



# RUTHLESS EMPIRE

SE TRAYNOR

# **RUTHLESS EMPIRE**

---

SOLITAIRE: THE DON

SE TRAYNOR

Copyright © 2023 by SE Traynor

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

# CONTENTS

## Preface

1. Gideon
2. Isla
3. Gideon
4. Isla
5. Dante
6. Isla
7. Gideon
8. Dante
9. Isla
10. Sebastian
11. Gideon
12. Isla
13. Gideon
14. Dante
15. Isla
16. Gideon
17. Sebastian
18. Isla
19. Gideon
20. Dante
21. Sebastian
22. Sebastian
23. Dante
24. Gideon
25. Isla
26. Dante
27. Gideon
28. Isla
29. Dante
30. Gideon
31. Sebastian
32. Isla
33. Dante
34. Isla
35. Gideon
36. Sebastian
37. Isla
38. Gideon

39. [Dante](#)
40. [Isla](#)
41. [Dante](#)
42. [Sebastian](#)
43. [Isla](#)
44. [Gideon](#)
45. [Dante](#)
46. [Isla](#)
47. [Gideon](#)
48. [Isla](#)
49. [Gideon](#)
50. [Isla](#)
51. [Isla](#)
52. [Gideon](#)
53. [Isla](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by SE Traynor](#)

# **PREFACE**

Dear Readers!

While this is not a dark romance, there are dark themes in this book and the series. Content warning for violence.

Please note this is a SLOW BURN (with simmering off-the-charts tension) and SLOW BUILD why choose/reverse harem romance. Slow build means the guys are added slowly over the course of the series.

Thank you  
SE Traynor

## GIDEON

The fire crackles in the hearth as the wind whips across the windows of my office. Winter in this small village in the North of England is brutal, especially up on this hill where, what some people would call my *castle*, sits.

It's not really a castle. Well, not anymore. At one time, a long time ago, I'm sure some Lord sat here, presiding over his people, but not me. I'm just a man with more money than I can count, a position that brings both fear and reverence from those in the know and a residential prison for my sins. I haven't left this old place in five years, and it'll probably be another five until I do. If not longer. It creates too much mystery for my liking, where I would rather be in the shadows, but taking one step out of these walls will likely result in my death. I'm not a dramatic man by any stretch of the imagination, although I do love a great Shakespearean tragedy. There's something familiar about the betrayal and intrigue, but when there are enough people out for your blood for their own agenda, it tends to make one... protective of one's body parts.

Taking a sip of my whiskey, I stare into the fire, the plush carpet soft under my feet, I hear a rustle behind me.

"Sophia. Lovely evening."

"Only you would think that," she grouses.

Grinning, I turn to my dear sister. Younger than me by six years, I dote on her. Probably because I have no one else in my life. She is it for my contact with human beings in a face-to-face manner. I am the typical stereotype for a reclusive billionaire, but I can't help the cliché. It is what it



is, as that annoying saying goes.

“That wind howls around this draughty old place.”

“Draughty? That’s a bit mean. It’s ancient but well-kept. The only draughts come through the open windows.”

“So shut them, you fucking lunatic,” she snaps and crosses over to the windows to slam them shut.

The noise of Mother Nature dies down, and I feel it down to my very soul. I do love the wild weather. It speaks to my darkness and gives me a slight excitement to see the reaction of nature in its savageness. Sunny and calm is boring as all fuck. Give me this any day.

“Rude,” I chide her gently.

“Gideon, we need to talk.”

“About what?” Her serious tone has piqued my interest, and I know my sister. She is about to drop a bomb on me from a dizzying height.

“I need a break,” she sighs and moves back to the doorway, already planning her escape.

“A break?” Giving her a severe glare, she purses her lips and drops her gaze. “From me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Never from you, but from this!” She gestures emphatically around the room.

“This...”

“You know what I mean. This life you lead is hard for me, too, you know. I have no friends; I barely go anywhere anymore. This book I’m writing is taking over my life, and I need a break from it and from this.”

“And where do you plan to take this break?”

Her blue eyes, just like mine, fire back up as I don’t shoot down her statement. Yet. She flicks her long, dark hair over her shoulder and gains confidence. She is so like me in so many ways, but she was never cut out for this life. This legacy.

“Somewhere hot and calm.”

Snorting as I could’ve guessed that, she throws me a smile.

“Okay, fair enough. But you know I need more than that.”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“And will anyone be joining you on this *break*?”

I already know the answer to that. She forgets how well I know her. Sophia avoids my gaze and steels herself.

“Maybe.”

“Who?”

“No one you know.”

“Try me.”

“Gideon. You are not getting involved in this. It’s new, and he is not ready to hear about my enigmatic hermit of a brother.”

“So you haven’t mentioned me at all?” I’m hurt.

“No.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“Online in a book group.”

“Online?” Frowning, I shake my head at her.

“Where else?” she scoffs. “In the village?”

“Why not? At least you would know more about this character. He could be anyone. He could be a serial killer, for all you know.”

“True, but I don’t think he is. I’ve done my homework, Gideon. I’m not an idiot, but I am thirty-five, and I need more to my life than just you and this house and your legacy. I love you, but I need to get away. Tell me you understand.”

It’s a demand, not a request.

*Wonder where she learned that from?*

Exhaling slowly, I fix my gaze on her steadily. “You can’t leave. You run this place. I would be lost without you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, and I have that covered.”

“How?” My sharp question claps out in the otherwise silent room.

Pressing her lips together, she braces herself. “I’m going to hire someone to take over my duties.”

“Like fuck you are,” I growl, taking a step forward. “That’s not how this works, Sophia, and you know it.”

“Calm yourself,” she snaps, her fire blazing as I try to intimidate her.

Doesn’t work. Hardly ever does.

“This is something I have been planning for a while now. I’ve got it narrowed down to one woman. She is perfect. She is honourable and discreet, her background is clean but not squeaky, her credit is exceptional, she isn’t in any debt. She makes good money and lives independently. She has lived in this village all her life, so she knows everyone and knows how to work around anyone who crosses paths with her. She is quite remarkable.”

“Is she now?” I ask darkly, not accepting any of this. “You are going to have to do better than that, Sophia. How do I know she isn’t a mole planted

here to take me out, and you're just going to invite her into my home?"

"That is some fucking long game if she is," Sophia sighs. "I know you trust no one, and you are right not to, but this is something I need to do, and you will have to accept this woman into your home."

"No, I don't have to do anything of the sort."

"Then you will cook and clean for yourself for six months while I'm away."

"Six months!" My roar of fury echoes around the high-ceilinged office, and it breaks Sophia's confidence. She steps back and narrows her eyes.

"Yes, six months."

"No."

"No?"

"No. End of story." Turning my back to her, I take a sip of whiskey before I throw the glass into the fire, taking satisfaction in the smashing glass and the flames blazing more brightly. "You will obey me on this, Sophia."

"No." Her defiance surprises me.

"Don't test me."

"Don't threaten me."

"You are not bringing a stranger into my home, and you are not leaving for six months, or even six minutes. Do I make myself clear?"

"No. I'm going, and there isn't a damn thing you can do to stop me. So you will take this file, read it and see for yourself that I'm not letting a mole in your life, or you can fend for yourself for half a year and see how you fare. Either way, brother, you can't stop me from leaving, and if you try, see how that pans out in the long run. Hmm."

The smile that passes across my face is genuine, and it is one filled with pride. Sophia is the only one who could talk to me like that and not die a painful and drawn-out death. She is no doubt the fiercest woman I have ever known.

Deciding to play her game, I grunt and indicate the desk where she should leave the information about this golden unicorn in a world full of backstabbing, double-crossing, greedy mercenaries. "Don't take that as compliance on my behalf. I'm more interested in seeing why you think this woman isn't a mole. Probably means she is one, and I want to know more so I can take her out before she takes me out."

"Jesus, Gideon," Sophia says softly. "Don't be like that. She's a good woman."

“Says you.”

“My word should be good enough.” Her voice trembles.

“Sadly, my dear, it is not. Leave the file and go.”

She sighs again and drops the file on the desk before stalking out without another word.

“Fucking six months,” I mutter. “What does she think this is?”

Lamenting my whiskey lost to the fire, I move over to the desk and pick up the file. It’s lighter than I expected, which tells me one thing. Sophia didn’t do enough homework on this creature. Sneering, I throw it back on the desk and pour another whiskey before moving over to the balcony doors and flinging them open to step out into the lashing down rain and gale-force winds. Feeling the freezing cold air hit my skin, I smile and throw my head back, revelling in the harsh nature of the weather. This tempest that fits my mood. Dropping my gaze over the village, lit up in the darkened night, the warm yellow lights cheery and a beacon of hope in the bleakness of the mid-winter, I wonder who and where this unicorn is right now.

One thing for sure is she has no idea who or where I am. Skulking in the shadows behind my castle walls, it is that way for a reason. As my father was before me, I am the Head of a Global Secret Society called Solitaire. It is my legacy, my birthright, my blood. It is also my weakness. As powerful as this position makes me in the world, it makes me twice as vulnerable. There isn’t a single member of the society that wouldn’t take me out given the chance in a coup that would pass the baton to them as told by the ancient bylaws of the Society. Do I blame them for wanting it? No. Do I want them to have it? No. Will I give it up willingly? Also... no. They will have to pry it from my cold, dead hands, but as much as I’ve protected my identity from the world and from those in the Society, there are a select few who know exactly who I am.

So, who am I to the world?

An enigmatic, eccentric, reclusive billionaire who lives up on the hill in the quiet village of Hemsway behind his fifteen-foot-high walls and electric gates.

But who am I really?

A man who has the world at his fingertips, who will do whatever it takes to stay twenty steps ahead of the game, a ruthless leader of an empire that is fickle and shaky as much as it is solid and absolute.

Power. It’s all about power. And the man behind the mask, the one with all the power, is the Don.

Gideon Hawthorne.  
Me.

---

## ISLA

“Don’t forget to put the key back through the cat flap, girl.”

Rolling my eyes as a smile, I call back, “Yes, Mrs Flannigan.” It’s not like I haven’t done this every other day for the last eight months, but she is a dear old woman in her nineties, and I adore her. She lived an eventful life, if her tales are anything to go by, and moved back to Hemsway thirty years ago when her husband died so she could die where she was born. I don’t think that’s on the horizon, but I guess you never know when your time is up. Turning the key to unlock the front door, I pull it out and leave Mrs Flannigan’s modest home, stepping out into the pouring rain on this freezing January morning. It hasn’t really got light yet, and I’m already one job down. Mrs Flannigan didn’t need much in the way of personal assistance today. Since I showed her how to do her grocery shopping online, she takes great delight in using this skill to cut back on my work.

More fool me.

I stupidly, and ignorantly, I’ll admit, expected her to forget how, and I’d still have a task to do for her. But I can’t be upset about it. She is one of my best clients, and I’ve grown so fond of her.

Locking up behind me, I throw the key through the cat flap, making sure it lands far enough away in case anyone tries to grab it and enter her home. Not that I think that’s likely in Hemsway. We are a small, close-knit community, and we look out for each other. Except for...

Glancing up in the rain at the castle on the hill, I roll my eyes again, but this time it’s with scorn. No one knows who he is. He moved in one day after

months of renovation work and hasn't been seen since. We know he's still there, though. The delivery drivers are kept in full-time employment just from that one property. But none of them ever see him.

"Isla Harding?"

Hearing my name, I turn and see a stunningly beautiful woman under an umbrella, leaning against a big black Range Rover parked behind me on the street.

"Yes?" Walking forward, I pull up the collar of my coat.

"Can we talk?"

"Now?"

She smiles. "Coffee shop on the corner?"

"What's this about?"

"A job," she says and snaps her broly down, shakes it out, climbs back into the Range Rover and drives off.

Leaving me no choice but to climb into my own car, I start the engine of the little Micra and blast the heater, shivering in my damp coat.

Wondering if I should even bother with complying to the rather rude request, I dither. I'm hired by an agency, so someone coming up to me on the street is a bit weird, but I can't say that I'm not intrigued. I've never seen this woman before, so I'm guessing she's a relative of someone who needs assistance.

Knowing I should go through the agency, I decide to meet her anyway. That way, I can tell her. She obviously doesn't realise this is the way I work.

Setting off, I drive the short distance to the coffee shop and pull up in a tiny space that was miraculously waiting for me. The Range Rover is already here, parked a bit away from the coffee shop, so I draw in a deep breath and rush inside out of the increasingly bad rain.

"Here!" The woman raises her hand, as if I couldn't pick her up out of a lineup. She is stunning. The exact opposite of me, she is dark-haired, blue-eyed and stick thin to my blonde, green-eyed, curvaceous self.

"Hello," I murmur, sitting down. "Before you say anything else, I work for the Greenberg's agency. You really need to go through them if you require my services."

"No, I know that, but this isn't a regular offer, Isla. Is it okay if I call you Isla? Such a pretty name."

"Who's doing the calling?" I ask.

She smiles slowly. "Forgive me. Sophia Richardson."

*Richardson.*

I can't think of any Richardsons in the village, but maybe someone escaped me.

"Okay, Sophia. What is this about, then?"

"I want to hire you permanently onto my staff, so you would need to leave the agency. I will pay you directly."

"To do what?" She is making me nervous. This is all a bit intense and weird.

Silently, she reaches into her bag and pulls out a brown A4 envelope. "Before I can tell you anything, you will need to sign this."

"What is it?" Frowning, I take the envelope from her and pull out the document.

"It's an NDA."

"A what?"

"A non-disclosure agreement. It means anything I tell you, or that you see or overhear, or read remains confidential at all times, or you will face a trip to court and a fine of several million pounds."

"What?" Gaping at her, assuming she is joking, I can see she is not. Her face is set into deadly serious mode, and my hands start to shake. "Several million pounds? I—I... that's insane."

"That is how serious this is."

"I would never in a million years be able to pay that back anyway, so what's the point?"

"You will on this salary." As if we are in some kind of spy film, she takes out a pen and scribbles something on the paper napkin in front of her.

She slides it surreptitiously across the table.

Glancing at it, I baulk. "What?"

That appears to be my go-to word of the day. I'm usually more eloquent than this. On the plus side, she might think she's made a mistake with the village idiot and move on.

"You can't be serious?" I choke.

"Very serious."

I can't even count the zeroes she's circled neatly across the napkin.

"Look, this is bizarre." I stuff the document back in the envelope and shove it at her. She takes it and slips the napkin inside and then thrusts it back at me.

"Just think about it."



“No. Listen, I work with people with mobility issues and old ladies. I wash their hair and do their chores, go shopping for them and read to them. I don’t know who or what you think I do for a living, but NDAs and obscene amounts of money offered to me on a *napkin* are not me. I’m sorry, but you need to leave me alone.”

Standing up, I stalk past her, but she slaps the envelope into my mid-section. “Take it and think about it.”

The way she says it leaves absolutely no room for refusal. She is bordering on scaring the shit out of me.

Taking it wordlessly, I know I won’t look at it or even think about it again. It will go straight in the shredder when I get home. Something tells me chucking it in the litter bin outside the coffee shop would be a huge no-no.

Shoving the café door open, I leave in a huff and climb back in my car. Throwing the envelope on the passenger seat, I set off, my hands still shaking slightly as I head to my next job. A lovely old man whose wife died only a few months ago, leaving him heartbroken and helpless. Thinking about him makes me smile sadly, but it puts my head back in the game. I can’t be thinking about ridiculous rendezvous when I have a job to do. I won’t give my clients anything less than one hundred per cent. They deserve my undivided attention, and they will always get that from me.

---

## GIDEON

One thing I've noticed about this file that Sophia left is that there is no photo of this woman. It raises more than one red flag about why she left it off. Why doesn't she want me to see her face?

It's been bothering me since I read the file cover to cover and then again this morning. On the surface, she appears as wonderful as Sophia thinks she is, but there is always the huge but.

Diving into the deep end of the indoor swimming pool, I start to swim laps while the rain lashes against the glass roof.

Ten.

Twenty.

Thirty.

Pushing myself harder, faster, it's no use. I can't get this woman out of my head. I need to see her face. It's driving me crazy. Not that it matters. She isn't stepping foot in this house, no matter what Sophia says, but still. Isla Harding has woven a web over me. She has no social media, and her background check has come back practically exemplary, apart from a parking fine two years ago outside the hospital and a few late payments on her rent from years ago. I'm guessing Sophia went through the usual Solitaire investigator to glean all this information, so I've sent it all over to my secret guy, who can do a deep dive on someone in a few hours and uncover every skeleton they tried to bury in the hour after that. He is the best, and that is why I don't want anyone else to know about him. I'm happy to keep him on a healthy retainer for just such occurrences.

Fifty.

Sixty.

Seventy.

Resurfacing with a ragged pant, I haul myself out of the tepid pool and sit on the side while I catch my breath. I'm getting old. Forty-one is no joke. I used to be able to do a hundred and still run a mile. Nowadays, it's just not happening. Lying back, I glare at the rain splatting against the ceiling and then sit up when my private mobile phone rings. Grabbing my towel, I stand up and dry my hands before I snatch the phone from the wicker chair near the pool.

"Did you get what I asked for?"

"Sending it over to you, but I gotta say. Sophia dug up everything on this woman there is to find. She is clean."

"Impossible," I snap. "Keep digging. There has to be something. I want a connection to this Society or worse by nightfall, so I can act on this threat, or you are fired and when I say fired, I mean that literally. Got it?" Hanging up, I growl and clutch the phone in my hand so hard that it might break.

"You are being pigheaded and ridiculous."

"Sophia, don't. You brought this woman into my sphere, and now I have to make every assurance that she isn't out to worm her way into my life to kill me."

"Paranoid, much?"

Spinning to her, I see her eyes narrow.

"Sorry," she says. "That was uncalled for. I know, Gideon, I know. But you have to trust me."

"You know I normally would, Sophia, but there's something about this entire situation that doesn't sit right with me."

"You mean me leaving?"

"It's part of it."

"It's temporary, and I need to make sure you are looked after while I'm gone."

"It's all very sudden."

"Not really. Not for me."

"You really trust this guy?"

She sighs. "This is the crux of your issue here, Gideon. Not poor Isla, but the man in my life."

"One and the same when it comes to not knowing fuck all about either of them until yesterday."

“Fair point. Perhaps I should’ve eased you into this with more finesse.”

“You are eager to leave me.”

“Not you.”

We lock gazes.

“Do your little checks, Gideon. You will find her as perfect as I do.”

“And him?”

“You won’t find him.”

“Wanna bet.”

“A million quid?”

Snorting with scorn, I shake my head. “Have your secrets, Sophia, but keep them away from me and this place.”

“Always.”

“And if you get abducted and killed by this stranger, then know I will avenge your death.”

She lets out a peal of laughter. “Oh, thanks. I appreciate it, you dick.”

Smirking, I let her go, thinking this is over. It’s not. I will find out who that man is if it costs me everything. But my guess is time is running out. I have someone else on this case so Jones could concentrate on the girl. Viktor and Francesca Di’Castello won’t let me down. As far as hierarchical tiers go, they are just under me. They are two of only five people who know my identity.

Following Sophia out of the poolroom, I head upstairs to my bedroom and flick the TV on. Seventy-five inches of porn appears on the screen, and I sit on the bed to stare at it, feeling my cock grow hard. The act of voyeurism gets me off, and right now, I could do with a release. Dipping my hand into my shorts, I pull out my cock and stroke it, eyes riveted to the pussy already full of cum on the TV. She reverse cowgirls her lover, slamming down on his large dick, making my cock stiffer. I pump more vigorously, feeling my blood heat up. I need this. I need more. I miss sex and sinking my cock into a hot, wet pussy. Groaning, I tug furiously, and at the same time as I see her pussy clench his dick when she orgasms, I spurt out my cum with a low grunt of satisfaction.

“Perfect,” I murmur, taking the towel to clean up before I rise and open the balcony doors to let the freezing cold, damp air in. “Just perfect.”

---

## ISLA

I t's taunting me. Staring at me from the table where I left it.

"Fuck off," I mutter, turning my back on the brown envelope with the secretive contents.

It's dark out now, still raining with snow on the way according to the weather forecast. Shivering in my pyjamas, I pull my oversized house cardigan tighter around me and pick up my glass of red wine to take a sip.

I nearly jump out of my skin when my mobile rings. It's almost 10 PM. Who would be calling at this hour? Is it my parents? We aren't close at all, and they live hundreds of miles away, but still. Snatching it up in case of an emergency, I see a number I don't recognise. Cautiously, I answer in case it is the hospital or whatever, and tentatively murmur, "Hello?"

"Isla."

Huffing as I instantly recognise the smooth, beautiful songbird voice of Sophia Richardson, I fold my arms. "What do you want?"

"Have you signed the NDA yet?"

"No. Forgot all about it."

"Did you," she snickers but then goes quiet. "Look, Isla. I want to tell you everything, but I need to know you won't repeat anything I tell you. That's all."

"I don't gossip." Cringing when I realise that isn't entirely true, I stick my chin out defiantly even though she can't see me. It's not that I'm a *gossip* as such. I would never betray a confidence or a secret, but people talk in small towns. It's drivel, like did you see May Carlson's new hairdo, or So-and-so caught the snooty Mrs Figson not picking up after her dog in the park again.

“I get that, but you are threatening me with a lot of money if I accidentally slip up and say something I’m not supposed to. This isn’t something I’m used to, and I don’t know what I can and can’t say.”

“You don’t say anything.”

“Easy for you to tell me that. You aren’t the one who will be bankrupt into my next life if I say something you don’t want me to.”

“Fair enough,” she murmurs. “I’ll start with a small titbit. Come to the window.”

Crossing over to the small lounge window of my first-floor flat, which looks out over the quiet street below, I see the Range Rover parked under a streetlight. The door opens, and Sophia gets out, popping her umbrella open as she looks up at me and waves.

“Can you see me?”

“Yes.”

“Isla, my name is Sophia Hawthorne, and I need you to trust me.”

“Why did you lie about your name? Not really invoking a whole lot of trust there.”

“It’s a necessary evil. Please look up to the hill.”

Automatically turning my head to see the looming, foreboding building that presides over our village, I shiver. “You live there?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re the mystery man. Boy, did they get that wrong.”

She giggles. “Definitely not the mystery man. But his sister.”

My head snaps back to the woman standing in the rain under my window. “Oh?”

“Please sign the NDA. I will be waiting at the park at 8 AM tomorrow morning. If you show up, I know you’re ready to talk. If not, I’ll leave you alone.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. I’m not trying to scare you, Isla. I need you.”

“I’d ask for what, but I’m guessing you won’t tell me.”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“8 AM.”

Sophia hangs up and gets back in her car to drive off. I watch the headlights disappear around the bend and then look back at the castle.

“Bitch,” I mutter. She did that on purpose to make me so curious I’d sign

her stupid papers to find out who lives there. She's good, I'll give her that because now it's all I can think about.

Moving away from the window, I go to the table and pull the document out of the envelope, sitting down to read it line by line. There is a lot of legalese that means nothing to me, but from what I can gather, it's pretty much exactly what she said. Shut up or pay out.

Finishing off my wine, I decide to sleep on it, so I place it back on the table and flick the lights off in the living room before going to my bedroom. Slipping off my cardigan, I climb into bed and pull the duvet up tightly around me.

Not even a minute passes when I groan and get up again, snatching up a pen on my way to the document.

"Fine, Sophia Richardson or Hawthorne, whatever your name is. You win. Hope you're happy now."

Flicking to the last page, I sign the NDA with a flourish and date it with tomorrow's date, so she thinks I wasn't as eager to do as she asked.

Gritting my teeth, I crawl back into bed and pull the duvet up over my head, hoping and praying I haven't just made the biggest mistake of my life.

I guess I'll find out tomorrow.

---

**DANTE**

**T**he shrill ring of the phone splinters my banging head.

Groaning, I roll over on the black satin sheets and curse the whiskey from the night before. Too much partying, too much networking, too much everything. One day, I will learn, but apparently not any time soon. Hitting forty kinda killed any party animal inside me, and now I feel I need to sit in front of the fire in my slippers, a smoking jacket and a club soda while I read *The Times*.

Eyes still closed, I feel around for the mobile and pick it up, growling, “This better be good.”

“Mr DeVare, it’s Wilson.”

“What do you want?”

“I have located the person you are seeking.”

All aches and pains instantly disappear, and I sit up, eyes open and wide awake. “Where is he?”

“England.”

Blinking, I wait for more.

Unfortunately for the complete idiot on the other side of the line, it doesn’t come.

“England,” I drawl with scorn etched into every letter.

“Yeeees...”

“The man in question is English.”

“Yes...”

“So it took you three weeks to find out that the Englishman currently resides in England.”



“Well, Sir, he is a very difficult man to track down. I...”

“You are fucking fired, you fucking cunt!” With a roar of frustration, I throw the phone against the wall opposite my bed. It smacks into the wood panelling with a loud crack and drops to the floor, no doubt broken and useless.

It’s not the first time. It won’t be the last. I’m aware of my anger issues, but I’m not interested in fixing them right now.

Shaking my head, I get out of bed stark naked and cross over to the balcony of my townhouse in London. It’s fucking freezing, snowing even this morning. Glaring over the dim light of the bare dawn, I sigh and run a hand through my hair.

“I will find you, you prick. This is too fucking serious for you to evade me for one moment longer.”

Grimacing as talking to myself is the first sign I’m losing my mind over this, I turn and stalk into the bathroom, not switching the light on because my eyes can’t take the harsh glare right now. Turning on the shower, I step in and let the arctic blast get rid of the lingering hangover before I allow myself the luxury of warm water. Growing up, we barely had any. Hell, we barely had running water most of the time in the dumpy flat we lived in, in one of the most deprived areas of London in the eighties. I knew from a very young age that I wasn’t spending the rest of my life grifting like my dad or making pennies at any old job that would have me like my mum. I was going to make something of myself and do whatever it took to make it happen.

Shady deals, running drugs, beating people up to prove my worth, I was willing and able. My past is something I’m not fond of rehashing, but it got me exactly what I wanted. Somehow, luck was on my side, and I ran with a guy who had it made. We were too much alike not to be friends. We got into scraps and had the time of our fucking lives, and then it all went to shit, and we parted ways.

And now that shit is back.

I’d say to haunt me, but I don’t believe in ghosts.

Or maybe I should.

“Damn you, Gideon.” The words are a curse that has tumbled from my lips more times than I can count over the last decade.

Ending the shower, I dry and get dressed, catching sight of my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot, not the usual green sparkle that can charm the pants off anyone. My skin has a grey pallor, which is made starker

by my jet-black hair, and I look tired.

Grabbing the eye drops from the dresser, I tilt my head back and splash a few drops in each eye before blinking rapidly and chucking it back in the drawer.

“Coffee. Lots of it.”

Making my way downstairs, the pot is already full, and I pour out a scalding cup to drink black, no sugar, before pouring out another.

The knock at the door is expected and bang on time.

Opening it, I glare at the visitor and hold my hand out.

“Again?” she complains. “Jesus, Dante. What this time?”

“Threw it at the wall. Oh, and that reminds me. I fired Wilson. Find me someone to replace him A-SAP.”

“Fucking hell. We’ve been through every single investigator in the city worth their salt,” Jemima, my assistant, complains.

“Then look further afield. Or maybe someone who isn’t worth their salt. Find me someone who will do whatever it fucking takes to get me what I want.”

We lock gazes, and she understands. She knows how I operate. We go way back. All the way back. We grew up together on the streets. There is no one I trust more than the woman in front of me. This is made even more secure by the fact that I think of her like a sister, and she finds me revolting to look at. Her words. It has cemented our deep friendship in a way that if we were avoiding any ‘feelings’, it wouldn’t have happened.

“You sure?”

“I’m done fucking about. I want that asshole found, and I want him found now.”

“You know you are looking for a ghost.”

“Even ghosts can be found.”

“You seem quite sure about that.”

“Do it or find yourself at the job centre tomorrow with Wilson.”

“Please,” she scoffs. “You wouldn’t fire me in a million years. I know too much.”

Shooting her a smirk, I pick up my briefcase to head out. “Well, I can’t deny that as fact. But you know what I do to people who betray me.”

“I do. I still have nightmares about Luis’s head exploding off his shoulders. Doesn’t help that the blood never came out of my Chanel suit.”

“Never wear designer to an execution.”

“Didn’t know that was the plan.”

“Well, think on your feet. That’s my motto.”

“And no one is better at improv than you.”

“Flattery, my dear. What are you after? A raise?”

“Ha, I wish. You are too stingy for that.”

We share a smile as we head out to the waiting car, idling at the curb.

“Find me the man who will hunt down my ex-best friend, and we’ll review your pay. How’s that sound?”

“So on my head be this?”

“Always, Jem. Always.”

“I’ll find him. Or *her*. Then I’ll have demands coming out of my pert backside.”

“I won’t hold my breath, but do you worst.”

With that agreed, we settle back for the drive to the office. My office. The billion-pound company that I built from the ground up with a few pounds in my back pocket.

But that’s what happens when you will do whatever it takes.

Whatever that may be.

---

## ISLA

**F**licking off the heating as I get dressed, I shiver involuntarily. I haven't slept a wink. I kept having second thoughts about signing this NDA and ending up bankrupt and living in a cardboard box on the street while I handed over my begging money to Sophia every day for the rest of eternity. Which, in my nightmares, lasted for *an eternity*. A never-ending cycle of torment.

"You are being ridiculous," I mutter as I make myself a cup of tea. "Whatever she tells you, just forget about it. It's not rocket science."

The trouble is, I know me. The more I'll try not to think about it, the more it will be in my mind.

This was a bad idea. Picking up the document, I wonder if tearing it in half will accomplish anything.

Probably not. Or what would be the point of it?

Sipping my tea, I keep an eye on the time. It's nearing half seven. I'm usually early by nature, so my stomach twists into a knot when I see I have half an hour until Sophia said to meet.

The park is a three-minute drive from here, so I must leave now. Placing the still half-full mug on the kitchen counter, I pull my coat on and pick up the document and my bag and head out to the car. Unlocking it, I slide in and shake the falling snow from my hair, opening the glove box to locate my woolly hat. It's my morning off today. I don't have anywhere I need to be until this afternoon, so at least I don't have to meet Sophia and then rush off to work.

Gulping back my nerves, I set off and trundle down the road to the park.

Approaching it, I see that Sophia is already waiting for me.

Panicking, I check the time, but then relax. She is even earlier than me. I guess she is anxious to see if I will show.

When she spots my car, she gets out of the Range Rover and waits for me to pull up next to her. Grabbing the envelope, I stuff it in my bag and climb out, locking the car behind me.

“You came,” she says, her relief evident.

“Yep.”

“Get in.”

She climbs back in the Range Rover, and I follow, getting in the passenger side.

“Did you sign it?”

Nodding, I pull the envelope out of my bag.

She snatches it from me and takes the document out, flipping to the last page to see my signature at the bottom. Nodding, she appears satisfied and slings it over her shoulder onto the back seat. Then she sets off, driving away from the park and my vehicle.

“Hey, wait! What about my car?”

“We need to keep moving. I’ve also jammed your mobile and any possible listening devices. I’ll return you to your car when we’ve finished.”

Hoping she’s right, I press my lips together and pray that I haven’t just been kidnapped.

“So?”

“I’m going away for six months,” she starts. “I need you to take over the tasks at the house while I’m gone.”

“Okay, so why all the cloak and dagger? Do you guys work for MI6?”

She blinks but remains silent.

*Shit. Do they work for MI6?*

That was a throwaway comment, but now I think I’m onto something. It would make so much sense if they were spies.

“My brother is a recluse. He runs a very large global empire, but he is the target of many enemies, and some that are considered friends.”

*Definitely spies.*

“I need you at the house for six months, and when I return, if things work out, I’d like you to stay. You will be paid the one mil I already offered up front, and then your annual salary would be one million pounds, paid in six-month increments up front. This is for all services required by the household

and to keep your mouth shut about what you see or overhear or are told during the course of your employment. Once this employment is terminated for whatever reason, you will abide by the NDA for the rest of your days.”

“What does the job entail, exactly?” My hands are shaking again. “We are talking big bucks here, but for what?”

“You will cook and clean, deal with the deliveries and the outside world. Gideon has his own private security staff that you will liaise with. They keep the grounds secure.”

“Gideon.”

“My brother.”

Nodding, I tuck that name into the dark recesses of my mind. It’s the first piece of information she’s actually given me that I can’t reveal to anyone, living or dead.

“You will reside on the premises and have no contact with family or friends.”

“What? You want me to cut myself off? What about my parents?”

She shoots me a knowing look. “I know you haven’t spoken to your parents in three months and that you are an only child. I also know that friends are not plentiful in your life. You like to keep to yourself.”

Gritting my teeth, I dislike that assessment. While true, it sounds like I’m a complete loser.

“Why should I trust you or anything you’re telling me? You’ve already lied, threatened me with court and abducted me.”

“I know, and I apologise for the first two. ‘Abduct’ is a bit harsh. We are driving around the village, and I will return you to your car when we are done.”

“What about my clients?”

“I’ve already arranged for someone to take over your duties.”

“Who?”

“A very reliable woman who will uphold the values you bring to your work.”

“Why can’t she do this job then instead of me?”

“I want you.”

“And Gideon?”

She pauses, and it speaks volumes. “He will come around. He is sore about me leaving. Don’t worry about him. You will report to me.”

“Where are you going?”

She smiles. “The Mediterranean.”

“For six months?”

“Yep.”

“Nice... What about my flat?”

“You can keep it or let it go. Depends if you plan on staying on after the six months.”

“Well, I can’t answer that right now, can I?”

“So, keep it. You will be paid more than enough to buy it if you choose.”

She is so matter-of-fact about money, it tells me that she was born into it.

She pulls up next to my car a few moments later, and we sit there in silence.

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course. But not too long. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I baulk. “I might need more time than that.”

“Tomorrow, Isla.” Her kind tone does nothing to quell the fear those two words instil in me.

It’s also a dismissal, so I get out of the car and slam the door shut. Sophia drives off, leaving me a nervous wreck.

She has dangled the one thing in front of me that makes me consider this. The money. Not for me, but to help the vulnerable. I could set up all sorts of foundations to help the people I work with, and it’s very enticing. The system fails so many people, and I can help change that. It is the only thing that is even remotely pushing me to take this job.

But I already know as I climb back into my car that I’m going to do it.

---

## GIDEON

I now get why Sophia left the image off the file. She knew I would be captivated by the sight of this woman, and she also knew it would drive me wild until I found out what she looks like. It wasn't that hard. David Jones is so good at his job, I wish he would work for me full time, but this Isla Ellen Harding is a veritable saint. This also intrigues me. As someone who has lived on the darker side of life since I escaped from the womb, I find it fascinating and strange that someone could be so clean.

Staring at the photo on my phone of this gorgeous blonde with the mesmerising green eyes, I wonder if it would be the worst thing in the world if she came here.

But then I get bitch slapped back to reality.

Yes. Yes, it would be the worst thing. I don't know her, and as much as her record says she's clean, I still don't trust her. Of course, my enemies would find the perfect candidate to enter my home and kill me in my sleep. Everyone has a price, and I wonder what Isla's is.

