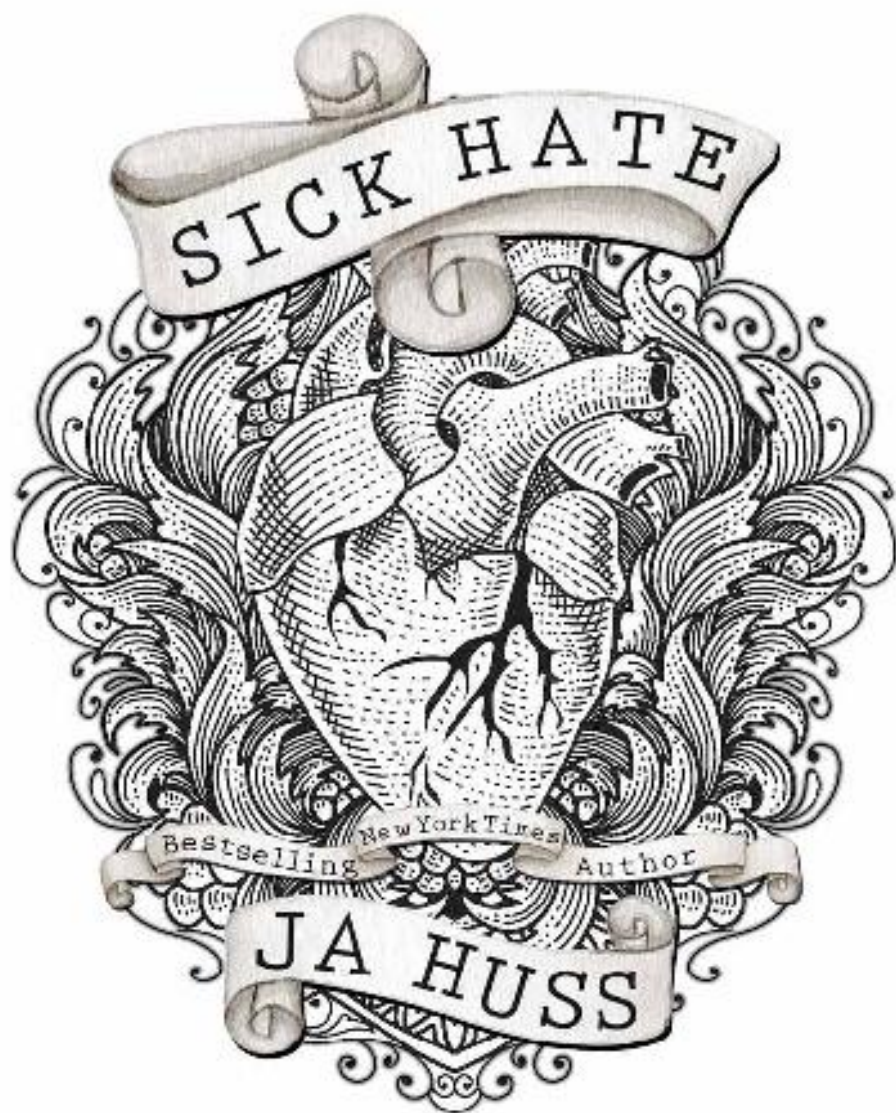


NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JA HUSS



*Sick
Hate*



CONTENTS

About the Book

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[End of Book Shit](#)

[About the Author](#)



Copyright © 2023 by JA Huss

ISBN: 978-1-957277-09-7

Edited by RJ Locksley

Cover Photo: Wander Aguiar

Cover Design: JA Huss

No part of this book may be reproduced or resold 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.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the authors' imaginations or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

ABOUT THE BOOK



Irina van Breda escaped the hopeless life she was born into and started a brand new one in America all by herself. She has everything she needs—a condo in South Beach, a new accent that doesn't betray her dark origins, a brilliant best friend, and an easy life of walking the beach and feeding the gulls.

But she is merely existing—until Dead-Eyes Eason Malone appears, asking questions. He knows who she is, he knows where she came from, and he's got a plan for her. A plan that could help him get over his own tragic beginnings.

Irina and Eason are on a collision course with the truth—and when they finally come to terms with what really happened to them as children, it just might shatter them both into millions of pieces.

Sick Hate is the second book in the Sick World Series. It is a standalone but new readers should start with Sick Heart first if they want the whole story of Irina's past.

What you can expect inside the pages of Sick Hate:

*DARK Past

*Friends to Lovers

*He Falls First

Bad As Hero

Bad As Heroine

*Slow Burn MF

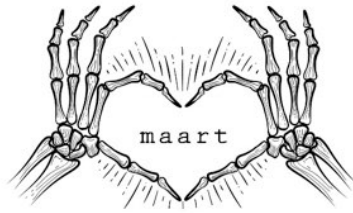
*She's a Virgin

*Touch Her and Die

*Sick World/Evil Bad Guys

*Found Family

CHAPTER 1



Rio de Janeiro, Bolivar and Atlantica

Fifteen floors up from Sick Fights Gym

“You have a last name now.”

The reporter—who I now know as Macks, which doesn’t fit her at all—is sitting across from me at the rooftop bar of the Bolivar Building. My gym is fifteen floors below us on the ground. I’ve agreed to talk to her because Cort said I should.

So. Yeah. Fun times.

“Maart?”

“Right. I do. It’s Carvalho.”

“Maart Carvalho.” She presses her lips together. “Mmm. I dunno. Does it suit you?”

“Does Macks suit you?”

She chuckles, and I realize she’s got a nice face. She’s older. Early forties, late forties? Hard to tell. But you can clearly see she was a knockout in her prime. Still is, but in a more mature way. Curvy. Brave, obviously, since she’s still alive. And a smile meant to wipe away all your problems, but

only so she can tease your darkest secrets right out of your soul.

The wind is blowing her mahogany hair across her face and this would bother most people, but it doesn't bother her. It's pulled back, but not neatly, so wisps of it are dancing across her cheeks. "Macks is just my fun name. My real name is Mackenzie."

"Hmm. That doesn't suit you either."

"No? Do you have a better suggestion? What should I be called?"

I shrug. "Beth."

This makes her laugh out loud. "You can call me anything you want, Maart."

I pick up my whiskey, jiggle the ice, take a sip, then shrug. "Whatever. I can live with Mackenzie."

This pretty much describes my life. Living with it. Because my whole world is surreal these days. I mean, I'm sitting at a rooftop bar across from Copacabana Beach and I own an entire floor of this building. I can see the ocean. And that's familiar. All of it. The scent, the wind, the waves, the sun. I could never leave that behind. But the women in bikinis always throw me, and the sound of traffic, and the laughter at night.

It feels like a nightmare.

"Does it feel like a dream?" Mackenzie is studying me intently and I realize I've been quiet for a little while, just staring out at the ocean.

I take another sip of whiskey, then look her in the eyes. "I'm not sure."

“Can’t decide if it’s real?” Her eyes are soft. In fact, she’s much softer than I remember her being back on the *Bull of Light* before Cort’s last fight. I was rough with her that afternoon, pushing her out of the way. But she was so different. Ambitious and hungry. Desperate to tease some words out of Cort’s silent mouth. Nothing at all like this woman in front of me now, who seems very... satisfied.

Back then she wore too much make-up and low-cut dresses. Today she’s wearing black bike shorts, trainers, a neon orange tank top, and a thin workout jacket. She looks like she wants to take a lesson in my gym.

Maybe she does?

“Maart?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you gonna talk to me?”

“What do you mean? I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Nnnnooo. You’re not. You’re somewhere else. If it’s not a good time...” She starts to get up.

But I reach out, place a hand on hers, and look her in the eyes again to make her stop. “No. I’ll talk. Just... sit down.”

She hesitates, then settles back. “Look, I’m not trying to be difficult here. If you don’t want to do the interview, just say so. I’ll go away.”

“I do.”

“You don’t. It’s not even why you told me to meet you here.”

She’s right. But I don’t look at her now. I just let my gaze wander across the ocean. It’s calm today, and it calms me. I

like the flatness of it. Always better than the storm, in my opinion. Even though the storm comes with dramatic thunderheads in every shade of purple and gray you can think of, and even though it's beautiful in a terrible and exciting way, the smooth glassiness of a calm ocean is like letting out a breath of relief. It's like relaxing back on a hot stretch of sand and closing your eyes for a moment of peace.

Something I never had much of before recently, because my life, up until Sick Fights became a gym and I became a world-class MMA trainer, was mostly jungles and blood.

That's why the bikinis, and the traffic, and the laughter throws me. How is it possible that this world I live in now exists side by side with the one I came from just a few years back?

Have they all been blinded by the sun?

Or is it a choice?

I guess I understand. If I had the choice to know, or not know, I would rather not know.

But I wasn't given that choice. I was born into this darkness. That's why I had to make up a last name. That's why all my papers are fake.

"OK." Mackenzie stands up this time. "Listen, I'm not here to torture you. I don't need this story. I'm retired. So if you're not ready—"

"Ready?" I stand up too. "What's that got to do with anything?"

She huffs, tilts her head a little, shoots me a look that says, *Cut the bullshit*. "I know what you're after. Cort told me, Maart. You're looking for Irina."

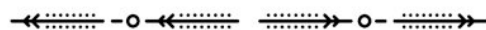
I turn my back on Mackenzie and run my fingers through my hair.

The next thing I know she's got her hand on my shoulder and she's leaning in to my neck. "Come on. Let's do this somewhere else."

Then she takes my hand, like I'm a fucking child or something, and leads me across the roof to the elevator.

The most interesting thing about this move is that I allow her to do it.

Maybe 'allow her' is a strong way to characterize it. Because I'm not even thinking about Mackenzie anymore. I'm still stuck on the name Irina.



SHE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE a name when she got to the camp when she was six. Sergey named her. Something Russian because she spoke Russian and so did he. That's how Irina came to me.

That's how almost all of them came to me.

Small things, mostly starving. Some pale, some brown. Some blue-eyed, some green-eyed, some brown-eyed. Blonde-haired, black-haired, even some ginger-haired.

It was just a constant thing, these kids showing up. Like a never-ending fucking river of kids. Every couple months some would die and new ones would take their place.

When Irina landed in camp she had a black eye, a cut lip, and a freshly broken finger. No one explained why she came

like that because Irina was dropped off without ceremony.

One day there was no girl named Irina. Then one day there was.

Not even Cort knew she was coming, and that was unusual in its own way. Udulf usually let him have a say in the kids he brought to camp. Not typically in choosing them, but definitely in accepting them.

But with Irina, there was no discussion.

She stood no taller than my waist and weighed thirty-six pounds that first day. I was twenty-two and she was six.

It didn't take her long to learn English—a few months. By that time she'd had her first fight and she could mostly have a conversation.

I remember looking at her that very first day, all beat up, while I was setting the bone in her finger. And I remember thinking... *It's just not fair.*

Of course, none of it was fair. Nothing in my life had ever been fair. At the time I had probably trained several dozen children. Cort had won maybe fifteen or twenty Ring fights by then. And Sergey was one of the first to come train with us and the only one left from those early days.

But something about Irina hit me harder than the others. She had a scowl on her face. She didn't ever whimper as I set her finger. And when I was done, she looked up at me and just... sighed. Like she was a weary soul who had lived too long and didn't really care anymore.

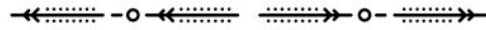
That was my first impression of Irina.

And I wanted her to win.

Of course, I wanted them all to win. I did. And I tried really hard to make that happen.

But they can't all win.

They can't all be Cort.



MACKENZIE and I end up in my gym. It's noisy, and stuffy, and smells like sweaty men, but it was a good call on her part because this is a place I understand.

That rooftop view of Copacabana Beach is too much.

I take her into my office, slip around the other side of my desk, and she shuts the door and sits in the chair for guests.

“What’s going on?”

I hesitate.

“Like I said, Maart, I don’t need a story. The entire world wants to know what the hell is up with you, so I’m here to write a stupid article if you wanna spill your guts. But I don’t need this story.” I make a face at her, but she puts up a hand. “I know, I know. You’re interesting. People are interested. Hell, *I’m* interested.” She pauses here to smile at me. “I know how much it’s worth, and I have a list of two dozen publications that want your story—including *Vogue*, by the way. Congrats on that. You know you’re an official player on the board when fuckin’ *Vogue* wants your story. So you’re worth a lot. But I don’t *need* your story. I am not the woman you know from the past. It’s been seven years and my life today looks nothing like the one I left behind.” She pauses here. Looks me in the eyes. “Yours doesn’t either, does it?”

“You know it doesn’t.”

She leans back in the chair. Relaxing a little. Crossing her legs as she leans an elbow on the arm and props her chin into her hand, staring at me.

Mackenzie was a reporter—maybe even the only reporter—for an underground fighting magazine called *Ring of Fire*, which was named after the underground death-fight circuit that I grew up in.

Actually, the Ring of Fire is the name of the highest level of that secret world. You have to fight for a decade, at least—killing opponent after opponent after opponent—before you are allowed to perform for the world’s sickest men in the final death fights at Ring of Fire level.

There were about six fights a year and each one was heavily promoted between the glossy pages of the magazine. Each fighter did an extensive interview with Mackenzie. There were photoshoots filled with romantic images and beautiful words strung together into sentences that never once mentioned the fact that only one of these two fighters would be alive when it was over.

But trust me, no one thought two fighters were gonna walk out of that ring. Everyone knew. Because the only people who ever saw those fights were the owners of other fighters who qualify at that level.

On the *Bull of Light* that night—when Cort had his last fight for these sick fucks—all those people who were watching were owners. They all had their own fighters back home. They all had their own death-fight camps filled with kids clawing their way up the levels.

Cort and I came up in Udulf van Hauten's camp together. Our friend, Rainer, was there too. I can fight just as well as Cort can. I've killed my share of opponents in the lower-level rings. But I'm also very skilled as a medic and since the Ring of Fire doesn't come with a healthcare plan, I was the one who put Cort back together after he won.

We made a deal when we were small. Before we were even teenagers. He would be the one to get to the Ring of Fire. He would get his own camp. He would get his own kids to train. He would get everything. But I would be the reason he got all that. Because I would keep him alive.

We had a plan. We were gonna buy our freedom. You can do that, at least in theory. The men—the ones who owned us—they told us it was possible. The price was high, of course. But the prizes each fighter got if they won in the Ring of Fire were massive. Yachts. Mansions. Things like that.

And Cort won thirty-six times.

He never once took a prize. He asked for the dollars. He never got the dollars, either, not really. Ninety-five percent of his cash-value prize was handed right back to Udulf as soon as the fight was over. He was paying, little by little, over many years and many fights, for our freedom.

He paid for me first. And by that time we were taking Rainer with us. After Cort had won enough for Rainer's freedom, Evard came along. I tried to talk Cort out of that, but failed.

So that last fight on the *Bull of Light* was the final payment for Cort's own freedom.

And he won, obviously. Since we're all still here and we're not living in death camps.

But the whole thing was a lie. They were never gonna let us buy our way out.

I knew that from the beginning. I saw it in Udulf's face when he talked to Cort. Feigning love. Calling him 'son.' You don't send your son into a death fight.

It was all lies.

But I couldn't tell Cort that. He believed. And belief is so powerful. It's what got him across that finish line every time he stood on the platform with a crazed, insane death-fighter looking back at him under the blacklights and dark skies.

He needed the hope. So I let him hope.

We had to kill them all in the end. Udulf, Lazar, all the other owners who came to watch the end of us. Came to watch us kill each other. That was their plan. Cort had won them lots of money over the last dozen years, but he was old to them. Over. He needed to die and he needed to take me out with him.

Of course, that's not how it ended.

I mean, what kind of dumbass walks into Cort van Breda's camp, stands there drinking champagne and laughing it up with their sick, rich friends, and expects Cort and I to kill one another?

It was never going to happen.

As far as how they all died that day? Well. It was the kids who did it. Even the little ones joined in.

Seriously. How stupid do you have to be to walk into Cort van Breda's death-fight training camp filled with two dozen MMA death-fighting children and think you're gonna get out of there alive?

I had ten-year-olds who could take down those bodyguards. Lazar, and Udulf, and the other owners—well, those assholes were just too easy. Even Anya could've killed them.

Irina was the one who took out Udulf in the end. Lazar fell off a cliff or something. I wasn't there for that because Lazar ran into the jungle like a little pussy and I was too busy trying to get my kids out of the way and onto our ship.

We did lose some. But they lost everyone. Not a single fuckin' owner who came into our camp to watch Cort and I fight that day got out alive. A few of the bodyguards got away, but it's nothing to brag about. They were going up against children who only had their fists, and feet, and minds as weapons.

This is the world I come from. And it makes sense to me.

What doesn't make sense is Copacabana.

What doesn't make sense is how much food I now have.

What doesn't make sense is how much money I now have.

What doesn't make sense... is how safe I feel.

And Irina. She doesn't make sense, either.

“OK.” Mackenzie sighs. “I guess we're really done here. Give me a call when—”

I reach over the table and place my hand on hers to stop her from getting up. “You're right. It's Irina.”

Just saying her name out loud hurts.

Mackenzie doesn't say anything. But she does relax.

“I saw the billboard in Ipanema.”

Mackenzie nods. “Everyone has seen that billboard. It’s kind of hard to miss.”

“Yeah.” I have to swallow here to get more words out. “So. She’s in America, I guess.”

“And you would like to see her again.”

“I would.”

Mackenzie takes her phone out of her pocket, flips open the cover, and starts writing on the screen with a stylus. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“God.” I pause here, but this time Mackenzie doesn’t look annoyed. In fact, she’s letting me relive that day, letting me get a good picture of it in my mind. And I’m not ready for that. “Four years.”

“That would make her... how old now?”

“Um, well, twenty, I guess. She was sixteen, I think. When she took off.”

“You think?”

I’m instantly irritated. “You know how it is, Mackenzie. I don’t really know how old she is. *She* doesn’t even know how old she is. There is no legitimate birth certificate for the girl we called Irina. Assuming she was sixteen when she took off, we can assume she is twenty now.”

Mackenzie gets a little lost in thought here, and I have to wonder how many kids she’s known from the fights. Did she know them young? Or did she only ever report on the high-level Ring of Fire events? Did she come up in the business like the rest of us? Or was she placed there at the top?

What’s her story?

“How old are you, Maart?”

“I know what you’re thinking.”

She scoffs. “No, you don’t.”

“You’re thinking I’m too old for her. Well, that’s not what I want with Irina.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking. I just want to know how old you are.”

I shrug. “Thirty... four? Maybe.”

“OK. So why do you want to see her?”

And here it is. I either tell Mackenzie so she can help me. Or I don’t and I let it all go.

I don’t think I can live with myself if I let Irina go. “She was mad at me that day.”

“What day? The day she left?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“I... did something. Made a mistake. And... I guess it was unforgivable in her mind.”

“What did you do?”

I ignore that question and point over my shoulder to the window behind me. “I saw her out there. She was standing out on the street under that tree.”

Mackenzie’s eyes dart over my shoulder and find the tree outside. Then she looks at me. “Why was she out there?”

I fold my hands on the desk and look down at them as I answer. “She was there because we had been fighting. Not physically.” I look up at Mackenzie. “Just wanna make that

clear, since it's... not always clear. I stopped letting her come to the gym."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" I sneer at the woman across the desk. "*Why?* Because she's a little fucking girl, Mackenzie. I don't want her fighting. She has a new life now. She needs to leave this one behind."

"OK." Mackenzie gets a smarmy look on her face. "But she wanted to fight, right?"

"It's all she knew."

"Right. I'll take that as a yes. And you were... what, bossing her around? So she had a teenage moment?"

"Teenage moment? The next time I saw her it was three and a half years later and her face was on a fucking billboard. She had a black eye. They took a picture of her, all dressed up in luxury swimwear, sportin' a black eye! She ran away to America, Mackenzie. She wasn't having a teenage moment. She was..."

"Punishing you?"

I let out a long breath, but I nod. "Yeah. Punishing me."

"Because she loves you?"

"How do you jump to that conclusion?"

"How do I not?" Mackenzie laughs. "I mean... come on. Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?"

"What?"

"You're a handsome man, Maart. You had a very intimate relationship with a teenage girl, maybe the most intimate relationship you've ever had—and don't bullshit me. Cort told

me how much you love Irina. And he didn't insinuate you were fucking her or anything—"

"Don't."

"I'm just saying. You trained that girl, from the time she was a small child, to kill people so she could live. And she did live. She's probably been infatuated with you since she was"—Mackenzie shrugs, takes a guess—"ten or eleven, maybe. And then she finally grows up, doesn't have to fight for her life anymore, and you're the guy she wants. How close am I?"

I don't answer her.

"And you never saw her that way. You maybe saw her as your saving grace."

I scoff.

"I know." Mackenzie smiles at me. "I'm a little poetic. But I am a writer, so you'll just have to let me go with it. Anyway. It's a start, I guess. I don't think she's going to be hard to find. She's on a billboard advertising overpriced bathing suits. She must have an agent. I'll probably have something for you by tomorrow." Mackenzie stands up.

"Wait. You're leaving?"

"I think I have all I need." She pauses here. "Unless you'd like to tell me more?"

"You don't want the story?"

"About you?" She laughs a little, that smile of hers back. So warm now. So easy. "Of course. But I'm not getting any more out of you today. You're—and I'm not being disparaging here, OK? It's just an observation—but you're holding a lot of shit in, Maart. I'm not a therapist."

“Fuck off.”

She puts both hands up, palms out. “Like I said, I’m not disparaging you. But your life...” She shakes her head. “It’s kind of a miracle that you’re not insane. I’ll get the story when you’re ready to tell it, and, in the meantime, I’ll find Irina for you.”

I just stare at her, unsure what to say.

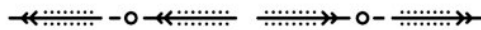
“Do we have a deal?” She puts her hand out over the desk.

I look at it for a moment before shaking it and meeting her gaze. “OK. We have a deal.”

She turns away, walks to the door, then pauses to look over her shoulder at me. “It’s Macks, you know. Not Mackenzie.”

“Sorry. It’s really not.”

Which makes her laugh. It’s a nice laugh. And then she opens the door and leaves.



CORT CALLS me a couple hours later to see how it went. I’m still in my office, still sitting at my desk, only I’ve swiveled my chair so I’m looking out the window at that stupid tree.

“Well? How’d it go?”

I shrug. “She says she can find Irina.”

“That’s good. Right?”

“Yeah. It’s good, Cort.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He sighs. He knows me so well, which means he knows I’m being weird. “You’re gonna find her.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Oh.” He pauses, probably to let me fill in the blanks. But I’m not going to, and he knows this too, so he just asks, “Well? Are you gonna tell me what you *are* worried about?”

“Do you think Irina was... like... into me?”

“Into you how?”

“You know. A way she shouldn’t be into me.”

“Are you into her? Is that—”

“No, you sick fuck.”

He laughs.

Which, I admit, is nice. So it makes me smile. “Mackenzie said—”

“Who the fuck is Mackenzie?”

“Macks.” I hiss this out. “I can’t call her that. She’s just not a Macks.”

“OK. Are you into *her*?”

“What? No. She’s like... retirement age.”

Cort almost guffaws. “We’re retired, Maart.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m not retired. I’m just getting started.”

“Anyway.” Now he’s frustrated. “This is good news, right? You can finally find Irina, run towards each other on a beach and do a whole slow-motion hug, murmur things about bygones, and *move on*.”

The way he says those last two words... I dunno. I understand there's something wrong with me when it comes to these feelings I have for Irina, but I don't understand what they are.

I'm angry at her, but I'm sad she's gone.

I miss her, but I don't want her around.

It doesn't make much sense.

"I gotta go."

"OK." He doesn't try to stop me.

Normally he's a little bit chatty. We talk on the phone almost every day. He's always got something to say, so this is his way of telling me he's tired of this Irina bullshit.

"Later." I hang up before he can say anything else. Mostly so I can get the last word in. We've always been competitive, even over stupid shit like hanging up the phone.

Then I just continue staring out at that tree. Picturing Irina's face that day she left.

She was crying.

I get up, shake it off, and then go out to the mats. There's no one here because it's late, but I don't like to train at night. The windows are too big and Rio never sleeps. Especially Copacabana Beach. I don't like the idea that people passing by can see me, but I can't see them because it's dark. I dunno. I'm paranoid, I guess. Still thinking that people are after us.

Which is stupid. Because it's been seven years, and we didn't do anything wrong. We had a deal. It was Udulf who double-crossed us, not the other way around. And sure, we killed a lot more people than Udulf that afternoon, but it was a

fair fight, if you ask me. A pack of kids against armed bodyguards and sick billionaires? Come on.

We earned our freedom twice, as far as I'm concerned.

And anyway, they'd have killed us by now if they really wanted to.

That's what I'm worried about, maybe. That they will realize Irina is out there all alone and get her. I mean, how stupid does she have to be to agree to that photo? Maybe she didn't know it was gonna go up on billboards in twenty-seven cities across the globe. But if Mackenzie's right, and she has an agent, then she would know.

Which means she let them take that photo on purpose.

And why did she have a black eye? Is she fighting again?

I will feel like such a failure if she's still fighting.

I stand there on the mats, looking up at the ceiling, and I pray to a god I don't even believe in.

Please. Please don't let that girl fight.

Please make her stop.

CHAPTER 2



*E*very morning there is a choice. To get up, or not.

That's my choice. To go on, or give in.

And on most days—recently, at least—I get up and go on.

But it's never gonna be enough. Ever.

I sigh, roll out of bed, and don't even wince when my foot hits the floor. The pain isn't so bad. Not anymore. Not enough to make me stop, and that's all that matters.

I make my way over to the billowing white curtains separating me from the outside world and peek past them for a moment before pulling open the sliding door. It's four a.m., relatively cool, and there's a breeze coming in off the ocean as I walk out to the terrace and lean on the railing. The moon is out, and it's a good enough size, so there is a nice carpet of light shining across the water.

South Beach is almost always busy, but there's a lull around this time. It's not empty, not even now. But there is a small span of time in the early, early morning when it's nearly quiet and there's just the sound of the surf on the sand and the low murmur of a mostly sleeping city.

I take a breath, go back inside—limping just a little—and then change into sweats and a tank. I mix a protein shake, stuff

a water bottle into my duffel, and seven and half minutes after I got out of bed, I'm pulling my front door closed behind me.

I live on the ninth floor of a beachfront building most people would die for. And, technically, I almost did die for it. It's been over seven years since my last Ring fight, but the injuries linger. And they go far deeper than the foot.

Was it worth it?

Look around, Eason. Of course it was worth it.

The money I have now doesn't really have anything to do with the fights. I had a little when things fell apart. Enough, actually. But not this kind of money. Wade, Davis, and I... we stole this money.

Technically, Wade stole it. But we divided it all up three ways and... well... we each got a lot.

There *was* a last fight. It just wasn't in the Ring.

It was in Dublin—in my old neighborhood, actually. But just when I thought the fight was over some asshole came at me with a crowbar. He was goin' for the knee, but he got the foot because I was mid-kick. There was a moment there, when I was on the ground, when I thought, *That's it. It's over now. You can let go, Eason.* He brought that crowbar down on my foot three more times before Davis got him from behind and pulled him off me. Then, on one foot, I put that crowbar right between that man's eyes and we left.

Actually, Davis and Wade had to carry me out. Which was a little embarrassing, but everyone but us was dead so I didn't really care.

The foot though. What a fuckin' mess it was. Couldn't walk, not for months, even though I had surgery and they put it all back together with pins and plates.

These days the foot is doing much, much better.

It is. It really is.

“Well, Eason, some might say you’re trying to convince yourself that’s the case there, brother. But you’re still fuckin’ limping, aren’t ya?”

I got into the habit of talking to myself during recovery because I spent so much time alone. After I got out of hospital, I stayed in a private physical therapy resort in the Bahamas while Davis and Wade came to Miami to start a gym with the money we stole.

Which, again, had nothing to do with that last fight.

I didn’t really plan on making Miami home, it was just close by. And where the fuck else was I gonna go? Certainly wasn’t going back to Ireland.

Not after how I left it.

So. Here I am. Seven years later, still talking to myself, still dwelling on things I swear to God I’m not dwellin’ on, and I’ve still got no fuckin’ clue where the hell I’m goin’ in this life.

Maybe nowhere.

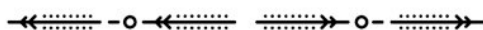
On that fateful day seven years ago we had a choice, Davis, Wade, and me. There was a fork in the road, so to speak. But for me, the damage was done. And that fork really only went one way.

They took everything from me. In a matter of hours, everything was gone.

Not a single fuckin’ reason to live.

And ya know what they say about men who've got nothing to lose?

Well, I don't really know what they say, but I'm pretty sure it's got something to do with zero fucks.



DAVIS OWNS TWO GYMS. This one in South Beach, down the street from my penthouse, where I train—it's a private gym meant for me alone—and another one across the bay where he sees actual clients.

He was my trainer when I was part of the Ring. Still is, I guess. Though there won't be any more fights. I could make a name for myself in UFC, maybe. Even with the foot. But there are no Ring fights in my future, that's for sure.

I have a sneaking feeling Davis only puts up with me these days because of the guilt.

Which he earned, so I've got no thoughts about that at all.

Wade was a paper-pusher. Still is. And ya might think he's got no place with guys like Davis and me. But it turns out an accountant with access to your owner's money comes in handy when said owner dies, and you're all the way across the world—safe and out the way—and ya decide to steal billions of dollars from the Saudi royal family on your way out of a life of death-fight slavery.

Yeah. Wade really came in handy.

And that's when shit got interesting, to say the least.

I don't really understand why I'm still alive. But I don't really care, either.

Zero fucks.

When I come into the gym Davis is in his office. I can see him through the glass. He's on the phone, so I don't bother him. I put my shit down in the locker room, then take myself and my wraps out to the training room, sit on a bench, and go through the routine.

It *is* a routine. Davis has been saying this for six months. "You're just not invested anymore. The injury—all of it—has fucked you in the head. You need to retire, or go all in. Like Maart's fighters."

The cynical part of me understands that I'm his meal ticket. Davis has the other gym, and he runs all kinds of classes, but he's teaching kids, and middle-aged men who think they can buy their way into a black belt, and wannabes who will never, ever make it.

He's got no reputation in the real world. He's got no winners to show off because, obviously, he can't point to me and say, "Look at our boy Eason here. Been fighting death matches since he was nine. Three turns through the Ring. And I'm the one who taught him how to do that."

No. He can't say that, can he?

So he's stuck with me. Naturally, he wants to keep me alive, and professional fights—legitimate fights—are the way to do this. If I went professional he could point to me and say, "Look at our boy Eason here. Come to my gym and I'll turn you into him."

Which would be a lie—there's no way to become a fighter like me unless you came up like me—but who cares.

There's another part of me—the hopeful part—that wants to believe Davis actually gives a fuck about my future. I want to believe we're kinda like brothers. In it together. A team.

I'm just not convinced.

Davis steps onto the mat in front of me. “You're never gonna guess who that was.”

I don't even look up. Just keep wrapping my hands.

“Macks. Remember her?”

I pause, still not looking up at him, and think back, placing the name. “The *Ring of Fire* reporter?”

“Yeah. Her.”

