand over the top of the box, it's not more than four-feet in length, three-feet high. That's when I see the chain.

A full body shudder rips through me at the memory. It makes my knees lock, the bones feeling like liquid. The cage isn't barred on the top, not like mine was. This one has a thick flat surface. My fingertips grind into it as I flex them.

Slowly, letting my hand slide off of the top, circled fingers gliding down one of the thick steel bars, I shift into a low crouch, knees clicking as I fold myself. The rancid smell does nothing to affect me anymore. I'm used to it, I spent months with it, sitting in my own filth, chained, cramped. Just like this.

Even in the darkness, I follow the chain links, attached to the floor at one end of the cage, the length of it heavy and

coiled. There's not a lot of slack in them where they disappear beneath matted dark hair, but I know what that means.

A neck shackle.

My spine twitches at the thought, vocal cords tightening. Despite not being able to see the collar, that is what it is, I feel my own phantom version tighten around my throat.

I slap my hand hard against the enclosed metal top. Squeeze my eyes shut tight, breathe in hard through my nose. Nostrils flaring, I catch the stench again and I think of *him*.

Blue eyes. Chestnut hair. Taunting fucking smirk. His face boils my blood and my fingers, slick with cold sweat, squeak over the metal top. That's when I hear it.

A rasp.

An inhale.

My eyes fly open like a sparked match, pupils blowing wide as they try to swallow the darkness. I peer through the bars, watching the naked carcass before me, straining my ears as they roar with the pounding of my heart. And then the chain clinks, a toe twitches and the almost silent, ragged inhale sounds again. Their spine bows with it, like the body knows it hurts, I imagine it does, but they do not seem conscious. They do not know I am here. There is no fear as I flick out my tongue, paste it across my bottom lip, tasting the air.

Death is all that is here.

I watch then, fingers tightening around the metal bar. I don't move closer, but I angle forward onto my bent toes, stare hard through the shadows. I don't hear their breath again, but I see it, the slow, too widely spaced inhales. Far too many seconds between each one. They are dying. They may never rouse again. The state they're in.

I want to turn them over. See their face. Know who they are. I never forget a face. Not one. My mind moulded to remember everything, every tiny detail of a person. Freckles, scars, all of it singeing into my brain. I breathe in deep, stand, my palm flat against the top of the cage. I search for the door, padlock, chain, hinges, two full circles of the small prison, and

there is a gate, or was a gate. But this person has been welded in.

Silently, I move backwards, out of the container. Force down the acid in my throat. Being trapped. Like that. At least I had a door. Some days, it was the only thing that kept me alive. That tiny sliver of hope.

Arms folded across my chest, I wait for Kyla-Rose to return with the tarpaulin. Something I don't think we'll need... *immediately.*

I grip my throat, feel the criss-cross of scars, crawl my fingers up the side of my neck, thumb the top of my right ear beneath my razor-cut hair. Feel the tiny divot in the cartilage, a missing piece Kyla-Rose tore out with her teeth because I locked her in a cage. She thought it could help me. With my trauma. It didn't. I couldn't wait to let her out.

“Charl?” her voice is like silk husk, rougher and deeper than most women's, but it's still always soft for me.

I look up, finding her a few feet away. Laced boots, skinny jeans, t-shirt tucked in, leather jacket, all of it black. A piece of her white hair drifts across her face, catching in her thick lashes, she blinks it free, those wide grey orbs locked on mine. It feels like we stick. In moments like these. Our lives so vastly different from what they were before. Well, hers. Mine is the same. Apart from being a little lonelier now. Without her. I am still the same.

She is different. A mum now, a wife to three men, a feared leader of The Firm. All things we would never be together. Apart from the last one, we still technically rule together. I'm just not interested in doing it anymore. I don't think I ever really was. I only did it because it's what she wanted. But she doesn't need me anymore. Not really. My chest feels like it deflates, rib bones buckling, turning in towards my heart like gripping talons.

“There's no body,” I rasp, the strain pulling the tendons in my neck taut.

“What?” she asks quietly, feet still planted, I want to grab her by the hair, pull her in closer, bite the tip of her pretty fucking nose off.

But I don't.

Watching her as she pulls her brows together, her face half in shadow. She cocks her head, lips curling in between her teeth. And then they pop free, eyebrows lifting on her forehead.

“Oh,” realisation dawns. “They're still alive?”

I nod silently, turning to glance back over my shoulder, peering into the darkness as though I might be able to see the cage from where I stand.

“We'll need something to cut the bars.”

Her brows pinch again, she glides a step closer, I think of the blade pressing into the small of my back, can hear the snick of it as I imagine slashing it against her skin.

“There's no door?”

She's in front of me now. I start to count down from ten. The way she gazes up at me twists my fucking guts and I see white spots spark across my vision. Her scent. Coconut, limes. It is a poison. Infecting my lungs.

“No.”

She looks past me, too close, like she can see, the same way I stared into the pitch container. Seeing nothing. Then she blinks, heavily, gaze refocusing on me and I take a step back, making her frown.

It's for your safety, Lala.

The space.

Our separation.

She wouldn't understand.

The way I feel now.

About the world.

Since I killed my brother.

For her.

“Get Eli,” I tell her, looking over the top of her head, a strange pull in my chest forcing me to stay sentry at the open doors of the container.

She stares at me for a moment, blinks, dipping her chin, and then she drops the bundled tarp at my feet, turns her back to me and heads back towards the others.

CHAPTER 3

CHARLIE

Red bulbs glow bright in the high ceiling of my cavernous basement. The walls a black painted concrete, the floor sloped towards the centre for drainage. There are tunnels. Ones I can use to slip in and out of the house unnoticed. It is easier. Now that she is not here. Kyla-Rose. Her voice infecting my brain, her scent steadily dripping like a drug to an addict into my bloodstream.

My fingers glide soothingly over my stuffed duck, Dillon's, white, feathered head. His pulley string tied around the table leg to prevent his escape on his wheeled wooden cart. His duck eyes glassy and fixed, the same way mine are, on our captive in a cage. It took twelve men to heave the thing up, load it into a truck and then bring it down here. I had to clean afterwards. Having that many people in my space makes my skin itch. It's all I can smell now, bleach. It feels like it cleanses my insides as well as my space when I use it.

The pale flesh behind the bars glows a gruesome pink, it is easier to see now. The filth, the bruises, the bleeding, the cuts, the scars, the wounds.

It is beautiful.

Her.

The unconscious female shackled in steel.

Kyla-Rose was not happy about me bringing her here. Wanting to clean up the mess, dispose of the body. I told her I wanted to do it. Provide the end for this suffering link of

bones. She didn't argue. She doesn't anymore. Not really. It's guilt. Over us. My brother. Her cousin. *Jacob*.

My free hand curls over the edge of my workbench where I rest my arse against it. Tension vibrating up my forearm as I think of him bleeding out on the floor of our warehouse. Fight Night continued not forty-eight hours later. As though his life was not still staining the polished concrete.

But I saved her.

I will always save her.

In this life and the next.

Our love is dead. But we are not. It has been a long time. Five years. And I will, hopefully, one day, learn how to cope with that.

I watch her. The skeleton in the cage. Like a little runt bird flung from her nest to die. Her back. Rising. Falling. So slow.

Reluctantly, I remove my fingers from Dillon's head, cock my own and stare. Counting. Eight seconds. That's the space between inhales. At rest, twelve to sixteen breaths a minute is average. But average things have never really held my attention for long.

I wonder how broken she is inside the parts I can't see. Beneath that strewn tangle of matted hair. Is there a cracked skull, torn skin, missing eyes, ears, pieces? I wonder what her mind is like now. Fractured. Splintering apart like she's nothing more than a burning sheet of newspaper, all of the important things distorted by the flames.

On bare feet, I pad over to the opposite workbench, flush along the entire length of the entry-door wall. Picking up a needle, some medical tape, a few bags of saline and some antiseptic wipes, I carry it all over to the cage. Legs folding beneath me, weight resting on my jean-clad shins, I sit on my haunches. The floor unforgiving on my bones as I get down on the ground, but I enjoy the sharp pain as it pulses through me like a dull heartbeat. I lay down the supplies, out of reach of the bars, just in case, and then I watch her.

She's easier to see up this close, my head cocked to one side. I peer at her through my razor-cut hair, chin length pieces of jagged white blonde slice across my vision. Her skin is white, beneath all the filth, the surface of her flesh so pale it could shine like the surface of the moon.

My eyes rake up the length of her body. From her small relaxed toes, over the sharp point of her ankles, to jutting kneecaps scraped and bloody. Visible hip bone that threatens to carve its way right through her skin. Small, bloated, round belly leading to a concave looking sternum. Each rib countable, protruding like antique birdcage bars. Her breasts are gone, if she ever had them, malnourishment having hollowed her out like she's already a corpse. Her collarbones slice their way across her upper chest, the hollow in the base of her throat not much more than a black hole in the shadows. I can't see her face, hidden beneath a curtain of dark, matted hair. So I follow, instead, over the cap of her shoulder, down her skinny arm, the skeletal bend of her elbow, to one of her hands, the other arm tucked beneath her, lots of her out of my view.

I don't know what I'm doing. Why I'm sitting here with supplies I keep for protecting my family, the prisoners I want to keep alive longer as I slowly torture them to death. But I find myself unable to look away.

I think of the man then. The trespasser. The one who was visiting this woman, maybe girl. It is hard to accurately age someone you cannot fully see, and who is already well on their way to meet The Devil. I wonder who this is to him. How long she has been there. In my territory. Under my nose. It feels like a violation. A stranger in my space. Whether or not she chose to be there. She was. And it makes me itch beneath my skin. I will find out later, when I decide to get to him.

It feels strange. Not being in a hurry to do just that. Torture and kill the man for information. But I find myself not wanting to go anywhere until I feel finished here.

I don't know why I'm bothering, though. This girl is going to die. And I do not feel any particular way about it. But I *do* feel unable to leave her.

Yet.

I eye her skeleton hands, long bony fingers with a mixture of broken and missing nails, bruised knuckles. Dirt and waste. Old and new. Smearred and dry across her skin. I flick my gaze up, the long length of steel chain disappearing beneath her hair, I know it's around her throat. The shackle. I want to see it. Crave to.

Instead of reaching in towards her face, pressing forward, bare chest against the cold iron bars, I stretch my arm through a gap, collecting the dainty weight of her only visible hand in my own. Perhaps she only has one. Feather-light in my palm, I smooth over the back of her fingers, the scarred, calloused tips of my own, so rough against her silky skin that the pad of my thumb snags over a scabbing cut.

With my right hand, I peel open the wipes beside my thigh, tug one free and swipe it across her skin. It comes away dark grey when I'm finished, so I drop it beside the packet and use a second one to wipe again. Her fingers hang loosely, hand over the back of my own, curling naturally up into the centre of my palm as I insert the butterfly needle beneath her ashen skin. Her veins are practically shrivelled dry, but I manage to get it in and tape it in place on the second try.

I connect the first bag of saline, fiddling with the little plastic roller clamp to control the speed. And then I hold it high, watching her as the almost silent drips drop into the chamber, rolling down the tubing.

And that is how I sit for the next three days.

Counting the inhales of a corpse.

CHAPTER 4

CHARLIE

Noise.

It hits me like a freight train after four days of being underground in silence. Eli's raucous boom of laughter rattles my teeth as I emerge from the shadowed hallway. Blinking hard at the light flooding through the archway from the dining room. Squinting, I step into the room, take my usual seat on the bench at the long wooden table, my back to the wall of glass windows.

I flex my other hand around the grip of my blade as a figure appears in my periphery. Fingertips ghosting over the bumpy skin of an orange as I reach towards the buffet of breakfast food in the centre of the table. My stomach churns with hunger, nausea like a fireball in my belly. But I am too focused on the tall silhouette hovering in the entryway to pay my hunger more notice.

It makes me think of my older brother, the way in which the person waits in the archway. I think of Jacob's cocksure smile and blazing green irises. The bleeding bullet wound I administered to his chest.

I blink.

The noise dies off.

My heart drums a steady rhythm in my ears as the point of my blade sinks into the wood of the table.

“Sup, Cuz?” Eli calls loudly from beside me.

My fist wrapped around my knife not two inches from missing his forearm, but he doesn't react.

One of the housekeepers passes through, dropping a heap of post down on the other side of Eli, who instantly abandons his breakfast, rifling through the pile. Pushing away his four plates full of food, he makes space for the brown padded envelope he plucks out.

"Hi," Lala says roughly, her voice tired.

I glance up, retract my hand from the centre of the table, minus the orange I was reaching for, and pull my blade free from the wood. Pocketing it, I watch as she wanders into the room, dropping into her usual place opposite me, beside Cam. She doesn't live here anymore, though. So I suppose it's not really her *usual* place.

Beside her, my brother Cam offers her a smile, pushing her a glass of juice with the back of his hand which she takes gratefully. Like he's happy to see her. I am unsure how I feel about her invading the house that has grown quieter without her, this early in the morning.

Then the rest of them herd in and that makes up my mind.

"Mornin'," Huxley, one of Lala's husbands chirps, pushing a warm-brown hand through his tight afro curls, he drops down beside her, filling his plate with a smile on his face.

Maddox is next, nodding at everyone with a grunt in greeting. Face etched with a permanent scowl, turquoise eyes flaring over the room, he moves to sit beside Huxley.

Then comes the third one. Kacey wanders in like some ridiculous looking Greek god, all tanned skin and blonde hair. If I didn't love my nephew Frankie so much, I would probably kill his dad just for all the ridiculous over-smiling he does. Kacey folds his huge frame into the large space beside me. He reaches across me, and without looking up, pounds knuckles with Eli.

"What ya got?" Kacey enquires, eyeing the box Eli is prying open with a fork, all whilst shovelling meats onto his plate in bulk.

“A courting gift,” Eli replies absentmindedly, tongue poking out between his teeth as he finally rips through the brown parcel tape. “Ah-ha!” he sing-songs, roughly shaking the contents out onto the table.

“A *courting* gift?” Kacey repeats in question.

Huxley chuckles with a gleam in his dark eyes, as though he’s already in on a secret that his best friend is not.

“Yup,” Eli nods, his elbow brushing my bare shoulder as he finally gets through all the packaging.

His thick thumb and finger pinch a dainty necklace between them. He lifts it up, viewing it under the overhead lights, his head cocking to one side. A thin gold chain, an ‘E’ initial pendant hanging from it, with a small white pearl bead hanging alongside it.

“You’re *courting* someone?” Kacey stops with a fork of meat halfway to his mouth, staring across me at Eli.

“Yeah,” is all he replies and then Kacey snorts.

“It’s pretty,” Kyla-Rose says, a weirdly soft smile on her face.

“It’s my spunk,” Eli replies casually, everyone stopping to look at him.

He’s still gazing up at the chain and I cock my head to look at it again. He reaches up with his other hand, taps the little white bead.

“Right ‘ere,” he smirks, “is my cum.”

“Fucking Christ, Elijah!” Lala shouts in disgust, screwing her face up.

“Yes, dude!” Kacey chuckles loudly, high-fiving Eli over the top of my head, I grit my teeth. “Who’s the lucky girl?” he asks, finally shoving a forkful of food into his mouth.

“Ivy,” Eli says dreamily, still staring up at his gift.

I stare up at it too, almost mesmerised by the thought behind it. It is interesting. I wonder if he will tell her that little white pearl is made from his semen or if he’ll just enjoy seeing

her wear it unknowingly. The corner of my mouth lifts at the thought.

Kacey almost chokes beside me, prompting Huxley to scowl across the table at him.

“My fucking *cousin* Ivy?!” Kacey half shouts, half chokes.

“Yup,” Eli shrugs, pocketing the chain and pulling his array of plates back towards him.

“You’re *courting* my cousin? When the fuck did this happen?” Kacey stares across at Lala, looking like he wants her to agree with him; instead she shrugs, as though she’s not really listening at all.

The conversation continues, and I watch it all from beneath my lashes, roll my gaze down towards the head of the table.

My dad, Dee, sits in his usual seat, newspaper open in front of him, hiding, what is likely, a smile, from view, only the very top of his greying head poking above the black and white pages. Violet, his wife, my stepmother for all intents and purposes, on his left, they didn’t marry all that long ago but she’s been in our lives since Eli was a baby. I like her, she smells clean and floral. Her shiny brunette hair is pulled back, just brushing her shoulders in bouncy curls, her brown eyes warm as she spots me looking at her.

I turn my attention to the seat opposite her, down along my side of the bench, empty. Dad’s brother, Elliot, Kyla-Rose’s father, usually sits there but it’s not him I picture as I stare at the empty spot. I think of my older brother Jacob again and bite down on my back molars.

“Why are you here?” it’s me that asks, the words rasping out as tension pulls at the tendons in my throat, because she is not usually here.

She has her own house, her own breakfast table, her own family. All of it not supposed to be here.

This is my space now.

I swing my gaze slowly onto her, everyone seeming to be paying me attention. There is an intensity that is uncomfortable whenever we are together now. It is me. I do it. Purposefully. It is easier if I don't spend as much time with her as we used to.

The infamous Chaos Twins.

Playing games and spilling blood.

I almost snort.

We don't do any of those things together now. Well, not as we used to. Business related transactions only.

Her grey eyes latch onto mine, my bare chest brushing the edge of the table, the wood cool against my rapidly heating skin where I'm almost crouching over it. She cocks her head, eyes flicking all over my face, and I want her to look away, pop those too big eyes out of her fucking skull and nail them to the table.

"I came to see you," she says huskily, not flirtatiously, it's just her voice. "You don't answer my calls," I can tell it hurts her, to say it.

A pale flush in the top of her cheeks, she's embarrassed I'm avoiding her and having to confess it in front of the entire family. But I don't care. I want to watch her squirm.

She is too quiet, speaking only to me, despite everyone else having quieted now, to listen.

This family was once so incredibly full of secrets, all of us intent on keeping each other safe, we never uttered a word of them. And now, since Jacob, we're all ravenous to hear more spill from other Swallow members' tongues, just so our own don't feel so debauched.

"Speak then."

"Charlie," she almost whispers, keeping those wide eyes on me, like if she focuses hard enough everything else will fall away.

That, or I'll give in.

I can't let myself do that anymore.

Not for her.

"Can we go downstairs?" she asks softly, too soft, too nice, too much.

I think of what I have hidden down there. The thing I said I would deal with. Feeling strangely protective of it, I shake my head, just once.

"Speak or don't," I rasp. "I have things to do," I dismiss, curling my fingers over the edge of the table.

"I miss you," she whispers, swallowing so loudly I hear it in the hush of the room.

My arse just lifts off the seat when she says it and I still, chest adjacent to the table top, knees bent in a half-standing position. My ears buzz and I feel the colour drain out of my face. It feels like shock. Like I've fallen through thin ice, and I am desperately inhaling freezing water, the temperature of it stabbing the insides of my lungs as I swallow it down, but my limbs won't work. I can't surface. And just for a moment I want to laugh.

The silence in the room is deafening. My insides tighten like a coiling serpent, constricting around my lungs. How dare she do this to me, choke me with guilt, when she has everything she fucking wants and is still trying to fuck me up.

I don't look at her, because if I do, I might grab her by the throat, rip her across this fucking table and cut her into pieces with a blunt butter knife.

Instead, slowly, my eyes roll up, so I am looking at her from beneath my fan of white lashes. She stares at me with sad eyes, and I want to smack her for it.

"Congratulations," I tell her with venom, just as a tear rolls down her cheek.

I push up from the table and it takes everything inside of me not to look back.

CHAPTER 5

CHARLIE

Blood drips from my lashes as I blink in the dark. The trespasser from the docks hangs limp. Legs roped together, his nailless toes graze the rough concrete floor of the warehouse, his body swinging softly from the ceiling. It's been a while since I've been down here. Preferring my basement at home. But that's currently occupied by a skeleton in a cage, so it was here or nowhere, and we need answers out of this guy.

Eli sits in the far back corner of the space, rocking on a rickety old chair. The click of its legs as it tilts back and forth echoing around inside my head. I wipe my wet hand down my jean-clad thigh. Push my white hair back with the other, finger and thumb still circled around the hilt of my curved blade, the base of its handle rolling over my scalp.

"Name," I rasp again, my throat tight and dry now with the effort of questioning.

I cock my head, stare up at his ashen face, eyes rolling back in their sockets. I tap his cheek with the side of my blade, the tip snagging the skin at the corner of his eye, not enough to cut, just enough to regain his attention. This is the one time I don't enjoy being ignored. Any other day. Any other time. That's exactly what I need. Ignorance. The blissful state of just existing without anybody paying me any attention.

Too many hours have passed. Sweat slicks my cool skin, my muscles are tight, my brain is tired and I'm unsure if any of this was even worth it. I thought of this man as a grunt worker. A skivvy. Someone at the lowest rank of the pecking

order. Now, I'm not so sure. He's held out far longer than most, and for the first time ever, I am desperate to be done here.

Curiosity plagues my mind as I absentmindedly continue with my work. Thoughts of the occupied cage in my basement gathering inside my skull like a smoggy veil of storm clouds. I blink again, the man's grunted screams wailing through gritted teeth, I drag my blade out of his trapezius muscle, swipe it over the front of his torn shirt.

"Who do you work for?" this is the last time I'm going to ask.

My endless patience seems to be wearing a little thin, and the constant rocking taps of Eli's chair legs echoing in my ears is driving me to the brink of murder.

"Ivanov," he finally rasps, blood and saliva hanging heavily on his bottom lip.

Vision unfocused, thoughts of *him* flash through my mind. Hands, lips, tongues, *betrayal*. Nostrils flaring, my insides heat, my skin cool, sticky with blood. I feel hot and itchy and irritable.

"The Russians?" Eli says almost silently.

This man won't hear him, but I do, my senses have adapted, evolved. So used to being plunged into silent darkness, everything is sharper now. Because of *them*.

Him.

"Why there?" I ask quietly, slowly twirling my knife in my hand, point of the blade in the centre of my palm.

I think of the docks, *mine*, think of why anyone would cage a girl and then hide them in someone else's territory. It doesn't make sense. It means nothing.

All of this was for nothing.

The curve of my blade connects with the side of his neck, his carotid artery bursting beneath the pressure as I drive my knife through tissue and fat. Blood arcs, spraying over my bare chest, exposed neck, face. I let my eyes close as his body jerks

in its bindings, swinging violently from the hook in the ceiling. My head falls back, the spray of warm liquid calms my racing heart as it hits my skin. The droplets run down my goosebump pricked flesh, soothing me somewhat.

Another kill.

Another body.

Just another day for me.

I don't feel it anymore.

Guilt. Pain. Hesitance. I don't tend to get sent in for the questioning jobs. Just the torture. An infliction of my treatment is usually enough to have even the strongest of people spilling their secrets.

But since everyone is under the impression that I've already dealt with the caged woman, they aren't in a hurry for answers. I, on the other hand, had heard enough from this one.

I blink open my eyes, feeling my brother approach. Not fully behind me, just slightly off to the side, enough for him to be in my peripheral vision. I don't react well to being snuck up on.

Eli doesn't speak, but I hear his silent question regardless.

"I'll deal with it," my throat scratches with the words, like claws slicing deeper into my damaged vocal cords. "I want to."

Eli shifts, the soles of his boots scuffing the concrete floor, "Charl-"

I cut him off, "She doesn't need the stress."

"Ky will want to know, bro," he tries again, still keeping a small distance from me. "She won't want you to deal with... *this*, not by yourself."

"I'll tell her, not you."

He blows out a breath, it reminds me of our eldest brother, the one I put a bullet in, dragged out to a shitty shallow grave. Unmarked. Tossed him in. Covered him with barely enough earth to bury an earthworm and then just... walked away.

“Okay,” he sighs, air blowing out of his nostrils as he lifts an arm, his fingers squeezing his nape, hand curling around the back of his neck. “You’ll take someone with you?”

I nod, already knowing I won’t be doing that.

Not there.

To see *him*.

“Charl,” he tries again, his feet shifting once more, and then, “Okay.” He swallows. “Okay.”

“Call the Blackwells,” I tell him, my voice cracking on my last word.

The Blackwells are The Firm’s clean-up crew. They’ve never been caught disposing of bodies, gore, parts. Generations of them have worked with our family. They’re probably the nearest thing I have to trust in anyone.

“I’ll tell Thorne we want one of his boys on this,” Eli says, my booted feet already taking me towards the door. “Be careful.”

I almost stop in my tracks, my body tilting forward with the sudden stop-start motion of my feet. But I regain my composure quickly, nod my head without looking back, push through the door and disappear in the dark.

CHAPTER 6

KAZIMIR

Blunt teeth scrape the underside of my cock. Nails dig into my solid thighs, and with my head dropped back, my eyes squeezed shut, I try to think of any-fuckin-thing other than what is actually happening.

One hand fisted in auburn hair, I tighten my fingers, thick strands snapping around my cracking knuckles as I shove the woman on her knees further down on my rapidly softening cock. Other hand secured over top of a half-filled crystal cut tumbler resting on the arm of my leather chair. I lift it up, knock the contents back, revel in the quick burn of vodka as it singes my throat, spreading heat through my chest.

Slurping sounds finally penetrate my ears, above the low drumming buzz from the heavy pounding music floors below. Eyes popping open, I stare up into the darkness of the high vaulted ceiling, ignoring the bright city skyline of Southbrook just beyond the glass wall opposite me. I flex my fingers, force a quick breath through my nostrils. Try to forget about the shitty week I've already had. Not forgetting to add terrible fucking blow job to the very top of the list, just to really top it off.

It's only fucking Tuesday.

Teeth catch my crown, a canine snagging the tip of my dick and it takes everything in me not to throw her off. I deserve this. I deserve to come. I command an army of Russian brutes. The least I should be able to do is shoot my fucking load into the back of someone's throat.

The more I think about coming, the further away my release gets. My pulse pounds in my temples, a vein thrumming in the side of my neck. My shoulders tense, my balls ache, and fuck me, for all that is unholy, please, let me come.

I try to think about something else. Someone else. The tight cunt I fucked last week. Short brown hair, big blue eyes, the most sinful fucking thighs I've ever seen, and my dick goes half-mast.

Fucking Christ.

The darkened ceiling morphs into the damp maze of hallways deep below my late father's manor. Hidden in hundreds of acres of the English countryside. Surrounded by trees, twenty-five-foot barbed wire fences and a moat that may as well have been tinged red with the copious amount of spilled blood on the property.

I think of the smell, mould, sweat, pain, *desperation*. Remember the whimpering, chains clanking.

My dick starts to perk up.

I bite down on my bottom lip, curled in, tucked between my teeth, I bite so hard I taste blood, it makes me think of *him*, as always. And then my balls are drawing up so tightly they threaten to explode and my cum bursts into the back of a hot, tight throat, *his* throat and I huff a half-laughing sigh of relief.

Thank fuck.

I tug the woman's head up, releasing my grip from the roots of her hair. Her lips pop off my dick, and she drops back onto her haunches. Lips swollen, saliva glistening on her chin, tanned knees rubbed red, she stares up at me, one tit having fallen out of her strappy bra. I cock my head, staring at her tight, pink nipple, pulled into a sharp point, think about slicing it off.

"Can I do anything else?" she asks quietly, wide eyes glassy.

Fear.

I picture it. Her neck split in two, rivulets of scarlet spilling, gathering and overflowing in the hollow at the base of her throat. Covering those pale pink nipples with claret. My knife burns where it rests against my thigh in my trouser pocket, fingertips fizzing with pins and needles. An itch to scratch. I blink, refocusing my attention on reality just as a single tear tracks its way down her flush cheek.

“Get out,” I order.

She scrabbles to her feet before I even finish speaking, tripping on her stilettos, tit still hanging out of its red lace bra cup. She slaps her hands against the solid wood of the door, falling against it as she reaches it. I hear the click as it’s unlocked from the other side. My eyes lazily rolling in their sockets, gaze fixing on her back. So much smooth skin. Tanned, blemish free. It would split so beautifully.

“Pakhan?” Dima questions lowly, blocking the woman from escaping through the barely cracked doorway.

His blonde head is dipped low, dark brown eyes flicked up on mine. My head lolls back onto the leather chair, I eye him for a moment, flick my gaze back to the trembling woman now clawing at his tattooed forearm. She’s heard the rumours. What I sometimes do to the women who service me. Luckily for her, I only tend to rip apart the ones I fuck.

“Take her.”

I tuck my cock away, balance my glass on the flat arm of the chair, and let my head fall back fully.

The room feels colder now, darker, it’s late, and I’m restless. Everything feels like a chore. I have nowhere to go. Nothing to do. I don’t want to fuck anything. Coming hasn’t even satisfied me.

I blow out a breath. A huff of frustration leaving me. I bring my thumb to the corner of my mouth, swiping it over my bottom lip. Drag my nail down, over the scar in the dip of my chin. I continue staring up at the ceiling, trailing my thumb back and forth across the risen skin, my mind blank when I smell it.

Marijuana.

The good shit.

Slowly, I bring my head up, straightening it on my shoulders. I peer across the dark room, stare at the now billowing voile curtains pulled across the glass double doors. Doors that are open, the scent of smoke wafting in from the balcony.

I'm silent as I push to my feet, thick carpet beneath my laced dress shoes muffling my steps. I don't bother with zipping my trousers, leaving them gaping open, hanging low on my hips, white shirt untucked, half of my buttons undone.

I make my way through the darkness, the air around me thinning, feeling cooler and cooler the closer I get to the doors. Anticipation spikes in my chest and I force myself to uncurl my clenching fingers. Heart pounding hard in my ears, deafening me to the rush of traffic below, I step out into the winter wind.

Inhaling the sticky scent of weed, I step up behind where he leans over, elbows resting on the metal railing. I stare at his bare back, the curve of his spine, each bone disc pushing out through his pale, tattooed skin. I think of my hammer tapping at them, the sound they would make. The vibration of it rumbling up my forearm.

I want to ruin Charlie Swallow.

"Din't wanna fuck her?" he rasps a chuckle, voice gruff and croaky.

He doesn't turn to look at me over his shoulder, the muscles in his back not even flexing with his laugh. He is completely motionless. My jaw cracks, teeth gritting. The urge to grin is overwhelming. Instead, I say nothing, tension heavy in my shoulders. I stare out at the city, lights blurring through the darkness, cars still rushing by regardless of the late hour. Southbrook never sleeps. Neither do we.

"You don't wanna know why I'm here?" he asks lowly.

Not a man of many words. He is always meticulous with the ones he chooses to speak.

I can picture his face, pale brows dropped low over his eyes, small lines creasing his lips from smoking.

He smokes too much.

I smoke too much.

When I don't answer, he snorts a half-laugh. My hands slide into my hair, fingers combing through the chestnut strands. I breathe in deep, the cold wind whipping around us. He still doesn't look at me, and it takes everything in me to keep my own eyes on the view.

Charlie Swallow is a compulsion though.

It doesn't matter how much self-control you think you have. If he wants you tangled up in his web, woven with blood and sinew, you won't need to worry about being tempted in, you'll throw yourself willingly. I am the viper. He the spider. I am harsh violence. A savage, sudden strike. He is the silent reaper. A deadly bite laced with slow acting poison.

Finally, I allow my gaze to fall onto him. Shaggy white hair, jagged ends just grazing his tattooed nape. I step closer. Not stopping until the front of my thighs are flush with the back of his.

I breathe him in, clean, smoky copper. He smells like clean laundry with wet pennies inside the pocket, drying over a bonfire.

Blood and cigarettes and him.

"I always know why you're here," I breathe the words into his ear, my teeth grazing cartilage, lips tasting the salt of his skin. "You only come to me when you want to hurt."

I turn my face into his, the tip of my nose pressing into the high arch of his cheekbone, lips in the hollow of his cheek. My hands go to the rail, either side of his hips, fingers curling around the icy metal. I stare at him, the side of his eye, his gaze still locked forward. That deep emerald, almost black in the lack of light. Everything about Charlie is light. His skin, hair, lashes. Everything physical beneath his swirling black ink is light. Everything except his soul.

“Did you miss me, Charl?” I speak the question into his skin, lips moving over his smooth cheek, taking small sips of his scent.

He breathes out a thick coil of smoke, the wind tearing it away as it escapes his nostrils. Grip tightening around the railing, I keep my blurred vision on the side of his eye, watching as it slowly rolls to the corner, locking onto mine. He blinks slowly, thick fan of pale lashes tinged pink, stained with the remnants of his evening activities.

“You sent men into my territory.”

Cool simmering violence is forcibly pronounced in every husky word, and as always, the corner of my lip curls into a smirk.

There’s a slow silent pause, smoke billowing from between his lips, the joint hanging from his plump bottom one. I pull back, just enough to see his face clearly.

“Oh, did I?” I taunt, licking over my bottom lip, keeping my eyes on his, he doesn’t blink, just stares back and then his eyes narrow.

“You’re walking a fine fucking line, Ivanov.”

I bark a laugh, step back, drop my arms from the cold railing, palms slick with icy condensation, it is early February and we’re expecting snow any day now.

“What you going to do to me, *Charlie-boy?*” I mock, cocking my head to one side, momentarily dropping my vision to his lips.

He pinches the butt of his joint between his finger and thumb, both digits tattooed, carvings of white scars cutting harshly through the black ink. Lazily, he flicks it over the rail, forearms still resting on the metal bar. He cracks his neck, rolling it on his shoulders before standing fully. Hands in my pockets, stopped a couple feet behind him, he turns, leisurely, controlled, silently. I press up onto my toes, drop back down onto my heels, shrug my shoulders. We stare at each other, his throat bobs as he swallows, and I watch it, entranced.

As I always do.

“Don’t fuck with my business,” he rasps, eerie, haunting, the words dragging in the wind like a serrated blade across my neck.

He is carefully controlled chaos.

But I know how to tap into him.

That dark crevice of hollow space inside his head. Thick shadows and icy ghouls. Deep dark horror.

I put some of it there.

I didn’t want to back then.

But now, I am oh so glad, that I did.

I am etched inside of this man’s brain. A branding on his depraved soul. A stain he can’t burn out. I am as much a part of him as he, unknowingly, is me.

I think of blood, violence, *chaos*.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I smirk, running my tongue across my front teeth, slowly climbing my gaze up his body, stopping on his face, holding his eye, “*Lover.*”

That’s when he strikes.

Charlie launches himself across the balcony, open palms slamming into the front of my shoulders. The back of my skull collides with the rough brick of the external wall, a thud reverberates around the inside of my head. A flash of white flares across my vision and then his blade is digging into the hollow of my throat, his voice hissing in my ear.

“Do *not* fuck with me.”

I drop my head back against the wall, his knife following, pricking the hollowed space of my throat. I swallow, feeling the blade, heat runs across my skin like liquid, head tilted back, gaze cast down. I stare into his eyes. Wide, knowing, accusatory. I think of the men I *do* have stationed in his territory, as I am sure, he has in mine, and I feel the smirk curl my mouth before I can stop it.

His hips carve into my own, his bare chest against mine, I breathe deep, think of the tip of his blade *just* puncturing skin

and I sag further against the brick.

“We’re doing this dance again?” I taunt, thinking of the last time he were here, too many years ago. “What did she do this time?” I chuckle, “Such a fucking predicament you seem to find yourself in every time *she’s* involved.” The knife digs in deeper, my skin flushes hotter and my smirk morphs into a grin. “So beautiful, isn’t she? All those striking scars, big grey eyes. And, I must say, *Lala* looks simply *stunning* in red, doesn’t she, Baby Boy?”

That’s what sends him over the edge.

It’s always her.

The hold she has over him.

I fucking hate it.

I want it to be me.

The blade drives into my shoulder so fast I don’t feel it right away. I blink, but I don’t move. My heart thuds loud in my ears, chest banging with the harsh beat of it. Warmth trickles down my left arm, seeping into my white shirt. I can smell the blood, but I still don’t feel the wound. Not until, slowly, those big green eyes on mine, pupils blown wide, raging fire in their irises, he twists the blade. Withdrawing it agonisingly slowly, a short sharp breath is sucked in through my nose, the icy air making me cough, my shoulder spiking with pain. I swallow my groan, a low simmering laugh spilling from my lips in its place.

Because I know he knows what he’s doing.

And he hates that I know he would never hurt me.

Not in a way I didn’t like.

Our breathing comes hard, our chests heaving, but neither one of us moves. Eyes locked in a tense stare, the smile falls from my lips. It’s been years. Since he has appeared like this. And I find myself almost not knowing what to do. But then I swallow, eyes flicking between his, and I see something there that is all too familiar.

“Lick up your mess, Baby Boy, and don’t miss a fucking drop.”

CHAPTER 7

KAZIMIR

Charlie hesitates.

Something I am not familiar with. But it has been years. And as much as I believe us to be tethered in a way, I don't think, anyone could understand, it is possible I do not know him all that well anymore. But as it still stands, I am not a patient man.

My fingers wind into the roots of his white blonde hair like a slithering serpent and I yank his face into my shoulder. His nose crashes into my collarbone, his teeth immediately driving into the parted flesh of my shoulder. His pointed canines tearing into the wound through my open shirt as I suffocate him against me. His arms fly up between us, forearms knocking mine away. My fingers are torn from his hair and he's falling back, away from me, trying to get his footing on the stone flooring.

His nostrils flare, my blood on his cheek, chin, the tip of his nose.

Fuck, he looks like sin.

"Fuck you," he seethes, chest heaving, fists clenched at his sides, he lifts an arm, swipes it across his bloody face, smearing the crimson higher, up and along his cheekbone.

"We could," I smirk lazily, dragging my eyes down his sculpted body, "but I do so enjoy our foreplay, *Malysh*."

"Shut the fuck up," he spits back, spittle like acid droplets falling to the ground.

“Why’d you come, Charlie?” I ask lowly, chin dipped, warm blood dribbling down my chest. “Why here?” I push off of the wall, taking a single step, slide my hands into my pockets. “Why me?”

He stares at me, face etched with anger, the tension rises and this always only ever goes one of two ways.

“Huh?” I shrug with the question. “You thought you could come here and try to what?”

I move closer, wind flapping my open shirt, blood sticking and pulling as the material drags over the fresh wound. I step into him, not touching, dip my mouth to his ear, face turned in towards him.

“I’m waiting, Charl, what the fuck did you come here for?”

His breath is heavy on my neck, cool and sweet, and I try to ignore it, the way it lights a furnace beneath my skin. I feel his bicep brush my chest, the cording of his muscles as he flexes his fists. The tip of my nose brushes the edge of his jaw and he doesn’t move, we are both so familiar with one another’s bodies it’s a wonder how we ever managed to tear ourselves apart from each other. His head turns in towards me, his nose brushing the lobe of my ear. I’m holding my breath, waiting.

Hoping.

“I’m going to carve you into pieces, Ivanov.”

And with that, he smacks into my bleeding shoulder, knocking me into the metal railing at his back and storms back through the open doors of the penthouse.

The room is dark and empty when I eventually head back inside and I order Dima to bring the brunette back.

CHAPTER 8

CHARLIE

Seven days.

One-hundred and sixty-eight hours.

Ten-thousand, eighty minutes.

Six-hundred, four-thousand and eight-hundred seconds.

Counting, my comfort. I calculate it all inside my head. The beats of her heart per minute. Her pulse. Breaths. The irregularity of it all. I feel caught off guard.

Why aren't you dead?

My mind whirs as she stares at me. The big, round, blue-brown eyes, sapphires ringed with glistening dark honey. Only one is visible, unblinking, pupil blown in the darkness, only a singular red bulb gifting the cavernous space any light. She is backlit by it, the bulb in the rear of the basement. Her face in shadows, but I can see the unusual colour of her iris so vividly, I can't look away.

She doesn't blink, this wide doe eye just stares at me like she can't be sure if I am really here or not. I suppose she may wonder if I am, in fact, a statue. For I am unmoving, leaning against my workbench, Dillon happily on his wheels at my feet. We had just finished our little walk when her eye opened. It hasn't closed since. I want her to look away. I want her to keep staring.

At me.

I am fascinated by her.

A breathing bag of bones. Grey, lifeless corpse with eyes that aren't overly unpleasant to look at. It doesn't bore into me, doesn't make my skin itch with the feeling of being stared at. That's all anyone ever does, stare at me. It's why I blend into my surroundings so often, people never look for me, they just stare uncontrollably if they happen to catch a glance of me. So I avoid it all by blending in. Something that is hard to do with features as stark as mine, the pale skin, black tattoos, white hair and green eyes. All of it is a little unusual I suppose, or perhaps that isn't why they stare at me at all. Perhaps it's not my looks at all that draws people's eyeballs in my direction.

I blink, staring at the girl. Her dark brown hair is matted, the ends of it scraggly, but there's so much of it, I wonder what she'd look like fully exposed. Perhaps I'll shave it off. I'm sure it's beyond fixing. Especially for hands like mine. I can't imagine trying to pick a fine tooth comb through that bird's nest. I am unsure why I should want to. Because I do. *Want to.*

I straighten my cocked head, her eye finally, *finally* blinking. Rolling up to the top of her socket to watch my movements.

She tracks me then.

Across the space. As I approach, she doesn't move, her hand still needled with the cannula, bag of saline hooked up high, fuelling her with hydration. I stop a few feet from her, cant my head, stare down where she stares up and it feels like a challenge, like something forbidden, a line, somewhere, we shouldn't cross.

I don't see it though. I cross the invisible barrier, smoothly drop into a crouch before her, curl my fingers around the cold iron bars of her cage and look down at her. That strangely coloured eye is more blue than brown up this close, her iris so large it's cut off by her top lid. I want to stick my arm through the bar, pull it upward. *Let me see.*

She growls at me as my hand slides down the bar, fingers squeaking gently, condensation beneath my palm lining the metal. Fuck it's cold down here, I hardly notice changes in

temperature, but I bet her skin is ice. I feel my lips kick, one corner lifting into a half smirk as I see the pricked flesh along her exposed skin. The rumble in her throat grows bolder, but she doesn't move, she doesn't blink, her chest is rising and falling in the same quick motion it has for the past week. Other than the noise locked away inside of her closed mouth, she doesn't react to me at all.

Until I shove my hand through the bars. Violently yank on the chain attached to her neck shackle. I can see it now, thick, wide steel, something so familiar to me, I can feel it on my own throat as I swallow, Adam's apple bobbing. A breath hisses out between my teeth, a sharp one sucking back in through my nostrils. And I grip the chain tighter in my fist, the length taut.

She fights me then, cannula tearing out of her hand as her temple smacks into the bars. My fingers coiling the thick chain around my knuckles, I yank on it savagely, her icy breath rushes out of her nostrils, raising the hair on my arms as it washes over my skin. I hold her against the bars by her chain, both of her hands are clawing over my arm, my fingers, knuckles, inner elbow, her blood flowing from the back of her hand. The sting lights a fire in my belly, a flare of heat hitting me in my groin.