When the phone rings again, I frown. "What is it?" I ask, answering it immediately.

"Grant Hitchings has been hit up by a PI in London."

"Any idea by who?"

"As far as I can tell, a woman named Jemima Pearson."

*Jem.*

Hissing, I clench my jaw so tightly I give myself a headache. "Kill the ID and move on."

"Done."



“David?”

“Yes?”

“Come and work for me full time.” I smile, knowing his answer.

“You know I can’t do that without telling my girl who you are.”

“Ruby Bellingham is not the worst person in the world to know, but do that, and you will never be found.”

“So you see our predicament.”

“One day, you will come to me.”

“Not likely. But I appreciate the validation.”

Chuckling, I hang up. I have a soft spot for the tech wizard down in Manchester. Ruby, his long-time boss and now lover, was recruited into Solitaire over a year ago. David immediately bounced off my radar, and I pulled him in as well. While I have never met him face-to-face and probably never will, he is a man I trust with my secret. Mostly because I know he has a healthy fear of me. But not so much that he cowers from my requests. He is the perfect balance, and his skills are the best in the business.

Placing the phone next to me on the desk as I lean back and glare into the roaring fire, I go back to the matter he raised.

Jemima works for my old pal Dante DeVare, so whatever she is sniffing around, he is behind. Whoever they got to dig up one of my aliases is good, I’ll give them that. But it begs the question, *why* is Dante looking for me? It has been about a decade since we last spoke, and that didn’t end well. He made an enemy out of me that night, and to this day, I haven’t forgiven him. And nor will I. If he is looking for me to make amends, he can go to hell.

“Gideon.”

Tearing my gaze from the fire, I see Sophia standing in the doorway. “Where have you been?”

“Speaking with Isla Harding.”

“No.”

“You can’t just keep saying ‘no’, Gideon. I know you’ve seen her. Doesn’t her face please you?”

“Oh, her face can please me all right, but I don’t want this stranger in my house.”

“Too bad. I’ve dangled more than enough for her to bite.”

“Why are you so hellbent on leaving me?” I demand, rising and crossing over to her.

“I’ve told you. I need to get away from here and all of this Solitaire

bullshit. It's more trouble than it's worth. I wish you'd just walk away from it!"

Her heated gaze bores into mine as she says the words she's been dying to say for years.

"If only it were that simple." Turning from her, I hear her muttered curse. "Go on your *break*, Sophia. And when you come back, have your priorities in check and never say those words to me again."

"And what about Isla Harding?"

"What about her?"

"Do you approve?"

"No."

"Then you will be alone."

"What else is new?"

"Gideon..." Her soft voice tears at the ravaged soul that resides unwillingly in this prison, aching to break free.

"Go."

A few minutes pass before she leaves. This confrontation has hurt my heart, but I can't look at her right now. But I know my sister. She is as stubborn as I am. She will leave now without a word, and I won't see her for six months.

Six months where I will have to rattle around this old place all by myself.

"Fun times."

As unappealing as that thought is, I just can't risk the alternative.

That's really all there is to it.

---

**DANTE**

**S**taring out over the city from my office in the sky, I twiddle my pen.

“Problem.”

Jemima’s voice behind me as she opens the door is curt and to the point.

“What now?”

“The man I hired to look into your old buddy is making headway.”

“So why is that a problem?” I ask, spinning in my chair to face her. She is serious, and a bit pissed off.

“You gave me five aliases, and he already hit up one, Grant Hitchings, through a shell corp in Birmingham.”

“And?”

“That ID has already been killed. Like, literally. A death certificate popped up, and now Grant is no more. Whoever ‘Grant’ has working this from the other side is good. Fucking good, because *my* guy is one of the best.”

“Is there a reason why we haven’t used him before?” This seems like an obvious question, but with Jem, it could be the most complicated rocket science answer known to man.

“He tends to work outside of the law.”

Nodding, I see the predicament, but right now, I couldn’t care less if he broke every law there is to get me breathing the same air as Gideon Hawthorne. “Tends to or does?”

“Does.”

Spinning back to stare out of the window, I say nothing.

“Do we close in on Birmingham?” Jem asks.

“No. He won’t be there. Keep this guy tracking the other aliases, but my guess is, head North of the Midlands. Grant Hitchings is a decoy, an easy find right in the middle of the country. Could go either way.”

“Why North then?”

“A hunch.”

“That’s risky.”

“What is life if not a series of risks?”

“Fair point,” she mumbles. “Don’t forget your meeting in twenty minutes.” I hear the office door open and close again as she leaves.

Going back to my brooding, I don’t realise how much time passes when the buzzer sounds, and Jem says, “Archer Jackson here to see you.”

Turning in my chair to face forward, I rise when Archer strolls in as if he owns the world.

“Dante,” he says smoothly. “Good to see you again.”

“You too.” We shake hands firmly, and I sit again. “What brings you down South?”

“Straight down to business. I can respect that.” He sits and crosses his legs as he gives me a shrewd glare. “One of the recruits I had an eye on has started working here.”

The accusation hangs there like a noxious gas.

Leaning back in my chair, I hold the pen up in front of me, clasped nonchalantly between my fingers. “Who?”

“Jerrick Wilmslow.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Dante,” he says, still with that charming smile, but the flash of death in his eyes is not to be taken lightly. “I want my recruit.”

“Take him. I seriously don’t give a fuck, right now. I have no room for newbies in my house, and to be honest, I don’t poach recruits. Whatever this is, it’s a coincidence, and you would be wise to accept that, get your recruit and leave my city as quickly as possible before I take offence at your barely there accusation.”

He sneers, but it quickly turns to a laugh as he rises. “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Dante. One day, we will have to have a real catch up. As long as we are on the same page about Jerrick, we don’t have a problem.”

Remaining seated in a show of power, I flash him a deadly smile. “Same

line even. See you around, Archer.”

“Dante.”

My gaze follows him out of my office. I’m arrogant, but not a stupid man. Turning my back on the head of the Manchester chapter of Solitaire would be a big mistake. I’d most definitely find myself with a knife buried between my shoulder blades, and I don’t mean that metaphorically. Whatever this cock up is with this recruit, it wasn’t something I was aware of. The dick must’ve decided to move to London and get himself a job with DeVare Industries. Not my fucking problem.

Going back to the issue that *is* my fucking problem, I frown and reach into the bottom drawer of my desk. Pulling out a metal box, I place my thumb on the biometric scanner, and it unlocks. Lifting the lid, I stare at the contents and shudder.

“Tick-tock, Gideon. Let my guy find you, and we can get this over with.” I know he knows Jemima was behind the guy looking for Grant Hitchings, so he knows it’s really me. A decade is a long time between friends, more so between enemies, and that night we parted ways, that is what we became.

But this cancels that out. This is bigger than either one of us, and that is saying something.

Slamming the lid back down, I shove the box back in the drawer and close it with my foot, pushing my chair all the way over to the floor-to-ceiling windows to resume my brooding.

“Everything okay?” Jem asks, coming into the office a few minutes later.

“Was it you?”

“Was what me?”

“Did you take his recruit?”

“Of course not,” she scoffs. “I’m many things, but I’m not a thief.”

“Liar.”

“Okay, I’m a thief, but I don’t take other houses’ recruits. I know it’s not the done thing.”

“So why was he here?”

“Beats me.”

“Do you have a death wish?”

“No, sir.”

“Then find the fuck out, and if I have to tell you how to do your job again, Jemima, we are going to have a serious fucking problem on our hands. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

She slips out, quietly closing the door, and I breathe out in frustration. She should know better than to test me right now. She is bratty and cocky, and usually, I find it amusing and entertaining, but this thing with Gideon has rattled me, and I won't rest until he is looking directly at me when I tell him shit is about to hit the fan.

---

## ISLA

The phone wakes me up at what appears to be the crack of dawn. Not even in mid-winter. It's still pitch black out, and the heating hasn't even clicked on yet to signify 6 AM.

"Fucking hell," I grumble and fumble on the bedside cabinet for my phone. Squinting at it, I can see it is half five. I answer it, already having an inkling who it might be. "It hasn't even been twenty-four hours yet."

Sophia giggles. "I never said twenty-four hours. I said *tomorrow*. You're lucky you got five and a half hours longer."

"Yeah, real lucky, thanks a bunch."

"Well?"

Taking a deep breath, hoping that this isn't the worst mistake of my life, I exhale and say, "You win. I'm in."

Sophia's exhalation is filled with relief. "Thank you," she murmurs. "I promise you won't regret this."

"I hope not."

"I'll pick you up in two hours. Pack your bags, clean up, say your goodbyes and lock your flat up tight."

"Two hours?" I exclaim, sitting up. "What about all my clients? I'm supposed to work at least a week's notice!"

"All taken care of. Two hours, Isla." She hangs up, which is an annoying habit of hers, to get her own way.

Glaring at the phone, I drop it on the bed and flop back, glad I made a start on my packing last night. But the most difficult part is still in front of me.

Knowing my parents will be up as they rise at five, no matter what day or season, I dial the landline and wait.

Mum answers after a couple of rings. "Hello?"

She isn't even worried it might be an emergency, just business as usual, as if everyone is up at this ungodly hour.

"Hi, Mum."

"Isla. This is a surprise. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine, just checking in."

"Oh, well, we are right as rain. You know us, just cracking on."

Nodding slowly, I don't know what else to say. "Good, good," I murmur after a brief, uncomfortable pause.

"Isla?" My dad comes on the line. "Come to your senses yet?"

Clenching my jaw, it doesn't take much to remind me why I don't talk to them very often. "I'm doing great here, Dad. I don't need a big job in the city."

"Well," he huffs in disbelief. "That's your choice."

Those three words make it very clear what he thinks of my choice. It's been a bone of contention between us for ten years when they moved to London when I was twenty-five, and I stayed here in Hemsway. They always hated it here, and when Dad finally got offered a job in London, they upped and left and never looked back.

"Yes, it's my choice. Well, I won't keep you. Just wanted to say 'hi'."

"Okay, speak to you soon," he says and hands the phone back to my mum.

"Bye, dear. Stay in touch more."

"Sure."

We hang up, and I shake my head. Not once has she picked up the phone to call me. It's always the other way around.

Hauling my body out of bed, I climb in the shower to warm up more than get clean at this hour of the morning, and with a yawn, I pull myself together to get showered and resume my packing before breakfast and Sophia's impending arrival.



SHE ARRIVES PROMPTLY AT HALF PAST SEVEN. SHE DOESN'T COME UP, SO



even though I see her from the window where I've been standing for the last half an hour, I wait for her to ring. She does, and I answer straight away.

"You ready?" she asks.

"Yes." My reply is barely a croak. I keep swinging back and forth on this, not sure if I should go through with it after all. There's still time to back out and keep my mouth shut.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Maybe."

She giggles softly. "My trip is booked, and I'm going this afternoon. Do you want to leave a helpless idiot on his own to take care of that place?"

Glancing up at the castle, I chew my lip. "Is he really a helpless idiot?"

"So much," she groans.

Chuckling, I say, "Fine, then. You seem to know which buttons to push on me, Sophia. You know I can't resist a lost cause."

"We are kindred," she says quietly. "You and me. Do you feel it as well?"

Sighing, I relent. "Yeah, I guess I do. If I didn't, I would've told you to get lost."

"I know. And that's one of the many things I like about you, Isla. Do not be afraid to tell Gideon to get lost if he hassles you. He is very particular, but don't let his demands scare you."

"Okay, now *you* are scaring me."

"His bark is worse than his bite."

"Barks still hurt."

"I know, but he will love you as I do, once he gets over what he will undoubtedly call my betrayal."

"You'd better be right."

"I know him."

"I'm coming down. Just let me turn everything off."

"Okay."

We hang up, and I pocket my phone in my coat and look around. Flicking off the gas and electric, I pick up the cooler bag with my perishables to drop off at the local homeless shelter on the way, assuming Sophia doesn't mind the detour, and place it on the suitcase on wheels. Hoisting my oversized bag onto my shoulder, I leave the flat and lock it up tight, throwing my keys in the bag and struggling down the one flight of stairs to meet Sophia at the curb.

"Mind if we make a stop? It would be a shame to waste all this."

“What is it?”

“Food.”

“Of course.” She beams at me. “Tell me where to go.”

Setting off, I direct her, and after handing over the bag, we are on our way up the hill, my stomach in knots.

“He still doesn’t know I’m coming?” I ask when the castle comes into view.

“Uhm...”

“I’ll take that as a no. I hope you know what you’re doing here,” I murmur.

“It’ll be fine,” she insists, but I’m not so sure.

This Gideon sounds like a bit of a nightmare, but maybe that’s why Sophia came for me. She knows I can handle awkward and particular clients.

“I’ve left you a file with everything in it you need to know.”

“Will I be able to get in touch with you if I need help?”

She shakes her head. “I’ll try to check in often, but if I leave you with any contact details, Gideon will find them.”

“Won’t he be able to find you, anyway?” I ask this because I’m still convinced they are spies, so trying to hide from a master spy seems quite pointless.

“He will try, and he will grill you, but you don’t know shit.”

“You told me...”

“I lied.”

“Oh.”

She shoots me an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“Fair enough. I guess you have your reasons, but it’s not my business to pry.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs and pulls up to these foreboding gates with a strange symbol on them. I’m guessing it’s a coat of arms of some kind.

My mouth goes dry as we are stopped by a security team that is terrifying to look at. Enormous guys with attitudes you don’t want to mess with.

“Who’s she?” one of them growls, bending down to glare at me with dead eyes when Sophia slides the window down.

“This is Isla Harding. You will liaise with her for the next few months while I’m out of town.”

“Boss know about this? We received no orders to let anyone onto the premises.”

“Oh, he knows, he’s just being a dick about it,” Sophia growls, which strangely sets the guard’s concerns at ease.

“Fair enough. Good luck, blondie,” he says with a slight sneer in my direction, which doesn’t make me feel any more confident about this.

Banging the top of the car, he lets us through the gates, and when they close behind us, it feels like being locked up in prison. But I suppose the simile isn’t far from wrong. Wringing my hands, I try to relax when the car rolls to a stop and Sophia gets out.

“Come on,” she urges.

“Coming,” I murmur and get out, opening the back door for my suitcase and bag.

Sophia takes the bag from me, leaving me to wheel my suitcase up the red brick driveway to the grand double front doors made from thick dark wood with iron studs in it. Very medieval. I hope the inside is a bit more modern.

Sophia opens the doors, and I take a step inside. The entrance hall takes my breath away with the cream marble floor, sweeping staircase which splits midway to go left and right, padded with a gorgeous Windsor print carpet. A crystal chandelier glitters overhead, and I feel like I’ve stepped into another world—one where I definitely don’t belong.

“I’ll get you settled, and then I’ve got to leave, okay?” Sophia whispers.

Nodding in awe, I follow her to the bottom of the stairs and grip my suitcase tightly as I lift it up, wondering what on earth I’ve got myself into.



## SEBASTIAN

Sitting in the back seat of the sleek, black Mercedes, I squint into the tiny binoculars fixed on the top floor of the building in the city. They might be small, but they are state-of-the-art, and I can see Dante glaring out of the window before he moves back to his desk. He is rattled. Dante DeVare doesn't glare out of office windows unless he has something he would rather not deal with, and the box I sent him is definitely not something he wants to deal with. But he'd better fucking had because I need him to. I need him to lead me straight to my target.

This is completely personal, although I like to think of myself as the consummate professional when it comes to this side hustle. I do it for fun, for the rush, the thrill that comes with taking a person's life, and they never even saw it coming. Usually, it is a simple process, but this time, well, it kinda fucking helps if you can find your damn target.

"Come on, Dante. What are you waiting for?"

For three long weeks, I've been sitting here, ignoring everything else, and yet he does nothing. I wonder if he knows it's me who sent him that box. Part of me hopes he does. He screwed me over, and I want what's mine. The *Don* of this fucking Secret Society is really to blame. He knew that the head of the South London chapter was mine, yet he passed me over for his long-time buddy, Dante. I always knew I was on the outside of that duo. Try as I might, I could just never crack that clique to be 'one of them'. I've long since lost any anger over it, but the dull ache that they took what was mine has not.

My phone rings, and I answer it, putting it on speaker as I don't move my gaze from the window.

“Yes?”

“Mr Christchurch. I’ve got a client for you.”

“Mmm?”

“She wants you to take out her cheating husband.”

Snickering, I lower the binoculars. “Oh?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’ve been through all the dross with her. She is adamant, and she can pay.”

“Fine, send me the details.”

“On it.”

The line goes dead before it rings again, and I answer. “Mm?”

“Are you ever coming back to the office?”

“At some point. Is there something you can’t handle?”

“No, but still...”

“Stop pouting, Kai. If you can handle it, get on with it. This is more important.”

“More important than running a billion-pound empire?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I should get a raise.”

“Shut up and do your job, and maybe I’ll look into it.”

“Shut up and do *your* job more like.”

“Now, you’re getting it, mate.”

“Fuck you,” he growls and hangs up as I chuckle.

He is a one-of-a-kind, and I’m lucky to have him. I know that. He knows that, and I will compensate him accordingly once Dante leads me to the Don so I can cut out his still beating heart, burn it in front of his eyes before I shoot him in the head and take over this whole fucking Society showing everyone how this game is really played. He can think he took everything from me, but he will soon find out what it means to be left empty-handed.

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll cut his hands off as well.”

Huffing when the phone rings for a third time, I ignore it and lower the binoculars in annoyance. This is becoming extremely tedious. I’m not suited to all this waiting around. Patience never was my strong suit, but playing the long game has forced me to sit idle for quite some time. I didn’t think it would take this long, though. The only conclusion I can draw is that Dante has no clue where the Don is. That opens up a whole other case that needs unpacking, but I guess they have parted ways, and it’s no secret that our illustrious leader has gone underground in the last few years. Apparently

more underground than I gave him credit for.

As I sit there, lost in thought, my phone rings again. This time, I answer it right away.

“Sebastian,” a low, gravelly voice says on the other end.

“Who is this?” I ask, my grip tightening on the binoculars as I don't recognise the voice.

“It doesn't matter who I am. What matters is that you stop looking for the Don. Consider this a warning, Sebastian. There are things you do not understand, things you cannot comprehend. If you continue down this path, the consequences will be severe.”

I scoff. “Is that a threat?”

“It's a warning,” the voice repeats.

“Well, whoever you are, tell your boss I'm not one to be threatened. I'll find him, eventually.”

There's a pause on the other end of the line before the voice speaks again. “Very well. The Society has eyes and ears everywhere. Watch your back, Sebastian.”

And with that, the line goes dead. I stare at the phone for a moment before chuckling to myself. This mystery caller must not know who they're dealing with. If anything, that warning has only made me more determined to find the Don and take over this whole damn Society.

But first, I have a cheating husband to deal with. As much as I enjoy taking out high-level targets, sometimes it's nice to have an easy job.

Scrolling through my phone for the details my partner sent me, I see it's simple enough. He supposedly meets his mistress at a hotel in the city. I need to scope out the place, find a location where I can set up and disappear without a trace after.

But as I sit there for a moment, contemplating my next move, a part of me wants to jump straight into action and take out the new target, but another part of me wants to wait and see if Dante makes any moves. Finding the Don is my top priority, despite this insidious warning, but I know taking out the cheating husband will give me a much-needed adrenaline rush. However, going in without doing any recon is a rookie mistake, and I'm anything but that.

“Head to the Lowcroft Hotel in SW6,” I say to my driver.

He nods but doesn't say a word. He is paid exceptionally well to not speak and to not hear anything. Trust is a hard issue to deal with in this business, in

this world, but sometimes you just have to roll the dice and hope it doesn't come back to bite you in the arse.





## GIDEON

**R**olling my shoulders as I make my way across the entrance hall from the pool room to my office, my towel draped around my waist, I groan softly. I pushed myself too hard, and I'll pay for it later.

Crossing over to stand in front of the fire as I warm up, I know I should get upstairs and get dressed, but I really can't be bothered right now. I know Sophia left early this morning. We were both too stubborn to say goodbye, but mostly, I'm still shocked she went.

My head snaps to the side when I hear a noise coming from the entrance hall.

Crossing over to my desk, I pull out the handgun from the clip underneath and stroll silently in my bare feet to the office door. Peering out, I don't see anyone, but I know I heard something.

Moving cautiously, I make my way to the kitchen door, following my instincts. Shoving the door open, I see a blonde woman peering into the fridge.

She looks up in surprise, and then her eyes widen as she sees the gun levelled at her head.

"Who the fuck are you?" I growl, but there is no need for a reply. I know already, and I'm so fucking furious with Sophia, it blurs my vision momentarily.

Isla Harding steps back and sticks her hands up like she's under arrest, her face ashen.

"Your sister hired me. I'm Isla Harding."

"I know who you are. Why are you here?"

She looks confused and then stammers. “Sophia hired me to housekeep this castle and to look after you.”

“Look after me?” I sneer, shaking my head but not lowering the weapon, causing this woman even more distress. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

“I have a file,” she whimpers.

Stifling the urge to chuckle at the ridiculousness of this entire fiasco, I lower the gun. “So do I. Wanna bet mine is bigger than yours?”

“What?”

Her startled response is cute, but it’s the heat that fills her gaze that captures my full attention.

Remembering I’m still wearing a towel, and *only* a towel as there’s nothing like a skinny dip on a freezing wintry morning, I inhale slowly. I guess hitting forty didn’t suddenly turn me into an old fuddy-duddy with rolls of fat and disgusting ear and nose hair. It amazes me how much I’ve missed seeing that look pass across a woman’s face, and it makes me rethink my life of solitude for just a moment before my reality crashes back down on me, and I glower at her.

“You can pack your bags and get out.”

With that, I turn and stalk out of the kitchen before I do or say something I’m going to regret.

“Sophia said you’d say that and that I should tell you I work for her. Not you.”

Catching me off guard, I keep walking a few paces before it sinks in, and I spin around, my gaze boring into hers, creating a path of scorched air between us. “Say that again.”

She lifts her chin up, even though her lower lip is trembling. “You can’t fire me.”

“Maybe I can’t fire you, but I can sure as shit kick you out of my home.”

“Why would you want to do that? I’m here to help you.”

“I don’t need your help, Ms Harding. Leave now, or I will do more than fire you.” Without waiting for an answer, I turn again, but as my foot hits the bottom step, she says something that freezes every blood cell in my body.

“Gideon.”

My name. My honest to God name, which only a handful of people know, has just tumbled from her lips and caused such a base reaction in me, I want to grip her by her hair and force that mouth around my cock.

“What did you just call me?” My quiet tone isn’t to be taken out of context, and she knows it.

“Your name,” she croaks. “Isn’t that your name? Gideon Hawthorne?”

Red flashes before my eyes as I realise my sister has broken the one oath that was to remain a secret at all costs. Gripping the gun tighter, I try not to take my anger at my sister out on this woman who has twisted my head a bit too far around for my liking.

“Never say that name again,” I grit out.

“Then what am I supposed to call you?”

“Sir or Master.”

“Please,” she scoffs. “In your dreams, maybe. I don’t know the way you work, *Gideon*, but I don’t believe in trumped-up titles. I will call you by your first name, and you shall address me the same.”

“Oh, shall I, *Ms Harding*?”

We lock gazes, but this entire confrontation is taking its toll on her, and she lowers her eyes.

Every cell in my body is screaming at me to tell her to get the fuck out of my house and out of my life and forget everything Sophia told her, but the words just won’t come out of my mouth. It takes me all of two seconds to realise I want her here. A part of me even needs her here. I long for this banter; it’s invigorating, and the expression of desire she has that has lit a fire deep in my soul is needed for me to take my next breath.

“Stay out of my way,” I growl and then turn and take the stairs two at a time, growing conscious of the fact that my cock is stiff under my towel, and it needs to be taken care of. I’d rather have Isla Harding service me, but something tells me she isn’t ready for that yet.

She isn’t ready for *me* yet.

She will be. I’ll make sure of it.

Smiling wickedly, I push my way into the en-suite bathroom and catch sight of myself in the mirror. I’m shocked by what I see. There is life in my eyes that hasn’t been there in years that I didn’t realise had dulled so much being here on my own.

This woman has crashed unwanted into my life and single-handedly given a fresh spark to the dying embers of my existence.

Even if I didn’t want her pussy wrapped around my cock, I would now keep her around for the sheer awe she has given me and the life she has breathed back into me that I didn’t know was fading.



## ISLA

With trembling hands, I let out a shaky breath and hope that I don't pass out from the sheer weight of that encounter. I'm mad at Sophia for not telling me that her brother is a psychopathic, gun-toting, helpless idiot who has the body of a god that I want to lick all over and climb like a tree, and deep blue eyes that I could drown in.

"Bitch," I mutter for the hundredth time.

Wiping my mouth in case there is any drool, I turn back to the fridge and push the door carefully closed before leaning against it. I've never been held at gunpoint before. Guns are illegal in this country, for a start, but Hemsway is safe and pleasant. I doubt anyone living here would even know where to procure such a weapon.

When my racing heart slows down, I straighten up and open the fridge again. I still have a job to do, and I'm going to prove to Gideon Hawthorne that he owes me an apology for being a complete tool.

Finding a lovely fresh, plump chicken and some veg for roasting, I set about preparing the meal, knowing this is one of Gideon's favourites. For all she didn't tell me, Sophia did a great job with her file. And if Gideon wants to compare sizes, I'm more than happy to show him mine.

Leaving the oven on low as it is still relatively early, I head upstairs, wanting to do a bit of exploring and familiarising myself with the layout of this place. Everywhere is spotlessly clean, which speaks to my own heart, so Gideon won't have any complaints in that department. Meandering along the corridor, past my enormous bedroom, I head further along where the lights are non-existent. Flicking a switch, I blink as low-level lighting casts a glow

along the corridor.

“I wonder what’s down here, then...” Looking back over my shoulder, feeling like I’m doing something wrong but not enough to stop, I progress forward, seeing more doors much like the ones near my room.

“What are you doing?”

Gideon’s sharp voice echoes down the corridor, and I freeze, my back still to him.

“Just getting to know the house,” I say, growing a pair and turning around.

His eyes are blazing, but that’s not the only thing I notice. He is dressed in casual black pants and a black shirt open at the collar, the sleeves rolled up to show off his muscular forearms.

Licking my lips is an automatic reaction to seeing him this way. I’m not sure if he is as sexy or sexier than he is when wearing just a towel.

“Don’t. You won’t be here long enough.”

“Says you,” I murmur and watch as his eyes light up at my defiance before hooding in that broody way he has working for him. “Why are you so hellbent on getting rid of me?”

“I don’t want you here.”

“But you do *need* me here. That much I know from Sophia.”

“Why?” he asks, crossing his arms and leaning on the wall, practically blocking my exit. “What did she tell you?”

Smirking, I reply, “You don’t want to know.”

Those blue pools of heaven flash dangerously, even though he retains his don’t-give-a-fuck pose. “Don’t be secretive, Ms Harding,” he murmurs.

“That’s rich coming from you, *Mr Hawthorne*.”

His eyes go wide, and his nostrils flare. “She didn’t,” he mutters.

“Or do you prefer Richardson? Or maybe I should just call you James Bond.” My mouth has lost the plot. I don’t know what it is, but this man just riles me up. Somewhere along the line, I’ve grown a sassy attitude, and it’s playing with fire right now.

“Excuse me?” he asks, carefully searching my eyes.

“Nothing,” I murmur, realising that probably wasn’t the most tactful thing to say to a spy whose identity has to remain a secret. I don’t want him to think Sophia said anything to me because she didn’t.

The air around us is charged with all sorts of tension that I don’t want to dissect, so instead, I lift my chin and stride forward, pushing past him and

catching a whiff of some expensive aftershave that does nothing to quell the burning desire in the pit of my stomach. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have a chicken to check on.”

“By all means,” he murmurs and steps aside, to my surprise. I half expected him to block my way completely.

“Humph,” I mutter and stalk off, feeling his gaze on my arse as I head back the way I came, now even more curious what was down the corridor that he didn’t want me to see.

Back in the kitchen, which is a gorgeous farmhouse-type affair, I check on the roast and, satisfied that it is coming along nicely, I check all the cupboards and familiarise myself with this room if none of the others. I daren’t go back out there now in case Gideon is lurking, ready to pounce on me with this smooth voice and choice words.

But there is only so much I can do in here. The rest of my work is out there. The chicken is going to be a couple of hours yet, and I don’t feel like sitting in here twiddling my thumbs when there is stuff to be done. I need to find a dining room for a start and set the table, so I peer around the door, relieved that the coast is clear.

Trying to be as stealthy as Gideon is, I check a couple of rooms close to the kitchen, figuring it’s a safe bet that the dining room is one of them. Luck is on my side, and I find it quickly, marvelling at the twenty-seater table with the chandelier overhead.

“Wow. Nice.”

Crossing over to the sideboard that runs most of the way down the far side, I search for cutlery and glassware. Setting a perfect table for one at the head, I’m satisfied with the work and return to the kitchen to recheck the chicken. I’m being overly paranoid, but this has to be flawless. I will never live it down if Gideon can find anything to complain about.

Bending down to check the oven yet again a few minutes later, I hear the kitchen door open.

After a short pause, Gideon says, “Can I help with anything?”

Standing upright, I turn to him with an incredulous expression. “You can cook?”

He smiles slowly, and it’s sexy as fuck. “That surprises you?”

“Sophia called you a helpless idiot.”

“Ah, okay, so the truth comes out. She’s not wrong, but I didn’t think you would tell me unless I tricked it out of you.”



“Dammit!” I exclaim, my cheeks heating up, which has nothing to do with the oven burning my arse. Kicking the door shut, I inhale slowly. “She didn’t really say that.”

“Liar. And a bad one.”

“Was she?”

He shrugs. “Probably not.”

“You don’t know yourself if you are a helpless idiot?”

He snickers. “I don’t know which bit to be more offended at, the helpless or the idiot.”

“If you are neither, then there should be no offence,” I point out.

“True, but I am probably one or the other when it comes to making a roast dinner that smells delicious, by the way.”

Beaming at the compliment, I say, “Do you still want me to leave?”

Narrowing his eyes, he contemplates my question. “You can stay until after I’ve eaten.”

“Gee, thanks.” Unfortunately, I’m not sure if he’s being serious or not. I mean, if he really wants me to go, I’ll go. I’ll just have to tell Sophia he threw me out and return her money to her, which is sitting in my bank account, probably making the bank staff suspicious and wary and possibly wondering if they should call the police. When he doesn’t give me more, I push it. “Don’t you want me to clean up first?”

“Hmm, good point. I can work the dishwasher, but Sophia reckons I need schooling on how to pack it correctly.”

Giggling, I press my lips together so it doesn’t sound too flirty. “An incorrect pack will definitely ruin the experience.”

“You can leave after that,” he says quietly, his gaze steady as he fixes on mine.

“Sure you don’t need me to do some laundry?” I ask in just as quiet a tone.

I feel like we have descended into some weird kind of kink here. Like talking about household chores turns us on to the point where we’re going to rip at each clothes and fuck like bunnies on the island in the middle of the kitchen.

He moves in closer, his eyes never leaving mine. “I might have one or two items.”

Nodding as my heart beats frantically, I murmur, “Darks or lights?”

“Darks.”

“You look good in black.”

“Better than a towel?”

My mouth has gone as dry as the Sahara. “I didn’t notice.”

“Liar,” he says again, his eyes flicking to the wisp of hair that is sticking to my suddenly sweaty neck.

Begging the universe to make him reach out and brush it away, I wonder what on earth is going on here. He is my boss, and I’m standing here in his home wishing he would sweep me up to his bed to make love to me until tomorrow while the chicken burns to a crisp, but we don’t care because we are too lost in each other.

“Chicken,” I murmur as I remember the roast dinner. “Chicken!”

“What?” he exclaims, blinking rapidly as the moment is well and truly shattered.

“My chicken!” I roar and spin back to the oven, yanking the door open to stare inside at the perfectly succulent chicken sitting there innocently amongst the veg. “Fuck. Stop distracting me! I will not let you ruin this dinner!”

“Me?” he asks, aghast, like I accused him of murdering someone. “You are the one in charge of the cooking, my dear.”

“Well, you and your charming ways need to fuck off out of my kitchen. Go!”

“You find me charming?” The smirk adorning his biteable lips is my undoing.

Laying my hands on him, which is the biggest mistake ever, I shove him out of the kitchen while he laughs at me. I don’t care, though, because his rippling muscles under his sexy shirt are hard as iron, which brings other muscles into my mind, and now all I can think about is his cock.

“Go and sit down. Dinner will be served shortly,” I clip out and spin abruptly to focus on the dinner and not the hot guy who has me flustered like no other man on the planet has managed to achieve. “Doomed,” I mutter. “I’m doomed.”



## GIDEON

**D**ying.

I'm dying from a cock so stiff, it's painful.

Sitting at the head of the table, where Isla has placed me, is uncomfortable at best. I don't know how that conversation turned into something so innocently erotic that it fired up my engines like no porn ever could. The woman is a goddess. When she had her hands on me, it took every ounce of strength I have to not grab her and force her to her knees in front of my aching cock.

"Fuck," I groan and drop my head into my hands. "What is going on here? Where did this all get derailed?" My life is simple. Remain locked away from the public and get on with shit.

Now, I'm presented with a gorgeous woman who does things to my body and soul that no one else ever has, but not only does she work for me, she isn't supposed to be here at all. She can never find out who I truly am. She won't be safe. I won't be safe. Sophia won't be safe. Even though I'm furious with my sister for her actions, in a deep, dark place, I don't begrudge her for wanting to get out of here and try to salvage some sort of life for herself. Although, that reminds me... I need to connect with Viktor and Francesca later to see if they have dug up this mystery man. If they have failed, I will pass this on to Jones. I'm reluctant to add to his workload because I need him to keep digging into Dante DeVare and why his shark is looking for me.

"Lucky for you, this turned out perfectly, if I do say so myself," Isla says, bustling into the room with a plate of food that looks and smells too good to be true.

“Don’t you mean luckily for you?” I lean back slightly as she places the plate in front of me.

“No. You.”

She turns to leave, but I don’t want her to go yet. “Aren’t you eating?”

“I’ll have mine in the kitchen.”

“Join me.” *What are you doing, man?* Ignoring my angel for the devil instead, I smile when she turns back in surprise.

“Are you serious?”

“Why not?”

“Thought you wanted me to go?”

“Not until after you’ve done my laundry. But then I think I might need you to do some polishing. I have this knob...”

Her cheeks go bright red as the innuendo hits home, and I chuckle.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Ms Harding. It’s an old antique brass doorknob that is looking a bit tarnished.”

“Of course,” she splutters and runs from the room to my disappointment.

However, a few moments later, she returns with a plate and sits at the head of the table on the other side.

“We might need a loudspeaker to have a conversation,” I call out and kick the chair to my right out. “Closer, so I don’t have to shout?”

Seeing her grit her teeth, she marches over and slams her plate down before she sits stiffly and tucks in, probably so she doesn’t have to say anything. Not that I can blame her. I am as lost for words as she is. There is nothing I can say about myself that doesn’t risk me losing everything.