“What the hell did she want?” Davis doesn't say anything for a moment, and then an idea hits me, so I look up, feeling more hopeful than I have in a long time. “She's got a fight for us?”

“What? No.” He laughs. Like what I just said was so stupid, he might never get over it.

I'm instantly irritated. The Ring of Fire was my life. Winning death fights was the only purpose I had. And then Cort van Breda and his little camp of murderous children killed a whole bunch of important people in some Brazilian jungle and it was over. Just like that. Over.

Cort wasn't supposed to win his last fight. And I don't really care about that part. I would've fought Pavo or Cort. Wouldn't have mattered to me who won.

The point was that I was next in the rotation. The winner of that fight was mine. I had everything on the line—literally everything I had left in this world—and Cort van Breda went and fucked it up with his dreams of freedom.

I will never get over that. Ever.

“Then what the hell did she want?” I’m squinting at Davis, getting angrier by the second.

“She’s looking for a woman.”

“Why is she calling you about that?”

“Because this girl is one of Cort van Breda’s child fighters.”

I stop scowling at him and just stare for a moment. “Which one?”

“Irina.”

“Never heard of her.”

“No. She wasn’t in the Ring of Fire. Obviously, since she’s female. She was only thirteen when that whole shitshow went down. But Macks tells me that she was the one who took down Udulf that day.”

“Lie.”

“Macks was there. She should know.”

“Maybe.” I mumble this, then go back to wrapping my hand. But when Davis remains quiet, curiosity gets the better of me. “Why is Macks looking for her?”

“It’s personal. That’s what she told me.”

I look up at him and find him doing something with his phone. Texting someone, maybe.

For a few years I wondered what happened to Cort and Maart and Rainer. I heard rumors that they were running a supply ship. But then, one night, there they were—Maart, at least. On the fucking pay-per-view stream. Having

successfully transitioned his top fighters from the death camps into the legitimate world of MMA.

He's got a world-famous gym down in Rio now. Fighters—top-notch fucking fighters—coming out his ass. He's got money, and women, and drugs—maybe not drugs, but probably—and fame.

Davis deconstructs each of Maart's fighters in every single event, so I've seen all the fights. The whole thing makes me furious, but there's no way I can't watch them. I'm obsessed with all of it. The gym, the location, the guys—and one girl, though she's retired now—the contracts, the money, the fame. All of it.

I've got most of that shit too. But he's still got his people.

My people are gone. And maybe it's irrational, but I blame Cort, Sick Heart himself, for that.

Still, this little twist in the narrative is interesting. “Did she run away or something?”

“Dunno. I just told Macks the same thing you said. Never heard of her. But get this. While we're on the phone, she sends me a pic. It's of a billboard in Times Square. Then another pic. Which is the same picture, but a different location. London. Then another. Paris. She sends me twenty-nine pictures of billboards all over the world and they've got one thing in common—this girl she's looking for. Irina did some modeling. Bathing suits.” He pauses here to smile at me. “You wanna see the pics?”

“Why would I?”

“She's pretty.”

“So?”

Davis gets frustrated. He's always frustrated with me. "I know you're angry about how it all ended. And I can tell you over and over again until I'm blue in the face that it's all worked out for us. But you never seem to get past it, Eason. You need to get past it."

"Get... *past it*? Get fucked, Davis." I get up, hands now wrapped, grab a jump rope out of the box, and start skipping. Every time my left foot hits the floor a sharp pain shoots up my leg. But I ignore it. I'm getting really good at ignoring it.

Davis follows me, standing just out of reach of my slapping rope. "My point is, I get you, Eason. I understand you and your... anger. And I think you should take a look at her." Then he holds up his phone, not really giving me a choice.

Woman? That's a stretch. She looks like a teenager. I stop skipping and take the phone from Davis to get a better look. She's pouty, and pale, and blonde, and thin, almost a cliché ballerina type. Long neck and legs. Shadows on her cheekbones and clavicles. Her ribcage showing. But she's not wispy and soft the way ballerinas are. She's... hard. Everything about her looks hard.

Which is a contradiction because she has nice, round breasts and even though there's almost nothing to her—I'd bet my life she's not any taller than five-five and doesn't weigh more than a buck—she's got hips too. Not an hourglass figure, she's much too thin for that, but curvy in a way only teenage girls can be.

The bikini isn't anything special. Pretty much the same thing you see all day on South Beach. It's black with gold fringe on the bra and completely useless for surfing, or diving, or anything, actually. Which, again, is how South Beach rolls.

She's got her jaw clenched, which is pretty hard to do as one pouts. Her eyes are ice blue and flashing anger. Like even if she wasn't getting paid to stand there and had nothing better to do at the time, she'd still be pissed off that she had to do anything at all.

Some might see that as entitlement. But to me, knowing who she is and how she came up, it comes off as... indifference. Maybe even resentment.

Like her little bag of fucks to give is empty as well.

But the most incredible thing about this picture is a purple bruise. I squint, looking closer at her. "Is that a black eye?"

Davis laughs. "Yeah."

I look up at him. "Why the hell would they photograph a girl with a black eye?"

He shrugs at me. "I don't know. It's..." Then he frowns.

"It's what?"

"It was a thing. A while back, though."

"What do you mean a 'thing?' What kind of thing?"

He stares at me for a moment, going silent.

"What?" I'm getting annoyed. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I'm trying to decide if I should tell you this or not."

I'm reading between the lines and the anger is building up inside of me, like lava bubbling just below the surface, ready to explode. "Go on, Davis. Say it."

"Milk carton kids. You ever hear that expression before?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

“In the Eighties there was an awareness campaign in the United States. When kids would go missing, they’d put their pictures on milk cartons to spread the word.”

“Sounds horrifying.”

“It terrorized an entire generation of children sitting at the breakfast table eating their frosted flakes.” Davis pauses to laugh at this. Sometimes I hate his fuckin’ guts. “So it stopped. Early Nineties, maybe? But then, right about the time the milk carton kids were going out of style, another term popped up. Milk carton *models*. They looked like drug-addicted street children. Mostly because they were.”

“What do you mean?”

“Talent scouts would pull runaway teenagers off the street, dress them up in designer jeans, and put their faces in the glossy magazines. They were always gaunt and tired-looking, black circles around their eyes. They called the look ‘heroin chic.’ But then people started condemning it. Started asking questions about the kids. Where did they come from? Where were their parents? And about the money too. So, almost overnight, the milk carton models suddenly and conveniently disappeared.”

I look down at the picture again. Despite the black eye—or maybe because of it—the picture is stunning. And even though there are three other people standing on either side of her—a boy and two more girls—it’s her who makes you look twice. Not her tits, not her suit, not even those coltish, racehorse legs.

It’s that bruise around her eye, that unmistakable imperfection. And the expression on her face. So fuckin’ defiant. Like she lost everything. Everything.

It's obvious that the photographer wanted people to think she'd been battered. But she hadn't. I know this without even knowing her. She's not a victim at all.

She's a fighter.

Maart's fighter.

And she didn't get that black eye from a drug deal gone wrong or a boyfriend with a wild fist.

She was in a fight.

I can't see the bruise very well, but it was a recent fight. Probably a street fight, because if she had been in the ring, there would be a lot more evidence. A lot more bruising, especially on her legs, which are bare, of course. She's in a swimsuit.

Everything about this picture says, *I come from Maart.*

"She's pretty, right? I'll send you the pics."

I look up at Davis. "When was this taken?"

"Macks said three and a half years ago."

"How old was she?"

"Seventeen."

I study the picture again and find a little cut on her lip, too. Maybe she's not pouting? Maybe her lips are just swollen?

She definitely looks seventeen. So that makes her twenty now. I glance back up at Davis and find him smiling. "What the hell are you smiling about?" I ask.

"I think we should look for this girl."

"Why would we do that?"

“Because it’s a connection, Eason. And you seem dead set on keeping that connection alive. This funk you’re in? It’s gotta stop. You can’t go on like this.”

I ignore that bullshit. “We wouldn’t even know where to start looking. And I’m not traipsing all over the fuckin’ country looking for a stupid girl.”

“I could put some feelers out. In fact, I said I would. According to Macks, everyone has seen these billboards, so she’s sending it out to all her contacts trying to find her.”

“*We* haven’t seen the fuckin’ billboard, so that’s not true.”

“Actually, I have. Well, not the billboard. A poster on a surf shop window right up Ocean.”

“Shut up.”

“Swear to God. I was over there at the shops at Ocean and Fifteenth—just the other day, actually—and that poster caught my eye from all the way across the street. Shit, the fucking girl I was with even stopped to look. Apparently, this pic is the most popular ad campaign that company ever ran, so they’ve been using it non-stop in different locations for years even though that bathing suit is so out of date, they don’t even sell it anymore.”

I narrow my eyes at Davis. “How do you know so much about this stupid picture?”

He shrugs and sighs out his words. “I dunno, man. It’s kinda weird, right? Like... fate or something.”

“So why doesn’t Macks just call her agent? Why is she so hard to find?”

“Macks tried, but apparently Irina is not a model. Some free agent found her on the beach down by the pier, made an

offer, took her to a studio, dressed her up, shot the pics, paid her, and never saw her again.”

I shoot him a look of disbelief. “They took the pics *here?* In South Beach?”

“Right?” He laughs this word out. “What are the chances she’s a local?”

I scoff and look at the picture again. “She doesn’t even look American.”

“No. Russian.”

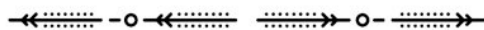
“So if the pics were taken three and a half years ago, why do they think she’s still here?”

Davis shrugs. “Good a place to start as any, I guess.”

I hand him the phone. “Just... let it go.” Then I go back to skipping rope. Davis tries to get me interested in the conversation again, but I turn my back and keep skipping.

I’m not in a funk. A funk is something temporary.

Nothing about how I feel is temporary.



LATER, after training is over, and only because I have nothing better to do, I take a walk up Ocean towards Fifteenth Street. It’s busy with people and cars. Yelling and laughing. Bright signs everywhere, trying to sell you things ya don’t need. Even though I own a penthouse here, I haven’t made up my mind about South Beach yet.

I do like the actual beach itself. I like to run on the wet sand at night. I like the heat here too. Reminds me of

Morocco. And even though I should never want to think about that place again, it's where the story of me really starts, so I can't just put it away like a piece of memorabilia.

Sometimes I think that those first few months, when I was running wild with the other homeless kids in the medina quarter of Marrakesh, were the best days of my life. And other times it feels like the start of a never-ending nightmare.

I was terrified nearly twenty-four seven. But there were minutes sprinkled throughout those hours that were fun, filled with strange food, and strange music, and that voice—bellowing through the city twice a day—that made me think about strange gods.

There was laughter too. The other kids were tough, but so was I. That's why I was there, wasn't it?

All of it—even the scary parts—was exciting. Because of course, when you're nine years old and your father sells you to a bunch of strangers who take you to Morocco, and you escape and hook up with a pack of feral children who have stories just like yours, and they talk you into hiding in a truck on its way to Marrakesh, where you live on the streets and steal wallets from tourists to survive, it's a temporary thing. It never even enters your mind that you won't be rescued.

There must be some mistake. I remember thinking that. *Surely Declan or Conor—who were both there when the whole transaction went down—will come and find me.*

I was the little brother, after all.

Back then I didn't really consider Eoin the baby, though he was. He was only just one. And we barely took any notice of him at all. He certainly never went along with us and Da for work.

But they never came, of course. There was no rescue.

I'm still here. That's what I would tell my father if he were still alive. *I'm still here, you fuckin' asshole. I'm still here.*

Anyway.

I find the surf shop and the poster of the girl. Though I've already seen it, I can't help wanting to take a closer look. The shop is still open, though getting ready to close, I think. So I go in, make a deal with the clerk, and end up leaving the shop with that poster rolled up in my hands.

Even though I blew a lot of cash on the penthouse, I still have way more money than I need and I'm not really the kind of guy who likes to shop—never got the point of owning things the way Davis and Wade do. But they're American and that's just how the Americans are, I guess.

Probably the Irish are that way too, but I haven't been Irish for a very long time now.

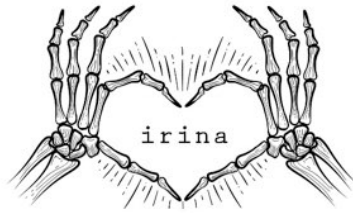
My point is that paying that clerk five hundred bucks for the poster was no big deal.

When I get back to my penthouse, I unroll the poster, grab some hand-wrap tape, and tape the poster on my ceiling just above my bed. Then I lie down and just look at her.

Irina.

Maart's girl.

CHAPTER 3



I do not think about them. Ever.

I wake up and take hot showers. Long ones. I brew single cups of coffee and nibble on dried fruit. I walk the beach, and feed the birds, and wear cool mirrored sunglasses. And sometimes I go to work at the restaurant.

I love waitressing. At least it's not a job where I have to sit all day. I had one of those when I first got to Miami. I answered phones for a law office. They thought my Russian accent was cool and hip when they hired me, but clients started complaining about it and it was suggested that I pay someone to get rid of it.

“Get rid of what?” I didn't even ask politely, either.

The Russian accent had been canceled. I wasn't even sure what that meant back then. I don't come from this world—America feels like a distant planet compared to Brazil.

There was a war, I guess. I had a hard time understanding what, exactly, that had to do with me. If I ever lived in Russia, I sure as hell don't remember it. I mean, honestly, I'm not even sure I'm Russian. I got this accent because my first language is Russian, but that doesn't mean I'm *from* Russia. It just means I learned to talk around the Russian assholes who owned me first, so that's the language I picked up.

Of course, I can't explain this to people. *Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention. I was a child slave for an underground fighting ring until I was thirteen and have killed nine people in death matches, plus a couple of billionaires. So while I understand that I look and sound Russian, it just might not be the case.*

That would go over well.

I mean, in Brazil, I could've told this story and most people—that I hung around, anyway—would just nod sympathetically and sigh, maybe pat my hand in solidarity.

But in America? Please. Americans have no fucking clue how the real world works.

Getting fired from the law office was really a great stroke of luck though. Because that's how LMR Eats became my second home.

LMR stands for Luis, Manuel, and Romero, three brothers who each wanted to name their Cuban restaurant after themselves back when they first started out in the late Nineties. Settling for the first initial of each of their names was a fair compromise.

It's funny how I got that job, because I wasn't even looking for a job. Through some careful planning, some lucky breaks, and some underground fights when I first got here, I ended up with money. Not a lot. Not left, anyway. I used most of the windfall in the beginning to buy my condo.

It's a tiny place just eight blocks off South Beach. And when I say tiny, I mean it's like a closet. But it's got a little kitchen, and my own stackable washer and dryer. Stackable, they call it here. I kinda love that word. Stackable. I don't know why. I've been speaking English for as long as I can remember, but we didn't use English a lot in the camp. Mostly

Maart and Rainer used it, actually, because Cort, when he did speak, would only speak English. But every kid I knew in Cort's camp spoke three or four languages and English was hard for most of us so, left up to us, we spoke anything but English. Until Anya came and Cort started talking more.

Stackable. It was a brand-new word and it's just fun to say.

Whatever. I'm weird.

Anya got me interested in learning more English. She's the one who taught me most of it. And I guess it never occurred to me that I might have an accent—Anya never said anything about it. So it was a little bit of a shock to learn that Americans judge you on your English accent. Who knew?

Hiring someone to fix my speech was actually a good idea. I mean, how in the world could I put my past behind me if everyone I met had preconceived notions the moment I opened my mouth?

That's how I found Nandy.

LMR Eats is just down the street from me—about five blocks closer to the beach—and Nandy is Romero's daughter. First in her family to graduate from college. She was in her senior year majoring in linguistics when I was in the restaurant ordering the Argentine rice bowl to take back to my condo—condo is also a great word, especially when you own one. There was a flyer taped to the glass counter at the cash register. It said, *Ditch the accent. I can teach you to speak perfect English. Nandy Jardinez, Romero's daughter. Inquire here.*

There was a picture of her face too. Long, dark hair, wide, dark eyes, and golden-brown skin. She looked my age and I

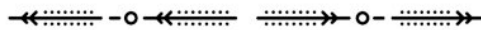
had seen her around the restaurant when I'd been in previously ordering rice bowls.

So I inquired.

Three years later that Russian accent is history, Nandy is my BFF, I occasionally work fill-in shifts at the restaurant, and I'm a well-loved member of the LMR Eats family.

So. As I said. I do not think about them.

Ever.



I LITERALLY GOT off a boat when I arrived here in America. I didn't understand that it was a cliché back then, so when I told people I just got off the boat and they would chuckle, I didn't get it.

Culture shock is a real thing. I've been places. Kind of. I mean, I've seen places. The jungles, naturally—since I spent most of my childhood living in them—and many cities in Brazil. Plus the Rock, that counts. And the eastern coastline of South America. And Rio, of course. I was there a lot that last year in Brazil.

But none of that was anything like Miami.

To say I was enthralled wouldn't even come close. To think that people live like this... I was in awe.

I had some money because I had been fighting in Rio before I left. I had a Brazilian ID and passport. Maart made all his professional fighters do one fight for each of us kids so

Cort could buy us all legal identities. They're totally real too. Bribery is kind of a thing down there.

So I had that, but it wasn't enough to get me to Miami. I needed quite a bit of money for that, so I did my own fights in the underground favela circuit. By this time, Maart's gym Sick Fights was already a worldwide phenomenon.

I wasn't fighting anyone big. Actually, it was a tournament. The first fight's winner got to fight again, and if they won the second fight too, the purse was doubled. Then they got to fight again, and if they won that one, the purse was tripled.

You fight until you lose. And since there are ten to fifteen fights each tournament, the prizes can be quite big. If you can get into the first fight of the night, and keep winning all the way to the end, it's a life-changing opportunity.

I had been going to the fights for weeks before I finally got my chance to be in the last round. When you first show up, they give you the last fight automatically. So even if you win—and I did—you don't earn much.

But I was smart in that fight. I didn't show them everything. I didn't give it all away. I did just enough to win. They passed me over several times after that win, but eventually, after three more months of showing up and getting nowhere, they gave me a real chance.

Fight one.

Those men taunted me. Laughed at me. Called me names and made rude offers.

They never saw me coming and the whole place went quiet when I took down that first fighter with an elbow move. Several people complained that the move was illegal.

I guess it was. In their world, but not in mine. And anyway, it was an underground fight club. It's not like I kicked him in the balls. Though I wasn't above doing that—it's just cliché and a sign of desperation.

They gave me the win and in the second fight I did another 'illegal' move. Because when you're five foot five and a hundred and twelve pounds, you win any way you can. Maybe they should consider that, since my winning move of choice has always been the neck snap.

This particular illegal winning move was a headbutt. Three times, real quick. Forehead, nose, mouth. He was a bloody mess.

But again, they gave me the win. It's not like I pile-drove him. I would've, but that guy had sixty pounds on me and there was no way I could lift him up to get that move.

In fight three, they were ready. My opponent had a team of people giving him pointers. By this time, they had figured out that I was probably 'one of those kids' several years back. Maart's kids. Only they didn't know it was Maart, of course.

There were rumors about the massacre in the jungle camp—death fights, children killing billionaires, little girls—and once they saw me fight, they were no longer rumors.

The third fighter played dirty. Tried to, at least. He was so much bigger than me, it was decidedly unfair. But I was small, and quick, and my flying armbar is world-class. I took down two boys in the death fights using the flying armbar.

I wasn't trying to kill the guy in fight three—and he pulled through—but he really hit his head hard when I took him down. That fight was over in under a minute.

I lost in fight four. This guy tried to gouge my eye out. I had to resort to kicking him in the balls to make him pull back enough for me to wriggle free from his hold, but I guess he saw that coming and was wearing two cups, so I just tapped and took the loss.

I had what I needed. The equivalent of five thousand US dollars. Twenty-five hundred for the new papers, another grand to get a plane ticket to Barbados, twelve hundred more for the private boat to Puerto Rico where I boarded a cruise ship and landed in Miami five days later after touring the Caribbean.

When I got off the ship, I had two hundred and twenty dollars in my little purse, a brand-new pair of flip-flops, and I felt like the richest person in the whole world.

Those first few days in Miami were like stumbling into a fantasy. It was everything I never knew I wanted. I slept on the beach, ran from the cops, ate tacos and French fries, and didn't stop smiling for three weeks. Then... well, then I got robbed.

It could've been worse. I mean, a gang of young men don't jump a girl my age walking alone on a beach at midnight because they want her money.

Of course, they never had a chance. They weren't fighters, they were drug dealers or something. I took out two before they even understood what was happening. Then another one. The rest ran.

But they got my purse. So I was broke and had a black eye and a split lip for my troubles.

It was the next morning that the scout found me. I had been walking the beach, trying to come up with some ideas for how to make money. It was early. The sun hadn't even

properly risen yet. You're not supposed to be on the beach all night, but people do it, so it wasn't empty. I wasn't the only girl, either. Not even the only young girl. There was a group of teenagers just down the beach from where I was sitting, boys and girls who had clearly been out all night drinking.

But the scout came up to me. I was watching her as she scanned the beach. She didn't look like she had been up all night. She was young, maybe twenty, but maybe younger. Her long, tanned legs were a nice contrast against her bright white shorts. She was a thin woman—thinner than me, even—but she didn't look unhealthy. In other words, she was drug-addict skinny, but didn't look at all like a drug addict. Her complexion, though she wasn't wearing make-up, was glowing and she had just the right amount of pink on her cheeks.

She was wearing a ruffle-y white summer tank and she had on a wide-brimmed white hat and mirrored sunglasses. Her hair was long and blonde—darker than mine, but still mostly blonde—and it was pulled up in a messy ponytail. But again, not messy like mine was. Not haphazardly put together, but very deliberate.

And the jewelry she had... it was like the contents of a treasure chest. Large, gold, hoop earrings and golden bangle bracelets and a necklace. I remember the necklace because it was odd. Gold, like the rest, but it was a set of antlers. Not the head of a deer with antlers, just antlers.

I'm not any kind of jewelry expert. I had never even owned a piece of jewelry at that time. But all that gold looked real to me.

I remember looking at her, watching her as she was coming towards me, and thinking to myself that she was out of

place in a very specific way. She looked like she belonged on a yacht, not the beach.

She came up to me and the rising sun was kinda in my eyes, so I had to put a hand up to block it in order to make out her face, and when I did that, she smiled. “Can I sit down?”

The accent was... I don’t know. Fake, I think. It sounded kinda like Maart’s accent, which is sorta British. But for some reason, I didn’t believe it.

I didn’t answer her question, either, but she sat down next to me anyway. She introduced herself—Regina Chase, talent scout, blah, blah, blah. “Would you like to make some money?” Her voice was soft when she said these words.

I wasn’t desperate for money. I will never be desperate for money. I know how to live without money. But... I kinda did need some. So I started talking to her, asking questions.

I’m not stupid. I know how the world works. When some pretty stranger walks up to you on a beach just after the sun rises and she looks like she’s about to spend the day on a billionaire’s yacht and I look like I was swept overboard two weeks ago, there’s a reason for this. And that reason comes with a hidden layer of darkness lurking just beneath the surface.

I was looking for that darkness. And when she asked if I wanted to be a model, I thought I had pinned it down. It was porn. It had to be porn. Because come on. My knuckles were still bleeding, I had a black eye and a cut lip, and this woman walked up to me asking if I’d like to make some money as a model?

I almost said no because I’m never doing porn. But I decided to give it a chance. What was the worst that could

happen? I'd fight my way out and run?

So fuck it, I went.

But it wasn't porn. It really was modeling.

Aside from the photographer, there were tons of people there too—make-up people, and dressing people, and assistant people, and food and drink people. Literally dozens of people, including other models, none of whom were found on a beach that very morning. They were professionals. They didn't need to be told what to do the way I did. The girls posed in just the right way. The one boy, he was as confident as the girls. I was stunned. The whole first impression kind of threw me off course.

And then... I dunno. I put the bathing suit on, did what they told me, and they took pictures.

When it was over, Regina gave me a whole stack of prepaid gift cards and a business card. She said I should get in touch with her next week. She would have more jobs for me and they would be paid in cash, not cards.

The gift cards totaled nearly five thousand dollars. They were from everywhere. Local restaurants and boutiques in South Beach. Amazon. Wal-Mart. Prepaid Visa. Prepaid MasterCard. Prepaid American Express. There was even one for a pet store.

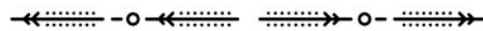
It was a lot of money, but not in the ideal form. I mean, what the hell was I gonna do with a pet store gift card? So I could see that Regina's cash offer was mean to be bait. A way to get me to come back. But it didn't matter, I guess. It took me a while, but I finally used, or bartered, all of those gift cards.

I never went back or called Regina up looking for more modeling work.

I might've, maybe. But just a few days after my first experience as a high-fashion bathing suit model, I discovered the real opportunity that would change my life forever.

Miami, it turned out, had its own version of the underground fight rings like they had back in the Rio favelas.

And that's how I bought my condo.



THAT FIRST YEAR was somewhat of a whirlwind dream. I forgot all about everything. It's like I was living in my own little world and nothing and no one existed but me.

It was a gift, actually. The first time I had ever been alone, and on my own, and in charge of everything.

Some girls might get wild and lose themselves, but that's not what happened to me. That first year in Miami I found myself.

And it was a relief. Such a relief. Because all growing up I was just existing, training my hardest and doing my best to live through each fight. I was so lost in Brazil. I was bored in the jungle. I liked the kids—of course I liked the kids. And Anya. She was my best friend. And Cort too, though I didn't hang out with him much.

But life changed when we settled in that little village in the jungle. Suddenly, I was supposed to go to school, and not the kind of school we did back in the camp. That was a bit of

reading, a bit of writing, and barely any math. Suddenly, school was a full-time job.

And I didn't like it. It didn't feel relevant. Not when everyone else—older than me, of course—and all boys, of course of course—was still training for the ring.

Not the Ring of Fire, obviously. But Maart had a place for them all. And he didn't have a place for me.

It's not like I just left without saying anything, either. I didn't tell Anya or Cort, but Maart knew. And he didn't stop me. I stood out there, on the corner of Bolivar and Atlantica, looking right into his office window, and dared him to stop me from leaving. Dared him to give in and let me train again.

I remember—and it's so clear in my head what happened that morning—he stood up, looked me straight in the eyes, and then he shut the blinds.

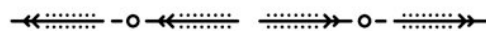
It hurt. I'm not gonna lie. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, swallowed down the pain, and then I walked away.

That was the last time I bothered caring what the fuckin' rules were.

I was so mad about being left behind, so mad about being forgotten, that I made a vow to myself that day. I would never, ever let someone else determine my future.

I didn't come all this way—I didn't win those nine death fights—just so I could let Maart tell me what to do, and who to be, and how I should act.

So I left.



EVEN THOUGH I'M only about twenty years old, my ID says twenty-six. There was no possible way I was gonna enter America under the stupid drinking age. Not that I drink a lot, but I don't have the patience for rules like that. I don't mind living within the confines of laws. However, every country has two sets of those.

One set for those with money and power and one set for those without.

And this is how I see it: if a country can't have one set of laws for everyone, all laws are invalid.

I don't want trouble, I don't want to break the law—I don't even have a reason to—but the American government can fuck right off if they think they're gonna tell me what I can and can't drink because I'm only twenty years old.

And anyway, I could be twenty-one right now. I might even be as old as twenty-three. Or possibly as young as eighteen.

Age didn't matter to Udulf when he bought me, put me in Cort's camp, and told me to fight until my opponent was dead. Didn't matter that I was six and he was going to turn me into a murderer.

So why should I give a single fuck about what the American government thinks about age?

I knew how to survive. Being on my own in a strange country at sixteen wasn't even that big of a deal. It's not like I ever had parents. And I do love Cort, Maart, and Rainer, but parents they were not.

There was no booboo-kissing when I got hurt. There were no bedtime stories. And I know us kids in Cort's camp had it

much better than most, but let's be real here—it was a fucking fight club.

Being a homeless teenager on the streets of Miami was a cakewalk compared to fighting for my life at age six in São Paulo.

When I got here, and found the underground fights, and did that one modeling gig—it was my chance to start over. To be someone totally different. Not Russian, not anything.

Just... Irina.

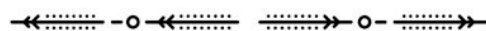
And I don't think about them. I don't.

But sometimes, when I can't sleep at night, I think about the fights, and how familiar the pain was. How limping was a sign of strength. How breathing past the scream of broken ribs was a reminder. How a bloody face and a broken nose was proof that I was still alive.

The injuries were a badge of honor.

A testament to survival.

Proof that I was a winner.



I WAS six years old when Udulf van Hauten stretched out his hand to me.

This took place outside. Somewhere hot. And although I am not any kind of expert on Russia, I know that this meeting did not take place in Russia.

I don't know what language Udulf was speaking, but someone was speaking Russian. That's why I have verbal

memories of that day. Little snippets of conversation that have stuck in my brain along with a few images and, of course, the heat. It was so fuckin' hot.

Udulf was offering me his hand. He was very tall. I was very small. So the memory of this moment, when I play it back in my head, highlights this disparity. He looked like a giant to me.

I took his hand. I remember that. It was cold, which confused me because I can't stress enough how damn hot I was that day. The coldness of him in the middle of that sauna bothered me. But then I figured out it was the air conditioning. He had just gotten out of a limo and it was air-conditioned.

I didn't leave with him in that limo. My things were packed and some other nameless, faceless person came to collect me. He gave me something to drink, which made me tired, and the next thing I knew, I lived somewhere else.

That's all I remember about the time before.

It doesn't bother me, though. Because my life really began the day I met Cort van Breda.

I already knew how to fight. I don't have any memories of struggling in that area and you'd think I would if it had been an issue.

Cort didn't say anything to me that day. I think he was in the middle of one of his silent times. But I remember Maart yelling at me for what seemed like an eternity. I have no idea what he was going on about because I didn't even speak English back then. Rules, maybe. Effort. Dying. Blah, blah, blah—shit like that, I'm sure.

But when it came time to sleep on that first night, I was put in a hut with the older boys. Sergey was there. He's the only

one I still remember, because he's the only one still alive.

It took me a while to figure out why Maart put me in with the older boys that night. There was no girls' hut. Ling, Sissy, and Cintia were there, but they were teachers. My girlness wasn't enough to qualify me for sleeping in their hut with them.

But Maart always had a reason for his decisions. At first, I thought it was because all those boys spoke Russian. That was the most obvious reason. It was a nice thing, I thought, to put me in with Sergey and his peers. Things made a lot more sense when you could understand the people around you.

But I didn't learn why Maart really put me in with them until the day of my sixteenth birthday when Maart bought me a dress and took me out to dinner.

He was relaxed and happy that night. Just a few weeks earlier Maeko had won a really big fight in Mexico City and it brought in enough money so the gym could finally afford to purchase a massive penthouse in a building right on Copacabana Beach.

Rainer had just moved in with some up-and-coming boys from our village in the jungle. That's where I still lived with Cort and Anya and the rest of the younger kids.

Things were going well. Maart had just cut his hair—it was so short, barely there at all, and it was weird watching him across the table from me. He looked so different that night. Partly because I hadn't seen him in so long, but also because—well, he was different.