So much red.

I've never felt this way over another woman before.

No one but her.

I shake my head. Bare my teeth.

"Enough," I hiss lowly, and she stills at my rasped command.

Her fingers remain curled around my forearm, skin covered bones, bumpy and uneven. Nails gouging deep in my skin, broken and snagged. I can feel blood dribble down my arm to my elbow ditch, hers, mine. My split skin stinging like a friction burn, but I don't look. Keeping my eyes on hers, both of them now peering at me aggressively from beneath matted strands of hair.

“Release,” I snarl, a grumble low in my own throat, echoing the one dying in hers. “*Now.*”

Her nails bite into my flesh harder, my eyes dropping to where she claws into me, her fingers blanching even whiter than her skin. I look at the blood blooming, beneath her filthy nails, bubbling up and spilling over. I can’t tear my eyes away, it looks too *right*, the way her skeletal hands are cuffing me. Painting us both in red, I flick my gaze up, her eyes still on mine, my chin dipped. I shift a foot, drawing me closer, my mouth to her cheek where she is pulled flush with the bars, unable to squirm away even as she tries.

“I will snap every joint,” I whisper, “in every finger,” licking my lips, tasting the filth upon her skin as the tip of my tongue catches her cheek. “And then sever them from your hands.”

And just like that her hands drop from my arm. I don’t move, my nose pressed to her prominent cheekbone, the arch of it carving through her flesh like it’s trying to push free of her skin. Her ghostly breath slices down the front of my throat, the chill of it skating down my chest like a blade, hardening my nipples. I fist the chain coiled in my curled hand, my pulse thudding heavy in my tight grip, fingers vibrating with the bite of it. My eyes close, my breaths slow and I breathe in deep, she smells rotten, dirt, earth, shit, blood, and I don’t care, I can’t move. She doesn’t try and move away, she doesn’t try to touch me again, I can’t see her looking at me behind my closed lids, but I can fucking feel it. The heat of her stare as she wishes she could flay me alive.

I understand rage and pain, the fear of being caged. I know what it’s like to have a captor do unspeakable, degrading things to you. I should not want to replicate my trauma. But it’s all I can think about inside my fucked up skull. I want to make her feel what I felt, despite her probably having already experienced something horrific.

I want to be that horror.

I open my eyes, her face a blur, but I look her in her eyes regardless, the shadowed brown and blue orbs nothing but

haze.

“Welcome to hell, Baby Bird.”

CHAPTER 9

CHARLIE

I like it when she sleeps.

She doesn't look peaceful.

No.

But she doesn't look quite as hateful either.

I should have put a bullet between her eyes on night one. As was instructed. As was decided. Just like I said I did. It would have been what was best all round.

Couldn't do it.

No one knows she's still breathing. Let alone still in the house. Down here in my treasure trove of torture.

Still inside that fucking cage.

It makes my teeth ache. The way I clamp and grind my molars like I'm trying to force them retreating down into the bone of my jaw.

The thick iron bars make me think of my time shackled inside one. Admittedly, mine was smaller. Or, perhaps, just felt smaller because I'm so much larger than this tiny waif of a girl.

I also wore a collar and chain around my throat. One cuffed around my ankle. I push all those memories back. Look at her naked, pale body, smeared in fuck knows what. Dirt, probably shit and piss, I'm not sure I really care.

She still had it better than me.

It's night nine and she should already be buried in a shallow grave or sent off to Heron Mill.

But she's not.

And I'm hooked.

Completely and utterly obsessed with watching her.

The way her ratty, waist length, brown hair is begging to be bound around my fists, using my grip on her like reins as I rail my cock into her from behind.

I've never fucked a woman before.

Never fucking wanted to.

Apart from Lala.

And now, I can hardly stand to think of her without wanting to break my own fucking neck.

I close my eyes, breathing in deep, refocusing on the room. Red light, cave-like space, shadows and cold.

Mine.

Baby Bird in a cage.

I go back to my thoughts; imagine the way her pale neck would arch back at the force of my fists in her hair. The delicate column of her throat exposed, just begging for me to sink my teeth into it.

I haven't heard her speak and I want to.

Impatient to hear the way she'll cry.

Scream.

Make any singular sound that isn't a grunt or a growl. Not that I don't enjoy those, but they're not what will satisfy me.

I push off of my work bench, uncapping the bottle of frosty water in my hand, condensation running down and over my scarred knuckles. Water plopping out of the top as I grip the thin plastic just a little too hard. I sink to my knees beside the bars. Tilt my head as I look at her. Curled up in a tight ball, a shiver running through her body. She could be sick. Could

have a disease. Perhaps she's already dying with something I can't see, eating her up from the inside like festering maggots.

I place the open water down on the concrete beside my jean-clad thigh. Slowly, so slowly, I put my hand through the bars. I watch her sleeping face the entire time and as I reach her ankle, willing myself to be gentle, I'm not.

My fingers tighten around her bony foot and I pull. *Hard*. She screeches like a banshee, kicking at me like a wild animal. Grunts and growls as I tug her sharply towards me. Her tiny body having no option but to slide towards me. She fights with both feet, so I shove my free hand inside and grab her other foot too. Making it all too easy to slam her up against the bars. She bolts up, one arm clutched to her chest, snagged, torn nails of the other hand clawing at my hands, my wrists, my lower forearms. A fire burning so hot behind her eyes, it makes her crystal blues even brighter in the dimly lit basement, the brown spearing through like liquid gold.

I pull her so hard I practically hear her bones creak beneath my grip, feel them grind against each other and I imagine the squeak. I pass one ankle into my other hand, clamping both tight in one first, freeing my left. I grip her face fiercely, my thumb pressing aggressively into the corner of her jaw, just below her ear. It hurts her, she winces, snapping her teeth at me as I press ever harder, chin in the webbing of my thumb and forefinger.

Without saying the words, I tell her with my eyes.

'Do not kick me when I let go.'

She starts to calm in my grip, knowing I can overpower her. Like I have the last couple days. Knowing her drawing blood with her filthy snagged nails down my skin is only lighting me up inside. A fire rips through my veins as her struggles slow. I loosen my grip on her ankles, my eyes locked on hers, I withdraw my arm from between the bars.

Gripping the water bottle from beside my thigh, I pass my arm back through, intense pressure on her jaw, popping her mouth open. I tip the bottle up, tilt her head back, her face between my fingers and thumb so fragile, if I squeeze just a

little harder I reckon my thumb would pierce straight through flesh and bone. The thought of it makes my dick stir.

Ignoring it, I refocus my attention on her puckered lips, pour a little water into her mouth. She doesn't try to swallow, instead she lets me fill her mouth until the ice water is overflowing down her cheeks. Her beautiful dead eyes peering into my own.

I wonder what she sees. What she feels when she looks at me.

Does she see a killer?

A tormentor?

Someone who's going to raze the world to keep her by his side?

I almost scoff at myself.

I wouldn't do that for anyone.

"Swallow," I growl the order, raspy and rough.

The fact that that singular word also doubles as my name has my cock weeping for attention. A little blood somewhere now and I'll explode like a fucking fire hose.

She blinks slowly, then fights my hold on her face, pushes her tongue out, sending the water cascading down the sides of her dirty face. Clean lines streaking her throat, running down her chest, over her breasts. Her dark nipples pebble at the cold. Ignoring it all, I keep her neck arched, head tilted back painfully against the edge of the shackle, my hand around her face. I'll hold out until she needs to breathe, but she'll choke instead.

"There are so many ways I could kill you," is what I say instead, because it's true and I still haven't quite decided what it is I want to do with her yet.

I like to play games.

I like to win.

But I like to struggle a little to get there first. And this girl, I think this tiny girl is going to struggle until it kills her, or us

both. My cock is so hard now it presses against the front of my low-rise jeans, I close my eyes, feel it throbbing in time with my heartbeat, weeping precum at the tip. Rushing blood pounds in my ears, until she starts to splutter.

The sound has me humming with satisfaction, I don't even feel the way she tries to attack me through the bars, but then her choking and spluttering reminds me of when the other half of my soul was drowning, and I release the girl's face so quickly I fall back onto my palms.

Blinking through the wave of sudden feelings, I grit my teeth, grind them together, feel my fang tooth snag the inside of my lip. Copper, iron. Peace washes over me, and I let my back hit the floor, head bashing hard against the concrete. Dizzy, temples pounding, the corner of my lip tips up, pain is my friend, grounding, keeping me tethered, like the weight on the end of a balloon string.

I think of Kyla-Rose, see her submerged beneath the water, bubbles exploding out of her nose. I see my brother, decaying, skin melting, eyeball hanging down his cheek, bullet hole in his chest, blood blooming on his crisp shirt. Feel the gun in my hands, heavy, my eyes closing. Remember the cage, the feel of hot piss as it ran down my legs, my body trembling like a leaf hanging onto its branch. I remember *his* eyes, blue like the Mediterranean, kind and soft, young, *sorry. He was always so sorry. After...*

I feel my chest rise and fall, stinging up my arms, claw marks from this girl, gouges in my flesh, blood on my tongue. I release my bitten lip, lick over my bloody teeth, swallow down the iron.

After a while, a bony hand finds my bare foot, curling around my ankle. I smile, expecting her to claw every exposed inch of skin. Maybe try to yank me in the same way I did her. But she just... holds onto me. Light and loose, soft, a shackle of bone around my foot. I stare up at the ceiling, my eyes stinging where I force them to stay open.

I think of my late brother Jacob, his eyes alight with happiness when I was no more than four years old, he a little

older than I. It was only us two then, happy, covered in mud and sticks and leaves. I was in the apple tree, sticky sap covering the palms of my hands as I clung onto the trunk. His hand around my foot, big toothy smile on his face as he scampered up behind me, my eyes down on his, he nodded, reassuring me, we climbed higher.

Blinking, I kick out my leg, a huff of air forcing its way out of her lungs. My toes smash into the bars, the heel of my foot thudding into the concrete as I scrabble my way backwards on my hands and feet.

She peers at me through her hair, her chest heaving, hands drawing her knees up to her chin, thin shins grey. I swallow hard, breathing through my nose, neither one of us speaks. Her, never having done so, I don't speak much either, not sinc-, I stop thinking about my own cage. Study hers instead.

My breaths slow, I push up from my palms, sit forward, resting my elbows on my bent knees. Her own arms curling around her pulled in legs. I look at where her chain is connected, large hook in one corner, the chain link welded to it. Red is smeared over her hand, dried from where her cannula was torn out the other day.

I wonder what she looks like beneath all the grime. I wonder how long she's been sat in her own filth. I've spent so long down here, I've gotten used to the smell. I've gotten used to a lot of smells, but this one is the hardest. The ripe scent of death, that's how you feel, stripped bare, chained, locked up. You are meant to feel worthless. And it works. Psychological disturbance. Absence of light, clothes, water, food, a toilet.

Slowly, I get to my feet, her blue-brown eyes tracking me as I walk backwards, my eyes still on her. I go over to the large trough-like sink, place a plastic bucket beneath the tap and fill it. The smell of bleach instantly assaults my nose, the feature wrinkling at the odour and I tip the fresh water back out.

I leave the bucket in the sink and then exit. Walk through the short tunnel, make my way through the security doors, only *my* handprint can now open. I think of Kyla-Rose, *Lala*,

her long, dainty fingers. My stomach sinks, remembering her hand splayed over the scanner, how her face dropped when she realised I'd cancelled her access.

I puff out my chest, holding my breath, heart pounding, as I wander through each door. A steady incline as I go. Exiting through the final one, it opens out into a small entryway type hall, hidden behind the staff kitchens, larders and pantries. I close the steel door at my back, leaning against it, palms splaying over the smooth surface, the crown of my skull knocking into it softly as I drop my head back. The breath I was holding shudders out of me, rattling my bones as I exhale, and then I make my way into the kitchens.

CHAPTER 10

AVA

He comes when he thinks I sleep.

The space is cold, echoey, my whimpers and growls ricochet around the cavernous walls like thunder in my ears even though I am quiet.

He watches me from a distance. Piercing green through the pitch. A red light turning his white hair scarlet.

Never speaking. No words. No muffling sounds. He thinks I am unaware of his ghostlike presence, but I have never felt more aware of anything in the entirety of my existence.

My skin is pebbled with goosebumps, tremors tearing up my spine, my back freezing as though I am turning into ice. Time has no meaning. There are no windows again, and I have not seen sunlight since my mother sold me. Desperation to feed her addiction. I passed through many hands of many vile men, but none of them ever ruined me quite enough to prepare for my last owner.

I shiver again, teeth catching the inside of my hollow cheek. I was always quite curvy when I was younger. Fifteen was the last birthday I celebrated, not many weeks after that I was sold. I do not know how many have passed since then. But I know I spent three years with my first family. Servicing not only the father but his wife, their sons. There have been seven owners since then, I must be in my twenties now. I squeeze my eyes closed tight, the backs of them burning, but I am too dry on my insides to form any tears. I do not cry. Not unless I am ordered to.

Curled into a ball, cheek flush to the filthy floor, hands linked beneath my chin, forearms pulled in tightly to my chest. The metal throat shackle rubs the length of my jaw painfully, neck aching and uncomfortable where I am unable to angle it fully down, chafed and raw beneath the heavy steel. My teeth chatter, but I keep my eyes shuttered, open just enough that I can watch him through my lashes. I breathe a little too fast, but I am barely alive, my body still functions, agonisingly so.

I want to claw into my chest, snap open my bones, tear my heart from the crevice. I am not lucky enough to have that sort of strength. My arms shake if I lift them for too long, my knees trembled when I last had to bear my own weight, but I have not stood in so long, perhaps I am no longer able to.

I don't know how long he was gone for, after I touched him. He let me and I don't know why I did it. He didn't like it. Kicking me away. But it wasn't immediate, and I liked it for the short moment he allowed me to do it. He was cold, his skin smooth, a light dusting of hair, coarse beneath my fingers.

He stands there now, back to the workbench, a white duck beneath the bench, its eyes on me every second of everyday, staring at me as though *I* am the taxidermy piece. I have never seen one on wheels before and the way the strange man cares for it, pulls it around, pets it, you would think it were alive. He cares for it greatly. Something so foreign to me. He is reverent in the way he strokes down the white feathers on its head, orange beak a little dull, but I imagine, once upon a time, it was vibrant and bright with life.

I swallow, the metal biting angrily into my throat. It clinks the chain, and his attention so apt on me, his head slowly cocks, one hard blink and he pushes up to stand. Looking down at me as he approaches. His chin never dipping, only those eyes.

“I know you are watching me,” he rasps, eerie and low, if I weren't already cold, I would be now, the way the sound penetrates through to my bones.

The hairs along my body stand on end, his attention feels obscene, too much, too intense, he doesn't look at my naked

body like it is anything to be desired or disgusted by. Not like my other owners. In fact, I haven't seen his gaze drop lower than my face anytime I have been conscious.

The back of my hand itches, dried blood where the needle tore out. I think of my hand on his ankle and a blush burns beneath my skin. I don't move, or open my eyes further, and I swear I see his lips twitch into something reminiscent of a smile.

He turns from me, returning to his bench, retrieving a blue plastic bucket, it swings lightly in his fist, the white handle squeezed tight. His other arm working atop the wooden table, doing something I can't see. And then he comes back to me, crouching low in front of my bars, his head cocked again, he flicks his gaze down the length of my body. Something I am unable to feel shy about anymore, regardless of the state I'm in.

Water sloshes as he places the bucket down onto the floor, bubbles spilling over the rim and running down the sides. Slowly, he reaches through the bars, the flinch in me is delayed as, one by one, his fingers curl around one of my wrists pulled up beneath my chin. He looks at me then, my dry eyes opening more, crust and gunk clumping my lashes.

"Can you hear me?" he suddenly asks, that same low, gruff crack to his words, like he doesn't use his voice often, can't, something is wrong with it.

I don't answer, unsure what I would even respond, if my voice even works anymore. I haven't used it in so long. My last owner didn't like to hear anything but my screams. Even then, I was not to make a noise. The punishment for making sound was always so much worse than anything else.

He releases my wrist, shifting onto his knees, he blows out a breath, and I stare up at him now, unable to retract my attention from him. Entranced, I watch him, his eyes are flicked to the ceiling above, his lips moving with unspoken words. I watch him fascinated, the way he cracks his neck, stretching it one way and then the other. I catch sight of light scars across his tattooed throat, my own feeling extra tight. I

wish I could fit a finger beneath the heavy metal, I don't know how long I have been wearing it.

The man looks at me, *finally*, and I feel something flutter in my tummy. And then he does something with his hands, moving his fingers to his palms, too quickly for me to really process what it is he's trying to show me. And then... then he does it again, slower, his large, tattooed hands glide over one another, his fingers moving and forming shapes. He's slow and careful, thick fingers wrapped in thorns, the ends of the vines stopping at his nail beds. He drops his hands, my eyes flicking up.

"You don't sign," he growls, blowing out a frustrated breath as though that took something monumental out of him, to try it with me.

My body starts to tremble, knowing what this could mean. I am so used to punishments; I shouldn't feel fear anymore. But it's the unknown, I think. I don't know how this new man works, what triggers him, what will set him off, what he will enjoy doing to me when I am corrected. And I have been in this room for days at least, staring at the wall opposite one end of my cage. Knives, hammers, saws, guns, things I can't even begin to try and name. I know what happens in places like this. Industrial drainage set in the centre of the easy wash concrete flooring.

"Stop doing that," he seethes, his hands wrapping around the bars. He brings his face close, "Stop shaking."

I swallow, my throat grating against the metal, my skin raw beneath, but I don't wince. I stare up at the man, his fingers pushing through his white hair. His square jaw is sharp, pale pink lips full, his white lashes brush over his high cheekbones every time he blinks. He's pretty.

Once again, my eyes on his face so I don't focus on what he's doing with his hands, he reaches through my bars, something to confine me as much as they feel like, some days, they protect me. I study the small lines around his mouth, the top of his lips, the few at the corners of his eyes. I breathe him

in as his skin touches mine, fresh and clean, something metallic, a little smoky.

His fingers lock around my left wrist. Roughly, he pulls my hand towards him, my knuckles knocking the thick metal bars as he yanks me closer. My body slides across the steel base as he pulls my arm straight, pain bolting through my shoulder as he does. A cracked cry leaves my lips, white spotting my vision. My breath comes harder, teeth squeaking as I bite down on my molars.

Ignoring the sound I made, he rolls his green eyes up the length of my arm, his face blank, expressionless, analysing. And then he drops his gaze back to my hand in his. A small crease forming between his pale brows. With his other hand, he dunks it into the soapy water, swirling it around, he brings it out of the bubbles, squeezing a yellow rag, and then he swipes the warm cloth over my cold, numb knuckles.

He doesn't speak anymore words. Running the warm wetness over my skin, each finger, nail, the webbing between. He repeatedly dips the cloth into the bucket of water. I watch his hand move, fingers curling, veins stark beneath his skin, ridging the back of his hand. He works his way up my forearm, to the ditch of my elbow. His hands inside my prison now, his skin so white beneath his dark tattoos, roses and swallow birds made of feather and bone.

I ignore the pain in my shoulder, collarbone, the tension in my neck. I stay limp, let him clean my skin. Even though it feels good, it hurts, every inch of me revealed is one more visible scar, bruise or badly healing wound. He doesn't seem to focus on any of them, the backs of my eyes burning with embarrassment as he pulls me closer still, my neck chain clinking against the bars. I can't smell myself, but I know I smell, I don't remember having access to a bathroom. No toilet, no shower. Nothing humane. Silently, he releases my other arm, turns me carefully more towards him, my aching arm re-clutched to my chest.

He leaves again. The release of my skin icy where his touch dissolves. I drop my gaze, stare at the jut of my ankle bone, leg bent and tucked beneath me. I don't look up again

until he comes back. The door closing, automatic locks thunking into place. He returns to the same position, what smells like a fresh bucket of water, steam wafts across the top of the foamy white, and he resettles before me.

Using both hands, he cups my cheeks, thumb gliding over a scar beneath my eye. He releases one side, retrieving the wet cloth, he swipes it over my face, cheeks, nose, his thumb hooked beneath the warm cloth, he cleans my eyes. Unclumps my lashes. The warmth glides beneath my chin, little dribbles of soapy water slicking beneath my shackle. I wince, and he pulls away, dumping the cloth back in the water.

Manipulating my legs, pulling the matchstick limbs out through the bars, he starts at my toes, working his way up my calves, one leg at a time. His rough hands glide over my bumpy skin, long patchy hair, burn marks, slash lines. Whites and pinks and reds. A mixture of healing and scars. Evidence of things done to me that I couldn't fight. Wouldn't. I wonder why I didn't just want to die. Why I don't.

It feels cruel, the pressure in the front of my skull, the intense pounding in my temples, burn in the back of my dry eyes.

Why can't I want to die?

"Baby Bird."

My belly flutters like bats in a cave, hearing those rasped words.

Identifying.

Making me something.

A gift of self.

Warmth pushes through my frozen veins. Flicking my gaze up, the man watches me. My bent knee in his curled hand, fingers pinching lightly at the sides of my kneecap, the back of it resting in his damp palm. His chin is dipped low, gaze upon me from beneath white lashes, the green like oozing slime, dazzling like emeralds. Such a mixture of gentle terror. I swallow, keeping my eyes on his, his head cocked. He glances back to my knee in his hand.

“This,” he rasps, something low and rough, it razes up my spine and it feels... *good*. “Who did this?” he taps a finger over the *J* initial carved in the divot of my kneecap.

I don't need to look down at it to know that's what he's gesturing to. I keep my teeth clamped, jaw closed, the muscles knotting below my buzzing ears. It's not necessarily safe to speak words, even at a direct questioning.

He hums lightly beneath his breath, his grip tightening, and then he continues washing me, soaping over the various names and slurs etched into my skin like a chiselling in a headstone. He doesn't ask again.

I keep my eyes on his face. Unchanging, expressionless. But there is a lightness in his eyes that speaks of rage. I have seen it and felt it too often. I do not know if this man would prefer my submissiveness or my fight. I will do nothing until it is clear. I let him pull my limbs, twist my torso, until I am facing away from him. The wet cloth slaps against my back, then he scrubs lightly between my shoulder blades, over the jutting of my exposed spine. I jolt forward as the heat passes over the open lashes, his free hand lifting my hair over my shoulder. The matting scratches against the front of my shoulder, and I ache to cut it off. Perhaps this man will. Perhaps he will do nothing and scalp me instead, shine my skull for a shelf full of macabre trinkets.

I feel warm at the thought, being in here forever with this unusual man.

He runs the cloth down my back, his other hand coming over my good shoulder, he curls me forwards, and then he takes the cloth over the base of my spine, down lower still. My cheeks heat, embarrassment thick. I want to pull away as he cleans me between my cheeks. Instead, I stay still, limp, like a doll. I keep arched forward until he's done. The water bucket sloshing as he dunks the cloth back into it.

He guides me back up, turning me around, my gaze on the dirty floor of my cage. I can't look at him now, my cheeks red, my breathing harsh. He says nothing, pulling my legs apart and bringing each foot back through the bars. My body gets

hotter, and I wish the ground would swallow me up. I have had humiliating things done to me for as long as I can remember but nothing has ever made me as uncomfortable as this.

My legs are wide, shaking with the strain, his warm hands glide a wet trail up the inside of my calves, insides of my knees, the rough pad of his thumb snagging over the scarred lettering until they stop at the top of my inner thighs. I can feel his gaze on me, my eyes squeezed tight, matted hair draping over my face, shielding me. His thumbs press into the ridging tendons, massaging hard at the crease of my thighs.

My legs continue to shake, the tremor running through my abdomen, up my chest and then his hands release me, the water sloshes again, and I still don't look up.

He sweeps a different cloth over my inner thighs, the texture something softer to the other one he just used. His free hand clamps onto my hip bone, his forearms wedged between the thick bars. He sweeps the rag between my legs. My cheeks heat hotter, warmth up my neck, down my chest, blooming across my breasts as he works the cloth over me thoroughly.

His hand disappears and I take my first breath, a huge gasp of air funnels into my lungs making me splutter. He does nothing but wait for my coughing to end, my eyes still closed. And then he finishes washing me, scrubbing lightly over my belly, up between my shrunken breasts, over my chest, down my sides. I try not to focus on the burn of his hand secured on my hip. And then he's finished. Both hands leaving me, a final slap of the cloth against water in the bucket.

I listen to him shift, stand, his almost silent footsteps as he walks over to the large sink, empties the bucket. And then he returns, a different bucket that smells like bleach and my eyes itch instantly as he places it beside me. But he doesn't sit this time and I let my eyes open, keeping my gaze on the bottom of my cage.

And then my neck cracks as my head shoots up, eyes wide on the loud whirring. An electric saw in his hands. My hands slap over my ears, my instincts screaming to back into the far corner of my cage.

He's going to cut me into pieces.

No one's ever used a saw on me before. A hammer, knives, matches, yes. Not a saw. Never a power tool.

Fear pounds through me, my chest heaving, eyes sparking with white spots, I heave for breath, the scent of bleach infecting my insides like poison. I tuck my head into my knees, my shoulder screaming, one hand covering my ear as I curl myself into an upright ball.

And then the saw screams.

CHAPTER II

CHARLIE

Three days and she still won't leave the fucking cage. I cut open the gate for her to get out. Broke her chain free from the floor, though the links still hang from the shackle cuffing her delicate little throat, but still, she huddles in the prison I brought her here in.

I lean myself back against the wooden workbench, fingers stroking down Dillon's feathered head, thinking about the happy sounds he used to make. I still hear them in my head some days, the short, sharp quacks, the way he would waggle his tail when he got placed in a bathtub, fluff up his feathers when I came home.

"Good boy, Dillon," I say lowly, raspy, I hate the sound of my own voice, cracked and weak.

I blink, staring at the girl where she huddles in the far corner of her cage. Opposite end open for her exit. She watches me, those unusual blue-brown orbs fully focused on me, the mug of soup in her hand, clutched closely to her chest. Her eyes stay on mine, even as she tips the cup to her mouth, plump, dry lips parting, her attention solely on me over the lip of the mug.

I stare at her other arm, elbow pulled in tight to her core, curled fist beneath her collar. It's limp, half-hanging, dislocated from its socket. It needs to be put back before she ends up with permanent damage to it, who knows how long it's been like that. I could cut it off, but I'd probably kill her. I'm not really sure why I don't want to do that. I let her finish

the soup, bone broth, no lumps, spoonful of thickening powder and too many dissolvable vitamins to count.

Blue-brown eyes reverently on me, I tread closer, crouch before the length of the side bars, ignoring the open door on one end in the same way she does. Slowly, my hand threads through the cage, her eyes tracking my unfurling fingers, my gaze on her face. She stares at my extended hand, and I wait, I am nothing if not terrifyingly patient. After what is much too long, she flicks those bloodshot eyes up onto mine and without breaking our stare; she places the cup into my hand. I blink, she blinks, and I take the mug, carrying it back over and placing it down on my workbench.

I feel tense, knowing I need to get her out in order to fix her arm, but when I think of popping it back into place, pinning her against the bars of the cage, my dick fucking twitches. Fists tight, pressing down onto the wood, shoulders hitched up tight around my ears, I drop my head forward, squeeze my eyes shut.

I hear her breathing, halfway across the room. Too fast, raspy, tight. My insides feel like they're curdling, knotting, guts twisting, lungs constricting. I think of binding that chain around my fist, yanking her head back, the shackle carving into her throat, breaking her jaw.

I hear it clink, my eyes snap open, my breath is stilled in my lungs. I listen, hearing her shift on the now clean base of her cage. I bleached it, swept it out, all with her huddled in one corner to the next. But it smells better, bleach filling my nostrils, her skin is clean too, soap and water, her own scent starting to carve through. The chain clinks again, and I can feel her tense, at the sound, the room so silent, she doesn't ever want me to know she's moving around, always so quiet, trying not to draw attention. Little does she know, everything she does draws my attention.

It is driving me insane. The way she watches me. Something reverent, something almost worshipping. It makes my skin crawl. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

I have made this all very complicated for myself.

I should have let her die.

I should have ended her myself.

Breath finally floods in through my nose, nostrils flaring as the cool air bites at my lungs. And I hear the clinking again. Turning on my heel, eyes like lasers shooting through her, she stares back at me. Still in the cage, those eyes on mine, peering at me through matted, dark hair. I drift closer, hands loose at my sides, eyes locked on hers.

A rush of anger floods through me, irritation making my teeth ache. She has infected my brain like a tumour. Latching on and spreading throughout my cranium. My temples pound, pulse hammering, my heart is a heavy, disgusting thing caged behind the bars of its bone prison.

I have dealt with this before.

Lala's pretty face pops into the forefront of my mind like she's here in this very room, those too big eyes boring into mine, a sinister smirk twitching at the corner of her lips.

Fixation.

Obsession.

It turned my blood black, my heart to mush, my insides felt like they were doused in acid.

I have killed for her.

My own brother.

I would die for her.

Even now.

And it is still not enough. It doesn't matter what I do. She will never choose me.

I am not enough.

I am too damaged even for her. My cousin. My twin flame. Soul mate.

It was, *is*, my ruin.

Her.

Her three husbands, beautiful son. She has a new family, a home, all things that took her from me.

And I still can't move on with my life.

I won't let it happen again.

My knees slam into the concrete as I drop to the ground at the open door of her cage. I reach in, hand clamping over her bony foot, forefinger and thumb curling around her jutting ankle. She hisses at me, her teeth bared, and rage explodes inside my chest.

I yank her leg, her hip bone popping, her back smacks into the solid metal base as she falls, her head bouncing off of it with a thunk. I rip her towards me. She arches up, chain hooked to her neck rattling, her good hand grappling with my hold on her leg. Snagged nails tear at my skin. She claws and growls, a low rumble in the back of her throat, the most noise she has ever made, and her eyes are alight with fire as I drag her free of the bars.

She clings onto the thick round metal, her dislocated arm limp as she flips onto her front, trapping it beneath her. She writhes to get away from me, but as I suspected, her legs don't work properly, there's no muscle bulking her skeleton, and as such, I can move and manipulate her without any effort at all.

I tear her out on her belly, her chin smacking the lip of the cage, a grunt of air forced from her lungs. I heave her up, standing quickly, I pull her to her feet. Her legs buckle beneath her, her entire body trembling. The chain swings between us, heavy and loud with its clinking against the concrete floor. Grabbing her roughly, I flip her around, her back to my front, legs hanging, toes dragging over the floor. Her one good arm claws blindly behind her, nails grazing my throat, my jaw, my face. I band my arm around her front, pinning her own at her side.

"Stop struggling," I hiss in her ear, my breath ghosting down the side of her throat.

She stills instantly, my lips brushing the skin just below her ear. For just a moment, we breathe, in time with one

another, too fast, uncontrolled. She goes lax, and I don't let go, but I don't tighten my hold any further on her either and then she's feral again.

Her wrist flexes unnaturally in an attempt to grab at me. Reach any single piece of me she can try to fight. But her legs are completely dead beneath her, my arm the only thing keeping her up, flush with my front. Growling like a little beast, she seethes in my hold. I carry her, lifeless limbs attempting to kick, hand trying to tear my flesh from my bones, heavy chain trailing along the floor at my feet.

Slamming her into the edge of the workbench, the air punching from her lungs. I snap her body forwards, over the wooden table. Her arm flies out in front of her, free from my hold, trying to soften the collision, but all that does is get it caught between the workbench and our combined weight.

I am smothering her back, all of her cold naked skin beneath my own, my jeans rough against the back of her thighs, arse. A shiver tears up my spine, her cheek flush with the splintering wood of the table, eyes narrowed and cornered on mine.

Her breath comes hard through her nose. Her back rising and falling sharply, spine jagged as it pushes against my chest. My fists planted on either side of her face, hips pinning hers to the table's edge, her legs limp, feet not even close to grazing the floor. Her head unable to flex down, to look at me properly, the thick shackle around her throat restricting her movements, she watches me from the corner of her eye, hair strewn across it. Our faces almost touching. I breathe her in and all she smells like is unscented soap, a slick of sweat, fear. My nose runs across the top of her cheekbone, I breathe her in, her dry hair rough on my skin.

Panting hard, I lift up off of her back, just enough for her to catch a full breath, fill her lungs with a rush of burning oxygen. She doesn't draw in anything even close to a full breath. Instead, her hand flies out from under her, up, straight for my face and her nails are gouging at my eye, a hiss spitting through my teeth as she drives her fingers into my flesh and rips the skin from my face.

I smash my forehead into the back of her skull on instinct, her face slamming into the table with the force, her arm falling away from me. White spots bleed across my vision, my clawed eye squeezed closed. I drop myself back on top of her, shoving her arm beneath her belly. Pinning her down.

My eye burns, my face stinging like it's been sprayed with acid and my heart punches against my sternum. But my cock pounds to life, kicking in my jeans against the slight curve of her backside. She whimpers beneath me as my hand crushes her skull into the table, my weight on the palm of my hand, fingers splayed, smothering the side of her face. Blood pounding through my veins, she tries to bite me, and I mash my thumb into her bared front teeth, applying pressure until my thumb goes numb.

I don't let up, even as she tries to squirm, the chain attached to her shackle clanging. My free hand shoves between our melded bodies, her bare arse smooth against my knuckles as I tear my jeans open. My cock so fucking hard, I can hardly breathe. All I can think about is what it would be like.

With her.

Lala's cunt wrapped around my cock.

I've never fucked a woman before. What if I was good enough?

Would Kyla-Rose want me then?

My cock strains in my hand, veins rigid in my palm, I guide it between her legs. My body leaning back just enough that I can see my tip weeping, glistening with precum, I smear it up and down her slit.

I'm always rejected by *her*.

Lala.

Always respectful.

Still. It doesn't matter.

She won't ever want me.

I am a monster.

Together we were something.

Without her, I am nothing.

But this.

With *this* girl.

No one knows she still breathes.

I can do whatever the fuck I want with her.

My cock slams inside her so hard, the vision in my open eye goes black. A hoarse, croaked wail rips from her throat at the violent intrusion. I can feel the vibration of it ricochet throughout my chest, into my heart, down my back, a tremor racing along my spine. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter before blinking them open, my scratched eye watering, a salty stream running down my cheek, stinging the open flesh from her nails. Pulling my hips back, my cock aching at how dry she is, I ruthlessly shove back in.

I watch her face between my spread fingers as I fuck into her. Pain in my cock, my pelvis, the tearing skin on my dick begging me to stop. I don't. I fuck her dry. Try to imagine what it'd feel like wet.

I study the silent whimpers on her lips, keep my weight pressed down on her face, the pressure of my thumb against her teeth intensifying. They are likely brittle, from malnourishment, I wonder if they will shatter, whether I will make her swallow the fractured pieces down if they do. Whether *I* will swallow the sharp pieces if they do.

She stops fighting me as I lower my chest to her back. Eyes on her closed lids, my vision blurred, I rake my teeth up her right shoulder blade, securing my bite in the space where her shoulder meets her neck. My teeth work into the skin, my hips pistoning in and out of her, burning pain slicing through my abdomen with every dry thrust.

Her legs are limp, wide, forced apart by my thighs, her naked body trapped beneath mine. Jaw locked, my teeth sink into her flesh until I taste blood. I flick my gaze up onto her

eyes, my hand still on her face, fingers splayed, thumb to her teeth, my other curls over her shackle bound throat. Thumb and finger arching her jaw up even more as my teeth drive into her deeper and deeper.

There is a pressure in my balls, fire in my temples, a coil of something hot in my belly. None of it is enough.

This isn't Lala.

I don't think I even really want it to be.

But I can't get those bulbous fucking grey eyes out of my head.

And I don't want to see them, imagine them.

Ever again.

"Look at me," I hiss, teeth tearing free of the girl's shoulder. "Open your eyes."

It is a demand, the words, the feeling behind them. My entire soul screams to have her fucking look at me. I want to have her attention. All of it. Even if it is with revulsion.

Her eyes open, and as she locks them on mine, narrowed and full of hate, but something else flits across her gaze, *wonder*. And my balls draw up, my cock slamming deep inside her, I come. With those beautiful blue-brown eyes on mine, I pulse inside her. My cum filling her up, hips melded to her arse. I still. Lave my tongue over the broken skin of her shoulder, the tip of it tasting every divot I created, lapping up the trickles of blood.

My hand releases from her head, her face, teeth. My other still secured over her metal bound throat, my thumb hooked over the O-ring where the heavy chain still hangs. Her back rises with a slow, deep breath. She doesn't look away, my thumb sweeping matted brown hair back from her face, uncovering those pretty eyes.

We stare at each other, our breathing slowing, and she doesn't look at me like she wants to kill me. I thought I might want her to. But she just doesn't. I feel something vicious in my chest, sharp and jagged. Her blood on my lips, my tongue,

I swallow that piece of her down, all while her eyes remain locked on mine.

Planting my hands on the table either side of her head, my fingers imprinted like a red bruised branding in her pale flesh. I push myself up, unsticking my chest from her back, my skin slick with sweat, smeared across hers. It feels satisfying, the carving in her shoulder, the bruises on her cheek, all of it glowing brightly beneath the red bulbs.

Slowly, still watching her, cock softening, I pull out. She winces at my exit from her body, the table shaking, chain rattling, her eyes squeeze shut, nostrils flared. I look down between us, at the blood on my cock, blood on her thigh, my cum oozing out from between her bloodied lips.

I've never seen anything so perfect.

I trace two fingers down her exposed spine, there are wounds still trying to heal, lacerations from something like wire over her back. Scars and brands and emblems. Her skin tells a story of where she's been, a little like my own and I feel a tethering of connection with her over that. No one has truly seen what's beneath my dark ink. No one but the tattooist, Lala, and *him*.

He put some of them there.

My fingers swipe up my cum, her blood, maybe it's even my blood too. The way my cock pulses with pain, I could have torn the skin, but in this moment, watching a piece of me seep it's way free from her, I don't care. I scoop my cum up onto my fingertips and thrust them inside her. Her walls quiver around me as my fingers savagely fuck into her, so hot and slippery and wet now, my cum and her blood having slicked the way. This would have felt so fucking good.

My cock pulses hard all over again in agreement, hanging out of my open jeans, no boxers because I don't like wearing them, it starts to harden. My fingers twist inside of her, feeling the spongy softness of her insides, my eyes on my digits working between her legs. My knuckles graze her asshole, tight and pink and scarred. That's when I feel the rougher patch inside of her.

I hear her suck in a sharp breath, my eyes snapping up to hers as I massage my fingers over it again and again, curled in against her front wall. I watch as her body quivers, her limp legs twitching, and I know she's going to come for me, even though she doesn't want to. I could stop. This torture. The way her teeth grit with disgust.

But I don't.

I won't.

She clenches her teeth, her good hand clawing over the edge of the bench, and her lips part, for only a second, before slamming together, pursing tight, her eyes squeezed. I feel her wall muscles tightening, my fingers struggling to move as she clamps down on them, and then she comes, a low whine caught in her silent throat. I fuck them into her until her muscles relax, twisting them before pulling out, a small trickle of her release running out of her as I do.

Raising my hand, lifting my fingers up to the red light, I study the sticky mess of our joint release on my tattooed digits, red streaked fluid. Glancing back down at her, her eyes on me, I bring them to my lips, swirl my tongue around the salty, tangy slick and suck my fingers clean. I lick my lips, her gaze dropping to my mouth. Something sharp flares in my chest, my lips parting to speak when she lunges.

Her legs buckle instantly as she pushes herself off of the workbench with a shaking arm, grabbing straight for my throat. I take one long step back and let her crash to the floor between us.

Her arm buckles beneath her, sending her down hard into the concrete, her legs twitching but not aiding her in getting any closer. I keep stepping back, watching as pure rage fuels her closer, her skeletal body jerkily slithering towards me. Only when I get to the open door of the cage, her, still clawing her way across the floor, do I feel the sting in my eye again, realise it's a little blurry.

Blind fury sweeps through me like an icy chill infecting my veins. I fucking saved her, and she thinks she can attack me. Heaving in a deep breath, I throw myself forward, closing

the gap, I dip down, yanking her up by her collar, the chain clanking making my ears ring. I spin us, slamming her spine into the top edge of the cage, her feet barely grazing the floor. I grab her damaged arm, tearing it away from her chest, her teeth snap at me like a wild alligator snared in a trap. I dip my face in towards her, my mouth dangerously close. I turn her arm out to the side, flick my gaze down to her mouth, back up to her eyes.

“If you try to bite me again,” my eyes flicking between her blue-brown ones, “I will tear your fucking teeth out.”

And then I slam her shoulder back into its socket.

A broken howl erupts from her, low and scratchy and wrong, it floods up from her crackly lungs, spearing me directly in the chest. And then I’m throwing her back into her cage and slamming the gate closed as she scrabbles to the far corner. I drag the long length of her chain around the gate and the solid bars, yanking on her shackle as I do. Grabbing a heavy-duty padlock from my wall of tools, I snap it shut over the twisted, thick links, and storm out of the basement, switching off the light as I go, plunging her into darkness.

CHAPTER 12

KAZIMIR

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh, letting my head drop back into the leather of my office chair.

It swivels gently side to side, rocking me as I close my eyes. The smell of cigarettes and bourbon thick in the air, the leather scent of the furniture swirling with the mix of too many woody scented aftershaves. My temples pound, another meeting with more men who have fucked up.

Again.

The Chicago Outfit's shipment was intercepted, millions of pounds of guns seized, nine men arrested with bail prices starting at half a mil each. Two of the Irish's pool halls were raided whilst my men were there, resulting in more arrests and the assault and battery of five police officers.

And now, barely even a week later, I have the Italians breathing down my fucking neck. Their product gone missing like it never existed, and none of my men can fucking tell me shit. How does a shipment of that quantity just disappear off the face of the globe? Now I'm fourteen million down and a whole lot more irritated.

Dima hovers beside me still. He very rarely speaks, but I can feel his silent, bulking presence as though I were looking directly at him. I sigh again, heavier than the last, and reluctantly, drop my hand from my face. Fingers curling over the arm of my chair, I look up into his small brown eyes.

“Yes, Dima?”

He shifts on his feet, looking uncomfortable, eyes averting just a little to the left.

“What is it?” I almost bark, my chest heaving with the sudden intake of breath. “Just,” I blow out the breath, huff another through my nose, “just tell me.”

I massage my temples, watch as Dima shuffles back just a small step, and then circle a hand in the air, gesturing him to get on with it. Unsure how anything could make this day any fucking worse. I just want to go home.

“Charlie Swallow just walked in,” he grunts, Russian accent thick, his tongue rolling the word Charlie around his mouth like something he’d quite like to spit out.