“This is good,” I end up saying after a few bites.

“Good? It’s fucking the best roast dinner you’ll ever eat.”

“Modest as well. Your traits are stacking up, Ms Harding.”

She glares at me from those forest green eyes, dying to tell me to fuck off. I hope she does. I want to see it. I need her to.

“Say what’s on your mind,” I whisper.

Averting her gaze back to her dinner, she says nothing.

Getting lost in the gorgeous food, we eat away in silence, which isn’t as awkward as I expected it to be. She finishes before me and sits back with a wicked gleam in her eyes. “So, where is this knob you want me to polish?”

Grinning, I say, “I’ll show it to you after you’ve cleaned up, run the dishwasher and done my laundry.”

“Are you sure this isn’t an excuse to keep me here? Do you secretly like

me, Gideon?”

“I not-so-secretly like your cooking. Based on this performance, you may stay.”

“Don’t expect this every night.”

“That’s disappointing.”

She smiles. “There is a entire world of dishes I can cook that will be just as tasty. By the time I’m done with you in six months, you will want me to stay indefinitely.”

“Is that an option?”

“Maybe.” She rises and clears the plates away while I contemplate that. My takeaway from that comment is that Sophia doesn’t actually plan on coming back. She has well and truly left me and made sure that her replacement is not only someone who can take care of this house but me as well.

I’ll never admit it to her, but she chose well, and I can see the next six months being filled with banter and challenges that I’m not too sure I want to avoid. Every protocol in the book says to stay away from her, but how can I when I’m drawn to her in ways I’ve only ever read about? It’s impossible.

“I have a phone call to make,” I say as she shoves the door open with her backside due to her full hands. “Find me when dessert is ready.”

She nods but doesn’t bite. I was hoping she would say she was dessert, but for all the five minutes I’ve known her, I know it will take a lot more work than a few flirty comments to get her in my bed.

But I will.

The Don doesn’t back down from obstacles in his path, but more importantly, neither does Gideon Hawthorne. Isla Harding will be mine, and there isn’t a damn thing she can do about it.



## DANTE

“**Y**ou were right.”

Looking up at Jem as she stalks into my office, I smile. “I know.”

“Don’t you want to know what about?” she asks as I carry on making notes on the marketing report.

“Everything, but if you have something specific you’d like to commend me on, then I’m all ears.”

“Arse,” she mutters under her breath. “My guy found one of the aliases up North. Frances Richardson.”

Now, that is enough to make me give her my undivided attention. I sit back and narrow my eyes. “Where?”

“We don’t have an exact location, but somewhere in the Lake District.”

“How?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“His sister got careless.”

“Really,” I drawl, intrigued by that piece of information. Sophia is the most guarded person I know when it comes to protecting her brother.

Jem shrugs. “She hired someone using the name Richardson. Poached her from an agency.”

“What kind of agency?”

“Personal Assisting to the elderly and vulnerable.”

I choke back the snort. “Okay. Interesting. So, your guy made the connection how? Richardson is not an uncommon name.”



Again, she shrugs.

“Ah, I see. Not quite a connection rather than a stab in the dark.”

“Do you want the info or not?”

Holding my hand out for it, I accept the file she slaps into it with good grace, “Thank you.”

“That’s better,” Jemima grumbles.

Flicking the file open, I don’t see anything other than what she has already told me. But for all my scepticism, it *is* a start.

“So, what do we do?” Jem asks when I don’t say anything.

Trouble is, I don’t know what to say. Do I waste resources chasing this lead down, or do I get this PI to keep digging?

“Give me a minute to think this through. I have to make the right choice here, or we could lose days.”

She drums her fingers on the desk impatiently.

Glaring at them, I snap, “I meant alone.”

She raises her eyebrow at my tone but leaves me to think this through. The more I think about the contents of the box, the more I’m connecting the dots all the way back to Sebastian Christchurch. That little shit never got over me taking his place as the head of the South London chapter. It doesn’t surprise me. If things had gone down the way they did, and the shoe was on the other foot, I’d be pissed too. But what he fails to recognise is that it was a mistake. A really bad one, admittedly, but this is where we are and ten years later, some of us are trying to forget it. I guess it’s more complicated for him, though.

He is, without doubt, gunning for Gideon, but the question remains as to his exact motive. He has enough to put us away for a really long time, yet he hasn’t said a word yet. Probably because he doesn’t know *the Don’s* real identity, which is how Gideon’s father always wanted it. He grew up with a whole-arse other name and it was only on his eighteenth birthday he found out who he really was. I wasn’t supposed to know. I was supposed to go on thinking my best friend was Cole Tomlinson. Gideon put both of our dicks on the chopping block when he told me his real identity. The strange thing is, no matter the bad blood between us, I won’t ever spill the beans. There are some things that are sacred, and even though we are now rivals, only I get to kill him with my bare hands. So, Sebastian coming in here and thinking he is running this show is a big mistake on his part. I won’t hand Gideon to that lunatic. He has another thing coming if he thinks he can use me to find the

Don.

That ignites my fury.

No one uses Dante DeVare, and if they try, they will get a lesson in why it's not a good idea.

Pushing the button on the speaker, I make a decision. "Jem."

She enters my office a few seconds later and leans against the closed door. "What did you decide?"

"Two things. Firstly, I need your guy to track down Sebastian Christchurch. Exact location. If he is sitting outside my office, I want to know about it. Secondly, I'm going after Frances Richardson. But just me."

"Ah, boo. How come I don't get to go road tripping up North?"

"Because you are needed here, and you don't need to get involved in this shitshow. Plausible deniability. If the worst comes to the worst, I need you here."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

"Fantastic. Did you update your will recently?"

"Funny. You're a funny arsehole. What makes you think you're in it?"

"Oh, I'm crushed. How you wound me with your insinuations."

"Fuck off."

She giggles. "Anything I can do?"

"Just get your guy on Seb. I want to know when he shits, sneezes, fucks a whore, I don't care. I want every last detail."

"Got it."

"I'll take a burner and try not to break it. If you can't get hold of me, don't assume I'm dead until you see my cold corpse with your own eyes."

She loses her sassy attitude as she takes in the weight of this endeavour and nods slowly. "You sure you don't need back up?"

"Don't need it." Standing up, I pack up my briefcase. I need to get out of here and go underground. If Seb is behind this, he will definitely be watching me. "I'll be in touch."

Jemima nods and steps aside.

Bypassing the main elevator, I take the stairwell and pull the jammer out of my suit pocket. Flicking it on, I temporarily disable the wireless cams and head down two flights to the service door leading to the back stairwell.

Stripping off my jacket and tie, I muss up my perfectly styled hair and slip on a pair of glasses. Folding the clothes and putting them into my

briefcase, I pull out a lightweight raincoat that folds up into a tiny package for easy transportation. It's navy blue and just like hundreds of others. Yanking a baseball cap out of the case, I unfold it and shove it on my head. As disguises go, it'll get me past most people who don't give a shit. It might take Sebastian a minute or two, but it won't hold him. Reaching into the back pocket of the briefcase, I pull out the small handgun and lift the jacket to ram it into the back of my pants. Taking my shoes off, I scuff the toes on the concrete wall and put them back on before taking my belt off my pants, letting them droop a bit.

“Well, you bastard. Let's see if you're paying attention,” I mutter as I slip the burner phone into my coat pocket and then close the briefcase, leaving it in a blind spot for Jem to pick up later.

Heading towards the service elevator, I get in and flick the jammer so that the cams go back up, and I head down towards the deliveries entrance at the back of DeVare Industries, where I head out into the gloomy London winter afternoon, my head down and my hands in my pants pockets, keeping a look out for old enemies, and any new ones who are always lurking in the shadows.



## ISLA

I've tidied away the leftover food, stacked the dishwasher, and cleaned every surface in the kitchen twice and now I need to go and speak to Gideon. I've avoided it for long enough. This flirting is very confusing, and I'm not sure it should continue. Well, I'm sure it shouldn't continue from a professional standpoint, but from a thirty-five-year-old woman who hasn't had sex in a while and a real relationship in longer, I'm on the fence about a bit of flirting.

It doesn't take me long to track him down. He is in his office talking on the phone. The door is ajar, but I stick my hand up to knock anyway, then I freeze.

"You had better be fucking joking," he hisses. "Who is this arsehole who is knocking over my aliases like a fucking game of dominoes?"

Dropping my hand slowly, I don't want to move my feet or even breathe too loudly in case he hears me. Clearly, this isn't for my ears, but then why was the door not shut and locked and a giant neon sign above it flashing "keep out"?

"Well, find out, Jones, or I will cut out your still beating heart and hand it to you in a basket that you can carry down to hell with you. Are. We. On. The. Same. Page?"

The last few words are definitely said with a clenched jaw. He is furious. That threat sounds more like a promise, and I gulp. Idly threatening to kill someone is one thing, but that was... chilling.

Hearing what sounds like a punch to a wall, I start to tremble and try to get my feet to move, but I'm rooted to the spot.

“Isla?”

The growl sends a spike of terror through my blood. Pressing my lips together so I don't whimper and let on that I'm actually standing here like a dumbfuck when I should be running out of the front door and as far away from this man and this house as I can, he says again, “Isla. I know you're there.”

By its own accord, my hand reaches out and pushes the door open. Plastering a bright, fake smile on my face, I clutch my hand into a fist and drop it, scrambling for an excuse.

“How much of that did you hear?” he asks with a raised eyebrow when he sees me hovering.

“Nothing,” I lie and then inwardly cringe.

“How many times do I have to tell you, you are a terrible liar?”

“Okay, I heard about handing a basket to someone to take down to hell with them. Would that be a handbasket by any chance?”

He snorts with mirth before his face goes dark again. “What else?”

“Nothing. I swear.” *Please don't see that I'm lying.*

“What did you want?”

“Dessert is ready.”

He turns to me fully, his gaze raking over me, head to toe, lingering on my breasts, which are pressed against the white blouse I felt was appropriate first day on the job wear with my smart black pants and ballet flats. He looks like he wants to devour me, and it sends a jolt of lust straight to my pussy as I stand there being appraised by this elusive, reclusive billionaire spy, or whatever he is.

“What is it?”

Licking my lips, I frown. “What is what?”

“Dessert.”

Cheeks aflame, I mutter, “Ah-apple pie and custard. Not homemade. I found it in the freezer.”

“Maybe later.”

His gaze is unwavering, and it is making me so nervous I want to cry while peeing myself.

“Okay, then, if you don't need anything else...”

“What about my laundry?”

“Oh, uhm... sure.”

“My bedroom is the one at the end of the corridor.” He points upwards,

indicating directly above us.

“You want me to go into your bedroom?” I ask tentatively. That seems invasive. Although, I suppose I have to clean and tidy up at some point, that is to say, tomorrow... probably.

“That is where my laundry basket is.”

“Do you want to join me?” I ask and then realise how that sounded.

Eyes wide as he raises an eyebrow at me again, he smiles sexily. “Is that an offer, Ms Harding?”

“No!” I exclaim. “No. I meant so you can make sure I don’t go snooping.”

“Snooping?” he asks in surprise. “That thought never even crossed my mind.”

“Oh.” Chewing the inside of my lip, I feel like such an idiot now. But I suspect that was his plan.

“Now that you mention it, maybe I should be concerned about you snooping. You clearly have no qualms about eavesdropping on conversations that aren’t meant for your ears.”

*Ouch.* Okay. I figured I’d gotten off too lightly with that one. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, I just...”

“What?”

“Happened to overhear you talking. Your door was ajar, and you talk too loud. Obviously.”

His face is a picture of astonishment as he takes in my words. “Do I, Ms Harding? Do I talk too loudly in my own office in my own home?”

“I’m sorry,” I stammer. “I just meant...”

“Laundry,” he says, eyes narrowed.

“Of course.”

“Sir.”

Stopping me in my tracks, I pause, half-turned in the doorway. “Excuse me?”

“Of course, *Sir.*”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Try it. You might like how it sounds. I know I will.” His eyes are hooded, so I can’t tell if he is teasing me or being deadly serious. I know one thing: I don’t want to be on the receiving end of a heart handed to me to take to hell in a basket by defying him, so as much as I want to tell him to get fucked, I inhale deeply and with that fake smile again, I say, “Of course, *Sir.*”

He closes his eyes and breathes in slowly before he releases it. “Mmm, delicious, Ms Harding.”

Staring at him, mouth agape as he smiles a sinful curve of his lips with his eyes still closed, I clear my throat and back out quickly.

Enigma doesn't even cover what this man is. What is that saying? A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. *That* describes Gideon Hawthorne perfectly. I wonder if there is a key to this mystery and if there is, where is it, and who has it?





## GIDEON

Waiting until Isla has left, I keep my eyes closed. As soon as I hear the door click shut with a firm hand, which makes me chuckle, I open them. She is so easy to wind up. I love that about her. But she is keeping her feet firmly in professional territory, which is disappointing. I'd rather she pounce on me and bounce up and down on my dick for a bit.

Actually, that's not true, insomuch as I would love her to, but this is more fun. I love riling her up and seeing her on the verge of telling me to fuck off, but then she does as I ask. One day she will tell me where to go, and that's the day I know I can take her to my bed and show her how desperate I am for my cock in her hot, wet pussy.

The thought of it now makes me groan and shift uncomfortably as my cock grows stiff.

Saved by the bell, the laptop rings for a video call.

Crossing over to it, I angle it a little bit away from my face and click answer. "Vik. Tell me you have something."

"No pleasantries? How wonderful of you, Don. I wonder if I might inquire how you fare?"

Snorting at his perfect speech and formal pattern that is inbred into his royal blood, I lean back and humour him. "You may."

"How are you?"

"I'll be better when you quit the BS and tell me who this dick is that my sister has run away with."

"Fair enough." He clears his throat as Francesca joins him.

"We have no idea. Your sister is an expert at keeping her tracks invisible:

dark web and encrypted chats. Sophia is a master at this,” she says.

“Then you be better. I need to know.”

“We will keep digging, but if she is determined to keep this person’s identity a mystery, then it is going to take some time.”

I watch, mesmerised, as she places her hand on her husband’s shoulder, and he reaches up to cover it with his own. They are the perfect couple, beautiful, rich, powerful and besotted with each other. It is something that I’m starting to resent, and it is making all sorts of dangerous thoughts drift through my head.

Blinking to regain my focus, I inhale a shallow breath. “I suggest you get me this information in twenty-four hours or prepare to face the consequences of defying a direct order.”

Hanging up, I don’t wait for their reply. My anger at them is irrational and has nothing to do with them not giving me the goods on Sophia’s mystery man. If they fail me, I will hand this over to Jones and see if he can do better. If not, I foresee several people heading down to hell in handbaskets as my wrath is increasing with each passing second that I don’t know where my sister is and with whom.

That begs the question of if she told Isla. Sitting forward with my elbows on the desk, I contemplate my next move. I am the king here and have all the power. It’s just too damn bad that I’ve locked myself away to retain that power, but I’m no fool. I know there is a price on my head. Several, probably into double figures, if I’m being truthful about the matter. And I quite like my head on my shoulders and my dick attached to my balls. Pulling the laptop closer, I type in the name of the local jeweller and search for diamond bracelets. I’m not sure if Isla has pierced ears, so buying her diamond earrings might be a bit of a faux pas. Finding a perfectly delicate tennis bracelet with a price tag of well over five grand, I feel this might go a long way in bringing Isla over to my side. She is very firmly in Sophia’s camp, and she won’t spill the gossip if she has any. There is no way in hell I would resort to my usual tactics to get people to talk. Isla is too valuable, too precious to harm in any way, and not just because she knows how to feed a man. She gives me a much-needed challenge, brings humour and a spark to my life that I thought had long since died. She is beautiful and slightly naïve in the way of how this world works. Not the Secret Society, which is wholly kept under wraps, but the billionaire lifestyle. She strikes me as the type of person who doesn’t care, but I will see with her reaction to this gift. If she

can be bought, I have more money than I know what to do with. If she can't, then it almost thrills me to think of the ways in which I will get her to fess up. Preferably tied to my bed, spreadeagled with her pussy aching for my cock.

Fuck. I can't stop thinking about being inside her. She has me intrigued, but that only means that I'll come out stronger.

Sitting back, as I finish paying for the bracelet, I drum my fingers and then head upstairs to find Isla coming down the stairs with my laundry.

"It can wait until tomorrow morning."

"I'm here now," she says, that bright smile adorning her pretty features. "Is there anything else you need after I'm done?"

Shaking my head, I can't speak for fear of telling her exactly what I want her to do. Stepping aside, I let her go to the kitchen and then disappear into my bedroom, needing a cold shower to douse my arousal in the hopes that I can think straight so I can figure out what the fuck Dante wants with me. Unfortunately, the only thing that comes to mind is that he has finally decided to kill me. However, I know my old friend turned enemy. He will want to do it himself, and that is a confrontation I'm very much looking forward to.



## SEBASTIAN

Taking the shot, I take one second to make sure the bullet hit the man in my crosshairs. Straightening up quickly, I methodically yet swiftly disassemble the rifle and place it piece by piece back into the hard, black case. Snapping it shut, I exit the office on this disused floor of the building opposite the hotel and head down the stairs. Texting my partner to let the client know the job is done, and several moments later, the remainder of the payment comes through. I dismiss it. I don't care. The fifty grand is pocket change for me. I do this for the thrill but going around killing people for free places me in the rather unsavoury category of murderer, and that is just icky and quite tacky. This job was so easy, almost like the target was just waiting for me to take him out, that I didn't even need to do recon. I just finished it, and now I can focus on the real deal.

Slipping into the backseat of the car waiting for me, the driver heads back to DeVare Industries, where I sit in the dark, wondering what my next move is. Dante will be leaving the office soon. It's dark on this late afternoon, but he is a creature of habit. Office, Solitaire club, home, rinse and repeat. However, just to double check, I bring up the tracker on his car that I placed there some weeks ago.

Home.

Interesting. He has moved the chess piece, which makes me think he is preparing to move across the board.

"DeVare's house," I murmur to the driver, but before he can set off, the back door opens and in slides a gorgeous red head with a rack to die for.

"Jemima Pearson," I state. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She smirks and then places a gun to my forehead.

“Oh, like that, is it?”

“What do you want with Dante?” she asks, still smiling.

“None of your business.”

“That’s bold coming from someone with a gun pointed to their head.”

“I don’t think you’ll use that.”

Anger flashes in her eyes. “I will pull this trigger and splash your brains all over this fancy leather without a second thought.”

“Fierce. Dante is lucky to have such an aggressive pit bull.”

She snaps her jaws and presses the gun harder to my head. “What do you want with Dante?”

“Still none of your business. And if you wanted me dead, I would be already. So why haven’t you pulled the trigger, hmm?”

“None of *your* business.”

“Well, unlucky for you, I don’t appreciate being threatened in my own car.” I slap her hand away and grip the gun, my other hand going around her throat before she can take her next breath. Fear and fury mingle in her green eyes, and it turns me on to the point where if I were in a position to, I would fuck her until she begged for mercy.

As it is, I’m not interested in her.

I am, however, interested in what she has to say about where Dante is. “Where is he?”

“No idea,” she chokes out.

“Don’t believe you,” I murmur.

“He left earlier. He didn’t tell me where he was going, okay?”

“Do you have the means to track him down?”

“No.”

“Wrong answer.” I take the gun and press it under her chin, seeing the terror before she crushes it into defiance. She is strong, I’ll give her that. “Get out of my car before I cover my fancy leather seats in your brains, and I won’t be so hesitant to pull the trigger.”

“Fuck you,” she snarls as I let her go, and she scrambles to open the door.

“You aren’t my type.”

She smirks at me again as she bends down to glare at me, leaning heavily on the door. “I’m everyone’s type.” Slamming it shut in my face, she strides off.

I have to admire her loyalty, but she has pissed me off.

“Decoy?”

Was she distracting me from the bigger picture? Scanning the area around the office building, I am almost sure I will see Dante sneaking off. This whole thing has been a set-up to distract me while he gets away.

“Where the fuck did you go, asshole?”

Seeing crowds of people milling about on the street on this freezing late afternoon, I narrow my eyes. “Where are you?”

Hissing in frustration, I don’t see the man I’m looking for, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t bypassed him. I dislike being made a fool of, and I know for a fact that this was a way for Dante to get past me. So he knows I’m behind this, and he knows I’m watching him. Not that this bothers me. If anything, I’m glad he knows. It has forced him into action because he knows I won’t hesitate to bring the Don down.

He is on his way to the Don now, I know it, and I will find them both if it’s the last thing I ever do. It doesn’t even bother me in the slightest that it might be. If this ends up with all three of us in the ground, I don’t have a problem with that at all.





## ISLA

**G**lad to finally be crawling into my bed after a long day that has been made more exhausting by the constant need to be on the front foot with Gideon, I sigh and flop on my back. Staring at the ornate light fitting above my bed, I snuggle further into the luxury of this enormous, circular bed. Even with its shape, you could easily fit three across it at the top. The brushed cotton, deep pink sheets, and cosy duvet are warm and gorgeous, and I could stay here forever.

As my eyes close, I'm jolted out of my semi-slumber by a loud noise.

*Boom.*

*Boom.*

*Boom.*

"What the fuck is that?" I mumble and get out of bed. I'm assuming investigating loud noises is on my list of things to do.

Sneaking down the stairs, pulling my white cotton dressing gown tighter around my white cotton pyjama'd body, I jump a mile when I hear the noise again.

*Boom!*

"The fucking door? Who the fuck is that?" Grumbling to myself that my sleep has been interrupted by a visitor, I stride across the entrance hall in my freezing bare feet and yank it open, ready to give whoever it is a piece of my mind.

As it happens, I don't get very far with that because it is none other than the giant Security guy from the gates.

"Package for the Boss."

He thrusts it at me in a black metal box with a lock on it.

“It’s been checked for explosive, biological and chemical components. It’s clean.”

Blinking as I take the box in two hands, I murmur. “Uhm, thanks?”

He sneers and marches off, leaving me to close the door, stare at the box, and then gingerly hold it away from me, hoping the security guy was right and it is clean.

Moving swiftly across the hall, I knock on the already open door of Gideon’s office, but he isn’t there, so I figure he must’ve gone up to bed already. Dithering about leaving it here or taking it to him, Sophia didn’t say in her comprehensive file about the protocol here, I eventually decide to try him upstairs. I feel this is the lesser of two evils because at least I tried to get the package to him as soon as possible. Taking the stairs quickly, I pause outside the door, which is also slightly ajar. Does this man not believe in closing doors around here?

Propping the box under my arm, I rap lightly and call out, “Gideon?”

When there is no answer, I push the door open a bit farther and say louder, “Gideon? Are you in here? I’ve got a package.”

Silence.

Shoving the door wide open, as I take a step into the room, intending to leave the box on the dresser where he can see it, I come to a complete standstill as the wind rushes into the room through the open balcony doors, casting rain and leaves onto the immaculate white carpet. But that’s not what makes my blood run a bit hotter.

On the gigantic TV screen on the wall opposite the bed, there is porn playing with the sound down. Pressing my lips together as the woman gets railed by not one but three guys in all her holes, I get a little sweaty, my gaze fixed on this scene in front of me. I’m not one to watch porn. It makes me feel slightly inferior. A few years back, I had a boyfriend who was into that and wanted me to be more uninhibited, but that’s just not me. He eventually called it quits when I was no more adventurous than letting him give it to me doggy-style and balked at the suggestion when he wanted to slip it in the back door.

Staring at the woman on TV, she is in her element. These guys are practically drooling all over her. She holds all the power even though there are three of them and one of her. Without her, their dicks would be in their hands. I back away when the positions change, and two of the guys drive

their huge cocks into her pussy at the same time and drop the box on the dresser, leaving for safer pastures. Clearly, Gideon is into all that, so fantasising about him as I have been doing is a pipe dream. But this is good. This means that I can forget about the arousal he tends to bring to my party and focus on the work. That is what I'm here for.

Blowing out a breath as I escape the sex show, I realise I'm wide awake now, so I head back down to the kitchen to make a mug of hot cocoa, wondering where Gideon is anyway.

Back in the kitchen, I boil the kettle and make the cocoa, throwing in a few tiny marshmallows for extra comfort and then shove the door open to head back upstairs.

Music coming from down the hall to the left distracts me. I haven't explored down there yet, but that is where Gideon must be. Deciding to find him and tell him about the package, I follow Beethoven's Fifth down a narrow corridor, which, to my surprise, leads to a massive pool room with glass walls and a glass ceiling. Peering around a potted plant, I see Gideon swimming laps in a huge, deep blue, rectangular pool as the symphony blares out of some hidden speakers.

Knowing I should walk away, I can't. I'm fascinated with his powerful strokes, cutting swiftly through the water. I'm not a great swimmer. To say I learned in school is a vast overstatement, and I haven't been near a pool since. It's a shame. That pool looks really inviting, but I'm not shy in saying I'm a bit scared of the water, especially with me being a very weak swimmer.

When he reaches the side and hauls himself out of the pool, I lick my lips as the water drips in rivulets down his hard, sexy body. He rises and moves across to lie down on a lounge.

My eyes widen.

He is naked.

"Fuck," I mouth and try to move away, but as soon as my foot moves, the music stops, and silence descends in the poolroom. I can't move now. He will hear me. I should say something, but he will know I've been standing here stalking him like some kind of weirdo. Trying to duck further behind the potted plant, willing the music to come on again, fear slices through me when it doesn't.

*What do I do?*

*Move, Isla. Move, for the love of God!*

But I can't. I'm frozen behind this plant, and when Gideon strokes his

stiffening cock with his eyes closed, there is no amount of power that could get me to move. My gaze is riveted to his hand as he clutches his impressive cock and masturbates on the lounge as if this is the most natural thing in the world, and nosy housekeepers aren't going to happen upon him and stand behind a palm tree watching him while he does it.

My hand shakes as the mug of cocoa in my hand brings me back to reality.

Just as I get up the courage to make a mad dash for it, he climaxes with a loud groan, placing his other hand over his tip while he pumps his cum out onto his palm. He wipes it on the towel, and a slow smile passes over his face.

"Ms Harding. Something I can help you with?"

"Erm," I stammer, coming out from behind the plant. "Brought you some cocoa."

He opens his eyes and watches me as I thrust out the mug, walking slowly towards him, hoping he buys my lame cover.

He sits up and throws the towel over his lap, holding his hand out for the mug. "How thoughtful." He takes it and glances down at it before a low chuckle escapes his lips. "Marshmallows?"

"Who doesn't like teeny marshmallows in their cocoa, hmm?" I ask, getting flustered.

"No one," he responds. "Thank you."

He takes a sip, and I grimace. Now, I'll have to make myself another one. "A package arrived. The security guy said it was clean of explosive, biological and chemical components," I rattle off the list, sticking my fingers up for added emphasis.

"Which one?"

"Huge guy from the front gate."

He smirks. "Jon-Jo. But I meant package."

Heat creeps up my face. "Oh. No idea. It's in a metal lockbox."

"Okay. Well, where is it?"

"I left it on your dresser."

"In my bedroom?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I see."

"You left the balcony doors open. It's blowing a gale, you know."

"I know."

His scrutinising glare is unnerving me.

Then I remember the porn and wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole. I'd forgotten all about that, what with having my own live porn show to drool over.

Fortunately, he doesn't comment further, so I bob my head and curtsy like a fucking dickhead from Victorian times and back out. "Goodnight, Gideon."

"Goodnight, Isla."

Fleeing the poolroom, I forget about another cocoa and just disappear into my bedroom, close the door and crawl under the covers, hoping that when I wake up tomorrow, things will be less heated between the two of us.



## GIDEON

G rinning, I drink the rest of the lukewarm cocoa, which is a dead giveaway that Isla was lurking in the shadows for longer than she alluded to. I knew she was there. Eyes on me is definitely something that sends the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. It's one reason why I decided to masturbate. I wanted to see if she would say or do anything. The fact that she didn't run speaks volumes, and while I am still disappointed she didn't approach me and take over, it thrills me to know that she wanted to stay and watch. I'm pushing her buttons, and I will keep pushing them until she can no longer hold onto her professionalism. The porn in my bedroom was accidental. I left it on but didn't know she would go in there, but it still goes some way in pushing her limits, and I will make sure to have it running twenty-four-seven and definitely getting filthier as the days go on. The possibilities are endless, and it brings me great joy to know she will squirm and fidget and be uncomfortable around it. I know her without knowing much about her. She is not innocent. Her file suggests five serious boyfriends, so one assumes she banged them all many times. However, she does have an innocence about her, which tells me she is very vanilla when it comes to the banging part of relationships. Hell, she has fire in the day-to-day, back and forth banter, and she is thirty-five, so life experience is a given, but sexually, she is my little girl that will blossom under my touch. It makes my cock hard again, just thinking about her being mine. She needs a real man to show her how it can be, and I will be that man if I have to remove every other male on this planet to ensure it.

That reminds me of the package she said was delivered. I expect it to be



the bracelet, but I can't be sure. Packages arrive here all the time.

Picking up the towel as I stand, carrying the mug in my other hand, I make my way to the kitchen to drop off the mug, placing it in the empty dishwasher in completely the wrong place, just to rile her up, and then head up to my bedroom. I'm not a completely helpless idiot, as my darling sister made out, but I think pretending to be for Isla is way more fun than being the sophisticated billionaire she was probably expecting.

Passing Isla's door on my way down the corridor, I pause, my hand hovering over the doorknob.

Instinct tells me to turn it and to take what I already know is mine, but there is something that stops me from being an asshole about it. She needs to come to me. I won't take anything less than her absolute acceptance that we should be together, and that means she has to make the first move. True, I could be waiting a while, but that is what makes it even more exciting.

So, I drop my hand and keep moving until I reach my bedroom. Entering, I close the door quietly and, with a wicked smile, dump the cum covered towel in the laundry basket. She will see it tomorrow, and it will taunt her.

Catching the climax of the porn show where the woman is filled with enough cum for it to seep back out of her holes, I turn my attention to the box. Retrieving the key from under the dresser, I open it and see the flat black velvet box nestled inside. Reaching in, I pick it up and open it, admiring the contents with a critical eye.

Diamonds fascinate me. How they are made, their flaws, their composition and their density. How they go from dull and lifeless to sparkling solitaires that glitter under the bright lights of extravagance. The quality of these diamonds is exceptional, and I'm happy with handing this over to Isla with the knowledge that it is perfect. Wondering when the best time would be to gift this to her, I decide leaving it in her room for her to find would be the most fun for me—maybe mixed in with her underwear. If I leave it lying just anywhere, she will think it's not for her and return it to me.

Satisfied with my plan of action, I climb into the shower and turn on the water to freezing cold, relishing in the ache in my bones and my stinging skin before I turn up the temperature and relax.

I have been distracted today with Isla Harding, but tomorrow, shit gets done. There are several issues that need dealing with swiftly and ruthlessly, and for all I've enjoyed having Gideon the man out to play this last day. Gideon the Don needs to get his eyes off Isla and back onto business.

Solitaire doesn't run itself and for my sins, that responsibility lands on me.



## DANTE

**S**itting in the M25 traffic was an absolute nightmare, but I've hit the M1 and am nearly at the junction to the M6 motorway, which will take me all the way up the Lakes where that asshole is supposed to be. If I'm on a wild goose chase, I will kill him regardless of anything else going on.

It didn't take me long to reach the getaway car, parked in an underground garage some way from the office, and this drive has given me time to think.

Ringling Jem through the Bluetooth, I wait while she answers. "About time," I grumble.

"Well, excuse me for having a life. By the way, before you say anything else, Sebastian Christchurch has been following you. I saw him outside the office."

"Oh, really? And you know what he looks like because...?"

"Oh, please. Everyone knows what he looks like. He is hardly a simpering wallflower about London."

"You fancy him," I tease her.

"Noooo."

"You do."

"Blonde hair and hazel eyes are not my thing."

"No, because when they are on a bad boy, it's really not your style, is it?"

"Fuck off."

Chuckling, I can see her blush from here.

"Besides," she says, clearing her throat. "He is your enemy, so he is mine. And I've got my eye on someone else."

"Oh, do tell?"

“Nope. You will interrogate him, and that’s just a big no.”

“Hmm. Now, you’re only intriguing me more.”

“Shut up and tell me why you rang.”

“Ah, yes. Who did Sophia poach from that agency?”

“Hmm. Hang on, it was in the file.”

I wait while she rustles about.

“Someone called Isla Harding.”

“Picture?”

“Sending it to you now.”

“Thanks. I’ll contact you again soon.”

“Buh-bye, loser.” She hangs up, and I roll my eyes.

Noticing a convenient sign for services only two miles away, I keep going and pull in a few minutes later, parking up and cutting the engine. Picking up my phone, I scroll to the file Jem sent and raise an eyebrow at the gorgeous blonde.

“Nice. Could do way worse, Soph. But what is your actual end game here?”

None of this makes any sense whatsoever. Sophia doesn’t make mistakes. So who was she trying to lead here? Me? Seb? Someone else? Her brother’s hundreds of enemies? And what does this woman have to do with any of it? Was Sophia looking for a wife for her dear, darling brother? She sure as shit landed on the one woman who would intrigue our fearless leader more than anyone else on the planet. I may not have spoken to the dick in a decade, but I know him better than anyone. Looks aside, which are exactly his type, this woman is, for lack of a better word, normal. She is the exact opposite of Gideon with his limitless wealth, power over this Secret Society and his machinations of manipulating governments, our own and beyond, into doing his bidding. He is sleek, predatory, ruthless and untouchable. She is his awkward prey that will stumble at the first chase.

Sophia knew what she was doing when she chose this woman to do whatever it is and while the tie to Gideon hasn’t been made in this file, I know. I know that wherever this woman is, Gideon will be right next to her, fascinated by her.

“So, find the woman, find the Don. Simple.”

Yeah, not so much, but I’ll take what I can get.

Setting off again, it’s not long until I’m on the M6, heading into the North of England, where the weather changes again to an incessant downpour

where the windscreen wipers on this average, black, mid-sized hatchback struggle to keep up.

“Christ, man. Why? Why do you live here?”

But I know why. Gideon likes the weird weather, and he always found London to be too claustrophobic. Too busy, too commercial, too... everything.

Sticking to the speed limit so as not to draw attention to myself, I settle back and call Jem again.

“Get me everything you can on this Isla Harding. I mean the deep dive stuff. I want to know everything.”

“On it.”

“Oh, and Jem?”

“Yeah?”

“Postpone my meeting with the Mayor on Wednesday. I have a feeling I’m not going to make it.”

“Damn,” she mutters. “That’s really important, Dante. We need his backing for the bill to go through Parliament.”

“Yes, I’m fucking aware of that, Jemima, but this is more important even than that.”

“Fair enough.”

We hang up again, and I ask *Siri* to find me a hotel within two miles of Hemsway, which is where I need to start my hunt for our elusive Don.