This was three years after our daring escape from Udulf and Maart was almost unrecognizable to me. We had only just left the supply ship a year before at that point. Sergey, Lilith,

Ivano, and Kioshi had been making most of the money to support us with their professional fights. But Paulo had won several too. And now Maeko.

And all I kept thinking was, *Soon. He's gonna call for me soon. And I will go live in the penthouse, and I will train at Sick Fights, and I will be on the TV, and I will make money to support us, and I will...* well, that was where it ended, I guess. I didn't know what came after that, but I didn't really care, either.

I just wanted that moment. My moment. I just wanted Maart to say, "OK, Irina. It's your turn now. Pack your things, you're coming back to Rio with me."

It didn't quite go that way. Maart didn't come to the village and make any kind of declaration about my readiness. It was Anya, actually, who came into the little house I was sharing with Zoya and asked me to go to the city with her. Rasha had already left to be with Paulo by this time. She wasn't living in the Sick Fights penthouse. I would've been so pissed if she were. She was in boarding school somewhere. Paulo was paying for it like any good brother would.

But Anya came in and invited me to go to Rio with her. I knew the next day was my birthday. I mean, that date is a hundred percent not my actual birthday. But it's the date I picked when Cort was getting my papers made up and I was officially turning sixteen.

I was excited because I thought, *This is it. They're planning something for me. Not a stupid surprise birthday party, but finally I will be invited to the penthouse and I will train with all the others who came before me (and who are still alive).*

Anya and I did go the penthouse. I did see everyone. I swam in the pool, we went to the beach, and shopped, and had dinner. But there was no invitation.

I was getting worried. Panicking, almost. Trying to corner Maart, who was so busy he didn't even have time for me that day.

Anya and I stayed overnight in a hotel a few blocks down. We did random things the next morning, just wandering around Rio, and then we went to the penthouse because Cort had come.

They threw me a surprise party. With cake, and balloons, and catered food, and presents. There was music, and all the guys were laughing, and everyone from the village was there too. Even Cintia, who had been spending a lot of time in Argentina back then with the man she would marry just a few months later. She came home for me.

It was a really nice party.

But then, just as I was starting to lose hope that this day might turn out the way I wanted it to, Maart pulled me aside and asked if I wanted to go to dinner with him. He had bought me a dress. I had unwrapped it earlier. It was nice, the nicest piece of clothing I had ever owned. Long, almost to the ground. It was the lightest shade of sage green and was made up of delicate materials that I don't have words for. It was not revealing or particularly sexy, but it fit me well.

Anya put my hair up and Ling dabbed some make-up on me, and when I looked at myself in the mirror right before I left, I didn't even feel like Irina anymore.

A car dropped us off at a yacht club. A host led us outside to the patio. We ended up at a table with two men already

seated. They stood, everyone was introduced, we shook hands, we sat. We ate. They talked, I didn't.

I just stared at Maart, sitting across the table from me, wondering what the hell this was. There was a lot of fight talk, but they talked about other things too. I learned that the younger man was the older man's son.

He was nice. He asked me questions. And the funny thing was, they were questions I could answer. Ya know, most of the time when you meet someone new, they ask you very normal things like, "Where did you grow up?" Or... "What do your parents do?"

I can't answer those questions. I mean, I guess I could, but the conversation would be derailed the moment their shock wore off and they could speak again.

But this guy—his name was João. He was a student at... some place. He was graduating that year and blah, blah, blah. Something about New York, I think. He asked me things like we were playing a game. "Would you rather... spend a week in Bora Bora or climb Mount Everest?"

Mount Everest. Beaches were not too exciting for me.

They were this-or-that questions. It was fun. I recall laughing. I was happy.

And then dinner was over and they had to go, so they excused themselves and Maart and I ordered specialty coffee and bolo de rolo—which was exquisite—and we let out a breath.

It felt like such a thing, that breath.

I was full, I was smiling, and I was looking at Maart across the table from me, also smiling.

He tilted his head. “Do you remember your first day at camp, Irina?” And I nodded, thinking back on it. “Do you remember where you slept that first night? That whole first month?”

“Of course. In Sergey’s hut.”

“Do you know why I put you in Sergey’s hut?”

“He spoke Russian.”

“He did. He does. But that’s not why I put you in that hut, Irina.”

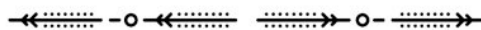
“Oh.” I was a little taken by surprise, but not shocked or anything. I mean, who cares? I didn’t.

But then Maart told me why.

And that’s when it all started to make sense.

That whole trip. That night. The reason why I was there, in that restaurant, with Maart.

And I. Was. *Pissed*.



I DID nine death fights in the kid division of the underground ring. All kids come up this way. This is how you earn your place in the Ring of Fire. You kill from the time you are small until you are a teenager. There is no set age to be invited in the Ring. You fight, you make an impression, they invite you in.

The prizes are insane. In the kiddie death fights your prize is your life. But in the Ring the prizes are life-changing. Luxurious things. A way to forget the past and what you had to do to get here.

A bribe to keep doing it.

Obviously, we didn't have a choice to fight or not. We were slaves. They were gonna put us up on the platform regardless of whether we wanted to be there. And the person looking back at us was gonna kill us if we didn't kill them first.

This was all the thought I put into it. Fighting the way we did was just part of life.

I don't think about them because when I do, they haunt me. Little ghosts trailing behind me with their bloody noses and broken necks.

But they are hard to forget.

My second death fight was against another girl—which almost never happened—and she was way too pretty to be in the ring. In fact, the first time I saw Anya out there on the Rock my first opponent's face popped right into my mind, she was that pretty.

Anya is like supermodel pretty. She could be one of those lingerie models who wear the wings. I'm pretty sure Anya knows she's pretty, but I'm equally sure she has no idea just how pretty. I'm also equally sure she has no use for that beauty and doesn't even play it up, as Nandy would say, with make-up or push-up bras.

The little blonde girl in the ring with me during that second fight looked like she'd stepped off a yachting vacation. Her eyes were sea-blue, her skin was tanned a golden brown with rosy, sun-kissed spots on her cheeks, and her blonde hair was nearly white. It was plaited back along her head and tied up into a flat bun at the nape of her neck so she looked like a little Swedish doll.

She was wearing matching gear—a gorgeous orangey-pink color. Coral, I think they call it. Both her tank top and her shorts were this color. And they were legit workout clothes, not the stained and cheap shit I was wearing that day.

Her toenails were painted that color too. I was kinda fixated on her toes because that was the first time I had ever seen nail polish.

Her hands were taped—I remember that because it was against the rules. But unlike me, she had someone with her. I think it was the man who owned her, but I guess it could've been someone else. He argued with the man in charge of the ring that day and the tape stayed.

I was watching from my corner. Just observing.

I killed her in under a minute. Snapped her neck. She was not a fighter, not prepared at all. I don't know what that man was thinking when he put her in that fight. Maybe he didn't understand. Maybe he just took one look at me—another little blonde girl with blue eyes—and thought to himself, *She's not a killer.*

But I was.

And I still am.

When I think about that fight I mostly don't think about that girl or the way she died. Or the way her eyes were empty black pits after it was over.

I think about the cameraman. It was not something I noticed in the first fight, but there was no way to miss this guy. He was in the ring with us. Getting close-ups.

But not of me. Of her. Just her.

Cort didn't say anything to me about it, but later—like a week later—I asked Sergey, in my new broken English, why they wanted to film that girl.

And he said, “So they can send the video to her parents, Irina.”

I was in shock when he said that. I almost couldn't talk. But I had questions, so I forced the words out. “Why? Why would they send that to her parents?”

Sergey shrugged. “Because they didn't do what they were told.”

I think about that conversation with Sergey way more than I think about Maart these days. Sometimes my past doesn't feel real. I mean, how does one go from death matches to living in a South Beach condo and waitressing?

It doesn't make much sense. And the really funny thing is that it didn't take much effort to change my path in life. Yeah, that first breakout with Cort, and Maart, and Rainer—that was major. Not the fighting. Those men were weak. They were so unprepared for us. I often wonder what those men were thinking. Did they not understand that teaching children to kill, then giving them the opportunity to kill you, is pretty much the definition of stupid?

Anyway. Once we fought our way out of the camp it was a couple years of checking our backs and working hard on the supply ship to save money. But once we settled back on land, and Maart got his gym, and Rainer took off for a while, and Cort and Anya acted like a happy married couple, life got very simple.

So changing it was simple too.

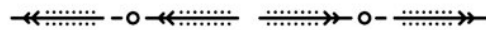
I mean, really, all I did was buy new papers and get on a plane.

Boom. Instant new life.

Of course, there were a lot of little dramas that happened afterward, but none of them required me to kill someone at the end of a fight.

I don't think people—and especially Americans—realize just how easy they have it.

Or how easy it would be to change it.



I WILL NEVER GET tired of air conditioning. I run that AC set at sixty-six degrees every day of the year. This adds to my unreality. That's what I'm calling the disconnect that's been plaguing me for the better part of a year.

My new life is great. Awesome. But it's so hard to reconcile where I came from and where I am now. It's like I'm living in a science fiction movie. Air conditioning. I mean, I knew it existed. There were a couple arenas where I fought where they had AC—especially that last one. It was nice.

But to just live in it? To just be comfortable and cool? To have cold fruit in your fridge? And phones. God, the phones here. Of course, lot of people have phones in Brazil, but I had never had a phone before I got to America.

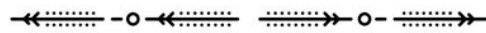
Maart and Cort and the older fighters all had those fancy phones. But I didn't even dream about something like that and now I not only have one, but last year I even upgraded to the latest model.

When I want to leave South Beach, I press a picture on my phone and a car appears.

When I am hungry and don't feel like getting out of bed, I press another picture on my phone and food appears.

I don't even have to wash my own dishes. Or clothes! Because I have a stackable washer and dryer.

My brain hurts when I think about this stuff.



It's my day off today, so I'm going to the beach. My tan was complete and perfect about eighteen months ago, so I'm not going to bathe in the sun. I like to feed the birds and swim. I put on a long-sleeved turquoise and floral one-piece with a chunky zipper down the front. Low-waisted cut-offs and white flip-flops complete the look.

I grab my straw beach bag as I walk through the door and then skip down the three steps that lead to the courtyard outside my condo. I love this courtyard. There's an iron fence painted turquoise blue that surrounds our little complex and palm trees swaying in the wind are dotted throughout.

It makes me smile every time I come out the door, which is the same color as the fence and gate.

The beach is eight blocks east of here. If I follow Sixth Street past Washington it spills me out right on the sand where the restrooms are. I always walk south until I get to the South Pointe Pier, and then I feed the birds. My beach bag always has stale bread in it from Eats—everyone there knows I love to feed the birds. They're just gulls mostly—I've never seen an

albatross here—but the sound of them, it's so great I can't even explain it.

People always give me dirty looks when I do this. They complain about the swarm that descends down on me. They bitch and moan. Sometimes they even tell me to stop. But I won't stop. And they give up and walk away.

There is a breaker wall that runs parallel to the pier, and when I'm done with the birds I always walk on the rocks to the very end. I don't like to walk on the pier because there are too many people. Hardly anyone wants to hop along the uneven boulders that make up the breaker. So when I get to the very end I'm usually alone.

I sit out there and just look out to the sea. My sea.

I come for the view too, but I'm really here for the swim. For the float. I swim out a little way, lie back on the water, floating on top of the waves, and then I close my eyes and go home. I drift into that other world where Irina is still Russian and America doesn't even exist yet. I think about the Rock and that faraway life where death ruled every moment of my day.

I let out long, deep breaths, and smile as the sun colors the inside of my eyelids yellow.

Suddenly there is splashing nearby and a moment later, someone is grabbing me.

I swing—it's just instinct—and hit a guy in the face. He lets go, swimming back, yelling at me. "Are you OK? I thought you were dead! Everyone thought you were dead!"

He points to the pier where a couple dozen people are shielding their eyes from the sun and staring at me. I've drifted, so they're not that close, actually.

I look at the guy. He's mid-twenties, maybe. Fit and muscular. Shaved head, brown eyes, and brown skin. He's just staring at me. "Well?" he finally says.

"Sorry." I look back at the people. "I was just minding my own business, floating in the sea. It's not a big deal."

"We thought you were dead."

"Well, I'm not."

"Do you need help?"

"Why would I need help?" This conversation feels ridiculous. I've floated here off the edge of the rocks many times and no one has ever swum out to me, accosted me, and accused me of being dead.

"Because you're just... you looked like..." He shakes his head.

"I looked like what?"

"Like you wanted to kill yourself."

Everything about my world just kinda stops when these words come out of his mouth. I say them over and over in my head as he lets the long seconds lie still. *Like you wanted to kill yourself.*

I scoff. "Trust me. This sea cannot kill me."

Which makes him scoff back. "That's not true and you know it. There's a rip current coming in—"

"Who cares?" I start swimming back to the breaker wall to get my shit.

He matches me, stroke for stroke, and then follows me out onto the rocks. They bake the bottoms of my feet and we are

both heavy with dripping water when we look at each other again. His eyes narrow down. “Hey, do I know you?”

I shrug, toweling off.

“Did you ever fight—never mind.”

“Wait, what?” I turn to him, keenly interested now.

“Nothing. It’s stupid.”

“No, what were you gonna say?”

His eyes narrow again, like he’s thinking very hard about something. “You did fight, didn’t you? That was you, wasn’t it?”

What are the chances that I bump into someone who recognizes me from some underground fights I did here in Miami three years ago? “What if it was?”

His whole demeanor changes right in front of my eyes. His posture relaxes, his smile grows wider, and he chuckles. “What did we call you?”

“Hurricane Irene.”

He laughs. Loud. He even throws his head back a little. “No. That’s what *you* called you. What *we* called you was the dumbest name ever.”

I’m confused, so I make a look of confusion. “What do you mean?”

He points to himself, but I get that he means the other fighters too. “We called you the Honey B.”

“A bee?” I make that confusion face again.

“No. The Honey B. Right? Like the honey badger?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Honey badger don’t give a shit? You know, the meme.”

All I have left is a blank face.

“The honey badger.”

“You can say those words all you want, it’s not going to change the fact that I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I hate when this happens. I have missed out on the world. I have very few reference points to anchor myself to the here and now, so I hate it when someone throws an obscure cultural reference at me. It pops me out of time and space and makes me feel alone, and stupid, and... sad, I guess.

When I first met Nandy I tried to explain this to her. She got it, because part of her job is to help new immigrants adjust to American culture. Which translates a little bit to my situation, but not completely.

There is no one out there who will ever ‘get me’ completely. Not the way the people from my past can.

And I hate admitting this.

So now I just want to get away from this guy. I want to go home, and lock myself inside my condo, and shut the blinds, and crank the AC, and force myself to put it all behind me. Just... make it all disappear into the past.

But his words are echoing in my head, softly at first, but then more insistent.

You looked like you wanted to kill yourself.

I don’t want to kill myself. I just... I let out a long sigh. I would like to risk my life once in a while. I would like there to be big consequences for my actions, the way it used to be. And I understand—I completely get it. I’ve got some kind of mental disorder because of how I was raised. It’s an illness,

this want. But knowing it's wrong doesn't change anything. I want to feel the rush of the ring, and the pain of the injuries, and the soreness the day after. Because I don't feel anything now. Anything.

I'm not happy, I'm just... safe.

And safe, from my perspective, feels a whole lot like death.

I don't want to kill myself. I just want to make things matter.

I look at my would-be rescuer and just... make it happen. "Can you get me into another fight?"

The guy just stares at me for a moment. Then he grins, and his tone, when he speaks, is teasing. "Honey Badger wants to fight again?"

"Don't call me that. It's stupid. I don't like Honey Badger."

"Well, Hurricane Irene is about as lame as they come."

"My name is Irina and I destroy things. I might not be the biggest storm, or the most powerful, but I am terrifying all the same." This proclamation comes out loud. And terse. And angry. But it ends in a whisper.

It also sounds very, very Russian.

It stops him dead and his eyes narrow down again, his teasing tone gone. "Well, well, well. I had forgotten about that accent. It might just be the only true thing about you."

I let out a long breath. "Are you going to tell me where the fights are or not?" This comes out Russian too, my voice a little bit deeper, less sweet, more real. It feels kinda good to be me again.

“What’s your number? I’ll text you a few hours before the next one starts.”

This is the moment. The one that will decide everything. Because if I give him my number, the safe life is over. All this pretending is over. I don’t want to be a fight slave. I don’t want to live in a jungle. I want what Maart gave the other fighters. I want what Maart gave the boys.

I want what Paulo got—a life doing what you’re good at, what you’ve trained for, without the threat of death lurking around every corner.

It’s a sickness inside me, this longing. This urge to hurt and be hurt back. But when I pretend that the sickness isn’t real, it just eats away at me from the inside out.

I don’t know how long I can keep going if I have to keep pretending.

Maybe I *was* thinking about killing myself today?

Maybe every time I’ve come out here to float, all I was really looking for was the end.

It’s hard being so alone. But if I could fight again, and be with fighters again, maybe I’ll stop feeling like a freakshow hiding under a circus tent.

I spit out my digits. The guy smiles, texts me a message, then gives me a little salute and walks back down the break wall without looking back.

I get my phone out of my beach bag and check the text. *I’m Dog*, it says. *Nice to see ya again, Storm.*

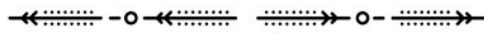
I sit down on a rock and smile, just looking at those letters.

Storm. It’s better than Honey B and Hurricane.

At least it's pithy.

And anyway, maybe I *am* the storm?

Maybe I have always been the storm.



FIGHTING in Miami was way different than fighting in the Rio tournaments. There were no women in Miami. Maybe a few girlfriends hanging around, but no fighters. Certainly no teenagers. I was most definitely the youngest one there.

The Rio fights were different in another way too. Everything about the fights revolved around desperation. Everyone in the favelas was desperate for everything.

I was desperate too. Desperate to make Maart pay for ruining my sixteenth birthday.

I was sloppy about those Rio fights. I wasn't even trying to hide it. By this time, a few months after I turned sixteen, I was leaving the village in the jungle, catching a ride with random people on the road.

It's not like Cort was my father. And while Anya and I were friends, she was far, far too young to have any say over my life. Rainer was the only one who could've stopped it, I guess. But he wasn't there. He was on the road with Sergey.

So off I went. Every single weekend.

I wanted Maart to find out about those Rio fights. I wanted him to ask me what the hell I thought I was doing. Why I needed so much money. But most of all, I wanted him to stop

me. To come to me and say, “You’re still one of us. Come and train. Come be yourself with us.”

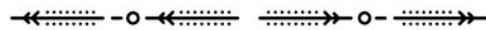
And then, maybe, after a while—after I turned eighteen—he would look at me differently one day. And we would be something different.

Not fighter and trainer. But woman and man.

He never did look at me differently. And he never would.

That’s why I was standing outside his office window the day I left. It was his last chance. I had everything I needed. New passport, money, and a plan.

He saw me. And then he closed the blinds on me.



IN MIAMI, no one was desperate. Everyone had way more than they needed and they just wanted more, more, more.

Which was OK with me. I wanted more too.

After I did the photoshoot, I was more careful with my money and took more precautions with my safety. I hadn’t chosen South Beach—it was just close by when I got off that boat, and it seemed like as good a place as any. I didn’t realize it was kinda high-end at first. But there were hostels there, really cheap places to stay. And it was small, an island. I liked that. I didn’t need a car, I could just walk everywhere. It was perfect, actually.

I’d been in the hostel for two days when I heard a couple of guys talking about the fights. They were playing cards in the community room, lots of people around, so it wasn’t like it

was a private conversation. They mentioned a gym about ten blocks up. I didn't ask them any questions. I walked up to the gym just as the sun was setting, and watched what kind of people were going in. What kind of atmosphere it was.

They were generally young. Early twenties. And it had the feeling of a good time. In other words, not only was no one gonna die at the end, but the loser would probably still be your friend. It felt like they all kinda knew each other, so I was hesitant to go in that night. But the guy at the hostel had said that the fights were never in the same place twice. So if I didn't go in, and didn't take part in some way, I wouldn't know how to find the next one.

I slipped in behind a group of guys. I'm so small, they didn't even see me. Of course, inside it was a different story. Everyone was noticing me. But I just chatted up a guy not much older than me, and kinda stuck to his side. He wanted to fight, had been coming for a few weeks already and had put his name in for the first fight, but he was afraid. I talked him into it because if he got in the ring it didn't matter if he won. He would be invited to the next fight.

He was not my boyfriend. I would not say the relationship we had was dating. But we did go out a few times. He was as shy around girls as he was in the ring, but he got me to the next fight. At least, he told me where it was. He wasn't going back.

I put my name in for the first fight. They laughed at me and there was no fight for me. But I stayed all night and when they were making arrangements, I was there. There were lots of people like me hanging around until three in the morning trying to get another chance. So yeah, they saw me. But they never really *saw* me.

No one ever really *sees* me.

It was about five months later when I finally got my first chance at fight one in Miami.

It really was a quick phase in my brand-new life. A temporary thing. And I was OK with that at the time. I had just left fighting, I wasn't yearning for it yet. Hell, I wasn't even missing it yet.

I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be like Nandy. I had already hired her, paying her in gift cards. I still laugh about how I pulled out my stack of gift cards after our first lesson and asked her which one she wanted.

She looked at me like I was a freak, but only for a moment. Then she shook her head and took the American Express.

The next time we had lessons she informed me that I had paid her a whole year in advance. And that's how I got my first American friend.

I liked her immediately. She was so damn normal. She had a family—a big, huge family—and she went to school. She took classes in things like dancing and piano on the side, and had other friends who lived both close and far away. And sometimes, when we were together, she'd get a call from one of them and she'd excuse herself to go have a chat.

I wanted her life so bad. I wanted to pretend that I grew up in some normal town, with parents, and school, and a life filled with music, and sports, and friends.

So that's what I did. I reinvented Irina van Breda.

Anyway, the Miami fights were a means to an end. A way to finance my lie. The purses were huge, too. In dollars, not Brazilian real. Fight one started at five grand for the winner and if you made it all the way to the end of the night, fight ten,

you were three and a half a million dollars richer than when you started.

No one ever made it to the end of the night. The guys here were definitely a different kind of fighter. Most of them were from local MMA gyms. Some of them were already professional, just looking for some quick cash.

They were bigger than me, and more powerful than me, but none of them had been trained by Maart since they were six.

My best night was three wins in a row. But over the course of several months I made over three hundred thousand dollars—the bulk of it in the last tournament when I started at fight one and made it all the way through fight three.

Obviously not everyone can start in fight one. So when I first started getting fights, they put me in wherever they had a spot. Sometimes it was fight two, sometimes it was fight ten.

But of course, fight ten really wasn't any different than fight one if the guy opposite me had upset the winning streak of the guy he just beat.

It was fun. I was starting to like it. But I had what I needed. More than what I needed. The condo I was looking at was only two hundred and twenty-nine thousand dollars, so it was time to stop.

I didn't want to admit that I enjoyed what I was doing just a little bit too much. That I was starting to put names to the faces. The tournaments were only once a month, so it wasn't like I was seeing these guys all the time. Of course, they all knew me. Not my name, obviously. I was Hurricane Irene to them. Or Honey B, as it turns out. But that last night they were

nodding at me when I was taping up my hands. A few of them even said hello.

If I stayed in one more tournament, I'd have been one of them. We'd have gone for drinks, or trained together, or maybe even dated.

And I couldn't afford to be one of them. Didn't want to be one of them. Not back then, anyway.

I do want to fight, and I do want to win, and I do want people to know who I am—but back then fighting was the only thing I knew and I didn't want it to be the only thing I ever was.

I still thought there was another path out there for me.

I still dreamed of a life as an American girl. A husband, a dog, a house.

But I should've known better.

Buying the condo set my future on a very specific path. You don't buy your dream home when you're seventeen years old using fight-club money and still think you've got room for something as normal as a husband when you're done.

A boyfriend, maybe. One-night stands is more likely.

I started life alone. I came here alone. I went to those fights alone. I bought the condo alone.

I am alone.

And it's time to face the facts. I've had four years to think things through. To settle. To put my feet on the ground and take stock of things.

To face the truth.

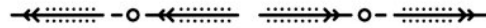
And the truth is... I am not normal.

There is no American dream for me.

I miss the aches, the pain, and the grueling workouts.

I miss the wins.

But most of all, I miss the kill.



I GO OUT FOR DINNER and drinks with Nandy. We laugh, and talk, and she fills me in on her day. She's in graduate school for linguistics and she's working on her Master's thesis, which is a huge project on some kind of fictitious language.

Her job kinda blows my mind. She gets to make up words. She's inventing a language. And she is celebrated for this. Her family is huge and they all just... lift her up. She, her brothers and sister, and all her cousins too, are everything to those people. They are the future to the Jardinez family. Nandy gives me hope because her life's work is so strange and everyone is OK with it.

It gives me hope that my strange life can be OK too.

"So how's things?" She takes a sip of her mojito, making a face of raptured delight, as she waits for me to answer.

I hate mojitos. I had never even heard of them until I came here. I didn't drink much in Brazil, but when I did it was always the tangy and exotic caipirinha. Lime, not mint. Cachaça, not rum. And about twice as strong. So I take very small sips. I don't like to get drunk. I don't like to lose control like that. But caipirinha reminds me of home and sometimes it's enough to keep my heart from aching.

“Same old shit. You know how it is.” That’s my standard answer. I’ve been in this holding pattern since I arrived. Well, not quite since I arrived. The first year I was here was all very unpredictable. I don’t like unpredictable, but when you skip countries when you’re sixteen and land in America, homeless, you work with what you got. But after I bought the condo, I did my best to make everything about my life predictable and boring.

It still very much is, so my answer isn’t even a lie, but I can feel that there is something coming up around the corner for me. I don’t want to mention this to Nandy, though. She would be way too excited. She’s always trying to set me up with boys, who aren’t even boys, but actual men, like Maart. And I’m just not ready for it yet.

“OK, just hear me out.” And here it comes. Her newest proposal. “Will you hear me out?”

I wave a hand in the air. “Fine. Go on.” I will pretend to listen, but I’m never going to say yes to her set-ups.

I have never had sex. If anyone touched me that way when I was small, before I was bought by Udulf and taken to Cort’s camp, I don’t remember it. And nothing like that ever happened in the camp. None of the boys even looked at me. Of course, I was only thirteen when it was all broken up, so maybe they would’ve eventually. The older girls in camp did mess around with the boys every now and then, but only in secret because Maart would flip his fucking lid if he found out.

I love that expression. Flip his lid. Americans are so weird.

But this inexperience isn’t something I can explain to Nandy. She would not understand, she would start asking questions, and it wouldn’t take much to make her suspicious. She’s so smart, and her family has seen things. Her mother and

father are first-generation. They came from Cuba. They know things. And they are part of things here. Big things. And since Nandy is one of them, she would see through me so quick. She would not let it go until I confessed.

I do realize I'm an adult. And I think my life here is very adult. But boys and sex... that I'm just not sure about.

So sometimes I just make up pretend boyfriends to keep her off my back. Of course, they always end in disaster a week later.

“So... what do you think?”

I wasn't even listening. But I don't need to, really. She tries to set me up at least once a month. “I'll think about it.” It's another one of my standard answers.

“You don't have time to think about it. It's tomorrow. I need to let him know.”

“Then no.”

“Why not? You're not working. I already asked my dad.”

“I... I joined a gym.”

She makes a face of puzzlement. “OK. That's... great. But what does that have to do with going on a date?”

Nothing. It has nothing to do with what she's asking me. I need to lie to her. It needs to be a very small lie or she'll smell it. “I mean, I already joined the gym. Last month. And there's... like... like a thing tomorrow.”

“What kind of thing?” Now she's making a face of suspicion. See, she's just way too smart.

“It's like a... um... you know...”

Nandy laughs. “You're making this up. There is no thing.”

“I don’t want to go. I really am going to train.”

“You never want to go, Irina.”

“I’m just not ready to think about dating right now.”

“Because the last fake boyfriend you told me about broke your heart?”

I look down, huffing a little.

“Never mind. I’ll butt out. I’m just... I just get worried about you.”

I raise my eyes back up to meet her gaze. “You really don’t need to worry about me. I promise, Nandy, I am the last person you need to worry about.”

She makes a face of sadness. “That’s the whole reason I worry. You don’t have any family, I’m your only friend, you’re a twenty-something waitress who owns her own condo, and you came to me with a Russian accent you needed to lose. Do you think I can’t read between those lines?”

“Of course you can.” My Russian accent leaks through. “You’re a linguist, Nandy. You read between all lines. But I’m telling you, you do not have to worry. A man isn’t going to make my life better.”

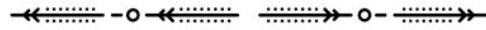
“And the gym will? Assuming you’re telling the truth about that.”

I make a face of yes. “It will, believe it or not. It really will.”

She studies me for a moment, reading my face the way I read hers. She has no idea why the gym is suddenly important to me, but she does accept that it is. She blows out a breath. “Fine.” She puts up both hands in surrender. “I’ll stop asking then. But the moment you stop having drinks with me on the

weekly, I'll hunt you down, Irina van Breda. I will not let you walk away without a word.”

I lift my drink, she lifts hers, and we clink. “I promise. I will not walk away without a word.”



I END the night early after that. I don't usually stray far into the city and Nandy still lives at home, so we almost always meet up in South Beach these days. Which means my walk back to the condo is only seven blocks and I spend every minute of that walk thinking about the fights.

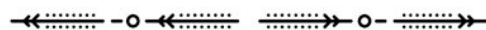
I picture them in my mind.

I start planning my training.

I say my new name over and over in my head.

I am the storm and they will never see me coming.

Because I am a girl... and so they never do.



THE TEXT COMES in late evening the next day and includes an address and a time, but nothing else.

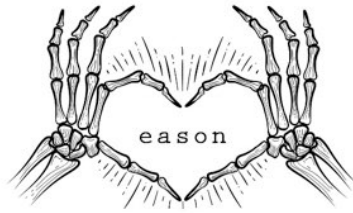
Tonight.

I'm not ready. I haven't been training. Not even cardio.

But winning isn't even the point.

It's not even the point.

CHAPTER 4



I'm lying on my bed looking up at the poster when Davis stops under the archway of my door, knocks on the wooden doorframe, and says, "Guess what?"

I just sigh.

"I found her."

I look over at him. "Found who?"

He points to my ceiling. "Her."

I'm already sitting up. Getting up. Walking over to him. Trying not to wince each time my foot hits the floor. "Where?"

"Well, I don't know where she lives or anything, but I asked the guys around town to keep an eye out—I figure once a gym rat, always a gym rat, right? So I just got a call from Dog—'member him?"

I nod, rolling my hand at Davis to get on with it.

"Well, blah, blah, blah—he found her on the beach. Says she gave him her number because she wants in on the tournaments."

"Really? Why? I mean, if she ran away from Maart, why would she want to fight again?"

“According to Dog, she was in the fights a few years ago. Her best night was three rounds. Took her several months to get that far. The guys were just starting to get used to her, kind of enjoying her progress. But then, after that night, she just took her money and disappeared.” Davis proceeds to tell me about how Dog bumped into her on the beach, floating on the ocean. Just... floating there like a dead body.