Everything gets very loud then, the inside of my skull knocking with my pulse. I can hear the bass of the music three floors below, some ridiculously priced DJ mixing shit that, in my opinion, sounds fucking awful. But, The Glass House is popular because of the European musical geniuses, again, in others’ opinion, we always seem to snag. The club is forever full and there is always a queue of people still hoping to get in.

Head cocking, hands dropping back to the arms of the chair, my chin dips, eyes flicking up onto Dima’s, my gaze roves across his face, a single bead of sweat rolling down his right temple as he waits for some sort of reaction out of me.

“And...?” I ask slowly, dragging the word out for too long, knowing there’s obviously something more.

“He’s bloody.”

A laugh erupts out of me in a bark, raucous and sharp. That is absolutely ridiculous, of course he’s bloody. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the man anything less.

“And he’s causing a problem?”

“Well, not exactly-”

“Show me,” I order, hand held out, he places his phone into my open palm.

I bring it closer, the writhing floor full of dancers, but he’s there, always the first thing I see in any room. Stark white hair

a sky blue beneath the strobe lights cutting across the floor, his head cocked, eyes on mine through the screen as he peers directly at the discrete camera.

A tremor creeps its way down my back, sweat slicking my nape. I roll my lips together, curl my bottom lip between my teeth. It is not a coincidence that out of all of my establishments, he shows up to the one I am actually at. He is as aware of me as I am of him. But we do not just drop in on each other. We do not talk or text or fucking breathe in the same proximity. And yet, twice, two visits in only so many weeks, he shows up looking like my worst fucking nightmare. It's not even that it feels unwelcome, the pounding of my heart, hammering of my pulse in anticipation, the unknown, what it is he's here for, it's that no matter what. Where, when, why. We never ever make a fucking scene.

My spine snaps straight, Dima's hands flailing, struggling to catch the phone as I toss it back at him. I rise from my chair, sweep a hand down the front of my shirt, buttons catching on the side of my palm. My shoulders tense, the healing stab wound in my shoulder pulsing with a dull ache making my teeth grind.

Regardless, I tear the office door open, the thwack of it loud in the dark hallway, more of my security standing at various points along the walls. I tear past them all.

“Stay!” I bark out, footsteps stilling as the word cracks from my tongue.

I tear down the steel stairs, curling around the landings between floors. The *tap, tap, tap* of my dress shoes against the steel-edged steps echoes upwards in the stairwell and then my feet are slamming into the bare concrete as I reach the ground floor. Hands grappling at the handles to wrench open the doors and there he stands. Twenty feet down the empty, dim hall, hands loose at his sides, low rise black jeans, grey boots. Bare chest, head cocked, chin dipped, face shadowed with the orange strip bulb at his back.

I don't stop, my feet taking me at a quick march to meet him. My chest smacks into his, the force of the collision

sending him back a step. I grip his upper arms, twist him around and slam him into the wall. He doesn't fight me as I mash his cheek into the wall, pinning him in place with my hips. His arms up, palms flat to the white wall, fingers splayed, he peers at me through a bloodshot eye. Bloody scratch marks mar his perfect pale skin, a claw mark slashed through his eyebrow, over the wrinkling of his eyelid, down the top of his cheek is gouged in deep, blood weeps, clotting on the fresh wound.

My heart is grinding, his own hammering through his back, vibrating into my chest. His gaze is on mine, that glaring emerald orb flicked to the very outer corner of his eye. One of my hands plants on the wall, in the space between his head and hand, the other snaps up, finger and thumb pinching his chin. I jerk his head further, twisting it on his neck until I hear his spine crack.

Breath pants through my nose, teeth clenched, I drop myself onto his bare back, crushing him flat into the wall. My muscle is much denser than his, his tall, lithe body much thinner than my own bulk. But he could fight me off.

If he wanted to.

“What the *fuck*,” I hiss through my teeth, “do you think you're doing here?” Tip of my nose pressing to his scratched-up cheek, his scent filling my nostrils, smoky, clean, copper. “You're a fucking mess,” I spit, dropping my blurred gaze down the length of him, unseeing because I'm too close, my vision too cross-eyed, but I know every inch of this body like it were my own. “Who did this to you? Hmm?” I hum, my lips parted against his cheek as I suck in greedy sips of his scent. “You deserved it, though, didn't you,” my finger and thumb tightening on the bone of his chin. “You deserved it because you're pathetic,” I whisper directly into his ear, licking my lips, my tongue catching his lobe. “You're my pathetic little whore, aren't you, *Malysh*?”

His hips grind into the wall beneath me, my hard cock digging into the split of his arse, a desperate groan locked in his throat. I lick a stripe up the side of his neck, pulse pounding beneath the flat of my tongue. I grip his chin harder,

our eyelashes brushing each other's where I'm leaning in so close.

"Why did you come here?" I ask roughly, words gritting out as his arse cheeks flex.

My teeth sink into his neck, muscles and tendons corded beneath my locking jaws. His leg kicks back, boot to my shin, but I hold tight, unflinching.

"Fuck you," he rasps, his voice going straight to my brain like a shot, my dick kicking with a new burst of adrenaline.

I release my teeth, eyeing the bloody crescents before lifting my gaze back to his, drawing my head back just a little to see him clearer.

"That's what you want," I say lowly, eyes flicking between bright green. "To fuck."

He snarls, the sound rattling in the back of his throat, a warning.

"Well, let's go!" I sing brightly, his eyes narrowing.

My hand drags down the wall beside his head, his own hands unmoving. I grab the back of his neck, razor cut hair soft beneath my calloused palm as I tighten my hold. My fingers pinch sharply, the fragile bones in his nape flexing beneath my grip, I lift my body from his and drag him away from the wall.

Without protest, he bows forward, my hold on him like the scruff of a hound being hauled outside. I guide him down the hallway, my steps strong and unhurried, his, clumsy and uncoordinated. I slam my palm against the bathroom door when we reach it, knocking it back into the wall as it violently swings open.

Unceremoniously, I throw Charlie to the ground. His knees crashing into the tiles, arms thrusting forward to save himself from face planting the floor. My chest is heaving as I stare at him on all fours, his eyes down, facing away from me, his back rising and falling sharply with ragged breaths. I swallow hard, staring at his back, dark ink swirling over his pale white

skin, covering markings and scars, but so much of it is *her*. *Kyla-fucking-Rose*.

Anger floods up through me like my stomach is trying to claw its way up my throat. I fucking did this shit.

“Turn around,” I order, my words simmering with violence, my hackles rise, his skin prickling with goosebumps. “Stay down.”

He moves on his hands and knees, head still bowed as he finally turns in my direction.

It’s heady. The way he follows my instruction so blindly. I feel like I’m falling, drowning, dying, him obeying my orders, doing what I say. He is volatile. Violent. Angry at the world. Yeah, well, so the fuck am I.

But then there’s this. when we’re together. Like this. He seeks me out. I just, I fall into him, into us and I remember, for just a moment, why we bought that fucking house. Two delusional young men. Both trying to deal with their trauma. Thinking that what they had between them was love. It makes me want to laugh. Emotion claws at my insides, anger, bitter and thick, pounds through my veins.

My mouth dry, I swallow, “Crawl to me,” it is low, my voice, rough, desperate.

We can play these games and sate the hunger, but it will never be more than what it is.

Stolen moments of terror.

That’s all we can ever be.

Terrifying, dangerous passion.

He stops before me, palms planted on either side of my feet. He doesn’t look up. His spine curved, muscles solid in his back, twitching beneath his skin. His hair falls forward, over his face, head dropped forward, my cock weeps and I draw in a steady breath.

“Kiss my feet,” my voice holds strong, unwavering.

He doesn't move, doesn't speak, and I am desperate to hear him fight back. Have that sinister growl bite into my eardrums. Instead, after a moment, his elbows bend slowly, lowering him down, not stopping until his shoulders are level with the backs of his hands. He drops his head forward, his nose brushing the tied laces of my right shoe, I feel his breath ghost over my ankle and then his mouth on the leather.

Every logical thought drops out of my brain. The unlocked door, cameras, guards, the fucking claw marks in his face. I'm hot. My thin cotton shirt too much. My belt too tight. Socks and shoes and trousers. My skin itches, on fire beneath the too many layers. My head falls back, eyes closing, my legs trembling and he's not even touching me.

But as his parted lips work up and down the length of my shoe, mouth moving from the right and onto the left. I force my eyes open, look down at him, and those fucking eyes spear me. Catching my gaze, holding me captive, he runs his tongue up the front of my shoe, a trail of saliva glinting under the harsh clinical bulb. I am breathing fast, air huffing hard through my nostrils.

I am enthralled, watching him, worship me.

"Take my cock out," I hiss through my teeth, venomous and cruel.

Without removing his mouth, still attached to my foot, he reaches up, balancing on his left hand, his right fingers work to free my buckle, button, zipper. And then the heat of my cock is being cradled in his cold, clammy hand. Fingers and thumb circling my thick length in a punishing grip. His hand slides up and down, tugging hard, it feels like he's trying to tear it off and a groan creaks its way free of my throat. I don't take my eyes off him, his back heaving, eyes flicked up on mine, then to my cock, and back again.

It's not enough, even like this, even having him here, at my feet, at my mercy.

I will never get enough of Charlie Swallow.

“Up on your knees,” I spit, disgust in my tone, real and torturous.

I fucking hate myself.

“Use your mouth,” I demand, chest rising and falling raggedly.

He lifts up onto his knees, parted lips shining with saliva, I swallow hard as his mouth suctions over my tip. My hips buck forward uncontrollably, my hand finding his choppy hair, fisting it at the root. I thrust into his mouth, his throat tightening around my length as he swallows around me. There’s no noise, no gagging, nothing but the pounding of my pulse buzzing in my ears. His hands claw at my thighs, shoving my trousers and boxers down to my ankles. His fingers run up my legs, gouging into the backs of my thighs, holding onto me as I fuck his face.

“Such a dirty boy,” I whisper cuttingly, “always coming to me when you need to let go. Pathetic,” I grit out, tightening my hold in his hair, thrusting farther into his mouth. “Always fucking up,” another thrust. “You’re a worthless piece of shit, aren’t you?” I spit at him, teeth gritted so hard my jaw cracks. “Answer me!” I bellow, his hips rocking in time with my own. “Speak.”

He mumbles around my cock, attempting to nod his head in my hold, his fingers driving deeper into my thighs.

“So sad,” I whisper, pouting my bottom lip, his eyes directed up on mine, shining with tears as my cock hammers into his throat. “Such a sad, lonely boy that nobody wants.” He sucks me harder into the back of his throat, a hiss escaping my teeth. “Poor baby Charlie having to come to me.” Saliva drips down his chin, “Must be desperate, huh?” his mouth slurps loudly on my cock. “What did you do, *Malysh*?” I hum, my balls drawing up as he sucks me even deeper, my eyes practically roll, but neither one of us breaks eye contact. “Who did that to your face?” I ask, brushing my finger over the bloody mark raking down his eye.

His teeth dig in a little on the next pull into his throat, scraping gently down my length and my eyes nearly roll.

“You’re not going to say it?” I mock, a brow arching high on my forehead, “Not going to tell me about the poor little boy you must’ve made cry?” at that, he bites down sharply, a breath sucking in through my teeth. “Is your mouth too full, lover? Jaw aching?” I tease with a smirk even as my muscles start to tighten.

I thrust harder into his mouth, tears dragging down his cheeks, breath held, his nails break skin, and I fucking explode. Coming, hands tight on the sides of his head, his nose flush with my pelvis, I pump thick ropes of cum down his throat, my cock pulsing and kicking between his sharp teeth. I feel the moment he goes to bite, finally wanting to breathe, I thrust in once more, a smirk on my face at his wet cheeks, the snarl in his top lip, hatred in his eyes. But, above all else, the lust in them, something more, meaningful, forbidden. It hurts something buried deep inside of me, hidden beneath layers of denial, fear, and I tear my dick free in panic, his teeth scraping aggressively along my length as I tear my cock out from between his lips.

The back of my hand cracks across his cheek, knocking his head to the side, my knuckles burning, his white hair flying across his scratched face. He breathes hard, his back rising and falling, my own chest heaving. I pull up my trousers, tuck myself away, rethread my belt, straighten and tuck in my shirt.

Without looking at him, I sniff hard, then step around his still kneeling form, eyes on the door, I wrench it open and walk away.

And it’s one of the hardest fucking things I’ve ever had to do.

CHAPTER 13

CHARLIE

She startles when I enter. Dragging a wailing man her way, throwing him to the ground beside her bars. Her neck chain still bound around the gate of her cage, not tampered with, and my cock weeps instantly. Knowing she hasn't tried to escape.

Here.

Me.

The man begs for life at my feet, clawing at my lower jean clad legs. Irritation spikes, yet I do not take my gaze from hers. Big blue orbs, sapphire ringed in dark honey brown, keep me locked in, obsessively, even as my foot collides with the disgusting man's jaw, the bone audibly snapping, his whimpering ruining the quiet. Even now, her gaze does not stray, there is no fear, no wince, even after what I have done to her. It makes my insides curl in on themselves, rib bones bowing into my heart, the blackened thing leaking tar, thick sludge seeping into my bloodstream.

But I do not feel guilt.

I liked it.

Fucking her.

I feel alive with her eyes on me. My cock kicking hard in my jeans, her blood, her scent, all still present on my dick. And with the taste of Kazimir on my tongue, his salt in my throat, my reddened cheek still glowing and hot from his assault. I find I am unable to focus on any singular thing, but this.

Violence.

It is what I am oh so very good at.

I am unsure what happens next, my movements unconscious, but when I finally take a full breath, head clearing marginally from the red mist of rage. Blood coats my hands, slick up to my elbows as I continue to tear out his intestines. Coils of them dragging over my thighs, my posture relaxed as I sit on my haunches, knees flush with the man's ribs. His head is turned to the side, eyes still on me, a slow, watery blink, the light now finally leaving him as I rip the last of them free, severing their attachment.

The stretched lengths of them are strewn across my lap, trailing on the floor at my sides, my hands still plunge back inside his open belly. I feel my way around, plucking out pieces, severing connections and ties, veins and fat and oozing pieces of flesh fill my hands and I discard them to the floor.

My dick is painfully hard, knowing she is there, at my back, watching me through the iron bars of her cage. Her chain rattling briefly every so often, the only sound strong enough to have me glancing back.

Over my shoulder, she stares at me, tiny, scarred hands curled around the cold bars, her naked body bloody, bruised, my fingerprints purpling her flesh. A possessive thread of ownership ripples through me at the sight.

Tongue sweeping over my bottom lip, I bite down on the inside of my cheek, cock kicking, chin on my shoulder, her gaunt but pretty face pressed up against the bars. She watches attentively, aptly, my heart thudding loud in my ears, I feel dizzy, the way her eyes graze down me, my seated position, bare spine, jean covered arse, booted feet. She blinks rapidly, those thick, black lashes fluttering over high prominent cheekbones. And then she lifts her eyes, locking them with mine, a ghost of a shy smile on those cracked, dry lips.

I drop the organ in my hand, the thud-squelch of it loud on the wet concrete at my side. My legs unfold, body lifting from the hard ground with barely any effort at all. It is as though I drift in her direction, compelled by those addictive eyes. If I

could pop them out, keep them in a jar, I am not sure I would ever leave this room.

She tracks me as I stalk forwards, her fingers white-knuckled where they tighten around her bars, but she does not back away. I drop to my knees, the bones grinding as they hit the concrete once again, pain shooting up my femurs, but I don't feel it at all. Her chin dipped as far as her shackle allows, eyes lifted, locked on me kneeling before her.

My own hands find the bars, placing my fingers just beneath hers, curling them around the metal. She swallows hard, and her eyes tighten with pain, my gaze drops to the neck shackle, my own throat tightening with the phantom weight of it. Then I hear her breathing labour, air sailing swiftly in and out of her slightly parted lips, her breath cool where it ghosts over my blood-slicked chest. Goosebumps raze across my flesh, sprouting out all over my skin. She swallows again, sinfully licking her lips, my cock punishing me, my desires, my need. I can't think about anything than what I have already done to her.

I am not sorry.

I want to do it again.

It is a compulsion that has my breath stilling in my chest, lungs constricting as her plump red lips part, long, matted dark hair covering half of her bruised face, right cheek blue with the imprint of my fingers. Her small nose, hollow cheeks. All of it is dainty, even her scars, something that I try hard not to study, the thought of someone –someone else- marking her, has my blood boiling.

The sides of my index fingers brush the sides of her little ones, our curled hands flush, hers set above mine on the bars. Condensation slick on the metal, mixing with the blood on my palms, sinister red streaking down the poles. One of her hands lifts, moving towards her chest, my eyes following, even though hers are still on mine. She plants it over her heart, atop her small breasts, dark nipples plucked into sharp points from the chill in the air. I have the urge to prick them with something sharp, my cock pulses heavily with my heartbeat,

reminding me that I can do so if I wish. I own her. My eyes so focused on her bony hand, mind wandering over the possibilities of piercing her body with an array of blunt and sharp objects alike, that I almost don't hear it.

My eyes snap up, a crackled exhale from her throat painful to my ears. Unbelievably so, her cheeks flush pale pink, gaze dropping, eyes closing. The noise comes again, and I am enraptured, waiting for her, patiently, but on the third attempt at whatever it is she's fucking doing, I snap out of it. Suddenly rushing up from my position on the ground, her hand instantly reaches out through the bars, her shoulder flush in the gap of the bars, as though she is trying to climb through, *reaching for me*, and I stop still. Staring at her, disbelief fills me as my lips part, my bare, bloodied chest heaving, she licks her lips again, the same crackled sound. And it reboots my brain.

My heart thundering in my throat, I grab the bottle of water on my workbench. Returning to the bars, tossing the cap aside, I jerk my head as I lower back to my knees, gesturing for her to tilt her own back, and without verbal command, she does as I want. Lips parting, mouth opening, neck arching as much as she is able with the shackle. I start to trickle the cool water onto her tongue. It doesn't feel like the last time, when she spluttered and choked, my fingers squeezing her cheeks. Those captivating eyes on mine, her throat works the water down, I lift the bottle, still close to her lips, but she turns her head back to face me fully, chin dipping again.

Her eyes flutter closed, nostrils flaring and then those Mediterranean blues are back on me. The crackle in her chest sounds louder, making me think about antibiotics, why I haven't heard this sound before when I listen to her so intently, it's all I can hear when I'm down here. I can't take my eyes from the skeletal hand over her chest. The matted dark hair strewn over her small breasts.

"A-" she swallows, trying again, my face leaning closer and closer. "A- Aaa- Vv-" shyly dropping her gaze, she pulls in another breath, deeper, my nose is almost flush with hers, and then she rasps the word right over my lips, "Ava."

My cock kicks in my jeans, heart thudding dully in my chest, my own throat tight. I hold my breath, her name sings inside my head. Her voice is just like mine, softer though, despite the crackle, the wince in her eyes when she forced it from her tongue. My hand reaches through, finger hooking in the O-ring of her shackle, I wrench her back into the bars, her lips and nose in the gap. Cheekbones like bruised butterfly wings pulled against the metal poles.

“Ava,” I rasp back, her lashes fluttering, eyes dropping. “Look at me,” I creak out. “Baby Bird,” her gaze snaps up, eyes flicking rapidly between mine, no doubt with blurry vision from where we’re so close.

I breathe her in, filling my lungs with her, thinking of only hours ago, having her bent over my workbench. My cock in her cunt. My other hand reaches through the bars, palming the back of her head, rough, coarse, matted hair beneath my calloused palm. Forehead dropping to hers, eyes closing, her quickened breath ghosts across my cheeks, my parted lips, panting breaths from her and I, heaving in and out.

Disgust roils in my belly, grey eyes infiltrating my mind, I fight them back, expel them from my thoughts, not wanting them to ruin this. I think of the ones I can feel staring at my closed lids instead. Blue, ringed in brown, heavy lashes, fat lips, high cheekbones, slim face. My breath sails free of my open mouth, I lift my forehead from hers. Eyes opening.

Ava.

My heart thuds and all I can think about is her.

Ava. Ava. Ava.

Baby Bird.

Finally.

It feels like a weight lifts from my chest, my shoulders falling, the tense muscles unclenching, burning with release. I let my head roll on my shoulders, the small bones in my neck popping and cracking with relief. My lungs pull in deep breaths, slow, unhurried, my brow smoothing. Thoughts of my

Kyla-Rose drain away from the forefront of my mind, the place they had been nailed to the inside of my skull.

My own cage burns into my memory, the smell, the room, the eyes, fists, feet. And I am suddenly standing, bolt cutters in my hands, the blade of which pinches the thick padlock I threaded through her chain. Muscles straining, the lock drops free, coiled chains slithering to the floor. I toss the cutters aside, the stench of death sharp in the air. Blood and organs, and more mere feet behind us and all I can think about is this girl.

Ava. Ava. Ava.

Her name fills my head like birdsong, dizzying me to the brink of madness.

She watches me, same position, same calmness as my hurried actions. I tug the chain from around the bars, ripping the gate open, and she doesn't move, one hand dropped from her bars, the other still white-knuckled around the icy metal. She stares at me, one knee bent, outer leg flush with the floor, foot curled beneath her other thigh, the leg limp on the floor. She is open to me, her bloodied cunt on full display, her concave belly rising and falling rapidly. But her eyes are on mine, wide and unblinking and I can't not take her again.

I reach in, my hands curling over her upper arms, dragging her towards me, she does not protest. Her legs drag behind her as I drag her into my chest, dropping back onto my arse, my thighs parted, one arm banding around her back, hand cupping her waist, thumb smoothing over the scarred skin on the side of her left breast. My right hand works my jeans, and then the hot flesh of my cock is pulsing in my hand. I lift her, positioning her legs over my thighs, her feet curling slightly into my back, my cock lines up at the dry heat of her.

I heft her up higher, dragging her even closer, her breasts flush with my bloody chest, she falls into me, hands loose at her sides, she eyes me, and I don't want her to ever fucking look away.

I think of keeping her forever, in her cage, with her shackle and chain, acting like a collar and lead. Having something that

nobody knows about, something just for me, and my dick swells. The fingers of my other hand bite into her hip, thumb in the divot of hollow bone.

She doesn't flinch when I thrust up into her, but I do. Her dry walls tighten so hard around my cock, I can feel it tearing the frenulum, my foreskin pulling back too fucking far and it makes white spots dance across my vision. I bite down hard on my teeth, a deep crease between my eyes, brows drawing in, but I keep going, keep fucking up into her, she gets tighter, my cock growing further, all of the blood in my body is shooting straight to my cock. Spurring me on.

But, Ava's not staring at me anymore. She's not doing anything. I thrust out, back in harder, but she just stares blankly behind me. I still, my hands tightening on her body. I glance over my shoulder, see fucking nothing, and my chest aches. I growl lowly, baring my teeth, but there's nothing, no response, if I released my hold on her right now, she'd flop down to the ground like a rag doll.

"Ava," I rumble, my chest vibrating with the threat of her name, and there's nothing.

I tighten my hold on her, my eyes boring into her glassy ones. Sweat drips down my spine, my facial features tightening, eyes roving all over her face.

Am I not doing this right?

Always fucking useless.

I'm no good for anything.

Not anymore.

Not since *him*.

Kazimir Ivanov.

I can't seem to focus on anything anymore.

Except violence.

My hips piston harder, my cock slamming relentlessly in and out of her. Dry, but not as dry as before.

I am doing it fucking right.

My hand slides up from her hip, over her ribs, my calloused palm presses over her nipple, my hand smothering her entire breast, fingers pressing on her collarbone. I know it's uncomfortable, I know it hurts, especially when I apply pressure like I am now, but she continues staring over my shoulder and I am incensed.

I throw her down onto her back, her slight body splatting into the blood and flesh from my kill. Chain rattling, breath oomphing out of her. My cock still inside of her, I hover, drop my weight down onto her, make sure she really feels me. I fuck her harder, skirting us across the floor with every thrust, blood covers us both, my hands in it, splaying on the concrete either side of her head.

I drop my face to the crook of her neck, graze my teeth up the column of her throat above the shackle, up behind her ear. I latch onto the top of her ear, bite into it, suck the cool cartilage into my mouth, move down to her lobe, sucking and nibbling, biting. Grazing my canine down the shell, to the corner of her jaw, I suckle the skin, bite the bone, fuck into her cunt so hard, I can hardly breathe. I draw back from her, thinking she's the best fucking feeling in the world.

But she still isn't fucking look at me.

Heat builds in my lower belly, balls drawing up, cock tightening, growing, swelling. I want nothing more than to come. To paint her fucking insides with my seed, let it bleed into her soul.

Infect her.

Taint her.

Mark her as *mine*.

My cock surges, cum shooting free from my tip, dick stilling so deep inside of her, my cock could be inside her fucking chest cavity, dousing her heart in my cum.

It should feel amazing, but instead, it feels like nothing, numb.

It feels like we're dead.

A corpse fucking a corpse.

I hold still inside of her, my breath erratic, chest heaving, but she's just staring. Her cheek flush to the floor, I reach down, turn her to face me, her eyes glassy, unseeing. I smooth the matted brunette strands back from her gaunt face. Blood sticky and clotting on her pale skin, my thumb sweeps beneath her eye. Those unusual blue-browns unfocused.

"Ava," I say lowly, my voice cracking, rage fills my bones at hearing my own pathetic voice, but I ignore it. "Ava." I grip her face in my hand, pinching her cheeks as hard as my ribs are piercing my thundering heart, dragging her focus back to me, I lick my lips. "Baby Bird."

She blinks, her breathing shallow, gaining speed as she drops her gaze down, seeing the blood. Her arms sort of jolt, like they're coming back online, an electrical current shocking through the limbs. Nails are the first things I feel, jagged little carvings into my skin, bony hands curling over my shoulders. A hiss slips between my teeth, but I like it, the bite of pain, the sting.

"Ava," the word cracks. "Baby Bird," I growl, a snarl like a hound curling my upper lip. "Look at me," my fingers and thumb bite into her hollow cheeks.

I sense it before I see it, the hair rising along my nape, down the curve of my spine, a shiver ripping through me, but I'm too slow to react. Her hand slaps across my face, my teeth rattle in my gums, but I don't have time to recover from it as her nails claw down my already wounded eye and cheek. Her fingers are knotting in my hair, tearing at my roots, yanking my head around, cracking my neck. My cock grows hard instantly, still inside of her, pain pulses through my cock, my balls, up into my lower abdomen. And that's what stills her. Feeling me.

Top teeth biting down into my bottom lip, I flick my lip free, cock my head, her wrists locked inside of my hands. My body looming over her, blocking her battered body from the red tinted light at my back.

“Ava,” I say louder, “Baby Bird,” I hush, and her eyes flick to mine, a crease between them, a wince as I shift between her legs.

I mirror her expression. My cock uncomfortable in the decadent heat between her thighs.

“Why aren’t you getting wet for me?”

I don’t mean to say it, but the words spill out of me, confusion, because I know how this works. I understand sex. Somewhat. I have fucked more men than I dare count, but this... Shouldn’t this be the same?

“Ava,” I lick my lips, staring into those addictive, dead eyes.

Her legs flex beneath me, the barest movement, I know she has no strength in them. My frown deepens, so does hers. We must be mirror images of one another’s expressions now.

“I want to fuck you again,” I tell her, my lips plucking over hers with each word, and her cunt pulses.

Barely, but I feel it and my cock punches in response, swelling, heating, begging me to move, urging my instincts to thrust, thrust, thrust. I do nothing. Gritting my teeth.

“Ava,” I brush my sticky, bloody fingers down her cheek, cup the fragile bones of her face in my hand.

She looks me dead in the eye, a corpse, like me, it only makes my dick harder. I bite my tongue, my cheek, drawing blood, thick in my mouth, in my throat. And I’m not sure I’ve ever wanted to move more in my entire life. Ever wanted anything more than this moment.

Our bodies joined, lain in blood, flesh, bone.

I want to roll us around, slather her pale body in it. In this, in us, I want to come inside of her again and again and again, over and over until I am all she can see, taste, feel.

I bite down into my tongue, blood bubbling, flesh burning, I stare at her as though I want to devour her. I think about taking a knife, slicing into her skin, replacing the scars she has with mine, with me, me, me. I want to come in her hair, on her

face, in her throat, cunt, hands. I want to slather her in my blood, cut her up into pieces and consume every portion like she is the greatest delicacy.

My hips punch forward, knocking the crown of her head into the butchered man at her back and I feel feral, at her touching him. I rip her up from the ground, blood decorating her back and I realise it's not mine, it's not me, her, us.

I tear her into my chest, dropping back onto my arse, black jeans still hanging onto my hips, I cradle her head beneath my chin, my lips in her hair, my eyes hard on the dead man behind her.

I am fucking feral.

Her arms hang at her sides, even though mine are banded around her. I think of the way Lala always holds me so fucking tightly that my skin crawls, and then I don't find Ava not clinging onto me so infuriating as only a moment ago. But I feel... *cold*, without her touch, and I frown harder.

I'm not good with people.

Especially not girls.

Women.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" I blink as I rasp the question.

The thought only just occurring to me to ask, even though my cock is currently snug and solid as fucking granite inside of her. I didn't ask her before, I wanted it, it was a punishment, I think, maybe, I don't know what I'm thinking when I get like that.

This though, this gets a reaction out of her. Her fingertips flex at my sides. Relaxing my hold on her cheeks a little, I can't see her, where she's tucked beneath my chin, so I draw back, dip my chin, cock my head, catch her eye. She looks at me now, her breathing slowing, her heart is hammering against my own, and the organ in my chest seems to cling onto the beat of hers. Mimicking it, syncing with her. Heat flushes through me, my eyes dipping down to the sliver of space between us. Her dark nipples are puckered on her small chest,

my mouth waters and reluctantly, I drag my gaze back up to hers. Her face bloodied, bruised with my fingerprints, and despite it not being my blood smeared across her, I feel the shudder it elicits all the way down to my core.

“I-” I lick my lips, trying to think about what I’m saying, but it all comes out wrong regardless. “I’ll try not to hurt you again,” I look away then, scrunching my nose, sniffing hard.

My grip is still tight on her face, despite forcibly relaxing my fingers, I’m too rough and I don’t know how not to be. I don’t want to learn not to be either.

It’s who I am.

Violence.

I look to her then, those pretty eyes on mine, and I feel all of my blood rush south again. I lick my lips, my gaze hopelessly locked on hers, tethered, frozen, caught, snared.

I am the poisonous spider in the web, but now, right now, I feel like the fly, captured and bound in silk.

“Charlie,” I say quietly, that catch of my voice cracking in my damaged throat, the tendons taut, muscles cramping. She drops her chin as far as she can, keeps her eyes up on mine, “I’m Charlie,” I hush again, and her lips curl, shyly, slowly, fucking beautifully.

A smile.

Her fingers lift slowly to my side, ghostlike in their touch, skeletal in their feel. She is cold, as am I, but I don’t want her to feel warm, it feels nice, not to be the coldest person in the room. My cock kicks and she doesn’t wince this time, she doesn’t slap me, scratch me, even though my face burns where she did, and I have zero doubts I’m bleeding. But I don’t care.

“Tell me no, Ava,” I say softly, the words pressing to her lips in something that’s not quite a kiss. “Tell me no,” I grit through my teeth as I slowly start to fuck into her again. “Tell me no, Baby Bird,” I breathe, her fingers curling over my sides, both hands locking over my ribcage.

She doesn’t tell me no.

CHAPTER 14

CHARLIE

Hand gripping the back of her neck, hips rocking brutally into her, thrusting up from the ground, my arse clapping against the concrete. My other hand plants down beside my thigh, smearing through the spilled blood. Slapping my wet hand over her protruding ribs, keeping my eyes on the pretty purpling of her previously dislocated shoulder. I swipe my hand upwards, curling it around to the front of her ribs, over the dip of her sternum, my fingers pushing up to the hollow of her throat. Thumb and fingers wrapping around the base of her neck, my cock swelling at the sight of her painted in red.

Her gaze lowers, chin dipping as much as it is able with the shackle, she peers down at herself, and when those eyes lock back with mine, she licks her lips.

Jealousy suddenly tears its way through me, and I'm getting up, removing us from the puddle of corpse pieces. I wrap her limp leg around my hip, my other hand still clamped over her nape, cock buried inside her. Tucking her face into my neck, her hands slowly sweep around my sides, up my back, fingers curling over my shoulders, she holds onto me.

She holds me.

And something inside of my chest swells so hard it almost knocks me to my knees.

Weapons. That's all I see as I head to the armoury wall. Ava in my arms, her breath puffing in and out against my throat, cool and damp. Vision in a narrow point, releasing her

leg, I reach out for the curved hunting knife. That's what has her tightening her hold on my shoulders. Ragged nails ripping into my skin, my cock still plunged inside her pulses with the sting. Her chain slithers along behind us with every step, my ears almost numb to the sound when I've got her in my arms. Attention firmly fixed on me, always on me, that's all that chain means, the metallic scent of it, the clinking, trailing of it.

But the metal of the knife catching against the cave-like concrete wall as I lift it from its hook, makes her lungs still. I am not one for comfort. Neither in words, nor touches. I turn us back to the open room, stare at the dead man, his thorax torn open, none of his insides where they're supposed to be. Pieces strewn all across my basement. Eyeing the thick puddle of blood, I stop at the edge of it, booted feet not quite touching. Hand with the knife coming back up, I hook her bony leg back around my hip, side of the blade pressing against her bare thigh.

Slowly, I kneel, sitting on my haunches, I carefully lower Ava back down, her body flinching with the cold as I lay her in the crimson. Her cunt clenches around me, spiking lust straight through my core, like she wants to keep me inside of her. Keep us connected.

I would stitch myself inside of you if I thought I could.

Sitting up from her, her legs lifeless around me, her body angled up, head and shoulders down, where she's flush with my thighs, my cock deep inside her. My rough palms drag down her scarred, bloodied skin, my eyes, fingers and thumbs grazing over letters, brandings, fucking numbers and slurs. All things cut into her that *I* didn't fucking put there.

Anger swells like a sudden summer storm, thunder and lightning crashing around my skull like symbols. Knife held up between us, thick, curved edge glinting beneath the red bulbs, she doesn't move, doesn't flinch, just stares, *at me*.

Watching me.

Tracking me.

Fixating on me.

With little force the blade drags easily through the skin of my inner forearm, the blade slicing down from elbow ditch to wrist. Tasting my blood, tongue dragging up the length of the knife, I drop it beside my thigh. Keeping my eyes on hers, the only thing I can focus on beneath my simmering temper. The oceanic blue ringed with deep honey brown. Gripping my free hand over my forearm, I squeeze the surface wound, coating my palm in blood, and then I cup her gaunt cheek with it.

Fingers swirling over her eyelids, painting her lashes, down the length of her nose, up the arch of her cheekbones, down her jaw to the sharp point of her chin. Thumb pad hovering over her parted lips, she blinks those heavy lashed eyes open, and when our eyes reconnect, her vision clear, I force my thumb down onto her fat bottom lip, the tip of it applying pressure against her teeth. She relaxes her jaw, opening her mouth, her tongue lying limp just behind her bottom row of teeth, I push my thumb inside, over her tongue, to the back of her throat.

She doesn't gag, her eyes glistening, I rub my thumb over her tongue, my fingers curling over her bruised cheek, fingertips resting against her hairline.

"I'm going to fuck you," the words rasp out, low and gruff. "I'm going to fill all of your holes with my cum, Ava." I'm going to do it regardless, but still, straining out more words, I say, "I want you to want it, Baby Bird."

And her lips close around my thumb on the back of her tongue, her already hollow cheeks, hollowing further, sucking the digit into her throat. A groan vibrates from my chest, a low clawing sound tearing its way up my throat. My hips buck, her cunt squeezing my cock harder than I've ever felt anything before. Vice tight and addictive, I almost don't want to pull out.

I pull back, thumb popping from her mouth, cock slipping free, glistening with streaks of her blood, my cum that's still inside of her. I palm my bleeding forearm, swiping up the blood and slathering it over my tattooed shaft. I grip my cock hard, tightening my fist around it until my knuckles blanch. And then I go back to my arm, gathering more scarlet.

Glancing down, eyeing her messy slit, my cum oozing out of her pink little hole, blood on her lips, on her thighs, I lift my gaze, her chest heaving now. My lips lift on one side, just for the briefest moment in time, holding her gaze, I spit on her cunt.

She jolts, but she doesn't flinch, and then my bloody hand is cupping her pussy, middle finger teasing her holes, back to front, front to back, sliding over the top of them. My head cants, hand moving up and down her, mixing my blood with hers, adding to my cum already lubricating her. I know I hurt her before. But if I want to take her again and again like I envision doing for the next who the fuck knows how long, then I need to stop tearing her up.

I lick my lips, lift my sliced arm up to my lips, teeth plucking at the severed skin, I suck the blood into my mouth. Gathering it on my tongue, swirling it around my mouth, I drop my hand to her hair, fisting the matted strands at the same time my finger of the other hand dips inside her. Her back arches into me, a low moan hissing through her teeth, lips parting.

I dip down, side of my face flush with hers, cheek to cheek. Mouth full of blood, I suckle on her lobe, her breath panting against the underside of my jaw, ghosting down the side of my throat. Her dainty hands come up, palms planting against my pecs, her fingers dipping into the hollows of my collarbones as a second finger joins the first inside her cunt.

My teeth work down the length of her jaw, biting on the tip of her chin, her breathing heavy and warm, as I slowly fuck my fingers into her. Hard and slow, her walls quiver around me, sucking me in. The sound of it is obscene, sloppy and suctioning. I pull my fingers free as my lips reach hers, a hairsbreadth apart, I stare into her eyes, lining my cock up with her entrance, weight balanced on my knees between her spread thighs.

My teeth nip her lips, the top then the bottom, and then my cock is thrusting inside of her, her mouth opening on a silent scream, those beautiful eyes squeezing shut, I spit on her

tongue. Her eyes snap open, gaze colliding with mine, and there's something lighter in it, something darker too.

It makes me want to feast on her fucking soul.

Consume every part of her.

Swallow her down.

Piece by fucking piece.

"Baby Bird," I rasp over her lips, hand planting beside her head as I grind myself inside of her. "*Fuck*, you feel so good, sloppy and wet, and so fucking tight, Ava." I grit my teeth, bite into her lips, suck the top one into my mouth, clench my eyes closed as her pussy squeezes me even harder. "Baby Bird, fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

I fuck her harder, panting, my hips smacking into hers, the wet suction sounds of our joining loud in my ears. It's what I focus on, the sounds of our fucking, her soft, breathy pants, all of it her, her, her, drowning out the clinking of her chain.

Sweat slicks the back of my neck, my chest, her fingers clawing into the skin of my chest. Her legs tremble, and I can feel her trying to move them around me, but they don't cooperate, they don't do anything. My cock slams into her, over and over, harder and harder. Fingers releasing her hair, I nudge her head back with the tip of my nose against the underside of her chin, angling her head back as far as the metal shackle will allow.

It's not even conscious thought when my teeth sink into the only exposed part of her throat, beneath her chin, I suck hard, bite harder, my hand sliding between our bodies, my other hand still planted beside her head, holding my weight off of her fragile body. My thumb finds her clit, pressing hard and circling frantically, she pants harder, I pant harder and then her hips flex, bucking into me, and I slam my way home. Roaring my release, my cum filling her and filling her, her cunt pulsing and squeezing. It feels like pure fucking ecstasy, fire, pain. Everything it should and shouldn't be.

Something I shouldn't be doing that feels so fucking good, I know I'll never be able to quit this, her. I lower myself down

on top of her, my arms sliding beneath her back, I roll us until she's on top, her body too light atop me, but I can fix that. I can do that, fix her.

Heavy breaths puff between her lips against my throat, the thick length of cold chain trapped between our sweat slick bodies. My heart thuds hard in my chest, echoing and buzzing inside my ears. I can hear hers too, feel it, banging against my chest, as though her heart is trying to break free, make its way to mine.

My eyes close, blocking out the red lights above, the feel of the blood beneath my back, my cum seeping slowly out as my cock softens inside of her. I have this frantic urge to force it back inside of her. To come again, decorate every inch of her in it. *Me*.

But she lifts up from where she's plastered to my chest, something I never thought would feel so right, my big hands cupping the sides of her head. She stares down at me, elbows bent, shaky hands planted against my chest. Breathing hard, that crackle I noticed before sharp in her lungs. It's what prompts me to move, to release her head, to lift up from the ground. Her hands curling around my shoulders tightly.

Focusing on my next steps, getting medicine, I place her back inside her cage, her bottom lip pouting. I release her, quickly turning my back on her, heading straight for the first door and she whimpers like a kitten caught in a bear trap. My head snaps over my shoulder, her eyes wide, body trembling where she tries to lift up onto her knees, but there's no muscle, all wastage, from being trapped, kept in a cage for fuck knows how long. I remember what it's like, having to learn to weight bear, walk again.

Agony.

"I'm coming back," I grunt lowly, those sapphire blues shining, her pale scarred body covered in me, my blood, my cum.

I nod my head at her again, and close the door behind me.

CHAPTER 15

CHARLIE

Having retrieved various antibiotics from my upstairs bedroom, I make my way back downstairs, my boots silent on the cold marble floors. Voices murmuring draws my eye to the darkened alcove entry of the family dining room. The halls are dark, wall sconces dimly lit, my dad is likely out with Violet, he takes her out most nights now that Lala and I are running things. And even that is something I've been pulling back from. Cam will be at the gym, because it's where his life is, training, fighting, watching. And Eli is likely off somewhere stalking a poor girl that he thinks is his soul mate. Pretty certain she doesn't know he even exists.

Regardless, I would know it's her anywhere.

Kyla-Rose.

Her voice, this low, rasped husk, deep for a woman, unusual, sexy. It doesn't matter that our souls are tethered in ways that blood relatives probably shouldn't be.

She is her and I am me and together we are chaos.

It is one of the only things that has kept me on this side of the veil of life and death for so long.

Ignoring her and whoever she speaks with, I drift past the archway without looking in, making my way into the kitchen. Hands securing over the round door handles, I pull open the wooden doors, entering the pantry. I fish out large plastic tubs of various flavoured protein powder, nutrient bars, an array of things that Cam uses when he wants to gain weight to bulk up.

Arms filled with cylinders and bags, I kick the pantry doors shut behind me, pinching a bag of protein clusters between my teeth. Grabbing a litre of full fat milk as I pass the fridge, I start to head back down the hall. Arms full, heart fluttering in my chest. I think of Ava's pretty face, the way she took me, everything I gave her. How she liked it, or at least, wanted my attention.

She didn't want me to leave.