As it turns out, the only one within *twenty* miles of Hemsway is actually *in* Hemsway. I didn’t want to arrive there until I had my ducks in a row, but I’m not sleeping rough in this hatchback, so I pull into the car park of the *Premier Inn* and cut the engine. Grabbing my go-bag from the back seat, I open it and pull out a stack of IDs, flicking through until I find a relatively new one. The black Amex attached to this ID is a bit of a red flag, but it’s also an alias that Gideon won’t know about. Possibly. I don’t know how much he has been keeping tabs on me, but I’m going to go out on a limb and say not at all.

Shoving the rest back into the bottom of the bag, I climb out of the hatchback and rush towards the doors of the hotel, getting soaked to the bone and cursing like a sailor.

Moments later, ‘Richard Peterson’ is holed up in his decidedly basic room with room service on the way.

Crossing over to the window to draw the curtains, something catches my

eye, and I shake my head, knowing I've hit the jackpot.

“Well, well, well. I always knew you had a God-complex, and there you are, in the sky, lording it over this town.”

The castle lights flicker off, but the grounds are bathed in light, casting a foreboding and eerie glow.

Whether Gideon is in residence up there or not remains to be seen. But I'm guessing if Isla is up there, so is he. So now I just need to find out where Isla Harding is and follow the trail straight to my old pal to tell him directly to his face that we have a situation on our hands that both of us knew would come back to bite us hard in the arse one day.





## SEBASTIAN

**B**eyond pissed off, I stare out of the window of my penthouse overlooking the city.

“Scott. You there?”

A heavy sigh. “Yeah. Sebastian, I can’t do this.”

“You owe me.”

“Anything but tracking a high-ranking member of Solitaire,” he hisses.

Narrowing my eyes, I glare at the phone. He is fucking lucky I used a secure line. “Unless you want to find yourself at the bottom of the Thames with concrete instead of boots, I’d get on it.”

“Threats? Is that how this is going to go down?”

“Well, I did ask nicely, and you refused.” I hide my disbelief. It’s not rocket science. You get one chance of me being nice *if* you’re lucky. Then the gloves come off.

“This is breaking every rule there is.”

“Do it, or you don’t wake up tomorrow.”

“My wife just had a kid,” he croaks.

“Then why are we still talking about this?”

“Fine,” he snaps. “Give me forty minutes.”

“Twenty.”

Hanging up, I clench my fist, aching to take someone out. It’s not every day that I get blindsided like this. If it hadn’t been for that job, I’d have been more on it. Dante was my primary focus, and I took my eye off the ball, and it sailed right past me into the stands.

Not acceptable.

But valuable lesson learned.

Watching the clock go round, I purse my lips when nineteen minutes pass. On the dot of twenty minutes, the phone rings again.

“Scott,” I murmur.

“He’s in a place called Hemsway in the Lake District.”

Raising an eyebrow, I blow out a breath. “I’m impressed. See what you can do when you put your mind to it? Walk me through it.”

Through gritted teeth, he explains, “He left the offices, went to a getaway car about half a mile away in an underground garage. Took the M25, the M1, stopped at some services and took the M6 into the Lake District, where he went directly to Hemsway.”

“And you are certain you tracked the correct person?”

He scoffs. “Facial recognition software doesn’t lie.” A slight pause. “Okay, it *can*, but not in this case. It was DeVare.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re even.”

“For now.”

Before he can say another word, I hang up as the door to the penthouse opens. “Kai,” I say, my eyes still on the city. “I’m going away.”

“Where to?”

“The Lake District.”

“Nice. Can I come?”

“No. You need to stay here.” Turning to face him, I smile.

He pushes his glasses up his nose and sighs. “Do I even want to ask why you’re going?”

“Not really.”

“I’ll go pack for you.”

“Good boy.”

Kai beams at the small praise and disappears upstairs. Feeling a slight rush of affection for the young man, I decide to give him the raise he has been asking for. He really is the best assistant a man could have. He is new, fresh-faced, and vibrant, and he will be an asset to Solitaire one day. Right now, he is too young, too naïve in the ways of how the Secret Society works. He doesn’t understand the undercurrent of political power that runs through the veins of the Society, nor how influential we are in certain aspects of government when it benefits ourselves. Our end goal is power. Always has been, always will be. There isn’t a single corner of Earth that doesn’t have a

base of operations, and one day, I don't doubt the world will be run by one global government: Solitaire. But that is a long way off yet. Past my lifetime and that of Kai. But it is the dream that keeps us running.

Following Kai upstairs, I stand in the doorway as he meticulously packs me a bag.

"How long will you be gone?" he asks.

"Remains to be seen. How does a million sound?"

"A million what?"

"Pounds."

That stops him dead in his tracks. His gaze fixes on mine. "Are you fucking messing with me?"

"Do I joke about money, Kai?"

"No, never. But..." He breathes out through his nose. "That's a lot of money."

"Do you think you're worth it?"

"Yes," he states with the confidence of someone who knows that while they are not inimitable, they will be damn difficult to replace.

"Well, how does it sound, then?"

"Perfect," he replies with only a slight stammer.

"Good, then. Welcome to the upper ranks."

He freezes. "What does that mean?"

"Lots of different things, Kai. You will be learning how to be a force in this world, and it's not for the weak." Crossing over to the dresser, I take off my cufflinks and place them in a small wooden box.

"I'll do you proud," he says with conviction.

Smiling at him, I say, "I know you will. I'm going to shower, and then I'm leaving. You can stay here while I'm gone. Look after the plants."

"You don't have any plants," he says, confusion in his gaze.

"Figurative plants, Kai."

He nods as if he knows what I mean, but I hold in my chuckle.

Turning to the en-suite, I pause at the door. "One more thing, Kai. Get to know Jemima Pearson on a personal level. Meet cute. Make her fall for your charms. Yes?"

His gaze bores into mine, full of questions he doesn't ask. "Okay."

Nodding, I close the bathroom door behind me and strip off my clothes. Stepping into the shower, I blast the water out as hot as I can stand it and then close my eyes. I've been trying not to think about it too much, but now that

I'm alone, I can't help it. Dante skipped out and headed up to the North of England for one reason and one reason only.

To meet the Don.

Is it finally time to get my hands on that fucker so I can snuff out his life like he snuffed out my father's?

Groaning softly as the image of the life draining from his body as I tighten my hands around his throat makes my cock stiff. Gripping it, I tug, keeping the thrill of his impending death in my mind's eyes so I can orgasm intensely as I let his body slump to the floor, my vengeance sated.

"Fuck," I murmur and pump harder, leaning my other hand on the cold tile as the water cascades down over me.

The climax hits me hard, and I bite my bottom lip to stop myself from making a feral grunt with Kai just on the other side of the door. My balls tighten, and cum splashes against the tile as my cock jerks roughly in my hand. The spike in my blood is almost unbearable as I grip harder, riding my hand through this orgasm. It's not the same as hot, wet pussy, but I haven't found a cunt to sink into for quite some time. I've been too focused on other things. Part of me hopes that the Don has a woman in his life that I can fuck while he watches before I kill him. But the chances of that are probably zero. He is too careful to allow anyone into his life now. But a man can dream, anyway.



## SEBASTIAN

**S**haking off the thought as my climax wanes, I admire my handiwork, watching my essence spiral down the drain. I take a moment, letting the hot water run over me, washing away the remnants of my lust. Then, I reach for the soap, scrubbing my skin until it's almost raw, washing away the desire and bloodlust.

After drying off, I leave the bathroom and go into the bedroom, where Kai has finished packing. He's left my bag by the door, ready for the journey.

Taking the time to dress casually in black combat pants, a white tee, and black boots, I pull on a black coat and pick up the bag, heading down the stairs. "Is everything ready?" I ask Kai, who is lingering by the window overlooking the city lights.

Kai turns to me and nods, pushing his glasses up his nose. I'm not sure if it's a nervous habit or if they need tightening. "Everything's packed. You have several fake IDs, a wallet, burner phone, charger and two changes of clothes in your bag. I've also packed some snacks, and water, and I'll text you the address of your hotel in Hemsway."

"Excellent," I reply, patting him on the shoulder. It's a small gesture of approval, but his face lights up. "Keep an eye on things here, Kai. And remember what I told you about Jemima Pearson."

"I will," he pledges, a seriousness in his eyes that I appreciate.

He's eager to prove himself, to climb the ranks of Solitaire. That ambition will serve him well.

"Uhm, sir?"

The formality catches me off guard. "Kai? What have you done?"

He blushes a bright shade of red and shakes his head. “Nothing bad. But full disclosure, Jemima and I are already... well, not dating, but in each other’s DMs.”

“Oh?” Raising an eyebrow, I wonder what fate has brought us here.

He nods. “I wanted you to know after what you asked.”

“Do you like her?”

His eyes light up. “Yes, I do.”

“Then keep at it.”

His face goes serious. “Can I ask what you want with her?”

“Keep your enemies close.”

“She’s your enemy?” Kai’s face falls.

“Let’s just say we aren’t friends, and the person she works for leaves a lot to be desired in the friendship area.”

“Okay, so where does that leave me and Jemima?” His fear that I’m about to tell him we are plotting his girl’s untimely demise is pushing at his curiosity.

“Getting to know each other.”

He nods slowly, knowing not to say anything else.

“I’ll be in touch,” I say as a goodbye and walk out of the apartment to the elevator. I press the button for the underground garage, and as I wait, I glance back at the penthouse. It’s a fortress of glass and steel, a symbol of my power and influence. The city spreads out below, lights twinkling in the dark. It’s a sight I never tire of, the bustling metropolis that never sleeps. But for now, I have to leave it behind for rural pastures.

Descending in the elevator, the doors slide open when I reach the underground parking, revealing my car, a sleek black Aston Martin. It’s a beast of a machine with a roaring engine and a smooth, powerful drive. It’s my escape, my sanctuary.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, I breathe in the smell of leather. Starting up, the car purrs to life, and I pull out of the garage and onto the streets of London.

The city is a blur of lights and noise as I navigate the streets, heading towards the M25. The traffic is mercifully light, and I make good time. I’m soon on the open road, the city skyline disappearing in the rearview mirror.

The journey is a long one, but I don’t mind. I enjoy the solitude, the hum of the engine and the open road. Driving for hours, watching the landscape change from city to countryside.

The Lake District is a beautiful place, a stark contrast to the bustling metropolis I've left behind. Rolling hills, glittering lakes, and quaint villages pass by my window. It's peaceful, serene, a world away from the cutthroat world of Solitaire, the assassination gig and my own company, which has become somewhat of a bore for me lately. Once my obsession with the Don is satisfied, I have some thinking to do about the future, and I'm not sure running my own company will be on the shortlist.

It's late at night when I arrive in the small town called Hemsway. It's covered in snow and is eerily quiet. I check into the hotel and collapse onto it, exhaustion pulling me under. It's been too long since I slept properly, but the long drive has tired me out to the point where I might grab a few hours. I'll start my search for DeVare in the morning. For now, I need to rest.





## DANTE

Ordering a coffee and a bacon and sausage sandwich, I figure this is the perfect time to indulge in a breakfast with more calories than my usual... well, nothing. I'm not a big morning eater, but today I have butterflies in my stomach, and it's pissing me off. I don't know why I'm so nervous, but I need to get it under control.

"So," I say to the woman behind the bar of the small pub attached to the hotel. "Do you know what time that castle opens up for visitors?"

She gives me a blank stare. "Huh?"

"That castle on the hill."

"Oooh," she says, realisation dawning. "That's a private residence."

"Oh, damn. I wanted a tour. Who lives there?"

She hands me my black coffee from the machine behind her and leans on the bar, eager for some gossip time. "Well, we don't really know. Some say that it's a really old guy who can't move much, so he stays inside all the time."

"And others?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

"Haunted," she states bluntly.

"Oh?" I wasn't expecting that, but there again, old castles in England... not really a leap to come to that conclusion with no other evidence.

She shrugs. "Everyone has their theories. But we definitely know someone lives up there. The delivery drivers are constantly dropping stuff off."

"Like what?"

She shrugs again. "Who knows? They don't talk."

“Really?”

She nods conspiratorially. “They’re probably paid not to. Or threatened, maybe by the security guards.”

“There’s security guards?” Of course, there is.

“Tons of them,” she exclaims.

“Hmm.”

She moves away as another customer comes along and serves them, bringing my sandwich to me a few minutes later.

I tuck in, relishing the decadence, and when I finish up, I pay and leave, ready for my next stop—Greenburg’s Agency.

Walking through the small town, it doesn’t take me long to find the Agency. They’re just opening as I arrive.

“Hello,” I say, trying to be friendly and open. Two things that are hard for me usually.

“Morning,” the manager says with a big beam. “How can I help you today?”

“I’m looking for someone to help my dad. He’s moving to the area in a few weeks. After my mum died, he’s been sad and lonely, and I’ve tried, but I have to work and…” Giving her doe-eyes, she makes a sad face and pats my hand.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. We come highly recommended.”

“So I hear. I wanted to ask you about Isla Harding. Her name came up, and I really want the best for my dad, you know?”

“Of course,” she murmurs. “Unfortunately, Isla Harding doesn’t work here anymore.”

“Oh? That’s disappointing,”

“Tell me about it. She was our best Assistant. But she was poached.” She lowers her voice to a whisper, the strength of her feeling about this evident in her tone.

“Poached? By another agency? Who would do that?” I act shocked, but really, I couldn’t care less.

“No, she got a private gig. The woman came in and arranged it all and found her replacement and everything. She really wanted Isla.”

“Hmm, well, so did I. Any chance you know where she went? Maybe I can convince her to come back?”

The manager’s eyes light up at the prospect. “Oh, that would be marvellous! But my guess is you’d need a few bob. The woman who came in

here was minted. Proper rich.”

“Money is no object,” I murmur, seeing her eyes flash with glee.

“Well, in that case, head up to that castle on the hill. I don’t know for sure, but my guess is that’s where you’ll find her.”

“Perfect,” I say. “Thank you for your help.”

“If you can’t find Isla, we have other assistants who could help your dad. Come back, and we’ll talk.”

“Will do.” Waving, I saunter out and head back to the hotel. This is all very curious. But it confirms what I thought. Gideon is definitely in that castle, and Isla Harding is with him. So all that’s left for me to do is drive up there and scope out the place for myself.

Getting in the hatchback, I set off, following the signs for the hilltop. Driving slowly up the winding road, it starts to snow as I reach the summit and turn the bend to see the entrance to the driveway. Closed off with substantial black wrought iron electric gates, there is a team of security guards in the gatehouse waiting for me. Interesting. They have the hilltop road under surveillance. Makes sense, under the circumstances. All avenues are covered. I wonder if that includes the unscalable cliff on the other side of the castle.

Pulling up, I get out to be greeted by a man twice my size with a scowl that is so fierce if I were anyone else, it would send me packing. As it is, I am me, and I don’t back down from anyone.

“Morning,” I say cheerfully.

“This is a private residence,” he snarls.

“Oh, really?” I glance around and huff out a breath that puffs out visibly in the freezing cold. “I was hoping for a tour.”

“There’s a visitor’s castle a few miles from here. Buy a fucking guidebook next time.”

“Wow, okay. No need to be so rude.”

“Move along.”

I hold my hands up, eyes scanning the entire area that is visible, which, granted, is not much. “All right, all right, I’m going. Can I ask who lives here, though?”

“No.”

“Fair enough,” I murmur and turn my face directly to the barely seen camera on the corner of the wall. That will have a direct connection to the resident inside, and I want my old buddy to see precisely who has shown up

on his doorstep.

Giving a mock salute, I back away and slip into the car with a smile. Something tells me next time I turn up here, I'll either be gunned down in the street, or the gates will open up so Gideon and I can come face-to-face to beat each other to death as we've both dreamed about for ten years.

Either way, it'll be fun to find out.



## GIDEON

“**Y**ou are shitting me!”

The roar echoes through my office as I stand and shove my chair back, sending it flying across the floor to hit the wall behind me. Marching across the office and out to the entrance hall, I see Isla standing there with Jon-Jo, discussing something furtively.

“What the fuck?” I growl, striding over.

Jon-Jo looks over at me. “You saw him? Do you know him?”

“Do I fucking know him? I’ll fucking kill him with my bare hands the next time he sets foot anywhere near this place.”

“We don’t think he’ll come back,” he says, eyes narrowed.

“Oh, he will,” I snarl. “Fucking asshole.”

Jon-Jo’s expression goes darker. He probably didn’t know if I was talking about him or Dante. Not that it matters. They’re both assholes.

“Uhm...” Isla murmurs, standing there like a deer in headlights. “What is going on?”

“Nothing,” I snap. “Get back to work.”

Eyes wide, she nods and slinks off quietly, making me feel bad for yelling at her. This has me rattled, though. How? How the fuck did Dante find me? It has to be because of Sophia and her bringing Isla here. She screwed up somehow, and now old enemies are here on my fucking doorstep, and if Dante found me, everyone can find me.

Not acceptable.

“If he turns back up here, shoot him,” I state to Jon-Jo and turn on my heel, crossing back to my office, where I slam the door, needing to vent some

of this frustration. Enough is enough.

Dialling Viktor on the laptop, I pull my chair back over to the desk and sit as it rings. He answers quickly.

“Don.”

“Who the fuck is with my sister?”

“Well, this is it, Sir. We don’t think anyone is with her.”

“What?” That has caught my attention in a big way.

“We have scoured the dark web, and we cannot find anything. Our conclusion is there is no man.”

“Fucking bitch,” I growl under my breath. “What the fuck is she trying to pull here?”

“That I can’t answer. But we will keep looking for her. As expected, she has dropped off the grid, so we will have to keep digging.”

“Do that,” I growl, so severely pissed off I’m about ready to murder someone.

Hanging up, I take a deep breath and then make the phone call I was just about to when Dante showed up on my supposedly hidden doorstep.

“Prime Minister,” I say smoothly when he answers. “My apologies for the delay.”

“Not a problem. I know you’re a busy man.”

“Are we on target for the election win next month?” I ask, getting straight down to business.

“Absolutely. The British Independence Party is ahead in the polls, and we are certain we can lock this down on election day.”

“You’d better. I’ve funnelled a hell of a lot of money into your campaign. I expect results.”

“We will deliver, Sir. I can guarantee it.”

“Good, because once this is over with, we need to make sure that tensions with Esteria are escalated. I want that government thrown out, so that Arachon is left in a fit, waiting to see what will happen. Whatever it takes to make waves is a priority going forward.”

“Of course.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Always.”

I hang up. Our conversations are always short and to the point. I like that about him. He knows he is where he is because of my support and bends over backwards to ensure my money hasn’t gone to waste. I know he will do



whatever needs doing to make sure that Esteria finds itself in a political mess. It is situated above Arachon, a small yet powerful state on the Italian border, where I find there are interests worth pursuing. Viktor Di'Castello is Arachon's reigning Prince, but that doesn't concern me. His loyalty will lie with Solitaire, or he will find himself in a war with Solitaire-backed Esteria. I'm sure that is something he will wish to avoid at all costs. The time will come when I will harden my approach with Esteria's opposing party. So far, it has been gentle and supportive, but soon, we must escalate tensions so the chess pieces of the small European Sovereign States fall under my rule.

Satisfied with my conversation with the Prime Minister, I sit back and contemplate Dante DeVare and how the fuck he found me. I guess it's a question I will ask when he, I'm sure, sooner rather than later, shows back up here for a confrontation that has been brewing for over a decade. I'm looking forward to kicking his arse the way I should've done all those years ago.

But, in the meantime, I have something else that is pressing against my patience.

Rising, I leave my office for my bedroom, pulling the diamond bracelet out of the top drawer of my dresser.

Giving it another once-over, I pull out a red rose from the vase of fresh flowers that Sophia placed there only two days ago. Next, I grab a pen and some paper from the dresser and, with a smile, compile a poem that will make Isla laugh, if nothing else.

*Roses are red,  
These diamonds do gleam;  
They'd look good on you,  
And your chicken dinner is a dream*

Folding the piece of paper over, I pick up the rose and the bracelet and sneak back into the hallway, keeping an eye out for Isla.

Hearing the vacuum downstairs, I slip into her bedroom and look around. Deciding to leave the gifts on her pillow, I lay them down, arranging the bracelet and rose to perfection. Knowing I owe her an apology for snapping

at her earlier, I will do that once she confronts me about the gifts. I'm very interested in her reaction, as it will tell me a lot about her. But for now, I will wait with anticipation.



## ISLA

I have never vacuumed a carpet to within an inch of its life before, but that man has pissed me off so intensely, I want to ruin his gorgeous floor covering. How dare he snap at me and tell me to get back to work like I'm a child? Ugh!

He's more than just a helpless idiot now. He's an idiotic, helpless dickhead.

Working up a sweat, I huff out a breath and turn the vacuum off. I think the living room, or whatever you call this room in a castle, is done now.

Wiping my brow, I check the time. I've been at this for about two hours now, and I'm beat. There is no way I can clean the entire castle from top to bottom every single day. I'll be dead by the end of the week. I'm going to have to work up a roster, and some rooms are just going to have to skip a day or two.

Deciding to get on that while I have a much needed sit down, I take the stairs slowly and enter my bedroom, closing the door behind me. Crossing to the dresser, I pull out my notebook and favourite pen. Turning to the bed, I see something on the pillow and frown. Moving over to see what it is, I clench my jaw and snatch up the single red rose and glare at the bracelet laid out neatly with it. The piece of paper is folded, and I swear it had better have an apology written on it by hand.

Opening it up, I read the short poem and snicker despite my anger at Gideon.

“Jesus. You are not Shakespeare.”

But inside, I'm all warm and fuzzy. It's sweet, and while the gift is far too

extravagant, I can't accept it. I appreciate the flower and note, although I have yet to see an actual "I'm sorry for being an asshole" anywhere.

Lifting the bracelet up to the light, I inspect it. It's absolutely gorgeous, but what is he thinking? This is so inappropriate, I can't even begin to count all the reasons why.

"Sorry, but you are going back," I murmur and, placing the rose and paper down, I leave my bedroom and march down the hallway to Gideon's bedroom.

Knocking loudly, I wait for a reply. When he opens the door, he has a broad grin on his face.

Holding up the bracelet, I arrange my face into a severe frown. "I can't accept this."

"Why not?" He leans casually against the door frame.

I try not to gaze lustily at him in his joggers and tight tee, but the sight of slippers on his feet makes me hold onto the giggle threatening to erupt. "It's ridiculous," I snap, maybe too harshly, as I try to tone down the arousal. "You can't buy me off. Words, Gideon. I need words. And what? You just have this lying around to give to the help?" I thrust it at him.

His face is a picture. He is horrified and slightly annoyed. "I bought it especially for you and 'help'? What kind of word is that to describe what you do?"

"What would you call it?" I yell. "I'm here to *help* you."

"But *help* is such an insult."

"How?"

"You don't think so?" He is genuinely confused by this. Probably because he has never *been* the help before.

"No! If you called me a *servant*, I might have one or two things to say about it."

"Okay, well, yes, and I would never say that. I value your work here, Isla."

"Then why are you being a dick?"

"How am I being a dick?"

"By buying me expensive jewellery. That's not how it works in the real world."

"Doesn't it? It sure as shit does in *my* world, and that's where you are right now."

"The arrogance!" I spit out and throw the bracelet at him.

His face darkens as it hits his chest and drops to the floor at his feet.  
I'm horrified.

Well and truly mortified by my outburst. I feel like a complete idiot, but I can't back down now. He has to know that this is unacceptable behaviour.

After a beat, where I think he is about to hit the roof, he bends down to pick it up and examines it carefully. "I think we need to both calm down here," he says, being all adult about it and making me feel even more ridiculous.

"Agreed," I grit out.

"I wasn't trying to buy you, Isla. I don't know where you got that idea from." His words are careful, and I get the feeling he is lying to me. But why? What does he want? "It was a gift to show my appreciation. You will have to forgive the ostentatiousness. It's how things work in my world."

Now, I feel even more terrible.

"I appreciate the rose and the poem, and an apology for shouting at me earlier would have been well received. But this? No, Gideon. It's not me, and I won't take a gift from you that can feed a family for several months. More."

He takes that in seriously, but then his eyes gleam. "Please accept it, Isla. Please wear it for a week, and then you can do whatever you want with it. Auction it off to help pay for food for those families."

I freeze.

"What?"

He shrugs. "It's yours, and obviously, that is something that is close to your heart, or you wouldn't have used it as a comparison. Please let me see you wear it for one week and then do what you will with it."

"One week?"

"Seven days, that's all I ask."

He has hit me right in the guts with that. Seven days, and then I can sell it and put it towards the foundations I want to set up with the million pounds Sophia gave me. Narrowing my eyes, I wonder if he would help me with that. I don't even know where to begin. He is clearly a master negotiator, so maybe I can come up with some of my own terms.

"I'll wear it for fourteen days, and then I want you to help me set up some charitable foundations where I can use the money Sophia gave me to work here to help people in need."

His eyebrows go up in surprise, but then he goes serious again. "Deal."

He holds out the bracelet, and I extend my left arm for him to clasp it.

When his fingers brush against my skin, I draw in a quick breath. It's like being hit by lightning. Goosebumps skitter across my body, and I clear my throat as his eyes heat up.

He felt it too. I can see it.

"Knew it would look good on you," he rasps.

"My break is over. I should get back to work," I murmur.

"I'm sorry, Isla, for snapping at you earlier. I was angry, and I took it out on you. That was wrong."

"Thank you. I accept your apology."

He nods and steps back, giving me a view of the TV where the porn channel is on again. I'm not sure if I should be scared or turned on.

"I'll let you get back to your orgy," I murmur and make my escape as he snickers behind me before closing the door.

The bracelet is awkward on my wrist, but we made a deal. I'll wear it and then sell it, and this will all be over.

My thoughts go back to the person who arrived here earlier who sent Gideon into such a tailspin. Whoever it is, I hope they don't come back. I have a feeling Gideon wasn't kidding when he instructed Jon-Jo to shoot him. And that just adds another layer to this complex recluse that both terrifies me and thrills me at the same time.





## DANTE

**D**own on the ground, in the snow-laden park, I tilt the binoculars a little bit higher until I see the castle against the skyline. Zooming in, I take note of every nook and cranny I can see on the outside. The brickwork is old, ancient, but has been meticulously repaired or renovated. I'm assuming Gideon paid for that and for the interior to be fixed up to his liking. There is an immense wall built all around it, and it is impenetrable from the cliff side, which was kind of the point of castles back in the day. From this angle, I can't see shit of the arsehole security team, so I have no idea how often they patrol and in groups of how many men. I'm going to have to get closer, but that is not going to be easy with the surveillance on the road leading up to it. As I was driving back down, I passed a delivery driver, so there is definitely that I could try, but I would have to commandeer an actual delivery from a driver so it is authentic.

With that decided, I replace the binoculars in my backpack and put my gloves back on. It's wicked cold, and I'm not suited for this type of climate. Give me the big city back any day of the week.

Setting off in the car back to the base of the hilltop road, I park up and wait.

Luckily, it's not long until I spot a delivery van headed this way. Getting out of the car, I flag him down.

He stops with a fierce frown and slides his window down. "What is it?"

"How much would it cost me for you to let me deliver this one?" Might as well be blunt and straight to the point.

His frown deepens, but then he sneers. "Fat chance. Do you know how

many people ask me that every week? Fuck off.”

He starts to slide the window back up, but I put my hand on it and pull out the gun. His eyes go wide.

“I’m going to ask nicely one more time, so it’s in your best interest and that of your face to answer me. Got it?”

He nods fearfully.

“How much would it cost me for you to let me deliver this one?”

“He will kill me,” he stammers.

“What do you think is going to happen if you refuse me, hmm? I have absolutely zero worries about shooting you in the face and taking your van. But I’m trying to lie low and do this the right way. So if you make me ask again, we’re going to have a problem. Understand?”

“Take it,” he croaks.

Shaking my head, I make a dissatisfied noise. “Can’t do that. I need to ensure you keep quiet about it.”

He takes that and sees that I’m deadly serious. There is no loyalty either way, but this way will at least ensure me *something*.

“Fifty grand.”

“Is that how much he pays you?”

He hesitates, but then nods.

He’s lying, and it’s less, but he doesn’t want to say now in case I drop it. Shoving the gun back in my pants, I pull out the burner phone and tap the screen, bringing up one of many shell corp bank accounts.

“Details?”

He stammers his way through his bank details, and when his phone dings, I gesture for him to pick it up.

When he nods his confirmation of arrival, I open up the van door for him to get the fuck out. He scrambles out, and I climb in. “Give me your hat and wait in that car. I won’t be long.”

He nods and hands it over before he trudges off. I wait for him to get in before I set off up the hill. I know the guards won’t let me through the gates, but it does give me a legitimate excuse to be there to scope out the place a bit more. With my glasses and the hat on, hopefully, they won’t recognise me, but the chances of that are admittedly slim.

Still, they won’t know that until I’m already there, so it’s a win-win, for now at least.

Pulling up to the gates, I lower the window and shout out.

The security guy takes in the registration number of the van and then looks up at me with a frown. “You’re not the regular guy.”

“True. He’s sick.”

He shakes his head. “Nice try.”

“Look, I don’t give a fuck about whatever you’re there to stop me from seeing, but I’ve got a delivery, and I don’t think your boss is going to be too happy to miss it just because you wouldn’t let me drop it off.”

Considering this as an absolute fact, he sighs and gestures to his mate to step forward. Glancing at the paperwork neatly laid out on the clipboard in my hand, I see this is a signed for delivery.

“Signature, please,” I mutter, scoping out as much of the front gates as I can. I get more this time and see a possible entry point, but that hinges on how many guards are stationed in the gatehouse at any given time of day. It is going to take more than this one visit to ascertain. It would be so much easier if Gideon just let me in so we could get this over with.

“Dammit,” the guard mutters and, with a fierce glare at me, marches back over to his colleague, and they have a muted conversation. Then the head guard, who I spoke to before joins in, looking over at me with suspicion. I tilt my face away slightly so he can’t get a full-on look and rat me out for being the idiot tourist he shooed away.

“Wait there,” the one with the paperwork shouts to me.

I give him a thumbs up out of the window and sink a bit further into my seat. This is not good. What are they having a mother’s meeting about? What the fuck am I supposed to be delivering here?

Looking at the ordinary cardboard box on the seat, about the size of a breadbin, I decide it could be anything. The boss man goes into the gatehouse to make a phone call, I’m assuming up to the main house and then comes back to his buddies to wait, throwing his hand up in a “keep waiting there” gesture.

Several minutes pass, where I’m getting ready to bail or find myself in an all-out gunfight, I wonder if Gideon is on his way down here. I doubt it, but you never know.

I don’t have too long to wonder when a blonde comes scurrying down the driveway, her hair in a messy bun and her coat on but undone as she wraps her arms around herself.

“What is it?” she calls out before she reaches them.

“Signed for delivery.”

“What? Why did you call me out here?”

“We can sign up to a certain amount. Anything over, Ms Richardson needs to sign. Seeing as she isn’t here, that means you’re it,” he says in a tone loud enough for me to hear, only because I’m eavesdropping.

My eyes scan her face as she glares at the security guy.

“Isla Harding,” I murmur. “How lovely to see you.”

Watching as she hurriedly signs the delivery note and jumps from foot to foot while she waits for the guard to come back to me for the package, I wonder about her and Gideon. Are they sleeping together?

Possibly, but something tells me not. Call it my gut instinct.

Passing the box over as he hands me the clipboard, I keep my eyes trained on Isla. She senses my eyes on her and locks onto my gaze. It bores into mine, curiosity and a little bit of lust bouncing around between us. She is spectacular, and I can see why Sophia pulled out all the stops to get this woman into Gideon’s sphere. She has indeed chosen a wife for her dear brother, but too bad for him, I plan on taking his life, and then I’m taking *her*.

If he wants to stop me, he can come out here and try, and I’ll revel in his destruction.



## GIDEON

“Isla?”

Calling her reaps no reward.

I’ve been up and down, and I can’t find her. The house is silent, and it feels empty. I don’t like it. I want her where I can see her and talk to her and make sure she is keeping up her end of our deal by wearing the diamond bracelet. I want to see it against her exquisite skin. Hopefully, one day soon, that will be all she will have on when I claim her.

The front door opens, and I turn, halfway to my office. “Isla. Where were you?”

“Outside signing for a delivery.”

“Oh?” I murmur, glancing at the box in Isla’s hand. “What is it?”

She shrugs. “No idea. You ordered it.”

I shake my head. “No, I wasn’t expecting anything until this afternoon.”

“Well, it’s come early then.”

“Has it been checked over?” I frown at it and try not to edge away so I don’t scare her.

Her face goes to a blank mask. “Why are you backing away?”

“I’m not,” I lie, busted.

Horrified, she takes a step forward and I take one back. “You are! Why?” She gives the box a filthy look and chucks it at my feet.

I leap back, ready to dive for cover as I’m expecting an explosion of... something, but nothing happens.

It’s just a box.

So far.

Schrödinger's box.

"Ack!" Isla exclaims and skitters back.

"What?" I yell.

"I don't know! Why are you acting like it's a box of scorpions or something?"

"What?" I cry as she has landed on a very real fear of mine. "Why the fuck would you say that?"

She presses her lips together, attempting to stifle her laughter.

She doesn't do a very good job, and it erupts in a bubble of glorious giggles. "You're afraid of scorpions?" she snickers.

"Fear," I scoff. "I'm not afraid of anything."

She raises an eyebrow. "Except going outside."

Her gaze locks with mine, and her face crumples. "I'm s-s-sorry. That was horrible of me. I'm not judging or mocking. I don't know why I said that."

Inhaling deeply, I release it to remain calm in the face of this hideous conversation. "That isn't fear, Isla. That is something else entirely."

"You don't owe me an explanation."

I'm fully aware that I don't owe her shit, but now that we are confronted with this elephant in the room, the facts are dying to come out. But I can't tell her everything. It will put her in immeasurable danger, but I can't seem to stop the following words. "It's not fear. It's self-preservation. Protection. There is a whole world of people out there who want my head on a spike and will take the first opportunity to take it. I don't step foot in my grounds because I can't be sure that there isn't a sniper, or several even, ready to take me out the second I do. I don't expect you to understand or care or even be able to tell the difference between the fear of death and just not wanting to die yet. But that is my truth. I've locked myself away here in order to be able to continue to live. Does that make any sense to you?"

She blinks and licks her lips before gazing at the floor. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you do here or who you are or who wants you dead. I don't know anything, so for me to make assumptions or wonder about your life is wrong and invasive. It does make sense on some level. I get wanting not to die. I'm not ready either." She gives me a weak smile.

"Then you have to understand that I cannot tell you any more about anything. I've said too much already."

Isla's face goes ashen, and she gulps. "Okay. I'm not asking for anything."

I'm just the help, remember."

Making a noise of disagreement and frustration, I shake my head. "No, you are more than that, Isla."

Her lips tremble, but she doesn't say anything as her gaze goes back to the box still on the floor between us. "Can you open it, so I know a bunch of scorpions aren't going to burst out of it and disappear under the furniture to come out at night and torment us, please? If you can. That is a request, not a demand."

Smiling, I murmur, "I know. But I am deathly afraid of scorpions."

"Really?" she asks, a small smile on her lips.