I walk past Davis to the kitchen, make a protein shake, and then take it out onto the terrace. This whole time Davis is following me around and talking. “So what do you think? We gonna do this?”

“Is she gonna be there tonight?”

“Dog said he sent the text with the info. It’s not a fight night. There are no tournaments happening for a few more weeks, but since we were looking for her, he called the guys in.”

“So there is gonna be a fight?”

“Not exactly. But a few of them remember her. They want her to come back. But this time, they want her to test.”

“Test?”

“Jesus, dude. Don’t you remember what it’s like to be a—”

He stops there. Because no. No, I do not remember what it’s like to be a newbie in a fight club. I’ve always been in the business. Every fight was a fucking test and if you were alive at the end, ya passed.

“Anyway.” Davis plays it off. Of course he knows about my past—he was there. But he wasn’t there the same way I was there, so he doesn’t like to talk about my past. He just wants to pretend it never happened. “A few years back Mad was running things.”

“Dog’s father?”

“His uncle. He thought the girl was a joke. They were just gonna fuck with her.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Not like that. At least, I don’t think so. She wanted to fight, they wanted a show, I guess. She lost. Predictably. But she was obviously trained. She was not some random little girl. And I know for a fact that Mad was familiar with the Ring of Fire.”

“How?” This one word comes out with so much contempt, Davis pauses for a moment.

“I’m pretty sure he had a fighter from there a long time ago. Someone escaped—”

“Bull. Shit.”

“Calm down. I’m just repeating what I heard. The point is, he had his suspicions that maybe the girl was from one of the Ring camps. So he let her keep coming, just to keep an eye on her, and they were gonna test her into the team the next fight after her three-round win.”

“But she disappeared.”

“Yep.”

“And what happened to Mad?”

Davis clears his throat. “Suicide. He was diagnosed with CTE. I heard the shit was getting bad quick and...” He shrugs. “Guess he didn’t want to go out that way.”

“How old was he?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Fuck. Which is why you should start thinking—”

“Don’t start with me, Davis.”

He puts up his hands. “All right. But, ya know... it’s a cautionary tale, Eason.”

CTE stands for chronic traumatic encephalopathy, an almost inevitable outcome for MMA fighters at my level. I turn back to the sea and enjoy what I have right now because there’s no way to turn back time and, unlike these guys around here, I never had a choice.

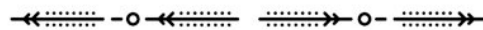
I still don’t have a choice. I never went to school. I have no other skills. And yeah, I have more than I need right now. I could sell the condo, buy a shitty piece of land in fucking Alabama or something, live in a trailer and never have to fight or work again.

But what the fuck is the point of life if you’re just gonna play it safe?

If it happens to me, then fuck it, it happens to me.

I’ll go out in a blaze of glory.

The same way Mad did.



THE MEETING IS TAKING place in Dog’s gym and we get there an hour early to have a pre-meeting chat. There are five other guys there aside from Davis and me, and all of them look to be in their late twenties, early thirties, except one lean Mexican guy who looks about my age.

At twenty-four, I'm young for street tournaments. Especially in Miami where there's an MMA gym on every fucking corner. But none of these guys look at me with anything other than respect. They don't know me, but they know *of* me.

Or, more accurately, they know of the Ring of Fire. Because the moment Davis and I walk in, they all go silent.

Dog does the introductions, starting with Muzzle, a massive Mexican dude who looks slow, but if he actually was slow, he wouldn't be here. He's wearing classic black shades even though we're inside. He looks like a fuckin' gangster, tattoos all up and down his bare arms, and his knuckles say 'DEADHEAD.' I'm guessing that has nothing to do with liking old-ass hippy music.

Next up is the only other white dude in the room besides Davis and me, called Kill Bill. He's lean and tall, with long arms and a reach I'd kill for. He's wearing an open seafoam-green button-down, Hawaiian shorts, and no shoes. He wants to dap knuckles with me, and when we do, he says, "'Sup, dude," like he's a fuckin' surfer instead of a fighter. But again, if he were just a surfer, he wouldn't be here.

Heavy Hand is an older dude—thirties, maybe—with a shaved head and black eyes. He's wearing sweat shorts and a white tank top. He proudly proclaims he comes from Brazil and then proceeds to do a little capoeira demonstration that forces me to cover my mouth to hide my smile. It's not that I don't believe him, it's just kinda... I dunno. Predictable? But just as I think this, his foot is right there in my face, grazing past my nose, the wind from the feigned strike blowing back against my forehead.

I point at him. "Noted."

He points back and winks.

Carwash comes over to me with his hand extended. He's a giant black dude, leaner than Muzzle, but taller too. His accent is easy and Southern. "Nice to meet ya." That's all he says and it comes out quiet. Not like he's shy, more like something practiced. Like he's not into meeting new people, but he realizes that making nice is part of the game. I like him immediately because he doesn't show off the way Heavy Hand did and I'm kind of a quiet man myself. I already know that if Carwash and I are ever left alone in a room together, we don't have to say a word.

Finally, Dog gets to the young guy. "This is Snake Eyes, the youngster in our group."

"Fuck you," the guy growls. He takes a moment to sneer at Dog, but then he directs it right at me. He looks like a gangbanger, but not the same old-school kind as Muzzle. He is cocky, and, I predict, stupid. He lifts his chin at me, narrowing his eyes down into slits. "Come by my gym someday, cabrón. I'd like to see what you've got." He even talks like a gangbanger. "Give you some pointers."

Dog snaps at him, "Shut the fuck up, Miguel." Then he looks at me, rolling his eyes. "Don't bother with that piece-of-shit gym. It's nothing but the back of an upholstery shop." He slides a glance over to Miguel, and I have to force myself not to smile. "His uncle owns it, not him. And if it were any good, he wouldn't be here."

Dog lets out a breath, like this little fucker gets on his nerves all the time, and then introduces me. Even though he doesn't even know me. "Boys," he says. "Meet Eason, a.k.a. Dead Eyes. Straight out of the Ring camps." Which is a lie, it's been seven years, but whatever. "He's here for the girl."

I nod at them and get right down to business. “How many of you knew her?”

Dog steps forward, obviously the leader of this little team. “Just me and Heavy Hand were around back then.”

“I saw her fight once.” We all look over at Kill Bill. “I wasn’t on this team, obviously, but I was coming up as part of Sandman’s crew. I was there the night she got through round three. Was a real trip, man, watching a little girl kick that dude’s ass. What was his name again?” He directs this question to Dog.

“Rough House, or somethin’ like that. He never came back.”

Everyone, including me, laughs.

But then Heavy Hand is talking. “She was legit, man. I couldn’t believe my fuckin’ eyes. And small!” He does a little woo-wee here. “She called herself Hurricane somethin’. But we called her Honey B.” He knocks Dog with an elbow, winking at him.

“Yeah. It’s funny too,” Dog says. “We had this conversation on the rocks yesterday. She didn’t like Honey B, but Hurricane was just plain stupid. I told I told her we were gonna call her Storm.”

“And you’re sure she’s the girl from the poster?” This is the first time Davis has spoken since we arrived. He didn’t introduce himself and I wasn’t gonna do it for him, so everyone but me kinda looks at him suspiciously now. “I’m Davis.” Then he nods to me. “Eason’s trainer.”

The guys nod and one or two of them make a little grunt of acceptance.

“I’m sure.” We look back at Dog. He’s got his arms crossed and his chin raised, like Davis’s question was a personal attack or something.

I nod at Davis and he unrolls the poster as I say, “Take another look before you commit. Because it’s very important that we do not get the wrong girl.”

“Why?” That’s the kid again. Miguel, Snake Eyes. Who isn’t a kid—he might even be older than me—but he’s definitely the youngest one of this group. “Why’s it so important that you get it right?”

“Because I have things to discuss with this girl. Things no one would know about but her.”

“Ring camp things?”

I nod to Dog. “That’s right. Ring camp things.”

Dog walks over to Davis, takes a good long look, then gazes back at me. “That’s her. I’m sure of it.”

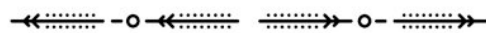
Davis rolls the poster back up and I let out a breath of relief.

This wasn’t my idea.

I wasn’t gonna get involved.

But this girl, she’s a straight line right back to Sick Heart.

And I’ve got something to say to that man.



SHE DOESN'T SHOW.

We wait almost two hours.

Dog texts her, but only once. “I can’t be over-eager. This is a pretty exclusive group, and anyway, if she really is a Ring camp girl, she’s gonna get suspicious if I’m over-eager. But listen, I think she goes out to those rocks a lot. I thought about it for a while, the way she was floating like that, and I think she might do it often. She said, ‘This sea cannot kill me.’ I swear to God, that’s what she said. And then I remembered about that Sick Heart guy.”

When Dog says that name, my heart thumps.

“I heard—and this is just a rumor, so I dunno—but I heard his camp was on some old oil rig in the middle of the ocean. If that’s true”—this is when he starts putting two and two together—“is she one of Sick Heart’s?”

Sick Heart doesn’t fight anymore. He’s not the face of his camp. Maart is the face of his camp. So I’m kind of impressed that Dog here knows more than most.

Also not happy about it.

“Well, we should call it a night.” This is Davis saving us.

“Yeah.” I try my best to look uninterested. “Text me her number. And if you see her again, Dog? Text me immediately.”

His fingers are already tapping out a text and my phone buzzes in my pocket just as he looks up. “Should I invite her to the next fight?”

“No. We’ll take it from here.”

I turn to leave, but once again, there’s Snake Eyes, questioning my motives. “You’re not gonna hurt her, are you?”

I look back at him, annoyed. “Why would I hurt her?”

“Because you’re acting like a man who wants to hurt her.”

I look over at Dog and he snaps at the kid. “Get the fuck out of the way, Miguel.”

Miguel moves out of my way, but he looks me in the eyes as I pass. “Come by the gym, Dead Eyes. Any time you want. Sixteenth and Lenox. Let’s see what you got.”

Dog shoots me a look that says, *Sorry about that*, and Davis and I leave.

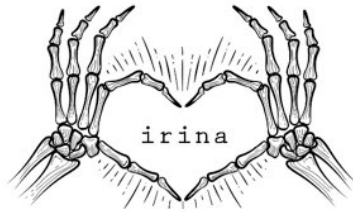
DOG’S GYM is only about ten blocks from our place, so we walked over. It’s such a bitch to drive around South Beach that only tourists do it. It’s hot, but there’s a wind blowing off the sea tonight, so it’s not too bad. When we get to my building, Davis opens the door for me, but I don’t walk through. I take my t-shirt off and tuck it into the waistband of my shorts. “I’m gonna run. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

Davis nods. “Don’t worry. This isn’t over yet.”

I’m not worried, but I don’t tell him that because it doesn’t matter.

I just fall into a lope and head for the beach.

CHAPTER 5



I can't believe I fell for this shit and I'm seriously disappointed in myself.

I almost walked into that. I'm not really sure what 'that' was, but I'm a hundred-percent positive that it wasn't a fight.

There was a gym and there were fighters, but this meet-up tonight was about something else.

You, Irina. The meeting was about you.

They found me. And again, I'm not sure who 'they' are, but I am sure who they're not.

It's not Maart.

That hurts. It really does. Because for a moment I allowed myself to sink into that fantasy.

He came for you. He hunted you down and came for you.

But he didn't. He never will. If Maart cared at all about where I was and what I was doing, he would've showed up years ago.

He's on the pay-per-view two or three times a year. They interview him. Do spotlights on him. All he had to say was, *Irina, call me. Come home. Get in touch.* He could've had Paulo say, *This one is for Irina*, the last time he won.

Because I've watched every single fight. Of course I have. And Maart would know that because he knows me better than anyone in this whole world.

I'm breathing hard and my heart is heavy as I stalk the two men home from the gym. At least I had the good sense to show up two hours early and stake that shit out from a rooftop café across the street.

I'm not sure that they're the ones looking for me, but they showed up an hour early and they were inside until eleven. The gym was closed, at least that's what the sign said on the door. These guys went in the back. Unless this gym has some kind of basement bunker where the fights take place—and unless the circuit here in Miami is miniscule, because they were the only two I saw—there was no fight in that gym tonight.

They turn towards a beachfront building and pause at the door. One guy—definitely a fighter—takes off his shirt and tucks it into his shorts. He says something to the guy he's with, then the fighter turns towards the sand at a jog while the other guy turns and walks back the other way.

I have to duck behind a tree so he doesn't see me.

When he's gone, I follow the fighter out onto the sand.

The sun set hours ago. But the moon is full enough to throw some light, so it's not dark on the beach. His lope becomes more of a run when he hits the wet sand and if I want to keep this up, I have to run too.

I decide I do want to keep this up, so I slip into a jog. I have not been training at all, so I don't even try to match his pace. He can't get far, though. South Beach is pretty small. He

will run out of room to run when he gets to the pier and then he'll turn back around and run right towards me.

Except that's not what he does. He's only about thirty meters from the pier when he stops, bends over like he's catching his breath—liar—and plants his hands on his hips.

There is no way he's winded, let alone out of breath. It was like half a mile.

I'm coming up behind him, so I have to make a decision. Keep going and let him see me? Or turn around and run back the way I came?

He sits down in the sand when I'm about ten meters away. I decide to keep going. Go walk on the pier. There are lot of people over there, it's a logical destination. No reason for him to be suspicious.

I keep going, not changing my pace at all, but just as I come upon him, he stands up. I try not to look, but he's shirtless, and kind of handsome, and the moonlight is catching his eyes in such a way that for a moment, he looks like Cort. It's that same icy gray color.

I do a double-take.

And in that moment, he speaks. "Are you following me?"

The accent throws me for a moment. Irish, maybe? Which makes me stumble. But I don't stop and I don't look at him again.

He starts running with me, falling into my much slower pace. "I asked ya a question. Are you followin' me?"

"Buddy"—I really like this American expression. Buddy. It's *so* condescending, yet friendly at the same time—"you *wish* I was following you."

“Ya always run this time of night, then, do ya? A young girl like you, all alone in the dark?”

I scoff and stop running. He stops with me.

I’m breathing a little heavy, which is unfortunate, but I’m not ready to double over or anything. I look him right in the eyes.

They’re green, not icy gray like Cort’s. That was just a trick of the moonlight.

His hair is not black, probably light brown, but it’s hard to tell at night. Not very long or styled in any kind of way, but it looks good on him.

He’s got a little bit of a beard on his chin. Not a lot, but enough to make him look older than he probably is.

And he’s grinning like an asshole. “Well? Ya gonna say something, girl? Or we’re just gonna stand here and stare at each other?”

“If you’re worried about my safety, it’s unnecessary. Do you need something from me? Or... what is this?”

“I asked you a question.”

“So what? Doesn’t mean I have to answer you.”

He chuckles, takes a breath, smiles. And for a moment I get lost in him. The eyes, the dark hair, the muscles on his chest and arms. I already know he’s a fighter, and I’ve seen lots of bodies this nice. But none of them looked at me the way he’s looking at me.

I can make out tattoos on his stomach and chest, but there’s not enough light to really see what they are.

“I know who you are.”

This makes me laugh. And everything about me relaxes. Not that I was worried he was going to attack me or anything, but his arrogance is laughable.

“Don’t believe me?”

I shrug. “Why would I?”

“Because you followed me home from the gym. I was waitin’ there for you. You never showed. At least”—he grins again, his eyes bright with moonlight and mischief—“you never came in. Were you drinking up there on the roof?”

“Well, well, well.” I cross my arms and tilt my head a little. “Someone was paying attention.”

“Were ya drinking?”

“I had something to drink, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Were. You. Drinking?”

“No. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“So you’re sober right now?”

I nod.

And just as I do that, his fist is comin’ at me. I jump back, trip in the sand, fall on my ass, and then he’s looming over me.

Everything that happens next is just instinct. My feet come up to his waist and my legs wrap around his hips. My body twists in the next moment so I’m face down, but my upper body is propped up with my hands. Then I twist again, taking him with me, and he falls into the sand, laughing.

I get to my feet and stand over him, fuming. “What the fuck?”

He’s still laughing. “Didn’t see that one coming. Where did you learn that move?”

I turn and start walking away.

He gets to his feet and runs after me. Both of us are breathing hard. He uses the breathing as a cue, I think, because the moment mine slows, he bumps me with his hip. Like we're old friends, or something. Like that was a joke back there.

"I don't know what the fuck you want"—I'm not looking at him. I'm looking straight ahead—"but whatever it is, I'm not interested."

"You were interested enough to show up at the gym tonight. Was it for money? Do you need a loan, Irina?"

I stop when he says my name. It's not really a secret. I mean, I didn't change my first name, and I did tell Dog what it was. So I'm not sure why this feels... intimate. Like he has a secret of mine. But that *is* how it feels.

My eyes meet his. He's still fucking smiling. "Do you need a loan?"

"No."

"Then why do you want in?"

"What's it to you? Are you the boss or something?"

"No." He laughs that word out. "I'm Dead Eyes." And then he points to his stomach.

I look at what he's pointing to. It's one of his tattoos. Then I squint and lean in, trying to see it better. It's... a face. A smiley face, but that's like saying an albatross is bird. It is a bird, technically speaking, but it's nothing like a sparrow. And this face—faces, there are a lot of them—they're nothing like a smiley.

They have x's for eyes, no nose, and something that reminds me of a jack-o'-lantern mouth, wide and smiling, but

with x's for teeth too. The whole thing is done up in black and neon green, making it more sinister. Like it's the horror-movie version of a smiley face.

Dead Eyes. Dead eyes.

Or... something laughing *at* you, not *with* you.

I look back up at him. "OK. So what do you want?"

"I've asked ya two questions now, you've answered neither of them, and you're still asking me what I want." He pauses here and narrows his eyes. "Are ya stupid, Irina?"

"What? Fuck you." I turn and start walking back down the beach again.

"Hey. Where did you get that black eye? At least answer this one."

Keep walking, Irina. Just keep walking.

"Did someone hurt you?"

I turn, angry now. "I don't even know what you're talking about. I don't have a black eye." I point to my face, which is not bruised.

"In the picture, Irina. You had a black eye in that picture ya took. Did someone hurt you?"

"No. I mean..." I sigh with frustration. Who is this guy? And why is he fucking with me? "I got jumped on the beach." Then I realize something and almost smile. "Right over there, actually."

"Why did they jump you?"

"Why do you think? I was a girl walking alone on a beach at night."

"And what did ya do?"

“I beat the shit out of them.”

He laughs. And my God, is he beautiful when he laughs.

“Three of them, anyway. The rest ran.”

“I bet they did. No one fucks with one of Maart’s kids, eh?”

Something happens here. Something... I dunno, weird. I think I stop breathing. I think I stop blinking too. But I’m looking him in the eyes. X. Eyes. Dead Eyes.

“I’ve watched all of Paulo’s fights. He’s good. About your age, right?”

It’s just wrong that someone I don’t know is using my Ring brother’s name to my face.

“Is that why you ran away?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“They’re looking for you, ya know. Macks contacted my trainer. She’s looking for you. Maart is looking for you.”

I turn away from him and walk towards the ocean.

“Irina.”

I don’t answer. I just walk into the water.

“Irina?” He grabs my arm.

I pull away, jerking hard to make him let go. And then I keep walking into the water.

“Where the fuck are ya going?”

When I’m deep enough, I push my arms forward and glide into the sea. Then I’m swimming. Just... swimming.

“Irina!” He’s yelling my name. Sounding a little desperate. Sounding a little scared, actually.

I push my face into the water, hold it there for a few seconds, and then roll over so I'm on my back.

He's swimming up to me when I do this, confused, and angry, too. He opens his mouth to say something, but then my lip trembles and he sees it.

His eyes dart back and forth to mine for a moment, trying to work things out. Then he lets out a breath and lies back on the water next to me.

We stay like that for a while. The ocean is calm tonight, and warm. Not warm the way it was at the Rock in the summer, but close. And the air tonight is thick with heat. High eighties, probably.

Finally, after maybe ten minutes of this silent floating, he takes a stab at talking. "It's nice. The moon. The water. And even a few stars."

I'm over the initial shock and ready to get past my stupid reaction to hearing Maart's name come out of this guy's mouth, so I add a bit of an explanation. "I've been floating on the ocean like this for as long as I can remember." It's really hard to get those words out without crying.

And then I am crying. I don't snifle or anything. And I don't think he knows. I'm not really a crier, I'm not. It's just... so confusing. One moment everything is normal the way things are normal for most people, and then Maart's name is right there, floating in the air in front of me.

I wasn't ready for it. That's all.

"Do you want to fight, Irina?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

“Because that’s what I do.”

“Could ya maybe do something else?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would be a waste.”

He huffs out a small chuckle here. “I’m not really fond of the ocean, ya know.”

“So?”

“So I’m gonna go now. But I’m gonna text you an address. And if you want to fight, you can fight with me.” He rolls off his back and he’s right-side up now, bobbing in the water next to me. I turn my head a little so I can see him. “I hope your phone wasn’t in your pocket.”

“I didn’t bring a phone.”

“Good.” He smiles a little, but it doesn’t go all the way up to his eyes. “I don’t know what this is”—he makes a vague motion that encompasses the ocean—“but I was part of the Ring camps, Irina. So I can take a good guess.”

I roll over and upright myself too. Shocked. Again. “You?”

He nods. “Dead Eyes. And you were one of Sick Heart’s kids, weren’t you?”

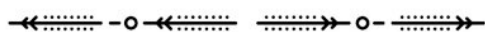
I nod in affirmation before thinking this through. I should not tell him anything. I should just swim away and forget about him.

He knows I’m thinking this. I can tell because he wants to leave it here. Wants to leave me hanging so that I think a little harder about his offer before I dismiss it outright.

So when he turns and swims away without saying another word, I'm not surprised.

I just watch him. I watch him get out of the water, pick something up off the sand—probably his phone—and then start running back the way he came.

I stay in the water until I'm shivering and my teeth are chattering so hard, the whole way home I do nothing but tremble. When I get to my condo I stand under the hot water of the shower and this alone, the very fact that I have a condo and a hot shower, is enough to make me believe in God.



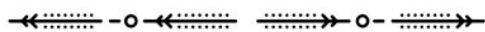
THE TEXT COMES in while I'm sleeping, but there is no way in hell I will ever sleep through the buzz of my phone. A siren four blocks away will wake me up. Even after four years, sleep is something I do with one eye open.

An address appears inside a little green bubble on my message stream. Then another one pops up. *4 A.M. Don't be late.*

It's three thirty-eight right now.

I pull up the map as I get out of bed. I brush my teeth, dress, and slip my feet into my trainers. At three forty-seven I'm outside, following the map on my phone. If I want to be on time, I should run. If I want to show up defiant and late, I should walk.

I run.



THE BUILDING ISN'T the one where those two parted ways last night, but it's only just down the street. Oceanfront—nice. And on the second floor of a café. It takes me an extra minute to actually find the door, so I'm still two minutes late when I arrive at a brightly-lit gym where I find two men on the mats. One of them is my new friend. The other is an older guy. Tall, lean. A fighter, or maybe a trainer. They both look over as the heavy door slams closed behind me. A third man is standing in the corner stirring a coffee. He looks like... not a fighter.

There's a moment of silence as we all look at each other. Then Dead Eyes—or whatever his name is—gets up and walks towards me. His eyes travel up and down my body, which unsettles me. I don't like men to look at me. I'm self-conscious about that shit. And even though I'm here to train, and training and leering looks are mutually exclusive in the world I grew up in, I don't know what kind of world *he* grew up in.

I don't know what this once-over implies. Is he checking me out? Is he sizing me up?

I can't tell.

“You're late.”

“Your door is hard to find.”

“Where's your fucking gear?”

“I...” I take a breath, trying to force myself to be calm. “I don't have gear. I haven't been fighting. I did those tournaments to earn money. That was your question, wasn't it? It was for money.”

“And is this for money too?”

“I wouldn’t mind the money.” He smiles and I relax a little. “But that’s not why I want to fight now.”

“Tell me why, then.”

“I want to fight because I’m good at it. No. I’m better than good. I’m great. And if the Ring didn’t end, I’d have made it there.”

He laughs. “Ya think so?”

“I do.” My chin goes up and I dare him to contradict me.

He takes one, two, three steps towards me. We were not three steps apart so right now I’m looking up at him. And at five-five in height, I am very small next to this looming man. “You could’ve fought me, then, little storm?”

“If you were good enough to make it, then yeah.”

The other two guys—who I had momentarily forgotten about—both laugh.

“I did make it, Irina.”

“Oh.” I blink once, then take three steps back as I suck in air. “Good for you, then. I guess.”

“It’s still around, ya know.”

For a moment, I can’t breathe. Then I get a hold of myself. “What’s still—” I falter. Suddenly dizzy. “The Ring of Fire?”

“Not called that anymore. Just Death Match, really.”

I’m lost. My mind is reeling with the sudden realization that the sick world I grew up in didn’t actually end for everyone when we killed our way to freedom seven years ago.

It only ended for *us*.

I turn away from him and stare at the door.

“Cold feet?”

I don't answer him. It's not cold feet. It's... I don't know. A gut punch. A realization that my reality was based on something false.

And I suddenly feel so stupid. So naïve and just... *stupid*.

Because of course we didn't end all the fights. We didn't end the slavery or the trafficking. We didn't end anything, really.

We just escaped. That's all it was. Just a stupid escape.

And that world, that sick fucking world, it's still out there.

Filled with terrified kids and bleeding teenagers.

Filled with death. And worse.

Seven years. That's how long I've been living in the fantasy world of ship life, and ocean travels, and jungle towns, and gyms in Rio, and a new passport that gets me a life in America filled with cell phones, and condos, and best friends, and waitressing jobs that come with free Argentine rice bowls.

“Irina?”

I shake my head, unable to believe I've been living this way.

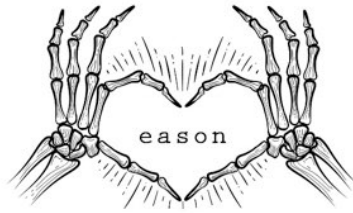
“Hel-lo? Irina?”

In denial. Oblivious. Carefree and sometimes happy.

I can't believe how selfish I've been.

I pull the door of the gym open and walk out.

CHAPTER 6



*T*he door slams closed behind her and I look over at Wade and Davis.

Davis is squinting his eyes at the door like maybe she'll reappear.

Wade takes a sip of his coffee and lets out a breath. "Well, she seems nice."

"Shut up, Wade." I pull the door open and go after her. I'm expecting her to be gone, disappearing from my life as quick as she blew into it. But she's not. She's at the bottom of the stairs pacing the alley.

I meet her down there. "You wanna fill me on—?" I stop talking because she's looking at me, and something about her expression comes off eerie and haunting. Maybe it's just the streetlights casting shadows and making her face look hollow and pale. But I don't think so.

She blinks. Breathes. Gets a hold of herself. "When was the last fight?"

"Ya mean the death match?"

"Yeah. That. When was the last one? Where are the camps? Where are the kids? Who's running it? What happened to everyone—"

“Hold up, girl. Slow down and ask one question at a time.”

She comes at me, pointing her finger in my face. “Fuck you! Where did you come from? Whose camp were you in? *Where are they!*” She screams this.

And instantly, I’m pissed. “Listen, girl—”

“Fuck you!” She strikes me. Right across the face with a closed fist. My lip stings and splits. I pause, because I’m kind of in shock, and then I laugh.

She tries to hit me again, but I’m ready this time. I block, she strikes. She kicks, I block. She’s attacking me and I don’t even know why.

I’m not sure if I should kick her ass or just back off and forget the whole fuckin’ thing.

But she doesn’t even give me a choice. She just keeps coming at me like a little fiend. Like an animal. And just as I’m thinking that word, her lip curls up over her teeth and she growls.

Which is where I draw the line. I grab her arm and twist it. But she is slick and small and her movements are smooth. Like she’s been grabbed by the arm by thousands of men long before I got here and knows how to get out of a hold.

And of course she has. Of course she does.

A few seconds later we’re in a full-on fuckin’ match in the middle of the alley and she’s swinging up in a flying armbar. The next thing I know her foot is against my neck, I’m on the ground—rolling—and she’s got my arm between her legs. All she has to do is wait for my roll to complete, lean back, and lock my elbow and this whole fight is done. But I don’t let her get that far.

I've got like a hundred pounds on this girl. So as I'm rolling, I throw my weight in that direction, taking her with me. She rolls all the way over and I'm on top, holding both her wrists and leaning down in to her face to growl back. "If you want to fight, we fight inside. We don't fight in the alley like —"

Her knees come up behind me and an ankle is pressed against my throat. She gives my neck one squeeze with her legs, and I gasp, letting go of her hands. Then I get a two-footed kick to my chest that sends me reeling backwards and gives her enough time to get up and start running.

I get up too. "What the fuck!" I yell it loud. And I run after her.

She turns left at the end of the alley, onto Ocean, running straight down the middle of the street. It's early, so there aren't many people about, but there are a few, and some cars on Ocean. A little blue convertible is coming right at her. It honks, the driver yelling something. And that fucking girl jumps right onto the hood, leaps over the fucking front seat, lands on the trunk, jumps down, and keeps going.

I laugh as I do the same, looking down at the driver's stunned face as I leap over him. When I land and find her again, she's leaping over a barrier blocking Ocean from vehicle traffic.

I follow. I don't even know why I follow. There's something wrong with this girl. I should just turn her back over to Maart and forget the whole thing.

But it's *because* there's something wrong with her that I don't do that.

I don't have a camp. I don't have anyone. And really, Davis and Wade don't count because they have no idea. No fucking idea what it's like to be me.

But this girl here, she does.

So I run and I follow.

I could catch her. I know I could. She's running hard now—not the way she was last night, but she's clearly out of shape.

I don't catch her. I let her stay in front of me. I let her take me with her.

She weaves her way over to Washington, heading south, and then makes a right on Sixth. By the time I make that same right, she's pulling open a gate to a small condo complex.

When I get to the gate, which is now closed, I find her standing on the front steps in front of a turquoise door. She's breathing hard. Crying, I think. And I don't understand any of this.

“Stop.” Her voice is small and weak. And it doesn't help that she can barely breathe from the mile-long sprint.

Even I'm breathing hard. “What's going on? What are you doing?”

“Just go away. Forget you ever saw me.”

“No.” I kinda laugh. “That's not even possible—it's not gonna happen. Why did you attack me? What did I do?”

“You didn't do anything. And now you're locked out. Go away and don't come back!”

I reach up for the pointy tips of the wrought-iron fence in front of me, jump, and swing my whole body over. She

watches this with her mouth open.

I laugh again. “Come on, Irina. That fence is nothing.”

She narrows her eyes again. Like I’m here to brawl with her and I just threw down a challenge.

She’s crazy. Clearly crazy.

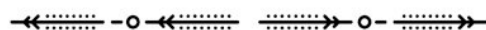
I amend my statement. “That fence is nothing to people like *us*.”

Her mouth closes, her eyes widen a little, and she lets out a breath. Then she keys in the code to her door—which I memorize—opens it, walks through, and... leaves the door open.

I look behind me for some reason, like I’m checking to see if anyone’s watching. I’m not. I’m just buying time, trying to decide what I should do.

“Clearly crazy.” But this time I’m talking about me.

Because I follow her inside.