Feet picking up pace, unconsciously, I start to move faster, suddenly fuelled to get back to her. The dark, red room. My face stings as the cool air of the house rushes against the claw marks but all it does is jerk my cock back to life. Growing hard in my jeans, desperate to get to her. I've never had something that is just mine before, I've always had to share. My older brother, Jacob, always got his way, I was never treated differently, but I cowed to him as children, let him lead, take point.

Jacob was supposed to be different.

My hands start to grow slick, moisture beading on the back of my neck. Mind conjuring memories of him, shot, bleeding out, my finger pulling the trigger, my gun expelling the bullets that took his life.

Saved hers.

It's been five years. I don't need to be thinking about this anymore.

I did what I had to do.

What was right for our family.

I protected us all.

Guilt tries to choke me, regardless.

The plastic packaging clenched between my teeth makes me want to heave. But I focus on my door. It's all I can see. My breathing is harsh and I know I'm about to collapse. I can't do that here. I need my safe space to be vulnerable. And strangely, thinking of Ava being down there, even though I'm

like this. Panicking. Breathless. Unfocused. It doesn't feel like an invasion of my space.

All I want to do is get back to her.

I'm almost at the door, a tub of protein powder dropping from the crook of my elbow, thunking loudly as it hits the marble floor. My gaze snaps down to it, watching it roll in the direction I don't want it to go. Lungs tight, breath stalled in my throat, I feel like I've been caught. I am never loud. I am silent and skulky, sullen.

My ears buzz, the hushed conversation from the other room is silent and my heart thuds heavily in my chest. Anticipation, because I know she knows it's me, she'll call, and I will go. And we will play this dangerous game of cat and mouse because it's the only one we know.

"Charl?" she husks and it short circuits my brain, her summons.

Compelled, my feet turn, arms still full, blood on my skin. I head back to the dining room. The space dark except for a low orange glow from a free-standing lamp in the far corner. My teeth release the bag of snacks, dropping it into the pile of stuff in my arms.

She sits in the centre of the bench seat on her usual side of the long wooden breakfast table. Waist length hair slicked back into a high ponytail on the very top of her head. White tendrils of it pulled forward over her shoulders, curtaining her breasts, fronts of her shoulders. Chin dipped, head cocked, I mirror her, my eyes flicked up onto large grey-green orbs.

Rubble is flush at her side, her number two, second only after me. Standing, his large meaty palms splayed over the solid wood of the table, paper calendars and electronic workbooks laid out before them. He leans over what they're discussing, but his head is up, blue gaze on me. He dips his chin in greeting, my eyes blinking back in the only acknowledgement I'll ever give. I like Rubble, but I don't *really* like anyone, I'm not ever going to give him anything more than acknowledgement.

My palms are sweating, my bare chest coated in flakey, drying blood. My face is scratched up and my chest rises and falls much too quickly for her not to notice. But she doesn't drop her gaze from mine, blinking those large eyes at me, a small smile on her plump lips.

I stare at her. Heart rate increasing beyond anything comfortable, and my lungs burn desperately for an inhalation of Eli's finest weed, but that's not about to happen, seeing as I have no joint tucked behind my ear, and neither does she. Something we both always have, a comfort blanket of sorts, but she's a mother now, perhaps having a five-year-old makes her more sensible. I hadn't noticed, though, until now.

"Have you stopped smoking?" I rasp, it's automatic, the way the words slip freely from my tongue.

I feel the pinch of tension between my eyes, but I can't think of anything else to do with myself, to calm myself. To stop this insane feeling of pain in my chest, something that is phantom. I know it isn't real.

Panic.

I'm still staring at her, her at me, Rubble tensing just slightly at her side, his eyes dip to hers but she doesn't look away from me.

Prickles raze across my flesh, goosebumps rapidly flying across my slick skin, perspiration cold, my flesh heats and my brain feels like it's much too big for my skull. Then she blinks, dragging me back to the now, the way those eyes, too big for her face, roll onto Rubble, a slight nod of her head. Rubble exits the room, I feel him leave more than see him, my eyes always captivated by her, and then we're alone.

"What you got all that for, Charl?" Kyla-Rose asks.

Her hands folding atop the table, over one another, covering some scattered papers. The left one scarred, trembling slightly from the nerve damage, she doesn't hide it from me, we never hide anything from each other.

Until lately.

Me more than her. I haven't wanted to talk to her, to be alone with her. But staring at her now, my mind drifting back onto blue-brown eyes, gaunt cheeks, bloody skin and bruised flesh.

Ava.

Baby Bird.

I suddenly forget why I have been avoiding my cousin at all.

Shrugging in answer to her question, I drop my gaze to the papers beneath her arms, lifting a brow, I glance back up.

“What're those for, Lala?” I rasp thickly, uninterested but wanting to talk about anything but my secret, my hidden caged treasure in the basement.

She sighs, slumping her shoulders, running a hand over her face. There are pale blue bags beneath her eyes. Sunken dark circles, lines of worry pinching the outer corners of her eyes, all things I haven't noticed, haven't been looking at, worrying about.

“We've got problems,” she blows out a breath, I want to go to her, but I don't, standing sentry on the opposite side of the long table. Her eyes flash up, arm dropping with a thud to her lap, “With Ivanov,” she spits, top lip curling with her distaste for the man I once loved. “He's up to something,” she sighs heavily, and she sounds... exhausted. “We're just trying to...” she pauses, eyeing my face, likely calculating the outcome of this conversation if she mentioned the state of me, the scratches, the blood, the protein powders. “Take precautions,” she scrubs her trembling hand across her brow, before propping her chin atop it, eyes dropping down, scanning over the papers laid out before her. “He's fucked up shipments with Vito, Alejandro, and Kai,” she purses her lips, looks up, eyes locking on mine, and it feels like a boulder is sitting in my chest, “with you?”

She speaks the words like a question, like she knows but wants confirmation, she's digging. That's all this is, digging

and delving into business that absolutely has nothing to fucking do with her.

“What trouble is there with them?” I ask instead, avoiding her diving.

These are things I should know.

It’s my business as much as hers.

We run The Firm.

I have as much right to the information she holds as she does.

She rolls her tongue across the front of her teeth, pushing out her top lip with the motion. Then she bites the inside of her cheek, cocks her head further to the left and rolls her gaze down my body, over what’s in my arms, the blood on my skin, something that is normal for me.

I feel like I’m under a microscope, her inspection of me something clinical and harsh. Perhaps, more of a magnifying glass, angled so the sun burns right down on me, making me twitch with the intense heat just before I’m set on fire.

“What happened to your eye, Charl?” she smiles then, something sharp and cracked. “Who did that to your pretty face, Charlie-boy?” she whispers, her fingertips of each hand curling over the edge of the table now, elbows below the wood as she leans forward. “Who fucking touched you like that, Charlie?”

Serpent like, the hiss that spits through her teeth, her eyes wide and locked on mine, analysing and venomous.

Protective.

My injury has personally offended her, something that is natural to us, to shield one another. I would be the same with her, but tonight, this just feels off.

Wrong.

“I don’t belong to you anymore,” I rasp, chin dipping, eyes glancing at the bundle of supplies in my hands, I cling onto them harder, think of Ava. “I am not yours.”

When I look back up, her lips parted, nostrils flaring, eyes unblinking and so, so wide, pupils blown, she swallows, licking her lips.

“Who hurt you, Charl?” she whispers again, a tremor in her voice that she tries to hide, swallow back, but she forgets I know her better than she knows herself. “Tell me and I’ll kill them.”

I think of tiny Ava’s jagged, cutting claws, skeletal fingers and vicious touch. A smile curls one side of my mouth, lifting the corner just enough to have me blinking and removing it from my lips.

“I can take care of myself, Lala,” I whisper back.

“Charlie,” she says again, louder, firmer, “I want-”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, Kyla-Rose,” I tell her boldly, cutting her off. “It doesn’t matter because we’re not doing this anymore.”

Her mouth snaps shut, eyes shining as she stares up at me. I shift the items in my arms, licking over my lips, I direct my gaze to the wood of the table, my heart clenching inside my chest.

“You have your own life, family, husbands, son-”

“Charlie-”

“That’s where your focus needs to be,” I finish, dragging my gaze back onto hers. “Not on me.” I swallow and it feels like ash and razor blades, dry and cutting. “Not anymore, Lala.”

She rolls her lips together, sucking in her cheeks, she pushes to her feet, planting her hands atop the papers, fingers splaying. She leans forward, head cocked and in the low light of the room, shadows cast across her face making her look like a demon.

“You will always be my focus, Charlie,” she says lowly, blinking at me like I’m fucking stupid.

My grip tightens around the bottle of milk in my hands, pressure threatening to make the top of it pop off.

“Don’t you get it, Lala?” my voice creaks, muscles rippling beneath my skin as I, too, lean further towards her, my knees now flush with the solid wood of the long bench seat. “I don’t *want* to be. I don’t want to have your focus.” I breathe in deep, her red-painted lips parting. “I don’t want you thinking about me.” My lungs are on fire, heart thudding painfully, jumping up the back of my throat.

“Charlie, I’m always going to look after you,” she says quietly. “I love you.” She shakes her head as though she doesn’t understand what’s not computing in my brain. “I will always love you, Charlie. We’re-”

“Nothing!” my voice cracks as I attempt to shout. “We’re nothing, we can’t be anything! I don’t want you to love me, I don’t want you in here.” The items in my hands thud as they hit the floor, my fist slamming into my chest, over my heart, echoing through my bones. “I can’t fucking *breathe* without thinking about you!” My voice breaks, her teeth bite into her bottom lip. “You infect me,” I spit lowly, her bottom lip trembling, but she doesn’t cry. “I killed my brother for you because I love you, but I’m not enough! I was never going to be enough. I’m never fucking enough! Why can’t you leave me the fuck alone?” I groan, my balled fists thump into my eyes, squeezed shut, black spots blurring behind my tightly closed eyelids. “Why can’t you just leave me the fuck alone?” I whisper it to myself, back rising and falling sharply with heavy breaths.

“Charlie.”

“Don’t,” I hiss, dropping my fists, squeezing my eyelids tight before letting them flutter open, gaze dropped to the floor. “Please,” I say quietly, my voice barely making its way up my throat now. “Don’t.”

I bend down, re-collect the items I dropped and straighten, not daring to look at her in fear of my heart breaking further.

“Please, Kyla-Rose,” I plead, my back to her. “Please,” every inch of exposed skin burning hot where her gaze bores into me. “Stay away from me.”

I take a couple steps closer to the archway to exit, and she calls out softly, “Do you regret it?”

I blink hard, my nose twitching, chin unsteady, “I’ll never regret saving you, Lala,” and I walk the fuck away without looking back, all so I don’t see her cry.

CHAPTER 16

AVA

Legs burning, I shift on my bony thighs, my pussy throbs, pain and something else making me tremble in the cold.

I shiver and shake uncontrollably listening to the many doors, I cannot see, close and lock. Meaning my owner, *Charlie*, is moving further and further away.

Never once has an owner ever given me their name. This feels different. My brain feels as though it is straining, my eyes heavy, thoughts moving like sludge through my skull. My shoulder pulses with pain, internal pressure making the joint scream, but I can feel my fingers again, wiggle them and curl them into a loose fist.

He fixed me.

Even though he was hurting me.

Raping me.

The first time.

But then, the next time, times, I didn't want him to touch me. I don't think. And then, I didn't mind it so much. His voice infects me all the way down to my soul. Raspy and thick, cracked, he sounds strained, the words, the sounds, all of it takes effort, but I crave hearing it. When he says my name, calls me Baby Bird.

Identity.

Regardless of what he does to me. I'm still a person, *to him*.

A shiver rips up my spine, knocking hard over every boned disc. Anticipation and impatience for his return is all I can focus on.

I don't know how long he is gone, but I am not sure I blink the entire time. Waiting for him to return. To me.

My ears prick, the first electronic sounds of approach.

Each door cranks open and clicks closed, louder and louder the closer he gets. I wait, impatiently, fingers curled around the bars of my cage. A place I have hated since I was placed inside of it by my last owner, but one, that now, since being here, feels like it's mine.

Safe.

Even though one end of it is open now, anyone can get to me, I don't think my new owner, *Charlie*, would share me.

Not like the others.

But then, my last owner didn't like to share either.

Master's wicked blue eyes flash inside my mind, his wide grin, the way he would laugh, raucous, loud, psychotic. All whilst hurting me. Torturing me. Burning me. Cutting me. Scarring me.

The freshest scars along my spine burn, thinking of the spiked wire he lashed me with in a rage. It must have been weeks ago, but at the memory, it feels as though they're flaring to life. Water fills my eyes, shock forcing the tears down.

I do not cry.

After everything I have endured, I do not cry.

The final door cranks open, seven seconds to fully unlock before it can be wrenched open, but it feels like it takes hours.

Desperation runs thick in my veins.

Wanting to see him.

His emerald eyes on mine, brutal hands forcefully manipulating my body. His mouth working hard to rasp out husky words, sharpened teeth driving into my skin. I can feel

the imprint of them in the space between my neck and shoulder, the right side throbbing where he bit into me, made me bleed. It feels like his clamped jaws speared poison into my bloodstream, penetrating all the way into my soul, infecting me with something addictive.

Something making me needy.

For him.

My breath catches when he moves back into the cave-like space, red light acting as my sun, the only light I've seen in however long. There was only ever darkness at my last place. Before they locked me in the smaller space. Left me to die.

His eyes find mine instantly. Glittering green, wide and bright, the right one scored with a red slash from my nails. He hones in on me. I follow him, nine long strides to his workbench, items in his arms clattering to the wooden top, his bare back to me.

It rises and falls rapidly, quickened, like it was when he was inside of me. My thighs twitch, wondering where he has been, who he's been with, he said he would be right back, but it has been much longer than I anticipated. He doesn't usually leave me for long. I wonder if there are others, perhaps he has more rooms like this. Lots of red lit rooms with girls in cages. Moving between them, taking whatever it is he wants from each.

My heart hammers hard in my chest and it makes me want to whimper. Jealousy, something foreign, but it feels heavy all the same. Foreign, unusual, uncomfortable.

I watch him, blood dried on his back, muscles rippling where his body trembles. I can hear it, his breathing, raspy and fast. He is usually oh so quiet, my captor.

His breathing quickens, faster and faster, his back rising and falling much too quickly. My brow crunches, a frown tugging at my lips, my fingers tighten around the icy, wet bars as I push my face between the gap.

I open my mouth to call out to him, to regain his attention. Even if there are others like me here, girls he also visits, right

now, here, he is mine. And he needs someone.

I glance down at the duck beneath his workbench, white feathers and dull orange beak, small eyes unseeing. I wish it moved, could quack or ruffle his feathers, something to draw attention, because when I open my mouth, throat tight, lungs crackly, desperate to call his name, nothing comes. No creaking, no spluttering, no heavy breath, no broken words. Just increased breathing, my lungs constricting tighter and tighter, as though snakes are coiling and squeezing around them.

I think his name loudly, over and over and over.

Charlie. Charlie. Charlie.

Nothing happens, no sound, no noise, just a gurgling crackle deep in my wet sounding lungs. A cough is threatening, but it so hurts my neck when I can no longer hold it inside. A spluttering up my throat, wet and painful. I swallow it down, wincing at the throb beneath my jaw.

I study his back, his breathing erratic, mine catching his rhythm as though we are one person. His knees wobble, legs trembling, and my mouth opens and closes uselessly, unable to call out to him.

Staring at the open end of my cage, the gate swung wide open, darkness lit with red beyond the familiarity of my metal safety. My fingers flex, numb with cold around the steel bars. Indecision warring inside my mind.

Gaze dragging between the open-ended cage, my new owner, the way his breathing is loud now, too loud, as though he may be about to pass out. I release my hands from the bars, let them splay over the metal floor. I've never left before. And it seems an incredible feat to even be considering leaving the confines of this crate.

But my ears are so terrifyingly loud with his ragged breaths that it spurs me on.

Moves me forward.

Pushing me not to think.

Focus on him.

Just him.

My fingers claw me forwards, hands slapping lightly against the concrete on the outside of my gate. It makes me pause, the change in texture, nerves shooting through me, I suck in a sharp breath, inhaling as deeply as I can, then I start to drag myself out.

Instinct has my legs twitching. The way my nervous system kickstarts, firing instruction through my limbs, but the muscles don't respond. Nothing but a dull agony pulsing through my legs. Fizzing in my toes, an ache in my ankles, burning in the soles of my feet as they try to stretch out. Pins and needles seem to ricochet up the length of my calves, piercing pain in my kneecaps as they drag across the rough ground.

My thighs feel like they have been set on fire, arms as though they've been lashed with something sharp and wicked. but my nails continue to claw into the hard ground, my naked body slithering behind me as I use all of my strength to get to him. I am so close now, sweat breaks out all over my flesh, and my shoulder punches with pain with every inch I crawl.

But I keep my eyes on him.

His heaving back, the sounds he makes, like strangled, breathless sobs.

Pain.

I should be pleased, after the ways in which he has already devoured me, that he is feeling some sort of hurt. Whether physical or emotional, I should be rejoicing in it, revelling in it. Something to even the playing field a little, even if I am not the one who directly caused it.

I stare at his feet, black suede, lace up boots, dried blood flecking the fabric, wrinkling of jeans on his lean legs. I follow the black material all the way up the length of his legs, over the curve of his arse, to the twin dimples in his lower back. White, naked skin, etched with black ink, slick with blood. The red bulbs illuminate his snow-white hair, causing it to

look pink in the dark, and even from my position at his feet, I can see the contortion of his face, a side angle, but it is clearly pulled tight in some sort of agony all the same.

I glance away from him, eyeing the white duck sitting atop a small wooden cart, a string looped from the contraption, tied around a leg of the workbench. It looks back at me, its eyes glassy, but it feels as though it's looking right at me. And I consider this man's relationship with this taxidermy bird.

Tucking my dry lips between my teeth, I look back up, Charlie's face contorted, eyes shut tightly, mouth open, air being sucked between his lips in shot, sharp gasps. He sounds like a fish out of water, desperate for air.

Slowly, carefully, I extend a shaky hand, my long skinny fingers trembling as I reach out, and then finally, the tips of them brush along the front leg of his jeans, just above the top of his boot. His heat radiates through the thick, dark fabric, almost singeing my bleeding fingers, the concrete floor having snagged my already torn nails.

I stroke my fingertips up and down lightly, not touching skin, not applying pressure, just being present. I watch little smears of blood press into the fabric, soaking and seeping slowly in. My nails catch the denim, a wince in my eyes but I don't stop trying to soothe him.

Maybe he can't even feel me, perhaps, he does not even know I am down here. My eyes are closed, the motion of my fingers gliding lightly up and down a very small patch of his jeans, but it is a struggle to keep my eyes open. All of my weight resting on a painful, shaky forearm, muscle non-existent and I have done nothing but cower inside a cage for what could be years.

It is my breathing then, that rushes in and out of my lungs. Desperately clawing in oxygen as the pain in my arm, the uncontrollable shake in it, becomes almost unbearable. But I don't stop, even as my elbow buckles and I grab onto his foot to stop my chin smashing into the floor. Fingers stopping their soothing and latching around his ankle instead. Heel of my

hand pressing into the top of his foot, inner wrist resting atop his covered toes.

That's when I hear it.

The silence.

His erratic breathing has stopped.

Not slowed.

Stopped.

Complete and utter silence buzzes inside my brain, his breath is held now, and my own is caught in my lungs. On a shaky palm, using my grip on his foot, I push myself up, using the leg of the workbench to support my weight. I am trembling, a cold sweat pebbling over my flesh. And I know he is looking at me before I even glance up. It heats my skin like blistering rays of the sun and that blush begins to creep its way back up my throat, heating my cheeks.

Swallowing, breathing slow and deep, I blink, glance up, and I am speared directly through the heart with the look in those sinister emerald eyes.

They glisten as he glares down at me, the right one red and swollen from my fingers that still rest against his shoe, the suede soft and dry beneath my buzzing fingertips. Lips parted, air sails up my throat, making the repressed splutter hack its way free. I am breathless, coughing, pain hammering through every bone in my chest.

My abdominal muscles clench tight, willing my stomach not to force up bile, but stars dart across my vision, causing my lids to close. White light streaking across my eyeballs beneath shuttered eyelids, I clap a hand over my bare stomach, spine crunching where it is flush with the rough wooden table leg, splinters catching my skin.

Cool hands curl around my upper arms, gentle at first, soothing, but as my coughing continues. Uncontrolled, dangerous, air not able to seep its way into my wet lungs, the grip becomes brutal. My body sagging, his brutal hold keeping me up, fingers biting my skin, he drags me up, my toes grazing painfully over the rough ground as I slump into his chest. My

body seizing with hacking coughs, lungs lurching inside my skeleton.

I am exhausted, eyes streaming, throat burning, neck painful where the shackle rubs against my already broken skin.

“Ava,” Charlie rasps, and my watery eyes blink open, cough slowing, breath heaving in and out of me.

My hands settle on his bare chest, sticky, cold skin beneath my bony hands. Forehead dropping to the base of his throat, my eyes sag closed, cheeks wet, I just breathe. Breathe him in, smoky clean copper. It settles something in my core, lungs screaming but not threatening to suffocate me. His arms are like iron bars around my back, a hand protectively cradling the crown of my skull. His fingers bite into my head, tight and unrelenting, like he’s trying to shatter the bone in his fist, but strangely, I like it, it makes me feel safe.

Here.

With him.

But then his hold intensifies, and I can’t stop the cracked cry that explodes from my mouth, my legs buckling beneath me as he drops me into a heap at his feet.

“Stay,” he hisses, venomous and commanding and I daren’t move.

Trembling, propped up against the table leg, I breathe hard, lungs rattling and wet. It makes me feel like my stomach is going to punch its way up through my throat. Anxiety and fear still me, I don’t attempt to crawl away, drag myself back to my cage.

The space I never should have left.

Trembling, my skin prickling with goosebumps, exposed and always cold in this cave-like lair. My teeth chatter and my eyes stare blankly ahead, red light the only thing misting over my vision.

Then he’s dropping down before me, his tall, lean body folding into an effortless crouch, his forearm still weeping where he cut himself, to smear me in him.

But the way he stares into my eyes now, dead emeralds, blown onyx in their centres, I fear it was all some sort of perverted dream.

The red light glows around him, casting his face in eerie shadow, illuminating him like a scarred devil.

He rests on his knees, thighs spread, toes bent where he leans forward, one hand opening his jeans, he frees his erect cock. And I look at it now, winding lines of black ink curling up his length, blood and cum dry on his flush flesh, contorting the ink beneath so I cannot see what the drawings are. His large hand slides down his slightly curved shaft, thumb and fingers circling, pulling back the foreskin, his flush head bright and red, a glistening bead of precum at his tip.

He leans in closer, sharing breath with me, my eyes flicking back up onto his. His other hand, the bloodiest one, the forearm he cut, it felt like it meant something, he glides his fingers down my cheek, along my jaw. His other hand moving up and down his cock, but I don't look, keeping my eyes on his. His canine, a sharp point, digs into the side of his bottom lip as it curls into his mouth.

Nostrils flaring, he keeps his touch on my face light, almost a caress. Tears spring to my eyes, his other hand punishing his cock, the base of his hand smacks into his pelvis, over and over and over. It is a devious soundtrack, one I can do nothing but witness, the tightness to his eyes, pursing of his lips.

He is older than I, I can see that now, studying him up close, but still young, a lot younger than some of my previous owners and those they leant me out to, but it's clear he has some years on me. He is handsome, in an unusual, and slightly demonic kind of way. His features so bright, white hair, green eyes, his naturally pale skin darkened with shadings of ink.

He grunts, his breathing heavy, as his hips thrust, his cock being squeezed tightly in his fist. He leans in closer, his breath in my ear, lips parted, pressing to the high arch of my cheek.

"Baby Bird," he whispers on a rough grunt, and he comes in his hand, his other still gently cupping my cheek.

He brushes some semblance of a kiss to my cheek, and I feel blood bloom beneath the skin, a flush bright in my face.

He lifts up from his knees, his touch dissolving as though it were never there, but my hand rises, lifting at the same rate as my eyes. My fingertips touch the place where his lips were, and glancing up, I watch as his cum dribbles from his hand into a tall blue cup in his other. His eyes on mine, something glittering in his gaze, making sure I'm watching what he's doing with it.

A crease forms between my brows, wondering, what, exactly it is he's doing. I cannot drop his gaze, like my eyeballs are on strings, pulled taut onto his.

He's the one to look away, lifting a bottle of milk, pouring it into the cup with his cum. Then he's unscrewing a cap from a large white container, dipping his hand inside and banging something else into the blue cup.

I look away, eyes pinched, staring straight ahead, willing my legs to work so I could go back to my crate.

It's that thought that has my heart thumping harder. If my legs did work, could get me back to the safety of my bars, would I go? Would I even want to escape this strange man with the brutal hands and pretty face?

"Open," he commands, dropping down before me again, staring at me hard.

Trembling, I swallow, lips parting, tongue tensing, I open my mouth.

"Drink," he orders, that rough, broken husk vibrating down my spine, his uncut arm lifting the bright blue acrylic cup to my lips.

My eyes drop, trying to see, but his other hand, the cut arm, his finger and thumb come to my face, pinching my chin, jerking my head back so my eyes are only on his. He leans in, licking over his top teeth, his breath on my mouth. His eyes dart down to my lips, breath panting through my nose.

"Feed, Baby Bird," he whispers viciously, and then the large cup is at my mouth, thick cold liquid filling my mouth,

my throat.

I try to swallow. The sweet creamy substance on my tongue, his cum inside of the mixture. But he's forcing my head back, arching my neck painfully in the restriction of my shackle.

Pain bolts down my spine, jarring my body, my hands fly up, nails gouging at his chest as I choke on the thick, cold sludge. But he doesn't let up, just keeps pouring and pouring. The pale mixture is spilling into my eyes, up the hollows of my cheeks. It is wet in my hair, steadily dripping into my ears, down the sides of my neck, beneath the thick metal cuff. I splutter, inhaling the milky substance, I can feel it as it slides down my throat, more into my windpipe.

My eyes are blinking rapidly, trying to clear it from my vision. Trying to see him. My brain feels like it's on fire, swelling with pressure, my temples tight. And then the last breath of air trapped in my lungs, punches up the back of my throat, forcing a sudden spurt of it out through my nose.

That's when he stops, releasing his hold on my face, hands slipping down his chest, over his rippling abdominal muscles, I fall forward into his lap. Cock still exposed through his open jeans, hard, once more, bounces against my cheek. I cough and sputter into the space between his thighs, hacking sweetness onto the concrete.

My hands come around his hips, hands clinging onto each other, fingers knotting at his back, the strain in my shoulders is intense, the way I am trying to wrap myself so thoroughly around him. My breath heaves, eyes squeezed shut, stinging with whatever it is that he fed to me.

His cum.

My cheeks heat again, even as my entire body trembles, lungs burning, I hold onto him like I will die if I release him. He doesn't move, his sticky cock gluing itself to my wet cheek. He doesn't shove me away, doesn't touch me, doesn't say anything.

And however wrongly, I crave it, his touch. Attention. The way I know he could be gentle, even when, I don't think he really understands it.

I don't really understand it.

I have never felt anything for anyone before.

Taken as a teenager, I had never had a crush before, not on a boy at school, not a celebrity, not a neighbour. And then I was taken over and over again, living in filth with people who did nothing but degrade me. Break me.

But this.

Him.

It feels like something else.

Gently, my thumbs stroke the base of his spine, the inch of skin I can reach, I smooth with my touch.

He trembles, goosebumps breaking out across his flesh. The top of my head flush with his lower abs, pressing into the hard muscle, face in the cradle of his thighs. His breathing is sharp, arms limp, backs of his hands against the floor, but he shifts, slow and careful. His hands come to my naked back, and my flesh ripples with goosebumps at his touch.

I sigh quietly, my muscles relaxing as his fingers smooth up and down my spine, his calloused skin rough over the bumps of my scars. I breathe easier, despite the crackle in my wet lungs, and so does he. Our breaths falling into something like synchronicity, I breathe, he breathes, and I cling onto him, a soiled heap in his lap.

His palms splay over my lower back, holding me in place and my lips curve, just a little, at the wave of comfort it brings me.

CHAPTER 17

KAZIMIR

Smoke drifts from my nostrils as I stare up at the tall office building. The cold air whips it away, a light smattering of rain dusting me as I lean back against the car.

Dima stands silently beside me, hands clasped at his front, his broad shoulder brushing mine as I shift my weight from one leg to the other. He, too, stares up at the thirty-third floor. The only lit level, other than the lobby, for a two-am meeting. One arm crossed over my chest, shoulder still pulsing with a dull ache, I think of seeing him again, here, of all places. At a meeting that is likely to consider lopping off my head.

I blow out a thick cloud of smoke, drop the cigarette to the wet tarmac and use the toe of my shoe to grind it out. Pushing up from the car, I straighten my lapels, shrug my shoulders and make my way inside, Dima at my back, a small team of our security behind him.

Our heavy footsteps echo off the marble floor and walls as we bypass the reception desk, armed men stationed along the walls from all different parties, my men join them as Dima and I continue. Dima reaches past me as we come to the lifts, pressing the call button for the elevator which immediately *dings* in greeting. Doors sliding open, we ride our way up, the electronic floor counter flashing with red numbers as we climb.

“I have your back, Pakhan,” Dima grunts lowly.

Head nodding automatically, I suck in a long breath, straightening my shoulders, and then the doors slide open onto the brightly lit, thirty-third floor.

Noise drifts in our direction, voices. Smoke, the smell of expensive aftershaves, colognes. Sharp liquor, cigars, weed. The wide hallway opens out at the end, the back wall made up of floor to ceiling windows, Southbrook's skyline glittering in the night beyond the glass.

The long conference table sits in the centre of the room, fifteen chairs on either side, two at the head of the table. That's where my eyes zero in on.

White hair, gloomy green eyes, the right one sliced through with a jagged, red claw mark, leather jacket pulled over bare tattooed skin.

Charlie's chin dips, head cocked, his eyes flicked up, he peers at me from beneath those thick pale lashes, straight, jagged cut lengths of hair fall across his brow. I swallow, plastering a smirk on my lips, something I'm usually known for, my cockiness.

I swagger my way into the room, head held high, cheeks lifted with my sly grin. Eyes find mine, some slightly less hostile than others. But none of them, and I mean none of them could flay me alive like those of Her Highness, Ms Kyla-Rose Swallow.

Her grey eyes narrowed sharply. I make my way towards the table. Dima passing me to retrieve us a glass of something that'll likely scorch my oesophagus on its way down. I slink my way down to her position at the head of the table. Charlie tensing slightly at her side, not a movement anyone else would catch, not unless they were as aware of him as they are themselves. It's why both Kyla-Rose and I, flick our attention onto him. But he's not looking at either of us anymore.

Jaw set, knotting at the squared corner, bone flexing as he clenches his teeth, eyes on the view beyond the window. His fingers twist a blade between them, hands below the tabletop, in his lap. He twirls it around and around, eyes narrowing

more and more, the longer I stand, my shadow falling across him.

My gaze drifts back to Kyla-Rose, her tongue rolls over her front teeth, sucking on them, she pops a pout. Drapes an elbow onto the table and drops her chin to her curled fist, head canting, she curls her eyes down my body, a sneer pricking her top lip before reconnecting with my eyes.

“Dazzling as ever, Ms Swallow,” I smirk, the corner of my lip pulling higher at her ever-narrowing eyes.

She rolls her large eyes, the corners of her plump red lips pulling downwards in an unimpressed purse.

“Sit down, Ivanov,” she sighs heavily, spitting my name with an eye roll.

“Yes, Your Highness.” I smirk, bowing dramatically, my sarcasm making her face flame with her temper, and flop down into a chair two down from the head of the table on Charlie’s side.

Dima reaches his arm over my right shoulder, placing a crystal tumbler with a clink of ice and clear liquid in it, down in front of me. He takes a couple steps back, standing behind me as everyone else’s guards do.

I light a fresh cigarette, throwing the packet onto the table, and taking a lighter from my jacket pocket, tossing that onto the glass too once I’m finished with it.

“We have an entire list of bullshit to get through, shall we start, gentlemen?” Kyla-Rose calls out, tilting her head around the room to catch everyone’s attention.

Men take their seats, Vito Gambino taking the seat opposite me. Black hair styled back, bright blue eyes already on mine.

“Kazimir,” he nods in greeting.

The Italian Don always so very polite, but I know he has a temper.

“Vito,” I beam in return, toothy grin burning brightly on my face.

Kai Bancroft drops into the seat between him and Kyla-Rose, his eyes bright, pale green and glaring, but there are bags beneath them, dark and sunken. He must have only just flown in from Chicago. Still, a smirk flits across his mouth all the same as he looks to me.

Kyla-Rose begins speaking, my ears buzzing as I zone out, trying not to look past the empty seat beside me to *him*. The way he stares everywhere but at me, yet, I can feel his gaze on me all the same. I keep my eyes averted, attention mostly on the ceiling, my head tipped back against the leather chair, cigarette hanging on my bottom lip. I smoke through one after the other, swallowing down my drink, before doing the same with its refills.

I nod at the correct intervals, unbothered by the agreements between others. I don't need to make fresh deals; I'm having enough problems with the ones I already have in place. It's the only reason I'm here after all. I wonder if they'll hang me from the roof of the building and set me on fire.

"Ivanov?" Kyla-Rose's voice has my head twitching back in her direction.

Lazily rolling my skull across the creaking leather, I drop my gaze onto hers.

"You want to say something?" she asks, lifting a brow, her hands clasped together atop the table.

Charlie shifts, tensing slightly in his seat, and I wish, not for the first time, that I weren't so fucking in tune with him. He moves, I move. It's like a ripple effect.

Sickening.

"There have been fuck ups," I say, sitting up straighter to make it appear like I really do give a fuck. I look Vito in the eye, then Kai, "I know the last runs we had, went... *awry*," I sigh, running a hand over my chestnut brown hair. "But I can assure you, I've put in extra security measures for the next to make sure nothing like that happens again."

"So, you're going to personally see it through, Kazimir?" Kai's deep voice rumbles expectantly. "I'm down five mil, I

can't see what the fuck you're gonna do to fix that shit."

I lick my lips, drop my gaze to the table, my lips curling up. I don't give a fuck about his money. I don't give a fuck about my own. I hate doing this fucking shit. If I could walk away from it right now, I would.

"And what of my drugs? Have they been located?" Vito asks, tilting his head to one side, his eerie calm washing over the silent room.

"No, they have not, *yet*. But I can assure you, I will find whoever it is that stole from us and deal with them accordingly."

Just the thought of whoever was slick enough to successfully steal tonnes of product from us, make three artic lorries disappear, *and* dispose of all of our men tasked with the exchange and delivery. All of that happening without a single one of them raising an alarm, has my teeth wanting to grind until they crack.

"I have my men on it also, Kazimir, and we shall deal with the thieves accordingly. Together," he emphasises that last word, making a small smile tug on my lips.

Flicking my gaze up, smirk evaporating for the sake of a professionalism, I do not have, I clasp my hands together atop the glass.

"I'm going to attend the next exchange personally," I tell Kai, in answer to his earlier question, my eyes hard. "You'll get your money back, three-fold." He nods silently, but there's disbelief there.

Directing my attention to the rest of the table, I pull in a deep calming breath.

"I know a few things on my part have gone wrong lately-"

Liridon Murati snorts, cutting me off, he smiles, "Wrong? These deals go *wrong*, as you say, but then the only ones seemingly benefitting from the fuck ups are the Russians," the Albanian leader cocks his head, narrowing his gaze. "You did not lose money your end when the shipment went missing on

its way to The Outfit,” a statement, one that is only partially true. “Correct?”

“And what is your accusation?” I scoff. “Because it sounds as though you’re implying that *I* am trying to fuck them over. I lost my fucking men too, Liridon,” I spit, upper lip curling in some semblance of a snarl.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” he shrugs with a sly grin. “Maybe it is The Bratva.”

“I *am* The fucking Bratva,” I bellow, pounding my fist onto the table.

He hums, “Are you sure? There is talk of overthrow within your organisation, Kazimir,” my skin heats with rage at that little nugget of information, these whispers have not met my own ears, and that’s... terrifying. “Should we be concerned with your execution?” Liridon raises his brows, flicking a hand in the air as he drops back heavily in his seat.

Dima shifts closer, his unyielding presence solid at my back. And I hope to God he hasn’t heard these supposed rumours and kept them from me. He’s one of my closest friends and most trusted men.

I am blindsided right now and it’s taking everything in me to keep that to myself. If the Albanians have heard it, and I have not...

“Good luck to anyone wanting to sever my head,” I laugh, but he doesn’t smile again, his gaze flicking to The Firm leaders at the head of the table.

“What of your sister, Kazimir?” Alejandro asks next, leaning forward from the opposite end of the room to catch my eye. “Bronya is not a threat to your position?”

The way my little sister’s name rolls off of his tongue like a caress makes me want to stab him in the throat. My teeth grind as I clench my jaw, my sister would never hurt me, but we are purposely not close, for safety reasons.

“Your men are supposedly not getting paid, due to the... *errors* that have been made,” he says then, The Cartel leader’s dark eyes glittering, “hers are.”

“Bronya is not your concern, Alejandro, especially when it comes to money,” I snap, hating that my father put her in such a spotlight when she was young, I’d prefer it if no one knew of her existence, let alone her business dealings.

I feel exposed, sweat beading along my hairline and it takes a monumental effort not to reach up and wipe it away.

I think of my father. Carting her around parties and business meetings, parading her in front of dirty old men with unsavoury intentions. There’s twenty years between us, and she would cling onto my hand at every event, scared out of her mind. She’s nineteen now, but I don’t ever want to force this shit on her.

“Why are we discussing this, instead of diagnosing the problem?” Charlie’s voice cracks out in a deep husk.

All eyes fall to him, the silence so loud, it buzzes in my ears. Charlie never speaks. Especially not in these meetings. He’s not looking at me when I turn my attention his way, instead, he closes his knife, places it down on the table, flicking it with his finger so it whirls on the glass surface like a spinning top.

“We need to cut the cancer out,” he rasps lowly, “this is internal sabotage,” eyes flicking up, he scans his gaze over the room, chin dipped.

Vito taps his fingers on the table, his laid-back posture straightening in his seat, “How do you propose we get to the root of the problem?”

But I’m already pushing up straighter in my chair, “You sound awfully certain of that fact,” I glare at the oldest Swallow son, hair rising like hackles on the back of my neck.

Charlie cocks his head, remaining silent.

I laugh loudly, slapping a hand down on the table in disbelief, shaking my head, I lean further towards him across the glass.

“You have some evidence of this?” my tongue slides over my front teeth, my lips sucking as I shake my head again. “I’d be careful if I were you,” I lounge back in my chair, smiling

slyly. “It almost sounded like you *know*. You have someone watching my operations, Mr Swallow?”

Holding my gaze, he licks his lips, not denying it. “I’m bored of talking about irrelevant things,” he says, eyes flashing. “I will go to the next shipment,” he declares lowly, his words smooth in a deep, broken way. “I will see if Bratva operations are up to par.” He sits straighter, bare chest heaving with his deep inhale, “If you have nothing to hide,” he swallows, voice quieting with overuse. “Then you have nothing to fear.”

Eyes narrowing on his, I see Kyla-Rose tense out the corner of my eye, her gaze slowly roving between me and her favourite cousin.

“I will attend on behalf of The Swallows, Gambino, Bancroft.” *The Firm, The Mob, The Outfit*. “We can reconvene after.”

I stare at him. Him at me. And despite the voices climbing in the room, I hear none of them. Not until his green eyes dart to his left, mine following suit, falling onto a scowling Kyla-Rose. Her teeth gritting so hard, I’m surprised they don’t shatter.

“All in favour?” she asks loudly, large grey orbs locked on mine, my lips morphing into a sinister slash as I hear all the ‘*ayes*’. “We meet back here in ten days,” she confirms, her gaze finally pulling from mine.

She nods to the room, and everyone starts to file out.

I don’t move, relaxing back in my seat, Vito Gambino stares at me from across the table, drawing my attention and I lift a brow.

“Yes?” I tease, cocking my head, lips in a permanent smirk.

The Italian licks his lips, flicking his eyes briefly onto Kyla-Rose, before coming back to me.

“Do not fuck this up, Kazimir,” face blank, words emotionless, but it makes my cocky half-grin falter all the same. “For all our sakes, get your shit straight. You are a much

better man than your father,” he says quietly, pushing to stand, large hands smoothing down the front of his white shirt. “But there are still those that sit at this table who just see an Ivanov.”

I watch him leave, my eyes following him and his guard out of the room, staring in a trance at the empty space he sat.

Others mingle in the room, drinks in hand, I lift the dregs of my own to my mouth, knocking the watery vodka back in one swallow. It burns its way down my throat, warmth bursting in my chest, like hot little fingers snaking through my veins. I stand from my chair, Dima at my back, I motion for him to stay put and head out of the room.

I don't want to be thinking about my father, the man is not someone I ever want to resemble. I don't want to rule The Bratva through fear, I want loyalty from my men because I earn it.

Because they trust me.

Because I'm a good leader.

A good man.

Everyone has been benefitting since I took over, more money, more deals, less war. But if someone is on the inside, sabotaging the operations to set me up, make it look like *I* am the one fucking the others over. Then I have a real fucking problem.

Avoiding everyone still lingering, I head to the darkened end of the thirty-third floor, making my way towards the restroom that hopefully no one else is using. Palm splaying over the wooden door, eyes a little bleary, I pull in a sharp breath as a hand comes over my nose and mouth. A leather encased arm banding across my chest, cold lips pressing to my ear.

“Don't scream, *Lover*.”

CHAPTER 18

CHARLIE

Hand clamped over his mouth, I drag Kazimir backwards, away from the restroom. My booted feet silent on the carpet, his large body falls back into me, his feet unsteady. Using my elbow to push down on the door handle, I wrench him into the dark storeroom. Kicking the door shut and spinning us around to slam him face first into the wood.

The dark space is illuminated with an emergency exit light above the top of the door, luminous green splitting the darkness, shadowing us with a green glow.

Hips pinning his, his back heaving with breath beneath my chest, my hand planted on the door beside his head, the other gripping his chin, jerking his head over his shoulder. I lean into him, my lips brushing his, breath sailing through his flaring nostrils, blowing over my cheek.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” I whisper over his mouth.

Breathing him in deep, cigarettes, mint, leather, rich, heady birch, it has my eyes closing, nose twitching. I lick my lips, catching his own with the tip of my tongue. He groans softly at the contact, my hard dick pulsing where it digs into his arse through his trousers.

“I just saved you,” I whisper against his mouth, his tongue darting out to get a taste of me, but I pull back, just enough that he can’t reach me.