"Really. Who the fuck isn't?"

"Okay, you got me there."

"But this is more. Would you mind opening it?"

"Are you sure? What if it's secret spy stuff?"

"Not a spy," I murmur, enchanted by her vivid imagination. Perhaps I should have let her carry on believing that. Maybe she would've been safer, but as far as cats go, this one is poking its head out of the bag already, and that is all down to me and my infatuation with this woman.

Bending down, her hands hover over the box. "Jon-Jo said he had cleared it. It's why I was so long. The delivery driver was getting pissed off."

"Seriously? I pay those arseholes a pretty penny to do whatever is needed of them, including sitting around all fucking day if need be. Maybe someone needs their pay docking."

But something about that doesn't sound right. This has never been an issue. Not once.

"Dante," I growl under my breath, causing Isla to look up at me. "Don't touch that box."

She freezes halfway to picking it up.

Snatching it up, knowing it won't be scorpions. "Why isn't it in a lockbox?"

"Jon-Jo handed it to me and said I was responsible for it."

Shaking my head, I mutter. "What a dick."

Ripping the cardboard open at the top, I peer inside, and then, when confusion clouds my mind, I reach it.

"Wait!" Isla exclaims.

"No, it's fine," I say, seeing the note with my sister's name on it. I pull out a diamond tiara and hold it up to the light. "Makes sense why they needed



you to sign for it. Twenty grand, maybe more.”

“What?” she baulks at the price tag. “Jesus.”

“Pretty, though. Want to try it on?” I hold it out to her with a wicked gleam in my eye.

She holds her hands up. “No. I can’t believe I threw that on the floor. It’s not damaged, is it?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Phew,” she murmurs, coming closer to inspect it for herself.

I’m aching to reach out and place it on her blonde head to see if it will make her look like an angel with a halo.

Suddenly, it’s as if my body has a life of its own. Turning to her, I lift the tiara and place it delicately on her head as her eyes go wide. “Beautiful,” I murmur.

“I feel like a princess,” she giggles.

“You look like a Queen.”

“Flattery will get you a chicken dinner if you’re not careful.”

“That’s my hope, Ms Harding.”

I curl back a piece of hair that has escaped her messy bun, my finger tracing lightly down her cheek.

Her gaze drops to my hand as fireworks go off around us. She bites her bottom lip enticingly.

She is primed, ready for me to brush my lips against hers. The need to kiss her is overwhelming. A craving surges through my body at breakneck speed.

I cup her face gently and move in closer. I couldn’t stop it even if I wanted to now, and I don’t.

Isla tilts her head up, desire darkening her mesmerising green eyes as her lips part.

Leaning down to capture her lips with mine, we suddenly jump apart as the sound of gunfire echoes through the castle.

“Go up to your bedroom and do not come out for anything,” I instruct her, losing the seduction mode and falling straight back into old habits. Reaching under the ornate Edwardian table that sits by the double front doors, I pull out the gun stashed there, one of many secret weapons in this vast castle, and level it at the doors as Isla screams and rushes up the stairs; the tiara still on her head and my heart still beating in sync with hers.



## ISLA

Racing up the stairs, my heart thundering in my ears, I forgot about the tiara on my head until it slides down, falling over my face. Snatching at it to stop it from dropping on the floor, I burst into my bedroom and silently close the door, locking it and then looking frantically around. Shoving my hand into my hair, I try to steady out my breathing, but I was already breathless from the near-miss kiss with Gideon, and then my Usain Bolt impersonation has tipped me over into gasping and wheezing territory.

Bending over, I rest my hands on my thighs but jump upright again when I hear a loud crash.

“Shit,” I rasp and spin to the door. Throwing the tiara to the bed in aggravation, I move swiftly across to the enormous dresser situated next to the door and try to push it across, but it’s too heavy. It’s ancient and was properly made. This thing probably survived World War One and Two and will outlast us all.

“Fuck,” I grunt and slide down the side, pulling my knees up and hoping whatever gunmen have breached the perimeter don’t find me here.

Of course, that’s ridiculous. They will find me eventually.

Breathing shallowly and going lightheaded but trying to remain as stealthy as possible, I crawl out from behind the dresser and over to the bed. I have three options. Under the bed, in the wardrobe or in the bathtub.

None of them are great.

Rolling under the bed, I realise that everything has gone quiet.

I’m not sure what that means, but Gideon said to stay here.

That’s all well and good in theory, but what if he is injured, or worse,

dead? Shouldn't I go and check on him?

"Don't be a fool, Isla," I mutter as the part of my brain that needs to help people in need lights up at the chance to be of assistance. I debate with myself for all of a minute, but it's no use.

Cursing my stupidity, I roll out from under the bed and get to my knees. Listening intently, I don't hear anything. Getting to my feet, I creep to the bedroom door and unlock it, cringing at the loud click it makes, which I've never noticed before.

Heart pounding, breath coming in ragged pants, I open the massive, solid oak door and peer out.

*Isla, get back under the bed, you fucking lunatic.*

*Nope, I'm here now, and I have to see if Gideon is okay.*

*You'll die.*

*Maybe, but aren't I going to die anyway?*

That shuts up the rational part of my brain enough for me to slip out into the vast hallway, and keeping my back to the wall, I make my way inch by inch towards the stairs, hoping to fuck I don't see Gideon's dead body at the bottom of them.



## DANTE

**K**icking the doors in, I level the gun I took from one of the guards. There were five, and I took out three of them. The other two are right behind me, but I wasn't letting anything stop me since I was already here and everything.

"Well, well," I say when I see Gideon straight away with a gun pointed at my head. "Look what I found."

"You fucker," he growls. "What did you do to my team?"

"Three down, two..." I jab over my shoulder and sidestep into the entrance hall as they barrel towards me.

"Stand down," Gideon says. "I'm going to kill him myself."

"Boss..."

"Leave."

The massive guard that I wasn't taking on for anything glares at me and trudges off with this colleague, presumably to check on the three I managed to get on the ground. They aren't dead, but they will be aching for about a week.

"You're such a dick," I say. "Why? Why all the cloak and dagger?"

"Necessity. And why the fuck are we still talking? You came here to what? Kill me, or just kick my head in?"

"You threw me under the bus, you prick," I growl as the old memories resurface. "Do you know the shit you left me in?"

"I know. I know everything."

"Not everything. That day has come back to seek justice, and I swear, you are going down with me."

He pauses but doesn't lower his weapon. Neither do I.

"Who says we're going down?"

"Sebastian Christchurch if he has his way."

"That little shit," he sneers. "He doesn't have what it takes."

"You been keeping tabs on him? You'll find he's levelled up a notch."

"Several, but that doesn't mean he can come at me and take me down."

"Is that why you locked yourself up in here?" I gesture with the gun around the entrance hall. At this point, we are both posturing. If we were going to shoot, we would've by now.

"One of many reasons," he growls. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"True, but I'm here now, so why don't you humour me."

"Get fucked, Dante." He lowers the gun. "Let's do this the old-fashioned way, hmm? I've been dreaming about kicking your arse for ten years."

"Oh, same, Gideon. Same."

I drop my gun on the table near the door while he lowers his to the ground.

Then we launch at each other, fists up and ready to go.

We're a blur of motion, each of us a coiled spring of pent-up fury and long-awaited vengeance. My knuckles connect with Gideon's cheek with a satisfying thump, and a trickle of blood spills from the corner of his mouth. He grins, a madman's grin, and wipes it away with the back of his hand.

"Is that all you've got?" he taunts, dancing back on the balls of his feet. He was professionally trained as a boxer back in the day. He won't go down easy, if at all. But there is no force on earth that is going to stop me from trying.

"You wish," I spit out, lunging forward. My fist sails through the air, but this time, he's ready for me. He ducks and weaves, his movements almost graceful. It's infuriating.

We trade blows, back and forth, neither of us giving any quarter. I can feel the old fire, the rage I've kept banked for years, roaring to life inside me. It's empowering, intoxicating. It drives me forward even as my muscles scream and my breath comes in ragged pants.

*Fuck. I'm getting too old for this shit.*

Gideon is strong and he's skilled, but I've got something he hasn't. I've got a reason to fight. A reason to win. And I'll be damned if I let him take that away from me. He needs to know that the fires of rage still burn inside my soul over what he did.

His fist catches me in the ribs, and I grunt, pain lancing through my side. But it's nothing compared to the pain I've carried with me all these years—the pain of loss, of betrayal.

With a roar, I surge forward and slam my fist into his jaw. Gideon staggers back, stunned. Blood gushes from his mouth, but he's still on his feet.

He shakes his head, trying to clear it. But I don't give him the chance. I'm on him in a heartbeat, my fists raining down on him. He tries to defend himself, to block my blows, but it's no use. I'm a man possessed.

I can feel him weakening, his blocks becoming less effective. I can see it in his eyes, the dawning realisation that he's going to lose. It's a look I've waited ten long years to see. The problem is, I'm all out. I'm fucked, ready to end this once and for all. There is no gas left in the tank, only fumes.

With a final, desperate effort, he shoves me back, and I stumble. He's buying himself some time, some space to regroup. We both fucking need it, and we both fucking know it.

But we are as stubborn as each other. This will literally go on to the death.

This knowledge is what drives me forward. If I'm going down, I might as well bring him down as well. I charge at him, and we collide, a tangle of limbs and raw, animalistic fury. We crash to the ground, grappling and punching, each of us determined to maybe be the one who walks away.

It's brutal, and it's ugly, but it's necessary. This is the culmination of a decade of hatred, a decade of pain. And it's going to end here, now, with neither one of us victorious.

It's almost as if that gives me a surge of adrenaline to try to triumph over him.

Somehow, I manage to get the upper hand, pinning Gideon beneath me. I straddle his waist, my hands wrapped around his throat, squeezing the life out of him. His eyes bulge, his face turning a sickly shade of red.

“Do you feel it, Gideon?” I hiss into his ear. “Do you feel your life slipping away?”

He struggles beneath me, his hands clawing at my arms. I don't have much left to give.

*Click.*

We both freeze, and I flick my eyes up to stare down the barrel of the gun Gideon laid down only moments ago.



*Fuck.*



## GIDEON

“Isla,” I barely croak out with Dante’s hands around my neck. I’m fucked if I know how that happened. I’m not in the same shape I used to be, but I already knew that. I did not expect to be beaten by this little fucker. But I guess he knows me too well.

“Get your hands off him,” she states with only a slight tremble in her voice, her eyes fixed on Dante.

“Put that thing down, darling, before you hurt yourself,” he replies, refusing to remove his hands.

But he has loosened his hold enough for me to place my hands on his chest and shove him backwards so he releases me. “Do that again, arsewipe, and I will make sure you don’t wake up.”

He gives me a narrow-eyed glare as he sits back on his arse. “I had you then, bastard.”

“You wish.”

“Saved by the girl. You are fucking soft, aren’t you?”

“Shut up!” Isla shouts, her hand shaking erratically. I have no idea if she knows how to fire a weapon, but I’m guessing not. “On your feet! Both of you!”

“Isla,” I murmur, slowly rising with my hands at half-mast so she can see I’m not a threat. She should know that anyway, but she is scared, and she heard the gunshots and saw the fight. “Give me the gun.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head rapidly and stepping back, training it on me briefly before returning her aim at Dante. “He was hurting you.”

“I’m okay,” I say gently, my heart swelling with affection for this fierce

woman who is trying to protect me. “You should’ve stayed in your room where I told you to.”

“Why? So I could come down to your dead body? Or be killed as well?”

“Oh, I’m only interested in killing *him*,” Dante retorts.

“Shut up!” she screams, taking a step forward. Her eyes are wild, and she is running on fear fuelled with the need to save me.

“Isla. Give me the gun.” I risk holding my hand out to her, and she stares at it for a moment.

“No, he will hurt you.”

“I’m okay.”

“No.”

“Isla. This is Dante DeVare. We are old friends.”

“Friends?” she scoffs.

I chuckle quietly. “Enemies, maybe. This fight was coming for a long time, but it’s over now.”

The questions race through her mind, but she doesn’t say anything, so I step forward until I reach her. Grabbing the barrel of the gun, I lower it slowly, and she lets it go. I flick the safety back on and shove it in the back of my pants, catching her as she collapses against me. Wrapping my arms around her, I murmur, “Everything is fine, Isla, I promise.”

She nods and lets out a choked sob. “I was so worried.”

“I’m okay, I swear.” I kiss the top of her head, catching the raspberry scent of her shampoo and tighten my hold on her. “But you’ve been a naughty girl. You were supposed to stay in your room where you were safe.”

“I had to see if you were okay.”

She looks up at me with eyes pooled with tears, and it rips at the restraint I’ve barely hung onto around her these last few days.

Feeling Dante’s curious gaze on us, I turn to him and frown. His gaze is filled with a deep lust and something akin to longing.

“You!” Isla suddenly snaps, pulling away from me. “You were the delivery driver.”

“Yep,” he says, pulling his gaze up to her face and regaining his arrogance. “Nice to see you again.”

“Fuck you,” she spits out and yanks out of the remainder of my grasp on her. She marches up to Dante and slaps him so hard in the face, I can’t hold back the snort of amusement. “You are a complete and utter twat,” she snarls, raising her other hand to slap him on the other cheek.

But he's quicker, and grabs her hand, stopping her. "You get one of those, darling and only because I wanted to feel your hands on my skin."

"Get fucked," I snarl as he moves in on my territory while I'm still fucking standing here. "Have you no shame?"

"None when it comes to precious angels. Be careful, Gideon. I might take this one from you before I burn your cold, rancid corpse and dance on your ashes."

"Jesus," I snap. "Let go of her and go to my office. We clearly have shit to talk about."

"No kidding, fuckhead," he murmurs, his eyes never leaving Isla's as she struggles in his tightening grip.

Clamping my hand over his, I crunch his knuckles together and grit out. "Let her go, Dante."

With a vicious smile, he lets her go, but I can see the fascination he has with her. Luckily for me, she is glaring at him with all the venom of a black mamba and hisses as she crosses her arms tightly over her chest.

"If you've hurt her, bruised her exquisite skin even a fraction, I will cut your fucking hands off," I rumble, blind rage boiling up at the mere thought of Isla being hurt. Gripping his coat lapel, I drag him away from her and towards my office.

"Isla, please go about your day as if this never happened. We will talk later, okay?"

She gives me a ferocious sneer but turns on her heel and marches off to the kitchen. Sadly staring after her, I'm guessing it's beans on toast for dinner tonight, and it would be my own fucking fault for being the asshole who brought this shit into her life.



## SEBASTIAN

When morning comes around, my eyes are gritty when I force them open. Glancing at the clock on the burner phone, I grunt in surprise. It's late. Somehow, I slept for hours, but I don't feel like it. I feel like shit, but I get up, needing to find Dante.

As I leave the hotel fifteen minutes later, I look around at the picture-perfect town covered in snow and breathe in the freezing cold air. Seeing the castle up on the hill, it's kind of hard to miss, I grin wickedly. That has to be where the Don is and where Dante will be scoping it out.

The chill of the morning air feels sharp against my skin as I move with purpose through the streets of Hemsway. The small town is already bustling, but my focus narrows on the imposing structure ahead. The castle, an ancient behemoth of stone, sits on top of the hill like a silent sentinel—its secrets hidden behind thick walls that have weathered centuries. If you think about it, it's the perfect place for someone to hide out.

Keeping to the shadows, my footsteps are silent against the cobblestone. My mind races with strategies, playing out countless scenarios. Dante is cunning, a veritable ghost when he wants to be, but he's not dealing with an amateur. I have to be smarter, faster. The Don of Solitaire is no less dangerous, surrounded by power, his *empire*, ensconced in his fortress.

Out of sight, I slip out of the town centre and retrieve a compact pair of binoculars from my backpack. I scan the castle's exterior, noting the security cameras that pepper the ancient stone like technological warts on a regal face.

No guards.

Curious.

This piques my interest enough to move ahead and find out why.

Dante and I were kindred spirits in many ways, a long time ago, but that's where our similarities end. He's the scalpel to my preferred sledgehammer, although certain activities require more precision than blunt force. Today, though, finesse has to win out. I need to be a ghost.

Putting the binoculars away, I pull out the burner phone to check the time. I've got to make tracks if I expect to head up there on foot. I know anything coming by the main road will be spotted immediately and shut down.

The plan forms in my mind, clear and sharp. I'll skirt the perimeter and find a gap, but at the end of the day, this is probably going to come down to firepower through the front gates.

Approaching the edge of town, I avoid the main path that leads up to the castle, opting instead for a more circuitous route through the thickening woods that flank the hillside. The trees provide cover, their bare branches a stark contrast against the winter sky. I move with care; every sense heightened, every shadow a potential threat, my boots crunching on the fallen snow.

Eventually, the castle gatehouse looms ahead, a stone guardian to the secrets and sins nestled within the castle walls. As I edge closer, concealed by the gnarled embrace of an ancient oak, I notice the guards are milling about in disarray. They're tense, weapons drawn, communications crackling with urgency. A surge of adrenaline courses through me as I realise Dante has been here. He's stirred the hornet's nest, and now they're on high alert.

I draw back into the shadow of the tree, crouching down and consider my options. There are three guards—two by the gatehouse, the third pacing in front of the vast electric gates. I need to get past them, and brute force is going to be my only option. They aren't prepared for an attack, I can see that in their scattered movements.

I reach into my jacket, fingers grazing the cold metal of the gun.

With careful aim, I fire it, the silencer making a soft *ping* into the afternoon air. I hit my pacing target in the shoulder. Painful, but he'll live. The two remaining guards react as expected, turning toward their fallen colleague in a synchronised flurry of confusion.

This is my window.

I slip out from my hiding spot, keeping low, moving with a silence borne from years of practice. The ground is firm underfoot, the snow crunching softly with each step.



I'm almost to the gates when the two guards see me and spring into action, their training kicking in despite the surprise. They're reaching for their weapons, but they're not quick enough. Gun levelled, with two simple shots to the vests, I take them both down through the gaps in the iron.

As they go down, I close the distance in a few long strides and leap up on the enormous gates, scaling them effortlessly and efficiently. Flinging my body athletically over the top, missing the vicious spikes, I jump down and land with a crouch, gun levelled.

Groaning and writhing as they try to breathe through the pain of being thumped by a bullet in their Kevlar, the guards can't get to me as I straighten up.

But I got cocky. I didn't bank on there being more guards in the gatehouse, apparently recovering from Dante's attack. Spinning, my fist connects with his temple before he can utter a sound, and he drops like a sack of stones. He is injured and should be tucked away in bed, resting and healing up. Another one manages to draw his weapon, but he's still fumbling with the safety when I kick it from his grasp. It skitters away across the icy ground, far out of reach.

There's a split second where we lock eyes, a silent understanding passing between us. He knows he's outmatched, but there's a stubborn set to his jaw, an unwillingness to go down without a fight. It's admirable but futile.

I feint left, and he bites, moving to block an attack that never comes. My right hand, still clutching my gun, swings in a tight arc, connecting with the side of his head. As he falls, I catch him, lowering him to the ground as gently as I can. There's no need for unnecessary roughness; he's just doing his job, the same as I am.

With the guards down, I allow myself a moment to breathe. My heart is thumping hard against my rib cage, a rhythmic pounding that matches the throbbing in my knuckles. Pain flares, but it's distant, secondary to the rush of success. I've made it past the first hurdle, but I'm not naïve enough to think it'll be the last.

I glance up at the castle, its stone walls now a silent challenge. Dante's inside, and so is the Don, I can feel it.

Time is slipping away, each second a precious commodity that I can't afford to waste. I need to get inside, find Dante, and confront the Don. Everything else is just noise, a background static that I push from my mind.



## ISLA

**N**ot even able to process what the fuck just happened, I stand in the middle of the kitchen, fuming, one hand on my hip and the other resting on my forehead.

“What the fuck is this? Gunshots, a massive brawl and then mates. These rich people are fucking nuts. They need some hobbies or something.”

Nodding as I agree with my own statement, I turn to the fridge and open it, looking for the least appetising thing in there to feed Gideon and possibly his devious friend, as well.

Unfortunately, I don't see anything that isn't gloriously sumptuous and mouth-watering.

“I wonder if he will feel hard done by if I just give him soup. With no bread and maybe too cool. Yes, serve you right for being a complete nutjob.”

Liking my plan and smiling as I know he knows what I'm planning but not what to expect, it gives me pause.

He knows me.

Somehow, after only a few days, he knows my thoughts, knows the exact right things to say and do to get me to respond to him.

I don't like it at the same time that I do. It's been so long since anyone *got* me. It's been way too long since someone held me the way he did and kissed the top of my head like I'm a delicate flower. I *know* he sniffed my hair, the fucking creep, and his threat to Dante about hurting me was chivalrous and a lot hot. That brings me back to the kiss we almost shared before all this shit went down. We both wanted it. The moment was perfect, the timing was epic, and I want to weep when I think about how amazing his

lips would feel on mine, but it wasn't meant to be.

In the cold light of day, or the gloomy late afternoon as the sun is on the verge of setting in mid-winter, it can never happen. As much as my body wants it, my head knows it's wrong. I work for him. He is my boss. It's all very well Sophia claiming that honour, but I haven't heard a peep from her yet. I'm here dealing with Gideon, so that makes him in charge of me.

I just wish he wasn't in charge of my heart because it is beating erratically as the adrenaline of the last few minutes wears off completely. Holding a gun, threatening someone with violence is not my forte. I help people, not hurt them, but I was willing to shoot Dante in his far too good-looking, smug face if he'd hurt Gideon.

And the depth of that scares the shit out of me.

Sighing, I close the fridge, forgetting I was staring into it and shivering as the chill gives me goosebumps. Leaning against it, I cross my arms and purse my lips.

"This is not worth a million pounds," I murmur. I should've held out for more. Hazard pay, or whatever they call it. Maybe I'll mention it when Sophia finally gets in touch.

Flicking on the light, the kitchen is illuminated with the bright glow from the many spotlights in the ceiling. Searching through some cupboards, I find some tinned soup which was a gamble.

A giggle erupts when I turn my nose up at the pea and ham soup in my hand. This will definitely not be nice cold and on its own. "Serves you right for being an arsehole."

Turning to the drawer to get the tin opener, I freeze as a face peers in at the window, hands cupped to get a good look.

My mouth goes dry as whoever it is knocks and gestures to the window opener.

Glancing over my shoulder, I wonder what to do. Who is this? Why didn't the guards announce him? And what is he doing up here anyway? For someone who is supposedly a big fat recluse, Gideon sure has a lot of visitors dropping by today.

Licking my lips as I dither, I eventually conclude this is not good and edge away to the kitchen door. The man suddenly disappears, and I freeze, not even breathing as I wait for... something.

Moments pass. Who knows how long?

I have to decide to move at some point, but I don't expect the kitchen

door to be pushed open, making me jump out of my skin and for the tin of soup to fly through the air as I let out a loud screech.

The man who snuck up on me catches the can with a wicked smile that does things to me and holds it out. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. The front doors were open."

"Were they?" I mutter.

He nods.

"Who are you?" I ask, getting my wits about me. I know that this guy shouldn't be on the castle grounds and less so in the actual castle.

"Sebastian Christchurch," he says. "And you are?"

"Isla Harding. Are you supposed to be here?"

His perfectly gorgeous hazel eyes glimmer as he smiles again. "I'm right where I need to be. Your boss here?"

Shaking my head, wincing at the lie, I say, "Nope."

"Liar," he says, his smile turning slightly more sinister. "Where is he?"

"Where are the guards? What did you do them?"

"They'll live. They were simply in my way."

"Are you here with Dante?"

His eyebrow goes up slightly before he settles again. "Yeah. He here?"

"No."

"Oof, you are so bad at that."

Annoyed, I grimace and cross my arms again. "Fuck you."

"Now I would take you up on that, sweetheart, but I've got shit to do, so point me in the direction of your boss and Dante to speed this up a bit. If I have to start searching room by room, I'm going to get aggravated and blame it all on you. Neither of us wants that, hmm?" He pulls a gun out of his jacket and holds it loosely in front of him, his other hand covering it in a mock-casual pose. I have a feeling he would shoot me in the face and walk away without a shred of guilt.

As we stand there, neither one of us saying a word, after a few moments, he sighs. "The hard way then. Your choice, Isla. Remember that."

Quick as lightning, he reaches out and grabs me by the back of my neck, hauling me out into the entrance hall, the gun pressed into my side, as fear rips through me, nearly tripping me up.



## DANTE

Gideon and I had barely had time to take a breath when we hear a loud shout.

“Dante, you fucking asshole. Where the fuck are you?”

Glancing at each other, we move stealthily and quickly from the office back into the entrance hall to see Sebastian fucking Christchurch with his hands on Isla.

“What the fuck?” Gideon roars and moves forward, but Sebastian shakes his head, that wicked smile that always seemed slightly *too* sinister widening as he sees us both.

“You,” he hisses, looking at Gideon. “Cole Tomlinson. I hope you’ve got your affairs in order because today is judgement day.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Isla give him a curious look through her fear, but it’s soon squashed when Sebastian tightens his hold on her.

“You fucking wish, little prick,” Gideon snarls. “You have no idea what you’ve stepped into.”

“Actually, I do. Gideon Hawthorne, is it now?”

He growls and takes another step forward, pulling the gun out of the back of his pants, but he’s too slow. I’m way ahead of him.

Aiming my gun at Sebastian, I’m itching to take out this fucker, but I’m surprised to discover the only thing stopping me is Isla. I have no idea how she would react, but more than that, I don’t want her covered in Sebastian’s blood as she watches the life drain out of him. The need to protect her is overwhelming, and while I was all up for a bit of fun with her by taking her away from Gideon, that has deepened into a fierce protectiveness that even I

can't explain.

"Let her go," I snarl, "Or I will blow you to pieces."

Sebastian's cool gaze lands on me. "Oh, she belongs to you? Here I thought she was the Don's property."

"Hey!" Isla snaps and then shuts her mouth as Sebastian's grip tightens even more, and she whimpers as he hurts her.

That's enough for me to go full-on defensive, but I'm too late this time. Gideon fires and shoots Sebastian square in the chest.

Isla's screams echo through the castle as Sebastian looks down in surprise and releases his hold on her. He goes down as she skitters away, her hands to her mouth in shock.

"Nice," I murmur but then squint at Sebastian as he drops to his knees, gasping for breath. "But you should've aimed between his eyes."

"Oh, I didn't want to kill him," Gideon drawls, stashing his gun and marching over to the wheezing Sebastian, who slumps over, having been hit in the vest by Gideon's bullet. "Yet."

He hauls Sebastian to his feet and practically throws him to me so he can go to Isla. Reluctantly, I catch Sebastian and lower him to the ground to catch his breath. He is going grey and looks like he is about to lose his lunch.

"F-fuuck," he rasps. "You b-bastard."

"Shut up," I growl, nudging him with my foot, but my focus isn't on him; it's on Gideon and Isla.

"It's okay. He's okay. Well, he'll be sore for a bit, but he's alive. I'm sorry, Isla. I'm sorry he laid his hands on you. Are you okay?"

He wraps his arms around her, and I scowl at them, jealousy searing through my blood, making my veins ache with longing. How? How did Gideon, recluse of the century, end up finding someone he could be this way with? I've *never* seen him so gentle, so attentive before. Sure, I've not seen him in years, but do people really change that much in this life? I guess when you are locked away, not part of the real world anymore, your perspective changes. It tells me he is lonely and seeking something only this woman can give him.

Sophia did good.

I can't help feeling a rush of warmth for my old friend that he has found the solace he was looking for in this woman.

But it doesn't stop the envy.

One look at her in the photo and I knew she was special. Seeing her in the



flesh confirmed that and more. She is more than special. Exceptional. I don't even know her, and I can tell that from the small interaction we've had. She is fierce and loyal, and even if she doesn't know it, she has fallen for Gideon like a ton of bricks.

Okay, it's not hard, but she doesn't strike me as the gold digger type. Even though the diamond bracelet hanging loosely around her wrist is an anomaly. It doesn't fit. It makes me curious. Gideon definitely gave it to her, but by all accounts, despite how they feel, they aren't together.

"Jealous," Sebastian wheezes, interrupting my ruminations that are far too focused on Isla Harding instead of where they should be.

"Pah," I scoff, but sadly, he knows. It must be written all over my face.

Catching Isla's eyes, she smiles. It's weak and trembly, but it reaches her eyes, and it makes me fall headlong into... something. I don't believe in love. Especially not at first sight. Companionship, affection, sure. But love? I can't justify putting that much thought into someone else's well-being and happiness.

However...

All I've done in the last few minutes is worry and feel jealous over Isla while contemplating my friend's feelings for her and hers for him.

*What does that mean?*

"Go upstairs and stay there this time," Gideon murmurs to her.

"What about dinner?"

He chuckles. "I'm sure I'll want to pass on cold beans on toast or whatever else gross thing you had planned to give me the finger."

She giggles. "Cold pea and ham soup."

"Eww," I mutter. "Was I included in that?"

Her gaze locks with mine with a wicked gleam that sends a bolt of lust straight to my cock. "Oh, definitely."

"I don't know whether to be honoured or be grateful for the lucky escape."

She smiles slowly, her eyes taking in every inch of my face. "If you are sticking around, don't think you got away with it."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I reply with a chuckle, which delights her.

Gideon, on the other hand, is about ready to slit my throat. He never did like to share, and that's a crying shame because I want Isla, and if I have to tear her from his cold, dead hands, I will. However, it would be far more pleasant, and she wouldn't have to mourn his loss if he relaxed a bit and let

me have her as well.

Assuming she would take us both. Right now, I think we are both lucky that she is still standing in our presence and not running the three miles she probably should straight to the po-po to send us down for crimes dating back thirty years to the present day.

Point in fact, Gideon shooting Sebastian in cold blood.

Even though he is fine, Gideon took a gamble. There was no way he could know for sure that Sebastian was wearing a vest.

But I guess he is smarter than I give him credit for. Coming into the lion's den unprotected is a foolish move, and I'm starting to realise that Christchurch is no fool.

But he is a prisoner.

Hauling him to his feet, figuring he's had enough time to get over the shock of being blasted, I drag him back to Gideon's office as Isla squeezes Gideon's hand and disappears up the stairs.



## ISLA

**M**y hands are shaking as I make my way up the stairs and into my room for the second time today on Gideon's orders. Whatever is going down right now is beyond my comprehension. All these dangerous men running around with *guns*! It's unheard of in Hemsway.

"Sophia, what did you get me into?" I mutter as I close my bedroom door and, for good measure, turn the lock, which slides into place silently. Glaring at it for being a knob and choosing when it wants to be quiet, I cross over to the bed and kick off my shoes before I crawl onto it, and snuggling under the covers, fully clothed. If I sleep at all tonight, it will be as I am. I'm not risking getting changed in case I have to run for my life.

Staring at the ceiling, I purse my lips, trying to sort through all the raging emotions building up inside me. Whoever this Dante guy is, he has more than piqued my interest, but I know that things are getting deeper with Gideon. If he didn't care about me, he wouldn't be so concerned with my well-being. I'm no stranger when it comes to relationships, and although it has been a while, I don't think the fundamental act of caring about someone you want to be with has changed. He doesn't strike me as the caring about all of humanity type. I can recognise that easily because it's who *I* am. I care about everyone. I'm even a bit worried about the gunman who came in here and grabbed me. Sebastian whoever. Didn't catch his last name with all the shock and fear.

When Gideon shot him, I was terrified, but I would've pulled out all the stops to help him. Turns out, he didn't need it, which is good for everyone involved. As deeply as I'm starting to feel for Gideon, I know I could not look the other way on cold-blooded murder. Especially one I'm a witness to.

Closing my eyes and trying not to think about what *could've* happened, I jump and stifle my scream when the burner phone that Sophia gave me vibrates on the bedside cabinet.

“Fuck,” I gasp and sit up, my heart pounding. I’m on tenterhooks, and I don’t like it. It’s too stressful.

Answering with a curt, “Hello,” knowing it has to be Sophia, I get a rush of anger when I hear her soft voice reply.

“Hello, Isla. How are things?”

Taking a moment to not screech at her like a banshee about how awful this is and how dare she place me in this precarious position, I inhale slowly before releasing it. “Fine.”

She giggles. “Liar.”

*Fuck’s sake. How does everyone know I’m lying all the time? Better question is, why am I lying all the time?*

“You’re a real bitch, you know that?” I hiss, unable to hold onto my temper. “You owe me way more than a million pounds. I want hazard pay, lots of it, for the rest of my life after what I’ve been through today!”

“Isla,” she says calmly. “Tell me what happened.”

“What didn’t happen? All the guards have been shot or beaten up, not one but *two* crazed gunmen have breached the castle, and one of them even had me at gunpoint. Gideon has been beaten up and shot someone! It’s a madhouse!”

She tries to stifle her giggle, but it doesn’t really work very well. “I see. Who are these crazed gunmen? Are they still alive?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” I grouse, even though I don’t mean it.

“Do you have names?”

“One of them was Dante something and Sebastian was the other.”

“Which one beat up my brother?”

“Dante.”

She laughs openly now. “Oh, ouch. Bet that was a blow to his ego. Dante could never beat him.”

“Well, I guess the tides have turned. He would have killed him if it hadn’t been for me.”

“You?” Sophia’s sharp question is serious now, all traces of laughter gone.

“Yeah, me. Dante was throttling the life out of Gideon, so I picked up the gun that was on the floor and threatened Dante with it. I mean, it was an

empty threat. I couldn't shoot anyway, even if I wanted to, but I was scared, and it was horrible, and Gideon was..."

"Isla," Sophia interrupts my mad rambling. "Slow down. Take a breath. Are you okay?"

"Me? I'm fine and dandy."

"Are you sure? You're not hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt, but you could've warned me."

"If I had, would you still have come?"

"No."

"And that's why I didn't warn you of the remote possibility. I didn't think you would be swept up in their petty argument."

"Didn't seem petty to me."

"Have you never noticed that men can be sooo dramatic?" she scoffs. "They are worse than women most of the time."

Chewing my lip, I'm not sure that is accurate in this case. It seems pretty serious. But I don't know shit about the spy world, so I should keep my trap shut and do what the NDA requires and look the other way.

Too bad, wherever I look right now, there is an attractive, dangerous man waving a gun about. It's kind of hard to take your eye off the ball.

"Apart from that, how is it going?" Sophia asks after a beat.

Snorting, I reply, "Fine. Your brother is an arse."

"Tell me something I don't know. But seriously, Isla, if you want to renegotiate your pay, I'm all ears. Just please don't leave. He needs you."

Her desperation is what stops me from telling her to fuck off. It takes me all of five seconds to know I'm not going anywhere. As frightening as today has been, I don't want to leave.

Twirling the diamond bracelet around my wrist, staring at it, I sigh. "I'm staying."

"How much more?"

"Nothing," I huff. "I'm staying because I know he needs me."

What I don't say is that I need him too. I couldn't leave him now if I were held at gunpoint.

Bad choice of words, for sure, but no less accurate.