HER PLACE IS TINY. One room, that’s it. As soon as I step in, the bathroom is on my left. I clock it, but keep walking forward. Two steps later I’m passing the kitchen on my right. I mean, if you can call it a kitchen. It’s galley-style and about six feet long. There’s a cooktop and a sink, but no oven. On the far side is a bar countertop, and past that is where Irina is. She’s got a pillow to her chest. She turns away from me, kneeling down, placing the pillow on the bare tile floor, and then... then she presses her face into it and she *screams*.

I just watch her as she does this over and over again. And it occurs to me that this is why she ran.

It wasn't to get away from me. I'm not going to hurt her. And she's not going to let me.

She ran to get home to her pillow so she could scream into it.

But what did I do?

I don't understand.

What did I do to cause this?

Because it was me, obviously. Something I said back there at the gym. What did I say?

I try to rewind the conversation, but my head is spinning with running and an unexpected fight. Not to mention the screaming girl on the floor.

Finally, she stops, but she doesn't get up. She just stretches out on the floor and cries.

That's when I notice there's no furniture in here. I didn't immediately see it because the place is so fucking small. There's just a tatami mat on the floor and when I see a phone charger plugged into the outlet next to it, I realize that's where she sleeps.

On the other side of the room, stacked neatly against the wall, are clothes. A few bathing suits. Some shirts and shorts. Two pairs of trainers and a bra.

I'm still looking when she gets up off the floor, walks past me, and goes into the bathroom.

I just stand there, unsure what to do next.

The shower starts.

I make up my mind to stay and walk into her kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers. All of them empty.

She has three things on the counter: a rice maker, a bag of rice, and a bag of... I have to pick it up to look at the label, because I don't know what this shit is. "Dehydrated chicken." I make a face and set it back down, then open her fridge to find a six-pack of water.

I walk over to the window and pull the sheer, white curtain aside. She has a view of an alley.

And look, I'm not some high-and-mighty fuck who looks down on poor people. I'm rich now, but I'm still 'poor people.' And this isn't even about money.

This is about... guilt.

I know this, feel it to be true with every fiber of my being, because I feel the same way.

Guilt. That we made it and all those others didn't.

That's what I said back at the gym. I was bragging because she was challenging me. And I said it was still here. The death matches are still going on.

It was shock, that look on her face. Shock.

Surely she had to have known that they weren't saving anyone but themselves.

But no. She was thirteen when that shit went down. It's entirely possible that she did think they saved people.

It's time to leave.

I'm mid-turn, facing the door, when she comes out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel. Her face is red, her eyes too, and she doesn't look at me as she passes.

I turn to watch her, curiosity getting the better of me, and then just stand there stunned, watching as she drops her towel with her back to me and picks up a tank top. She puts it on, grabs a pair of shorts—no underwear, I notice—and pulls them up her legs.

When she turns to face me, I see so, so much in that hard-edged face. Then the tears spill out and run down her cheeks.

Those blue eyes of her are directed right at me when she spits her words out. “I hate. *Everyone*. I want to kill people. You wanna know why I want to fight? Well, there you go. I want to *kill* people.”

“No, you don’t, darlin’.”

“Fuck you!” She’s snifflin’ and tears are streaming down her face. “You have no idea what I want. And you have no idea what I’ve done!”

“Sure, I do. Because I’ve done it too.”

She stares at me with wild eyes for a few moments. And then... all the hardness falls out of her face. Every last bit of it. She breaks. Right here in front of me. She breaks.

I walk towards her and she takes an equal number of steps back.

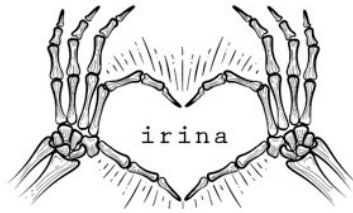
“Don’t.” She points her finger at me, like I can be warned off by a crying girl.

I come right up to her, and what can she do, really? There’s nowhere to go in this place. It’s the size of a fucking closet. I reach for her—she’s shaking her head, but I ignore it. I just pull her in and give her a hug.

And this is enough to make her completely fall apart. She covers her face with her hands and sobs into my chest.

Noises coming out of her that I never even knew existed.

CHAPTER 7



*S*omething is seriously wrong with me. I don't even know why I'm crying. It's all so stupid.

But... even though I would never have asked for it, the hug feels good. I can't remember a time when someone hugged me like this. We weren't affectionate in the camp. We couldn't afford to be because every few months someone left and didn't come back. And even when I came out of my death fights, I never felt as vulnerable as I do right now.

And nothing happened.

I mean, something did. I faced the truth. Which, on some level, I had to have known. I just didn't think about it before. I didn't spend time thinking about the well-being of my opponents.

Why should I? When we faced each other in the ring, we both knew one of us would be dead when it was over.

And every time I stood in that ring—every single time—I was looking at a dead person.

That's what they were to me. All of them. They were just dead people.

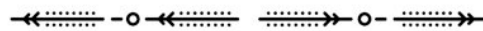
I take a deep breath, push back from his chest, and then feel even dumber because I don't even know this guy's name. I

refuse to call him Dead Eyes. “What’s your name?”

He offers me a small smile. It’s one of those sad smiles. I recognize it because that’s how Maart looked at me that last year I was in Brazil.

“Forget it.” I walk over to the door, open it up, and nod my head at it.

He presses his lips together for a moment, then accepts my invitation to leave. But on the way out he says, “Eason.”



ALL MORNING long I just lie there on my mat and stare at the ceiling, wondering why it all has to feel so complicated. It doesn’t have to be. Nothing has to be complicated, it’s the emotions that do that.

But how do you stop feeling? I can do it up to a point, but any further and it’s too much.

This encounter with these men this morning feels like too much.

My phone buzzes. So at ten forty-five I get up, put on my uniform, and walk to work because someone couldn’t work today for whatever reason, and I’m the fill-in girl.

I like waitressing because if you work at the right place, there’s no downtime. You’re on your feet, bustling all over the place, talking to people, practicing your new American accent. And the time goes by quick. The tips add up, the tables fill and empty, and the food comes and goes.

Plus, all these people here really do feel like family. I'm the only outsider working here, but I don't work much. They only call me in when they're short.

But it's OK with me because I don't need the money. I don't have any credit cards, I don't own a car, and I don't have a mortgage. The only thing I really need to pay for is the HOA for the condo. But there aren't any perks at my place. Just those palm trees and cement benches. Sometimes the fountain works. So my HOA is only three hundred and fifty a month.

I still have almost seventy thousand dollars in my bank account.

I spend a little bit on food, but I don't understand three meals a day. I have never eaten three meals a day in my life.

I don't need much.

And this worries me because I'm afraid that one day I will wake up and I won't want anything. Won't need anything. And there will be no more reasons to go on.

Normally, this is not how I think. I don't dwell on the past. I don't really think about the future, either. I'm just existing. And I'm getting tired of it.

When I was in Cort's camp I wanted to live so bad, I would do anything to see another day.

Now, I don't really see the point of any of this.

Why even bother? Why even be here?

It doesn't make any sense.

But I've been thinking about this all day in between pouring coffee and delivering rice bowls to tables. We don't get a choice to come here. To be born. That just happens to us. Now, if you wanna get philosophical, perhaps there is another

realm under this one where we all decide, “OK, we’re gonna be born now.” But that’s magic, I think. And not real.

So we don’t get a choice to be here. But we do get a choice about how we spend our time here. And we all know, even though people like to pretend it’s not true, that this is a little journey. A temporary trip no different than a bus ride.

You get on, you get off.

And so, because people like to pretend that they are the only person in the history of people who will never die and will live forever, they mostly play it safe. They worry about what they will eat each day, and where they will sleep each day, and how they will pay off bills.

God, that’s sad.

The first time I heard the phrase ‘cost of living’ I thought this was a joke. I was eavesdropping on a conversation between Romero and Luis’s wife, Floramaria. And she was complaining about the ‘cost of living’ going up.

I am maybe not the smartest person in this restaurant. But it’s not because I’m dumb. I’m not dumb. It’s because my perspective is warped. I came up a certain way. I see things a certain way. And when I heard this expression ‘cost of living,’ I took it literally, the way a child might.

I know it just means how much you have to pay for necessities like food and rent. But in my head, I relate it back to the stories that Cintia used to tell us kids in camp. She, and Ling, and Sissy raised us. Maart was in charge of training, Cort was in charge of money, Rainer was in charge of making sure we didn’t snap, and the older women in the camp were in charge of the little bit of school we did.

Cintia was my favorite because she didn't want us to write, or spell, or math. She wanted to tell us stories about gods and goddesses who lived long, long ago. I liked all of them, but the story I was really intrigued with was the one about crossing the River Styx. And it wasn't the river that intrigued me, but Charon, the ferryman. He is the one in charge of your journey and you have to pay him in silver to take you across the river when you die.

That was the image in my mind when I heard the phrase 'cost of living.'

It's not about bills. It's a trade. If you want the condo, and the waitressing job, and the BFF, and the beach to walk on just a few blocks over, then you gotta pay the fuckin' ferryman.

But there's always someone who can't pay, right? I mean, sometimes people just can't pull it together. They cannot fit in to society. They don't just disappear. They're still here. They're just on the edge, doing something else.

I know this better than anyone. No one in the Ring of Fire camps is spending one moment of time thinking about their damn credit cards. They don't even think about food. It appears twice a day and they eat it. They don't think, *Hmmm, not really in the mood for chicken and rice today*. They just shovel it into their mouth.

They have a cost of living, but it's different.

The cost of living to people like me is a fight. That's our cost of living.

And it pisses me off because I never asked to be here in the first place.

Maybe there is some magical world underneath this one where I agreed to this shit, but if that's true, then whoever sold

me on the idea of being born was a fuckin' liar.

There's no way I would agree to this cost of living.

And, well, yeah. That's the truth of it.

So now, what do I do about it? That's the question.

When I first got here, I just wanted to be American. I wanted the dream. And I think I got it. I do. It's just not all that satisfying.

I like having my own space, but only so I have a haven to retreat to. A place where I can stop being American and just be Irina.

I am unfulfilled because I have achieved my goal and I don't have a new one.

Whenever I came back to camp after a fight—whenever anyone came back to camp after a fight—we had a little party. Ling would cook up something good, beef and noodles or something similar, and we would celebrate. We would get one day to feel safe and cared for.

But the next morning we all had to meet with Cort and Maart. Cort didn't talk, of course. Maart did. But it was very clear that Maart was talking for Cort. And they told us that we were not safe. We were never safe. And we should forget about that last fight because it no longer mattered. It was no longer able to save our lives.

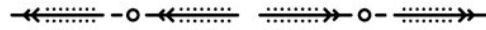
In other words, they gave us a new goal. Win the next fight too.

And there's where I went wrong. I was so busy paying the American ferryman, and then so busy getting lost in the dream, I forgot to give myself a new goal.

But when those words came out of my mouth this morning, it all became clear.

I need a new enemy.

And now that I know the old one still exists, it'll do.



AFTER WORK IS OVER, I go home. It's nearly ten o'clock. I take a shower so I can stop smelling like a Cuban restaurant and then I pull on some shorts and a tank top and leave.

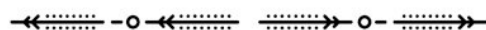
I don't go find Eason. I don't go back to either of the gyms.

I go to the beach. I walk all the way down to South Pointe Pier to warm up my muscles, and then I turn around, facing north, and I run.

It's ten miles from South Pointe to Bal Harbor Pier. I run the whole way.

Then I turn around and I run back.

When I get back to my condo, I'm dead tired, my legs ache, and I haven't felt this good in seven fucking years. I turn my phone off, lie on my rice mat, and for the first time since I got to America, I let go and really sleep.



I WAKE UP ON TUESDAY. I didn't even know I slept for two days until I checked my phone and saw the messages. Two of

them are from Nandy, which makes me sigh in frustration. She's got a guy she wants me to meet. I love her, I do, but I'm so tired of this. I'm not ready. I don't want a boyfriend. And what kind of guy would want a girl like me?

Maybe Irina from a few days ago could've pulled it off. But Tuesday morning Irina isn't the same girl.

I don't call Nandy back, but I do text her and tell her that I'll see her on Sunday for drinks. I don't mention the guy, so hopefully she takes the hint.

There are two messages from Dog. One of them is a text inviting me to come train, one of them is a voicemail asking if I'm all right. I have to admit, I'm a little touched by this last one because I don't know this guy and he doesn't know me, so why does he care?

He does care, though. I can hear it in his voice. "Irina. I don't know what's going on, but if I spooked you in some way, I'm sorry. Just come to the gym. Or let me buy you a coffee. At the very least, let me know you're OK. I'm just..." His hesitation is real. He's not from the Ring, but he knows about us. "I'm just worried I made a mistake."

Then he hangs up.

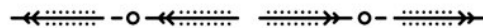
His mistake was inviting Eason and those other guys to the gym that night.

The other message is from Eason. He leaves a voicemail. He sounds like he just woke up, but it came in at two in the afternoon, and he doesn't come off as a guy who takes naps in the middle of the day, so I think this is just how he sounds. "I've been thinking about what you said"—what I said? I kind of laugh. That I want to kill people?—"and if that's true, I

think I can help you. But I'm not coming to you. You need to come to me."

He didn't call back and that was yesterday.

I take a shower, pull on a new pair of shorts and a clean t-shirt, and then I go out and run the beach, the same twenty miles, in the heat of midday.



I DO THIS ALL WEEK.

On Sunday, I wake up early and do the run again. I've got my time down to a little under three hours for the whole thing. Which is not great, but not bad for running on sand and just picking it up again after years of downtime. I've never timed myself before because in camp no one cared what your time was. We did care who finished first and even though I never did win that, I came in the top five lots of times. So I know I'm fast because I was running against the boys.

After my run, I shower and blow-dry my hair so it falls straight down my back like silk, looking at myself in the mirror for the first time all week. Most of my clothes are just shorts and shirts stacked on the floor, up against the wall, but I keep my uniforms and sundresses hung up in the little closet near the door.

I choose a yellow sundress that falls just above my knees and leave my place at seven forty-five. Nandy is waiting outside the bar we meet up at, looking like a princess in a pale lavender sundress that shows off her long, dark legs. When she

sees me, she brightens up and I do too. “Well, look at you! Taking this whole thing seriously, aren’t you?”

We do a little air kiss, but when I pull back, I’m confused. “Taking what seriously?”

“The date.”

I make a face. “What date?”

She stomps her sandaled foot. “Irina! I told you I was setting you up with a guy tonight!”

“I never said yes, Nandy! No.” I look around, nervous, wondering if he’s here.

“Relax. I told them to meet us at eight-thirty. Not eight. So we had time to talk.”

“Them?”

“I’m dating his friend.”

“Nandy!”

“Oh, come on. You’re dressed up. Normally you show up in shorts. You look nice. Better than nice, actually. You look sexy.”

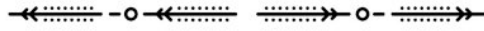
I look down at myself, then up at her. “I wasn’t going for sexy.”

“That’s why it’s so sexy, chica.” Then she winks at me. “Come on. ” She takes my hand. “Let’s get a drink to loosen you up. You don’t have to see him again. It’s one night of drinks and conversation.”

Despite my urge to run, there’s really no way out of this without looking like a freak. So I go in.

One night of drinks and conversation.

I can do it.



THE GUY IS VERY HANDSOME, I'll give him that. His name is Joe, and he's not an asshole. He doesn't get too close to me, or ask me stupid personal questions, or, God forbid, try to kiss me. He tells stories. At first, he and Nandy's guy—Rico—tell the stories together. They are best friends and have known each other since they were five, so they have a lot of stories. And they are fun stories. I find myself slightly fascinated at their very American upbringing.

They are rich too. They come from rich families, so a lot of these stories are about all the things rich kids do at the beach. Boating, and surfing, and diving.

I have done all of these things too. Even surfing. We found a surfboard on one of the beaches along our supply ship route in those in-between years, before we settled in the jungle, when we did nothing but travel the sea.

And it feels kind of good to know that my past life is not so different than the ones these guys lived. In some ways, at least.

But eventually Nandy and Rico excuse themselves to go dance, and so I end up alone with Joe at the table. He smiles at me—nervously, I think. “So. Nandy didn't tell me much about you.”

Nandy doesn't know much about me, but I don't say that.

“Where did you grow up?”

I lie when I have to, but I don't like it. And anyway, Nandy has asked me this before, so I have an answer. I'm just not sure that this guy deserves an answer. This is why I don't want to date. He's a stranger and hasn't earned this information about me. But in social situations it's polite to make small talk. So against my better judgment, I answer. "Brazil."

"Really?" His surprise is genuine and... I don't know. Intriguing. My answer to him, and his reaction to me. "What part?"

"Mmm. A few places. Mostly São Paulo and Rio."

"Wow." He leans back in his chair. "That's cool. What's it like down there? Just like Miami Beach, but people speaking Portuguese?"

Not even close. "Yep. That's pretty much how it is."

"Mm. So you're... Brazilian?"

He's asking because I am as blonde and blue-eyed as they come. "No. Russian, actually."

I think.

"Russian. OK. That's..."

"Unfortunate?"

He laughs. Loud. "No. It's just unusual. You're... unusual. I like it." Then he smiles before taking a sip of his drink.

He's just about to ask more questions when his attention is diverted to something over my right shoulder. He makes a face of annoyance. "Can I help you, bro?"

And when I turn, Eason Dead Eyes is standing right behind me. He smiles at me, then directs an unfriendly gaze at Joe.

“No, thank you. I was just gonna ask Irina here if she would like to dance.”

Joe looks at me. “You know this guy?”

I look back at Eason. Then nod. “I do.”

Eason ignores Joe, aiming his eyes right at me. Then he offers me his hand. “Come dance with me.”

“Uh, look—” That’s as far as Joe gets. I don’t know what happens, because I’m not looking at Eason, I’m looking at Joe now, but Eason must be making a face of ‘don’t fuck with me, bro,’ because Joe says, “Fine. Dance.”

I turn and look at Eason now, making a face of confusion. “I don’t dance.”

“I don’t either. I’m just trying to get you to take a walk with me.”

“OK, this is getting weird.” Joe stands up. Rico appears beside him.

Nandy appears beside me. “What’s going on?”

Joe answers for me. “This guy, he wants Irina to take a walk with him.”

Nandy looks him up and down. Everything about Eason Dead Eyes says, *I’m Eason fucking Dead Eyes and you do not want to mess with me.* The funny thing is, I don’t think he’s projecting this deliberately at all. I don’t think he can help it. “She’s not going anywhere with you.” Then Nandy turns to me. “Do you know this guy?”

I press my lips together and nod. “I’ll be right back.”

“Irina!”

“Nandy.” I put a hand on her arm. “It’s fine. I’ll be right back.”

She leans down, whispering in my ear. “He looks dangerous. That tattoo on his neck. I’ve seen it tagged on walls, Irina. It’s—”

“You must not know Irina very well.”

Nandy turns to scowl at Eason. “What? She’s my best friend, asshole.”

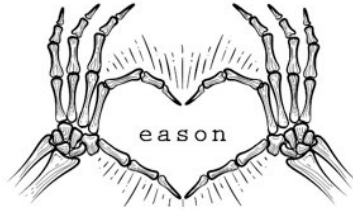
“Then you would know that there is no way she would let me hurt her. And you would know that you have nothing to worry about if she goes outside and has a chat with me. Because Irina is a storm waiting to happen.”

“OK.” I get up, making my stool scrape on the tile floor. I look at Nandy. “I’ll be right back.”

Then I push past Eason and head for the front door.

And oddly enough, the moment I get outside, I feel relief.

CHAPTER 8



*“Y*ou have no situational awareness at all, do ya?”

Irina scowls at me. “What?”

“You’re like a fucking child. I’ve been running behind ya all week. Twenty-one miles each day. And by the way, you’re slow. You should be able to run that in two and a half hours, even if ya are a girl.”

She takes a step back, stunned, I think, that I am talking to her like this. Seven years. That’s how long it’s been since someone talked to her like this.

She sets her jaw. “What do you want?”

“I want you to train like you mean it. Not just go for a fuckin’ jog on the sand like a goddamned tourist.”

This time she laughs. And her whole sour face changes into... something else completely. She’s got an unusual look to her. A face you just want to stare at. So cold. But then that smile, so warm.

“Like a tourist, huh?”

I shrug, trying to hold my own smile in.

“It’s really none of your business, Eason Dead Eyes.”

“It’s just Eason. I really don’t like to be called Dead Eyes.”

“Then why do they call you Dead Eyes?”

“That’s a story you haven’t earned, girl.”

This stops her for a moment. Her faces changes once again. Not sour, not amusement, but... agreement. “OK. Fine. I take it you would like to give me pointers?”

“I would.”

“What could I do to improve?”

Her Russian accent comes through. It catches me off guard and it takes me a few seconds to recover because I want her to keep talking just so I can keep listening to it. “Work harder. Go faster.”

“Why? Why should I bother?”

“You should bother because if you want to kill people—specific people—then you’re gonna have to do a lot better than what I’ve seen. Meet me at South Pointe Pier at four a.m. And if you’re even one second late, the whole thing is off. So maybe ya better show up early.”

Then I turn and walk away.

I want her to call after me. And I also want her to walk away with me. But that’s mostly because of that guy she’s with.

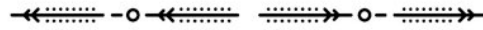
Not her boyfriend. Irina the Storm has one friend and that is Nandy Jardinez. Daughter of one of the owners of the restaurant where she sometimes works.

I know this is a fact. I also know that Irina isn’t interested in that guy.

If she were, I wouldn’t let her go back in there. Not because I give a fuck about who she dates, but because a man

in her life—a man who isn't me, that is—would complicate things.

And I'm not going to put up with complications.



IRINA IS WAITING for me at the bottom of the pier when I show up at three forty-five. She's wearing black training shorts, a pink, cropped, zipper hoodie with the hood up, and a scowl on her face.

“Don't look at me that way.” She turns and faces the water.

“If you don't want to be here, go home. If ya do, then fall in.” I take off towards the water and the sound of her footfalls on sand follows me as I enter the wet sand. We don't talk at all. Just keep running. I set a fast pace. She really isn't slow, not for a girl or even a man—who isn't a fighter, that is. But I was running behind her all last week and the pace was painfully sluggish compared to how hard I usually run.

She keeps up and that's all that matters. I don't care how she does that, as long as she does.

When we get to Bal Harbor Pier she thinks we're going to turn around and go back. That's what she's been doing, so she slows a little. But I keep going, cutting over to the road, taking the bridge across the channel, and then making our way back to the beach to continue our run.

She's doing calculations in her head now. I know she is. How far is this? How much distance will it add to the total? Am I going to be able to run back?

It's twelve miles.

It will bring the one-way total to nearly twenty-three miles.

There's no way in hell she will be able to run home.

Hard lessons are the best lessons. But I'm sure she knows this.

We arrive at Dania Beach Pier around seven. I've already shaved nearly thirty minutes off the time she was doing last week and she is *dying*.

She bends over, catching her breath. She doesn't puke though. It's not that much more than she's been doing, it's just double her one-way distance with a much faster time. When she straightens up, she doesn't look at me, but glances over at the parking lot.

"Are ya looking for a bus stop?"

"Funny." She's still breathing hard and her face is bright red.

"Ya OK there, darlin'? Gonna puke? Pass out?"

"Fuck you."

"You're thinking about that run home, aren't ya?"

She turns her back to me and stares out at the water. I watch her, wondering for the thousandth time if this is a good idea or not.

It's not.

But I'm gonna do it anyway.

"Well, good news."

"Yeah?" She turns to face me, breathing almost under control now. "What's that?"

"We're gonna have breakfast before we go home."

She stares at me for a moment, blinking. “Uhhh, no. I’m gonna pass.”

“Nah, you’re not. You’re gonna eat.”

“Why? So you can see me puke on the way home?”

“Come on. I know a place.”

She huffs. But when I take off at a brisk walk, she falls in, probably relieved the run has been paused. But then again, I don’t know her. Maybe she likes punishment.

We go left on Ocean, then right into the Dania Beach Marina. I glance over at her to see if she’s gonna ask, but she pretends not to see me look. This whole time, she never took her hoodie off, so she’s got her hands shoved into the pockets and the hood back up on her head.

She breaks when I take her onto a dock. “Where are we going?”

“To my boat, darlin’.”

“No.”

Her no is very firm because she stops walking behind me. I turn. “What’s the problem then?”

“There is no problem. I’m just letting you know that I will not be getting into a boat with you.”

I laugh. “Ya think I’m trying to kidnap you? Irina, if I wanted to kidnap ya, you would find yourself kidnapped.”

“Well, that’s not the answer I was looking for.”

I smile. Can’t help it. “I’m not gonna hurt you. But we are going somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I bought this boat last month, but the Miami Beach Marina didn’t have a slip for me until now. So we’re gonna take her home. It’s a nice drive. But you’re more than welcome to run, if you like.”

I could be lying. She knows this.

But I’m not, and she knows this too.

“OK.” Her voice is small and so is her shrug. “Fine.” She pans her hand, indicating I should lead the way.

I smile and turn back to the dock. The boat isn’t brand new, but it’s only a couple years old and it’s pretty fuckin’ nice if I do say so myself. I jump on, then offer her my hand.

She scoffs at me, then jumps on without taking it.

“Ya’ve been on boats, right?”

“Yes.”

I turn and watch her take it all in. At just thirty-eight feet, it’s nothing spectacular. But then again, it’s pretty fuckin’ spectacular. “Nothing like this, though?”

She’s still looking around. Then she moves to the bridge and pauses to look below. “I worked on a supply ship for a couple years.” She meets my gaze. “I’ve got sea legs, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I bet.”

“But... it’s nice.” And she smiles.

Which makes me happy. “It is, right? I mean, it’s not built for parties or anything. But it’s good enough for me. I had Wade bring food. I figured I’d make you come with me. You might not be better company than Wade and Davis, but you’re definitely nicer to look at.”

She scowls. It makes her lip go up and her eyes narrow.

“You don’t like compliments, do you?”

“I like compliments just fine. I just don’t like them from strangers.”

“Are we strangers?”

“We are.”

“Aren’t we... co-workers, at least?”

“Are you my trainer?”

“Do you want me to be your trainer?”

She turns away from me and touches the tip of her finger to the polished wood of the galley counter. “Depends on what we’re training for.”

“Killing, right? Isn’t that what you wanted?”

She sucks in a breath and takes a seat at the bar. Then she swivels the stool to look at me. “What’s in it for you?”

“That’s a very good question. One you haven’t earned the answer to yet.”

“That’s the second time you’ve used that excuse.”

“What was the other time?”

“Eason Dead Eyes.”

“Right.” I smile. “Well, Irina, it’s like this. I’m a suspicious asshole. You’re a suspicious asshole. It’s gonna take time, isn’t it?”

“I suppose. I mean, maybe I would accept that if I wasn’t part of the equation.”

“The equation? Is that what this is?”

“It’s an expression.”

“I’m aware. OK. So you’re not going to accept that? Why?”

“Like I said, this is a mutual thing. You get something, I get something. You don’t get to hide what you’re getting out of this—that’s deceptive. So if that’s your final answer, then fuck off.”

“It’s not deceptive if you agree to it.”

“You’re not a good listener. I’m not agreeing to it. I haven’t thought much about the fights since I left Brazil. Even before then, it had been years, really. So, number one, I can live without them.”

“What’s two?”

“Number two is that I don’t need you to kill people.”

“Nah. Ya don’t, that’s true. But you do need me to kill the *right* people.”

She lets out a breath, relaxing a little bit, which gives me time to stare at her, compare her to that picture, and think about how it’s on my ceiling above my bed. Her black eye. Her too-thin frame. Her messy hair. The clothes and the people around her.

Some of it was real. The black eye, for sure, because she admitted it. And her tiny frame that was nothing but muscle, that was just her conditioning and her youth. A girl like Irina is never going to be overweight. She could eat forever and still not gain like that. So part of her gauntness in that picture was genetics and training, but the rest...

“When you did that picture, did they put make-up on you?”

“What?”

“That photo. The famous one. Did they put make-up on you?”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking or why. Who cares? The point is, maybe you do know the right people to kill, but I could find them. If I tried. I want to know what you’re getting out of this or I’ll just...” She shrugs with her hands. “Leave.”

She’s not going to leave. We both know that. But I’m not going to point it out. “Are you looking for revenge?”

“Why?”

“Because I am.”

“Revenge for what?”

“Sorry, darlin’. That’s not part of the equation. You don’t get to know my whys.”

“Your... wise?”

I smile. She’s actually easy to be around. And even though she’s not pretty in the way I typically gravitate to, she is pretty in a very specific other kind of way. “My whys. W-h-y-s. Whys.”

“That’s not even a word.” She says this so seriously, her entire face filled with confusion. Like never, in the history of Irina, has she ever come across a made-up word.

“I’m aware of that as well. But what I’m saying—”

“I get what you’re saying, Eason. I just don’t like how you said it.”

“It’s too woo for you?”

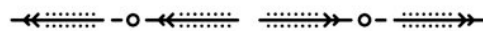
She cracks a smile.

“Woo? Are you having trouble with that one too? It’s not a poo, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Now she actually laughs. “I’m not a fuckin’ child, Eason.”

“No. I doubt you’ve ever been a child, Irina.”

She takes a deep breath and turns on her swivel stool. “Well, are we just gonna talk all morning? Let’s go.”



AFTER MOTORING out of the marina and settling into our path back to South Beach, I turn to Irina. “Would you like to drive or cook? I’m hungry. Aren’t you hungry?”

She thinks about these questions. Such a deliberator. “I’ll drive.”

I beckon her with a finger and then get out of the way as she takes the helm. Then I go to the small galley behind the cockpit. She flips the seat up and stands at the helm instead of sitting, but she’s kinda small, so I bet she has trouble seeing if she’s sitting.

I have three bits of food on this boat, courtesy of Wade. A paper bag with four bagels, a tub of cream cheese, and two bottles of cranberry juice.

Five minutes later, I’m serving breakfast.

Despite Irina’s earlier refusal of food, she smiles when I hand her a bagel and set a bottle of juice in the cup holder nearest her. She doesn’t give me the wheel, but I take it anyway. “Scoot.” I fold the seat down behind us and nod my head to the space to my left.

Then I wait for the fight, but she disappoints me. Not really. I actually like that, for once, she just does as I tell her.

We eat in silence as I drive. She finishes first. “Are there more?”

“Hungry now, eh?”

She gets up and a few minutes later returns with two more bagels, handing me one. I take it and we continue to eat and enjoy the view as we cruise down the Stranahan River.

“How long have you lived in Miami?”

I look over at Irina to answer. “I’ve been on and off for about five years. But I only just bought the penthouse this past year.”

“How many Ring fights were you in?”

“Three. And one planned, but never realized.”

“Where were they?”

“On a ship. They’re all on a ship now.”

“The *Bull of Light*.”

“Yeah. Ya heard of it?”

“That’s where Cort’s last fight was.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten. Udulf used to own that boat.”

“Part of it. Who owns it now?”

“I’ve got no idea.”

“Don’t they... try to take you back?”

“Ya mean, put me back into slavery?”

“Yeah. How did you get away? And why didn’t they hunt you down and take you back?”

“Why don’t we concentrate on more important things.”

She huffs. “Let me guess. I haven’t earned that answer yet.”