My hand on the door slides down, resting on the top of his head, fingers sliding into his warm brown hair, fisting at the

root. I grind my pelvis into him, his body slowly melting against the wood of the door, like he's falling into it.

“Say ‘*thank you, Charlie,*’” I chuckle, biting into his bottom lip, a low moan grunting from his throat. “Say it,” I hiss, biting him as hard as I can without breaking the skin. “Say it, filthy boy, or I’ll make you beg.” I smirk against his cheek, using my grip in his hair to knock his head into the door, once, twice, three times, *thud, thud, thud*. “You’re not going to?” I whisper, pouting my bottom lip, he groans, panting through his parted lips. “Say, ‘*thank you for saving my pathetic arse, Master.*’”

Kazimir tries to push back against me, rolling his hips, his hard cock probably painful where I pin him to the solid surface of the door.

Releasing my hold on his chin, I graze the back of my hand down his outer bicep, his forearm, and even through his suit jacket, I can feel his muscles tensing. I let my cold fingers ghost over the balled fist of his hand. Brushing over scarred knuckles.

His breathing gets harder, the rise and fall of his back knocking into my chest as my hand slips between our flush bodies, my back arching just enough for my hand to work its way between us. Hand gliding up his back, over his shirt, beneath his jacket. He sucks in a sharp breath as my hand lowers, a single finger teasing just along the waistband of his trousers. And then I tear out his gun, shove it beneath the hollow of his chin, using my fist in his hair to knock his head against the door once more, I nip his jaw.

“Say it,” my voice cracks with the hushed order, his warm breath blowing over my mouth, cigarettes, mint, vodka.

“Thank you for saving my pathetic arse, *Master,*” he finally spits, then it's my turn to groan, tearing his head back, I lick up the side of his neck, press the muzzle of the gun firmer beneath his chin.

“Mmm, that's right,” I hush, dragging my parted lips messily down the column of his throat. “See how good I can be to you, Kaz,” my mouth is wet, breath cool as I maul down

his cheek, short stubble rough on my chin. "I'm going to fuck you now," I whisper, biting savagely into the side of his throat, just beneath the corner of his jaw.

"No," he croaks out, breathless and needy, *pathetic*.

"Yes," I hiss, "Yes, I am, and you're going to take it like the good little slut you are," I grunt out, teeth sharp against his cheekbone. "Or I'm going to pull this trigger."

Breath huffs heavily out of his nose, lips parted, his eyes squeeze shut as I release my fist in his hair, threading my hand between him and the door. I free his belt buckle, button, zipper, and then my fingers are pushing beneath the loose elastic of his boxers, finding hot, hard flesh in my palm, I grin. My teeth pressing against his erratic pulse point.

"Spread your legs," I grunt in his ear, using my foot to kick his apart.

I press into his back further, working my teeth up and down the length of his neck, nipping at his hot skin, sucking on the lobe of his ear, nibbling on it between my teeth. I free my cock, letting it thump heavily against his bare arse cheek as I shove his clothes out of the way.

Gun still held to his chin, I lean back from him, just enough to get a good look at him, bare from the waist down, he trembles in anticipation, my mouth lifting into a cocky smirk as I palm my cock.

Lifting my hand up to his mouth, "Lick," I instruct him, "get it nice and wet, Pretty Boy." His tongue swipes out, licking up my palm, over each finger, his teeth biting into the pads of my palm. "See, you can take instruction on the first ask," I laugh against his nape, my tongue dragging up his skin into his hairline. Demanding, "Spit," just before my filed canines sink into the muscle of his shoulder.

Fabric fills my mouth, dry and full, making me want to gag, but I keep biting into him until he shudders.

Dropping my spit coated hand back to my throbbing cock, "Spread yourself open for me," I whisper, my eyes on the firm, tanned globes of his arse.

His big hands come around behind him, the backs of his hands brushing against the tops of my thighs.

“Back up into me,” I hush, watching his hands pulling the flesh of his backside apart. I trace the gun up the length of his jaw, down his back, pressing the muzzle into the base of his spine, “Bend,” I snarl. Applying more pressure on the gun, my other hand stroking absentmindedly up and down my tattooed cock. “More,” I grit out huskily, voice catching in my chest as he parts his cheeks. Gun stroking up and down his spine, “Just like that,” I say appreciatively, the side of my hand coming to rest on his shoulder, gun to his temple.

Kazimir says nothing, panting where he’s angled awkwardly, slumped against the solid wood of the door. Face shadowed, neck arched back, short strands of chestnut hair fallen across his brow, dark eyes illuminated with the lime green light overhead, he looks fucking desperate.

“You’re a fucking mess,” I snarl, top lip curling, I spit on his cheek, his eyes squeezing shut on instinct, fluttering back open, his bright blue eye narrowed on me. “Look at you,” I tut, watching my saliva slide down his face, drip from his chin to the collar of his white shirt. “So desperate and needy for a cock in you-”

“Yours,” he pants, interrupting me, breaking his breathy silence. “*Only for yours.*”

My heart clenches inside my chest, tongue drying in my mouth at the honesty in his words. I tap the gun against his temple, hearing the rapping of metal on bone. I lick my lips, gathering saliva on my tongue, I look down, stare at his fingers biting aggressively into his firm cheeks. Spread wide open, the swollen head of my cock so close, but not quite touching.

Parting my lips, chin angled down, saliva dribbles free from my bottom lip, landing on his tight, puckered hole. His arse twitching as my spit lands on him, his fingers digging into his flesh harder. I drag my drying hand back down my cock, pulling back the foreskin, lining up with his entrance, my teeth grazing lazily down his shoulder blade.

I step closer, my booted feet between his spread ones, lips to his ear, gun to his temple, I grin. Huffing a laugh through my nose, I slam my way inside him.

No warmup, no teasing, no preparation.

I jerk my hips back, pain in my cock making my eyes water, I grind my jaw, breathing hard through my bared teeth, lip curled up in a snarl. I pound into him, his body hammering against the wood of the door, too loud not to draw attention, so I rip him backwards, shoving him down further on my cock, his hands trapped between our sweat slicked bodies. Trousers and boxers circling his ankles, my jeans hanging low on my hips.

I wrench us back, spinning us towards a tower of plastic boxes, sharply bending him forward. His hands not having moved from where I told him to put them, he pulls himself wider, my cock instantly sinking into him deeper. A groan tearing from both of us as I flex my hips.

Shoving my leather jacket off of my arms, exposing my bare flesh, I drop forward, my chest flush with his back. Gun moving back to the underside of Kazimir's chin, his neck arching, my free hand yanking his head back with a fistful of his thick hair. I pound into him, flesh clapping loudly as I fuck into him harder and harder.

Burying my groan into the side of his neck, teeth digging into his skin, jaw locking, I tear my head side to side, ripping through his skin, his blood heavy on my tongue. I suck on the wound, his groan ricocheting through the taut tendons in his neck, swallowing him down as he takes everything I'm giving him. My hips snap, cock swelling, my movements becoming uneven, I suck on his flesh, liquid metal coating the inside of my throat, painting my lips.

"*Malysh*," he breathes heavily, panting as my pounding gets harder, my movements jerky, erratic, my teeth sinking even further into his flesh. "Come," his words low, husky, "come for me. *Fuck*," he rasps. "Fuck, I've missed you," he throws out, like it hurts him to admit it, and my hips stutter.

Movements slowing, teeth retracting from his neck, I lean up from his back, glancing down at his face. A pinch between his brows, sweat slick on his face, glistening under the shadows of green. I lick my lips, mouth open, breaths heavy. I blink, my throat tightening.

“Charlie?” Kazimir looks up at me, those bright blue eyes like turquoise slime in the dark. “Baby Boy,” he says quietly, breathlessly.

I pull the gun back, away from him, his words rattling around my skull like a shaken box of razor blades.

I step back, cock slipping out of him, slapping against my lower belly, still hard, wet.

“Charlie?” he husks, letting go of himself to turn around. He straightens, my back colliding with the door, the thud making me blink, a frown forming between my eyes. “*Malysh?*”

“Stop,” I say, throwing my hand out to stop him coming any closer, my breath coming faster and faster.

“It’s okay,” he reassures quietly, his hands pulling up his clothing, the clink of his belt drumming in my ears as he re-buckles it. “Breathe with me,” he looks up at me from beneath his dark lashes, arms at his sides, his hands open, palms facing out. “Breathe nice and slow, Baby Boy.”

A hiss escapes through my teeth, eyes pinching closed, hand held out in front of me, shaking. My other arm by my side, gun heavy in my hand. I tap my thigh with it, counting to ten, my breath scraping its way up my windpipe like broken glass.

“It’s okay,” Kazimir soothes, my eyes blinking open, his face twisted with concern, eyes sad. “You’re safe.”

His words trigger something locked away deep inside my brain. Hidden in a darkened crevice, chained with silver and doused in holy water. A little wooden box of time I want to forget.

Still, I see him younger, his face pressed up between the gap of my bars, my body beaten and bruised, lying in a puddle

of my own filth, and his eyes were sad then too.

“It’s okay” the pretty boy coos, his hands wrapped around my cage bars, his big blue eyes sad, glistening with unshed tears.

My own singeing my hot cheeks as they streak down my face, the rest of me burning, bruising and bleeding. My arms squeeze around the rest of me tighter. Lying in the fetal position. Trying to hold my shattered bones in place. Keep my insides from becoming my outsides.

The chain attached to my ankle clinks, making me cringe at the sound. My jaw clenches making my broken teeth snap more, sharp, bolting pain slicing through my dislocated jaw. I try to move, the agony in my face making me want to die, the heavy shackle around my neck so tight I can barely breathe where it strangles my throat.

But I so desperately want to touch him, even though I know I can’t keep him.

Body too broken to claw my way towards him, I drag my gaze up onto his pretty face instead.

“You’re safe,” the boy says, a tear tumbling down his left cheek, because we both know his words are a lie.

The gun comes up between us in a shaky hand, aimed at him, but I don’t mean it. I don’t know what I’m doing. I feel nothing but a jarring pain stabbing inside my chest.

Kazimir’s gaze drops to the weapon between us, but he says nothing, doesn’t try to take it from me, even as he steps into it, the tiny, dark room causing my lungs to constrict. I feel like I’m suffocating.

Turning the gun over in my hand, I wave it in his direction.

“I have to go,” I crack out gruffly, voice broken, overused, it hardly comes out, the words mumbled.

“Charlie,” Kaz pleads, gaze dropping to the gun between us, he sighs heavily, taking it from my hand, our fingers

brushing, his hot to my cold.

I turn my back to him, tucking my semi-erect cock away, buttoning my jeans. I scoop up my jacket from the floor, throwing it over my shoulder. My fingers brushing the door handle, I feel him take another step, his heat radiating, warming my cool back.

“I meant it,” I drop my gaze to my feet, “*mean* it,” he emphasises, my breath halting in my lungs. “I miss you,” he throws out desperately, but he doesn’t close the small foot of space between us.

I hear him shift, swiping, what I presume is, the back of his hand over his short stubble, the rough sound filling my ears and I think of him wiping my spit off of his skin. Pushing his fingers through his hair.

“There’s nothing to miss,” I respond, my skin crawling with the need for fresh air.

“There is,” he inhales a deep breath, blowing it out slowly, my hand hovering over the door handle. “You...” he sighs again, “I’m not saying anything right.” I grind my teeth, holding my breath. “I’ll always want you, *Malysh*,” he husks, something twisting in his throat.

Want.

I huff a laugh then, shaking my head, white strands of hair falling across my eyes as I drop my head forward, clinging onto the door handle.

“*Want* means nothing, Kazimir,” I tell him roughly.

And then I wrench the door open before he can say anything else. Stepping out into the carpeted hall, gaze instantly falling on the person leaning back against the opposite wall, leather-clad leg bent, booted foot kicked up. A flush blooms high in her cheekbones, grey-green orbs staring at me, narrowing as they flick over my shoulder to Kazimir stepping out behind me.

A brow lifts high on her forehead, arms crossed over her chest. She licks her tongue across her front teeth, over her deep red painted lips, massaging them together before they

pop open to speak. But I'm already storming past her, blocking out whatever shit she's spewing at Kazimir because I don't care.

I don't fucking care about her opinion.

I don't fucking care about Kazimir's cocky bullshit statements.

I don't fucking care about anything.

But then big blue orbs, sapphire ringed in dark honey brown, flare brightly in my mind, and my feet pick up pace.

Desperate to get me away from here.

And back to her.

CHAPTER 19

KAZIMIR

Irritation spikes down my spine like acidic raindrops watching Charlie storm off, his head of white hair disappearing through the door to the stairwell. And if this bitch wasn't in my fucking face, I'd be going after him.

Wouldn't I?

Dima stands shadowed in a corner before the elevator, and he nods at me as I shove a hand back through my hair. Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, blowing out a frustrated breath as Kyla-Rose steps up to me, toe-to-toe. I grunt, peering down at her, she's six feet of pure rage, but I'm still taller, angrier.

She presses up onto her tiptoes, our noses almost brushing as she gets in my face, her scent, like citrus coconuts, invading my nostrils, and I instantly miss him. Copper, cigarettes, clean and smoky, like fresh laundry left outside to dry during a bonfire on a cold night.

"Stay the fuck away from him," she snarls in my face, the words seething through her bared teeth. "I don't give a fuck who you are, *Pakhan*," she spits my title with disgust, lazily rolling her gaze down my dishevelled suit, before dragging those bulbous orbs back up to meet mine. "But if you hurt him," she breathes, "*again*." Wrinkling her nose as though she smells something bad, her teeth rake over her bottom lip, "I will force feed you your own testicles." A smirk flits across my mouth, a brow rising on my forehead, "While they're still attached," she hisses, spittle hitting my lips with her last threatening word.

Eyes flicking between hers, a deep chuckle clucking its way up my throat, I shake my head. Stepping into her, forcing her to drop back onto her heels, losing her extra inches of height from leaning up on her tiptoes.

“You know what I find funny?” I laugh the words.

Continuing to step into her, forcing her feet to move until the crown of her skull is thudding against the wall at her back, a small oomph of breath forced from her lungs at the impact. My hands plant on the wall either side of her head, I drop my chin, our lips almost brushing, her nostrils flare but she doesn't speak as I look into her eyes.

“I'll tell you shall I, *Lala?*” I smile, letting my lashes shutter my eyes before refocusing on her. “It's that *you,*” I murmur over her mouth.

One of my hands lifting from the wall, slowly reaching toward her, a large curling scar cutting across her pretty heart shaped face, disappearing up into her hairline. My fingers brushing down the white crease of it, twirling a strand of loose hair around my finger, I hold the end of it between my thumb and forefinger.

“You,” I sigh again, “think it's everyone else who's trying to hurt him,” my eyes glide between hers, unblinking, her lips pursing. “When in reality, *Lala,*” I smirk, dropping my gaze for a moment, roving my eyes down the sliver of space between our bodies. “It is only *you* that hurts him,” I say sharply, my eyes snapping up onto hers. “You hurt him more than *I* ever have.”

Her breasts brush my chest as her own heaves, her hands balling into trembling fists at her sides. I tuck the curled lock of her hair behind her pierced ear, untwisting it from around my finger. Resting the pad of my thumb on the dimple of her chin, my forefinger stroking the hollow underside, tilting her head back gently until it bumps the wall once again.

Face hovering just above hers, mouth slanted over her lips, I suck in a short, sharp breath, tasting her breath on my tongue. I lick my lips, catching her pout with the tip of my tongue.

“Three husbands still not enough dick for you, Lala?” I whisper over her mouth. “You still need *my* boy’s, too?”

A smirk pulls at the corner of my lips as she pulls in a sudden breath. My eyes dropping to her parted lips, listening to her heart hammer in her chest, my own heartbeat calm and solid. The tips of my fingers flex against the wall beside her head, digging into the plaster.

“I think it’s *you* that should be staying away from him,” I whisper, plucking her lips with my own with every spoken word. “I think it’s *you* that’s infecting my boy,” I chuckle as she throws her head forward, barely missing my chin as I jerk back out of her way.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” she spits, her entire body trembling with rage.

I take a few steps away from her, casually sliding my hands into my pockets, I shrug my shoulders, scuff the toe of my shined shoe across the pattern in the carpet.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” I say quietly, my chin still dipped, eyes flicking up beneath my lashes.

She sneers at me, “What?”

“The truth,” I shrug again as she steps forward.

“You fucki-” she starts but she doesn’t get to finish, her name being called calmly from the other end of the corridor.

Her husband with the black hair stares between the two of us, his shoulders tight beneath his black t-shirt. He takes a couple steps closer, her eyes only on him.

“You ready?” Maddox Swallow asks calmly, his bright turquoise gaze flicking between the two of us.

His pale, tattooed forearms tensing as he rolls his wrists, the bones popping as he does so. His booted feet bring him closer, his eyes only on hers now, she doesn’t look at me as she steps into him. One of his thick arms draping over her shoulders, he draws her tightly into his side. Big tattooed hand curling over her shoulder cap. He moves them towards the other end of the hallway, taking them back towards the

meeting room, and with her attention firmly on the space in front of her, Maddox turns his head back over his shoulder.

Eyes sharp, they pinch, narrowing in on me, a crease forming between his brows, “Later, Ivanov,” he calls, before steering them through a door.

The heavy, swinging thud of it closing behind them, echoing throughout the hall.

I stare into the empty dark space, hands fisting and uncurling at my sides, vision blurring as I stare unseeingly into the darkness. Thinking about Charlie.

Always thinking about Charlie fucking Swallow.

The boy is hooked beneath my skin, rotting inside my bone marrow.

But I can’t quit him. I can’t get him off my mind. I don’t want to.

Want.

That’s what he said.

‘Want means nothing, Kazimir.’

What the fuck does that mean?

“Pakhan?” Dima’s voice has me blinking hard, blurred vision dissipating, I clear my throat, turning back to face my most trusted soldier. “Shall we leave, Sir?”

I nod my head, his thick finger stabbing the call button for the lift, the both of us stepping inside when the elevator *dings*, doors sliding open. He hits the ground floor key, the lift taking us down fast enough to give me head rush and then we’re stepping out into the cold, icy spring air slapping across my face.

I move unconsciously, Dima opening the back door of the car, my arse hitting the leather, feet like lead on the carpeted floor. I stare out of my window as we drive, letting the blurred darkness wipe away my thoughts. Then his voice is what brings me round again.

“We’re home, Pakhan,” Dima grunts deeply, his dark eyes on mine, where he peers in through my open door, holding it open for my exit.

My finger and thumb pinch the bridge of my nose, a heavy sigh making the tension in my shoulders drop.

Stepping out of the car, damp cobblestones beneath my feet, misting rain in the freezing air. I trudge my way up the wide front steps, the door to the house already pulled open. I grip Dima’s shoulder once he slams the front door shut behind us, only the two of us in the entrance.

“*Spasibo*, Dima,” I sigh heavily, grateful as always for his loyalty.

He dips his chin in response, blonde hair flopping over his brow. Dropping his dark gaze, his meaty hand patting atop mine where it rests on his wide shoulder.

“Whatever I can do, Kazimir,” his deep voice sincere, his rumble pulsing through my pounding temples.

He reads my face well, a grateful expression buried somewhere beneath the exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours, and just like that, he makes himself scarce, leaving me alone in the cold echo of my marble foyer.

CHAPTER 20

AVA

Chattering teeth make my jaw ache. The cold embedded so deeply inside my skeleton, ice has replaced my bone marrow. I wonder if my owner likes the cold, the way he never wears anything on his top half, seemingly unfazed being here in the low temperature. We must be underground, what with the industrial floor drainage, the lack of windows, air only circulating through a vent.

I try to shift my numb legs, huffing when my brain denies sending them the memo to move. Using my arms to pull them out from beneath me, I drag my bent knees up to my chest. Just to circle my arms around them, tucking all of my parts together to hold what little heat I have left to myself. I blow breath through my mouth down my thighs, the air cool as it ghosts over my belly. My teeth chattering so hard they feel like they're going to rattle until they shatter free of my gums.

My stomach twists sharply, forehead dropping to my knees, eyes squeezing tightly closed. Days of pills being fed into my body is making everything feel like it's burning, yet I'm still cold on the outside. My crackly lungs feel lighter, my breath less raspy, but I feel worse. I feel... *hungry*.

A groan mumbles from my lips, I have been starved for as long as I can remember, I don't get hungry anymore, but my belly rumbles so loud, it feels as though the sound bounces around the black, cavernous walls. I can't sleep, my insides knotted with pain, but I place a palm down on the steel floor, try to turn onto my side, shuffling away from the bars at my back. Something that is always cold to the touch.

Shivers rip through me, a tremor uprooting from its place in my core and spearing its quivering talons through my flesh from the inside out. Goosebumps lift on my skin, chattering teeth sinking into my bottom lip to try and quell the tremors, but nothing calms it. I squeeze my eyes closed, feeling sick, the dimly lit red room around me twirling like I'm on a carousel.

A loud bang jerks me awake, the tang of copper dry on my tongue, my bottom lip crisp. Stinging as I drag my sandpaper textured tongue across it, bitten from my clattering teeth which continue rattling even with my clenched jaw.

Another monstrous bang has my eyes snapping wider, blurrily scanning over the space before me.

Charlie stands in the open space between me and his workbench. His bare back heaving, body folded in half, hunched over, tattooed hands on his knees, fingers gripping hard. A low sort of choking sound bubbles free of him, and I curl my hands around the condensation coated cage bars to heft myself up to sitting.

His gasping breath makes my own lungs feel like they're collapsing, and I have the desperate urge to help him. To do... something. I lick my lips, dropping my gaze. Heart pounding at the thought of leaving my cage again, my eyes roving onto the open gate. I haven't left voluntarily, except to use my bucket just outside of the bars. Not since the last time.

Even with the thought of that, of what has happened when I have left the illusion of safety inside of my crate. He held onto me, almost tenderly, like he didn't want to let me go, and I think that frightens me more than him forcing himself on me. I'm used to that, but sometimes, when he touches me, it feels like warmth, even though his hands are cold, and his eyes are colder.

It feels like more.

Like it could mean something.

I gave him my name.

Ava.

I'm half surprised I even remember it. After all these years of nobody using it. Calling me all of the other names. Horrible, derogatory ones that aren't true, but at times, feel that way. It's hard to reject the ideology of something the longer it is forced on you. You start believing the vile things they say to you, carve into your skin.

Baby Bird.

Identity.

It fuels me.

Thighs flopping open, I grip my ankles, moving my legs, my flesh squeaking over the metal base. Ignoring the pain pulsing through my thighs, I shift onto my knees. Arms shaking with the strain of pulling myself up, pressing my face into the gap between bars, a heavy breath huffs out of me at the exertion, a cold sweat beading along my spine. Matted clumps of hair obscure my vision as I focus on my bruised thighs, scratched knees, and then I look up, bladder seizing tight with shock.

"Baby Bird," Charlie says breathlessly, his hands already wrapped around the bars on either side of my own, chin dipped, his emerald green eyes focused entirely on me.

Blinking hard, I don't understand how he got to me so fast, unnoticed by me, so silent. He shuffles in closer, shifting on his knees until they're flush with the cage. The tip of his nose brushing across mine. I keep my gaze on his, even though he's so close, his features are blurred. But I don't care about that, when he's this near to me, his attentions only on *me*.

It's like he *wants* to be here.

With me.

Breathing him in, his lips parted, almost touching mine. A crease forms between my brows, lips curling into my mouth, I can't remember the last time I used a toothbrush, and a flush of embarrassment finally warms me through. I drop my gaze, breathing in hard through my nose. It makes me squirm, head dipping, moving back, away from his. Hands slowly uncurling from the bars, to crawl backwards away from him.

But it's as though he senses my intentions, anticipating my actions before I decide them, his big hands covering mine over the cold metal. My eyes snapping onto his, his thumbs smooth over my scarred hands, tension in his eyes, he keeps staring at me, and I feel uncomfortable, too exposed. My skin crawls, like insects are creeping beneath my skin, beetles and maggots wiggling through my veins. I want to claw it off, my skin, pull it from my rotting flesh and dissect myself into pieces and parts, if only to stop the creepy feeling.

“Ava,” he rasps, low, cracked, pained. “Ava, look at me.”

I shake my head, tears springing to my eyes, I blink them away, keeping my chin as close to my chest as possible, the thick metal shackle making it impossible to drop my head forward completely. I squirm back, but Charlie doesn't release my hands, even as I struggle uselessly against him. Tugging and pulling, anticipating he'll release me, all the while hoping he won't.

It's confusing and scary and I don't like it. It feels overwhelming, his attention now. The way I'm the only thing in the room he's focusing on. It feels too much, suffocating, when I realise with a sudden gasp, I can't breathe.

My eyes snap up onto his in panic, his fingers tightening over mine.

“Take a deep breath in through your mouth, or I'll have to find another way to kickstart your lungs, Baby Bird,” he murmurs and just like that, hearing his voice that he hardly ever uses with me, my lungs contract, expanding with a deep inhale, air burning my throat. “Good girl,” he hushes, making me shiver. “Why'd you pull away from me?” he whispers, knowing I won't be able to answer him with words.

My cheeks flame at the thought of him trying to understand.

He couldn't.

Lifting one of his hands through the bars, a finger curling a matted strand of hair behind my ear, hooking the rough clump back from my face. I can't look away, his high cheekbones

shadowing his hollow cheeks, his green eyes blown wide in the darkness of the gloomy room.

His finger traces down my cheek, stopping at my mouth, the calloused pad of his finger slowly sweeping across my bottom lip, catching on the bitten skin. He plucks at my lip, letting it slap against my bottom teeth, a hum vibrating the taut tendons in his neck. I swallow too hard, the shackle cutting into the underside of my chin, making the chain clang, the heavy metal links grating over my breasts.

Charlie easily pushes to his feet, his hands leaving me, numbness sinking into my flesh where his touch dissolves. I feel my breath come harder as he turns away, panic seizing me again, like a hand around my throat. I go deathly still, bar the soft rattle of my chain as my body trembles.

Confliction twists my belly into knots, a sinking feeling deep in my soul. I wanted him to be away from me because I'm disgusting, but I don't want him to leave either. Breath pants through me, and it makes my eyes blot with dark spots, trying to suck in enough air to keep myself upright. My head spins and my throat tightens, and it feels like the floor is spinning as I try to focus on a small grated drain a few feet from my cage.

My eyes flutter closed, my body swaying, hands slipping from the bars, my temple hits the metal ground, and it feels good as the cold seeps into me, cooling my flushed cheek. My teeth stop chattering and my eyes get heavier, and just as my body feels like it's sinking into the floor, lungs dragging in less and less air, a screeched yelp forces its way up my throat. Heavy lidded eyes dragging open, I look down the length of my body to the open gate.

Charlie squats at the end of my cage, something shiny glinting sinisterly beneath the red bulb, between his fingers, and my breathing gets shorter, quicker, harder. A choked, sputtering cry wrenches up my throat as his free hand encircles my ankle.

"I've got you," he murmurs, my eyes wide. "Come," he orders and my brain kicks inside my skull, demanding my legs

work, drag me to him.

Nothing happens, even though I will it, my temples pounding with the lack of oxygen, and I claw helplessly at my throat. Panic is thick in my blood, expelling all sense of calm from me like an exorcism. Back of my skull knocking into the metal beneath me as I can't keep it held up any longer. And then my body is dragging across the floor.

Hip thudding onto the cold concrete, lungs burning, working faster and faster. Black stars spark and burst beneath my closed lids. My temple smacks off the lip of my cage, cheek grazing over the rough surface, my fingers tearing at the collar around my throat. Breath rushes out of me, none flooding in, and a desperate animalistic sound tears its way through my teeth.

A sharp pain pricks my side, something sharp stabbing in the hollows between my ribs, and it feels like air seeps into the imaginary holes. My fingers curl up beneath my chin, my eyes closed. Fingers caress over my outer knee. Rough skin glides up my outer thigh, long fingers closing around the jut of my hip. The sharp pain jabs lower, towards the hand, sending a calming shiver through me.

I'm tugged lower, across the rough, damp ground. My head thumping in time with my heart. The sharp jab pinching as it pokes down my outer thigh, stopping at my knee, the pain evaporating, leaving a tingling feeling in my leg.

"Baby Bird," Charlie rasps.

Fingers tightening on my hip, he skates his hand up the outside of my body, his fingers curling through mine where they tuck beneath my chin. Aggressively, he tugs my hands away from my throat.

Charlie coils the chain around his knuckles and yanks me up to sitting, my jelly legs flopping out in front of me as he positions me in the cradle of his parted thighs. Body side onto him, my shoulder bumping his chest.

"Keep those pretty eyes closed," he whispers, and I preen inside, at my owner calling me pretty. "Focus on my touches,"

he rasps in my ear, rough and demanding.

I shiver, the heavy chain slapping into my breastbone as he releases it, positioning his arm up the centre of my back instead, elbow resting at my coccyx. His long fingers threading into the back of my hair, cradling the base of my skull in his palm, fingertips holding firm.

The scarred knuckles of his other hand skate down my chest, one of my hands dropping to the floor, the other at my side, in the small, squashed space between our bodies.

Backs of his fingers pinch each nipple, his hand passing down my belly. Flattened fingers sweeping across the inside of my thigh. Knuckles nudging my thighs wider, my right leg dropping out to the side easily.

“Keep still,” he breathes.

Charlie tucks my head beneath his chin, cheek to his chest, his heart steady and hard against my ear, drumming evenly inside my skull. Then the sharp pricking spears the inside of my knee, making me jolt. Pain bolts down my spine, a stinging pinch buzzing through me as he works the sharp point down the flesh of my inner thigh.

“So good, Baby Bird,” he rumbles approvingly as I sit still in his lap just like he instructed, my breaths slowing the tighter his fingers press into my skull.

The pinprick sensation stabs deeper at the crease of my inner thigh, the coolness of his hand welcome over my rapidly heating core. Back arching automatically, a low whine on my tongue as the sharp point punctures me again, closer and closer to my cunt. He huffs a breath against the top of my head, something like amusement, my breathing picks back up, heart rate steadily climbing.

“Such a pretty baby bird,” he hushes, breath rushing across the top of my head, blowing tangled strands of my hair.

Fingers massaging my scalp, a groan building in my chest. His hand drops between my legs, my body stilling as he drags the sharp object across my pubic bone. The cold metal slipping lower, the length of it pressing between my folds. Charlie’s

fingers in my hair continue circling in place. His chin digging hard into the top of my skull.

“Mmm,” Charlie sighs against the top of my head, my eyes still closed, hands balled into fists.

His thumb brushes lower, the object still in the grip of his fingers. Pad of his thumb stroking up my slit, another light huff of laughter.

“Feels good, huh, little one?” he rasps, my heart blooming with the endearment. His thumb pushing between my folds, over the sharp metal, “You’re wet,” he murmurs, my cheeks flushing with heat.

His thumb is a gentle caress up my slit, re-pinching the metal between his thumb and finger, he drags it up through my wetness. Removing it from my flesh. And then the sharp point is pricking the wet skin, his fingers fanning over the crease of my thigh as he works the tip into my flesh.

He groans lowly, a strangled sort of sound echoing in his throat, then he presses deeper, making me jolt as pain bites in the sensitive flesh, his fingers tightening on my scalp.

“Open your eyes,” he hushes. “Look at what calms you, Baby Bird,” the point of his chin digging harder into the top of my head as he, too, moves to look.

My eyes flutter open, gaze on his inked chest, focus on the feel of his cool, bare skin wrapped around me. Gifting me a false sense of security, he holds me tighter, and I look down. I swallow hard, watching his vein rippled hand slowly work the sharp tip of a long, fine needle in and out of my skin. Puncturing the flesh of my most sensitive area with ease, care, restraint.

I try not to squirm, glancing up at him, his large green eyes enraptured on the movement of his hand. Bottom lip curled between his teeth, the pink skin blanched white where he bites down on it. The soft pricks of pain evaporate the longer I stare at him, my lips parted, eyes flicked up high to watch him. Serene, the glassiness of his eyes, the concentration of tension

between his brows. I melt into his hold, his gaze finally rolling down onto mine. A small tilt to one corner of his plump lips.

“You’re not panicking anymore,” he whispers, soft eyes on mine, the needle still working down one side of my exposed pussy.

He holds my slight weight with ease, almost like an embrace, the way his hand softens in my hair, his eyes flicking to the dark, knotted tangles with something like reverence.

“My brother cuts my hair,” he tells me quietly.

My entire focus honed in on him, tunnel vision on the delicate flutter of his pale lashes, the way they dust the top of his cheekbones when he blinks. The way his damaged voice rumbles through his chest, vibrating into the bones of my face.

“I don’t like strangers touching me,” he says with a small crease between his brows. “I will have him sort this out,” he breathes the words softly, my gaze never wandering from his where he stares at my hair between the webbing of his fingers. “Will you let him, Baby Bird?”

Mouth parted, head tilted back, enraptured with any word he speaks to me, skull resting in the warming palm of his hand, I nod slowly, licking my dry lips.

He rumbles an encouraging sound, then, “So good, my little Ava.”

His praise warms my insides, my guts twisting and knotting with his approval. Heart pounding so hard in my chest, it threatens to break free of my skeleton.

The needle pierces the delicate flesh on the inside of my folds, my tummy tightening, hunger forgotten as Charlie looks down at what he’s doing to me and a low moan mumbles from my lips.

“Yes,” he hisses, “so good, Baby Bird,” the needle moves to the other side, closer and closer to my entrance. “You bleed so fuckin’ pretty,” he drags the tip of the needle up the length of the delicate skin, tapping the end of it against my swollen clit.

A whimper rips free of my hoarse throat as he hums. I squirm then, trying to stop myself from moving, his eyes flash onto mine, something like awe in his deep green depths.

“I knew you were like me,” it’s a murmur, fear and devotion thick in each pronounced word, it ripples through my bloodstream as the needle punctures deep into my clit, making my back arch, electricity bolting through my veins with pain and pleasure.

My breath rushes in and out, teeth puncturing my bottom lip as he pushes the sharp point so deep it feels like the needle will disappear inside of me.

And then he’s tearing it free, my back slamming into the cold concrete as he thrusts me out of his lap. The needle clatters to the floor beside my head. Length of my chain slithering from my body to the ground as he curls himself over the top of me, breath panting over my lower belly. I crane my neck. Tilting my head forward as far as my shackle allows so I can see him.

His arms curl beneath my knees, bending my limp legs up to my chest, and dragging my pulsing core up, directly into his mouth. A loud groan of shock rushes from my lips, a whimper and cry as he flicks his gaze up onto mine.

Lying flat on his belly, my legs gripped tight in the juncture of his elbows. Nose nuzzling my painful, pulsing clit, he lashes the flat of his tongue up the length of me. Sucking my clit into his mouth, his sharp teeth taking hold of my flesh as he pulls as much of me into his mouth as he can.

His hands at the crease of my thighs, his fingers find my folds, yanking the delicate skin apart, his mouth covering the entire length of me. Tongue fucking into my tight entrance, twirling around inside of me before grazing his teeth up, sharp canines snagging, and biting down onto my clit.

A howl rips free of me as he holds me tight to his suctioning mouth. Back arching from the damp ground, head knocking into the concrete as I writhe in his arms, an explosion rocking through my body like overwhelming waves of pleasure and pain. Rattling my bones, skin burning where

he holds me in a vice tight grip, stars exploding beneath my closed lids.

He laps at me lazily as my eyes flutter open, body melting into the floor. Blood on his top lip, the tip of his nose, his tongue licks over me, every piece of exposed skin is ravaged by his mouth, and he doesn't take his eyes off of me.

I try to speak, so desperately wanting to say his name, but as though he knows what I want to do, he clambers his way up my body on his hands and knees. Hovering atop me, his face almost touching mine. I stare at the claw mark through his right eye, and feel my heart warm, knowing I put that there. Every time he looks in the mirror, he'll think of me.

I hope it scars.

“Don't try and speak,” he murmurs, lifting a hand to my face, a single finger brushing up the arch of my cheekbone, carefully, almost like he's trying to soothe me. “Mine,” he says quieter, gaze on mine and it's so intense I want to shut my eyes, but I don't. “You're mine, Baby Bird,” he hushes, claiming me, lowering his face so it's flush with the side of mine, my eyes going to the ominous red bulb above us. “I'm going to keep you forever,” he whispers into my ear, gravelly and rough.

His lips brushing my skin with every pronounced, clear word, like a threat, a warning, a declaration.

“I'm never letting you go,” he says a little louder, more aggressively, his teeth nipping at the soft skin beneath my ear. “Never,” he hisses, savagely fisting my hair and arching my neck back. “*Never,*” he repeats, and it feels like the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.

CHAPTER 21

KAZIMIR

Being conscious of every fucking move he makes is driving me to the brink of insanity. I glare at the back of Charlie's head where he leans casually against a steel post, watching my men check the drug shipment inside one of my warehouses. Trying really fucking hard to ignore how tight his leather trousers are, moulded to his sculpted arse.

I survey the men working, armed guards dressed in all black line the walls, others unpacking, counting and repacking the stock into different containers for transport. I breathe a sigh of relief that the exchange went without a hitch, after all of the fucking problems I've been having lately with this shit, I'm almost surprised this is going so well.

"Pakhan," Viktor's deep, stoic voice rumbles in my ear.

Turning my head over my shoulder to take in my oldest friend's unimpressed expression. Tattoos covering his throat, up the sides of his jaw, symbols inked beneath his eye. Broad, lean frame dressed in a white button down shirt, hands thrust casually in his black slack pockets, tension keeping his posture straight. I jerk my chin, instructing him to speak. His ice-chip blue eyes glancing from Charlie and back to me.

"You think this is going to gain respect with those others," he says with distaste, referring to the other mob leaders.

My eyes stray to Konstantin shoving another one of my men out of his way to check the product in the wooden crate. Grunting with distaste, spitting Russian at the man whose hands are held up in surrender. He rifles through the packed

weight, bright white grin finally cutting his face in half. Konstantin's huge hand claps the man on the back, a raucous chuckle leaving his chest as he lets the guy get back at it. I shake my head at the crazy bastard, his dark eyes finding mine, he pushes his blonde hair out of his eyes and moves onto his next victim.

"Are you listening to me?" Viktor hisses, and my eyes narrow in irritation.

"I am trying to be diplomatic," I reply casually. "This seems reasonable."

He huffs a disgusting laugh, stepping up beside me, "Only because it's him."

"Watch your mouth, Viktor," I spit back, looking at him from the corner of my narrowed eye.

He shakes his head, licking over his teeth, "The men are talking," he sighs bitterly.

I shrug, "Let them," he shoots me a shocked glare, "then put a bullet between their eyes. I'm their fucking Pakhan, it's treason." Viktor shakes his head, his thick black curls slicked back, unmoving with the amount of gel used to cement them in place. "I want you to go to Bronya," my voice strong, "I don't trust anyone else with her."

"Kaz-

"I'm not finished," I say lowly, flicking my gaze back onto him, still facing forward, I stare at him from the corner of my eye. "I want you to take Konstantin and Mikhail too."

"*Yebat*," he spits under his breath.

"You're my most loyal friends, *brothers*, and whoever is targeting me here is no friend to her either." My gaze flits back onto Charlie, "He is right, brother," I murmur, staring at the white haired demon, a cigarette clinging to his bottom lip. "Someone is betraying me, I just have to work out who and why," Charlie's tattooed arms cross over his bare chest as he tracks the hulking figure of Konstantin stalking across the room. "And I can't focus on doing that if I'm worrying about my sister." I look back to Viktor, "You would protect her if the

earth blazed around us,” I murmur, a crease between my brows as I return my stare to the man I want. “That’s why it has to be you.”

“And what about you?” he spits back, breathing in deep, “I’m not abandoning you.”

A warm smile tugs at my lips, but I bite it back, “Dima will remain here with me.”

He sighs, rubbing a fist down the stubble of his jaw, “For how long?”

“However long it takes, a month, year, maybe forever,” I shrug. “However long it takes to find the saboteur.”

“You’re not going to change your mind,” Viktor pushes a breath through his teeth, shaking his head again. I shake my head once, “When do we leave?”

“Tonight,” I nod, more to myself than to him. “Now,” I hum, “yes. Now. Get them both, and leave now, there’s no time like the present. We have shit handled here. Go.”

Viktor shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and with unspoken words staying that way, he nods firmly and crosses to Konstantin, halting his terrorising of another mover. Konstantin’s blue eyes come to mine, over Viktor’s shoulder, and then he, too, nods, the both of them turning away and leaving out of a side door.

Dima steps up beside me, his silent presence comforting as my chest clenches a little. I’ve spent the last few years separating myself from these friendships, trying to keep them safer, less connected, but they’ve still always been there. Whenever I needed them. Now three of them are just... gone.

The rest of the evening passes without incident; the crates are packed and counted, the final door closing on the last lorry.

And I watch as it drives away, Dima at my back, Charlie off to one side.

“You got enough information, monitoring that?” I ask lazily, but I’m irritated, being babysat.

Charlie's green eyes sliding to mine, he nods without words, hands slipping into the pockets of his leather pants, unlit cigarette tucked behind his ear.

I glance over my shoulder to Dima, jerking my chin towards the car, and without hesitation, his footsteps crunch across gravel, the door to the vehicle opening and closing.

"It wasn't someone here tonight," Charlie rasps, turning to look at me, bare skin of his upper body glistening beneath the moonlight. "You're going to have to look closer to home," he rumbles, but I can't think straight, staring at his wounded face.

I don't know what happened to him. The man's always cut up and covered in blood, but the scratch marks down his cheek, his eye, bother me. Plus, they make me think of sex, and jealousy tears through me with the possessive need to dominate him. Mark him with me too, so I'm also on his skin.

"Kazimir," he rumbles, forcing my name from his tongue with something like a plea. "Listen to me," he says, and my knees threaten to buckle. "Someone is trying to set you up."

I blink at him, letting the words sink in, frowning, "It's not that serious," I snort. "We'll find whoever the fucker is an-"

"No," he shakes his head, turning to face me, "I think you've got a bigger problem than you think," tilting his head back, he looks up towards the black night sky, too many clouds to see any stars. "It feels deeper," he rumbles, dropping his head back down to look at me with serious eyes. "Think about it," he murmurs, "someone that knows everything, every plan, every shipment, every drop off, every day, time. Where *you* are," he swallows hard, voice barely audible from overuse.

"Why would someone fuck up operations from the inside, and then make you all not want to work with me?"

"Because if you're to blame, the villain can take you out and swoop in to be the hero." His hand lifts towards his neck, fingers fanning as if to massage his throat, but he stops, dropping his hand. "Look at your most trusted and start there," he rasps quietly.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, stopping and starting all over again, but I can't tear my eyes off of the man trying to help me. He stares back, head cocked, chin dipped, eyes wide.