## GIDEON

Closing the door to my office as Dante shoves Sebastian into a chair by the fire, I lean against it, contemplating my next move. This day has gone to the dogs. Yesterday, I was secluded from the world, and today everyone and his fucking cat knows where I am.

“Why are you here?”

Silence.

“That is a question for both of you arseholes, so I suggest you both get talking. I’m tired, and this day can fuck off. I’m in no mood to piss about, and I will shoot you both in the head if I lose patience with this, whatever the fuck it is. Both of you showing up on the same day is not a coincidence, so who followed who?”

“I followed Dante,” Sebastian says, with his usual don’t-give-a-fuck attitude. “I knew he was coming to you after I sent him the box.”

“You dick,” Dante hisses.

“What box?” I ask, feeling like I’ve come in halfway through.

Dante gives Sebastian a furious glare before he shifts his gaze to me. “You know which box.”

Pushing off from the door, I cross over to Sebastian. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t shoot you in the face?”

“Too fucking easy. Not your style, is it?” His sneer riles me up. He is so arrogant and doesn’t give a shit if he lives or dies. His only concern would be if he manages to take me down with him or not.

Choosing diplomacy over brute force for the first time in my life, I say quietly, “Your father’s death was a mistake.”



Sebastian's face tightens into a hard mask. "And the fact that Dante took his place instead of me? Was that a mistake as well?"

"Ah, I see. That's what pisses you off the most."

"What can I say? Dad was an arse. That place was mine."

"True, it would've been yours if your dad had died of natural causes or in an accident that couldn't be pinned on anyone. But that's not how this game is played, and you know it. Dante killed your dad, even though it wasn't meant to go down that way. So it was his rightful place."

"Jesus. You are such a cock!" Dante hisses at me. "Even after all this time, you still throw me under the bus!"

"What?" I ask, turning to him. "Throw you under what bus? You fired the gun that killed him."

"No, it was you, fucking dick. You paid me off with the head of the South London faction."

"What?" I say again, shaking my head. "Okay, wait... I'm getting way above confused, and that is not good for my patience, which isn't good for either of you, remember? Explain your reasoning behind that clearly and concisely, or I swear to God, you will meet your maker and take this little shit with you."

"Hey!" Sebastian exclaims. "I was here for what was rightfully mine."

"You can't have it."

"Says who? If I kill *you*, then I get it all."

"Oh," I say and roll my eyes like a teenager. "*That* was your plan? What am I even doing humouring either of you right now? You're as bad as each other."

"Don't lump me in with this idiot. He's a petulant child."

"And you aren't? Whining about something that you've made up in your head for ten years and blaming me for?"

"Stop this."

The soft voice from the door gives us all pause.

Turning to see Isla standing there, I hadn't even heard the door open. "Isla, go back upstairs."

"No, this sounds like you need a mediator, and you're *all* acting like petulant children. You will get nowhere if you carry on like this."

"This doesn't concern you." The warning in my eyes is desperate. She cannot be here, listening in to Solitaire business with two witnesses who will use her to get to me without batting an eye. "Do as you're told and go back

upstairs.”

“No. Sophia told me that this is a petty drama, and none of you can see the other’s side clearly enough for you to ever get anywhere.”

“Sophia?” I growl and take a step towards her. “When did you speak to her?”

“We hung up a few minutes ago. Let me help.”

“You can’t. This is...”

“None of your business,” Sebastian says.

Isla’s eyes narrow as she glares at him, crossing her arms and giving him a thorough once-over, which ignites my green-eyed monster. “You shut up before I let Gideon shoot you.”

Sebastian’s mouth drops open in surprise as Dante snickers.

“Guess we know who wears the trousers in this relationship,” he snorts.

“We aren’t in a relationship,” Isla states.

“Aren’t we?” I murmur, knowing it isn’t the time or place for this.

She fixes me with an expression of disbelief for my epically crap timing. But it’s not like it wasn’t there, waiting for an answer.

“Really?” Sebastian drawls. “So she’s fair game?”

Incensed, I spin back to Sebastian, crossing over to him and hauling him to his feet by his coat. “If you even look at her again, I will scoop your eyeballs out of your head with a spoon and peel them like a grape before I shove them up your arse.”

“Ohh, jealous, much?”

“You held a gun to me,” Isla hisses. “I wouldn’t touch you with a fucking barge pole.”

Sebastian snickers. “Sorry about that. I wouldn’t have shot you. There is no point to that, and senseless murder is just so...”

“Senseless?” she bites out.

He beams. “Exactly. Forgiven?”

“No.”

“You’ll change your mind. I happen to be really good at convincing people to see things my way.”

“Will you shut up?” I roar at him and throw him back into the chair. He grunts and slumps, still feeling the very possible cracked rib from my bullet hitting his vest.

Unfortunately, it sends Isla straight to him. She crouches in front of him, and it’s all I can do but watch this shitshow unfold in front of my eyes.

“Are you hurt?” she asks.

“I’ll live, sweetheart.”

“Don’t be such a pig-headed man. Let me look. I’m trained in first aid. I can help.”

“Well, who am I to refuse if you want to get me naked?”

“Ugh, shirtless at best,” she says with a mock gag, and I shake my head.

Dante looks a little sick, which does nothing to help calm the situation.

“You can fix him up later. We need to deal with the matter at hand, which is him coming into my home, attacking my guards, holding you at gunpoint and threatening to kill me.”

“Still want me to go?” she asks, the challenge in her eyes as she rises.

“It’s not safe,” I murmur.

“Neither is me being here while you three are posturing like bucks during a rut. So, I stay and help you sort out this drama, or I walk.”

The ultimatum is what shocks me the most in considering her request. I don’t doubt for a moment that she won’t get up and leave me. There isn’t a chance in hell I can allow that to happen, but the alternative is dragging her into a life of danger she cannot even fathom, and there will be little I can do to protect her from the Society whose secrets are the very nature of this business. There are protocols and laws that date back as far as the dawn of time, and there is one that can never be disputed. As the Don of this Society, its leader and king, I should be the last person considering this betrayal of everything we stand for because as much as this position of power is absolute for *me*, that doesn’t extend to innocent housekeepers who have wormed their way into my soul.



## SEBASTIAN

**T**he decision that Gideon is about to make affects us all, and it is serious as fuck. He is seriously going to tell this woman all about Solitaire while Dante and I are standing, well, slumped, right here.

Dante catches my gaze and shakes his head, caution etched into his face. In complete agreement, I clear my throat. “I’m really fucking aching over here. Any chance Nurse Nancy can see to me now?”

Dante’s relief is clear as he blows out a breath. “Good idea,” he murmurs.

“Nancy?” she spits out. “My name is Isla. Who the fuck are you?”

“Sebastian Christchurch,” I grunt. “Nice to meet you.”

“Go to hell,” she mutters but holds a hand out to help me up.

I clasp it and feel like I’ve been hit with a high-voltage surge of electricity that nearly stops my heart.

Using none of her strength to haul myself up, I don’t let go of her hand for a few seconds longer than necessary. She snatches it back with fury and clenches her fists. Turning on her heel, she marches out of the office, and I follow with a glare at Gideon.

“We are nowhere near done here,” I hiss.

“You got that right,” he snarls back under his breath.

It seems that having Isla here has made us all a bit more civil. Had she not been, blood and guts would be everywhere by now, with at least one of us dead, if not all three. We are on our best behaviour, which is just odd. Whatever power this woman has over Gideon, I know they aren’t together. She confirmed that, but they are definitely brewing in that department. It makes her very enticing to me. However, I can also say with absolute

certainty that she has captured my full attention anyway.

“Keep up,” she snaps as she strides across the entrance hall.

Grimacing at the pain, I rush to her side, and she casts me a side-long glance. “Go in the dining room, over there.” She points to an open door. “I saw a first aid box in the kitchen. I’ll get it.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Go and wait in the dining room,” she orders, and I chuckle.

With a mock salute, I murmur, “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Humph,” she mutters rudely and stalks off while I take a detour to where she pointed.

The dining room is significantly over the top. It seats twenty, which makes no sense. It’s not like the Don has been having grandiose dinner parties while he has been holed up here. Someone would’ve mentioned it. So why all the pomp and splendour? To remind himself of who he is and what his life could be like if he weren’t at the top of everyone’s most wanted list. And that’s not even in the assassination sense. If members of Solitaire got a whiff of where he was, he would be hounded night and day for this or that favour, and it would become a serious pain in the arse. As much as I loathe him, I get why he has locked himself away.

Shrugging off my coat with a pained expression and a slight curse, I let it drop to the floor and sit at the head, waiting for Isla to join me.

When she enters the room a few moments later, she gives the fallen coat a scathing glare. “You are a slob as well as a psycho?” she asks, bending down to pick it up.

“Sorry, not usually. It was the only way to get it off, and then I couldn’t bend to pick it up.”

“That bad, huh?” Her look of sympathy seems to be genuine.

Nodding slowly, I might be making it out to be worse than it actually is. Sort of. It hurts like fuck, but I’m a grown-ass man, and I can take it. However, if she wants to play nursemaid, who am I to stop her?

She kneels at my feet with a big box next to her, and all I can think about is those luscious lips wrapped around my cock. Stifling my groan as I shift uncomfortably in the chair, I watch as her eyes go straight to the squished bullet embedded in the Kevlar vest. Slowly, she reaches out and touches it, fighting against a deep emotion that I know has fuck all to do with me, but is pleasant to see anyway.

She purses her lips and lowers her hand to rip at the Velcro holding the

vest together and pulls it up over my head and lowers it off my arm to drop on top of the coat on the chair where she placed it.

“You’re lucky you came prepared.”

“Always, sweetheart.”

She avoids my gaze and murmurs, “Unbutton your shirt, please.”

“Can’t you do it? It hurts.”

“You managed to get your coat off.”

“Barely.”

Still not meeting my gaze, she reaches out to undo the first button on my black shirt. I thank God in that moment that I didn’t wear a tee instead. This is going to be all kinds of sexy as I watch her do this.

Her fingers tremble as she undoes another one and another, being careful not to touch my skin. When she reaches the final button, she spreads the shirt open and hisses at the big black bruise already formed from a bullet being slammed into the vest.

“Shit,” she murmurs. “Is it okay if I touch you? To make sure your ribs aren’t broken?”

“Oh, you don’t need to ask my consent, sweetheart, in fact, I prefer it.”

Isla’s eyes narrow. “That’s not very twenty-twenty-three of you.”

I snicker. “Don’t worry about me. But I will ask for your consent before I ram my cock into your hot, wet pussy and beg you to scream my name as I fuck you so hard you will weep for mercy.”

“Ah,” she gasps softly, her mouth dropping open. “Forward, aren’t you?” The tremor in her tone makes me smile. She is innocent when it comes to deep passion, and that is something that I’m very interested in teaching her more about. She surprises me, though. She is bold, a straight talker and doesn’t take much crap, not even from us. Yet, this slightly innocent side to her is gorgeous, but weirdly, it makes me fiercely protective of her.

When her fingers prod my side, and I hiss at the coolness of her touch, she snatches her hand back. “Sorry.”

“Cold hands.”

Her eyes shoot up to mine, and she smiles. “In that case…” She splays both of her hands across my abs, and I yelp with a laugh.

“Wicked woman,” I smirk. “But keep your hands right there.”

She grins and moves them. She doesn’t like being told what to do, which I get, but it is something I want to push.

Licking her lips as she goes back to work, I know she is admiring my six-

pack. Her fingers keep brushing lightly over the ridges that are carved into my flesh. Butterfly touches that would feel amazing on my cock, if only she would lower her hand a bit.

“I don’t think your ribs are cracked. You’re lucky.”

“Can I get even luckier?”

She looks at me with confusion until my meaning sinks in. “No. You are still the asshole who held a gun to me.”

“Not forgiven yet, then?”

“No.”

“But there’s hope?”

“Depends on what you do next, Sebastian.”

Wondering what she means by that, I sit forward and take her hand. “I am sorry, Isla. I have a way of dealing with things, and you were unlucky enough to be there at the wrong time.”

“That doesn’t make it any better. You would still have done it if it had been me or someone else.”

“True, but know I will never scare you again or hurt you.”

“How can I be sure of that?”

“My word is my honour, but you don’t know that yet. I hope one day you will, but in the meantime, if we survive this shitshow, I’ll prove it to you.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to prove yourself to me? What do you care what I think?”

Sitting back with a snort of amusement, I give her an honest answer. “Good question, Isla. But I feel something when I look at you and touch you. It’s rare, and it’s something I want to explore. If you will let me.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that.”

“You fascinate me, you make me want to know you. I want to protect you from all the horrors of this world that I know are out there lurking because I’m one of them. Is that enough for now?”

“Enough for what exactly? What are you asking me?” Isla sits back on her heels and folds her hands in her lap, her gaze searching mine.

“I’m not really sure,” I say, returning her intense stare. “I guess we’ll find out if Gideon doesn’t make me kill him.”

“Make a move on him, and I will kill *you*,” she hisses. “And if you don’t believe me, ask Dante, who had a gun in his face only a bit ago.”



“So protective of him. He is a lucky man.”

Isla stands up and retrieves the unused first aid box. “You’re fine. You’re a big, strong guy; I’m sure you can handle a small bruise.”

Choking back my laugh of disbelief, I ask, “Aren’t you going to help me with my shirt.”

“No.”

“You like saying ‘no’, don’t you?”

“Only to you. You strike me as a man who always gets what he wants. Not this time.”

“And that right there is why I need to learn more about you, Isla,” I call out as she leaves the room.

Smiling to myself, I slowly button up my shirt, knowing I’ve got to her. She will be thinking about me and everything I’ve said when she curls up in her bed tonight. Too bad I won’t be able to join her, but for once, I’m willing to put in the work to get what I want.

And I want Isla Harding.



## ISLA

I don't even know how to unpack any of this. This entire day has been like something out of a movie or happens to someone else, but never you. You couldn't make this shit up.

Shoving the first aid box back into the cupboard, glad that Sebastian seems to be okay, I have to wonder why I care on a level that goes past just me caring about human beings as a whole.

It could be those mischievous hazel eyes, or his rock-hard body, or the way he is so dominant but at the same time apologised for being a douche and wants to make it up to me. Those are qualities that are intriguing at worst, highly attractive at best, but either way, they are extremely hard to ignore.

Going upstairs back to my bedroom for a much-needed minute to gather my wits to walk back into the lion's den, I look up when there is a soft knock on the half-open door.

"Everything okay?" Gideon asks.

"Yeah, it's just a lot. But I'm fine. I'll be back in a second to help you three figure out your drama."

He smiles. It's sexy and lights up his eyes. "You don't need to do that."

"I do, or you are going to end up killing each other. More threats have been made today than I know what to do with. Some of them aimed at me!"

"About that," he growls. "If Sebastian hurt you, I will slit his throat."

"He didn't hurt me, but he sure as shit scared me. You all have."

"I know, and I can only apologise."

"Since when do alpha males do so much apologising?"

"Alpha males don't?" he asks with a soft smirk.

“Not usually, no.”

We share another smile, and it all feels very odd, like we’re both walking on eggshells.

He moves in closer to me, and my breath hitches. “Turn around,” he says gruffly.

“Why?” I ask, even as I do it. It seems my body needs to do what he says regardless of if I want it to or not.

He pulls the tie from my messy bun, which must look like a bird’s nest right about now, letting my hair tumble down my back. To my surprise, he scoops it up in his fist and reties it on top of my head. His body is close to mine. So close I can feel his chest brushing against my back. His fingertips trace over the skin at the nape of my neck, and I shiver with longing at the lightning that strikes my soul at his gentle touch.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“Making sure Seb didn’t hurt you.”

“Oh...”

Gulping as his lips brush my neck, I gasp when his hands clasp my upper arms.

My heart races as he presses his body tighter against mine. His breath, warm against my skin, sends shivers down my spine. My mind is clouded with desire as his fingers trail up and down my arms. I turn to face him, my eyes locking with his.

He leans in, his lips hovering over mine, and for a moment, I hesitate. But then his tongue traces my bottom lip, begging me to open up, and I melt into him. Our kiss is electric, passionate, and all-consuming. I feel dizzy with pleasure as he pulls me closer to him, his hands wandering down to the small of my back.

Abruptly, he pulls away from me, leaving me gasping for air.

“Sorry,” he says, his voice low. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Shaking my head, needing more of him, I lean in for another kiss. This time, it’s slower, more tender. We explore each other’s mouths like we’ve been waiting for this moment forever. Finally, he pulls away again and looks at me seriously.

“I know the timing of this is so bad,” he says, his voice laced with uncertainty. “But you are the missing piece in my life, Isla.”

I stare at him, my heart thumping erratically. A part of me wants to run away and hide, but another part of me is drawn to him like a magnet.

“I know what you mean,” I murmur.

He wraps his arms around me and kisses me again. This time, it’s wilder, more desperate. Our bodies are pressed together so tightly that I can feel his heart beating against mine. We stumble until I’m pressed up against the wall, his hands roaming over my body.

I moan into his mouth as his fingers find their way under my shirt, tracing over my skin, cupping my breasts before he pinches my nipples. I gasp as the pain sinks into my body. It’s intense yet exhilarating, and I want more. His cock is hard against me as he kisses me until I can’t breathe.

Pushing against his chest until he steps back but doesn’t let me go, I gaze into his eyes. He looks dazed, his lips parted as his breathing comes in short gasps. I reach my hand up to my head and undo the knot in my hair, letting it fall around my shoulders as I slip out of his grasp. His eyes widen as they travel down my body. But then I throw my arms around him and kiss him with all the passion I have inside me.

I’m still a little unsure, but when he looks at me tenderly and strokes my cheek, all my fear melts away like snow under the heat of the sun. Nothing can stop us now.

I brace myself for whatever is going to happen next when a voice startles us both out of our lustful daze.



## GIDEON

“I see now why you were taking your time,” Dante says, lounging in the doorway, hands folded in front of him as he takes in the sight of Isla and me in a passionate tangle.

Growling a curse, I step back as Isla hurriedly pulls her top down and ties her hair back again. I wish she’d keep it down, but she is a practical woman. It is one of the many things that has attracted me to her.

“Back downstairs,” I snap at Dante. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Fine.” He shrugs and saunters off.

Turning to Isla, I murmur, “I’m sorry. This was irresponsible.”

She nods, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment at being caught out. “I’ll just freshen up, and then I’ll be down in a sec.”

I grab her hand. “No, Isla, please, stay up here.”

She searches my eyes and shakes her head. “It seems to me that the three of you can’t seem to have a conversation without things getting out of hand. You need someone to help you navigate whatever it is that’s causing this rift. I don’t think I can handle any more fights, fists, or gun related.”

Smiling, I cup her face gently before pulling away. “You are sweet, Isla, but there are things that you can’t know about. You need to stay up here.”

“Spy stuff?” she whispers.

Snorting, I nod. “Yeah, spy stuff. But I need you safe, so stay up here and do me a favour?”

She nods.

I lower my voice. “Lock the door when I leave. I don’t think you are in any danger. Dante or Sebastian won’t harm you; you seem to have charmed

them as you have me, but for my own peace of mind, please do as I ask.”

“Okay.”

Nodding, I leave her bedroom reluctantly, my cock raging at the dashed prospect of finally getting some. It’s making me even more cantankerous, and I know it. Closing the door behind me, I wait.

“Isla, the door.”

I wait for her to click the lock into place, and then I take the stairs quickly to find Dante and Sebastian in my office, slouched around like they own the place, drinking my 30-year Scotch.

“Look. Whatever the fuck is going on here, please can we call a truce for now,” I start before either of them can say anything. “We will resume this in the morning. I’m aching, you…” I point to Sebastian, “…will be as well, and your fists look like they need some ice,” I add to Dante. “We aren’t the childish idiots we used to be, so let’s just take a breath and do this for Isla. She doesn’t need any more drama on her doorstep today.”

“Firstly, I’m still young enough to kick your arse,” Sebastian says, “and Isla seems to have you whipped, doesn’t she?”

He leans back and searches my face. He won’t see anything there other than contempt for his fishing expedition.

“Just me?” I retort.

He smiles. Slow and sinister, and for the first time in my life, I’m actually terrified of what that means. If he has done anything to her while they were alone, I will skin him alive.

“Fine,” Dante says, being awfully quiet since he arrived here, all guns blazing. “Do we leave, or are we prisoners here?”

“You aren’t setting foot outside so you can disappear back into the woodwork. Which reminds me, how many of my guards did you kill?”

“None,” Sebastian says. “Yeah, they’re all going to be aching for days, but then, so the fuck am I, so retribution, I guess.”

“What he said,” Dante mutters. “My objective was to get to you. Luckily for them, they weren’t exactly a challenge. You need to up your game in that department, old pal.”

I give him a filthy glare. “Noted. Now go upstairs and turn left. Head down into the west wing and find a room each.”

Sebastian rises and starts walking away. “Sleep with one eye open, Gideon, I haven’t decided not to kill you yet.”

“Don’t sleep anyway,” I reply.



He turns to me with a look of solidarity. "I hear you."

"Well, fuck you both. I sleep like a baby, but if one or both of you tries to take me out, know I will gut you." Dante smirks and as they are both at the doorway, I reach over to my desk and pull out the stiletto blade that doubles as a letter opener.

Flinging it, it leaves my hand and sails through the air to embed itself in the wooden door frame right next to Sebastian's head.

He freezes as it vibrates loudly in his ear.

"If either of you even think about going to Isla, I will string you up by your balls and peel your skin off inch by inch. Are we on the same page?"

"Sure," Sebastian says. "But that is a one-night-only deal. If I'm still alive tomorrow night, she will be riding my cock as your name drifts out of her memory."

Clenching my fist, as I know he is saying this to rile me up, I ignore him.

He chuckles as he knows he's got to me anyway because I have no comeback. Instead, I wait for them to disappear up the stairs, following their movements as they turn left at the top.

Going to the phone on my desk, I pick it up and dial the gatehouse.

"Yeah," Jon-Jo croaks.

"You're all fucking fired."

"Yes, sir. We already have replacements on the way."

Hanging up with a sneer, I accept that. This isn't the first set of guards who have screwed up, and it won't be the last.

Pouring a Scotch, I then head upstairs with it, passing Isla's door and opening my own. Leaving it wide open, just in case those two arseholes try something, I sit back in the armchair and contemplate this shitshow of a day and how the hell we are going to sort this out tomorrow, seeing as they both know exactly where I am and how many of their people have they told. Looks like the Don is going to have to pack up and move, which is something that really pisses me off.



## DANTE

**F**inding myself in a room overlooking the cliff top, I chose the one right at the end of the corridor and made sure to lock it behind me. I don't know, nor do I care, which one Sebastian took, but I look out over the view and ponder what the hell the three of us are doing. Bitter rivals suddenly in a truce because of some woman that we don't even know.

The weird thing is, I want to hold myself to this because I know Isla will be upset and disappointed if I break it.

I can't even begin to unpack how much she has affected me after only a couple of interactions, but it appears I'm not the only one. I guess we are used to a certain type of woman. Know what they want, hard as nails, seductive, either wealthy themselves or a complete gold digger, or both, even.

Predators.

Isla is the complete opposite of this, and we can all see it and want a taste of that innocence. We have given her no reason to trust us, yet she was willing to help Sebastian because he was injured.

Speaking of that... I look down at my fists. They're red and sore, but nothing I can't handle. It was worth every single second to smash Gideon's face in. Right now, I can't think about his surprise when I mentioned his betrayal. He has to be faking. There is no other explanation for it.

Wondering if Sebastian will hold up his end of the truce, I decide to risk it and take a shower. I'm hot and sweaty and aching. Gideon wasn't joking when he said we're all too old for this shit. I haven't had a fistfight in as long as I can remember, so I think I'll pass on that and stick to weapons only. It's much easier to take down your opponent with a swift and brutal slash of a

knife.

Stripping off, I step under the shower and turn it on, forgoing my ritual of cold first. I need heat. Lots of it.

Standing under the torrent of scorching water is bliss. Turning into it, I hiss when it stings the cuts and scrapes on my body. Relaxing after a few seconds, I enjoy the peace and quiet and solitude. As much as I wish we'd had this all out tonight, I get why Gideon has called a halt to it. We all need to be on the front foot tomorrow, and right now, we are sideswiped by Isla's presence here.

Reluctantly getting out of the shower a few minutes later, my burner phone vibrates in my coat pocket, having somehow made it through the fight with the guards and Gideon.

"Yeah?" I know it will be Jem; she is the only one with this number.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Do you have an update?"

"Not for you."

"Not helpful."

"This doesn't concern you."

"I think Sebastian has gone after you."

"He did. He is here."

Shocked pause.

"And you're both still alive?"

"Yep."

"You're not giving me much here, Dante."

"I told you, it's none of your business."

"Well, that's just great. I'm the one sticking my neck out for you right now."

"With who?"

"Everyone! Everyone is asking where you are, and no one believes I don't know. It's a shitshow."

"Please. You don't know what a shitshow is," I murmur and then look up at the soft knock on the door. Frowning, I say to Jem, "Gotta go," and I hang up.

With the towel still slung around my hips, I pick up the gun that I left in the bathroom and creep over, clicking the lock back as I hold the gun up. Swinging the door open, I lower the gun immediately as I see Isla standing

there, her eyes wide when she takes in the weapon I had pointed at her face.

“Isla!” I say a bit too loudly. “Sorry, this wasn’t meant for you.” I shove the gun awkwardly into the back of my towel, feeling it loosen slightly.

“But it was for either Gideon or Sebastian?”

“Only if they paid me a visit to kill me.”

“Would they have knocked?” she asks curiously.

Giving that some thought, I shake my head and laugh. “Probably not, no.”

We stand there in the silence that falls over us, where Isla’s gaze travels over my abs and lingers a bit too long at the top of the towel, barely covering my pubes at this point.

“Uhm,” she murmurs. “Do you want some cocoa?”

Taking that in with a frown, I wonder if she’s talking in some kind of code, but I realise she actually means *cocoa*. I don’t think anyone has ever offered me cocoa before, so I’m a bit taken aback.

“Sure,” I mutter. “Sounds good. Give me a sec?”

“Of course.” She beams, but then her eyes go wide as the towel slips down completely, revealing my semi-hard cock as the gun clunks to my feet behind me. Good fucking thing I still had the safety on. “Oh,” she murmurs, staring at my cock, which causes it to leap into action and grow harder under her gaze.

When she licks her lips, the visceral reaction of my body is a surprise to both of us. I grab her, pulling her into my arms, crushing my mouth against hers as I pull her into the bedroom and kick the door closed behind us. Pressing her up against it, I devour her mouth. She tastes of chocolate and marshmallows and all the sweet, gorgeous things which are the very essence of her.

“Fuck,” I groan into her mouth, my hands going up to her neck. I cup her nape and reach up to pull the tie out of her hair, letting it fall around her face like a halo. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

Pulling back, I gaze into her eyes with a ragged pant. Taking her hand, I guide it to my cock and groan as I close my fist around hers as she grips me loosely.

“Dante, I…”

“If you’re worried about Gideon, don’t be.”

She blinks but doesn’t say anything. We just stand there with her hand wrapped around my stiff dick.

Bending down to capture her lips in a brutal kiss, she gasps, her hand

tightening around me. Rocking my hips back gently, I force her to jerk me off but let go of her hand. She doesn't remove it, if anything, she tightens her grip even more.

"That's it, darling," I murmur against her plump red lips. "Mm, that feels so good."

"Ah," she pants and then removes her hand, to my crushing disappointment. "Cocoa," she breathes and pushes on my chest.

She spins around and tries to open the door, but I put a hand to it, stopping her. Taking my cock in my other hand, I whisper in her ear, "Turn around, Isla."

Slowly, she faces me, and I take a step back, tugging on my cock gently. "Watch me. Don't touch. Just watch me please myself, knowing you caused this reaction, Isla."

She turns around, watching my hand as I begin to pump my length slowly.

With her long, blonde hair falling in curls around her face and shoulders, I admire just how beautiful she is, like an angel. She has the power to make every inch of my skin tingle with awareness. I pump harder, knowing it won't take much.

Grunting, I feel the climax hit me and cup my hand over the tip of my cock.

She presses her lips together, and when I coat my hand and cock with the cum that I release, she closes her eyes.

Startling at her reaction, I reach out to push a strand of hair from her face and let out a moan as my cock throbs even more. "Open your eyes, Isla." She obeys, continuing to watch me as she gazes at me with hooded eyes. This is so fucking hot, the way she's looking at me like I'm a god who is tempting her. The way she's the siren who has lured me here with her sensual kisses and made me hard like steel. Her gaze does things to me that no one else ever has. She does things that make me feel alive again in ways nobody else can.

"Do you enjoy being the one to see me come undone?" I murmur.

She breathes heavily but doesn't say anything.

After a few seconds, she stumbles back and opens the door, rushing from the room, fleeing whatever feelings overcame her in this moment. Gideon is going to have a fight on his hands if he doesn't allow me to take her. If I hadn't already been pulled into her web, I would be now after this encounter. She has shown me something about myself tonight. My soul runs deeper than

I imagined, and right now, it is twisting its way around Isla's, drawing her to me even though she is running. She won't be able to stop herself from returning.





## ISLA

**S**currying away from Dante's room like a rat being chased by a cat, I turn the corner in the hallway and then stop, pressing against the wall as I catch my breath.

I don't know what I expected by going to his room to be hospitable, but it wasn't that.

"Isla."

I look up as Gideon approaches me, concern etched on his face.

"Why aren't you in your room?"

"I wanted some cocoa and thought I'd offer some to the rest of your guests."

His eyes narrow. "Did you speak to either of them?"

"Just Dante. He didn't want any."

*Cocoa, that is.*

He was quite up for something else entirely. And what the fuck is it about cocoa that is so arousing, anyway? I swear, I need to stop making it before I wind up in trouble.

"Hmm."

*Hmm?* What does that mean exactly?

"Do you want some?"

"Some what?"

"Cocoa," I practically breathe as my voice box has gone numb.

He shakes his head. "What I want is for you to go back to your room and stay there like I keep telling you to."

"Sure," I murmur and straighten up.

I wonder if he knows I've kissed his rival. Do my lips tell a story that I can't see?

Wiping my hand guiltily on my jeans, I smile and wait for him to move out of my way. When he doesn't, I falter.

"Isla, please do as I ask. These men are not the sort you should be offering cocoa to. I know you are trying to play the good hostess, but they will eat you alive. Please. I need you safe."

"Maybe I want to be eaten," I blurt out as my cheeks flush.

He raises an eyebrow and snickers. "You are a wicked and enigmatic woman, Isla Harding. You keep me on my toes."

"Isn't that what you like, though?" I don't know who I think I am to presume anything about him, but he strikes me as the type who would get bored easily with a docile, do-as-he-asks woman. More and more, I want to be *his* and yet, my fear that he will find me dull once the novelty has worn off is crippling. He is sexy, sophisticated, a complete mystery and a little bit unhinged. It all boils down to an attraction level that is through the roof. His attention is going to my head, and I need to pull back or find myself falling down the rabbit hole with this man who has turned my head completely around and somehow, without even really trying, has wrapped his soul around mine. There is so much I don't want to admit to myself. Not yet.

His gaze is veiled when he stares at me, contemplating my question. My heart skips every other beat, making me feel sick as we stand there.

"You have caught me by surprise, Isla. In my world, things are never guaranteed. Everything is fluid, and nothing stays the same for very long. It's like trying to grasp a handful of sand... it just slips away, and you have to start all over again."

Chewing the inside of my lip, I try to follow. I'm not sure what he is saying. Is he trying to say that he doesn't want to pursue whatever is brewing between us? He is talking in riddles and confusing my already befuddled brain.

"So you like predictability? Is that what you're saying?" My mouth has gone bone dry as I wait for his answer. I've played this all wrong, and it's going to finish before it's even started.

"Where I can find it."

"What does that mean?" I whisper, terrified. I don't want to be in this position, but he has put me here, and I know I can't walk away. His kiss was the start of something. We both know it, but he has all the power and that

scares me. Maybe that's why I let Dante kiss me and why I touched him. I had more control over it.

Gideon doesn't answer me.

I'm so nervous, I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole, so of course, I say the first thing that comes into my head. "I kissed Dante."

The silence that falls is shocked, and if I didn't know better, I'd say the air went a little bit cooler.

"Oh?" he croaks.

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "It just happened. He initiated it, but I didn't push him away. It was sudden, and there was a situation, and it just..."

"What situation?" he growls.

"He was naked... but it's not what you think!"

"Naked?"

He looks like his head is about to explode.

"Shower. Towel. It dropped down... long story short, we kissed. But it was nothing."

"Was it? Why are you telling me any of this, then?"

"Please don't hurt him," I implore.

"You're begging for his life now?"

"No, I..." His words sink in. "Do I need to?"

He lets out a surprised laugh. "You tell me."

I shake my head, even more confused. "Gideon. I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Don't be sorry, Isla. He is the one who needs to be sorry for taking advantage of you."

"No, it wasn't like that."

"Then what was it like, Isla?" He moves in closer, not quite in my personal space, but only because I step back and press against the wall again. "Did you enjoy it? Was it as fantastic as our kiss?"

His voice is husky and seductive. I'm not sure if he is trying to trick me. "It was different," I murmur.

"How?"

"I can't describe it."

"Who would you rather kiss again?"

Blinking, I wonder what the fuck is going on here. "Both. Neither. You?" My voice goes high-pitched at the end.

He smirks and reaches out to cup my face gently. Still as a statue, I keep

my gaze on his, unable to tear it away. “Why is that a question? Don’t you want to kiss me again?”

“I do,” I pant softly. His body, so close to mine, is doing things to my mind. I’m losing it around him.

He brushes his lips against mine softly before demanding I open up with his tongue thrusting into my mouth. I grip his shirt, dragging him closer to me, smashing my body against his. His hands go to my hips as we ravage each other in the best kiss I have ever had. It takes my breath away as the blood pumps through my veins like molten lava.

“Gideon,” I whisper when he pulls slightly away to lean his forehead on mine.

“Isla. If it wasn’t abundantly clear, I want you. I need you. You have swept in like a tornado and made a mess of my order. But you thrill me, you challenge me, you defy me, and it delights me. If I were to lose you from my life now, I would be broken.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I rasp.

“And what about Dante?”

“Who?”

He smiles slowly, with a dash of evil dancing across his kiss-swollen lips, and my heart breaks.

“I see,” I mutter bitterly and pull away. “This was all just a ploy to get my attention back on you.”

He grabs my hand. “Not at all, Isla. If you want him, by all means, have him. But know that he is a sub-par version of the man you really want.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s completely fair. I’m saying if you want him, you can have him.”

“And lose you at the same time! Why would you even do any of this?” Tears pool in my eyes before they spill down my cheeks.

“Who said anything about losing me?” he asks, turning his head to the side in query. “I never said you would lose me.”

“Wh-what?” I stammer, not following.

He takes my hand and leads me down the hallway, back to my bedroom. Pulling me inside, he closes the door softly as my palms sweat.