“That’s not why. I just try to keep myself in the present whenever I can.”

There is a silence after this. Maybe a whole minute before she comes up with something else to say. “You want to talk about training.”

“It’s the future, isn’t it? And the future is far more important than the past, that’s for sure.”

She eyes me sideways. “Should I be worried that you’re not trying to talk me out of this?”

I side-eye her back. “Do ya *want* me to talk you out of it?”

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. “No.”

I turn back to the water in front of me. “Well, I’m not really the kind of man who cares about the destinies of others, but if ya need me to play that part, let me know.”

“That’s the most honest dishonest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I smile. “Darlin’, it’s just a movie. And we’re both nothin’ but bit players. Might as well accept that now. Because this fucked-up world only makes sense if you convince yourself it’s a reality show and we’re only here as entertainment. It’s just a game.”

“You’re crazy.” She mumbles this and turns her head away, looking out the port side.

“I might be. But at least I’m not attached.”

She turns back to me, and when I glance at her, she’s got her eyes narrowed. “Attached to what?”

“Any of it. Life, mostly. But all of it. The money, the condo, the beach, the boat. I don’t care about any of it.”

She and I lock eyes for a moment. Then she puckers her lips—which are plump and smooth, a contrast to her almost sharp cheekbones. I can see why they wanted to take pictures of her. She’s... very unusual. And it kinda surprises me that she was given to the fights in the first place. With those blue eyes and that blonde hair, she would’ve been a very attractive child.

I have an urge to ask her about this, but I can’t. If I do, and she answers me, then I’ll owe her an answer of my own.

That’s not gonna happen.

She gets tired of our silence and starts in again. “Then why bother? Why bother with any of it?”

“You mean, why not give up? Why don’t *you* give up?”

“I never said I wasn’t attached. I’m attached to everything.”

I laugh. Loudly. “Are ya now?”

“All of it.” She nods her head, confirming her answer. “I love it. Even back in the fights, I loved it. My village, Cort, Maart, Rainer, and the kids. It sucked, ya know? I’m not gonna deny that. The way they all disappeared, one by one, and no one talked about them ever again. But those of us who didn’t disappear—me, and Paulo, and Maeko—” She stops here, like she’s thinking. “And Peng. Before.”

“Before what?”

“He died that last day at the village. Didn’t make it out.” She shakes her head and grunts. “He made it through all those

fights and then gets shot in the end by a fuckin' bodyguard. What a waste. But anyway. I want more life, not less."

"Irina. That makes no sense."

"Why not?"

"If you love life, then why are you asking me to train you to kill people?"

"Because I'm good at it, Eason. And it feels good."

She says this like someone might ask for milk in their tea. Unaffected and distant. Like she's got a million other things on her mind.

"Ya lied, then."

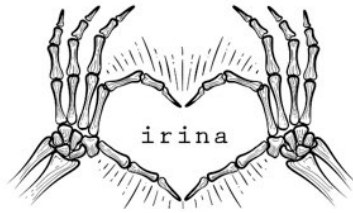
She squints her eyes at me. "What did I lie about?"

"Revenge. You want it too."

"No." She denies it again. "It's not revenge. It's... karma."

I sigh out a chuckle. "Whatever you say."

CHAPTER 9



*E*ason is mostly quiet after I deny his accusation. He can have his revenge. That's not what I'm doing. I'm just a killer, that's all. It's something I'm good at.

He's no different. Obviously, since he's still alive and he's... I dunno. In his twenties, at least. I'm a bad judge of age. My whole life revolved around children. Up until we broke away, I saw very few adults. And that continued for a while since we were on the supply ship and then in the jungle. So maybe he's twenty-two or maybe he's twenty-six. Doesn't matter, really. He's alive and that means he's a killer.

When we finally arrive at the Miami Beach Marina it's nearly noon. He has to go into the office to sort some things out, and that takes another thirty minutes. So by the time the boat is docked and we're making our way back onto the streets, it's almost one.

My condo is just a few blocks away. Almost literally next door. We cross Alton Road and I stop on the corner of Fourth Street, ready to ditch him. "Well... what time tomorrow?"

"Ya think you're done for the day?"

"Oh." I had assumed. Incorrectly, I guess.

"Come on." He takes off jogging down Fourth.

I reluctantly follow. But it soon becomes apparent that he's jogging me home. A few minutes later, I'm opening my gate and turning to him. Again. "So—"

He pushes past me and walks up to my door.

"Oooo-kay." I let the gate close. "I guess you're inviting yourself over." I punch the code to open my door and enter. Eason follows.

"Pack up your things."

"What?" I turn to look at him. "Why?"

"You want to kill people? That means you're in training. And if you're in training, you live with me."

I make a face, which apparently delights him, because he grins. "Why would I have to live with you to be in training?"

"Because, Irina, training for a death fight is a twenty-four-seven job. Even if you are plannin' on killin' billionaires."

"I... but... I have a job."

"You're a waitress. Ya work like one day a week."

"Like I said, a job."

"You will quit that job. From now on, your life is the gym. And me. You're gonna to move into my condo, take one of the spare bedrooms, and we will train like our lives depend on it."

"But... I don't want to live with you. I like my place."

"I didn't ask what you wanted. I am your trainer and you will do as I say. Pack your fuckin' things."

It's been a while. Seven years, actually. And I've grown used to having opinions. But he's not wrong. If I want to kill the people responsible for the death fights and killing camps—and I do—then it needs to be my life.

It's kinda sick. I get that. If I had to explain any of this out loud to, say... Nandy, she would call me psychotic.

But in my head, I feel like this goal of killing bad people is something. And I've got nothing, really. No purpose at all. I'm living, but I feel dead.

If I'm in training, then I have a purpose.

And if I'm in training, then I need to do as I'm told.

I don't relay any of these feelings out loud. I simply gather a tote bag hanging off a bar stool, fill it with training clothes and toiletries from the bathroom, and walk back over to him. "I'm ready."

I can tell he wants to say something about my packing. *Don't you need more than that? Perhaps something other than training shorts and tank tops?* But he holds it in. Just nods and we leave.

We pick up the jog again, but I've had a long while to rest and my tote bag isn't heavy, just cumbersome, so it's an easy jog up Ocean to the same oceanfront building where I saw him pause the other night.

It's a very trendy area, and the building has shops underneath it—a coffee shop, a clothing boutique, a pizza place, and an Italian café. We cut past all those places and enter the building on the side. Same door I saw him at before. But this time he goes in and I get to follow.

This isn't the main lobby, just a side entrance. But still, there is a doorman and a small desk. "Good afternoon, sir." The doorman at the desk tips an imaginary hat at Eason.

Eason pauses and makes a thumb gesture towards me. "This is my guest. If she ever needs anything, you'll take care of her, right?"

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Good.” He’s short and curt with the doorman. But I don’t think it’s personal. Eason doesn’t come off as a snob. I think he just hates people in general.

We take the stairs up—because of course we do—and it’s a long way. I mean, I’m all for the stairs, but nine floors after a twenty-something-mile run? I’m over it.

However, the view, once he opens his penthouse door, eases some of my pain. “Holy shit, Eason. What the hell is this?” I turn to look at him, find him smiling. Dare I say... even proud?

Well, maybe I wouldn’t go that far.

“It’s nice, right?”

“It’s...” I walk past the kitchen on the right, through the living room that has ceilings as high as a church, and practically press my nose up against the glass doors leading to the terrace. The ocean is fuckin’ turquoise from up here. And the sand... “Wow.”

“Impressive?” Eason folds the glass doors open and the salty sea breeze hits me in the face.

Now, I’ve been living near this very beach for years now, so of course I know it’s beautiful. But I’ve only ever seen it from the ground. From up here, it’s... “Wow.”

“Yeah.” Eason chuckles as he walks over to the terrace railing and rests his elbows on it. “Sometimes, Irina, I swear, it really does feel like I’m living inside a reality show.”

I smile and walk up next to him, leaning my chin on the railing, because I, of course, am much shorter than he is. “This was your prize?”

“Does it make you want to fight for money?”

“No. Well—”

He laughs. “It wasn’t the prize. Not exactly.”

“Have I earned the right to ask what that means?”

He lets out a breath. Like he’s considering my question. But he doesn’t answer me. Not outright, anyway. He does, however, give me something. “Those guys at the gym that morning? Davis and Wade?”

“OK.”

“Davis is my trainer. From before. And Wade is... just Wade. Anyway. We were... presented with an opportunity a while back and we took it. And this opportunity made us rich.”

“Wow. Despite using quite a few words, you told me absolutely nothing.”

He grins at me. And it’s a real one. I’ve made him happy. I know this because that smile reaches all the way up to his green eyes.

I pause here, lost in them for a moment, thinking back to that night on the beach when they were silver under the moon and how he reminded me of Cort.

“Nothing gets past you, Irina.” Eason looks back out at the sea.

“Do those guys live here with you?”

“No. They live... out there.” He kinda waves his hand in the general direction behind us. Meaning Miami proper, I guess.

“Are they from the Ring, Eason?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

He turns his head to look down at me. “Yeah, why?”

“So they fought too? The death fights?”

“No.” Eason almost guffaws. “No.”

“But... Maart and Rainer, they had to fight. They didn’t make it to the Ring, but they fought in the lower levels.”

“Yeah, well...” Eason pauses here. Like he’s not sure if he should say more.

“Well, what?”

“Davis and Wade weren’t slaves, Irina. Just... employees.”

“Oh.” I make a face and turn back to the beach. “Oh.” I say this again, because this fact has unsettled me for some reason. And shaken my worldview a little.

“Yeah. They got paid. It was a job.”

“That’s...”

“Gross?”

I look back up at him and nod. “Yeah.”

“I think so too.”

“Then why do you keep them around?”

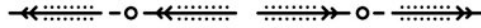
“Because...” He pauses to study the ocean in front of us. For so long, actually, that I start to think he forgot the question. But then he looks at me and tries again. “Because... that’s all there is.”

We stand there for several minutes saying nothing.

That’s pretty much all he’s done with me since we’ve met. He’s used a lot of words, but he has said absolutely nothing.

A lot like Cort, indeed, but in the opposite direction.

Cort uses no words, but says so much.



EASON TAKES me on a tour of his home. It's massive. Four bedrooms, four baths, two levels, four terraces, and a view of the ocean from every single window. It's modern and bright. The furniture is a bit cold and European for my tastes, and it's not really comfy. But it is gorgeous.

His bedroom is downstairs, a massive suite right off the living room. But the room he puts me in is equally as large, just on the level above. I've got my own bathroom, even a tub, and a private terrace that has a lounge chair on it and a little palm tree in a pot.

"Is this good enough?"

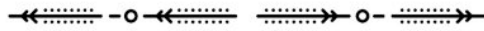
I make a face at him. "Do I look like a princess?"

He stares at me for a moment. Too long of a moment for my comfort level. I know I shouldn't feel so self-conscious. He's my trainer. It's just... he's a man, too. And he's rather handsome.

He turns away, shrugging. "Just making sure it's up to your standards." He leaves, going down the stairs, then calls over his shoulder, "We might as well take the rest of the day off. Shower and come down when you're done."

I walk over to the door and tap it closed without answering.

Then I turn back to the room, walk over to the terrace, go outside, lie back in the lounge, and promptly fall asleep.



WHEN I WAKE, there are voices downstairs. Loud, gregarious, male voices.

The friends. They are laughing about something.

It's not dark, but the sun is clearly setting on the other side of the building. Light is reflected off the lingering clouds offshore, making them glow an orangey-pink.

My body feels gritty and gross from the early-morning run. So I get up, run the bath, add some bubble bath from the complement of glass bottles lined up on a ledge, and, once it's filled, ease my tired and aching body into the water.

It feels so good, I almost fall asleep again.

Back in the village, after we came back from a fight, Cort would let us take a bath in his tub. He lived in the house, a real house, him and Maart and Rainer. The rest of us lived in the huts just outside.

His place wasn't like this. It was rather a mess compared to this condo. But it was nice in my eyes. It was luxury to us, and those baths, my God, they were like... I don't know how to explain it. They were the best thing I ever experienced.

Thinking about this makes me a little sad. Especially after realizing that there are kids out there who are still stuck in the fight ring. They might never get a bath, never even know what bubbles are. And here I am, soaking in hot water inside a

luxurious beachfront penthouse, pretending like I can give my life meaning if I just kill the right people.

Maybe it is a reality show? Maybe it is just a game?

I think Eason might be on to something. Because life? It's all so unfair, how can it be real? And it can change so quickly. One moment you're training like a maniac, your next death fight just a few weeks off, and the next thing ya know, you're working on a supply ship with a brand-new second chance. And that's not the only time, either. I've had more than my share of fresh starts. This place—before Eason—included.

And now here I am, once again, with an... upgrade.

It's crazy, and if I dwell on it too much, I'll get stuck in my head trying to force it all to make sense, only it never does, so there's no point. And I don't want to be stuck in my head anyway. So I wash, and put on new training clothes, and then open the door—unwilling to go downstairs, but feeling obligated to nonetheless.

I'm surprised to find that the friends are gone and Eason is busy in the kitchen. Cooking.

He nods at me when I appear. "Did ya fall asleep?"

"Yeah." I pull out a bar stool in front of the island that separates the kitchen from the main living area. It's a nice modern kitchen. Sleek white enamel cabinets, a smooth gray concrete backsplash, and stone counters. Not granite. Something less fancy and more masculine. Also gray. All the appliances look commercial, like they belong in a restaurant and not a home. "This is nice."

"It is. Did I wipe you out with that run?"

He's chopping up a cucumber and there's a very tasty-looking green salad in a stainless-steel bowl next to the cutting

board. Just looking at it is making my stomach rumble. “Wipe me out?”

“It means—”

“I know what it means. You think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“I don’t. You’re just not from here.”

“Neither are you.”

“Yeah, but I grew up in the civilized world. You grew up in...”

I think he’s waiting for me to fill in the blank, but I’m not going to. I might owe him obedience in diet and training, but I do not owe him a personal history.

He answers his own question. “The jungle?”

“Among other places.”

“Rio and the Rock.”

“Among other places.”

“Right. The ship. Did you see many port cities then?”

“Did you?”

He smiles at me when I turn the question around, then tucks his head down trying to hide it.

“I’ve been all over, Eason. I’ve been to many port cities.”

“Europe.”

“No.”

“Australia.”

“No.”

“Los—”

“No. Many port cities in Central and South America.”

“Like I said. The jungle.”

“It’s not the jungle,” I say. He raises an eyebrow at me.
“Not all of it.”

He goes back to cutting. A tomato now. “I’m just fuckin’ with ya, Irina.”

I sigh and look around. “What happened to the friends?”

“They’re going to LA for a month.”

“A month? Why?”

“Expanding the business? To get away from me? One of the two.”

“Why would they want to get away from you?”

“Because I’m so fuckin’ charming they can’t stand it.”

“You’re dumb.”

He dumps the cut-up vegetables into the salad bowl. “And you’re very easy to fuck with.” He gets two bowls out, dishes out two servings of salad, and then points to a jar of honey vinaigrette dressing. “Do ya like this?”

“I’ve never had it.”

“I love it. So you’re gonna eat it.” He dribbles dressing on both of the bowls and grabs two forks. “Get the beer and come out on the terrace.”

“Beer? In training?”

“Relax, Irina, training starts tomorrow.”

I blow out a breath as I slip off the stool and walk around the counter to grab the beers.

One month. Alone with him.

I'm having doubts now. Why am I even here? Do I really want to kill people that bad? I look down at the beers in my hands and get stuck on the label. Mula IPA. It's a Brazilian beer, one of Rainer's favorites, and the label has a picture of a rearing horse with a head made of fire.

And as soon as I see it, I have a flash of memory of all of us kids in Lençóis Maranhenses National Park, building little rock towers next to the hundreds of freshwater pools to pay tribute to all the kids who died along the way.

We drank this beer that night as Anya—the girl who didn't talk—talked for hours in front of a little rock tower with her sister's name on it. All of us, even the little kids like Jafari and Zoya, got to share a beer because everything was so sad.

It hits me hard for a moment. Remembering all the faces that came and went.

I do my best not to think about them, I do. But they are a part of me whether I like it or not. And that day at Lençóis Maranhenses was a day just for them.

It was Anya's idea to build the rock monuments. We collected rocks from every place we stopped with the supply ship. They were mostly small, about the size of a palm, and they were all smooth, like they had tumbled all over the world through the power of the ocean.

It took us a few weeks to collect them all. We painted the rocks and put names on them. One for each kid who died from our camp. We remembered each and every one of them. Rainer had a list in his head. He knew all of them. He didn't let us forget a single one.

And Bexxie, of course. Anya's little sister who was killed because Cort won that last fight and decided to save Anya on

his way out.

That day, surrounded by those freshwater pools and towers of painted rocks, I let myself remember all the kids who came and went, and I cried. I cried for hours. And when I was done, I slept for a whole day.

It was the most beautiful and most heartbreaking day of my entire life.

It was also the last time I cried until that night when Eason said Maart was looking for me.

“What are ya doing?”

I look up, startled to find myself standing in the middle of the kitchen holding the beers. “Nothing.”

Eason makes a face, but doesn't ask another question. Just reaches into the fridge to grab a cutting board with two salmon steaks on it. He only barely glances at me as he pushes past. “Then come on. Let's eat.”

I follow him outside to the main terrace. It's so nice, with the sea breeze, and the ocean, and the sand down below. It's not loud, either. You can't hear the people on Ocean Drive because it's on the other side of the building. And you can't hear the people down on the beach, either. The waves drown it all out.

Eason puts the salmon onto a hot grill, closes the top, and then takes one of the beers from me and cracks it open. He tosses the cap onto the glass table. “Sit, Irina. You're making me nervous.”

I sit. He's put me directly across from him. Which is better than sitting next to him, but not by much because now he's got a clear view of me.

“What was that back there?” He shoves a forkful of salad into his mouth and chews, locking his eyes on mine as he waits for me to answer.

I shove my own forkful of salad into my mouth.

“Nothin’, eh? That’s your final answer?”

“Just... I was having second thoughts.”

“About being here? Why? Because you’re gonna be alone with me? Do ya think I’m gonna hurt ya, Irina?”

“No.” I scoff out the word. “That’s stupid. I mean, maybe you could.” I look him in the eyes for this. “But then again, maybe you couldn’t.”

He just grins through my threat. “Yer that badass, huh?”

I shrug. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Hey.” He reaches across the table and has a hold of my wrist before I can even process he’s done this. I startle, pulling back, but he doesn’t let go. “*Look* at me.”

I look at him. Still startled.

“I know who you are. I know what you can do. Do you think I’d waste my time if I didn’t think you could do it?”

Do it? Do what? What does he think I want to do? Because I’m not even sure I know what I want to do. All I know is—

“Stop.”

“What?” I lock eyes with him.

“You’re thinking something. Something important. Say it out loud, Irina. You’ve got to trust me. We’re gonna be sparring tomorrow. If you were just some kid off the street, I’d go a little easy for a few days. But you’re not. We’re gonna get

on the mat and beat the shit out of each other. You need to trust me.”

“Why would I need to trust you to do that?”

“Because there’s gonna be that moment, Irina, when I’ve got your arm locked, or your leg, and you’re gonna think, *He won’t do it*. But I want to make it very clear right now that I will.”

“You’ll break my arm.” My eyes are narrowed down into little slits.

“If you don’t tap, fuck yeah, I will.”

“I’m failing to see how this has anything to do with trust.”

“Because there are gonna be other moments, as well. Moments when you think, *I know he’s gonna break my arm. But I’m gonna do this stupid countermove anyway.*”

My scowl breaks.

Eason finishes the smile for me. “See? It makes sense. If you know me, you can get past me. And if you can get past me, Irina, you can definitely get past them.”

Now my frown is back. “I’m... I’m not sure who ‘them’ is.”

“No.” He shoves some salad into his mouth. “You wouldn’t. Because you killed them already, didn’t ya?”

“Not all of them.”

“No. You won’t ever kill all of them, Irina. They raise them up, ya know? Like they do us. They raise up their children to see us as things. Things to use any way they see fit. Ya hear people say it all the time. ‘Be careful, Eason. Those people aren’t like us.’”

“When did they say that to you?”

“At the parties. Well, after the parties. Wade and Davis would pull me aside the next day and say these things to me. ‘They’re not like us.’ It’s just an expression, right? Rich people, they’re exactly like us. That’s what we want to think. And I’m not talking about, ‘Oh, look at them. They have a nice house and that nice car. They go on trips and send their kids to private schools.’ That’s not what I mean, Irina. I mean ‘generational wealth’ rich. They made their fortunes hundreds and hundreds of years ago. And ya know how they keep it?”

I shake my head no, because he’s waiting for an answer.

He holds up a finger. “They lie.” He holds up another finger. “They cheat.” He holds up a third finger. “They steal. And they do this in the most disgusting ways. The most inhuman ways. You know this.”

I nod. Because I do know. Maybe I was spared, maybe I had it better than most, or maybe I just blocked it out the way Cort did. So I admit, I didn’t see a lot of the abuse. Not as much as some. Not nearly as much as Anya did.

But I remember all the faces that came and went.

“They’re sick, soulless, empty fucks. And they breed each other the same way they bred us. They raise their children up to despise outsiders. To despise the common person. To care about their money and power exclusively. And to be perfect little monsters, just like their parents. They don’t teach them manners, they teach them traditions. They teach subservience to the bloodline and make them pray at the altar of power. It’s a cycle. Hell, everything is a cycle if you think about it. The whole universe. And we’re nothing but specks, Irina. That’s all we are. And that’s all this is. Just one great big cycle of abuse.”

I make a face, picturing this. I never thought much about the real children of the men who owned us. Never thought about them at all, to be honest. But he's right. How could they be anything other than despicable if these men, men like Udulf and Lazar, are their fathers?

They are victims too.

They are all victims.

We are all victims.

I lock eyes with Eason. "Who are they, Eason?"

"No one special." Then he shoves another bite of salad into his mouth.

"But... if that's true, who gave them all this power?"

"No one, darlin'. No one did. It's easy to get caught up in the hierarchy. I mean, it's hard not to, isn't it?"

He makes me feel stupid. He knows so much more than me. "I'm not following."

"That's a good thing, Irina. A very good thing. But it's like this... there's a government, right? Every country has one, right?"

I nod.

"And they run things, don't they?"

I nod again.

"And they say that the people gave them the power to run these things. But if that were true, couldn't the people take it away?"

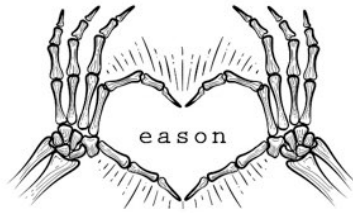
I let out a long breath. "I don't think it works that way."

“Of course it doesn’t. Because the people don’t have any power to give, darlin’. The people have never had any power to give.” He gets up and busies himself at the grill, turning the salmon steaks over and shaking some seasoning onto them. “Anyway.” He doesn’t turn to look at me. “The point is, that’s who ‘them’ is.”

“Don’t we need names, or something?”

He looks over his shoulder at me, grinning. “Oh, don’t you worry about that. I’ve got plenty of names.”

CHAPTER 10



I watch her carefully as we have dinner. She likes the salmon and she eats the whole thing very quickly. Then she settles and eats her salad slowly.

When we're done, I take all the dishes and wash them up. She joins me in the kitchen and begins to clean up the small mess I made cutting vegetables.

We're doing this in silence for several minutes when she leans back against the counter and watches me for a moment.

"Can I help ya?"

She shrugs. "I was just thinking about camp on the Rock."

I lean back against the counter across from her. "Do ya miss it?"

"Sometimes." She pauses, then starts again. "Sometimes I think it's sick."

"To miss it?"

She nods her head. "Why would I miss that place? I ask myself that over and over again. Every minute I was out there, I was training for my own death. It shouldn't be a place where I felt safe, but I was safe there. I was safer there than anywhere else in the whole world."

I process this for a moment, seeing if she'll continue. But she just sighs.

"Because of Cort," I say.

She nods, but that's all the answer I get.

"I never met him, of course. He's older than me by ten years. But he was around so long—"

"I know." Now she's smiling, which kind of throws me for a moment. "Thirty. Six. Fights, Eason. How? How does one man get through so many?"

"One moment at a time, I presume." She's enamored with the Sick Heart, I think. And why shouldn't she be? He brought her this far, didn't he?

"What was it like in the Ring of Fire, Eason?"

"Did ya ever see one?"

"No. Evard got to go. But that's because it was the last fight, so Cort didn't want him to be back in the camp alone, just in case Cort lost that night."

I replay those words in my head, trying to force them to make sense. But I must be missing something, because I can't find a way to do that.

"Haven't I earned the answer to this one yet?"

"What?"

"The Ring of Fire? You don't want to tell me what it's like?"

"Did ya ever ask Cort that question? Or Maart?"

"No."

"How come?"

“Because we just didn’t talk about our fights after they were over. It was like... an unspoken rule. You won, you were alive, and now you just thought about the future.”

It makes sense, I guess. To keep the kids focused on something they could control instead of all the horrible things behind them that they couldn’t. “The Ring of Fire...” I almost sigh just thinking about it. “It’s... just...” I want to say ‘special,’ but then again, I really don’t want to say ‘special.’ It’s so gross. “It’s just... a show, ya know? The whole thing is a production.”

“Isn’t it like the others? I mean, I’ve been in my share of fights in the kid ring.”

“It’s not. They treat you so differently. Like a celebrity, almost. Or, more accurately, like a prize racehorse or something like that. A rooster in the cock fights might be a better analogy.”

“What kind of prizes did you get? Besides money, I mean.”

“What did Cort get?”

“Nothing.”

“What?” I laugh. “That’s impossible.”

“Well, I think there were prizes. But he never took them. He took the cash and then he gave it right back to Udulf.”

“Why the hell would he do that?”

“Oh.” She blinks at me. “You don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“He was buying his freedom. His, Maart’s, Rainer’s, and Evard’s—that’s his son. Evard was sent to the camp for Cort to

train. Every bit of what Cort earned from the fights was used to buy food for us kids or give back to Udulf to pay for their freedom.”

It takes me several seconds of blank staring before I fully unravel what she’s saying. “That’s why that was his last fight?”

“Yeah. The debt had been paid. They were out. But then...” She sucks in a long breath and exhales slowly. “Then... Ainsey happened.”

“Who the hell is Ainsey?”

“His daughter. She was... I don’t know, three or four when she was sent to our camp.”

“For him to train? In the death fights?”

Irina nods. “Yep. I think that, even if I live to be a hundred, learning about how Udulf was making Cort train his own children to fight to the death might be the most disturbing thing about that world.”

“Where was the mother?”

Irina shrugs. “Probably dead. Paulo, one of the boys in my training group, he used to tell us that the fighters always win a girl at the end of the night. Is that true?”

“Yeah. They used us like... like stallions, I guess. Studs. To make more fighters. So those were the children Cort was training?”

“Well, not all of us, I guess. I don’t think Cort is my father. I don’t look anything like him, at least. And I’m not quite sure the dates and ages line up. But I guess anything is possible. It was easy with the others. Both Ainsey and Evard have Cort’s

eyes. Gray, like clouds. So it was hard to miss.” She makes a face at me. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“What way?”

“Like you’re confused.”

I push off the counter and walk out into the living room, pacing back and forth the length of it as I run my hands down my face.

Irina has followed me, but she’s hanging back. “What’s wrong?”

I stop pacing when I get to the terrace. I look out at the sea and wonder if anything was ever true. Or has it all just been lies? One long string of lies.

When I turn to face Irina again, I don’t know what to say.

She doesn’t say anything either. But she’s making a face like she’s thinking very hard about something. Whatever she works out, it doesn’t take long, because her next question is direct. “Why am I here, Eason?”

Of course, there’s an answer for this. She’s here to train. She’s already been told that. But she’s seen the lies too. She’s lived in their web and the conversation we just had was filled with so many clues, if she hasn’t already guessed at least half of it, she’d have to be stupid or willfully ignorant.

“I was supposed to fight him.”

“Who? Cort?” Her voice is higher in pitch, she’s genuinely surprised.

“I was set up to fight him next. It was my fight.”

“In the Ring?”

I nod.

“They told you... well... what did they tell you?”

“I know the odds were not in his favor, but I was told that he was gonna win, Irina. And he did. I was told I could have him next. He was getting old, ya know. That’s a lot of fights. It’s a lot of injuries.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I was there.”

“Right. So they were talking me up. Telling me I’d be the one.”

“To take him down?” Irina scoffs. “Do you think they told Pavo the same thing? Do you think Pavo was still believing the lie when Cort and Anya pushed him off the platform and he rolled into the dark sea? I know that’s how that fight ended. Anya didn’t know the unspoken rules of the village and she told me how it ended.”

I let out a long breath, then take myself over to the couch and flop down into the cushions.

There’s a lull. It goes on for a while. She’s the one who breaks the silence, not me. “I’m surprised, you know.”

I find her gaze from across the room. Her mouth is a flat line. Her arms are crossed. “Surprised at what, exactly?”

“That you fell for it.”

My jaw clenches, working side to side. “Do you know who you killed that day?”

“What day?”

“That day in your camp.”

She scoffs at me again. “Who? Udulf?”

“Nah. The others.”

“Are you asking if I knew their names? No. Other than Lazar, of course. I had no idea who those men were. I grew up in the fuckin’ jungle, remember? I wasn’t pretty enough to be taken to parties and rented out to rich men.”

It’s interesting how her Russian accent leaks through some times. When she’s emotional, I think. “Right. I’m not accusing you of anything.”

“Good. Because I am... unshameable.”

I crack a smile. “I don’t know what that translates to in Russian, but in English—not a word.”

She shrugs one shoulder. “Fine. I have suffered no dishonor for the killing I’ve done. Right up to, and including, Udulf van Hauten. Every injury I’ve ever inflicted—every life I’ve ever taken—was justice.”

“Darlin’, you don’t have to convince me. I was there as well.”

“I’m just making it clear. No, I don’t know all the names of the men who were killed that day. I don’t even think Cort, or Maart, or Rainer know that either. We were isolated at all times. We trained in the jungle and in the middle of the ocean. Fuck the world outside those parameters. It meant nothing to us. I don’t know what your camp looked like—and I don’t remember anything that happened to me before I came to live in Cort van Breda’s training camp when I was six—but you got it right the first time. We lived like savages compared to... to...” She throws up her hands. “To all this.” She spins in a slow circle with her arms up, probably indicating Miami. But in a broader sense, she means the entire Western world.

She has missed my point and I’m not sure I should correct her. So I pause here.

But she just keeps talking. “Did you have girls in your camp?”

I shrug. “One or two over the years, but no. Not really. No one wants to waste time and money on them when they were never gonna make it.”

Irina snorts out her offense. “I would’ve made it.”

“Maybe.”

“You have no idea what kind of training I have. And you know what? I like it that way. I like it when men underestimate me.”

“So you can fuck them up on the beach, get a black eye and a photoshoot opportunity for the most famous fashion designer on the entire planet?”

Finally, she pauses. “What?”

“Which part of that sentence flipped your world, Irina?”

She just stares at me.

“Was it the fight? Or the black eye? Or how they are both connected to the opportunity you got?”

She is genuinely confused. “What are you saying?”