“Why are you trying to help me?” it's a whisper, the way the words curl from my mouth like smoke. “Why don't you just write me off like the rest of them?”

His gaze holds mine, and he doesn't blink, “Because I'm not like everyone else,” he rasps thickly, and it feels like more, the way he speaks, stares.

I swallow around the lump in my throat, taking a single step forward, and he doesn't back away, letting me close part of the distance, “Charli-”

My phone rings again making me curse, and I pull it from my pocket as Charlie takes a step back from me, turning my back to him to step out of listening range.

I move back closer towards the warehouse and stab the answer button as an unknown number dances across the phone screen, snarling into the phone, “*What?*”

A wave of heat slams into me, throwing me across the empty lot. Head hitting the ground hard, ears ringing. I blink hard, my eyes watering, red and orange dancing above me, blooming across the night's sky as I pry my eyes open, staring up. Arms limp at my sides, I force my fingers into the damp gravel beneath me, every bone in my body screaming as I try to sit myself upright, air whooshing out of my lungs as I drop back down, spine slamming into the earth.

Big hands force their way under my arms, long fingers curling up and over the front of them, digging into my collarbones. Lifting my upper body from the ground, dragging me back, away from the heat.

I blink, Dima's small brown eyes are wide, panicked, staring into mine, but the hands are still there, solid, and Dima's are cupping my face, coming away with blood. He spits words that I can't hear as he lifts my feet, pain bolting up my legs, shooting through my spine and injecting agony into the base of my skull.

My head drops back as I'm lifted into the air, neck arching, skull too heavy for me to try and hold it up. That's when I catch sight of him. My white-haired demon-boy. His violent green eyes are not on mine, his head angled back over his shoulder as he and Dima move me between them, but I stare up at him all the same, until my vision goes black. Ears bursting with a high-pitched buzzing, pain ricocheting through my skull like a boom, and I wonder if it's the sound of death.

Flies readying to feast.

CHAPTER 22

CHARLIE

Ava doesn't try to fight me as I kneel down at the open gate of her cage and reach in. Summoning her silently with nothing more than a jerk of my head. She licks her lips, round eyes on mine, and uses the bars to drag herself towards me.

My hands find her waist, too many bones digging into my palms as I drag her out, lifting her effortlessly into my arms. Her fingers curl in her lap, matted hair pulled forward across both shoulders, hiding those little dark nipples from my view.

Her legs hook over my forearm, my other arm curling around her back, and I adjust her in my hold as high as I can, just so I can breathe her in. She smells a little like bleach, from her clean cage, and the leftover soap from when I washed her this morning, but other than that, she only smells of me. And as I carry her towards the work bench, I find my face getting closer and closer to the top of her head, just so I can smell me on her.

After weeks of feeding Ava shakes and vitamins, antibiotics, to build her strength, I want to try her on solids. Plain foods, just to get her stomach used to eating again.

I rest my back against one of the wooden legs of the workbench as I take us down to the floor. Dillon already positioned beneath the table to sit beside us. I stroke my finger down his orange beak, up and over the soft, white feathers of his head, his eyes, too, on her. And not for the first time since I brought her here, do I wonder what Dillon thinks about my keeping her, in his space.

Ava's tiny body tucks into the crook of my right arm, and then I position her bottom half, so she's curled up on my thighs, my legs stretched out before me. Her cold skeletal hands lace together in anxious fists, scarred knuckles pressing into the hard packed muscles of my abdomen as she leans into me like I'm not the monster that hurts her. But I don't hate it, and it makes my heart gallop beneath my bones.

Taking the small black bowl from the bench above our heads, I lift it down to show her, but she doesn't look at the bowl, let alone what's inside. Her big blue eyes, ringed in warm honey-brown, stare past me, like she's captivated by something else. Her hands pressing into my belly harder and harder as though she's not consciously aware she's even doing it, and I wonder if she's even really seeing me.

"Baby Bird," I rasp lowly, my voice still aching from a few days of speaking too many words. "I'm going to feed you," I tell her, but she doesn't react. "Okay?" I dip my chin, try to catch her eye, my right arm curled tightly around her back, long fingers fanned over the front of her exposed ribs.

Her lips pop open like she's going to speak, but she winces almost immediately, like even attempting to talk hurts her and I worry that the shackle isn't the real problem with her speech.

I follow her line of sight, finding Dillon. I glance between the two of them, and then place the bowl behind my back, instead, twirling Dillon's pulley string around my finger and wheeling him closer. Ava flinches at the small squeak his wooden wheels make, staring up at me as the white duck stares at her.

"This is Dillon," I introduce her, taking one of her hands in mine, the back of it against my palm. "And this is Ava," I tell Dillon, reaching our joined hands up towards his face.

I look down at Ava, burrowing into my chest as she watches our extended hands move closer.

"He won't hurt you, Baby Bird," I reassure her, nodding my head in Dillon's direction, the front edge of his cart flush with the side of my thigh.

Then I bring her fingers to the top of his head, using my grip on her to stroke down his feathers gently. Dillon is the only thing I am ever gentle with. I never want to be careful with anything else.

Until maybe now.

I feel her flinch as her fingertips make contact, and a short laugh escapes me at the divot of uncertainty appearing between her dark brows. At the sound, she freezes in my lap, outstretched arm going stiff. She cautiously lifts her gaze to mine, eyes flicking between my own, and slowly, the corner of her mouth pulls up into some semblance of a smile. Her hand still balled in my lap uncurls, fingertips flexing against my abs, she slides her hand up, over my sternum, sending goosebumps smattering all over my exposed skin.

Flattening her palm over my heart, she stares at her splayed fingers, and the longer she stares, the harder my heart kicks against her touch, the beat of it getting quicker and quicker. And then her fingers start to move again, the taut tendons in her arm relaxing, and it's her guiding me as she strokes Dillon's head.

I feel frozen then, the way I feel her entire body relax, melting into me, letting me keep her cradled to my chest, but she burrows her way in further, as though she's trying to crawl her way inside of me. And I would let her. I would help. Cut open my own chest cavity, hold apart my ribcage as she crawled into the space, stitched herself into my heart. I would be immortal, with her soul tethered to mine.

She coughs, snapping me free of my thoughts. The splutter not as wet sounding as before. I release her hand, letting her wander over Dillon's head. I should feel possessive over him, he's just for me and I don't let anyone but Lala touch him. Instead, I just feel warmth, and I can't explain what it means, but I don't hate it.

I reach behind me, retrieving the small bowl, drawing her eye finally as the sound of the china sliding across the rough concrete reaches her ears.

She stares at the small, chopped carrots as I scoop some onto the gold spoon, and flinches back like I'm attempting to force feed her razor blades. Placing the spoon back into the bowl, I tip the carrots off, using the back of the spoon to crush them into a chunky paste.

"We go at your pace," I tell her with a small nod of my head, keep my eyes on hers, "but you *are* eating."

Ava's eyes flicker between my own, uncertain, but I keep the spoon held up, and just as I feel the threads of my temper spark to life, her mouth opens. Lips parting to wrap around the gold spoon, her sparkling blue-brown eyes never straying from mine, she takes the puree onto her tongue and slowly starts to chew.

I watch Ava carefully as she swallows with caution, trying to swallow wearing a shackle makes you feel like you're going to suffocate, but she manages to make it look graceful even when she winces. Her little nose twitches and wrinkles as she chews the next small spoonful of mashed vegetables. After so many mouthfuls, her eyes never having left mine once, I drop my gaze to the small black cereal bowl. Only a few grains of white rice left which I shovel onto the spoon, lifting it to her lips.

Once she takes the last spoonful in her mouth, I place the bowl down beside my leg, drop my hand to her bare calf, pressing my fingers into the muscle I struggle to locate. She flinches at that like it pains her, relaxing into the touch almost immediately as though my touch burns but soothes in some sort of unexpected way. Perhaps she just always expects my touch to hurt.

I stare down at her naked skin, all of her pulled in close to her centre, like she's cocooning as tightly as possible to be less noticeable. I don't ease up my grip on her calf, massaging lightly up and down the length of her leg, feeling more bone than muscle as I switch between the two.

Her head rests easily into my chest, cheek pressing to my skin and her hand remains palm down over my heart. Her other hand rests atop her belly, her chain sandwiched between.

Fingers curled loosely into the palm of her hand, digits relaxed, just like the rest of her. Something I wonder if she even notices.

We sit in silence, the black painted room bathed in dim red, only a singular bulb lit as we stay holding one another on the damp floor. I think of Kazimir, the explosion, blood seeping from his head. How all I could think of as I stared at him flopped and limp on the ground, my feet pounding through singed earth to reach him, was that he never told me how he felt.

Because I wouldn't let him.

Because I don't know how to do that shit.

Feelings and emotions and rights and wrongs. All of it blurs and morphs and twists into something I can't understand. So I shut it all out.

Stay quiet, stay hidden, try to pretend I don't have any of those things. The invisible things can break a person more than me and my weaponry ever could.

I drop my cheek to the top of Ava's head, her breath catching in her throat, she holds it in her lungs, the sharp inhale, and I silently count to five before she exhales again, her fingertips flexing against my chest.

"Do you like sweets, Ava?" I whisper, little fluffy hairs on the top of her head blowing with my expelled breath. "Hm?" I hum, "you like desserts?" I don't shift away from where I rest atop her head, and eventually she nods, just one tiny incline of her head, but it makes me smile all the same. "What kinda thing you like?" I whisper again, keeping us locked in this small, protective bubble of vulnerability. "Chocolate?" no response. "Cake?" again, nothing. "Ice cream?" a small nod, and my lips pull up into a smile. "Vanilla?" ... "Strawberry?" another nod.

I hum again, and I can't get rid of the curl of my lips.

"My little Ava is such a good girl," I rasp a little louder, my hand still massaging her calves, and her head moves beneath my cheek.

Another nod.

I huff a small laugh, “Shall I find us some, Baby Bird?” her fingers twitch against my chest, nails sharp, and I frown.

The tightness in my features easing almost instantly as I think I realise why.

“Are you worried about me leaving you for too long, little Ava?” And the nod comes instantly, harder than all the rest. “Don’t you remember what I said?” I’m still whispering so there’s less strain on my larynx, but the longer she holds her answer, the more I feel my grip on her readying to tighten.

I replay my own words over and over in my head, hoping there’s some way she’ll hear them, even though I don’t say them out loud.

‘You’re mine, Baby Bird.’

‘I’m going to keep you forever.’

‘I’m never letting you go.’

“Ava?” I blow out a breath of frustration. “Do you remember what I told you?” desperation bleeds out in my cracked words, because I want her to.

I need to know she listens to every word I tell her and believes it. I mean nothing to the world, but to her, I am the world. The only thing in it. Only words, only food, only light, only dark.

It’s all me.

But if I still mean nothing, even here, where I am the only thing that exists. I don’t understand the point of anything at all.

But then she nods, kickstarting my heart and keeping me just a little further back from the edge.

CHAPTER 23

CHARLIE

One arm beneath her legs, the other threading up the length of her spine, fingers gripping her nape, I cradle Ava to my chest. Her face in the hollow of my throat, little warm puffs of breath against my neck. Her arms caught between us, hands curled over my shoulders, she clings onto me, and I can hardly bear to let her go again.

But I do, as I promise, “I’m coming right back.”

I place her back down in her cage, the chain attached to her throat clanking and making my ears ring. I peer at the long length of it, cocking my head, but just as I’m looking at it, it’s being gathered up, slithering like a metal serpent inside the cage. I glance up, hands clasped together, elbows on my knees where I crouch low. Ava stares at me, her fingers closed tightly around the severed end of the chain like it’s her lifeline.

Curious.

I think about it, her reaction, all the way up to the kitchens.

I pull open the freezer door, scanning over the contents. I’m not really one for sweet things, so I’m not sure why it even entered my head, but I wanted to talk to her. And I don’t really know how to make small talk. It just felt... *right*, to ask her about something that she could answer without words.

Something else I don’t know how to make better.

Her voice.

I like the quiet, but I can’t get the memory of her broken voice, when she struggled to give me her name, out of my

head. Or those breathy moans, the cracked, hoarse groans that bubbled up from her throat when I had my tongue buried inside her cunt.

“Charlie.”

Fingers curled over a strawberry ice-cream split, I still.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Lala snaps from the opposite side of the kitchen island.

Sighing, I grab the ice lolly, and kick the freezer closed. Staying on my side of the kitchen unit, I cock my head at where she stands in the dark. The lights from the hall casting her shadow across the length of the dark room.

“Since when do you eat ice cream?” she asks in confusion, screwing her face up as she stares at my hand.

“What do you what?” I ask her roughly, every muscle in my body tightening, wanting to get back downstairs.

Wide eyes looking hollowed out in the dark, like they’ve sunken inside her head, she blinks at me, one long slow blink, and slams her hands onto her hips. Long black talons curling over them. Oversized black t-shirt hanging off of one tattooed shoulder, the bottom of it tucked into the front of her high waisted black jeans. Her straight white hair is down, parted in the middle, tucked behind both pierced ears, hanging down her back.

“Are you fucking joking?” she scoffs, shaking her head. “I don’t see you for days. You go on a job with the fucking Russians,” she sucks in a deep breath, eyes momentarily fluttering closed before snapping back open. “AND GET BLOWN UP!” she screams, making my ears pop.

She slaps her hands down onto the marble countertop between us, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She drops her head forward, hair curtaining her from me and I’m glad. I don’t want to look at her. I don’t want to be in the same room as her. I don’t even want to be in the same country as her right now.

She laughs, head shaking like she’s heard my thoughts. And I wouldn’t be surprised, we have always had such a close,

intricate connection, we've never needed to use many words.

I don't know how we've ended up here.

Like this.

Canting my head, she looks up at me from beneath those heavy, black fans of lashes. Grey-green orbs blown wide.

"You're unbelievable," she whispers it, the words skating down my spine, hair raising up the length of my arms. "You won't answer my calls," she swallows. "You don't talk to me. You can't wait to be away from me, escape me at every fucking opportunity," she chokes on the words as she expels them in a breath, staring at me.

I stare back at her, emotionless, because she doesn't get to keep doing this to me.

"What of it?" I ask, not denying it's true.

"Are you *with* him, Charl?" she asks with a false calm.

Hands still splayed over the marble, hair draped forward of her shoulders, her face shadowed, body backlit by the light in the hall.

She looks like a fucking demon.

"Is that what it is? You're fucking that Russian scum, so I'm what? Not good enough for you anymore?" Lala scoffs again, shaking her head, she pushes up from the island, flicking her hair back over her shoulders. "It's a shame he didn't burn alive in that explosion."

My grip crushes the ice lolly in my hand and my feet are pounding around the island between us, flinging the frozen treat aside before either one of us can blink. Kyla-Rose spins around, staring up at me, wide eyed, as I walk straight into her, my hand curling around her throat. I shove her back, her lower spine crunching as she hits the marble.

"What did you just fucking say to me?" I breathe the words over her mouth, plucking at her lips with every word. My eyes flicker between hers, "Repeat it," I order her, a snarl curling my top lip.

Her eyes flash, her lips mimicking mine, “I said,” she whispers, leaning into me, “it’s a fucking shame,” she spits, my fingers flexing on her throat. “That your vile cunt of a boyfriend, didn’t. Fucking. Die!”

The words fly out of her in a strangled scream, spittle hitting my face as she pushes herself harder against my tightening hand. Her own shoving and slapping at my exposed abs, but I don’t move, staring into her hateful, sorrow filled eyes. She pants for breath, screaming in frustration through her gritted teeth.

“Let go of me, Charlie,” she seethes, teeth bared, nostrils flaring.

Applying more pressure to her throat, her back bowing backwards over the counter, her hands grab hold of the edge of the marble.

“Charlie! Get the fuck off of me!” she thrusts herself forwards, trying to knock me free, but I step in closer, hips pinning her in place.

I know she has a gun on her, she always does, likely a nice array of knives and pointy weaponry too, but she won’t use it on me. She thinks she’ll hurt me, and we both know what happens to my dick when that happens. It almost makes me want to laugh.

Head cocked, I squeeze her neck tighter, brush my lips across her cheek.

“Are you jealous, Lala?” I breathe into her ear. “That what this is?” I lick up the length of her ear, cool metal studs bumping over the flat of my tongue. “A cry for attention?” I hum a laugh against her temple, my lips parted against her scarred skin. “You miss me, Lala?” I hush the words into her cheek, lips mauling lightly over her upper cheekbone. “You want me to tell you, I miss you too?” my voice creaks like phantom footsteps in the upper floors of a haunted house. “You upset that he gets to fuck me now,” the words whispering off of my tongue. “And you don’t?”

She is deathly still beneath me, bar the tremor of her damaged hand, the heat of her short, sharp pants against the bare skin of my chest.

“Charlie,” she whispers, and my heart cracks a little at the sound she makes on the end of my name, a horrid, putrid plea that makes my insides twist. “I just want-”

I lean back, fisting her hair with the hand not collaring her throat, and wrench her head back, arching her neck viciously, forcing her gaze up onto mine.

“I already fucking told you, Kyla-Rose,” I whisper lightly, “I don’t give a fuck what *you* want. It doesn’t matter what *you* want. We. Are. *Nothing*.”

It’s a hiss as it leaves my tongue, the venom from my words injecting directly into my heart.

“Fuck you,” she whispers, sucking in a breath through her teeth. “Fuck. *You*.”

Her pupils are blown black, face shaded with my shadow falling across her, and she stares up at me like she wants to tear out my throat. It makes me wonder if she will. She could. I’d probably let her if she tired. She was my everything once upon a time. And even now, I would give my life for hers. But it feels different, the way I think it, the way in which my heart doesn’t beat any faster, and my lungs don’t seize.

Everything just feels off.

Wrong.

I think of everything we’ve been through, and it’s like a knife through my chest cavity, spearing my heart, its beat thudding slower and slower.

“That what you want?” I rasp, my eyes unfocused on her face. “Hm? You want my cock inside that desperate little cunt of yours?”

“Get the fuck off me, Charlie,” she thrusts forward, her booted foot lifting and slamming down into the inside of my calf, again and again. “Now, Charlie, let me the fuck go!” she struggles in my hold, her neck arched back, spine curved so far

back it feels as though it may snap. “Charlie!” she hisses. “Let go, right now!” her foot collides with my inner knee and my leg almost buckles. “This is madness, Charlie,” she says breathlessly, my hand on her taut throat tightening. “Let me fucking go!” it’s a scream of hysteria, the way her voice hits my ears, but I’m already not listening.

“You want me to fuck you, so you can get it out of your system? That it?” I snarl in her face, “Then you’ll leave me alone?”

Her teeth snap at the underside of my chin. I jerk back, squeezing her neck tighter until her eyes nearly roll back. Her body goes limp, head dropping forward as I tear my fist from her hair, unbutton my jeans.

She gasps for breath, head snapping up as I flex my hold, allowing her to breathe again. Her hands fly up to my forearm, long nails dragging down my skin like knives.

“Don’t do this, Charlie, stop it!” her voice trembles between her lips, teeth chattering, hands clawing at my flesh.

And for a single moment I don’t fucking see her at all, imagining someone else entirely as I snap open the button on her jeans, yank down her zipper.

I see blue eyes ringed in glittering honey, matted dark hair and gaunt cheeks.

Ava.

I almost groan, thrusting my hand down the front of her jeans.

“Charlie!” she shrieks then, at my intrusion, the way my cold skin cups her heat, not moving, just holding her, probably bruising her. “Charlie, Charlie, Charlie,” Kyla-Rose chants. “Stop! Charlie! Please! STOP! Charlie! I’m pregnant!” she screams it at the top of her lungs, her entire body trembling and it’s like my heart drops into my stomach.

I lean forward, our noses brushing, she stares into my eyes, and we’re so close she is nothing but a blur.

“You think I give a fuck?” I whisper over her mouth, a choked breath catching in her throat. “You think I won’t fuck you just because you’re carrying someone else’s fucking spawn?” I scoff, glancing up towards the ceiling, before dropping my gaze back down to look at her, I smile, “It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

Her eyes flicker between mine as I draw back, and then she spits in my face. My eyes snap closed, her hot glob of saliva slowly sinking down my cheek.

“Fuck you,” she whispers, and it twists something so sharply inside my brain, it almost sends me to my knees. “Fuck. *You*. Charlie Swallow. Fuck. You.”

It’s as though a wave of clarity washes over me, ears buzzing, sight blurring as I flutter open my lashes, and my hand tears free of her open jeans.

Rage seems to bubble up inside my chest. For me, for her, for us. This situation we always seem to find ourselves spiralling in. Caught in a vicious cycle of pain and torment, misery befalling us both when we just don’t know how not to be this.

We are a disaster, and I don’t know how not to be.

How to fix us.

But to be different from before.

To be better.

Good.

But I don’t really feel like I’m good as I stare down into her eyes, glistening with tears that she tries so hard to keep from falling. Tears that I put there, *we* put there, because I’m falling apart and she’s not mine.

Pregnant.

I almost choke on the sharp lump that lodges in my throat.

Liquid beads in the corners of her eyes as she trembles in my hold. Then her eyes suddenly fly past mine, big and wet, gaze focusing on something I can’t see at my back.

That's when I hear him.

"Uncle Charlie?" Frankie's voice is gentle, but too loud.

As it is sometimes, and at others, too soft, because he can't hear it himself, and he stutters with nerves, so he prefers to sign. So often he goes unspeaking, silent, and it makes me want to protect him so much more.

Kyla-Rose shakes her head, her eyes squeezing shut as she slumps in my hold, drawing in a ragged broken breath, and a tear slides down her nose. I release her neck, holding her up by gripping her arm instead. I rebutton her jeans, pull up the zip, smooth her hair back from her wet cheeks.

Put her back together like I wish I could do for us both.

She doesn't want her son to see her like this, his mother, his uncle. Two people he loves unconditionally because he hasn't seen the rot in my core yet.

I give her my back, lending her privacy as I stare across the dark room to the little blonde boy illuminated in the archway.

What's up, little man? I sign, his eyes flicking from my hands back up to my face.

He ignores my greeting, trying to peer around me, "Mumma?" he calls, quieter than before, cautiously.

She sniffs at my back, clearing her throat, "Mummy's here, baby," Kyla-Rose says once she steps around me, so he can see her lips. "You ready for Fight Night, big boy?"

He nods, peering between the two of us, cocking his head at us in the same way that we so often do. Kyla-Rose steps up to him, smoothing her hand over his head of bright blonde hair, lighter than his dad's, darker than his mum's.

"Say goodbye to Uncle Charlie," she says, a big bright smile blossoming on his face, he waves me goodbye.

I lift my hand, waving back as I stare at him, wondering, not for the first time, what he'd have looked like, had he been mine.

But now, I see him with dark hair, and blue-brown eyes and it becomes hard to see anything else as I picture it.

“Goodnight, Charlie,” Kyla-Rose murmurs quietly, turning her head over her shoulder to face me, ensnaring my attention once again.

Hair tangled at the crown of her head, eyeliner smeared beneath her eyes. I see my finger-marks starting to bruise the pale skin of her throat. And I don't care.

I don't take a full breath until their collective footsteps are disappearing down the hall, echoing in the foyer, then finally, the front door slamming shut at their backs.

And I still can't find it in me to care.

Not until I start making my way from the room, stilling as I catch sight of the crushed ice lolly discarded to the floor.

And I find I do care about something, after all.

'I'm coming right back.'

Breaking my promise to Ava.

CHAPTER 24

AVA

Claw marks run up and down his arm, it's the first thing I see when he steps back inside the room, his hands empty of the ice cream I was promised. I don't have a watch, no clock on the wall, but I know he's been gone much longer than he promised.

Despite the fresh injuries to his skin, jeans hanging open, lower than normal on his slender hips. I would have known he had been with someone else.

He smells like them, whoever they are, and I hate it.

Something citrusy and fresh, creamy and mild beneath it, nothing like I must smell. Stuck down here without a proper bathroom, washing only when he does it for me. I suddenly feel shy. I've been without clothes for as long as I can remember and only over the last few days have I been given a toothbrush, well, Charlie did it for me. Brushing my teeth with foamy mint paste and it felt like he enjoyed doing it. He was careful and thorough, and I felt like I belonged nowhere else but in his strong, lean arms, letting him take care of me.

Charlie stalks forward, those grisly green eyes on me, one scored with my claw mark, glaring as he trails across the cold space. Unseeing, he drops into a crouch at my open gate, coiling my chain around the knuckles of his right hand, and I numb myself in preparation.

As he untangles my legs from under me, roughly yanking me out of my cage in such sharp contrast to the way he so tenderly placed me back inside.

I go somewhere else.

Disappear inside my head as he pins me over his workbench, thrusts inside my body. Jolting me forward, my cheek jerking over the splintery wood. I stare at the wall, the empty door frame that leads to the heavy mechanical doors I listen intently to whenever he's not here.

Wishing he'd come back.

To me.

Even if it's just to do this.

A fist in my hair snaps me back into the room, sharp pain racing across my scalp. Charlie wrenches me up, my back to his front, the long length of my chain slithering across the floor with every piston of his hips.

His cool breath feathers down the column of my neck, fanning across my shoulder as his mouth drops to my skin. Lips mauling and teeth tearing, he bites into me over and over, up and down the length of space between neck shackle and shoulder. The pain so unbearable, I can hardly stay conscious. My eyes flutter and his mouth finds my cheek. One arm banded around me, fingers squeezing the divots of space between my ribs. His other hand comes up, gripping my jaw, tilting my head back as far as he's able, the crown of my skull smacking viciously into the front of his shoulder.

"Open your eyes, Baby Bird," he growls, nipping at my cheekbone so savagely I almost yelp.

My words almost break free, building the courage to say his name, untangle my vocal cords, unlock my voice box. Tell him to be gentle with me, that I'll be good, that I'll fight, whatever it is that he wants, I'll comply.

I know he's upset about something, the way he fucks me in the same brutalising manner as he savaged that man in front of me with a cleaver. And I want to know who hurt him, so I can comfort him, tell him it's okay, because he's got me, and I won't ever tell him no.

Even now.

Even as he fucks me so hard, I know I'll tear, that I'll bleed from more than one place today. My cheek dragging over splintered wood, hips colliding with the sharp cornered edge of the workbench.

I just want him to always want me, even if it's like this. I know he can be tender; I can separate myself from the pain to keep the good. I've never had anything good before.

And Charlie's given me a glimpse of it.

No matter how small.

"My good little Ava," he praises, plump lips worshipping my gaunt cheek after abusing it, his tooth marks embedded deep in my skin, and my vocal cords tighten, twisting, locking my voice back up once more. "Such a good girl for me, Ava." His cock slams in and out of me and I feel my body start to melt into him, "Yes," he hisses, feeling the tension bleed out of my limbs, the word mouthing into my cheek. "So good, let me in, don't fight me, you're all for me. I'm never letting you go, let me in," he coos it, the chanting words, and I soften in his hold.

His arm tightening around my waist like he wants to hold me close rather than stop me breaking away. He lifts me higher, straightening my spine, legs dangling where his hips still pin me against the table. Splinters of wood cut into my bare hips, the bones banging into the workbench. Charlie's breath is flooding down my neck, hot and damp and his teeth bite into me almost desperately as his cock punches into the entrance of my cervix harder and harder. Bruising my insides to match my already tender outsides.

I think of Dillon beneath the bench, a witness to it all, and I wonder what would have happened, had Charlie come back here with a sweet treat like he promised. Instead of wounds on his skin and hatred in his heart.

Even still, his hand cupping my jaw, keeping my shackled neck arched back against his shoulder, other arm around my middle. I don't want him to stop. I crave his attention more than anything I think I ever have. I want him to stay down here forever, with me.

And no matter how weird it may be, I like waking up to the sound of wet thunks and grunted snaps. Watching the muscles in his lean shoulders and back shift beneath his tattooed skin as he butchers bodies atop this blood-stained workbench.

I like when he touches me violently as much as when holds me tenderly.

Because it's only me.

And him.

I am his entire focus for however long those precious seconds, minutes, hours, last. I'm all he thinks about.

My belly flutters as he sinks his teeth deeper into my neck, the sound of them colliding with the metal shackle making me tremble. Canine teeth sharper and pointier than all the rest. They feel like filed knitting needles; the way they seem to pierce deeper than all the rest. The warm, wet heat of his mouth pulls at my flesh, sucking hard as he bites into me further. It's like a pop jarring me when he finally breaks skin, my vision flooding white, temples pounding with my pulse at the pain, but I remain silent.

The way it has been conditioned in me by my last owner.

His eyes flash brightly inside my mind and my hands find Charlie's forearm, clinging onto him, uneven nails like serrated razors burrowing beneath his skin. He grunts against my throat, and hearing him at my back, despite feeling him hammering his way in and out of my body, it feels better.

Good.

Reassuring that it isn't *him*.

I breathe in as deep as I can with my neck angled at such a sharp curvature, metal collar cutting in, but I need something else to ground me besides his skin underneath my nails. Metallic smoke, cigarettes, something fresh and clean that I don't really think is from soap, fills my lungs, and I let his scent keep me tethered.

Relief washes over me in the form of a cold sweat, goosebumps raze across my skin, and my heart thuds almost painfully in my chest. Charlie's mouth still sucking and pulling on the broken skin of my neck. I go limp in his hold, his breath heavy and panting through his nostrils, skating down the slick skin of my chest.

He bites harder and I think he'll crack bone if his jaw locks any tighter but I don't think I care. I'll let him do anything to me if he holds me sometimes too, then he releases me. Licking up the length of my neck, tongue swirling through the mess he made, up and over the metal of my shackle. I feel the trickle of blood dribbling down my chest as his cock swells inside me, still fucking into me hard and fast, knocking me into the table savagely with every thrust.

Arm still around my waist, his hand comes up, cupping over the entirety of my tiny breast, his finger and thumb plucking at my pert nipple. He bites my earlobe, tip of his nose at the shell of my ear.

"I'm going to fill you so full of cum, Baby Bird," Charlie whispers into my ear, a shiver tearing its way down my spine. "That you'll taste me on the back of your tongue when I'm finished with you," he snarls the words, pressing his bared teeth into my cheek.

My eyes close, nails driving into his arm harder as he jostles my body in his arms, my chain clinking against the concrete flooring. His breath is hot and heavy on my cool, sweat slicked skin, my heart erratic in my chest.

"I'm never letting you go," he huffs at me, his raspy voice cracked and strained as he fucks into me. "My little Ava," he groans, and I melt into him, the way he coos my name. "I'm going to fill you with me," he bites the words out aggressively. "Watch your belly grow big with my babies," he hisses like he both hates and loves the idea. "That's what we're going to do, Baby Bird," he grunts. "Fill our nest."

A choked cry lodges in my restricted throat, and I hate that I can't force the sound out. Desperately wanting to say his name, to tell him to do it. Whatever he wants with me. I have a

warped sort of desire to please him. I know it's wrong, but I don't care.

His hand drops from my breast to cup my pussy, his fingertips brushing the base of his cock as he continues to thrust in and out of me. The heel of his hand grinds into my clit at the same time he forces two fingers into me, alongside his thick cock.

I bow forward in his hold, but he doesn't let up, fucking me savagely, his lips going back to the agonising fire of his bite. He lines up his teeth with their bloody indents and rests them there, holding me gently between his jaws. His groan vibrates my bones, warmth rattling around inside my chest, his tongue lapping the wound between his teeth.

“Come for me, my little Ava,” and as he demands it, I feel my belly clench tight. “Such a pretty little baby bird. So good for me,” he murmurs tightly, his hips stuttering, thighs pressing flush with the back of my own. “Come for me,” he snaps, teeth driving back into my new wound, and I come as pain pulses through my temples.

My entire body stiffens, eyes squeezing, breath panting through my nostrils. My cunt clings to him, muscles tightening around his thick, pulsing length. He holds deep inside me, and then his cum is coating my insides, hot, thick ribbons spilling into me with short stuttering thrusts of his hips.

Dragging his teeth over torn skin, the flat of his tongue cleaning up his bite. I can smell it. The blood. Thick iron in my nostrils. Pain in my neck, my shoulder, collarbone, muscle ache hot in my upper back.

But I feel light, knowing he's calmed. The way his fingers and thumb caress my jaw now with something like reverence, instead of grinding his fingertips into it with a pressure that makes my eyes want to pop free of their sockets.

Charlie's fingers slide out of me, his cock still buried deep. I lick my dry lips, my eyes closed, body completely at ease in his hold. His other arm comes around me, both of them crossing at my waist, palms coming up to my shoulders, he holds me against him. Burying his face in my neck, his cool

cheek pressing to my bite, and it feels so good, a sigh slides between my lips. Charlie stiffens, gripping me tighter, nuzzling behind my ear.

His cock slips out of me, his stance widening. I hear his booted feet shuffling, his hands cradling me to him, manoeuvring his arms, he turns me in his hold slowly. Keeping my numb feet lifted from the floor, until I'm wrapped up in his arms. My limp legs hanging over the crook of his right arm, his left banding around my middle.

Cheek flush to his chest, I listen to his heart beating solidly beneath my ear, his cum slipping out of me, liquid silk coating my inner thighs. He carries me back to my cage, and I'm ready for him to leave me again, a shiver running through me in anticipation of losing his touch.

He crouches low, bending at the knees, folding himself into a squat, and I reach out my hand to find the bars. Drag myself back into the metal crate. But his grip tightens, his breathing a little too harsh and then he's pushing back up to standing. Returning us to his workbench, and slipping to the floor beneath, his back to one of the wooden legs of the table.

Charlie tucks me in close to him, his chin to the top of my head. A yawn cracks my jaw as my hands come up between us, curling beneath my chin. I blink up at him, his gaze already aimed down, locked on me.

“Sleep now, Baby Bird,” he coos, raspy and thick, his big hands clutching me close. “Such a good girl for me,” he praises, running his long fingers in slow swipes where his hands rest over my skin. “Goodnight, my little Ava.”

His arms tighten around me as I bury my face in his chest. I keep my eyes flicked up, staring at his face, his eye starting to scar now with a wound I gave him. I don't want to stop looking at him, but my breaths deepen, heart calming, slowing to match his, and I finally let my heavy eyes close.

A figure watches me from a dark corner, sending a chill down my spine. Eyes wide, my bony fingers curled tightly around the

cold, slick bars of my cage. I watch the pitch darkness warp and bend around him, like he's made of the same thing, umbra. One with the shadows and the gloom and the things that go bump in the night.

Sinister.

Terrifying.

My heart picks up pace, fast and hard and loud. It drums in my ears, my pulse a loud thudding, and I squeeze my hands tighter around the condensation slicked metal, but I don't look away.

Can't.

Caught in his gaze like a baby bird in a snare.

And when he finally steps forward, emerging out into the low red light of the black cave. Venomous green eyes, disturbing hooked smirk. Devine terror wrapped in brutal, bloodied, inked skin.

He smiles.

There's a ruthless monster trapped beneath his bones, and as my lips pull up at the corners, the skin at the outer corners of my eyes tightening. I smile back, silently asking him to show me more.

CHAPTER 25

KAZIMIR

Smoke drifts up towards the ceiling, pluming and circling thickly overhead. My eyes narrow in on the man opposite me, beady brown eyes, greased back, dark hair, thinning in the front. Gold teeth gleam at me from around the fat cigar, the smarmy, smug grin on my uncle's face makes me want to punch him.

Or shoot him.

I'd prefer to stab him if I had the strength.

But the pain in my temples continues to pound, even a week after being fucking bombed, and it feels like there's a rave happening inside my skull.

I push the dark sunglasses up, fingertip running the length of my bruised nose, they're possibly the only thing keeping me fucking upright in this chair. The stress of being blown up, everything else that comes with it. All on top of an agonising migraine, is way more than I want to be dealing with today.

Let alone the man, loose term for what he really is, spineless fucking rodent, sitting opposite me right now.

"Why are you even dealing with these Italians?" he spits on the floor, and I see Dima twitch out the corner of my eye.

Uncle Leonid having barged into my office to announce his arrival whilst I was mid-meeting with Vito Gambino.

Not ideal.

I kiss my teeth, tongue rolling over the top ones. I shift in my seat, leaning forward, mashing out my cigarette in the

crystal ashtray atop the desk. The chair rocks side to side as I lounge back in the leather.

“Business,” I reply, dropping my head against the top of the chair, cracking my neck.

“Why don’t I know about it?” his fat fingers pluck the cigar free, resting it between his two forefingers, ashing it on the floor.

A smile splits my face, sensing the shudder from Dima, the man is very much anti-mess, and he’s going to want to clean that up himself, just to make sure it’s done correctly.

“You don’t seek advice from your beloved *Dyadya* anymore?” Leonid asks, an eyebrow raised over one eye.

“What are you here for?” I exhale heavily, already fed up of being in my deceased Father’s brother’s presence.

I wonder when he is going back to Russia.

I wonder if I could hurry it up...

“How much do you want?”

He spits again, slamming a fat hand down on my desk. Leaning forward in the chair, his chin almost flush with the wood.

“How dare you speak to me that way, boy,” his eyes drop down my relaxed position in the chair, rolling back up my body, a sneer on his mouth. “I just came to check in on my favourite nephew after hearing what happened,” he tsks, leaning back into his chair, cigar popping back between his teeth.

I scoff, attempting to hide a smirk on my lips, “I’m your only nephew, Uncle.”

He nods in agreement, dropping his gaze, those beady little eyes flicking back up onto mine, “Tragic, may your brother rest in peace.”

My nostrils flair at the mere mention of him, and it makes *me* want to fucking spit. Instead, I roll my eyes, plaster a grin on my face. Something my brother was also very good at.

Faking it.

“What do you want? I’m a busy man,” I turn my palms over, backs of my hands to the arms of the chair. “I have appointments,” I smile, and a sly one mirrors on his own mouth.

“Yes,” he hums, dragging out the word, rolling his eyes over my office, the camera feed. “I can see you are...” his gaze leisurely falls back to mine, “...rushed off your feet.”

I say nothing, still grinning, showing off all of my straight white teeth. He swallows, thickly, his fat neck rolling with the barest hint of his Adam’s apple.

“Well, I really only dropped in to say hello,” he lies, “to check on your wellbeing,” I keep grinning. “Perhaps, I shall see you later on tonight,” he rumbles, Russian accent thick. “At The Glass House,” his dark brows raise on his forehead. “There shall be a VIP area arranged for me, Nephew?”

I nod, flicking my head at Dima, who shifts his standing position at my side but says nothing.

“That all, *Dyadya*?” I lift my brows, still grinning.

He swallows again, stubbing out his cigar on the cherry wood of my desk. His meaty hands curling over the thick arms of his chair, aiding him in pushing to stand. He gets to his feet, the chair screeching over the wooden floor as he shoves it out of his way with the backs of his legs. Planting a palm on the edge of the desk, thick gold ring with the Ivanov family’s emblem engraved in the round face of it staring back at me, one that matches my own, he beams down at me.

“I shall be there at eleven if you’d like to meet me for a drink,” his brows rise again, his finger tapping the desk.

I stare at it, still grinning, and then I stand too, towering over him from the opposite side of the desk. I straighten my shirt, fix my collar.

“Maybe,” I smile back, “Good day, Uncle Leonid.”

I round the desk, gesturing with my arm extended for him to leave first. He purses his lips, taps the table once more and I

follow him out of the door that opens into the room from the other side. The hallway is lined with my men, armed and stoic and waiting for any reason to shoot. If I could get away with killing my uncle here and now, it'd have been done over an hour ago.

Leonid walks through, eyeing each of them as I follow closely behind, grinning at the back of his skull, imaging the heel of my foot cracking through it.

I walk behind him until we reach the back door. Cold air rushing in as I push down on the bar, shouldering it open.

“I can get you a good arms deal,” he says then, one foot out of the door. “From Russia, it will be the best you can get. Better than dealing with these *duraki*.” I thumb my bottom lip, stare down at him, his short, round frame almost a foot shorter than me. “You won’t need the Italians,” he sneers with disgust, and my skin prickles beneath my clothing.

I grin lazily at him, dipping down, so my face is in line with his.

“I don’t need anyone,” I smile, enunciating my last word, nose twitching at his stench, stale cigars, too much aftershave. “I like Vito,” I shrug, his small mouth popping open. Letting that sink in, I step aside, turning back in towards my office. “Don’t fuck up whilst you’re here, *Dyadya*,” I call over my shoulder, glancing back, Dima sentry beside him, waiting for my uncle to exit. “I am Pakhan now.” It’s a reminder, the threat only mildly laced through, and the way his eyes narrow, I know it hit. “Enjoy my club.”

Shoulder pinching with every light sway of my arm as I make my way back to my office. The pain having returned to the freshly healed stab wound, reinjured during the warehouse blast. Reminding me how I should absolutely not be thinking of Charlie Swallow. His pale scarred skin, etched with carvings of *my* fucking name, hidden beneath layers and layers of shadowy black ink. Vicious emerald eyes and cutthroat smile. I think of what we would be doing right now, if we were together, far, far away from here and it almost chokes me.

CHAPTER 26

KAZIMIR

Eighteen feet of spiked black steel stands before me, the call box untouched to my right. My arse rests back against the side of my car, unlit cigarette between my lips, keys digging into my cold palm.

I stare up at the Swallow family's home.

Aged stone brick, large windows. Rectangular, black lanterns hooked on short posts lining the long curving driveaway. Darkened windows and double doors leading out onto stone balconies, I know which room is his. Red bulbs, the rest, walls, sheets, carpet, all of it black. I have only ever been inside once, but I have ventured through the underground tunnels to his private sanctuary many times before. Never once being let inside. The place is guarded and armed better than Buckingham fucking Palace.

Yet, I am determined, tonight, to get inside.

To find my boy.

I don't know what in the fuck it is I'm doing.

Here, now, why.

But my body thrums with nervous energy, an anxious need to get to him, *see* him.

It's Friday which means it's Fight Night, nobody else will be here. But I know that he is. I always know, I can feel him better than my own consciousness some days. It doesn't matter how long we've been apart, separated by circumstance, fear. My heart will always bleed for him because no matter what,

we can never be together, will never, our worlds are too similar and too different to be anything but what we are now.

The Russian King.

The English Prince.

Nothing but stolen moments and lustful hatred. Dirty, degrading blowjobs and fucked up dangerous sex. Bloody tongues and venomous words.

Toxic.

Broken.

Ruin.

I am his. He is mine.

I inhale deep, lean forward and press the call button for the house. The loud buzzing pierces the icy air as it rings, rings, rings. Finally, I light my cigarette, staring up at the dark house, eye my own reflection in the shined black hood of my car as I glance down.

He's not going to answer.

I know it.

I wouldn't.

Toe of my shoe kicking through the dusty gravel, the buzzing of the call box thick in my head. I think about just leaving, when it suddenly stops. Silence hangs heavy on the other end, but it's been answered. I know it's him without even hearing him breathe. My own catching in my chest, I wait, exhaling a heavy breath of smoke, I lick my lips.