“I have realised something about myself since you swept in here. You have made me see that I would do absolutely anything to keep you in my life. I’m a ruthless man, Isla. I don’t give a flying crap about anyone, with the exception of my sister. Usually. I haven’t given a shit about anyone I’ve hurt

or destroyed or killed to stay at the top of this game. I still don't give a shit. But you..." He shakes his head as he stares at me. "You have changed all of that. I care what you think. I care how you feel. It bothers me that I might disappoint you or that I might upset you. I haven't killed those two arseholes who attacked me in my own home and who hurt you because I know that's not what you would want me to do. I am a leopard, Isla. They don't change their spots, but there is something about you that my soul is begging for, enough that I'm considering your feelings above my own."

"Oh... I'm not even sure what to do with all of that. I guess the big question is, why?"

"Good question," he says with a hollow laugh. "But you are missing the point here."

"Which is what?"

"That I don't care if you want Dante. Kiss him, fuck him, ride him from here until dawn if that's what *you* want to do. Hell, go and do the same with Sebastian if he's up for it, take them both, I actually don't give a fuck, Isla, because all I want is for you to be happy, and as long as you will be mine, I don't care what you do. There is precious little that you *could* do that would make me walk away from you now because, for the first time in my life, I've had a taste of something real. Something tangible, something that makes me feel alive, and I will hang onto it with everything that I've got because I am not losing you. You are not walking away from this. I won't let you. So you can do what you want, with whomever you choose. But you are *mine*, Isla. Don't ever forget that."

The air crackles with the tension and intensity that follows that passionate speech. I'm rooted to the spot. I don't know what to say or do. No one has *ever* said anything even remotely in the vicinity of what he has, and I've had several long-term, serious boyfriends in the past. But that kind of says it all.

They were *boys*.

Gideon is a man. A real man, able to speak openly about his feelings and how deep they run, even if he does sound a little crazy.

But crazy, in this case, is good. It's better than good. It's perfect because I know that I feel the same way. "I am yours, Gideon. I think I knew that the second I laid eyes on you when you had a gun pointed at my face."

"I know I felt it before then."

"So, where do we go from here?"

"You need to decide what you are going to do about Dante," he says with

a sigh. “I can’t guarantee that he didn’t just kiss you to get to me, so you need to sort that out.”

“I don’t want Dante,” I say, shaking my head. “I know you are used to seeing one woman with multiple men in your porn orgy shows, but that’s not me, Gideon. I hope that is okay with you because I, too, am a leopard, and my spots don’t change either.”

He smiles softly and gathers me in his arms, kissing the top of my head. “You aren’t a leopard, Isla. You are a unicorn. Magical, beautiful and full of possibilities you haven’t even dared to explore yet.”

Blinking back the tears, I smile into his shirt. “For a man who doesn’t engage with the public at large, you have a way with words, don’t you?”

He chuckles. “I still converse with people, you know.”

“I know, but you have charisma coming out of your arse. Is that why you are such a superspy? You can talk your way into anything.”

“Not a spy,” he mutters again, but with a secretive smile that only a superspy would have. “Go to sleep now, Isla. You need to rest. It’s been a long day.”

“No kidding,” I agree. “You too.”

He shakes his head. “Maybe when I’m dead.”

Eyes wide, I tremble. I hope he means that as a joke, but in this house, who the fuck knows?



## DANTE

**S**ilently waiting for Gideon to leave Isla alone, I sneak down the hallway and knock softly when he disappears into his room.

Slightly mussed and flushed, Isla opens the door quickly, probably thinking I'm Gideon. When she sees it's me, her eyes widen, and she smiles prettily, lowering her gaze as she tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Hey," I murmur, leaning up against the doorframe.

"Hey. Nice to see you clothed."

Snickering, I give her a very brazen once-over with my gaze, taking in every inch of her curves. "Shame to see you are."

"Funny," she says and then gathers her wits. She folds her arms and lifts her gaze to mine, glaring at me. "Why did you kiss me?"

"Why do you think?"

"Don't play games with me, Dante. I'm too old to play guessing games. Be straight or leave."

"Fair enough. I find you absolutely gorgeous, not just your goddess-like looks but your entire attitude and loyalty are pure gold, Isla. Do you know how rare you are?"

"Call me a unicorn, and we are going to have a problem," she replies drolly.

"You don't like unicorns?" I muse.

"Love them, but Gideon already called me that once today, and I'm not sure I can believe it a second time."

"Why not?"

She shrugs and looks away again.



“You don’t believe you are a wondrous creature to him or me? You are, Isla. Call us jaded because fuck knows we are that and more, but you are exactly the woman that I’ve been waiting for.”

“You don’t even know me. I could be awful.”

“I doubt that. I’ve seen enough. And no, I don’t know-know you, but that will change.”

“Confident of that, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you want to get to know me?” My heart nearly stops beating as I wait for her answer.

“Can you answer my question first? Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I wanted to, because I’m wildly attracted to you, and I wanted to see if you would kiss me back.”

“So it didn’t have anything to do with Gideon?”

“Ah, I see,” I murmur. “You think I only kissed you to get to him?”

“You still haven’t answered that.”

“No, I didn’t. Perhaps when I first learned about you and saw you here with him, taking you from him was something I wanted to do, I won’t lie about that. But when you slapped me, I was smitten.” Smirking at her, she can’t hold back the smile.

“Like a bit of pain, do you?”

“Oh, you have no fucking idea,” I murmur darkly, causing her to blush again. “But know this: my cock doesn’t lie. Seeing you look at me the way you did kickstarted a desire that is overtaking my mind right now. I need to know something back. Did you kiss me to force Gideon into making a decision about you and him?”

“What?” she splutters. “No! No, I wouldn’t do that. I don’t like games.”

This is the second time she’s mentioned this, so my conclusion is drawn. She’s been hurt by shady fuckers in the past, and she is wary.

While I love a good play, I won’t put her through the wringer. She deserves better than that.

“So why did you then?”

“Because you kissed me.”

“Is that the only reason?” I’m pressing her despite her exclamation, she is toying with me now. She doesn’t mean to, but she hasn’t given me the answer I require.

She looks down and shakes her head. “No.”

“Then why?” Stepping closer, I reach out and lift her chin up so her gaze

can meet mine. It is heated and full of desire, which mirrors my own. It makes my heart thump.

“I wanted to.”

“Do you find me attractive, Isla?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to know what my cock feels like sliding into your pussy?”

She gulps and takes a step back.

*Noted.*

She won't jump into bed with me just because I ask nicely, nor because she has had her hand wrapped around my cock.

“Gideon,” she says.

“Dante,” I mutter with narrowed eyes.

She giggles. “No, I mean, he and I... we are starting something. I don't know where it will lead, but I am attracted to you, Dante. I'm unsure what to do because I don't know you. You burst in here not that long ago, looking for a fight, and now you're being all charming and seductive. I'm not sure where I stand with you, nor do I know what your intentions are with Gideon.”

“I won't hurt him if you ask me not to.”

“Don't hurt him.”

Smiling slowly, I nod. “I won't. I don't want to do anything to upset you. We can take this at your pace, Isla, but I'm intrigued, and I want to pursue this.”

“I told Gideon we kissed,” she blurts out.

Raising an eyebrow, I'm surprised by her bluntness. “Did you? And what did he say?”

“He said he doesn't care if I want to be with both of you.” The way she says it makes it sound like a challenge.

“Colour me shocked, darling. Gideon never did like to share.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Oh, I love to share,” I say wickedly. “I'm not greedy.”

She giggles and looks down at her feet again but loses the crossed-arms stance and relaxes. “I need to see where things go with Gideon first. I've never...” She purses her lips. “I'm not...”

“Say no more,” I murmur, to save the embarrassment of having to explain herself. “I will wait.”

“Really?”

Her surprised tone melts the last part of my heart that I was guarding

against her in case she shot me down. She is vulnerable and precious, and my instinct to protect her at all costs just rose into the stratosphere.

“Really,” I say, grasping her chin again so she will look at me with those forest-green eyes.

She nods, pressing her lips together and then glances over my shoulder with a frown.

“Sebastian,” I mutter, letting go of her. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“Dante,” he grits out. “Can I have a word with Isla?”

“Sure.” I don’t move a muscle.

“What is it?” Isla asks, her face full of concern.

“Got any painkillers?” he asks, but I can tell from his tone that this isn’t about him being in pain. He wants time alone with her.

Can’t say I can blame him, but she is in demand now, and that is cutting into my time.

“Yes, of course,” she says immediately, looking back at me. “Excuse me.”

Without having any reason not to, I step aside and let her pass. She smiles at Sebastian, and I turn to the side to see Gideon watching this from his bedroom doorway with hooded eyes, Scotch in hand, seemingly relaxed.

I’m not buying it.

Whatever tune he’s singing to Isla about not caring if she comes to me doesn’t sound like the Gideon I know. I’ll get to the bottom of it soon, but tomorrow we need to clear the smog that has descended down on us over the last few years so I can get some answers and hopefully have another turn at kicking his arse again if he’s up for it.

Wondering if I should follow Isla and Sebastian downstairs, I pause. Gideon doesn’t seem concerned about them disappearing together. He must know that Sebastian has also fallen into the Isla web of intrigue and is giving him the opportunity to, I can only assume, cock it up, so she decides he is a douche she never wants to lay eyes on again. I mean, it’s not hard. He is a psychotic alpha male with violent tendencies that he expresses by killing people for money. Somehow, I don’t think that is on Isla’s list of acceptable jobs, but how and when she finds out is not up to me unless it ends up putting her in danger.

Then, all bets are off.



## SEBASTIAN

“I’m sorry,” Isla says as we head downstairs.

“What for?” I ask, taking in her soft beauty.

“I should’ve made sure you weren’t in pain earlier, and I didn’t. That’s not very caring of me.”

Frowning as I’m not sure if she is joking or not, I realise that she is being genuine. “Honestly, I was fine until I moved upstairs.”

“Don’t believe you,” she says with a cute smile. “But there’s some painkillers in the kitchen.”

“Seriously,” I insist. “Do you know what a trek it was to my room?”

She giggles. “I can imagine. Do you want some cocoa?”

Her cheeks flush when she says that, like it’s an inside joke that I’m not part of. “Okay,” I say. “It’s not something I usually go for, but I’ll have some. Got any marshmallows?”

She gives me a horrified glare. “Of course. What do you think this is?”

Pushing the kitchen door open, she flicks on the lights and heads straight to the kettle to turn it on. It starts to boil merrily away while she fusses about getting me the painkillers I don’t really need, but the excuse was perfect to go and see her. It looks like I was a bit late to the party, though, with Dante already sniffing around her. It didn’t take him long, but then it never did.

We stay silent through the cocoa-making process and then she hands me a big mug topped with tiny marshmallows and two painkillers.

“Thanks,” I mutter, a bit dumbstruck for the first time in my life.

“No worries,” she murmurs. “Can I ask what your issue is with Gideon?”

The blunt question comes out of the blue and startles me. “It’s a long

story.”

She nods. “Code for you don’t want to tell me.”

Chuckling, I blow on the cocoa. “Can’t sweetheart. There’s stuff you are not allowed to know.”

“Spy stuff?” She huffs and leans against the kitchen island.

*Spy stuff?* “Sure.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, don’t tell me. But I’ll tell you what I told Dante. Don’t hurt him.”

“Can’t promise that.”

“You’d better, or I’m taking my cocoa back.” She reaches for the mug, but I hold it out of her reach.

“Hey,” I complain. “Rude. This is mine. You made it for me.”

“And I’ll totally take it back if you don’t make me the promise right now not to hurt Gideon. Or Dante, for that matter.”

“You dislike violence.” It’s a statement that doesn’t require an answer. I knew that about her the second I laid eyes on her. She is sweet, kind and gentle. There isn’t even a speck of darkness lurking in her soul. Too bad mine is pitch black and will never be anything else.

“Of course I do. Only psychos enjoy it,” she snaps.

“Ouch, but not inaccurate. I’ll take the hit.”

Isla’s eyes narrow. “You think of yourself as a psycho?”

“Sweetheart, if only you knew what I am capable of.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“I don’t see you running.”

She presses her lips together. “Touché.”

Smirking, I take a sip of the steaming cocoa and then down the painkillers still clutched in my hand. After I’ve swallowed the pills, I search her eyes until she looks away. “You aren’t scared of me, are you, Isla?”

She shakes her head. “I should be. I know that. My head is screaming at me to run.”

“So why don’t you, then?”

“Good point,” she murmurs. “Maybe you’re all talk.”

Almost choking on my cocoa, I refrain from saying anything else on this matter right now. She would sprint, not run, a thousand miles away from me if she knew. “Maybe,” I mutter.

“I think you need to get up to bed,” she says after a beat.

“Don’t sleep.”

“To rest then.”

“Will you join me?”

“No.”

“There’s that word again, Isla.” My dark gaze meets her playful one, and it causes a reaction to my cock that I wasn’t expecting. I’m suddenly rock hard. “I’m going to spank that word out of your vocabulary, sweetheart.”

“Something tells me you won’t. You like hearing me say it.”

“You’ve got me all wrong. You were right before. Not many people say no to me. Very few live after they have. I hate being disobeyed.”

“You want me to *obey* you?”

Loving where this conversation is headed, I place the cocoa down and move in closer to her. She straightens up, trapped between my body and the kitchen island, suddenly on high alert.

“I want you to do everything that I ask of you, Isla. If I say to you to suck my cock, I expect you to reply, ‘Yes, Master’.”

“Master?” she croaks.

“Mm. That’s perfect. Say it again, only this time, purr it like a good girl.”

She blinks and stares at me as if she has no idea what to do. If anything, all this does is confirm to me she is as beautifully innocent as I want her to be. She isn’t the siren who will drop her knickers for me the second I ask, and I know that if she did, I’d be bitterly disappointed. Knowing this has made me want her even more. She is the white whale. The one I have to work to get. The chase, the thrill, the hunt.

I won’t stop until I have her, and I don’t care who I have to go through to get her.

I stroke her face with the back of my hand, and she parts her lips, her breathing deeper than before. “I’m aching to touch you, Isla.”

“No,” she whispers.

Narrowing my eyes, I say, “You’re lucky I require your consent before I take your body and claim it, Isla, or I’d have you bent over this island with your knickers around your ankles while I impale you on my cock, whether you wanted it or not.”

“Ah,” she breathes out in shock.

“Does the thought turn you on, Isla?” I whisper in her ear. “Does the thought of me fucking you arouse you?”

“N-no,” she stammers.

“Liar. Do you know what I do to liars, Isla?”

She shakes her head, the rest of her frozen.

“I force them to confront the truth by whatever means necessary.”

“Please,” she whimpers.

I brush my lips against hers, gripping her chin tightly. “Don’t lie to me, Isla.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t lie to you again.”

“Answer honestly now. Does the thought of my cock pounding into your pussy turn you on?”

“Y-yes.”

“Are you wet for me, Isla?”

She nods, and I stifle my groan. “That’s better. Always tell me the truth, no matter what, okay, sweetheart.”

“O-okay.”

“Good girl,” I murmur and kiss her forehead before I step back and pick up my cocoa again, pleased with how this encounter progressed. We have laid down some ground rules for her to work with, and I expect to see her flourish under my care.

“Don’t lie to me either,” she says quietly as I turn to leave.

Smiling before I turn back to her, I say. “I won’t. Trust works both ways, Isla.”

She clenches her jaw but doesn’t say anything else, even though she is itching to.

But it’s time I left her to think about all that has happened in here tonight. I want her to go to bed, close her eyes and drop her hands between her thighs to play with herself until she comes all over her fingers thinking of me.

Because fuck knows, I’ll be rubbing one out thinking of her as soon as I get back to my room, and fair’s fair, after all.





## ISLA

Waking up from a restless sleep where every time I dropped into a deep slumber, I'd wake up with a start, remembering everything that happened in the last day, I groan and kick my leg over the covers.

"Ow." Hitting something hard, I sit up and root around in the covers to discover that the tiara was all mussed up in the sheets. "Oops," I murmur, holding it up to check it's not damaged. Not that I would know on a level that isn't where the diamonds are falling out or it's bent, but it looks okay.

Needing to get this back in the box for when Sophia returns, I get up and shower quickly, getting dressed in black leggings and an oversized black tee with flip-flops on. Hurrying downstairs with the tiara, I find the box exactly where Gideon left it and place the tiara in carefully, folding the top over and bringing it with me to the kitchen to remind me to take it back upstairs later. Deciding to make the three guys a lovely breakfast where they can hopefully have a civilised conversation, I pause at the counter where Sebastian seduced me. I'm not sure how I held out from jumping on him, but something held me back. There is a darkness there that is frightening, and I don't want to get in too deep with him, even if it is just flirting from my side; he has different ideas.

"Morning," Gideon says, arriving in the kitchen just as I'm putting sausages in the frying pan. "Are you okay?"

Turning to him with a smile, I reply, "Perfect. You?"

"Better now I know you are okay."

"You're sweet. But you don't have to worry about me."

"But I do and will. Did you talk to Dante?"

He stares at the box and flips the lid open as a distraction.

“Yes. I’m still a bit unsure where all of this is going, but he said he would go at my pace and wait until, *if*, I’m ready. But that depends on you, really.”

“Me? I already said it’s fine.”

“You plural. You need to get your air cleared.”

“Hmm. Is that what this breakfast is for?”

“Yes. So, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get it ready.”

“I’ll be in my office unless you want some help.”

“Nope. Go. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

He nods and leaves, something weighing heavily on his mind. I wish he would open up, but I understand why he can’t.

Turning the sausages down, I head to the dining room to set three places at the head of the table and return to the kitchen in time to add bacon to another pan and scramble some eggs. I cut off big slices of the gorgeous farmhouse bread and slip it in the toaster, ready to be buttered and served.

Before I’m ready to plate it up, I go to the bottom of the stairs and hope everyone can hear me as I yell, “Breakfast is ready!”

I needn’t have worried. The three men come running like they haven’t been fed in days. Mind you, I don’t think anyone has eaten anything since they arrived here yesterday, so they probably are all hungry.

“This smells absolutely delicious,” Dante says, sitting on Gideon’s right as Sebastian takes the left.

“Wow,” Sebastian says as I place a full plate in front of him. “I haven’t had a home-cooked meal in…” He frowns. “Well, ever, I don’t think. Mum was a buy frozen and heat quickly woman.”

“Well, as long as you are all here, enjoying this good food, why don’t you have a talk, hmm? Catch up, clear the air, and all that.”

Dante catches my eye. “Bribery? Nice, Isla. You’re learning.”

“Not bribery. A companion to your conversation.”

“Thank you, Isla. It looks wonderful,” Gideon says quietly.

I take that as my cue to beat it. As much as I would like to mediate this conversation, none of them will say shit while I’m there. I know it, they know it, so I might as well bugger off and start cleaning this immense castle while they hopefully sort out their issues.

“Oh,” I say as I reach the door, “If any one of you throws a punch, draws a knife, or shoots anyone, you will never be fed by me again. And if you don’t think that’s a threat. Start eating.”

“You don’t need to convince me,” Gideon says, tucking in. “Fuck me. Is there more?”

“Maybe after you’ve talked. Be good boys now.” I waggle my fingers and blink as Dante’s face lights up.

“I like the mother hen touch. It reminds me how empty and sad my life has become.”

“I know how to take care of people. It’s my job, my calling, so you do your part, and I’ll do mine.”

“I’m convinced,” he says with a slow smile before he starts eating.

Sebastian is already halfway through his, which makes me feel all warm and fuzzy.

“Bye now.”

Disappearing back to the kitchen, I grab the box and go upstairs to find Sophia’s room to leave it, and then I get started on my duties, shaking my head in disbelief that I’ve only been here a few days. It feels like forever, and I can’t help the thrill that skitters over me when I think about all the excitement that has happened.

“Now whose life is sad and empty,” I murmur, but I don’t care. I actually feel *happy* for the first time in I don’t know how long. And nothing is going to ruin that for me.

Wincing as I know I just jinxed the shit out of myself, I forget everything as I get to work.



## GIDEON

“I don’t even know where to start. This is your thing, so one of you needs to get it over with.” Isla’s threat hangs ominously over me and my stomach. I need her cooking, and I need her.

“I’ll go,” Sebastian states. “My thing involves both of you, and yours is just between you two, so it makes sense.”

“So practical,” Dante drawls. “Since when?”

“Since I grew up, you dick. Now listen up. I’m pissed that you killed my dad and took what was mine.”

“Hang on...”

“Wait,” he says, holding his hands up. “My turn. I’ve got the fucking conch.”

“Hated that book,” Dante mutters.

“But for the sake of Isla,” Sebastian continues, “I’m willing to make a deal, a compromise, if you will.”

“I’m listening,” I growl.

He shovels the last of his breakfast into his mouth, and I wait for him to finish impatiently.

“You took what was mine, and I want it back.”

“You can’t have it. Dante is the Head of South London. You could kill him, but then I’d be a bit pissed and have to kill you. No one gets his head on a spike except me.”

“Nice,” Dante drawls. “Back at you, prick.”

“I don’t want South London. Well, I *do*, but that ship has sailed. I know you won’t let me take Dante’s head, so I’ll take anywhere.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, I propose a win-win for both of us. You give me the weakest link, and I’ll take them out and take over their patch. You get me out of your hair, and I get what was rightfully mine to begin with, albeit somewhere else.”

Sitting back, I rest my elbow on the chair arm and regard him curiously. “You’d be willing to go anywhere?”

“Well, let’s start with local and work our way outwards.”

“You want England? That’s going to be tough.”

“Make it happen.”

The gauntlet has been laid down. I can think of a few Sector heads I’d like to get rid of, but with it will come a floodgate of problems for both Sebastian and, therefore, me. Pursing my lips as I think, he wipes the last of his toast around the sauce on his plate and sits back, hands crossed on his stomach.

“Well? I don’t have all day.”

“Will you take Scotland?”

“Depends. Where?”

“Edinburgh.”

He raises an eyebrow. “What did Andrew do to piss you off?”

“Let’s just say he is a liability who drinks too much and takes too many whores to his bed. Who the fuck knows what he’s blabbing to all who will listen? You get rid of him, and you can have his patch.”

“The whole of the city?”

“That’s his patch.”

“Deal,” he says quickly and holds his hand out for me to shake.

Cautiously, I extend my own. It’s making a deal with the devil, but then I know he is thinking the same thing.

“Right,” he says, letting go of my hand and standing up. “I’m going to find Isla and charm her into loving me.”

“Good luck with that,” I mutter.

He pauses halfway to picking up his plate. “You don’t think I can?”

“I think that she is mine, possibly Dante’s as well, and you don’t stand a chance.”

“No? She was dripping wet for me last night in the kitchen from just a few murmured words.”

“You wish,” Dante blurts out. “Stay the fuck away from her. You are no

good for her.”

“That’s fucking smug coming from you,” he retorts. “You are no fucking saint.”

“So you know that when she finds out what you do as a side hustle, she will run a fucking mile away from you? So have at it. You won’t get far.”

“Fuck you,” he snarls. “She isn’t just a passing fantasy to me. I want to get to know her. Her light is intriguing, and I’m not backing down. I don’t care what you say, I want her. I want to touch that light and darken it.”

Rising in one fluid motion, I slam him to the wall at his back with my hand at his throat. “If you so much as corrupt a single cell in her body, you won’t make it long enough to rule a sector. Do I make myself clear?”

He smirks, and it infuriates me. This asshole, along with the other still stuffing his face with sausage, show no fear, and it irritates the shit out of me. They are just like me. Just as ruthless.

“You are no better than me,” Sebastian growls, grabbing my wrist to try to remove my hand from his neck. “Do you think she’s going to stick around once she knows all your secrets? All the people you’ve killed to get what you want?”

Letting him go roughly, I have no comeback because he is right. I’m living in a complete fantasy land, thinking Isla and I can ever be together. Avoiding Dante’s almost panicked expression as he’s probably thinking the same, I sit and go back to my food ignoring them both.

There is only one way forward if I’m going to make sure Isla stays in my life, and it’s not a decision I can take lightly.

But it’s already made, and all three of us know it and need to prepare for the backlash.

“Try it with Isla and see how far you get,” I say. “If she wants you, I won’t stand in your way, but if she rejects you, you leave her the fuck alone and never lay eyes on her again.”

“Another deal, Don. She will be mine.”

“Ours,” I say softly. “She doesn’t have to choose if she doesn’t want to. But if she does...”

“Then we honour that,” Sebastian says. “I’m not a complete asshole, Gideon. I can be a decent human being on occasion.”

“Not often enough,” Dante murmurs.

“Isla might change that.”

With that said, he picks up his plate and leaves me and Dante, simmering



in a stew of our own making, but not even knowing where to start with this shitshow.



## DANTE

“One down, bigger one to go,” I drawl, finishing off the best cooked breakfast I’ve ever had in my life and sitting back.

“I don’t even know why you’re pissed off. You got everything you ever wanted.”

Shaking my head, I inhale deeply. “How can you deny that you shot that gun?”

“Easily,” he retorts. “Frank came at me with the gun, we struggled, you got involved, and I stumbled, and the gun went off. I wasn’t even touching it. You were.”

“In your fucking dreams,” I snarl. “You are seriously deluded.”

“How? How am I deluded? I wasn’t near the weapon that shot him.”

“Neither was I!” I roar, standing up and running my hand through my hair. “Jesus. You pulled the trigger, shot Frank, he died, and you made me Head of the South London sector because you couldn’t take it, and you knew I wanted it. But then you fucked off and left me to deal with the fallout.”

“No, that’s not what happened. You were made Head because you took out the current one.”

“We are going round in circles here,” I spit out in exasperation.

“So let’s think about this logically then. If you didn’t pull the trigger, and neither did I, then that leaves Frank. He shot himself.”

“Could be...” I think that over. “I mean, stranger things have happened.”

We stare at each other for a few moments.

“Fuck. Do you think?”

He shrugs. “Has to be. I really thought it was you, and that’s why I was so

fucking mad. I had a position lined up for you. I took out Mark so you could have Chester, and then this happened, and I had to give you South London.”

“Jesus. What a shitshow. You really took out Mark?” I ask after a beat. “For me?”

“Yeah,” he grunts, not happy about that right now. “He was a lazy arse who had it coming, and I had plans for you and for Sebastian and it all got shot to hell. Literally.”

“Why did you leave straight after?”

“I had to. Things were getting too tense. Everyone was in my face every second of every day. Look at Frank. I needed to step back and regain some of the respect that my father had for being less available. It was the only way.”

“I felt like you abandoned me.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. “You didn’t even say goodbye, just left me with Frank’s death to clean up.”

“I know. It was all planned. If I hadn’t left when I had prepared to, I wouldn’t have got away. You know that. You know what it was like.”

“But you didn’t even tell me where you were going. We were best friends. You told me everything, so why not that?” My bitterness at the pain of his betrayal is still too raw for me to think about.

He sighs and slumps in his seat. “I was going to. After. But then shit hit the fan, and I knew you were gunning for me for leaving you to clear up the mess we left with killing Frank. Then Seb and the aftermath of you taking over. I wanted to reach out, but I couldn’t trust that you’d keep it a secret. It was easier just to let you go.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss. “It was the coward’s way out.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head sadly. “I had, have, the weight of this world on my shoulders, Dante. I had to leave you to sort it out, to gain the respect, to take control.”

“I’ve lived with this for ten years. This betrayal, this title you gave me that I didn’t really deserve.”

“You deserved it. And it’s my right under the circumstances to give you any position I clear myself. You’re right; I can’t take them myself, so the bylaws say I can give it to anyone I choose.”

“You make it sound like I’m supposed to fall to my knees in gratitude.”

“Fuck that, dickhead. Do that, and I’ll chop your head off.”

Snickering, we share a look of bonding that we once had and that I miss, but I sober up quickly. “You hurt me.”

“I know, and you hurt me too by turning on me. But I get it now. Do you?”

Looking away, I slump back into my chair. “I think so. It was a huge misunderstanding, but your leaving exacerbated it.”

“I had no choice.”

“Yeah.”

“Friends?” He holds his hand out, and I glare at it.

“Just like that?”

“It’s this, or I kill you, so it’s your choice.”

“Well, gee. I guess it’s no choice then, isn’t it.”

“The way of Solitaire.”

I slap my hand against his, and we shake on it. The burden of this entire situation lifts a little. I can see his side as he has laid it out. I still don’t know for sure if he is telling the truth about Frank accidentally shooting himself, but I guess that’s just something I’m going to have to get over because he firmly believes he didn’t do it, as do I.

“Did you really say to Isla that you’d let me share her with you?” I ask suddenly, letting go of his hand.

“I did.”

“Why? That was never your thing before.”

“I’d never met a woman like Isla before that I would do anything to keep in my life, even if it means accepting she doesn’t just want me.”

“She does just want you. She isn’t sold on the idea of having more than one man.”

“Can you blame her? It’s not exactly the norm.”

“True, and in so many ways, she is so innocent; it would never have crossed her mind before now.”

“You’ve fallen hard for her in a short space of time.”

“Like you didn’t?”

He shrugs. “I adore her. She is everything I need in my life, and I’m not losing her, Dante,” he says softly, seriously, and I hear the threat behind his words.

“I’m not going to hurt her. I told her we would go at her pace if she decided she wanted to explore something with me.”

He nods slowly. “I hope you mean that.”

“I do with everything that I have. I’m stunned by how much she has affected me. The thought of waking up back at home tomorrow in my empty

bed, my empty apartment, to do the same thing over and over on repeat, just going through the motions, is a bleak and frightening prospect.”

“That’s exactly how I feel. I don’t know why or how Sophia arranged this, but I know she didn’t just randomly pick Isla out to housekeep this old place.”

“She was looking for a wife for you. I see that. But where do I fit in? She left a trail, and that’s how I found you.”

“Maybe in her meddling ways, she wanted us to make up.”

“Sounds like Sophia.”

He smiles fondly, but then clears his throat. “Do you think we can trust Sebastian?”

“He’s always been a straight shooter, pardon the pun. He is renowned for hating liars, so I guess we have to accept he is telling the truth and take it one day at a time.”

“Like every other day here, then.”

“Damn, you really isolated yourself, didn’t you?” I sit back, feeling happier than I have in a while. I’m well fed, I have a crush on an angel, and I’ve made up with the man I thought I would kill one day for betraying me. Life is full of surprises right now.

“Had to. You know I have to move now, though, right?” He sounds pissed off as all fuck about that.

“Fuck that. I’m not going to tell anyone, and I don’t think Sebastian will. It will hurt Isla, and his infatuation with her has him on his best behaviour.”

“Like all of us then,” he snickers.

“Who’d have thought?”

He agrees silently, and we sit back, contemplating this change in our relationship and where the fuck we are supposed to go from here.



## ISLA

**S**tifling my squeal of surprise when I see Sebastian loitering in the hallway, I turn the vacuum off and glare at him.

“Hey,” he says casually. “I washed up my dishes.”

“There’s a dishwasher.”

“I know, but I figured I might as well.”

“Did you do the other’s dishes too?”

“No, I finished before them.”

“Oh.”

“Thank you, it was glorious.”

Smiling with pride, I push the tendrils of sweaty hair off my forehead. “You’re welcome. Did you sort things out with Gideon and Dante?”

“I did. I wish I could stay to sample some more of your delectable dishes, but I have to go and take care of something.”

The feeling of disappointment hits me harder than I expected. “Good, but that’s a shame. Where are you going?”

“Scotland.”

“Nice. Whereabouts?”

“Edinburgh. Have you been?”

“Loads of times. One of my favourite cities.”

He nods slowly. “Well, you will have to come for a visit.”

“You’re relocating?”

“How do you know I don’t live there?”

“Stab in the dark. You sound like you’re from the South of London, not Edinburgh.”



“You have me there. Yes. I will be relocating.”

“You’ll love it, I’m sure.”

“Ask me to stay?”

“Hmm?” I frown at him as he takes a step closer.

“Ask me to stay, and I will.”

I shake my head. “No, that’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

Good question. But while my body is begging me to ask him to stay, my mind is screaming at me to push him as far away from me as possible. He is seductively dangerous, and I just can’t bring that into my life right now. Or ever.

“It’s just not.”

“We’ll see, sweetheart. You’ve just given me an incentive to come back when my business is done.”

“Sebastian...” I shake my head again, but it doesn’t repel him. If anything, it attracts him.

“Stop pushing me away, Isla,” he murmurs, cupping my face. “I need to learn more about you. It’s nagging at me, like a loose tooth I have to keep prodding.”

“I’m not the right woman for you.”

“Oh, but you are. You are exactly who I need in my life, Isla. You tame me.” The slight smirk that adorns his handsome face is almost irresistible.

“I don’t want to *tame* anyone.”

“Too late. You have three ruthless men at your beck and call, Isla. You control our actions, our thoughts, our needs. You have all the power to make or break us.”

“Stop,” I murmur.

He presses closer to me and runs his thumb over my bottom lip. “Why are you running from it, Isla?”

“I’m scared,” I admit without thinking.

“Of us?”

“Yes. But also myself. I don’t want to lose myself. Lusting after all of you isn’t me. And it definitely isn’t right when I’m finding myself with deeper feelings for Gideon than I’ve had for a very long time... if ever. How can I make you understand that?”

“I do understand. And thank you for being honest with me, Isla. But consider this: you don’t know what you’re capable of in the right hands.”

“And you think your hands are right for me?”

He drops his hand to the back of my neck and pulls me even closer to whisper in my ear. “You have no idea the things I can make you feel with just my hands. Add in my lips, my tongue, my cock... I can have you reaching heights you never even knew existed. Now think about that, and then add Dante and Gideon to the picture.”

Gasping as my mind runs away with me, all I can picture now is the porn I saw with the woman and three men railing her in all her holes. A shiver of arousal ripples through my body, and I bring my hands up to rest lightly on Sebastian’s chest. “Stop doing this to me.”

“No. I want you to see how it can be, Isla. Don’t reject the idea because you’re scared.”

Lowering my gaze, I gulp.

He kisses my forehead and steps back, letting me go. “I’ll be back, Isla, and when I am, I want to continue this conversation. I hope you have a broader view of things then.”

“I can’t promise anything.”

“I know, but think about it. You have all the power, Isla.”

“I want more than just sex,” I blurt out, needing him to know so he stops pursuing this. I can’t hold out much longer, and I know he will break my heart if I let him in even a fraction.

His eyes search mine. “So do I, Isla. I’m talking about forever.”

“Oh,” I murmur, my cheeks heating up as I got him figured all wrong. Or did I? Are they just words? That there is the problem. I don’t know because I don’t know him.

“I’ll be seeing you, sweetheart,” he says, and with a last kiss on my forehead, he sweeps out of my life, crushing a tiny part of me that desperately wants to believe what he says.

“Isla.”

“Yes, Gideon,” I say as I see him approaching, crossing Sebastian on the stairs.

“I set the dishwasher running.”

“What?” His words jump-start me back into reality. “No, you’ll have done it all wrong!”

He chuckles. “Contrary to what my sister told you, I’m not completely stupid.”

“You’d better be right. But I’m going to have to check it, or it will bug

me if I have to start the cycle all over again because everything is dirty.”

“I want you to feel more at home here, Isla,” he says suddenly. “I don’t want you doing all of this…” He waves his hand about wildly.

“What’s this?” I ask, mimicking his gesture.