What *am* I saying? I blow out a breath. This whole conversation has gone off track. “Forget it.”

“No. You chose those words for a reason. What was the reason?”

“It’s been a long day. Do you want to go for a run?”

She actually smiles, but it’s an incredulous smile. “We ran twenty miles this morning. Why the hell would I want to go back out for more? And you’re just changing the subject.”

“I don’t even remember what we’re talking about, Irina.”

Now she laughs. Then she walks over to the chair opposite my couch, and sinks into it, pulling her legs up to her chest, folding herself in half. She’s a tiny thing, really, and fragile-looking. Everything about her is deceptive. “We were talking about black eyes. Photoshoots. The names of dead men.”

But that’s not what we were talking about at all.

We were talking about Cort and how he was buying his freedom.

She’s watching me as I think these words, looking at me like she’s a fuckin’ mind-reader. And maybe she is? Because she’s very much on track when she speaks. “That fight you were promised.”

I smile and sink a little deeper into the cushions. “That fight I was promised was a lie, Irina.”

“OK. But what’s it mean?”

What does it mean? “I haven’t worked it out yet.”

She wants more from me. I can see it. But she’s at a loss as to which questions she should ask to get to the answer she’s looking for. Hell, I don’t even know how to get to the answer *I’m* looking for, so she hasn’t got a chance.

I glance at the clock and realize it’s only seven p.m. It won’t even get dark for two more hours and I suddenly just want to go to bed. Sleep forever. Never get up again.

After what I’ve learned tonight, nothing makes sense anymore.

Irina makes no sense anymore. And now she’s here.

But I want her to leave.

“What’s wrong with your foot?”

“What?” Her question surprises me.

“You have an old injury?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you favor it.”

“I ran twenty-three miles on that foot today. I don’t think I’m favoring it.”

“But it was injured, right?”

“So?”

“So what happened to it?”

“It got smashed with a crowbar.”

She winces. “How long ago?”

“Seven years.”

“Did you get proper treatment?”

“Twelve hours of surgery.”

“Wow. They have good hospitals here.”

I smile despite the conflict coursing through my mind. “They do, I guess. The foot was a mess. It’s got pins and plates in it still.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“Everything still hurts, Irina.” And this comes out way too soft, which also puts a tinge of honesty on it. Hell, more than a tinge. Those words—that one sentence—is overflowing with truth.

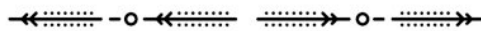
“Yeah.” She slides sideways in the chair, places her hands under her cheek, yawning. Her head propped up on the arm,

her knees tucked up to her chest. Cradled in the curvature of the chair back like a fetus. She sighs. Then her eyes close and I swear to God, a few seconds later, she falls asleep.

She got one true thing out of me and then she was done. Satisfied. Content, maybe.

I watch her for a little bit, wondering what I should do now. It's pointless to keep this charade going. What she told me tonight changes everything.

But I am reluctant to let go. Because if I let go of this, I don't think there's anything left for me.



THE NEXT MORNING at four a.m. I am staring at the ceiling where that poster used to be. I would like to put it back up, but she'll see it. And then what? Then I'd have to start spilling the story, I guess.

I turn over, shove my face into the pillow, and drift back off to sleep.

A knocking on my door jolts me just a few moments later. "Are we training or what?" Irina's voice is muffled and low from the other side of the barrier between us.

All this time the training has kept me going. It has gotten me through the pain. The training and that last promise from Benny. "You will fight the Sick Heart and you will win. And it will all be fine."

But he was lying.

There was no fight.

Nothing was ever gonna be fine.

It was always gonna end up just like this.

“Nah,” I tell her. “Go ahead and go back to sleep.”

“What?” She tries the doorknob. It jiggles. I turn back over to look at it, cursing myself for not locking it last night when I got up and left her sleeping on that chair. She opens it and waits in the hazy darkness of the doorway. “I thought we were training?”

“There’s no point, Irina.”

“What do you mean?”

“You should just go home.”

“What? Why?” She steps into my room and walks halfway to the bed. I can smell her shampoo from here. She’s already showered. She’s dressed in the same nondescript training clothes she prefers, black training shorts and a white tank top. “What’s wrong?”

Everything’s wrong. “Nothing’s wrong. Just...” I can’t even finish it. So I just go silent. Then I turn over, turn my back to her, and close my eyes, forcing the world to go away.

I’m actually drifting off again when I hear the soft tapping of her bare feet on the concrete floor. The smell of her shampoo gets stronger and the heaviness of her presence behind me is too much. So once again, I turn. “What?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me. I just... I don’t want to do this.”

The look on her face is painful to watch. Because it’s not anger, it’s... rejection. Or the results thereof. “You really want

me to leave?”

I wait for the tantrum. I’ve grown used to them over the past few years. One-night-stand girls lying next to me in my bed in the morning, looking at me like I’m an asshole when I tell them they need to get the fuck out.

But Irina isn’t one of these girls and we didn’t have sex last night, and she’s not feeling dejected because she gave me something and got less than she expected in return.

She’s just... disappointed, I think. To finally meet the real me.

Irina sighs. Then she pushes me over and climbs into bed with me.

“What the hell are you doing?” I say it too loudly. Too much objection in my tone.

“I’ll sleep if you want to sleep. But I know what this is.”

“What are you talking about?”

She turns her back to me. There is literally like ten inches of space between my body and the edge of the bed, but she manages to fit herself into that space, her warm back pressing up against mine.

I scoot over. Not to give her room, but to get away from her. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but—”

“Shut up. I don’t want to have sex with you, Eason. I don’t want to have sex with anyone. So you’re safe. I just think...” She sits up a little and twists her body until she can see me. “There’s something wrong with you. I said something last night. I’m not sure what it was, but something we talked about changed you and this”—she pans a hand at the bed—“is you coping. And that’s fine. We’ve all been there.”

Who is ‘we?’ Then I realize it’s not me and her she’s referring to, but her crew. The kids in the camp with her. They’ve all been here where I am. Wanting to sleep away the day. Stay in the dark. Stop eating. Hoping for death.

“But you don’t get to check out if I don’t.”

I scoff. “Do ya wanna check out with me?”

“No. But if you want to sleep today, I’ll sleep with you.”

Sleep with me. She means it literally, not provocatively. I play her words back, suddenly filled with questions. “Do you really not wanna have sex?” Irina’s laugh is so immediate and childish, I can actually picture the blush on her cheeks. “I’m not talking about with me, Irina. I mean, you don’t want to have sex with anyone? Ever?”

“Just shut up and sleep.”

I smile, despite the encroaching darkness that wants to cover me like a cloak. It’s dangerous to give in to the urge to stay in bed. After my surgery I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t walk for nearly eight months and then there was constant pain with every step. Bed was my answer. Not bed, really. Sleep.

I don’t take drugs recreationally. Ever. But I can see why people do.

Sleep is more than rejuvenation for some people. It’s a black hole of emptiness that fills in for death while you wait for that Grim Reaper to come and make it all final.

That’s what it is for me. Sometimes.

I’ve gotten better. When I get up before the sun, things go better. And if I just keep training, I feel like I have a purpose.

When I got news of Irina, that... I dunno. Gave me something else. A new goal. Irina was going to fill in for sleep

and death, at least for a little while.

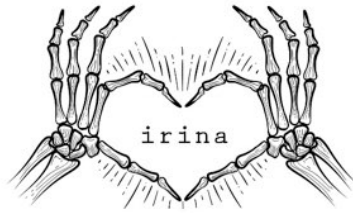
But it's all ruined now. Nothing they told me about what happened that day, or what came next, was real. They lied. About all of it.

Cort was buying his freedom.

There was never going to be a thirty-seventh fight for him. He was out.

And this changes everything.

CHAPTER 11



*W*hen I wake, Eason is gone, but I can hear the shower going in the connecting bathroom. The AC has made this room frigid and even the down comforter covering me isn't enough to keep the chill away.

I'm facing the bathroom door so when it suddenly opens, I'm looking right at him when he walks through a cloud of steam. He's already dressed in a pair of training shorts, but he's still wet.

His eyes find mine immediately. "Lazy. Are ya gonna get up or not?"

It's not me who's being lazy. It's not him, either. It's not about laziness. It's about depression. It's a problem for him. Probably a constant battle.

I'm not prone to it like some people. I feel it. I feel the hopelessness and the futility of it all. But it doesn't ever get a hold of me the way it did some of the other kids.

I wish it did. I wish I could just lie in bed and sleep the days away.

Rasha, Paulo's little sister, did this when she was younger. She was always depressed. We used to run laps around the camp every morning and every afternoon. There was a

footpath worn into the dirt from so many feet running in the same loop over the years. Rasha would cry—sob, really—the entire time she was running. Morning and evening.

Everybody knew she was doing it. But she never did it any other time, not even at night. So no one ever said anything about it. Staying in bed in Cort's camp wasn't an option. And anyway, she had Paulo to keep her focused. He pulled her through those dark times. She was a good fighter too. Obviously, since she's still alive. The only other time she would cry is after she came home from a win.

We all understood crying about that. Though I don't think anyone else ever cried like Rasha did over her dead opponents.

The last time I saw Rasha she was twelve and teaching herself to speak French. She and Paulo were both born in Brazil and already spoke Portuguese, Spanish, and English, so I'm sure she's fluent by now. Nandy would probably give up her firstborn son for an opportunity to interview the kids in Cort's camp for her linguistics thing. Hell, Anya would blow her mind. She speaks seventeen languages, not even including sign language.

I wonder for a moment where Rasha is now. Boarding school, I guess. But where is it? France? I bet it's in France. That's why she was learning French. She wanted to live in Paris.

Paulo was already getting famous in the legitimate MMA circuits when I ran away. He was making good money. It was a complicated relationship between the two of them. Paulo was so confident and Rasha, while a very good fighter, was not gonna make it past her next fight.

You can't get attached to people if they're just gonna go and die on you. Paulo tried to keep her at a distance, but he

always loved her. And as soon as we got the supply ship the first thing he did was promise to get her the fuck out of this shit and put her somewhere nice.

And he did. He kept his promise.

Obviously, Paulo doesn't live in France. He trains at Sick Fights. He lives in the penthouse. But I can see Rasha in my mind's eye living in one of those amazing Parisian apartments. She would only be sixteen now, but Rasha has never been a child. She can take care of herself.

Eason tilts his head a little, like a puppy with a question. "What?"

I didn't answer his other question and we've been staring at each other while I had my thoughts about depression, and crying, and Rasha's theoretical Parisian apartment.

I throw the covers off me and get out of his bed, already showered, and dressed, and wearing shoes. He smiles. He's got a really nice smile. Everything about him is nice to look at. He was such a contradiction this morning. It upsets me a little to realize that he's so normal. Just like the rest of us. That he's not immune to the human experience the way he probably wishes he was.

He's rich, and successful, and alive, and living on a beach that isn't connected to a death camp.

It's weird how someone could have so much and feel so empty.

He's not wearing a shirt, so I get a good look at his tattoos. That face. Eason Dead Eyes. It's scary-looking. It's smiling, but with jagged triangle-shaped teeth and x's for eyes. The opposite of a smiley.

It's right in the middle of his stomach. And it's not the only one. He's got... maybe a dozen? Maybe more. "Do all the fighters have tattoos?" These words of mine come out so Russian, it takes me by surprise.

It makes Eason smile bigger though. "Most of them. Why do you speak like an American?"

"They don't like Russians here."

"Are ya Russian?"

"Probably not. But I sound Russian."

"Was that your first language?"

Normally I don't like to talk about myself, so when people ask things, I naturally deflect. But it's different with Eason because he's the only person in this whole country who understands what I am. "Yes, it was." And with this answer, my American accent is back. "I don't remember much about life before Cort. But I didn't know English when I came to live with them when I was six. I learned that later because Rainer only knew English." This makes me smile. "He was the only person in the whole camp who only knew English."

"Was he English? Or American?"

"I have no idea." This makes me laugh because I have known Rainer so long, he feels like a part of me. And yet I have no idea who taught him how to talk. "American, maybe. He didn't have an accent like Maart. It's funny, though, because I never even wondered about where he was from. He did know sign language. We all did, because Cort made us talk in signs for weeks at a time. We had a strict 'no talking' rule on the Rock. One month, no talking. Then one month with only sign language. And then, finally, the last month of each

fight camp we were allowed to talk and eat good things like cookies.”

“Did you like him?”

“Who? Cort?” I scoff. “How could anyone not like Cort? He’s... everything. He’s everything.”

“Then why did you run away?”

“What makes you think I ran away?”

“Did you forget that I told you Maart was lookin’ for ya?”

“No. How would I forget that?”

“Because ya haven’t asked me about it.”

“Who cares.”

“Don’t ya care?”

“Maybe the better question is why do *you* care so much?”

“Forget it, Irina. It was just a stupid question.” He walks out of the bedroom and leaves me there, alone, in the middle of the room.

I keep standing there for a few moments, trying to figure out what just happened. Because something just happened.

When I leave the bedroom, I find Eason in the kitchen pouring green juice into a blender filled with ice. He grabs a can of protein powder and adds a few scoops. Then he watches me as he puts the top on and blends it up. When the grinding noise stops, he pours us each a glass.

I don’t even ask what it is. I’ve had every kind of protein shake the world could ever think up. Though not for a while now. So when I gulp it down, and realize it’s gross, I come up grimacing. “Uck. What is that?”

“Pea juice.” And then he laughs, and his laugh is even nicer than his smile. So I laugh too.

He takes a long drink, finishing it all at once, then puts his glass in the sink and fills it with water.

I drink the rest of mine too because I’m not sure if I’m still training, and if I am, then it’s my job to drink this shit, and then he takes my glass and puts it in the sink with his.

When he turns back, he leans against the counter with his arms folded. Just staring at me.

“What?” Now I’m the one tilting my head like a dog with a question.

He sighs, like he’s about to deliver bad news. But no words come out.

“Just... tell me.”

“It’s a long story. And a sad one too.” His eyes narrow when this last part comes out, and his face goes weird. Which makes my heart skip because his emotion, while still under control, is so... *so* heavy inside him, makes me suddenly overcome with anxiety over what he might say next.

Whatever it is, this is why he didn’t want to get out of bed.

I don’t know what to say. My throat is getting tight and beginning to ache like I might cry. And I don’t even have a reason to cry.

But that isn’t true. I want to cry because he wants to cry.

His hands come up to his face and he covers it, scrubbing them up and down as he takes a deep breath.

I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know how we got here, but I do know that Eason Dead Eyes might be the saddest

person I've ever seen. And right now, he's having a really hard time hiding it.

“What did I say?”

He's making a noise I can't quite describe. But then he pulls his hands away from his face, laughing as he stares out the window towards the sea. It's not a happy laugh. “Ya know what's funny, Irina?”

“What?”

“I feel like you the other night. When you found out that the evil was still there. It never left. You didn't defeat it. All ya did was put it out of your mind for a while.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You thought that in saving yourself—by killing those men—you were... maybe... saving the others too. But ya didn't save them. And it hurt to face that truth, didn't it?”

I don't know where he's going with this, but it's starting to sound like an accusation, so I'm starting to get defensive. “I have faced plenty of truth in my time. So I don't know what you're getting at, but I have nothing to feel guilty about. Nothing.”

He slowly turns his head towards me. Looks me dead on. Green eyes narrowed down into angry slits. Immediately my body tenses up, ready for a fight. But he doesn't come at me. He just spits out words. “I took some prizes. In the early days.” He's practically snarling at me. “I had a better boat than the one I showed you.”

“So?” I growl right back. “I don't know what that has to do with your sudden change in attitude.”

“I took them because they were offered. I took them because I earned them. I took them because I didn’t know, Irina. I. *Didn’t. Know.*”

“Know what, Eason? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I wouldn’t even think that his eyes could narrow down any more without closing, but he manages to do this, the muscles in his face tightening, his lips pressing together. He swallows.

“What?” Now I’m whispering. Because I’m afraid. Not *of* him, but of the words he’s trying to get out. Because whatever they are, they are something terrible. “What happened, Eason?”

It’s a dangerous question. One I don’t really want to ask because I really, really, *really* do not want to know what happened to him. I don’t. I don’t want to know.

His face goes blank for a moment, then he sucks in a breath and turns away from me. Walking out of the kitchen.

I stay where I am just to see what he does.

He paces the room, walking towards the ocean, then back towards me, then back to the ocean. He does this about twenty times, then he stops with his back to me.

I come out from behind the counter that separates the kitchen from the living room and stop just a few steps behind him. “You don’t have to tell me.” Because I don’t want to know. “We could just... run. Or... something. Train. Mats. Weights. Spar. Box—”

“Shut up, Irina.”

He doesn’t say it mean. He’s just telling me to stop making excuses for him. Because that’s all the training is. That’s all

the training ever was. A way to shut down the memories, and the questions, and the evil of it all. It's just the way we trick ourselves into feeling in control.

“Get drunk?” I catch a little huff of a laugh. “Smoke? I don't smoke. But if you want to, I'll do it. Or we can... swim? That's why I go in the ocean.”

He turns now, looking at me with glassy eyes.

What? But I'm not even whispering now. It's just my lips moving inside a moment of silence.

“What are you trying to forget, Irina?”

My shoulders drop and I let out an exasperated breath. I don't want to talk about me. This is not about me, this is about him. I'm just trying to be polite.

He lets out a little laugh. “If you could only see your face right now. You'd think I asked you to kill someone or something.”

“Well, here's the thing, Eason. You're the one acting weird. Not me. I've got no desire to talk things through.”

“Neither do I.”

“So... well... what are we even doing then? You come on all strong, trying to talk me into shit, and now you're just... pushing me away. Is this some psychology bullshit? To make me wanna stay?”

“Is it working?”

“That's not what you're doing, I can tell.”

“Then why ask the question?”

“Because...” I exhale in annoyance. “Because... I don't know if I can handle your story, Eason.” My face goes tight

and I have to hold my breath to keep all that pushed-down pain inside me. “I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s all right.” His shoulders do a little insecure shrug. “I wasn’t gonna tell ya anyway.”

Which is a lie. He wants to tell this story so bad, he’s out of control. And I have to make a decision here. Because if I stay, I have to listen to it. If I stay, I have to be there for him. That’s just how it is. If we’re partners, then we’re partners.

Our eyes are locked while I have this internal debate. He breaks the silence first. “What are you thinking about?”

I’m not really that great of a liar. Not for big things like this that come with so many emotions. So I just tell him the truth. “I’m wondering if I should walk out on you and never look back.”

“So go.” He points to the door.

“I’m not sure I want to do that.”

“Why?”

“Why do you get to ask all the questions?”

“Because I want to know things and you just want to hide from them.”

“Says the man who’s desperate for me to coax his secrets out of him.”

“Is that what ya think I was doing?” He scoffs. “Irina, I was talking myself out of killing ya.”

“Fuck you.”

He smiles. “I was. But not really. Because it’s not your fault. Ya didn’t know.”

Wait. Did he just admit he was serious? “Why would you want to kill me? What did I ever do to you?”

He scrubs both his hands down his face, then walks over to the couch and collapses down, sinking back into the cushions. He sighs out the word, “Benny.”

“Benny? Who the hell is Benny?”

“The guy who owned me.” Eason nods as he works the tension out of his jaw. “I didn’t start there with him. It was a winding road. I started off in Ireland. I’m Irish. Maybe you can tell.”

I smile at him. But he doesn’t smile back, and this makes my stomach clench up in dread. Because something bad is coming. I can feel it.

“I came up in Ireland until I was nine. My father ran a gym in Dublin. When he was comin’ up, it was mostly boxing. But then MMA kinda took off and that’s where the money was, at least in the underground fights. He had three sons at that time. Declan, Conor, and me. I was the baby back then. To say that Declan and Conor came out of my mam’s womb with fists up would be an understatement. Maybe it’s genetics, maybe it’s environment. Who cares? The point is, the Malones can fight.”

“Malone.” The word comes out before I can stop it. “That’s your last name?”

Eason slowly nods his head. Everything about him today is slow. Like he’s moving through water instead of air. “What’s yours?”

I don’t answer right away, even though I have an answer.

“Trick question?” He’s not mad when he says this. He’s trying to keep me talking, I think. Maybe so he doesn’t have to.

“No. It’s not a trick question. I was just thinking... it must be nice to know where you come from. My official last name is van Breda, of course. I mean, not ‘of course.’ I chose it, actually. When Cort got us all legal papers, I just took his name. Which isn’t even his name, he’s got no last name. Neither do I. And”—I look up at Eason—“that’s fucked up. And... unfixable. I mean, I can make up as many last names as I want. I can get new papers. But it doesn’t change anything, ya know?”

Eason shrugs. “I don’t think I do, Irina. I wasn’t... I didn’t... it was just different for me.”

“Right. Sorry for interrupting. Keep going.”

“I thought ya said ya didn’t wanna hear it?”

“Well, Eason...” I sigh out a long, tired breath. Mostly just to buy myself time so I can figure out how to put this, but also because I’m tired and it’s not even lunchtime yet. “You’re the only person in this whole city—maybe this whole country—who has any idea of what I’ve been through. So... I can’t just toss you aside like trash, can I? Like it or not, I need you.” I wince at this last part. Even though that’s truly how I feel, admitting it wasn’t in the plan.

But it does make Eason smile. “That’s good to know.”

“So keep going. I’m listening.”

“Well, it’s complicated. But not really. My da was a fighter. My brothers were fighters. I was a fighter. I don’t even remember a time when I wasn’t in the gym training. Brothers there. Father there. It was my life. Of course, I was too young to fight for real. But my da, he wasn’t too concerned about the rules. Declan, who was eight years older than me, he was all legitimate. But he was never gonna be professional. He was

never gonna make it. And my da, well, his dreams were big, I suppose. He found out about the training camps.”

“Wait. Like Ring of Fire?”

“Definitely not, but something like it. He found out that there was a group of men training children to be fighters. All over the world they were training these kids. I think he probably tried to get in on it as an owner, but it was never gonna happen. You don’t ‘get in’ on things like that. You’re born into it.”

I nod. Because yeah, that’s how it goes. You’re born into this shit.

“Anyway, he did it different with Conor. Started putting him in some underground fights when he was seven. Bare-knuckle stuff, not boxing. Conor did well. By the time I was...” Eason pauses to swallow and then suck in a breath before continuing. “By the time I was sold, he was fifteen. I guess good ol’ Da thought that was his chance. He was never gonna get in the big underground fights, not yet. But he could buy his way up, little by little.”

Yep. I knew it. My stomach churns at this revelation. But I knew it was coming. How else does a kid from a random Irish family in Dublin get here? “He sold you to get in.”

Eason nods. “He sold me. My brothers were standing right there. I was taken, kicking and screamin’, and put on a boat. The next thing I knew, I was somewhere hot and stifling. It was Morocco, but I didn’t know that then. Actually took me a couple weeks to figure out where I was, because once I arrived my new owner—”

“Benny?”

He scoffs. “No. Not Benny. I don’t know what the man’s name was. Maybe they told me, but I don’t remember it. I wasn’t there long enough to give a fuck.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“I’m not sure, really. I was in some kind of basement. But not a real basement. Like a lower level built into the ground, but no windows or anything.”

“A dungeon.”

He laughs. “As good a word as any. A dungeon. It wasn’t dark like that, though. The walls were made of rock, or sand, or something. And there were tapestries and tables. And cages.”

“Tables? For like... customers?”

“Dunno. I guess. Again, wasn’t there very long. The power went out—which it often did—but this time there was screaming upstairs. Gunshots. Some kind of raid, or just some attack by a rival gang. Someone came, opened up the cages—there was just me and two other boys, plus a girl. All younger than me, though. I was nine. They were... four? Maybe five, but I doubt it. They were small. And they were drugged with hands taped together and gags in their mouths. Anyway, whoever these men were, they took the little kids and left me there. And just before the last guy retreated up the stairs holding the little girl, I asked, ‘What about me?’ In English, of course. Which he didn’t speak, I don’t think. But maybe he understood, because he gave me the finger to fuck off.”

“Well, that’s weird.”

“Yeah. It is, isn’t it?” His mood has lightened with the telling of his story. This must not be the bad part then. The bad part must be coming up later. “I never did figure it out. It took

me weeks to learn any words at all in Arabic, and even then, I was only worried about food and water. After all the fighting stopped upstairs, I went up there—dead people everywhere, blood splattered everywhere—and I just... walked out the door. It was night-time. There were even people in the street, walking by like nothing happened. So I walked away like nothing happened too.”

“Where did you go?”

“To the water. Looking for the ship they brought me in on. I didn’t have anywhere to go, so I went to the only place I could think of. This is where I met Sami.”

“Sammy.” The name just comes out, low and sad.

“What?”

“Oh. We had a Sammy in our camp too. He died though.”

Eason nods. “Right. Well, Sami was a street kid. He was maybe... eleven? And he said he’d been on his own since he was eight. I think he was tellin’ the truth too, because that little fucker knew how to do everything. He’s the one who got me to Marrakesh. We hid in the back of a truck. And when we got there it was fuckin’ amazing. Every day we had food, and water, and a place to sleep. There were others too. Hundreds of homeless children running around the medina of Marrakesh. Sometimes we even worked. Helped out doing various things. It was a strange time—I was a little boy in a strange country who had escaped child traffickers after his family sold him to gain entry into a fight club. And when I thought about that, it was scary. But when I didn’t, it was... fine. I was fine.”

“So how did you get into the Ring, Eason?”

“Oh.” He laughs, still smiling. But I can see the darkness coming now. “It didn’t last. There were hunters everywhere,

looking for stray children to put back on the market. So yeah, eventually I was caught. Sold. Ended up with just another random jackass. And then... fight camp. I was trained under a guy called X-Eyes.” He points to his stomach, to the scary smiley faces all over him. “His tattoos looked like this. I was there long enough to get through two death matches. The kiddie ones, right? Working my way up, I guess. And then X-Eyes lost in the Ring of Fire and... well, you know what happens next.”

I picture his life and compare it to mine. I guess I had never realized how lucky I was. How much worse it could've been if I had landed in any other camp but Cort's.

Everyone wants in the Ring of Fire because the prizes—for both the owner and the fighter—are enormous. The fighters get to live. But they get other things too. Money, and gold, and houses, and yachts. Not to mention women to bed and more kids to train in their camps.

The owners get things like... controlling shares in global businesses. Ways to make legitimate billions. Respect. And more fighters, because they also get the training camp of the losing opponent. They get all his up-and-coming fighters. They get all his hard work.

Losing in the Ring of Fire has consequences for both the owner and the fighter. Of course, the fighter dies. But the owner loses all chances to fight in the Ring again because he loses his best prospects.

If he's an older owner, maybe he's got two camps. Two fighters at Ring of Fire level. Maybe even more. So the blow is not as bad.

But if he's young, if this fighter was the only one he had, the fighter would've been very precious. Because losing

means the owner starts all over from the bottom. Finding a young boy who has what it takes to go all the way again isn't easy. There is only one Cort van Breda on this whole planet. Only one.

All the rest just... die.

“No,” I tell Eason. “I actually don't know what happens next. Cort never lost. I've been with him—was with him—the whole time.”

Eason just looks at me now, his face different. It's not anger or sadness. It might be jealousy. He presses his lips together to force a smile, then continues.

“My next camp was worse. Bigger. Kids were assholes. I did one fight there—won, obviously—and then the Ring fighter lost and we were given away again. This happened four more times in just two and a half years and then I landed at Benny's when I was thirteen. I was put up for auction. There was so little left of the original camp I came into after all those losses, they just sold us all off like... like a fuckin' estate sale. By that time, they all knew I was gonna make it. I was a ticket in for a hungry up-and-comer, which Benny was. He said he was part of the Saudi royal family, but I wouldn't know any better if he wasn't. He was someone, though. Someone important. Or, at the very least, the son of someone important. Because I was sold for a very pretty price. Almost twenty-six million dollars.”

I just stare at him for a moment, my mouth open in shock as I try to process what he just said. But mostly my mind is still stuck on the words 'estate sale.'

Meanwhile, Eason continues. “I didn't have much of a concept of what a racehorse was back then, but Benny had a thing for them too. And right after he bought me, he took me

to Japan for some racing. God, that was nice. The whole thing was nice. The horses, the food, the people, the track. It was amazing. Benny was young, not even twenty-five. He felt like an older brother to me. Which, of course, was something I had lost when I was sold in Ireland. And he treated me like a little brother too. If putting one's little brother in death fights was a thing, of course. Anyway, the point I'm making is that I was a racehorse to these people. A piece of flesh with potential, put up for auction. But ya see, the racehorses? They're treated like kings, Irina. Best food, best care, best training, best accommodations, best travel. That's what I got from Benny."

Eason has been leading me here to this moment the whole time. This intersection. And here we are—at the crossroads—standing in the middle of possibilities.

The end of this story is on the tip of his tongue, but he pauses, like he's not sure how to say the rest. So I prod him along. Because it's very clear that there is no Benny here in South Beach. There is no owner. "What happened to him, Eason? What happened to Benny?"

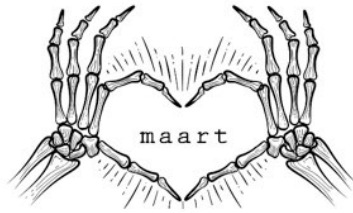
Eason's eyelids drop. His gaze becomes distant. His lip lifts up in a snarl. And that's when I see it.

Dead Eyes.

It's the perfect name for the man across the room from me.

"Ya killed him, darlin'. That's what happened to Benny. Ya killed him. He was in Cort's village that day you all made your escape."

CHAPTER 12



I'm just punching in the code to the penthouse when my phone buzzes. I shove open the door, realize the place is empty and quiet, and then kick it closed behind me and pull the phone out of the side pocket of my cargo shorts.

Unknown number.

My heart skips for a moment. But it's an irrational hope, so I force myself to breathe and accept the call. "Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's Beth."

I narrow my eyes, thinking. It takes me a couple seconds to put it all together. I huff. "Hello, Beth. What's up?"

"I had you for a minute, didn't I? You have no idea how much fun I've had thinking about you calling me Beth."

I crack a smile, then actually chuckle. "You're dumb."

"Anyway. I'm calling to invite you to lunch."

"You have news?"

"Not anything spectacular, but yes. I do have some."

"Can't you just tell me now?"

"Of course I could. But I'm inviting you to lunch instead."

“When? Tomorrow?”

“Right now.”

“Right now? It’s three p.m., Beth.”

“I know. But I’m on that diet—one meal a day. Ever heard of that one?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “So I can’t eat until four, otherwise I just want to scarf everything before I go to bed. Plus, if I invite you to dinner it sounds like a date, and it’s not a date.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s a meeting. Completely professional. Business only. Colleagues. Well, now I’ve gone too far. How about... friends? Do you have many?”

“Many what?”

“Friends, Maart.”

“I have four fighters living with me right now.” I look around the place, peeking into bedrooms. “All of whom seem to be missing at the moment.”

“I’m not talking about fighters. I’m talking about friends.”

“They’re all friends, Beth.”

She chuckles. And I smile. I like Beth. She’s kinda fun. And even though she comes off as easy-going and playful, almost unaffected, I know there’s another side to her. And it intrigues me.

“I’m gonna grill you on this tonight, Maart.”

“On what?”

“Your friends.”

“Why?”