"*Malysh*," I breathe, leaning closer to the box, licking my lips again, I swallow dryly. "Let me in."

The silence that comes after my pleading is suffocating, but he doesn't hang up. I drop my cigarette to the gravel, swivel my foot over the top of it, grinding it out. I inhale, and then blow it out.

"Please," I swallow again, palms sweating. "I need to see you."

“Fuck off, Kazimir,” he grumbles through the crackle of the speaker.

Glancing over my shoulder at the liquor on my passenger seat, I turn back to face the call box, “I bring booze.” He is so silent, I fear he’s cut the connection, but the call box crackles again, and I know he’s still there. “You got any weed?”

He grunts, “What do you want?”

“To smoke, to drink,” I answer quickly, desperately, but I can’t find it in me to care. “Just to...” I flick my gaze around, seeing a dark figure patrolling the grounds.

“To what, Kazimir?” he blows out a breath, words low, and I imagine him shifting on his feet, glaring at the wall panel he’s speaking through like he wishes he could set it on fire, maybe blow it up.

“Talk,” I whisper. “To talk,” I answer again, a little louder. “I’ll... Nothing heavy, just, I don’t know,” I confess, brows pulling together. “I don’t fucking know.” I throw a hand to my head, card my fingers through my hair. “You know what, don’t worry about it,” I push up from the car, glancing down at my feet, I shake my head, blowing out a breath. “I dunno what I’m doing,” I fist my hair, biting on my upper lip.

The call box goes dead. A frustrated scream trapped behind my teeth. I force out a breath, bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood and then turn back to the car. Tearing the door open, I throw myself into the seat, palms of my hands smacking against the steering wheel. I grip it tight, the leather creaking beneath my clenched fingers. Forehead dropping to the top of the wheel, I breathe in deep, eyes shut tight.

I don’t know why the fuck I’ve come here.

I knock my head gently into the wheel, groaning at the pounding in the back of my head, I got blown up and didn’t die, but it’s all I can fucking think about.

And I just want to see him.

I have a desperate desire to.

Even if it’s just for him to tell me to fuck off.

Hands dropping to my lap, I stare down at them. Tattoos swirled up the lengths of each finger, spun lines of filigree-type patterns wrapping around each digit. I shove up the ring on my middle finger, wriggling it up to the knuckle so I can see it. A tiny 'C' tattooed on the inside of my finger, re-inked more times than I dare count, hidden beneath the band of my Ivanov family ring.

I wonder why I had it done. Perhaps it was just to torture myself. Perhaps it was a fuck you to my father. Maybe I just really fucking hate myself.

Reaching down for the car keys, fingertips brushing the wiry floor mat, I scoop them up, put the key in the ignition, start the engine, foot on the clutch, I knock the gear stick into reverse. Glancing at the house beyond the gates once more, I shake my head.

It was fucking stupid to come here.

Left arm hooking over the back of the passenger seat, I flick my chin over my shoulder, right hand on the wheel. I check the private road behind me is clear and then... I hear a low whine.

My head whips back around, mouth popping open a little before quickly snapping closed. The tall black gates start to move, slowly parting to open outwards. My arm drops from the back of the seat to the gear stick, fingers flexing over the round top of it. I lick my lips, swallow dryly and wait until they stop moving.

And then I do nothing.

Staring up the dark driveway, I wonder if I should leave anyway. Whatever happens here isn't going to change anything. I don't even know if I want it to. I feel breathless, like no matter how much air I suck into my lungs, it'll never be enough. Then the gates start to move again, closing, and I have mere seconds to make a decision.

Fuck, what am I doing here?

Maybe I should just stop thinking.

I shove the car into gear, slam my foot down on the accelerator, and burst through the slow closing gates, catching the wing mirror on the left side as I do, but I don't care. I don't care about anything right now that isn't Charlie Swallow.

Slowing my speed, I wind up the curling driveway. Lanterns lining the gravel road, tyres kicking it up with clouds of dust, the tiny stones pinging off of the paintwork. I come to a stop just past the wide mouthed stone staircase. Turn the key, switching off the engine, I peer ahead, stare into the darkness, grab the bottle on my passenger seat and get out before I can rethink it.

The night's sky is clear, the air cold, wind whistling ominously through the manicured fir trees lining the property, blowing their full branches of needles back and forth with a calming swoosh.

I feel his eyes on me before I register the click of the opening door, and as though I'm dragged in his direction, I turn on my heel.

His bright green eyes are almost black in the dark, face shadowed, his hollow cheeks appearing deeper, like his cheekbones are cut from marble.

I'm at the bottom of the steps before I've instructed my feet to move, never taking my eyes from his. I stare up at him, shirtless, low hanging black jeans clinging to his hips, Adonis belt carved like a valley through his lower abs. He stares back, silent, loose limbed, head cocked, chin dipped, his white hair flopping forward, half hiding his newly scarring eye.

It's like staring upon a God and The Devil, dark light warping as it travels through his veins. His angelic outsides hiding his sinister insides. Yet, my knees want to buckle, hit the stone and crawl me to his feet.

My fist curls at my sides, the muscles in my forearms bunching and flexing, but I don't move to climb the stairs. As though I'm frozen in place, I stand statue still, waiting for what, I'm not sure, until he speaks.

“Come on then,” he rasps, rough words whipping through the harsh slap of wind, and my feet are pounding against stone.

I smell him, intoxicating smoke, iron, cigarettes, something that cuts through it all, fresh and clean, all of it rendering both my brain and my heart useless.

He says nothing, giving me his back and sloping his way back inside the dark house. Marble clicks beneath my heels, the heavy door closing with a soft click at my back, and he doesn't stop. Doesn't quiz me on why I'm here, why now. Just continues deeper into the house. And I follow. Unspeaking, letting the angel-faced monster lead me to what I already know will be my death.

In one way or another.

The night feels heavy. Storm clouds circling despite the outside being clear. Here, inside, it brews like poison in a witches cauldron. Something sick and terrifying claws at the walls, eagerly anticipating the destruction readying to unfold. Yet, we both continue, footsteps unfaltering, we gracefully venture through the marble mansion.

It's hot when we reach the sunroom. A jungle of exotic plants and flowers. Wisteria covers the ceiling, buds of purple hanging in grape-like bunches. Wide fans of unusually shaped, shiny leaves, growing on trees I can't name. Bright flowers wear luminous coloured petals, everything full of life, blooming even under the dark sky.

Sweat beads along my nape, and I'm stripping my jacket off as Charlie gracefully folds himself into a white wicker chair. Angled so the person taking up residence in the chair's view is of the expansive garden. There are no neighbours here, no buildings, nothing for acres and acres but this house.

Folding my jacket over the back of it, I sit in the chair opposite without him inviting me to, his eyes locked on the gardens, but I feel him watching me in the reflection of the large window. Glass clinks against glass as I lift the bottle of liquor hanging between my fingers, place it down onto the small table between the chairs. Condensation runs down the inside of the glass room, the outside world much colder than in

here, but it feels more like the night is crying. As though this room full of living, breathing organisms that thrive in the sun's rays is really just a mirage.

A room of deception, something pretty occupying the space, smothering the truth. A place of death and decay. A place hearts come to die.

“Why are you here, Kazimir?” Charlie asks without looking at me.

His hands palm down on the arms of his chair, fingers relaxed, naturally curling inwards as he leans his back against the cushioned wicker.

Instead of answering his question, I lean forward, snatching up the bottle of vodka. The cap pings as I twist it off, discarding it to the terracotta tiles beneath our feet. Liquid glugging loudly as I gulp a couple mouthfuls down straight from the bottle like a heathen. Leaning forward, I place it back down, wipe my clammy palms over my knees, fabric of my designer trousers soft beneath my rough fingers.

“I came to see you,” I tell him, a short huff of knowing expelled through his nostrils, he shakes his head, but he doesn't speak.

I swallow, gliding my eyes onto the view too, trying to come up with literally anything to fucking say that isn't the truth.

When I'm with you, I feel like myself.

No one gets me like you do.

I miss you.

I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off before I can lie.

“Do not lie, Kazimir,” he sighs, and he sounds... *exhausted*. “If you intend to lie, you can leave.”

My lips flap like a gasping fish, mouth opening and closing for a moment, I shake my head.

“I don’t have the capacity for it,” he whispers, my eyes snapping to his, and I shut my mouth.

“What’s happened, Charlie?” I ask quietly, feeling the sudden delayed burn of vodka flood through my chest, like I’ve come back online, have a purpose, can breathe.

He sighs, unseeing where he gazes out onto the gardens. Everything shrouded in pitch, the night is dark, and the room is only lit with a small floor light hidden somewhere amongst the leaves at our backs.

He says nothing and I don’t attempt to pry. Fear filling me at him changing his mind about my being here, throwing me out. I don’t know what to do or say, so I speak the first words that pop into my head.

“Leonid is here.”

His hands tighten around the arms of the chair, and slowly, he swings his head in my direction, his eyes the last thing to follow the movement.

“Just him?” he rasps.

I think of all the things I watched my uncle do to Charlie, back when he was our prisoner, shackled by the throat, ankle, locked in a too-small crate. How I did nothing. Let my father’s men ruin the boy I fell for.

“Just him.”

He grunts in the back of his throat, gaze flicking down to his lap.

“Any of the others coming?” he asks, and I can hear the rage in his voice, the loathing, it’s almost as loud as the self-loathing I house in my core.

“It seems unlikely,” I pass a hand over my head, grip the back of my neck. “But I don’t know.”

He nods, his mind somewhere else, his eyes lift to mine, and I want to grab him. Shake him. Hold him. Kiss him.

We sit in silence, but neither one of us looks away, probably thinking of the same thing. I think of the time he was

in one of my father's cells. Abducted at my father's order, snatch the Swallow boy with the future. Charlie was going to MIT, away from the violence of our world. He could have done great things for the world, and my family took it all away from him.

He would have been safe.

He never would have met me.

I think of the twenty-two year old boy, tall and lean and naked. Frightened. That's how I first met him. Bundled into a metal cage, a thick collar pinching his neck too tight. A length of chain used to yank him around by his throat. A second added to his ankle, good for keeping him spread out. Pinned down.

I remember the sound of snapping his ankle, the look in his eyes, and my own squeeze closed.

"It's done, Kazimir," he says quietly, my chin dropped to my chest.

My head shakes. I can't get the sound to stop. Replaying it over and over inside of my head. The pained squawk that tore its way up his throat as I smashed a hammer into his foot.

My throat is tight and my lungs squeeze, a desperate exhale huffs through my flaring nostrils.

"It doesn't matter," he rasps, making my teeth grind. "It was a long time ago."

"It does matter," I shove my hands through my hair, dropping my elbows to my knees.

"It doesn't"

"It does to me," I whisper, staring at my feet, shined shoes against the warm red of the terracotta tiles.

There's a moment of silence, and I don't breathe.

"Kaz, it's been fifteen yea-"

"It doesn't matter," I grit out, cutting him off again, always making excuses for me, for what I did. "It doesn't matter how long it's been, it still happened and I didn't stop it."

“You saved me,” it’s a low growling statement and I hate hearing it, because it’s not even remotely true.

“I was a coward,” I laugh caustically, lifting my eyes to his from beneath my lashes. “I’m still a coward now,” I whisper, and it feels like my chest cramps. “I’m still a fucking coward.”

“I don’t think that when I think of you,” he admits. “That’s never been a word I’d associate with you.”

I stare at him, the bright moon washing him out, his pale skin glowing white beneath the dark ink of his tattoos. He watches me, licking his lips, he shakes his head, glances down to his booted feet, still lying back in the wicker chair.

And all I can think of as I look at him, this beautiful, violent savage, is that he still thinks of me. He still fucking thinks of me. It’s something. That I’m on his mind. And I wonder when, why, what triggers thoughts of me inside of his head.

Charlie reaches up, taking a spliff from behind his ear, lifting his hips up from the chair, weight on his elbow on the arm of it, he shoves his hand in his pocket, plucks out a lighter.

“Smoke?” he asks, dropping back down heavily into his chair.

Placing the joint between his lips, I nod silently, watching his pout pucker around it, cupping his hands, he lights the tip, drawing in a heavy pull. His chest rises, lifting and lifting, until it stills, breath held. Our fingers brush as he leans forward, passing me the joint, which I hastily force between my teeth. Slowly, I draw in a deep breath, thick, sticky smoke filling my lungs, I feel my body tensing, muscles coiling, and then I let it all go with my exhale at the same time as him.

Dropping my head back against the top of the chair. I take another drag, pass it back, roll my head to the side to watch him. His head leant back, position mirroring mine, he places the joint between his lips, letting it rest on his bottom one.

Sweat sticks my clothes to my skin, collecting on the top of my chest, little beads gathering and rolling down my abs with the humidity. I flick open the top few buttons of my shirt,

rough pad of my thumb catching on the cotton. I let the sticky smoke seep out of my nostrils, rolling my tongue across my teeth to let the rest of it rush out of my mouth.

I look back at him, and picture him as he were, when we were both young men and we were so different to what we are now. He was this intelligent, almost nerdy, softly spoken guy with a dimpled smile and bright eyes. There was light inside of him as opposed to the monster that resides there now. I helped create it, the beast beneath his bones and I wish I were sorrier.

But I want this Charlie as much as I wanted the old version. Before. The one before the caging and the torture.

He flashes his eyes up onto mine, like he knows what I'm thinking about, and his eyes tighten, just a little, the way his lashes seem to flutter without actually closing over his eyes, brushing his cheekbones. They vibrate like a butterfly's wings and then they close altogether.

"Charlie," the way the word rolls off of my tongue, like crushed, jagged glass, my throat swells as though I just vomited up a broken vase. "I'm sorry," I swallow, wanting to look away but unable to with the way his head cants, giving me his attention. "For the other night. For the one before that, and the one before that." I swallow again, curling my fingers into the palms of my hands. "For everything," my shoulders lift up to my ears with tightness, and I don't know why I said anything at all.

Maybe it's the cloud of marijuana circling our heads, flooding my lungs. The vodka as I sit forward, swallow some more, let it burn its way down my oesophagus.

Perhaps I'm just tired.

It's as though my whole body melts at the thought, flopping back into the foam cushion, sinking into the chair.

Charlie shifts in his seat, the sound of his jeans rough on the plump cushion, and I see him move in the reflection. Leaning forward he pinches out the spliff, dropping it to the glass top and reaching for the bottle, he swallows it down, his throat working, Adam's apple bobbing.

I know he won't know what to do with the words I just gave him. Charlie's never truly been sorry for anything, I don't think. I don't think he really understands what it is, forgiveness. If that's even what it is I'm searching for.

Maybe I just needed to say it. Confess. Get down on my knees an-

"Kaz," Charlie rasps, elbows on his spread knees. "I want you to be happy," and it's like my heart stops.

I blink hard, trying to keep my eyes averted, unable to look at him.

"I want you to find someone who makes you happy," my mouth opens to tell him I don't fucking want that. I don't want anything without him, "I'm happy," he confesses, looking at me still, but I can't do it, I can't fucking look at him as my insides knot. "I think," he half-laughs, but it doesn't sound humorous. "I don't really know what that means for me, what it means to be happy," he swallows, finally looking away, but it's worse then, his eyes on mine in the dark reflection.

I'm on my feet in seconds, my hand wrapping around his throat, wrenching him up and out of the chair, I force him against my chest, my own heaving with breath.

"You think this is nothing?" I ask him, his hands by his sides, my fingers flex on his throat, knocking his head back, thumb squeezing at the corner of his jaw, forcing him to look up at me. "You think I'm nothing to you, now?"

He laughs and it's rough and deep, too much for my brain to compute, so I clasp him tighter.

"We're nothing, Kazimir," he whispers. "I've never been more to you than a dirty secret." He stares into my eyes, something dark lurking in the slime green depths. "Nothing more than a filthy little *fuck you* to your dead daddy."

"That's not fucking tr-"

"True?" he breathes the words against my lips, our noses brushing, my teeth grit as I breathe him in. "It is true, you can't be fucking me, I'm a man, and no Pakhan of The Bratva is gay, Kazimir."

“I’m not gay.”

“Okay, well, either way, Ka-”

“I’m not fucking gay!” I scream it through my teeth, a crevice deep between my brows, forehead colliding with his as I drop my face forward, squeezing my eyes shut. “I’m not gay.”

He doesn’t say anything. Panting, nose pressing so hard against his it’s almost painful, I can’t pull away. I’m scared if I let go of him right now, it’ll be the last time we ever touch.

“I’m not gay, you’re not- that’s not what this is,” I mumble, and it feels desperate, the words scratching their way up my throat.

“Okay,” he says placatingly, it’s so un-Charlie.

His lips brush mine with the word, and I can’t pull myself away, my fingers firm around his throat, but I’m not squeezing him anymore. He’s not pulling away, my heart is pounding so hard, I wonder if he can feel it against his steady one. My other hand moves to his at his side, fingers curling between his, holding onto him, but he doesn’t grip me back.

“Charlie,” I breathe his name into his mouth, summoning him forth. “Please,” it’s a desperate plea, my lips plucking softly at his parted ones. “Just for tonight, let us have this,” I groan as his fingers close over mine, my teeth clamping over his bottom lip, dragging it away from his teeth to suck on it. “I want you,” I murmur, and he freezes, his breath hard against my mouth.

There is silence between us as we both still. Waiting.

“I’m with someone, Kaz, someone else.”

The earth just sort of shatters beneath my feet, and all at once I release my hold on him, jerking myself back from him. I shove my fingers through my hair, grip both sides of my head and drop forward, bending at the waist.

“I don’t wanna do this anymore,” he says it all so unevenly, like he’s not even sure of what the fuck it is he’s saying. “I don’t want to be kept in the shadows anymore.”

“You live in the fucking shadows, Charlie. What the fuck do you mean?” I snap at him, gnashing my teeth as I pace back and forth behind the white painted wicker chair I was just occupying.

“We’re almost forty,” he says loosely, factually, and it’s not factual for him, he’s thirty-seven to my thirty-nine.

“What has that got to do with anything?” I straighten, run a hand down my sweat-soaked skin, over my chest in the gap of my shirt.

“I want to make the most of the time I have left,” he shrugs, like it should be obvious, as though he doesn’t understand why I’m not thinking much the same. “We will all die young in this life, Kazimir,” he says softly, despite his sharp, cracked voice, it sounds like he’s explaining this all to a small child.

I suddenly feel panic. At the thought of losing him. Death. Even just this. Whatever the fuck *this* is. It feels as though he is getting further and further away from me, and I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all. And I want it to stop. I want it all to stop.

“I have someone, I think, I could spend my time with now,” it’s like a razor blade to the wrist, but it’s pressed deep and dragging slowly through my veins, gouging deeper and deeper until it hits bone. “I want to spend my time with her.”

My head snaps up sharply, neck crunching, “Her?”

And fuck me, he smiles, his fucking lips lift, curling at the corners for no more than half a second but I see it and I witness the way he tries to smother it, realising what he’s just said, giving me too much. It’s not to taunt me, I realise, it’s organic, the reaction, true happiness at the thought of her.

“You don’t fuck women, Charlie,” I scoff, shaking my head with mocked disgust, but it slices deep, the pain, as I force the words out.

“I fuck her,” he says carefully.

And I think about it, him, only having ever fucked people he actually likes, has some sort of connection with.

'I connect with souls, not genitalia.'

He told me that once. I never understood it before, but it's starting to become clearer. In this moment, my heart thundering so hard in my chest it's threatening to burst free. I'm starting to understand him.

"Charlie, I want-"

"That's the problem," he bites out, cutting me off this time. "That's the problem with all of you, you all want, want, want. Well, what about what the fuck I want?" I'm surprised, by his outburst, his lack of careful control he so well curates to every situation. "None of you give a fuck about me, not really, I'm second to everyone, third, fourth, tenth, and I'm done with it. If I'm not number one, Kazimir, I don't want to be anything."

I stare at him, his shoulders tense, moonlit washed skin glittering with a thin layer of sweat from the high humidity of the room. Eyes hard on mine, his chest heaves but he doesn't say anything else.

I lick my lips, think over his rushed words, blinking to clear my thoughts.

"This is about her, isn't it. What did she do this fucking time?" I scoff, thinking of Kyla-Rose and how she gets inside his mind, manipulating shit to suit her. Shaking my head at his silence, I say coldly, "You're taking it out on me."

"I'm not taking anything out on you, Kazimir, I'm just done with this. I told you why, that's all there is to it."

"Who is this woman? I want to know what the fuck I'm competing with," I almost laugh, because this is fucking ridiculous.

"There is no competition," he says slowly. "Not with her."

Blood seems to bubble as it boils inside my veins, heat zapping through my limbs. I shake my head again, denial. There's no way.

"It won't last," I tell him seriously. "You always come back to me," I whisper it, it's true, it was only a handful of

weeks ago he turned up in my apartment after years of absence.

“Not this time.” I stare at him, loose limbed, blank face and I hate myself.

“What makes her so fucking special? Huh? What’s sh-”

“I’m her number one,” he shrugs honestly.

“It’s that simple?” I scoff, shaking my head again, but I want to punch myself, this is my fault.

“It’s that simple,” his voice cracks but I know it’s from overuse, it’s not from feeling.

My boy never did know how to do that. Emotions, even before my father and his men, *me*, broke him apart inside a cage. Cracked open his skull, infected the delicate parts of his brain, tore others out. Stitched it all back up without the missing pieces.

I swallow dryly, a lump in my throat. My tongue sweeps over my lips, wetting them, running over my front teeth, vodka on my tastebuds.

“So we’re done then, just like that?”

“Kazimir, we’ve never been anything else.”

The urge to sob almost chokes me, my knees wobble and before I can stop myself, I’m throwing my body into him, spinning him in my hold and tackling him face down into the terracotta tiles. Pinning him in place with my weight, he blinks up at me, a little dazed, like he doesn’t understand how we just got down here. A crease forming between his pale brows, he stares up at me from the corner of his eye, cheek flush with the hard floor.

Lifting my hips, keeping one hand on the back of his skull, crushing his head into the floor. I snap open my belt, tear down my slacks.

He doesn’t struggle beneath me, doesn’t try to shove me off. Just stares at me from the corner of his eye as I reach around his front, deftly pop open his button, pull down the zipper, push my hand inside the denim. I groan in his ear, my

hand wrapping around his semi-hard cock, forehead pressing to his temple. I stroke him, slow and hard, the awkward angle only making me more desperate to get him hard.

For me. Not for her. Whoever the fuck she is.

My own dick solid and throbbing, threatening to tear through the cotton of my boxers. His breath is short and sharp, his cock softens further in my hand, and I just... stop. Collapsing on top of him, my chest to his back, I pull my hand from his jeans, plant it beside his head, my other releasing the pressure on his skull.

And I do nothing.

Breathing him in. My favourite scent in the world, and it's the last time I'm going to get to smell it. I've lost him. But I don't think I ever really had him. My throat closes as I try to hold back what I feel. Greif sort of sweeps through me, seizing my lungs, and I wonder if this is what it feels like to die.

Slowly, I lift up from Charlie's back, drop down onto my arse, knees bent, feet planted on the floor. I stare at my hands hanging between my legs, elbows on my knees. He moves to stand, and his shadow, even in the dense darkness seems to smother me. I nod my head, bobbing it over and over before a shake of it ends the action. A tremor runs up my spine as I use the chair to lift myself from the floor.

I sweep my hands down my front, re-buckle my belt, button my slacks. Grabbing my jacket from the chair I fold it over my forearm, grind my teeth.

Then, without looking at him, I make my way out of the room. Down the many halls of the cold, marble mansion, crossing the foyer, my footsteps echoing around the vast, empty space, I let myself out of the front door. Taking the stone steps one by one until I'm seated in my car.

I turn the key, the gates opening automatically as I steer the car down the winding driveway. When the tyres hit the smooth tarmac road, I don't dare glance back, and I'm numb until I make it home.

That's when I let myself fall apart.

CHAPTER 27

CHARLIE

Ava attempts to scream. I think that's what it is as I come at her with large bolt cutters. I suppose, perhaps, that's a normal reaction. But I don't have time for this.

"Come, Baby Bird, I'm not going to hurt you," I tell her calmly, her eyes wide in the red lit room I'm going to miss so much.

She licks the pink tip of her tongue over her cupid's bow, gaze dragging between the cutters hanging loosely between my fingers and me. Her bony, naked body is hunched forward, shoulders pulled up tight to her ears, the shackle restricting her neck movements, but I don't want to take it off.

I don't know why.

But she hasn't asked. Whether we communicate with words or gestures, she has never once requested its removal.

I'm not sure I would do it anyway.

For one brief second, I have a vision of a lanky, cramped up, white-haired boy with green eyes. Blood running down his face, burn marks smoking on his chest, piss running down his thighs. His nailless fingers torn and shredded, gripping onto the bars of his too small cage. But there's a smile on his lips, all the same, as another young guy squats down before him, just a couple years older, but it feels like much more, the way he can command a room. He's on the other side of the bars and he grabs the white-haired boy's hand, holding it tightly in his like he never wants to let go.

Then I blink.

And the young men disappear.

The cage remains.

But it's Ava I'm staring down at.

Ava's dainty, skeletal hands wrap cautiously around the condensation slicked bars of her cage, and she peers at me with uncertainty. Wanting me to reassure her, to explain, but she knows I'm not a man of many words.

I think about her voice. How it sounded, when she gave me her name all those weeks ago. Cracked, dry, nervous, unused. And I wonder, not for the first time, though I haven't really put much deep thought into it for more than a few seconds. But I wonder if her voice does work, she just can't get it to come out because she's expecting sound from her to come hand in hand with something else.

Probably pain.

Maybe something worse.

I think she likes a little pain though.

Or maybe that's only with me.

It makes my chest warm at the thought, having something with her that no one else ever has.

I ended things with Kazimir for you.

I think it as though she'd understand, even if I said the words aloud, she would have no idea what that meant. Knowing not who he is. What he means to me. But I've seen her jealousy, the pain in her gaze when I come back with claw marks, hickeys. Without her ice cream.

I want to shove a hand through my hair, my head cocked, eyes on my booted feet, I want to scream, force her out. If I ordered her out, she would come, but I don't think I want to own her through fear.

I feel her cunt pulsing and squeezing around my tongue when I ate her out and she came so fucking beautifully. I did that. And I'm almost certain, wherever she came from, that won't have happened before.

She preens under my praise, she shudders with a compliment, a whispered caress in the shell of her ear.

All of it strikes me in the centre of the chest like it's going to be the death of me, and I'm not really sure that I mind.

"Be a good girl for me, little Ava," I coo, although it's a deep, raspy injection of violence into the words, never taking her gaze from me, she shivers and my lips twitch, readying to smile.

Fuck, she's pretty.

"Come," I rasp, low, quiet, and I think she's moving before my instruction even fully registers. "So good, my little Ava," her entire body quivers and I wonder if I could make her come from my roughly whispered praise all on its own.

I am towering over her as she hauls herself forward, legs limp, but she feels pain in them, they twitch on occasion, so hope is not lost. It will be better, easier to deal with when we get to the other house.

She slithers her way out of the metal crate, dragging her body along the black painted concrete with her misshapen hands. I thought they were just skin wrapped bones, from malnourishment, but looking at them more lately, they're crooked and bent and the little finger on her right hand doesn't bend at all.

She looks up at me as she reaches my feet. One hand finding my left ankle, closing over the leather of my boot. Her other fingers climbing up the leather of my trousers on my right, bunching a small gathering of material into her fist, holding onto me to keep herself up.

Those big blue-brown eyes are wide, pupils large, the room is always dark, only a singular red bulb lighting the space, but she always looks *right*. Her matted hair needs detangling and brushing and probably cutting and I planned on making my younger brother Cam come down here and do it. He would ask no questions, and he would keep her a secret. But she's nude, and no matter how ridiculous, I don't really want to dress her. Which is exactly what I'll have to do in not

too many minutes from now, but before that, I need to cut the length of this chain down.

“Ava,” I say quietly, staring down at her, clinging onto me like I’m her lifeline.

It fills me with a heady sort of power. And I hate that we have to leave here. But I can’t stay here any longer. I just need to get away from everything.

“I’m going to cut this chain off,” I rasp, eyes angled down on her, but I don’t dip my chin. “And you’re going to sit still, whilst I do it,” I pause, making sure she’s taking in what it is I’m telling her.

She nods, and I know it’s not because she cares about the chain. She just wants to please me. I squat down before her, coil the length of heavy metal links around my hand, pulling it taut away from her face.

“Hold this here,” I show her how to hold the chain in both of her hands, and she wobbles a little at first. “You have to stay still, Baby Bird.” She nods again and my dick is so fucking hard, I can hardly concentrate.

I raise the cutters, bringing the blades of them to the O-ring on her shackle.

“Tilt your head back,” and I watch as she does, moving it as much as the shackle will allow.

Obediently and somewhat blindly trusting me, even though I definitely don’t deserve it. But I think that’s why it pleases me so much when she follows orders. I thought I’d prefer her fight, violence is the guaranteed thing to get me off, but her submission, *fuck*, it tastes so sweet it could crack my teeth.

She swallows as I line up the cutters with the first link in the chain, but she doesn’t move, keeping her eyes on mine. I don’t want to look away, lose those gorgeous eyes that fill every thought inside my head, but I need to concentrate on not snipping the flesh of her neck and killing her before our... whatever this is, has even really begun.

Muscles bunching in my forearms I widen the mouth of the cutters, get the thick link of metal between its jaws and she

moves.

“Ava,” I scold, a cracked whimper catches in her throat, “I’m not removing the shackle.”

I’m not sure why I voice it. It feels like the right kind of thing to say, like a reassurance. She is slightly territorial over her cage, not wanting to leave its bars, despite never being told not to. I broke open the fucking gate. Yet, I always place her back inside of it when I leave, like an automated action, and now I wonder if there’s some sort of comfort in the heavy iron that shackles her pretty little neck.

She blinks those large eyes, staring up at me, and without looking at what I’m doing, despite it being really fucking risky, I hold her gaze. Keep her comfort and snap the cutters closed. I almost squeeze my eyes shut as I do, but I don’t tear my gaze from hers, and then she blinks again. One, long, slow blink, and she looks down, the slithering sound of heavy chain coiling onto concrete draws my own eye. She drops her hands, fingers uncurling as the chain glides free of her palms.

And she just stares at it.

And I, at her.

Her chest heaves and she doesn’t blink again, her fingers reach up, towards the shackle still locked tight around her throat, but she doesn’t touch it. Her fingers merely dancing lightly in the air, as if she’s wondering what to do now. I imagine it must be better, the weight not constantly forcing her to strain her neck and shoulder muscles.

I stare at her, my teeth, bloody indents in the space between her neck and shoulder, another in her upper throat. I know I should wash them properly, probably apply some sort of antiseptic cream but all I can think about when I look at them is sinking my canines back deep inside her muscle, see if the tips of my sharp teeth can scrape bone the next time.

A strangled, cracked sound seems to rip from her throat, and it startles me so much I physically jolt. Dropping to my knees before her, sweeping the chain aside with my hand, grabbing her chin with the other. She bites her lip, tears

clinging to her bottom lashes threatening to fall and my cock fucking jerks, weeping at the tip, pressing against the tight leather of my trousers.

Using my thumb and forefinger on her chin, I drag her attention to me, her eyes lowered, hidden beneath her thick lashes, gaze on the offending metal. She reaches up then with her suspended hand, the one that was just twitching close to her throat without touching. She grabs the ring on her shackle, a choked, heaving sob wrenching out of her mouth.

“Baby Bird.”

I grip her harder, tilting her chin up, base of her skull crunching on the metal around her throat. My other hand goes to the side of her throat. Thumb beneath her jaw, I dip my chin, lift my eyes, cock my head.

“Ava,” I rasp, louder, sharper, and she finally lifts her gaze to mine.

Her eyes are so blue, the ring of brown around the edge almost black and her pupils are deep and wide and pitch. Wet. Tears run in rivulets down her cheeks now, big, heavy beads, dripping from her lashes and splashing against her bare thighs, the concrete between us.

I groan, low and deep in my throat, the sound vibrating its way all the way up from my chest.

“Oh, my pretty little Ava,” I crack the words out, thick with lust.

Leaning in, my lips brushing over hers, she stills, tears still rushing down her gaunt cheeks. Fuck, I thought she was pretty before, but now, like this, big wet eyes, her bottom lip quivering. I think this must be what love looks like.

The flat of my tongue runs up the length of her cheek, the tip of it catching the salty liquid hanging in her lower lashes. Pressing my nose to her cheekbone, my lips wide, bottom one pulled down, teeth against her jawbone, I shift, moving so I’m crouching right over her, holding her face. She breathes hard, her fast, hot pants against my bare chest, prick goosebumps

across my skin. I palm the side of her neck tighter, lazily lap at the skin of her cheek, collecting her tears on my tongue.

I mouth her other cheek, sucking and plucking at her pale scarred skin. Biting along her jaw, tasting her, filling my mouth, exciting my tastebuds with just her. I'm breathing hard too. Panting breaths blowing down across her bare chest, pebbling her nipples. Goosebumps rushing out over her skin, I lift my eyes to hers.

"So pretty, my little Ava," I whisper over her mouth, and shocking me, her eyes big and round on mine, she snags my bottom lip between her teeth, biting, *hard*.

I groan as she sucks my lip into her mouth, rich copper tainting and electrifying our kiss. Our teeth clash as she mauls my lips, the bottom then the top, biting and suckling, and fucking eating me. I grab both sides of her throat, palming her neck over the thick, wide shackle, thumbs pressing into the hollow underside of her chin.

She devours me.

Licking my tongue into her mouth, over her teeth, the roof of her mouth. Hers dips inside mine, circling it, caressing, long devilish licks, she groans into my mouth, the satisfied rumble filling my own chest, heating my blood.

My heart is thundering inside my chest, battering against the bones that hold it captive. And her fingers are working my trouser button and zipper, her tiny hands pushing them lower on my hips. She thrusts her hand inside the leather, fisting my thick, hot cock. A moan rattles my teeth as I bite her tongue, both of her hands stroking and pulling at my pulsing length, the tip weeping.

Hands holding her up by my hold on her neck, she whimpers, her tongue licking over my lips, lapping at the saliva smeared on my chin. She fists my length hard, the other hand coming to my chest, pushing me back, she angles her hips, and I'm grabbing them, lifting her high and impaling her on my swelling cock.

We both groan, fingers driving into her hips as she attempts to lift herself, fucking me. It's messy and uncoordinated and I know it's a lot for her, but it feels so good, I don't stop her. Letting her do what she wants to me. Her cunt wet and hot and tight. Clenching around my shaft, my cock pulses, her walls dragging up and down, working along my length.

She pants into my mouth, kissing me, and I kiss her back. Biting and sucking and fucking our tongues against each other's. And I don't want to ever stop.

I feel alive, better than alive.

Her and I.

Two corpses reanimated only for each other.

Jerky hip movements on my lap, her pussy so fucking tight, I'm going to come, she's going to make me come.

Her nails drill into my bare shoulders, clawing too deep, feeling the skin pop under the pressure. Blood is dripping steadily down my chest, my back and I want to lift my hips, fuck up into her, but I don't. She's fucking me and it feels so good, I don't know how I could ever try and stop her.

She doesn't stop kissing me. My tongue thrusting into her mouth like I want her to feel it in the very back of her throat. She bites down on it, sucking hard and I'm coming. My hands locked on her hips, fingertips nothing but bruising, I come. Emptying deep inside her, my cock kicks, filling her up.

Ava doesn't slow down, doesn't stop, not until her eyes are squeezing closed, her neck arching. She breaks our kiss and grits her teeth and I watch her make herself come using nothing but her tight cunt gripping my cock and it is fucking beautiful.

Her walls clench, my cock twitching and I dive back in for her mouth. Kissing her and breathing her in and she keeps working her hips on my lap. Slow little circles, her pussy fucking squeezing me, and I'm getting hard again, breathing her air. Sucking her skin and she's picking up the pace again.

Using her grip on my shoulders to lift her slight weight, I don't hold back this time. Fucking her and fucking her and I wonder if this is love. If this is what it feels like.

Pure. Fucking. Ecstasy.

CHAPTER 28

AVA

Leather scent fills my nose, tinged with smoke, copper, something clean, *Charlie*. I sigh quietly. Body jostling, there's heat in my tight lower belly, my hands are palm down, those, too, touching leather and a small frown line grows between my brows.

I feel hot, my skin itching, and I feel something covering my body. My brain feels fuzzy, and I squeeze my eyes closed tighter, not wanting to wake up yet. But I don't know when I went to sleep... My head feels heavy as I try to remember, mouth dry and tongue thick. I think of the pills in Charlie's open palm, his long fingers placing them on my tongue, the water he made me drink.

Charlie drugged me, and I let him.

There is leather beneath me, and I don't understand what it could be from. It isn't warm like when I slept in Charlie's lap, and it feels different somehow, feeling it only beneath my cheek, my hands, wrists. There was a huge black t-shirt pulled over my head of matted dark hair, sleeves too long and Charlie rolled them up to my knuckles. I thought I would like to have the privacy of clothing, but I instantly wanted it off. And he made me keep it on.

There's intense heat between my thighs, and his voice in my ear, and I can't open my eyes, heavy and glued together with evidence of a deep sleep I don't remember falling into.

"Such a good baby bird," Charlie coos, his breath against my jaw. "Go back to sleep," he hushes, his lips caressing my

cheek and my body melts into the cushioned leather beneath me at his words.

His lips stay pressed to my skin and a groan I can't smother seems to rumble from my throat, his breathing is heavy, harder, hot breath against my face.

There's wetness on my thighs, a deep ache in my belly, and he's thrusting into me, pinning me down with his weight.

"Mmm, so good, Baby Bird," he whispers, my eyes straining to open, lashes fluttering. "Keep your eyes closed," he coos the command and I stop trying to see. "That's it," he grunts lowly, kissing my cheek. "Do I feel good inside of you like this, my little Ava?" he asks and a moan hushes from my lips in agreement, a shiver working its way up my spine like a slow unfurling heat. "I've already fucked you three times. You took me so well whilst you were unconscious. So beautiful," he rasps roughly, his voice a whisper and it's clearer this way, less strain in his words. "I've come so deep inside you, Ava, there's no way you're not going to be full with my baby soon." I am panting, my pussy pulsing around him as he slowly thrusts inside of me, almost tenderly.

Thinking of him doing this whilst I slept, not knowing that he was using me. I'm sure it should feel wrong, but I feel so good, knowing he wanted me, even like this, limp beneath him, not able to squeeze myself around him like I do now. A low groan tears through his teeth, the vibration of the sound rattling my teeth where his mouth is pressed to my cheek in something resembling a kiss. But this, the way his teeth scrape along my cheekbone, it feels desperate and owning and my cunt tightens harder around his slowly thrusting cock.

I don't think about him coming inside of me, with no protection, no testing. Although, I, myself, have had testing, every time I am dealt between hands, to make sure I don't infect my new owner with something forced upon me by an abuser.

But to want to put a baby in me, something I think I absolutely do not want, I don't fight him off. I am gone for this man. Perhaps something inside of me is broken, but I will let

Charlie do anything he wants to me. I would let him butcher me into pieces if it meant he might keep me for eternity. Maybe he would kill me slowly, painfully, and I would enjoy it.

I would welcome it.

Death.

If it were by his brutal hands.

This savage man with soft lips and broken words.

Tears build behind my closed lids as he kisses my temple, one of his hands cupping the back of my head, caressing me with strong fingers. Grunting as he pushes himself in deep, so deep I can feel him in my belly. And I feel him as he fills me up. There is wet sloshing as he pulls slowly out, licking down my jaw.

“Stay sleepy, Baby Bird, I don’t want you to wake up yet,” he coos, and I sigh, content to just lie here, wherever here is, so I do as he says.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, he holds me close, turning me onto my back, spreading my legs further. One of them thudding as my foot hits the floor, wiry carpet beneath my bare foot. My head lolls to the side, and I melt once again into the leathery cushioning beneath me.

I can feel him, his fingers between my thighs, his tongue on my clit and I want to squeeze my legs together, crush his skull between my knees. But I can’t, and I dream of it, my legs lifting, squeezing tight on either side of his face.

My back arches, pressure so intense in my lower belly, I can hardly breathe, has me stirring, a low groan leaving my lips. Eyebrows drawing in, I breathe hard through my nose. Suddenly feeling frightened because something is happening to me and I am so tight, and he is too big and there is pain. It is like a hot poker in my lower spine, and I try to go back to sleep.

“Oh, little Ava, look at you, taking me so well, breathe for me, beautiful. Long, slow breaths,” Charlie praises and calms and his hand comes up my belly, over the *lump* there.

Cupping my small breast beneath the pushed up t-shirt, his thumb rough over my tight nipple. My eyes snap open, my breathing erratic. I am staring at black leather, a car seat I quickly realise, and I think of the pills I swallowed before.

Charlie.

I think it, his name, turning my head slowly, looking at his beautiful face and he is in rapture. There is no other word I can use to describe the awe of wonder on his usually blank features.

“You’re taking my fist so fucking well, Baby Bird, so fucking good,” it’s strained his words, and I realise with shock that I am so, so full.

Fist.

Panic starts to bleed into my rapidly pounding heart and I can do nothing but look at him, unblinking, unbreathing. Willing his eyes to come to mine.

Please, please, please, look at me, Charlie.

And like a summoning, that glaring green gaze is on mine.

“Breathe,” he orders and my lungs work, his eyes snapping down to my belly, and I can *feel* him.

Inside of me, his scarred knuckles rough against the spongy softness of my insides. So full. It’s all I can think, and I don’t think I want to look even though my every instinct is demanding it of me.

“Look. Look at me fucking you with my fist, Baby Bird.”

He is smiling that sly, half smirky smile, a dimple popping in his left cheek, the opposite one to where he is beginning to scar with a raised, pink claw mark of my own making.

He is happy and it’s because of me.

All of my muscles clench around his fist and the pain I thought I was feeling is really only pressure.

I look down. My usually concave belly is so full and shaped strangely and then Charlie sort of, flexes his fingers, a sharp inhale filling my lungs.

“How’s it feel, my little Ava?” a groan unexpectedly mumbles free of my lips, his eyes seem to brighten in the darkness of the car. “You’re doing so good, you’re so full of me,” he whispers all of these pretty, rasped words.

My insides clench around him even tighter and I sort of feel like maybe I’m going to pee. With every tiny flex of his hand or his fingers, his knuckles, all of it is too much but it feels surprisingly good, and I think I’m going to come.