“Cleaning and cooking.”

“But it’s my job.”

“I don’t want you to do it anymore.”

“So you want me to leave?” My heart plummets to the bottom of my feet.

“What? No. I want you to stay but to be with me here. Not working here.”

“Oh,” I murmur, relief flooding me. “But who will cook and clean then?”

He frowns. “Uhm…”

Giggling, I rescue him. “I want to do all this, Gideon. I like cleaning and cooking and taking care of you.”

“It doesn’t feel right when we are starting something.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, but I’m here, so I might as well carry on, yes?”

“No.”

“Okay, that wasn’t really a question. I’m here, I’m carrying on. Got it.”

He smiles. “You’re not leaving me much choice, are you?”

“Not really. Did you sort your issues out?”

“For now. I think there is a lot of shit still there, and I don’t think Sebastian is done with me yet.”

“He is going to Scotland.”

“I know. I sent him there.”

“Oh, you’re his boss?”

“You could say that. Did he say he was coming back?”

“He did.”

We stare at each other for a long moment. “What else did he say?”

“That he wants to… I don’t really know. It was confusing.”

He nods slowly. “I see.”

“I’m glad you do because I don’t.”

“Ah, there you both are,” Dante says, interrupting us. “I hate to eat and run, but I have to go back to the city.”

“What? Why?” I ask, now even more disappointed. But it kind of tells me a lot. These guys aren’t interested in me. They were trying to get to Gideon by using me. It’s obvious now. They’ve got their way, and now they’re leaving.

“If I plan on coming back indefinitely, I need to go back to London and sort some shit out.”

“How long will you be?”

“Two days tops. I won’t be long, darling. But I have to clear my plate so I can drink cocoa with you and not have work hanging over my head.” His eyes gleam wickedly at the mention of cocoa.

“Okay,” I murmur, reassured that he is coming back. “Is that okay with you?” I ask Gideon.

“Yes, of course. As long as Dante knows that if anyone tracks him here, shit will hit the fan.”

Dante grins. “Like I would intentionally cause a shitfan. I’m not Sebastian. Him, you have to worry about.”

“No,” I interrupt. “I don’t think you do.”

Both men stare at me curiously, but I clear my throat and look away. “I need to get back to work. I guess I’ll see you later, then.”

Dante smiles and gives me a light hug before brushing his lips over mine in a chaste kiss. “I’ll see you soon.”

Nodding, he leaves us, and I stare at Gideon, who hasn’t taken his eyes off me. “And then there were two.”

“Like it should’ve been all along,” he grouses. “I’ll be in my office. I’ve got a shit ton of work to do.”

“Okay, I’ll bring you tea and biscuits in about two hours.”

His face lights up. “Sounds good.”

He leans down to kiss me, and I tilt my face upwards so his lips will land on mine, only he is aiming for my cheek, and my movement causes his kiss to end up on my jaw.

“Oh, erm,” I fluster, stepping back, feeling like a fool.

Gideon laughs softly. “If I kiss you on the lips, Isla, I won’t be able to stop there, so I’m trying to be good.”

“Okay,” I squeak, wishing he would be so very bad, but he walks away, and I distract myself by flicking the vacuum back on before I remember the dishwasher and groan. Turning it back off again, I head downstairs to the kitchen to make sure it is running efficiently and to my surprise, it is.

“Not so helpless then, are you, Mr Spy?”



## GIDEON

**S**lumping reluctantly into my desk chair, I glare at the stack of files waiting for me to have a gander at. All the potential new recruits for the upcoming year. There are a lot. I'm behind as fuck because I just couldn't be bothered, but I need to get my arse into gear and sort this shit out.

Picking up the first file, I glare at it and frown. "Jesus," I mutter. "I've only just started and already there's drama."

Opening the laptop, I dial Archer Jackson. When he picks up, I say, "Can you talk?"

"Give me five minutes." He hangs up, and I wait for him to get rid of whoever he is with.

Two minutes later, he rings back. "What the fuck is this?" I ask without waiting for pleasantries.

"Well, my crystal ball is cracked, but I'll take a stab in the dark here, shall I? The new recruit?"

"Everyone's a comedian," I groan. "Yes, the fucking recruit. How did this prick end up at DeVare Industries?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. He is a little dimmer than I initially gave him credit for. He is as clueless as a shoe."

"He doesn't know himself how he ended up in London from Manchester?"

"Well, no, he knows that. He was sent an email from DeVare Industries inviting him to take up the position as a junior associate. Of course he took it; he is apprenticeship material, not junior associate."

"Who invited him? Dante?" I'll fucking kill him if he's messing with shit.

“He says not. But I wouldn’t put it past that shark in the water he calls an assistant.”

“Jem,” I growl. “She never does anything without Dante’s say-so.”

“So he either knows, or she has gone rogue.”

“I’ll ask him the next time I see him.”

“No need; I can handle this for you.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got this.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll be speaking to him soon. Is this recruit back where he belongs now?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.”

I hang up and sit back in my chair, pondering what the fuck is going on here, but until I speak to Dante, there is no point in speculating. So I move on.

Luckily, the following five files are all pretty straightforward, and then I look up as there is a soft knock on the door.

“Hi,” I say as Isla comes in with a tray.

“Tea and biscuits as promised.”

“It’s been two hours already?” I rub my hand over my face. I’m growing tired, and even I know when to admit defeat. I need to sleep. It’s evaded me for long enough, and now it’s caught up, and if I don’t succumb, I’ll end up falling asleep where I sit.

“You look exhausted,” Isla murmurs. “Why don’t you go and get some rest.”

Rising, I stack the files neatly in a pile and grab the mug of tea and a biscuit. “I’m going. Do you need anything before I go upstairs?”

“Isn’t that my line?” she jokes.

Smiling, I murmur. “Wake me if you need anything or anything happens. The new security team are already here, but lock the door and don’t even let them in. I need to clamp back down on this shitshow.”

“You’re scaring me again.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to. But what happened here yesterday can never happen again. Dante and Sebastian are unique. It doesn’t surprise me that they got past the guards, but that’s where it ends. Maybe I shouldn’t sleep,” I say, suddenly panicking that something will happen to her while I’m out.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You look like you’re about to keel over. When was

the last time you slept at all?”

“Five, maybe six days ago?”

“Fuck. Go, what are you still doing standing here talking to me?” She shoos me out of my own office, and I smile broadly, enjoying the audacity and sheer normalcy of the action.

“I’m going, I’m going,” I laugh but pause at the bottom of the stairs when she says.

“Get some sleep, Gideon. I’ll check on you in a bit.”

“Thank you, Isla.”

“What for?”

We lock gazes, and time seems to stand still.

“For taking care of me. I guess I didn’t know how much I needed it.”

“Sophia did.”

I nod and turn back to the stairs, taking them slowly with my tea, but by the time I see my bed, I barely have time to place the mug and biscuit down before I fall face-first onto the bed, my eyes already closed.





## ISLA

**P**eeking in on Gideon around 7.00 PM that night, I see him face down on his bed, looking like he fell there and went to sleep. It's not surprising. I can't imagine how exhausted he must've been.

Creeping in, I gently pull the covers over him and sneak back out, closing the door quietly. I've left some soup out for him if he wakes up after I've gone to bed. I'm sure he is capable of microwaving it himself.

As soon as I close the door to my bedroom, the burner phone vibrates on the dresser, and I pick it up. "Hey, Sophia."

"Isla, dear. Is everything okay?"

"It is now. I think."

"Good, good. I'm coming home tomorrow."

"Oh? Things not work out?"

"Let's just say no and leave it at that."

"Fair enough. Does that mean I have to leave or..." I chew my lip as I wait for her reply.

"Leave? Do you want to leave?"

"Not really, no."

"Then don't. I told you that when I returned, and if you wanted to stay, that was an option."

"True, but you said six months, not a few days."

"What difference does that make?"

"None, I guess. Okay, I'll tell Gideon when he wakes up."

"He's sleeping?" Her surprise tells me this is an irregular occurrence.

"Yes."

“Okay, well, don’t bother him. I’ll surprise him.”

Shrugging, I say, “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Bye, Isla.”

We hang up, and I replace the phone on the dresser before I strip off and climb into bed naked. My skin is sensitive to the touch after all the pent-up arousal of the last couple of days, and I want to feel the silky sheets caress my skin as I do something that I don’t usually do. Opening my legs, I touch myself. Hesitantly at first before I close my eyes and brush my fingers over my clit.

I press my thighs together, squeezing tighter in response to the pleasure. I feel tense. My breath coming quicker as I spread my legs and push my fingers inside my pussy.

*God, I forget how good this feels.*

Closing my eyes, I see flashes of light behind my eyelids because of the sheer amount of excitement I’m feeling.

Thoughts disappear, and emotion replaces them amid my gasps and moans as I thrust my fingers as deep inside my pussy as I can.

I continue my intimate explorations until I start to feel a growing bubble of sexual tension deep inside me, a fiery ball of excitement that, as it builds up, threatens to erupt.

The wild, dark, dirty side of me rushes ahead, taking over, pressing harder against my clit with my palm. The movement causes me to slip my fingers deeper.

Every sense is now on high alert. Everything is heightened. Every moan, every time I brush against myself, the gentle shift of my body, the pleasure gets out of control.

Bringing Gideon’s face to mind, remembering our kiss, I gasp and my clit twitches. Then Dante’s kiss is foremost in my mind, and I groan as Sebastian’s seductive words echo in my ears.

“Fuck,” I groan and withdraw my fingers to circle my clit quickly.

My orgasm begins very slowly, with just a tingling sensation. It starts at my toes, my blood heating up and spiking with excitement. Slowly, it grows into sensations, giving way to waves of pleasure all over my body. My ragged pants are burning my lungs as the climax hits my clit, and I convulse, crying out softly as I lift my hips, trying to prolong the feeling that I haven’t had in so long.

“Fuck,” I murmur again, opening my eyes and staring at the ceiling.

Maybe Sebastian is right. Maybe I need to try this just once with all three of them.

But then maybe it's just a fantasy, and I'm better off not thinking about it at all.

Muffling my groan as I turn my face into the pillow, I curl up and close my eyes as my clit still pulsates gently under my fingertips, lulling me into a beautiful daze of wild dreams and passionate rivers of arousal.



## GIDEON

Waking up with a start, I roll over quickly and get tangled in a blanket I don't remember throwing over myself. Fighting with it to get free, I look over at the balcony to see it's pitch black out. It was definitely still light when I crashed, so I must've had a good two or three hours.

Checking the clock on the TV, I'm shocked to see it's 3.00 AM.

I've been asleep for over twelve hours. How?

That has never happened to me, even after the most raucous drunken night with Dante back in the day.

"Fuck," I mutter and rub my face.

I'm not sure if I feel better for it or worse.

*To be determined.*

Needing to get up and move, I grimace at the cold tea and bypass it for the bottle of water. After I've taken a big gulp, I stand up and strip off, heading straight for the shower. Blasting out the icy water before I turn the temperature up, I grunt and stand there, letting it soak me.

My only conclusion about this anomaly is that Isla's presence comforted me. Even though she wasn't next to me, the thought of the possibility that she would one day be, soothed my ravaged soul. She is taking care of me, watching over me, and that is something that I've never had before. It's a freaking revelation, and if I didn't already know I needed to snap her up, I would in a heartbeat after this.

She is everything and more I could want in a woman. She keeps surprising me with little things, and I'm falling deeper than I ever have.

Eventually, I get out of the shower and get dried and dressed, moving

quietly down the hallway, past Isla's bedroom to the stairs. The first stop is the kitchen for coffee, and the second is my office to continue with the boring files that are stacked up.

Mug in hand, I come to a halt at my office door. "Sophia," I say when I see my sister, lounging in an armchair by the roaring fire, her legs crossed at the knee as she sips on my Scotch. "You're back."

"Don't sound so thrilled," she giggles and tilts her head as I cross over to stoop down to give her cheek a kiss.

"But I am. Clearly, you have come to your senses that 'out there' is not necessarily a greener pasture."

"Not at all. I spoke to Isla, and she sounded like she needed the help."

"She doesn't. So if that was your only concern, you can leave again." Her attitude pisses me off. She left and brought Isla in to take care of me and this place, and now she thinks only she can do the job. No one, and I mean *no one*, is irreplaceable to me.

*Wrong.*

With the exception of Isla, no one is irreplaceable to me.

That thought scares me and I move across to my desk to place my mug down. I'm putting her in so much danger just by knowing her.

"Someone smitten with the housekeeper?" Sophia asks, almost snidely.

"Someone jealous?" I retort, not even bothering to hide my disdain for this conversation topic.

"Hardly," she says. "Being jealous of my big brother finding someone is not on my to-do list."

"Because you have your own someone," I say, sitting in my chair and leaning back. Something about this just doesn't make any sense.

"Exactly," she says. "I am merely here to make sure everything is okay. Isla sounded fraught when I spoke to her."

"She is managing just fine."

"With Dante and Sebastian Christchurch showing up here with guns? You sure about that? Also, where the fuck are the security guys?"

"Outside."

"Not them. The other ones."

"They fucked up, so they got fired."

"Hmm," she murmurs and takes a sip of Scotch. "So, is she perfect?"

"You know she is."

Smiling smugly, she finishes off the Scotch and sets the empty glass

down. “You can thank me anytime now, you know.”

Regarding her closely, I give her what she wants. “Thanks.”

“Gee, the sincerity of that has left me reeling,” she snickers. “You can thank me properly by naming your first daughter after me.”

“What if we have all sons?”

“Aha! So you are thinking long term with this woman. I knew it! I knew she was perfect.”

“You don’t need to be so smug. Any idea why Dante showed up at my door?”

Her face goes serious. “I may have scattered some breadcrumbs. This feud has gone on long enough.”

“Breadcrumbs? You left an entire bakery. Sebastian Christchurch was not welcome here.”

“He isn’t here now, though, is he?”

“No, I sent him on a... I don’t even know what the fuck it’s called.”

“Mission?”

“If you like.”

“Have you cleared that fog from your life?”

“In a manner of speaking. I doubt this is the end of it. It was all too easy, too smooth.”

“Well, I guess time will tell.”

“Guess so.”

“Does Isla know anything about anything?” Sophia looks away as she says this, clearly fishing for info.

“No.”

“So what did you tell her about the guns and whatever else?”

“She thinks I’m a spy.”

Sophia considers that and nods approvingly. “I can see that, and it’s good that she has expressed this opinion to you so you can keep up the ruse.”

“I’m not going to keep up the ruse. I’m telling her.”

Sophia’s head snaps to the side as she glares at me. “What? You can’t be serious? You’ve known her for five minutes, and you’re already considering spilling secrets? Have you gone mad being cooped up here all these years?”

“No, quite sane, but thank you.” My sarcasm is lost on her. She is fuming and with every right. But at the same time, she doesn’t get to dictate to me who I tell.

“Gideon,” she hisses. “Think about this.”



“I have.”

“You will be putting her in immeasurable danger. What are you doing right now?”

“Thinking long term, and I don’t want to lie to her.”

Sophia rises and strides angrily across the room towards me. “This is insane! You cannot tell her about Solitaire, Gideon. And you cannot tell me you’re telling her! You’ve lost your damn mind!”

“The decision has been made,” I reply calmly.

“No! You have put me in an impossible situation now!”

“This isn’t about you.”

“You’ve made it about me by telling me all of this. Fuck you, Gideon! I swear you’re going to be the death of all of us.”

She storms over to the partially closed door and swings it open, only to come face-to-face with Isla, looking shell-shocked with a mug of coffee in her hand and a plate of toast, presumably for me.

“Fuck,” I mutter and rub my face again, in what appears to be my go-to move for dealing with shitshows. “Fucking hell, Sophia.”



## ISLA

“U hm,” I mutter as I stare between a furious Sophia and a resigned Gideon. “I’ll come back later.”

“Too late,” Sophia says, plastering a grin on her face and leaning in to give me an air kiss on each cheek, even though my hands are full. “Come in.”

Sidling past her as she gives Gideon a ferocious stare, I place the coffee and toast in front of Gideon. “Thought you could use this.”

“Thank you, Isla. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. I was up anyway. Couldn’t sleep.”

Shifting my gaze to Sophia; she is watching this encounter with narrowed eyes before she says, “Well, I guess I’ll leave you to it.”

Gideon ignores her as I wave her off absently. “Everything okay?” I ask cautiously. I’m not sure what I overheard, but whatever it was, has Sophia in a state.

“Yes,” Gideon says. “Everything is just fine. Did you hear much of that?”

“Some...” I know there is no point in lying, so I might as well just come out with it. “You work for something called Solitaire?” I’ve never heard the name before, but that doesn’t mean jack. Still, he needs to know what I overheard.

“No, Isla. I *am* Solitaire,” he says quietly, watching my reaction to that closely.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I know you don’t, and that is why we need to have a conversation about it to clear things up.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Yes, we do.”

“No, really, if it’s going to cause trouble with your sister and other spies, it doesn’t matter. I won’t ask questions.”

“I don’t give a shit about causing trouble, Isla. What I do care about is not lying to you. I can’t expect you to trust me if you don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“Okay,” I murmur. “What is Solitaire then? An offshoot of MI6?”

He smiles that slow, sexy smile that drew me in instantly. “No. In a roundabout way, MI6 work for me.”

I take that in with what I hope is a straight face, but underneath, I’m impressed. “So, you’re high-level government?”

He shakes his head. “The government also work for me. As do several others in the world. I am the man behind a lot of the political scenes that you may or may not know about.”

“I’m still not sure what that means,” I say, even more confused than ever.

He stands up and takes my hand, leading me to the squishy leather sofa on the other side of the office. “Sit.”

I do as he says and lower my backside to the couch, folding my hands in my lap when he lets me go and sits next to me. “Solitaire is a Secret Society. We operate in the shadows, shaping governments and global organisations to our will. I am the Head of this Society, as was my father before me, his before him and so on.”

“A Secret Society?” I’m still none the wiser.

“There are intricacies and rules and things that I can’t go into right now, but I will soon. Just know that for now, I am called the Don, and you have stepped unknowingly into a hornet’s nest. Or rather, Sophia brought you here.”

“Why am I in danger because I know this?” I ask quietly.

“Part of the rules are the Society remains a secret. It’s in the name,” he says with a soft smile, “but deeper than that, there are protocols and ancient laws. We operate in the shadows for a variety of reasons, but the main one is so we can conduct our business without interference.”

“I understand that. But I still don’t understand why my knowing puts me in danger.”

“Because you aren’t in the Society. You could tell others, and if the Society becomes public knowledge, there will be an outcry. We have

members in every sector of every district in every country in the world. Judges, lawyers, Police Commissioners, doctors, nurses, CEOs of billion-pound companies, scientists, teachers, civil servants, the jockey who throws a race to corrupt the bets, the man who owns the corner shop, the delivery guy, the waitress who serves the President of Uganda his to-go cup of coffee. Do you understand now why you can't say anything to anyone?"

Taking in the enormity of what he is saying, I nod, even though I'm not sure I fully get it. It's still more than I knew a minute ago. "So keep quiet and don't tell anyone anything," I murmur.

"In a nutshell. I can protect you only so far, Isla. I will die for you, but if I'm dead, there will be no one to save you from those whose very job it is to eliminate threats to our existence."

"Shit," I mutter. "Threats?"

He nods. "This is all I can tell you for now, but you have to promise me you won't ever mention Solitaire again or anything about what I've told you."

"Why *did* you tell me all of this?" My palms have gone sweaty, and my mouth is dry.

"I am serious about where I want this to go between us, Isla, and that means not lying to you every second of every day."

"Only some seconds?"

He chuckles. "Yes, that, unfortunately, is the way it's going to have to be."

"Can I become a member? Is there a fee?"

He smiles and takes my hand. "Your soul," he says sadly.

Thinking he is joking, I burst out laughing but when he doesn't join in, I gulp. "Oh. You're serious."

"Deadly."

"So no on the membership then."

"Not right now. Maybe one day, but you are not even on Solitaire's radar. I cannot just bring someone in off the cuff. There are..."

"Protocols. I'm a nobody."

"You're not a nobody, Isla. You should be grateful and proud not to have made it onto the radar."

Somewhat insulted, I huff out a breath. "Easy for you to say."

"You are everything to me, Isla. I hope, for now, that will be enough for you."

Getting over myself quickly, I realise I'm being a bit of a brat. So what if the elite club didn't even notice me? What else is new? I should be happy that Gideon has told me the truth, showing me I can rely on him and trust him.

"It's more than enough," I murmur, reaching out to cup his face. "I don't care who you are to everyone else. You are everything to me as well."

His eyes fill with longing and desire, and he grabs me, crushing his mouth to mine as his tongue urges me to open my lips. Our tongues duel fiercely as we devour each other, and I know I'm ready for this to go further. We both want it. We both need it.

I just hope no one interrupts us this time before we get down to it.



## ISLA

“Isla,” Gideon murmurs against my lips. “Is this what you want?”  
“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” He frowns and stands up, on the verge of talking himself out of it. He strides across the office and breathes out, expressing his frustration in that one action.

Rising quickly, I go to him, standing by his desk. “Gideon.”

He turns to face me, longing and desire written all over his face. His sparkling blue eyes are heated and tell me everything I need to know.

“I want this. I want you. I don’t care about the Solitaire stuff. I know that isn’t you.”

“But it is, Isla, don’t you see?”

“No, I don’t see. You have been honest with me; you haven’t played games with me. You have shown that you respect me by waiting and not pressuring me. But I’m not letting you talk yourself out of it this time. I want this to move forward. If you’re worried about repercussions, I’m on the pill, and I haven’t had sex in, well, let’s just say a really long time.”

He smiles almost sadly as he reaches for my hands and pulls me closer. “Bet it’s not as long as me.”

“Probably not, which makes your restraint even more admirable.”

He snickers and holds me close. “I need you, Isla. I can’t go further with this if you have even a shred of doubt over what I’ve told you.”

Pulling back to look up at him, I shake my head. “No doubts. Now kiss me.”

Without another word, Gideon pulls the tie from my bun, and my hair



cascades around me. His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer to him. His lips crash onto mine, his tongue seeking entry past my lips. I eagerly let him in, our tongues dancing in a wild and primal rhythm. His other hand runs down my body, gripping my waist tightly, pulling me against him. I can feel the hardness of his cock pressed against my hip, and I moan into his mouth.

He steps back, leaving me wanting so much more. With a sudden surge of strength, Gideon sweeps everything off his desk, sending folders, pens, and his laptop flying to the floor. He picks me up and lays me down on the cleared surface, his lips returning to mine. His fingers tug at the hem of my tee, and I help him out by pulling it off and tossing it aside. His hands roam over my bare skin, his touch electric and sending sparks of desire throughout my body.

I arch my back as Gideon's lips move down my neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin. His hands unhook my bra, freeing my breasts, and he takes one nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it before moving on to the other. I moan loudly, my fingers threading through his hair, pulling him closer to me as he pushes them up into two mounds that he devours with all the passion of a man starved of affection for so long.

His hand trails down my stomach, and he slips it under the waistband of my leggings, teasing the edge of my knickers. I lift my hips, silently begging him to touch me where I need him the most. Gideon smirks and drags my leggings down, bringing my underwear with them, exposing my wet pussy to him. He groans softly when he sees the little landing strip and spreads my legs wider as he kneels in between them. His hot breath on my clit makes me edge closer to him.

He runs his tongue along the length of my pussy, making me gasp and squirm on the desk. He sucks on my clit, and I moan loudly, my hands reaching down to grip his hair. Gideon's fingers enter me, pumping in and out, matching the movement of his tongue. My body clenches, the pleasure building up inside me already.

Just when I'm about to come, Gideon stops and stands up. He removes his tee and joggers, his eyes never leaving mine. I've seen him naked before, but somehow, seeing him undress is so sexy and thrilling; I let out a pant of desire when he reveals his muscular chest and abs. His cock strains to get to me, and I want it more than anything in my life.

Gideon crawls onto the desk as I scoot back, his body hovering over mine. He leans in, our lips crashing together again. His cock presses against

my soaking-wet entrance, and I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer to me. With one swift thrust, he is inside me, and I cry out in pleasure.

He moves his hips, thrusting in a steady rhythm. Desperately, I match his movements, my body moving perfectly with his. With each thrust, I get closer and closer to the edge. My hands roam over his rock-hard body, gripping his shoulders as he rides me into oblivion.

Gideon leans back and grabs my hips, lifting me as he stands. He carries me over to the balcony door, the village lights shining dimly down below at this early hour. He lowers me so my feet hit the floor. With a wicked smile that enchants the woman in me, he turns me around, taking my hands and placing them on the cool glass. My breasts press against the cold surface. Pulling my hips back, he enters me again, this time from behind, and I moan loudly at the feeling of him filling me up, his huge cock sliding past my G-spot in a movement of utter perfection. I cry out and stick my backside out, needing him deeper, needing every inch of him inside me.

He grips my hips tightly. His thrusts become more demanding and faster. The pressure builds inside my core, my body aching for release. Gideon reaches around and starts rubbing my clit, sending me spiralling over the edge. I scream his name as I climax, my body convulsing in ecstasy.

He continues to thrust harder, deeper, his movements becoming more erratic. He is getting closer to his own orgasm.

“Fuck, Isla,” he rasps. “Fuck, you are perfect. Soak my cock like a good girl, that’s it. Come for me again, angel. I need to feel you possess my cock. It’s yours, fuck. I’m yours.”

Gasping as his words turn me on more than anything I’ve ever felt before, I jerk my hips, moving with him to gain the maximum amount of pleasure. I’ve never been in this position before, and I wonder why not. But then I remember my inhibitions, and I’m startled at myself for being so brazen. It was effortless. Gideon made me want this without even trying or thinking about it.

“Fuck, Gideon!” I scream as my pussy clutches his cock in a grip so tight, my eyes widen as a slice of fear cuts through me.

*Am I hurting him?*

“Jesus, Isla. Fuck, that’s it, angel. Squeeze me until I flood your pussy with my cum. Fuck, I need you. Fuck, only you... only you.”

“Ah!” I cry out as I come even harder, soaking his cock with my juices.

With a loud groan, Gideon climaxes, bruising my hips when he tightens

his grip, his hot cum filling my pussy until I can feel it gushing back out. He removes his hands from my hips and laces his fingers through mine, still pressed against the window. He moves in even closer, his chest against my back as my knees give way. He quickly lets go of my hands and catches me, scooping me up in his arms with a smile that fires up my engines again. Panting and trying to catch our breath, he strides over to the office door and carries me naked and full of his cum up the stairs to his bedroom, where he places me down gently.

“That was incredible,” I murmur, still trying to catch my breath.

“It was,” Gideon replies, his hand reaching out to caress my cheek. “Isla, you are amazing.”

I blush at his words, and he leans in to kiss me again, joining me on the bed, his hands exploring every inch of me. “I’m not done with you yet, Isla. I’m aching for you again already.”

“Then take me, Gideon. I need you.”

As those words leave my mouth, he ravages me, biting my lips, squeezing my flesh, bruising me, hurting me, but I don’t care. I want it. I want it all.



## GIDEON

**S**avagely, I explore every inch of her with my tongue and fingers. Spreading her legs, I suck my cum out of her pussy, filling my mouth before I kiss her deeply, forcing her to taste it, to swallow it. She gasps into my mouth, but then she cups my face, deepening the kiss as she devours me. I'm ready to take her again. I'm never going to be done with her. She's mine now. I've claimed her. She has claimed me. Owned me. Gripping her hips, I lower my mouth back to her pussy and thrust my tongue inside her as far as it will go, making her squirm. She tugs my hair, inching forward to get closer to my mouth.

"That's it, angel. Let go and come for me. Scream my name until your throat is raw." My gaze finds hers, and she stares into my eyes as she comes, her pussy soaking wet, dripping with her orgasm. I'll never get enough of this woman. Her taste, the scent of her arousal, the way she feels against my skin, the way the moans roll from her lips as I lick her pussy.

I ravage her until she is on the brink of exhaustion, her cries growing weaker as the orgasms tear through her body.

"More," I rasp. "I need more. Can you take it, Isla?"

"Yes," she pants. "Please, Gideon, I need you."

Looming over her, I edge my cock gently inside her. She is dripping with cum, and it feels like fucking heaven.

"Take it, angel," I groan. "Take every inch of my cock."

"Ah! Yes!" she cries out, her body quaking with every slow thrust. Her pussy tightens around my cock eagerly, desperately, greedily trying to hold on to me as I fuck her into submission.

This woman is amazing in every way possible. She's loyal and beautiful, and I've falling head over heels for her.

Withdrawing from her tight cunt, I breathe out heavily and take her hands, helping her sit up. "Suck my cock, angel. I need your mouth around me."

She swallows and nods, being my good little girl eager to service me. Bending down, she opens her hot, little mouth and takes me all the way in, sucking hard on my cock, making me growl.

I thrust into her mouth as her tits sway with the movement. Her perfect tits are magnificent, as I knew they would be. More than a handful, enough to squeeze and get hold of.

Loosely, I hold her head with both hands, giving her freedom to move up and down my length, her tongue circling the head before licking me all the way down to my balls.

"Fuck, you've got a dirty mouth, Isla. Fuck, that feels so good."

She stretches her lips to fit me. It's a sight that turns my insides to liquid fire. The hot pressure on my cock is intense, and it's pushing me over the edge. My balls tighten in readiness for the imminent explosion of cum.

"Stop!" I order in a strained voice when I don't think I'll be able to hold out much longer.

With a moan of protest, she releases me and looks up at me with doe-like eyes, hearing what I have to say. "Ride me, Isla."

Lying flat on my back, she straddles me, and I grab her tits, rubbing my thumbs over her nipples, enjoying the look of intense passion on her face. Gripping my shaft firmly, wrapping my fist around the base of my cock, I position the tip against her clit before I glide inside her wet pussy with a loud groan of relief.

"Fuck me, Isla. Ride me hard, angel."

"Ah!" Reaching up, she holds her tits as they bounce.

The sight is so fucking hot, I almost detonate. Her head falls back with a groan of pleasure as she rides me harder and faster. "Gideon!"

"That's it, angel." I urge her on. It feels like my whole life, I've been waiting forever to fuck this woman raw. "Fuck my cock until you scream."

Tingling sensations erupt in the base of my dick, and I can't hold back anymore. I grip her hips tightly and thrust upwards, slamming into her pussy as hard as I can to chase the climax between us.

"Fucking hell, yes!" With a loud roar, I empty my load inside her, my

cock pumping out enough cum to fill her pussy and still have some slide back out around my cock to soak my balls.

Isla falls forward onto my chest, breathing heavily.

“I love you, Isla,” I whisper in her ear. “You have given me everything, and I can’t ever be without you. It’s fast, it’s crazy, but I know. I’m man enough to admit it, and I’m old enough to know what I want. Does that scare you?”

“Only if me loving you back scares you.”

“Not a fucking chance.”

She smiles but doesn’t say another word. She is exhausted so I roll her over and leave her to grab a sponge from the bathroom. Running it under the warm water for a few seconds, I squeeze it out and shove it back under again before repeating the action. Satisfied, I return to her and part her legs, wiping away the pools of cum from her pussy and thighs.

Her tired eyes widen in confusion as she takes this in. “What are you doing?” she asks, almost shyly.

“Taking care of my woman,” I murmur. “I will always be here for you, Isla. Always.”

“I could get used to this,” she whispers.

“Please do.”

She giggles and closes her eyes with a contented sigh as I finish up and pull the sheets over her.

“Sleep now, my love.”

“Will you?”

“With you next to me, yes, I think I will.”

Even though I slept for so many hours earlier, I nestle in next to her and hold her close, scared she will leave me in my sleep. That thought sits heavy on my chest and I stare at the ceiling, wondering if sleep will ever come again now that I have something so precious, so beautiful to protect.





## ISLA

Waking up, the sun is high, shining down from a cloudless blue sky. I smile as the sight is perfect and fits my mood. It's freezing, and I shiver, burying further under the covers and turning my head to see Gideon flat out next to me. He is snoring softly, which is the cutest thing ever. I'm thrilled and happy with how amazing this was. I was worried I'd be too vanilla for him, but everything he asked me to do was easy. I wanted to please him, and I still do. There is no fear or concern when the person you are with understands you and wants your pleasure as much as their own. It's been too long since I had that, and I've never had *this*. Gideon is a god. He has to be. There is just no other explanation because *man* just doesn't seem enough to describe him. He is out of this world.

Staring at him while he sleeps, just watching him for I don't know how long before my stomach rumbles, breaking my concentration, I realise I'm being a bit creepy. Glancing at the clock, I see it's past midday.

My eyes wander back to Gideon, but then I tear them away. Gideon is everything I need. He makes me feel secure and beautiful. I sit up and look around for my clothes, but remember they are downstairs in his office. Giggling softly, I climb out of bed and grab the neatly folded tee that I left on his dresser yesterday, fresh from the laundry. Slipping it over my head, it falls to my mid-thigh, and I feel sexy and spontaneous and not self-conscious anymore. It feels natural. I knew it was going to be special, but I never expected it to feel this perfect. No, that isn't true. It couldn't be anything *but* perfect. I've always believed that the second you truly love another person, you become honest with yourself and them, and we have both shown we can

be that for each other. The things he's told me about this Secret Society are scary, of course, but it's better I know instead of being blindsided. I'm also aware that this has cost him a lot. He trusts me to keep this secret, and I will. I won't let him down. It's something I think will be impossible, and it makes me happy that I've found him.

Making my way downstairs for coffee to bring up for both of us, I set the kettle to boil and grab two mugs.

"Morning... or afternoon, rather," Sophia says, coming into the kitchen.

"Hi," I say with a big beam.

She takes in my outfit and messy hair and smiles. "I see. Aren't you glad you took the leap of faith?"

My cheeks go hot as I lower my gaze. "Yes. I guess I should thank you for bringing me here."

"Ah," she murmurs. "That's sweet, and now it's going to make this even harder."

Looking up as her tone has gone darker, I jump back as she pulls a gun out from the back of her pants and aims it at me.

"Sophia! What?" Turning my head, I see a man looming up behind me. I recognise him and call out. "Help!"

The loud crack of the gun being fired sounds like it comes from a vast distance away. I scream as the bullet slices through my flesh with a white-hot pain that makes my head spin. The man's arms wrap around my waist as I go down, and everything goes black.

Broken Empire is available to pre order - coming soon! [Pre Order Broken Empire](#)

**Join my Facebook Group: [Eve Newton's/SE Traynor's Books & Readers](#)  
Sign up to my newsletter: [Eve Newton's/SE Traynor's News](#)**

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

SE Traynor is the pen name for USA Today Bestselling Author, Eve Newton.

Eve is a British novelist with a specialty for delicious romance, with strong female leads, causing her to develop a Reverse Harem Fantasy series, several years ago: The Forever Series.

She lives in the UK, with her husband and five kids, so finding the time to write is short, but definitely sweet. She currently has over eighty books in her catalogue. Eve hopes to release some new and exciting projects in the next couple of years, so stay tuned!

## **ALSO BY SE TRAYNOR**

<https://evenewton.com/se-traynor>