I’m heaving for a breath that doesn’t seem to come, and then his fingers start to unfurl, his whole hand is inside of me, and a scream is clawing its way up my shackled throat. Taut tendons grinding against the thick metal, but I can’t stop it as I explode all over his hand. Spine arching, head thrown back, eyes squeezed closed, I pant for breath. Everything is so sensitive, that with every shift of his hand, as I come down, is amping me up again.

He stares at me, his entire hand buried deep. His other lightly pressing over my belly, feeling the movement of his hand inside of me. He watches me, that dimple carved out in his cheek, sly smirk pulling at one side of his lips.

I am panting and he is almost fully grinning at me now. He twists his hand, the pressure exploding inside of me once more, this time, something more. Like the cork bursting from the top of a champagne bottle. I’m coming again and I can’t stop and liquid sprays from me, coating his bare chest where he leans over me, and that’s when he grins. Something smug and full of satisfaction on his face.

I flop down onto the back seat of the car, his hand stroking my belly, coating me in a razing smatter of goosebumps. Sweat slicks my brow, my mouth is dry and there’s a hard suctioning sound filling my buzzing ears, pulse thudding heavily inside my skull.

Charlie’s so careful as he works his hand out of me, and I let my eyes slip closed, trusting him, unable to consider why I shouldn’t.

Wouldn’t.

His hand finally pulling free of me, fingers gently curling inside of me as he pulls out.

My name on his lips.

Heavy eyes blinking open, I stare up at him, sitting back against the opposite door, slick with something from me. A flush blooms across my chest, the tops of my ears hot, but he's still got that look on his face as he stares down at me. Flicking his gaze between my face and the place between my parted thighs.

I feel empty, *gaping*, and I tense all of my muscles, trying to *close* myself up, but nothing is happening, a panic sits high in my chest, but Charlie is suddenly over top of me. One hand planted on the back of the seat, the other on the leather beside my head.

“No panicking,” he brushes his lips over mine. “I don't have a needle,” is what he says calmly, making me blink.

Memories of when he poked the sharp object into my flesh, calming me, holding me. A full body shiver rattles throughout me at the thought, and slowly, I drag in an easy breath. Wincing at the tight pain in my lower belly.

He glances down, between us, his weight not on me, his knees bracketing my right leg on the seat, my left flopped over the edge, foot to the floor. I try to curl my toes, a fizzing in the sole of my foot, but I don't think it moves. I try not to focus on it, my lack of movement, staring at Charlie instead.

I reach up, my fingers to his lips, his green eyes look down at his mouth, my fingertips on him. The back of my hand glides up his cheek, thumb stroking over the length of his nose, through the centre of his eyebrows, over his right brow. I drag my fingers down, over his eye, middle finger tracing the newly forming scar.

He snatches my wrist suddenly, stopping my exploration. Green eyes gazing down at me in the darkness of the car. No light beyond the lime green glow of the dashboard reflecting on the black fabric roof of the car. He turns my hand inside his hold, thumb and forefinger looping my tiny wrist, his other

fingers spanning down my forearm. He brings my hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss to the centre of my palm, grazing his teeth against the soft pads of my fingers. Soft bites and licks and kisses decorate my skin, setting me on fire in my chest, letting the rest of me smoulder and smoke.

“We’re home now, Baby Bird,” he rasps against the inside of my wrist, my other hand by my side. “Things will be different here, it’ll be better.” It feels like a promise, but I’m unsure of what it means, and then he tells me, “I’ll be better.”

He stares down at me, and I am not breathing, unmoving, still and silent as he watches me, looking for something. He gives me nothing as to what it could be, though. Dipping forward, pressing my palm to his cheek, holding my hand there as he captures my lips with his.

It feels right. His tongue melding with mine. Our mouths moving in a softly violent collision. I feel a little like I’m dying when he breaks the kiss, pulling back just enough to brush the tip of his nose across mine. And then he kisses me lightly, just a soft peck of his lips and I’m ruined.

CHAPTER 29

AVA

Charlie's arms bundle me against his bare chest, layers of rotting leaves crunching wetly beneath his boots. I have on a black t-shirt, the too-long sleeves rolled up to my knuckles, some sort of silky gym shorts that are tied tight at the waist and won't really stay on. All of it feels too much, like maybe I'll drown in the fabric, suffocate. It feels as though it swamps me, as it does, but it's much more dramatic in my head.

Regardless, I won't complain.

It's chilly outside, in what feels like the middle of the night. And it feels kinda nice not to have a cold back. But being outside, breathing the fresh air I thought I had missed so much, smelling the wet leaves and hearing the rustling fir trees, feeling the dampness of rain in the air.

It all feels like it's a little too much.

Arms looped around Charlie's neck. Safe. Protected from anyone else. I stare up at the enormous purple brick house looming over us.

Three floors of darkened windows, slate grey frames with large-spaced cross-hatching through the glass. Tall and arch shaped with points, big enough to feel like they're really doors that you could step right out of. Free fall until you hit the brick driveway below with a splat.

Charlie walks us right up to the huge front door, the same shade of grey as the window frames, wood, I think. It has steel grey knobs, a strange shaped knocker that looks as though it

has deep-set eyes, but in the pitch of night, I cannot make out what it is.

Charlie's one arm clutches me up higher, his now free hand bringing a large old fashioned key to the door, others on the same ring, the gentle jingling of them seems loud in the quiet of night. I want to ask where we are, whose house this is, if it's safe.

I keep calm in his hold, trusting him. I don't think he's gifting me to anyone else. He promised me he wasn't ever letting me go, but men are fickle, and they get bored. But I push thoughts of that aside and think logically about the now.

He has a key.

So it's possible he owns the property, or is, at the very least, close with the person who does. He doesn't hesitate in placing the key in the lock, turning it hard, his arm using a firm flick-like motion. I can hear bolts turning, sliding, whatever it is they do inside a door, and it's opening. With his long fingers tight over the round handle, he pushes the heavy door wide. A soft, eerie creak of its hinges as he does. Like a haunted house.

I shiver as his arm comes back to my legs. Adjusting his solid hold on me, he flips my limbs over the crook of his elbow, effortless in the way he is so easy with carrying me.

He shoulders the huge door wide, the low creak growing louder. He steps inside, pulling me even closer as my arms drop from around his neck, allowing me to twist to see better.

There is no light, apart from the small blue flashing of an alarm panel by the door, which must not be on, for Charlie doesn't even spare it a glance. My eyes strain, attempting to see, the space feels large, open, despite not being able to really see anything. It has that feeling, like maybe there's a cliff edge somewhere and we're about to topple right over the lip.

Charlie walks us forward, lifting a hand towards the wall and light suddenly bursts into the room, my eyes slamming closed, face instantly burying in the crook of his neck. His fingers flex tighter, one hand wrapped around me, placed on

my hip, the other threaded up my spine, supporting my head. He sways gently on his feet. Like he, too, is a little blinded by the sudden flare of brightness, his shoulder brushing the wall to his left.

My lashes flutter, attempting to open, but it has been so very long since I have left my cage, seen something so luminescent, my eyes just aren't ready. I feel overwhelmed, by the light, by the air, the smells, the space. And I wish so hard for my cage, the one we left behind. If only to have something familiar. Something mine.

The absence of intense pressure on the back of my neck, the heavy chain now gone from my shackle, placed on me by my last owner. Something that has been weighing me down for months, maybe years. My head feels too light for my body, as though it might pop off at any second, take flight like a weightless balloon.

“Open your eyes, Baby Bird,” Charlie rasps quietly.

His breath a gentle wave over my face, his scent strong like the mint he popped into his mouth in the car. Offering one up to me in the open palm of his hand, a natural thing, it felt, for him to do. To share with me like it meant nothing. But to me, to me, it felt like everything. I can still feel the evidence of it on my teeth. But the burning inside my tummy is a sign that I shall regret taking his offering. Sugar, clearly, being something I absolutely should not have indulged in.

I flutter my lashes, face buried in the cool flesh of his neck, he is always cold to the touch, his skin something that never seems to heat, but holding me, I still feel a semblance of warmth. The light is dimmed now, less glaring, and I squint hard, my eyes filling with water at the burn.

The walls splashed a deep, dark forest green, with beautiful slate grey wood panelling along the walls. The same colour coving along the top of the walls morphing into a ceiling of the same dark grey. Set so high above our heads, I struggle to see where it ends. It almost feels like the night's sky as I stare up and up and up, arching my neck back as far as the steel around my throat will allow.

The lights are sconce fixtures on the walls, little dimmable bulbs inside glass lanterns. Candelabra-esque, in the way they twist up on long, intricately designed arms.

The floors along the wide length of the hall, leading to a larger open space, are the same colour as the walls. Tiny cube tiles, no more than about two inches in size, are set in what feels like a hundred changing shades of forest and emerald green. They create a sea of colour, like dancing fingers of kelp beneath the English Channel waves.

It is unlike any house I have ever seen.

It feels like it should be too much, too rich, opulent, indulgent, but it doesn't really feel that way at all.

It is beautiful.

And this is only the entrance hall.

Charlie shifts me a little higher in his arms before he starts walking, his boots almost silent swooshes along the glass like tiling. The hall does indeed open up, the room is the size of a ballroom, with open archways and closed doors leading off of the space. The largest fixture of them all is the stairs.

Dark grey wooden steps with a runner carpet up the centre of them, the same dark green as the floor and walls. Black twisted iron railings, curl and warp up the side of them, the stairs climbing along an angled circular wall, windows lining it the entire way to the top.

I'm still staring up at it as Charlie turns us away, taking us in the opposite direction. Walking us through the large space, an array of plush velvet chairs and intricately designed side tables. Unusual trinkets, and vases, unlit candles in various sized glass jars. All things we pass until we're stepping through an open archway, the room in darkness which Charlie corrects with a twist of a light switch. Raising the brightness so it's no more than a warm yellow glow.

It's a small space, deep grey bookcases lining the walls, a large desk of the same colour facing into the room, and a couple of oversized lilac-grey armchairs angled towards each other, sitting before it.

“I’m going to get Dillon,” Charlie tells me roughly, placing me carefully down into one of the large armchairs.

I startle as my bottom sinks into the thick cushions, jerking forward, clawing my nails into his arms before he can fully let me go. I’m staring down at the chair, half lifting myself out of it as I pull myself up with my clawing grip on his arms. I feel like I shouldn’t sit here. I would rather he put me on the floor, propped me against it at the most. I feel uncertain, elevated from the ground and, I don’t want him to leave me alone in this big house alone.

Charlie grips my chin, whipping my head towards him, the shackle cutting into the base of my skull where he tilts me back too far.

“Enough. Settle,” he tells me sharply, my feet and shins already dragging over the cold floor.

He lifts me easily with his big hands wrapped around my waist, fingers flexing aggressively into my rib bones. I clutch him so tightly my fingers blanch, knuckles aching with the intensity and he eyes me, his pinch on my chin absent, but the pain is thudding through my teeth.

“Ava,” he rasps, pulling me up higher, drawing me back into his chest, the tip of his nose against mine. “Be a good girl for me, I’m coming back,” I tremble, my entire body vibrating.

I believe him, but I don’t want to be-

“Do you want to sit on the floor?” he rasps over my lips, his own plucking at my mouth. “Is it the chair? You want to go on the ground, Baby Bird?”

He is intoxicating, his mouth on mine, his hands around my body, holding me tenderly even though I have seen these same hands disembowel someone and fuck me in the blood.

With it.

Gaze dropping, I nod, keeping my eyes lowered, submissive.

“Look at me,” he whispers tersely, and my attention is snapping back to him, his pretty green eyes speared with

shadows capture me and I'm nodding more. "I'm coming back with Dillon and our bag," his sight flickers over my face. "Then I am locking the door, setting the alarm, and coming straight back to you." I swallow, wincing, uncertain. "There is no one else here but you and I, nothing is going to distract me."

I cannot blink, look away, my entire attention on his eyes. The sincerity in his gaze, the thrum of his words heightening the thrashing of my heart.

"Nothing is going to keep me from you." It feels like a promise, and I am the one moving closer, my lips touching his, not kissing, just resting against his mouth, breathing hard. "You are mine. My little Ava. My pretty Baby Bird."

He announces the ownership so beautifully that I almost forget how he does, in fact, actually own me.

And I find that I don't mind that fact.

I don't think I mind it at all.

CHAPTER 30

KAZIMIR

Weeks have blurred past me, rapidly turning into months. My empire is growing, thriving, as everyone else's around me seems to crumble and ash. Making me the obvious villain.

I have slaughtered more of my own men than I care to count as I search for a rat, a leak, a traitor, and I am still no closer to understanding what the fuck is going wrong. Who's using me as a scapegoat whilst they fuck all the other players over, and I still don't know who blew me the fuck up. My phone rang, the other line was dead and the warehouse exploded. It feels like yesterday since this all started happening, and yet, weeks rolled into months and I'm alone. Lonely. I have had zero contact with my closest friends, other than Dima, no word from my sister, *him*.

The meeting of leaders, earlier tonight, was absent of both leaders of The Firm, instead, it was chaired by Vito and one of Charlie's brothers, Eli.

They look so much alike, but also not at all, bar the white hair and green eyes, there really are no similarities between the two. Yet, my gaze wandered onto my lover's younger brother more times than I care to count, wishing the vision would change for one of my preference. Still, my thoughts did not summon him and neither did my calling him. A number that now tells me it's disconnected.

It's why I find myself here, once again, desperate for his attention at The Swallow family's marble mansion.

I was buzzed right through the gates, driving to the front door at a speed much too fast for a driveway, but I have a weird feeling sinking in my gut and I can't do anything until I see him. Everything will be better when I see him. I don't care what he thinks, telling me he's seeing someone else. It means nothing. He and I are something else. Different. He just needs to accept it.

Thoughts of me telling him I'm not gay rush through my brain and I feel the tips of my ears redden with a sudden wash of heat. I feel embarrassment like it's a living, breathing thing, but we have seen each other in our most desolate of states. I do not know why something that is... true, perhaps, partly, makes me squirm with such uncomfortableness.

My shined dress shoes are splattered with murky raindrops as my feet hammer up the stone steps. Side of my curled fist pounding on the door. I hear voices, raised voices, a lot of them, and a rush of footsteps just before the front door is wrenched open.

The grand foyer is filled with people, all of whom fall into silence, eyes turning to me, as Kyla-Rose stands before me. Thorne Blackwell and his brothers, Charlie's brothers, Eli and Cam. Kyla-Rose's husbands, some of The Swallows' closest soldiers. Charlie's dad and his partner, Violet.

"Where the fuck is he?" Feral and feline in the way her top lip curls, her tongue rolling the words out in a wicked fast hiss between her teeth.

One clawed hand wrapped over the edge of the door, the other curled over her hip. She wears a knee length black dress, tight on her small pop of a pregnant belly. Black combat boots on her feet, arms bare, but the look on her face is what really draws me in, and I both want to smack it and question it all at the same time.

"What?" I spit back with distaste, hands fisted at my sides.

I don't like her, and she doesn't like me, but it is only really because we have both laid claim to the same man. One who likely wants neither one of us. Still, we will always loathe

the other, it is just the circumstances we find ourselves in, a soul deep pain of possession.

She laughs hard, loudly, a pained sort of cackle thick in her throat. She releases the door, her hands trembling, one more than the other, and fists her hair. Strands tangling in her fingers, pulling at the root, and I feel compelled to just... do something.

“Kyla-Rose,” I say quietly, taking a single step inside the house, ducking my head to see her face buried beneath her hair.

She’s bent at the waist, a ragged sort of sound muffled behind her clenched teeth. My hand finds her upper arm, she flinches, hard, as my fingertips connect with her bare bicep, goosebumps ripping down the skin.

“What’s happened?” I ask her in a half-whisper, and I think the kindness is wrong, she doesn’t expect that sort of response from me and it just sort of fractures her apart.

“You,” she sweeps her hair back, waist-length strands tossed over her shoulders as she straightens. “You, Ivanov, you. You’re the problem,” she spits it in my face.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” it’s only now I think of her first words, *where the fuck is he?* “Wait, hold up, what do you mean *where the fuck is he?*”

Coming toe-to-toe with me, head tilted back, neck arched, I want to break her. Rip off her head, tear her spinal column out through her neck cavity. And I don’t give a fuck that her family are at her back, all off whom are staring at us, unmoving, unspeaking. I don’t spare them a second thought as I dip my head down, get right in her face. She doesn’t move this time, no flinch, a challenge. She thinks she’s the alpha as I breathe in her air, she breathes mine, and neither one of us says anything for long, slow seconds. And then she exhales, slow, deep, menacing.

“I am so going to enjoy ruining you, Kazimir,” her plump pout brushes over my bottom lip, but I do not move as she

flicks her too big eyes up onto mine. “I will get him back, and when I do, I am going to fucking destroy you.”

I want to smile then, tilting my head to one side, a cocky smirk pulling so hard at my lips it makes my teeth ache.

“You think someone took him,” I whisper, licking my lips and tasting hers.

“I know you did.”

“I can see why you would think that of me.”

Her eyes flicker over mine, so close to me, the vision blurred. My gut twists with pain, heat thudding hot and hard, my mouth feels dry and sweat collects beneath my arms. Because the thought of him being *not here*, means he’s with his *her*, whoever the fuck that is, and I think that’s worse than picturing him in a cage.

Kyla-Rose scrunches her nose, and a smirk envelops my mouth.

“Did you ever stop to think... just for one second,” *like me*. “He might have left, of his own accord. Just to escape you?” *because I’m certain he left to escape me*.

Her hand cracks across my face before I have time to register it, but the sting is sharp against my cheekbone. The pain burning my skin with her handprint, and it feels *good*. To hurt on the outside the way I hurt on the inside.

“Kyla-Rose,” Dee warns lowly, and without looking back at him, or away from me, she takes a step back, fisting her hands at her sides.

I don’t move back, or leave, or even think about doing any of those things. Because I need to know.

“How long has he been gone?” I ask, flicking my gaze over her head, glancing around the very full room.

All white marble, cut with grey, silver furnishings, cold, all of it is like stepping foot into an ice palace, but it makes me think of Charlie. His pale skin always cool, his hands always cold.

Too many eyes are staring at me, likely wondering why the fuck I'm here, in their house. And it isn't a wonder that it would be Kyla-Rose letting me through that gate, answering the door. I'm the first person she thinks of when someone wrongs her beloved cousin.

My eyes meet Dee's then, Charlie's dad. A man, who rightfully so, probably hates my guts, and definitely would not want me within one million miles of his son. If he knew what really happened between us. No one but Kyla-Rose knows anything about my relationship with Charlie. Even still, he knows my father kidnapped his son, and by bloodline, I too, am not to be trusted.

"You know!" Kyla-Rose spits back at me, full body trembling with rage now.

I look back at her, lazily lifting a brow on my head, "If I had taken him, why would I be here?"

It's logical to try and cover my tracks, make myself appear innocent this way, were I responsible, still, I have never been to their house before like this. I would not do so either, were I guilty.

"Because you're fucking sly, you sleazy cunt, that's why! We're not fucking idiots, we know it was you!" she steps into me again, jabbing a finger into my chest, I want to break it. "You have a sick obsession with my cousin!"

I laugh loudly, cutting her off, her chest rising and falling without control.

"I have a sick obsession with your cousin?" I fire back, smirk sharp on my mouth. "You have a sick obsession with your cousin, Kyla-Rose. Not me," I shrug, sliding my hands into my pockets, lifting my eyebrows into high arches on my forehead.

She scowls at me as though she'd like to cut out my tongue for that, but she's not thinking clearly enough to be that rapidly violent, so, instead, she shoves me in the chest. Palms flat, fingers splayed, she smacks her hands into me, hard, the

sound of it echoing throughout my chest. And then again, and again.

“I hate you!” she screeches it, and her bottom lip wobbles. “He isn’t yours!” *smack*. “He won’t *ever* be!” *smack*. “Give him fucking back,” she smacks me so hard that time, the heels of her hands making my chest ache, I drop my hands from inside my pockets shaking them out. “GIVE HIM BACK TO ME!” she explodes with a pained moan.

Eli instantly grips her shaking shoulders, hauling her back from me, spinning her around in his arms. His almost seven feet of height bowing over top of her, pulling her quivering body into his. He looks up at me from beneath long pale lashes, those emerald green eyes *just* like my Charlie’s.

“I think you should leave,” he says gruffly, walking backwards with Kyla-Rose still engulfed by his arms.

Her blonde husband stepping around them both, shielding them from me with his huge build. He says nothing, yellow eyes unblinking. And I think I could just say no.

Stay longer, really make them see, *Charlie isn’t yours*, my mouth opening to do just that, because no one in this house knows him like I do. Not even Kyla-fucking-Rose. But out the corner of my eye, I see Violet, tears in hers, hands up by her face, fingers pressing to her lips.

And I deflate, just like that.

She has been here for most of Charlie’s life, he won’t talk about his biological mother, or what happened to her, but Violet has been there since Eli was a baby. Charlie won’t call her mum, but that’s who she is to him.

I take a few steps back, the blonde giant unmoving, tattooed arms folded across his broad chest, and then I turn, through the front door, out into the night.

A million things rush through my brain, thinking of where he would go, voluntarily being separated from his basement lair for any period of time seems highly strange. Unless...

“Kazimir.”

Turning back towards the steps I just rushed down, I glance up, Charlie's dad quickly makes his way to the bottom of them, stopping before me. Automatically, I offer him my hand, out of respect, and surprising me, he reaches out without hesitation, taking it in his, warm and firm, he shakes my hand.

"Sir," I nod, our hands separating.

He eyes my cheek, likely glowing a vibrant red from his niece's slap, and he smiles with his eyes just a little. I respect that.

"Weeks," he says, making me blink. "Months now, he's been gone almost three," he sighs, and he looks... exhausted.

Even in the darkness of the driveway, light streaming out from the open door at his back, I can see the deep rings shadowing beneath his eyes.

"If you can find my son," he pauses, and he looks at me with a glint in his eye, like he knows something he shouldn't, but isn't going to address it. "I will forever be indebted to you."

I stare at him and in this moment, I think of my own father. A man I never respected, only feared, and I wonder what it would have been like growing up with someone like Dee instead.

"Can you?" he hushes, hopeful. "Find him?"

I stare at him, and I can see Charlie, in all the features you wouldn't expect to, the slope of his nose, pull of his lips, the curve of his ears, pinned closely to his head in a way that is too pretty.

"If I can find him, it doesn't mean I can make him come back."

Dee eyes me, and I can see his venom, "I understand that," he nods, glancing back over his shoulder before refocusing on me. "We just need to know he's okay."

I swallow, at the sincerity, the way his throat rolls with his own swallow, Adam's apple bobbing. This man loves his son.

I nod, “I can do that,” it is a whisper I did not mean to let slip, my words a little shaky.

I drop my gaze, blink down at my feet, and try hard not to jolt as his hand comes to my shoulder, squeezing lightly with comfort.

“Thank you,” Dee’s deep voice rumbles, releasing his grip and taking a step back. “Thank you, Kazimir.”

And without waiting for me to look back up, he starts back up the steps, the door clicking closed. And I take a full deep breath, clenching my clammy palms.

I climb back in my car, circling around the driveway and heading back to the wrought iron gates, already standing open. I turn left as I clear the gates, entering onto the private road, absent, as always, of any other vehicles. And as I drive along the pitch dark roads, thinking of the purple house I haven’t seen in years, I already know that’s where I’m gunna find him.

CHAPTER 31

CHARLIE

Ava's pale, gaunt face is pierced with the brightest eyes. They're like dual North stars lashed in night, sitting atop her sharp cheekbones.

Bright sapphire blue ringed in deep honey brown peer up at me, wide and wet and captivating. I thumb her bottom lip, parted from the top, my rough, calloused skin snagging on the small tear I just put in it. A puncture wound from my canine through her pretty red pout. Blood beads, my own eyes widening, pupils blown as I hone in on it like a most coveted delicacy.

That's how she feels to me.

Something not many could ever hope to have.

To keep.

And yet, here she sits, at *my* feet. A rare, unusual creature, something that should only be treated with the most loving, delicate touch, but, instead, she has me.

Barely breathing, I stare down at her, submissive, responsive, so, fucking, "Good," I rasp.

Her parted lips tilt up at the corners in some gruesome semblance of a smile, the blood from her lip spreading across the tautness of her pretty mouth, forcing the bubbled pearl of blood to rush down her pale chin, drip to her barely clothed chest. I watch it fall, enraptured as it rolls into the low, gaping neckline of her oversized, loose vest top. Red blooming in the crisp white fabric, and I study the droplet as it expands in the material like gory, spearing fingers.

My knees hit the mauve rug, solid mahogany floors beneath it harsh on my bones, something I didn't pick out when we decorated this house, but Ava seems to love. Considering she still won't voluntarily sit on any *real* furniture. She enjoys sitting on this particular carpet, running her fingertips over it. Although, I wonder if perhaps it's that she can look up in here, feel like she's outside without actually having to leave the safety of the walls we have found some sort of solace in over the past few months, almost three. The domed roof, a glass turret revealing the pitch night's sky, stars glittering, the moon a sliver of a waning crescent as the sky prepares for a new moon.

She likes the gym too, the thick mats she lies on three times a day so I can manipulate her legs, trying to build muscle. They twitch now, her toes flexing, bending, parts of her control coming back. Now that the warmer weather has arrived, I can get her in the outdoor pool, too. I wonder if she knows how to swim.

I draw her chin down, the shackle still a restriction on her movements, something I am going to correct, just tonight, replace it with something that is all me. And a little bit her. I think of blue sapphires and black diamonds set in bright silver draping over the dainty column of her pale throat, and smugly smother my smirk, stare into the eyes I would choose a thousand times over real sapphires.

Anything.

The thought sets my heart racing in my chest. Galloping with adrenaline as it shoots through my veins. My hold on her chin, along her jaw, tightens to a harsh pinch, but she doesn't wince, she doesn't even blink. So very used to my rough handling of her. A little like how she is with me. It is fascinating to me, how she has gone from strength to strength, but is still something like frightened of a simple chair.

"My little Ava," I hush over her bloody mouth, scenting iron, she hums, a sound she would not have dared allow free merely weeks ago. "Such a good girl for me," I drag her bloody bottom lip through my teeth, scraping at the congealing

blood, pushing it to the back of my tongue and swallowing it down.

Mouth plucking at hers, my tongue lapping at her chin, teeth scraping along her jaw, up the length of her cheekbone. Her breath is a harsh but gentle pant against my mouth as I realign it with hers, glance up from beneath my lashes, her eyes already on mine.

“Kiss me, Baby Bird.”

Her mouth smashes into mine, feral and desperate, her hands clawing at my bare shoulders, newly neatened nails dragging down my chest, the perfect little curves of them digging into my skin. She bites my upper lip, sucking my tongue violently into her mouth, making it pulse with a delicious bolt of pain. I bite down on it, my own tongue, swallowing her soft gasp as she deposits the decadent sound in my mouth.

Long luscious licks of her tongue over mine, teeth and lips biting and sucking. The tip of my tongue traces over the inside of her teeth, across the roof of her mouth. I grip the shackle under my palms on either side of her neck, shove my knee between her spread thighs, her legs limp on either side of where I kneel before her, pushing the cap of it directly onto her cunt, nothing but thin white cotton between us.

“Grind on me,” I whisper over her lips, holding either side of her neck, as she pushes herself against my knee, bare through the slits in my jeans.

Heat and warmth press against me, her grip on my shoulders intense, nails digging into muscle as she lifts herself, using me in more ways than just getting herself off. Her hips roll against me, hot little pants of breath over my mouth as I keep my chin dipped, face flush with hers.

I glance down between our bodies, drop one of my hands to pull the baggy, loose, vest fabric out of my way so I can see. Watch her. Holding the tight fistful of it against her lower spine, I watch the little circle of wetness on her white underwear grow larger, feel it against my cool skin. The room is warm because she prefers it that way, not wanting to wear

clothes. I offered them to her, she has an entire wardrobe full of things she'll likely never wear, but they're there all the same.

A whimper travels lowly up the back of her throat, and I am always so very desperate to hear her voice, to hear her say my name. I groan, my eyes dropping closed, rolling into the back of my head at the thought of my name on her tongue. I have heard no words from her except for her name, just that once and I know it's not because she's shackled. Hers a little looser than the one I was trapped inside off, cutting into muscle and nerves and tendons, my screams and animalistic cries wrecked my vocal cords.

I think her issue is something else.

I taste her blood in my mouth, drying on my lips, thick in the back of my throat.

"Clean me up, Baby Bird," I whisper over her mouth, lips slanted, her breath on my teeth, blood on my tongue.

Her tongue swipes out, her nostrils flaring, the soft light in the room making her newly brushed hair shine like silk. It took a lot of patience and a pair of scissors, but she sat the entire six hours whilst I combed through it, without complaint. And I love the feel of it now, the smell of it, of her, us. She uses my soap, my shampoo, no deodorant because I like the smell of sweat on her skin, knowing I helped put it there.

I hum as she pulls away, licking her lips, her eyes squeezing closed as she climaxes, her breathing harsh, loud pants through her nose. My thumb smooths circles on the corner of her jaw, I am unable to look away, enraptured with her, with everything she does, every breath, flutter of her lashes, beat of her heart. I want to tear it out, carve my name into it and stitch it back inside of her chest so it only beats for me.

"Ava," I rasp roughly, something heavy in my chest, her eyes flutter open, bright one mine. "It's time, Baby Bird," I tell her softly, lifting the small tool from my jeans pocket.

I spin it slowly between my fingers, making sure she knows what it is. I feel it, her flinch, it jolts through me like a gunshot, the way she scrabbles backwards across the carpet and I know I'm going to have to chase her. We have attempted this only once before and it was three days before she would willingly let me near her again. And only if I showed her my open hands, prove my pockets and boots alike were empty of anything to use to take it off of her.

"I am going to replace it," I tell her, watching her drag herself backwards across the carpet she likes so much.

I am unmoving, watching her chest heave uncontrollably, I could drug her again, like I did to get her here in the car all those weeks ago. But I want her to trust me, and I don't want to knock her out every time I do something to help her. I could not wait to have my neck shackle removed, I remember how raw my skin was beneath, the cuts, the chafing, the missing skin.

"Come," I order her, her hands working her surprisingly quickly back across the floor, her hands hitting the bare wood now, a flinch at that too, the change in texture. "Do not move any further, Ava," I warn, it is a low, gruff rumble through my clenching teeth.

I cannot understand the aversion to its removal, but I do understand that change is not something she handles well. It is why I got her a replacement in the form of a choker. So she does not feel the loss of something, like her cage, and feel unbalanced. I am her balance.

"Ava, enough." I push to my feet as the crown of her head bumps against one of many bookcases in this room. "No more," I scold her lightly, stopping before her and staring down. "Come here now and you can sit in my lap." I drop into a crouch, elbows on my spread knees. I look her in the eyes, wide with fear, "I won't let anything bad happen to you, Baby Bird."

She trembles, shaking her head, a choked mumble on her lips and I wait, anxiously, listening for words I do not hear. I lean in closer, and she moves then, lashing out at me, striking

me across the face, whipping my head to the side. She drops to her left, dragging herself along the floor with her hands as I blink hard, flex my jaw, hearing it crack, my cheek burning.

I lunge, diving on top of her, dragging her arms back, and pinning them to her sides, using my knees angled in towards her to keep her in place. She thrashes beneath me, banging her chin against the wood, but even that doesn't deter her, hearing her teeth clack violently in her mouth.

I slide the hexagonal shaped key into the shackle joint at the nape of her neck, hearing it click. Her body heaves, twisting violently beneath me where I sit on her back, pinning her to the floor. And then I twist the long tool, hearing it click, listening to the loud clunk as it falls free of her throat, hitting the wooden floor beneath, in something like slow motion.

She is still beneath me, unmoving, breath held, and I feel that I, too, do the same, if only for a second. And then my fingers are tracing over the back of her neck, thick, cutting scars and lacerations ridged and uneven beneath my touch. I see her pulse thrumming in the side of her neck, my free hand tossing the key aside, I sweep her hair over her shoulder, her cheek flush with the floor now.

She breathes slow and deep, me on her back, but I'm holding my own weight up, off of her. Her eyes are closed, and her lashes flutter like butterflies atop her carved cheeks. And then suddenly her back heaves with a sob, and I track a lone tear as it drops from the inner corner of her closed eye, slides down the side of her nose. Dripping from the tip to the dark floor beneath.

I drop my lips to her wounds, red and inflamed and angry. I pluck the skin softly between my lips, tasting nothing but blood and metal, ensuring there is no infection, no dying flesh. I kiss her there, my chest erratic with my breaths as something foreign seems to fill my eyes and I blink the salty liquid away as I let my eyes close. Keep my lips pressed to the back of her neck, my nose in her hair.

Something takes flight inside my belly, lower abs tight, I plant my hands down either side of her head, fingers splayed.

Touch my forehead to her crown, her head twisted to one side, my lips to her ear, I swallow dryly, opening my eyes.

“Look at me, Baby Bird,” I rasp, and she does as I say, always.

Those big blue eyes ringed in brown, pupils blown, stare up at me, tracking me from the corner of her eye. Brushing the tip of my nose down the length of her cheekbone, my lips to the corner of her mouth, I press a kiss to her lips, draw myself back, just enough that she can see me clearly.

“I think, I love you, Ava,” I tell her, words I think I have always wanted to hear but never have, and with this woman, even if she feels something for me, I still never will.

But I say them anyway, my heart thundering dangerously in my chest. She stares up at me, her eyes widening, her arms flexing beneath my clenched thighs. I quickly lift up, throwing my leg over her, moving so she can get up. Offering her my hand to help her sit up, she stares at my fingers, and I feel sweat collect along my nape, in my hairline, nervousness vibrating inside my bones, because what if I’ve got this all wrong. But then her fingers close around mine, and I lift her from the floor, scooping her automatically into my lap, settling her against my chest.

I cup the side of her face, staring over the top of her head, my chin to her crown, her hands press to my chest, a tremor calming as it runs through her. I rock her gently in my lap, wishing she would say it back, say anything, *feel* something. And then her head moves beneath my chin, and I know I have to look at her. See hatred in her eyes maybe, perhaps something like disgust, perhaps something worse. Like humour.

I lift my chin from the top of her head, pull back so I can look down at her in my arms. See her as she arches her neck all the way back, for the first time in fuck knows how long, exposing it to me, a soft smile on her pretty red lips, the dried puncture wound of my tooth in the bottom one. A semblance of a smile on my own mouth, I drop my gaze and freeze.

I blink. Hard. Four maybe five times before what I'm looking at really, truly registers. My gut sinks, my happiness dying instantly, an overwhelming heat rips its way through my bloodstream, fire flooding through my limbs.

I'm moving before I even realise it. A clenched fist in the roots of her newly detangled hair. Her nails digging into the back of my hand as I drag her down the hall, unbolting the basement door with deft fingers of my free hand. She thunks heavily behind me as I drag her down the wooden stairs. My eyes burn as I pull aggressively on the hanging light chain above my head, the red bulb illuminating the never used space created just for me.

Screeches and grunts leave her lips, but still, no words. Even though she knows I know now.

I can't bear to look at her.

It.

Bile wrenches its way up my throat, burning my chest. Betrayal is like black sludge inside my veins, heavy and thick and permanent. I tear open the door of the last cell, slinging her carelessly inside, banging the chain link fencing gate closed as her body slams into the brick wall. I thread the open padlock through the lock. Snapping it shut with an audibly deafening click.

Everything too loud inside my head, a pounding buzz in my ears. I turn my back without looking at her, even as she grabs the fencing, shaking it in her hands, letting out some sort of desperate squeal behind me making my heart clench. I hammer my feet against the wooden steps, my entire body feeling like I'm not really here, not really inside of it. I grip my hair in my fingers, bending forward as I try to keep my stomach contents down.

That's why I don't hear the front door opening.

The alarm disengaging.

Feet marching with purpose down the hall.

His scent hits me first, leather, rich, heady birch, a fresh cigarette, mint. His hands next, grasping desperately at my

upper arms, shaking me hard. His voice sort of echoes inside my head, I hear my name, my hands covering his, and without a word I'm leading him, too, down the basement stairs. It's like I don't see him at all, his blind trust in finding out what's wrong with me is what has him willingly following me.

I walk down to the end of the cells, turning to face Kazimir, my body blocking the already occupied one. His concerned eyes on mine, the bright Mediterranean blue bleeding into the black as his pupils grow in the low red light. His chestnut locks dishevelled, a deep crevice between his thick, perfectly shaped brows. He stares at me, completely bewildered and I jerk my chin at the open cell, each one separated by solid brick, only the gates made of wire so I can see the occupants, but they can't see each other.

Kazimir leans forward, peering into the empty space, and he steps forward, frowning, his back to me, he looks inside, turning back to face me with a look of confusion.

"What is going on, Charlie?" he asks, deep and rough yet still smooth, I shake my head and he frowns harder.

Then my hands come up between us so fast, he doesn't see it coming, only staring into my eyes. One hand slams into the centre of his chest, the other flying up towards his face, the heel of my hand smacking him in the underside of his chin, momentarily dazing him. He stumbles back, trying to catch himself with his hands on the brick walls, but he falls all the same. His back slamming into the wall at the back of the cell, his arse hitting the concrete floor, an oomph bursts out of his lungs, a wheeze in his chest as he coughs out my name.

But I'm already padlocking his gate, stepping back as he stares at me moving away.

He calls my name, I see his lips moving, but my ears are ringing and I hear nothing. Not seeing Ava's face at her gate, likely huddled in the far back corner because of the unfamiliar voice. And I want to go to her, to hold her, to kiss her, to reassure her.

But I don't do any of those things.

Instead, I turn off the light, climb the stairs in the dark, slamming and locking the basement door, bolting the four extra locks, and slump down against it. My spine crunching as it collides with the wood, my arse hitting the green tiled floor.

I stare down at my hands in my lap, long, thick brown strands of Ava's hair caught around my fingers. I pick it free, wondering how I didn't see it...

The Bratva thriving as everyone else crumbles. Me trying to help Kazimir discover who was fucking him over, believing him when he told me he was innocent, even though everyone else thought him guilty.

And they were right all along.

He planted a trojan horse in my territory. Something he knew I might have a sick fascination with. He didn't know it would work this well, I'll bet. A dying woman shackled and caged. A woman who knew exactly who I was all along because she was sent to fuck me over from the very start. One that I moved into my space, learnt to trust, to love.

I wretch, bile, but nothing else coming up, my stomach churning with acid. My heart feels like it might explode out of my chest, hammering brutally against my rib bones.

I press my fists to my closed eyes, unable to get the image out of my head.

The Ivanov family emblem branded in the centre of her pretty little neck.

To be continued...

AFTERWORD

I don't really know what to say.

I guess that's the first thing.

It feels surreal, finishing this book, it felt like something so unobtainable to me for such a long time. I couldn't imagine writing this after finishing Persecution (Swallows and Psychos series). Getting Charlie and Kyla-Rose to a place of something like peace, knowing full well, when I wrote Charlie's book, I was going to royally fuck it all up.

The trauma bonding between the characters in this book, *all of the characters* in this book, has been intense. There is so much you don't know yet, there is still so much, I, too, do not know yet, but I can tell you this, it's going to be one rough ride to happiness. Which, yes, as always, I promise it will be a happy ever after.

Eventually.

I am so grateful to everyone who picked this up because they loved Charlie from Swallows and Psychos. But I will say, I was worried you had some wild ideas in your head that Charlie was some semblance of the word *good*.

Which, if you have read that series, you will, hopefully, have seen the mirroring of that phrase in here too. All of these characters running around trying to *be* good, or to find good. It all seems completely wild, because honestly, not one of them really knows what that means.

I'm going to shut up now because you've already consumed over eighty-thousand words of mine in these, what

feels like, very few pages. But I hope you enjoyed it, I hope it lived up to your expectations, if it didn't, that's okay, too.

I am grateful to you reading something that hurt to write. And I thank you so much for being here.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Markie, thank you for sacrificing our time together so I could finish this book. Thank you for giving me the confidence to keep going with it and supporting me when I felt like I had had enough. I love you endlessly. And if you ever try to leave me, I'll lock you in a cage.

Inga, thank you for being crazy supportive, giving up your time to edit, to cheer me on, to come to signings. I love you so much. Oh, also, credit for the cum. There's a lot of that in this book and I honestly cannot remember which cum thing it was I owe you credit for... so take it all!

Raeleen, thank you for organising me, for supporting me, for helping me, advising me, and being all round fucking incredible. But most importantly, thank you for being my friend. I feel so blessed (by The Devil, obvs) to have you in my life and I can't imagine life without you. I love you so much. Thank you for everything.

Keeks, ohhh, Lady G, my favourite girl, you keep me going, you keep me laughing, you motivate me. You are so supportive of everything I do, and I am so, so grateful to have you in my life. I love you so much.

Jade, I love you more than you'll ever know, you're so brave and so strong, keep pushing through the dark, beautiful.

Leah, you're a fucking rockstar. Goddess. Thank you for encouraging me through the self doubt, and as always, for the cover of our boy, you hit the nail on the head. I love you endless amounts.

ALSO BY K.L. TAYLOR-LANE

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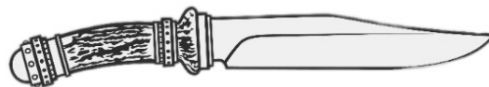
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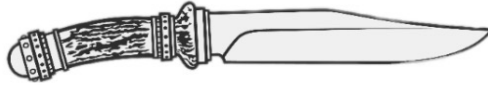
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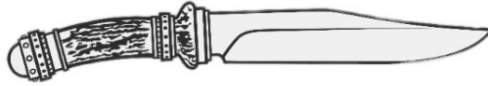


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CONTENT LISTING

Captor/Captive • Forced proximity • Age gap (18 years) •
Forbidden love • Stockholm syndrome • Enemies to lovers •
Mafia/Gang themes • Second chance • Blood Play • Knife Play
• Graphic Violence • Non-Con between main characters •
Somnophilia • Forced Feeding • Coercion • Dub-Con between
main characters • Manipulation • Needles • Forced care •
Graphic Rape between main characters • Drugging • Eating
Disorders/Difficulties Caging/shackling/imprisonment • Angst
• Murder • Torture • Drugging • Human Trafficking • Drug
Use • Ownership • Forced Orgasms • Starvation • Physical
struggles due to Malnourishment • Explicit language • Death •
Abuse • Piquerism • Dacnolagnomania • Alcohol use/abuse •
Fisting • Slapping • Gun Use • Sadism • Degradation • Cutting
• Guilt • PTSD • Cum Play • Self Harm • Spit Play • Breeding
• Sexuality oppression • Selective Mutism • Panic attacks •
Anxiety • Graphic sex

*This list is not exhaustive - there may be other content
contained in these pages that could be considered triggering*