“Because you owe me a story. Remember? Don’t worry, though. I don’t want *that* story. Not yet. Now I’ve said too much. I’ll tell you when you get here.”

“Get where?”

“My place.”

“Your hotel?”

She tsks her tongue. “I don’t live in a hotel, Maart.”

“You don’t live in Rio at all, Beth.”

Now she’s laughing. “That doesn’t mean I don’t have a house here.”

Well. She just upped my intrigue level. “You’re weird, you know that?”

“Yes, I know. I’ll text you the address. Don’t take too long. I’m really hungry.”

The call ends and I just stare at the screen for a moment, shaking my head. Then I press Paulo’s contact in my phone.

He answers on the third ring. “Yup.”

“Where are you? Where is everyone?”

“We’re at the beach, Maart. It’s fuckin’ Saturday. Where have you been all day?”

“I haven’t been gone all day.”

Paulo sighs. “You were in Ipanema, weren’t you? Looking at that stupid billboard.”

I don’t admit to this, but he’s right. Ipanema is just south of here. It’s kind of easy to walk that direction and bump into that fuckin’ billboard.

“She’s fine, Maart.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You know what I do know? If Irina wasn’t fine, she’d get in touch with us. That’s what I do know. This is Irina we’re talking about. She mothered me like a hovering auntie my whole life even though I’m a year older than her. She’s careful, and smart, and she would call if she needed help.”

I know all those things, but... ever since I saw that billboard, that black eye... I just can’t get the image out of my mind. “Are the boys there with you?”

“Yep. Budi and Evard are swimming and Maeko is hittin’ on a girl two umbrellas over.” Maeko protests in the background. “Come join us.”

“Nah. I’ve got a... an appointment.”

“An appointment, huh?”

“With Beth.”

“Beth? Who’s Beth?”

“I mean Mackenzie.”

This makes Paulo laugh. “God, you’re stupid. Anything else, then? We’re trying to have a good time here.”

“Nah, that’s all. I just didn’t know where everyone had gone off to.”

“We’re all fine, Maart. You don’t need to mother us like a hovering auntie.”

I know this. Hell, Paulo is the reigning UFC Middleweight Champion. If he can’t keep a group of killer boys safe, no one can. “All right. I’ll see ya tonight. Don’t keep Evard out too late. I don’t want Cort to call the house phone and Evard not be here.”

Paulo just huffs and hangs up on me.

None of the kids really had any trouble slipping into a normal life once our time on the supply ship was over. The younger ones went into the jungle with Cort and Anya for school and... well, to give them a chance to have a bit of a childhood. Everyone older than fifteen came with me to start the gym. Irina was about fourteen—maybe she was fifteen, but I wasn't convinced—so I made her stay with Cort.

She was pissed about that. Paulo and Maeko were both here and the three of them came up together since they were small. They did everything together.

And then I cut her out.

“Shit, Maart,” I chastise myself. “Ya did a little more than cut her out.”

Right. I understand it hurt her feelings. I understand it's not fair. I understand the only reason I did all this is because she's a girl.

I get it.

But I don't care. She's five foot five and a hundred and twelve pounds sopping wet. She couldn't see what I was seeing. She couldn't see that the differences between her and the boys were multiplying exponentially by the day.

And I do realize that she doesn't have to fight boys anymore. It's against the rules in UFC, so that's never gonna happen. But that's not the point. The point is, it was time to stop.

So I made her stop. And I stand by that decision no matter what.

We've been here in the penthouse for almost five years. All our oldest fighters have moved on. They're all gone now. Even Rainer is gone.

I don't understand where all the time went. It bothers me how fast it goes.

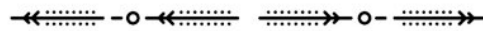
But the really disturbing part is that I feel like I'm stuck in the mud. Unable to move on.

It's Irina. I can't seem to get over how she left.

She's got a piece of my heart, that girl.

I need to see her again. I need to have one more conversation.

Macks. Mackenzie. Beth. She's how I do that.



BETH IS A RICH FUCK, apparently, because she lives two beach neighborhoods down in Leblon. She opens the door for me with a showy wave of her arm, like she's presenting the view straight in front of me. An entire ocean through the frame of floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Fucking hell, Beth. You never told me you were a goddamned billionaire."

She chuckles as I walk forward, drawn like a puppet on strings to the outside just past her terrace. "My father died last year and I'm the last one left. So..." I look at her over my shoulder and find her shrugging. "It *allll* went to me."

"You say that like it wasn't supposed to."

She almost snorts. "Trust me. It wasn't."

"What?"

“Never mind. A story for another time.” She closes the door and that’s when I realize the whole place is empty.

“Are you moving in or moving out?”

“I never lived here. I’ve never been here, actually. Not until I came here to see you. It’s on the market. Well, it will be in another week or so. I’m just squatting at the moment.”

I smile at her. She’s very pretty. And not wearing training clothes this time. Not those too-tight, too-revealing dresses from the Ring fights, either. A dress, but not a fancy one. Plain white cotton with thin straps and tiny, barely visible flowers sprinkled all over it. Something very summery and young. She’s barefoot too, so when she breezes past me—leaving the scent of roses trailing behind her—I catch the patter of those feet on the incredible hardwood floors.

The place is massive. The front room is just a foyer. But from here I can see the living room, the dining room, and the terrace.

“Follow me, Maart. The food is outside.”

It’s why I came, so... I follow.

The terrace is longer than it is wide, but the width is not insignificant. There’s an outdoor kitchen and that’s where I find Beth, efficiently removing takeaway cartons from paper bags and placing them in front of a small stack of paper plates.

“I didn’t know what you like, so I got a bunch of everything.” She peeks at me over her shoulder. She’s not wearing a lick of make-up, but her cheeks have a rosy blush over her tanned-brown skin. Her hair is down today as well, long and straight, like she ironed all the wrinkles out. “I hope you like Brazilian food.”

“Well, I am from Brazil, so...”

She smiles. “Have you ever had a hamburger here?”

“What?” I kinda laugh the word out. She’s so strange.

“A hamburger?”

“Yes. I’ve had hamburgers.”

“I am dying for a hamburger. But eating hamburgers in Rio is like eating tacos in London.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that. Haven’t made it to London yet. Is that where you live?”

“Where I live?” She taps her chin with a manicured fingertip, pretending to think about this. “No. Not really. Naturally, we have that castle in Scotland.”

The laugh comes out of me automatically. “Naturally.”

“But I live... wherever. I don’t really call any place home. Certainly not that castle in Scotland. So... here’s as good a place as any.” She narrows her eyes at me, but it’s not done in frustration or suspicion. It’s playful, I can tell. “Shall we eat? Grab a plate. I’m so hungry.”

I walk over to her and grab a paper plate. “Why are you only eating once a day? Even the kids on the Rock ate twice.”

“Oh, you know. Diet fads.” She sighs. “I’ve been on a diet my whole life. It’s just something I do.”

“You don’t look like you need to diet to me.”

“That’s because I diet, Maart.”

“I like you, Beth.”

“I like you too, Lance.” She bats her eyes at me. “Can I call you Lance?”

I chuckle. “I don’t care.”

Her plate is full and she smiles at me, cheekily, as she passes me with a swish of her dress. “Join me at the plastic dining table when you’re done, please. I have news.”

My stomach tightens a little when she says that and I blow out a breath. That’s why I’m here. To get news of Irina. And Beth has some.

There is a lot of food. I grab some meat pasties, some cheese pies, and some rice croquettes and take it all over to where Beth is sitting at a cheap plastic patio table. She’s waiting for me, her food untouched, and she’s smiling.

“You must have good news.” I sit down across from her in the hard, uncomfortable chair. “You’re smiling like an idiot.”

She wants to laugh, but holds it in. “I found her.”

“Where is she?”

“Miami. Specifically, South Beach. A nice area.” She looks out over her terrace railing. “Kinda like this place, actually.”

“Do you have a house there?”

“No. But I’m pretty sure there’s one in West Palm Beach.”

“Pretty sure?” I take a bite of cheese pie, then moan a little. “Fuck, this is good.”

“I own the restaurant, so thank you. I’ll tell the chef. And I haven’t had a chance to see all the houses yet since my father died. But I’m fairly certain that while I was perusing the will with the lawyers, I saw West Palm Beach in the inventory.”

“Who the hell was your father?”

“Sir Brendon Scott.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Nah. He wasn’t that kind of billionaire. A silent partner.”

“Oh.” I nod. “I see. So you grew up in it?”

“The sickness? Yeah. I did.”

I stop eating and just stare at her for a moment. I have a million questions, but I can’t seem to sort through them at the moment.

“I’ll tell you that story, if you want. But first, Irina. She’s living in a condo, which she bought herself, by the way—”

“She bought a condo? How the hell did she buy a condo?”

“She appears to be very resourceful. But I’m not quite sure about that. I didn’t get this info from the fighters. I was told she was there in South Beach, so I ran her name—she’s still using van Breda, by the way—and found the deed. She’s owned it for over two years now.”

I put my fork down. “Where the hell did she get all that money?”

“Well, it is a closet of a condo. So it was rather cheap. But still, it was over two hundred thousand dollars.”

“She’s fighting.” And as soon as the words come out of my mouth, I know it’s true. “She’s fuckin’ fighting.”

“Maybe. Don’t jump to conclusions.”

I just stare at Beth. “What do you mean? How the hell else is she gonna make that kind of money? She doesn’t have any skills.”

Beth huffs and places her fork daintily down on her plate, staring at me.

“What?” I ask her. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“So let me get this straight, Lance.” I crack a smile, even though she’s being totally serious. “You trained this girl to fight like a champion. Didn’t teach her any other skills. And then you told her she wasn’t allowed to fight. Is that the gist of it?”

I blow out a breath, frustrated. “I did it for her own good.”

“Who are you to tell her what is and isn’t for her own good?”

“Mackenzie, she’s gonna get hurt if she keeps fighting.”

“Every fighter gets hurt, Maart. It’s part of the job.”

“I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Most people don’t want anyone to get hurt. But this is the only skill the girl has. And you tried to take it away. I would’ve run from you too.”

“I tried to find her a husband. I didn’t just kick her out.”

Beth stares at me. Blinks. Blinks again. Then regains her composure. “You tried to find her a *husband*?”

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Why do... Maart. Is this what pissed her off? You set her up with someone?”

I let out a long sigh. “He was a good man. With a lot of potential and money. I figured...” I throw up my hands. “Hell, I don’t know what I figured. She was so persistent. And I already knew she was in love with me. So on her sixteenth birthday I bought her a dress and took her out to have dinner with the man and his father.”

“Holy. Fucking. Shit.”

“What?”

“That’s... cruel, Maart.”

“It’s not cruel!” At least I didn’t think it was. At least when I planned it. I sit back in my chair, angry, and defeated, and sad. “I can’t watch it, Beth. I can’t watch her fight. I can’t do it.”

“Then don’t watch it, Lance. You’re not the babysitter. And even if you do have nanny tendencies, she doesn’t need you anymore. She’s a grown-up and, from what I can tell, she’s doing just fine.”

“So you’re, what, telling me to drop it?”

“Not at all. I’m telling you to let her go. I don’t know what your plans are, but if they include any thoughts of dragging her back here to Brazil, you’d better have a backup. Because that won’t fly.”

Then she picks up her fork and starts eating again. Leaving me to stew and think about her words.

After a minute of this she leans back in her chair, dabbing her mouth with a paper napkin. “So. Do you want to know my story? Or are you ready to go now that you got the information you came for?”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Why not?”

“Because I just got here.”

She smiles, which kinda forces me to offer one back. “I’m not done with Irina. I have a call in and I’m sure it’s gonna pan out. So I’m going to find out more. She’s with another fighter.”

“Who?” I snap this word out and it hangs in the air like something sharp.

“A guy called Dead Eyes. You ever heard of him?”

I squint, thinking back. “Maybe. Wasn’t he called X-Eyes, though?”

“No. Different fighter. That was his first mentor.”

“Oh. Then maybe I don’t know him.”

“You probably don’t. He was only”—she hazards a guess—“sixteen or seventeen, maybe, when Benny was killed.”

“Who the hell is Benny?”

“His owner.” Beth takes a deep breath and holds it.

“What? What aren’t you telling me?”

“He was there. In Cort’s camp. That day you guys killed all those people.”

“What?” I make a face.

“That’s right. You killed his owner. It’s kind of a weird situation because Benny was up-and-coming. A Saudi prince. Dead Eyes—his name is Eason, by the way—Eason was his only fighter. And Eason was vacationing on a beach in France when the word came in that Benny had been killed. There’s a little more to it than that, but the outcome was... he was let go.”

“Let go, how?”

“Just... let go. His trainer, along with Benny’s accountant, kinda... took him.”

“Took him where?”

“I think they went to Dublin first. But they’re in Miami now.”

“She’s dating him?”

“Are you jealous?”

I want to automatically say no, but Beth is perceptive. And there’s no point in lying to her, so I take a moment to consider the question. “A little bit. Maybe. But not the way you think. I just... she’s just...”

“Yours?”

“Mine.”

Beth smiles. “Not any more, Lance. You need to, at the very least, accept that Irina is a grown woman who can make her own decisions. But, from what I can tell, she just met him. Maybe she’s dating him? Maybe she’s not? But if you’re going to make contact with her then you need to keep calm about her choices in men.”

“Is he an asshole?”

“I haven’t a clue. I did interview him. Three times, actually.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You did?”

“Yeah. Three fights in the Ring, three interviews. He was the last interview I ever did for *Ring of Fire*.”

“Do you have the issue?”

“Not with me. But I can get it. Do you want it?”

I nod. “Yes. I do.”

“OK. What do you want me to do next? Call up the trainer again? Try to get Dead Eyes on the phone?”

“No. I don’t want to talk to him. Try to get Irina on the phone.”

“OK. I’ll do my best.”

I nod. “Thank you. For all this, actually.” I wave a hand at the food. “Did I ever apologize for being rude to you on the *Bull of Light*?”

“Do you have a memory of apologizing for the scene you made on the *Bull of Light*?”

I point to myself, smiling. “Scene *I* made? You ambushed us. And you broke the terms.”

“To hell with terms. If I followed every stupid contract I ever had with a Ring fighter I’d never get any information at all. And ambushed you?” She scoffs. “Please. I once parachuted into a Ring camp in Cambodia to get a story on a fighter.”

“Shut up.”

“Swear to God. That was probably the most extreme case, but I’ve done a lot for that stupid magazine. And every owner, every fighter, was insane. They’re all crazy. You and Cort? Easily the sanest of the bunch. That interview with Pavo was something else. He tried to kiss me. In fact...” She pauses for a moment, like she’s thinking back on a memory. “That Benny fellow? The Saudi prince? He came on to me too. Gross.” She makes a face. “He was handsome enough, and definitely rich enough, but that man would fuck anything that walked. Anyway. Small world, I guess.”

“Who *are* you?”

She laughs, then offers me her hand from across the table. “Mackenzie Scott. Nice to meet you, Maart Carvalho.”

I shake her hand and let it go, smiling at her. “I have a funny feeling that your story should be in the magazine, not mine.”

“Well, you’re not wrong there.”

“So you...” I’m not sure how to ask this. “You grew up... knowing how they get us, Mackenzie?”

She offers me a much smaller smile now. “I was twelve when I met my first fighter. My father’s fighter. His name was Jeroen, but they called him King.”

“I don’t think I ever heard of him.”

“No. He died a long time ago.”

“Were you friends?”

“Friends?” She considers this. “Maybe. I was his prize.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I was Anya, once upon a time.”

“But your father—”

“He wasn’t my real father, Maart.”

“Oh.”

“I was *Anya*. Once upon a time.”

“Oh.” She was a slave. A ‘house slave’ is the nice term for it. But the real term is ‘sex slave.’ They kill them, usually. Right around puberty. Either that, or they turn them into breeders. “Did you...”

“No. I never did have children. Not for their lack of trying. Just”—she shrugs a little—“broken inside, I guess.”

“Oh, fuck, Beth. I’m so sorry.”

She reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Don’t worry. It’s been over now for a very long time. I stayed in Jeroen’s harem for about three years. Then he died in his last fight. And you know how it works. Fighters and women of the

loser go to the winner's owner. But my father paid to get me back."

I wince.

"Yeah. He was attached, I guess. But he wasn't interested in me anymore. Not like that. I was too old for his taste."

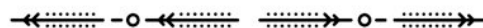
It has been years since I've had to have a conversation about this shit. And the whole thing makes me want to vomit. I want to tell her to stop talking, but I can't. Because this is her story. And no one should be told to shut up when they're telling their story.

But then I realize something about this doesn't make sense. "But Beth, this penthouse? All the other properties? How—"

"Oh, that's a whole other story." And she's smiling again. Laughing, almost. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Yeah. I get the feeling you came out on top."

She looks around, then out at the ocean, sighing out the words, "Did I ever."



WE FINISH EATING and then move to the two cheap lounge chairs positioned in front of the short flowering hedges that double as the terrace wall, and stare out at the ocean. There is a lap pool just to our right, but it's empty. It looks like it's been empty for years.

Mackenzie Scott left her harem house when she was fifteen and was taken back to her 'father's' estate in Scotland

to care for Sir Brendon Scott's aging wife.

"I was her caregiver until she died, just a few months after I returned home." Beth looks sad for a moment.

"You liked her?"

"I did. She was me, once upon a time."

"Not one of them?"

"We're all one of them, Maart. Even you, at this point."

"Probably right."

"But yeah. She was a house slave too, when she was small. Lord Scott took a fancy to her, the way he took a fancy to me." She shrugs. "And I have to say, as far as slave owners go, my lord was less evil than most. He hired me tutors. I ended up going to university when I was sixteen, but only stayed two years because by then, I was offered the job at *Ring of Fire* magazine."

"At eighteen?"

Beth nods. "Yeah. It was... as normal a fucking existence as a girl like me could've hoped for, let's just say that."

"That's..."

"Twenty-five years."

"Wow. I can barely remember what I was doing twenty-five years ago."

"You were fighting for your life."

"Yeah. I was. We were... nine, I guess. Just putting this whole plan in place back then."

She clears her throat, then looks at me.

"What?"

“I...” She blows out a breath. “I am desperate for that story.”

“Why?”

She turns her whole body towards me in her lounge chair, kind of angling herself on her side. She’s fuckin’ sexy too. I don’t know what it is about her, but she just is. Worldly, and confident, and smart. No, cunning. She’s like a fox. “I don’t know. It’s just what I do now. You see, stories, Maart—it’s how I make sense of things. I have every issue of that stupid magazine going back twenty-five years. That’s how I know I have the Dead Eyes issue. All three of them, actually. I kept them all. Because even though the articles are about the fights, they’re about the fighters too. I have the story of every single man who ever died for these sick fucks. Every single story except one. Because one of them refused to speak.”

“Cort.”

“Well, yeah. But it’s not just Cort’s story, Maart. His story is your story. And it’s kind of hard to get a story from a fighter who refuses to talk.”

“You really are desperate for it, aren’t you?”

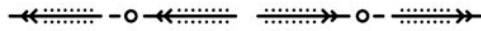
She smiles, but it’s sad. “I am. I can’t make sense of this puzzle until I have the last piece.”

“But that’s not us. We’re not the last piece. They’re still out there.”

“You, and Cort, and the camp—including Irina. You are one ending. Then it just begins again. Because stories don’t really end, do they?”

“No.” I sigh out a long, tired breath. “I guess they don’t.”

She turns her body again, so she's facing forward, then puts her hands behind her head and stares out at the sea. "But not tonight. We need Irina first. It's a critical plot point." She side-eyes me. "After we get her, I'll get you."



I STAYED A LITTLE LONGER, but not much.

It felt like we'd gotten somewhere and now we needed a break. So I just thanked her for dinner and there was an awkward hug goodbye.

I have waited three days now and she hasn't called. So on the fourth day I text her.

Come over for dinner. It's my turn.

Her reply: *Who is this?*

Lance. Six o'clock. Don't be late. Boys get hungry and they don't like to wait.

Her reply: *You're going to let me meet your boys?*

Is this a selling point?

Her reply: *I'll be there.*

She's cagy like that. Never really giving up too much. But I'm kinda cagy like that too, so it's fine. Does she want to interview the boys?

Maybe.

Do I care?

I'm not sure. But they're grown men. They can make up their own minds if they want to tell their stories or not. Except

for Evard, who is Cort's legitimate biological son, so Cort would have to OK that. But Evard has slowly turned into Cort over the years—quiet and introspective, except when he's angry. So he probably wouldn't talk to her anyway.

There was a time during that last fight of Cort's when I thought Evard would never be a fighter. His freedom was bought and paid for, so he was slacking off that year. He won his last death fight at age eight and he knew there was never gonna be another one.

But he surprised me when he turned fifteen and wanted to join Budi at the penthouse. Cort gave his approval, so what could I do? I said yes. But I didn't expect much.

Turns out, though, Evard is serious about this future as a fighter. He's not big and massive like Cort or Budi. He's lightweight now, but he'll be welterweight by the time he's ready to go big.

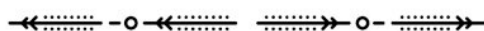
Maeko is welterweight and just won his third title only four months ago. He's training to defend it in Vegas next year. Both he and Paulo will be defending in Vegas.

Two champions in the UFC. It's not a small thing. I am a fucking rockstar MMA trainer. Every day coaches from all over the world are emailing me trying to get a meeting for a fighter they feel is promising. Trying to get them in my gym.

I don't take outside kids.

Not yet, anyway. I need to get our kids set up first.

Then I can think about other people's kids.



BETH FED ME TAKEOUT, but we don't eat takeout. Almost never. Fighters need good food and even though that dinner was tasty, it's just not good enough for this house.

I have a cook for them. A full-time chef, five days a week. On the weekends one of us cooks. Mostly Budi, because for some reason he likes it.

So Budi is cooking tonight. At seventeen, he's massive. Middleweight now. He's not gonna make heavyweight, but he's gonna be light heavyweight before long. I wanted to switch him over to boxing last year because he's got a mean uppercut that has knocked me out twice without even trying, but he said no. Actually, he said, "I didn't just spend the last fourteen fuckin' years fighting for my right to live to give up now."

I tried pointing out that boxing was a legitimate sport, but he wasn't having it.

Beth texts me at five minutes to six, letting me know she's downstairs. Almost in the same moment, I get the call from the doorman. She is let in.

"Are you gonna meet her at the elevator?" Evard asks, smirking at me.

"Behave, Evard. Or I'll send you back to the jungle."

He just snickers.

I open the door and I do meet her at the elevator. The doors pop open and there she is, wearing another very casual summer dress, a kind of light orange color with a light-purple flower pattern. Only this one goes all the way to the floor, swishing as she exits. Her hair is up in a fancy way, not just a ponytail. It's slightly messy. Like she did it up this morning

and didn't bother tucking all the stray bits back in for her dinner with us.

Which I like.

“Lance. Long time.”

I smile at her. “Beth. It's been days.”

“I wasn't sure if you were gonna push on. You know, with the date thing.”

“Are we dating?”

“We could be.” She tilts her head at me, like she's keenly interested in what I'll say here.

“You refuse to date a Saudi prince, but you'll date me?”

She chuckles. “Where are these boys? I need to meet them.”

“So you can date them too?”

She shoots me a warning. “You better be nice to me.”

“I'm kidding. But obviously you do like the young ones.”

She tsks her tongue. “Shit. You're an old fucker, Maart. And I like you, don't I?”

I chuckle too. “Come on. Let's get this over with.”

“Have you ever brought a date home before?”

“Hell, no.”

Beth tilts her head. “Why do you say it like that?”

And then we're through the door and all four boys—men, whatever—are standing in line, grinning like a bunch of assholes. Chuckling like they are about to have the time of their lives telling this woman all my embarrassing secrets and when she leaves, they're going to rib me about it relentlessly.

It's all the more entertaining to them because of who she is. How many times have I complained to them about 'that fucking reporter?' Dozens, at least. And they remember all of them, I'm sure.

Maeko offers his hand first. "Macks. Nice to meet you. I'm ___"

"Maeko." She finishes for him. "Yes. I know. That last fight was amazing. I'll be watching next year when you defend. I predict another belt for you."

The smile that forms on Maeko's face is... I dunno. I've never seen him smile like that before. He can't even respond, he's so taken with Beth.

Beth redirects her gaze. "And you're Paulo. Wow." She looks him up and down. "You're even more formidable in person than you are on the screen. I pity the next fighter who comes up against you. Each time I see you in the ring, you're better than the last."

Paulo practically blushes. "Thanks. You're... you were a good reporter. I read all the Ring interviews when I was a kid. They were well-written. You always kept it interesting."

Beth might melt a little. Paulo always was a charmer. Polite, respectful, intelligent.

But then she turns her attention to Budi. She makes an exaggerated gesture of looking up. Then she just chuckles. "The one and only Budi."

Budi is a quiet kid—man, whatever he is these days. So he doesn't say anything back, just nods at her.

Then Beth lands on Evard. She nods at him. "Yep. I can definitely see your father in those eyes of yours."

Evard lets out a breath, which prompts Beth to place a hand on his cheek, forcing him to look at her. “Don’t worry, Evard. You won’t be in his shadow forever.”

And this makes Evard brighten. It’s hard being Cort’s son, I guess. So many expectations that Evard won’t be able to live up to unless he carves his own way through this world.

Finally, introductions over, Beth turns back to me. “Smells good in here.”

I nod at Budi. “He’s the cook tonight.”

Beth offers him another smile, but Budi just ducks out and goes back to the kitchen.

“All right.” I wave my hand at the boys. “Go away. Don’t hover like a bunch of lovestruck puppies.”

They disperse, cracking jokes about me and my new girlfriend.

I turn back to Beth. “Drink?”

“Sure. Red wine, if you have it.”

“Come on. Follow me.” I take her hand, feeling a little self-conscious about that, and lead her through the living room, past the kitchen, and into an office that is set up with couches and a private terrace with a spectacular view of the ocean. “Have a seat. I’ll get that wine.”

I turn away, busy myself at the little bar, and when I turn back, Beth is out on the terrace, the wind blowing her long dress against her legs. I join her out there, handing her a glass and keeping one for myself.

“Thanks. You’ve got a nice place here, Maart. And those boys are nice too.” She turns her body, leaning one elbow on the terrace railing as she cocks her head up at me. “I’ve met a

lot of fighters in my day but I can tell you this—none of them were anything like yours. You’ve got a real family feeling with them. Kind of paternal. Am I right about that?”

“Such a reporter.”

She shrugs, but takes it as a compliment because she’s smiling. “What can I say?”

“Well, I do owe you.” I turn and face the ocean, leaning my forearms on the railing with my wine glass in both hands, our shoulders bumping a little. “So I don’t mind answering the questions.”

“No? What changed?”

“Well, like I said”—I side-eye her a little—“I owe you. But not just that.” I hurriedly add that in. “I know you now. At least a little bit. So it’s fine. And the answer is yes. I feel like a father to all of them.”

“Even Irina.”

“Especially Irina. I mean...” I sigh. “Look, we didn’t have a lot of girls. We had Sissy, and Cintia, and Ling—”

“Those girls who came up with you, Cort, and Rainer?”

“Yeah. They helped us, we helped them. That’s how it went. If you have a nice big camp, right? That’s a lot of kids to wrangle. And when they keep winning, and grow older, it’s really tough to keep that anger checked. You need women for that.”

“But you don’t need girls, do you?”

“No. You don’t. I feel bad saying that. And it’s got nothing to do with how I feel about them. It’s just... they lose, Beth. They always lose.”

“But don’t they all lose, Maart? Men and women alike? And you had one, didn’t you? Just about to go into the ring?”

“Lilith. But she wasn’t gonna win. Everyone knew it, even her. Trust me, I’ve seen enough boys grow up to know what happens when they turn sixteen. They become monsters. Lilith was a great fighter. She would go very far in strawweight. But that’s UFC, ya know? Not Ring of Fire. It’s all very fair in the real world. The Ring is just straight-up evil. They would’ve put her up against someone like these boys here. And even though Evard is nothing compared to the rest of them in that room, he would take Lilith out in seconds.” I look Beth in the eyes. “Seconds. And her life would be over.”

I let out a long breath.

“But Irina could’ve fought in the real world.”

I turn to Beth, getting kinda pissed off. It comes out in my tone. “I don’t want her to fight.”

Beth puts up a hand. “OK. I get it. I’m just trying to point out that you’re not really allowed to make those decisions for her. You can guide her and teach her, but in the end, Maart, it’s none of your business what she does with her life. And when you see her—”

“Do you have news?”

“No. I’m expecting some though. So I just want to prepare you. When you see her, you need to treat her not like a child, but like a grown woman. Because that’s what she is. Just pat yourself on the back for helping turn her into this amazing creature and leave it at that. You’re not her father. You’re not even a friend, at this point. So be careful. Choose your words wisely.”

I let out another breath, wondering now if inviting Beth over was the right choice.

She turns and walks over to a table and takes a seat, setting her wine glass down. “Come on. Sit. Let’s talk.”

I join her. But before I set my glass down, I drink it all. Beth is smiling at me. “What?” I ask.

“You need courage to answer questions?”

“No. Yeah. I dunno.” She laughs and I smile. “It helps.”

“Good.” She leans back in her chair and crosses her legs. I can’t see them because they’re hidden under that long dress, but I look anyway. And when I meet her gaze again, she’s smirking at me. “Am I your girlfriend?”

“I have no idea.”

“Should we date, Maart?”

“Are you seeing anyone else?”

She almost snorts. “That’s your answer?”

“It’s a logical question.”

“Coming from the man who shares a girl with his best friend?”

I huff. “It’s been a while. We don’t really do that anymore.”

“Do you love Anya?”

“Of course.”

“It’s just that simple? Of course you do? And how does Cort feel about that?”

“I guess you should ask him.”

“Surely the two of you have talked about it?”

“No.”

Beth uncrosses her legs and leans forward onto the table. “You’ve never talked about the fact that you both sleep with the same woman?”

“What’s there to talk about?”

Beth laughs and puts up a full-stop hand. “I have *hundreds* of questions.” Her eyes are dancing with excitement.

So this is what’s she’s on about. Anya. I tilt my head at her. “This is the story you want? Not my story, *our* story.”

“Maart, I’m gonna be honest with you here. I’m dying for that fuckin’ story. I’ve been playing it cool, but I need that story.”

I chuckle a little. “Why though? I mean, who cares?”

She exhales slowly. “It’s like... I dunno. I think it’s a...”

“Fuck’s sake. Spit it out.”

“It’s like... a really good erotica. I think I could write a novel about this.”

I guffaw.

“What’s so funny?”

“You want to write a novel about us?”

“I can see the promo now.” She pans her hand across the space in front of her, the way a movie director might when he’s describing a scene. “‘Based on a true story.’ I’d call it *Sick Hope*.”

“Sick Hope?” I make a face. “I don’t like it.”

“What’s wrong with *Sick Hope*?”

“It’s a play on Sick Heart. I don’t like plays.”

“What would you call it?”

“*Jungle Sex. Supply Ship Sex. Rock Sex.* Any of those would do.”

“Is that all it was to you? Just sex?”

I sigh. “No, Beth. That’s not all it was. I don’t know what it was. It was...”

“Sex.”

“Yeah, but—”

“With your best friend. Did you ever do that without Anya? Or any other girl between you?”

“You do know that Rainer was there a few times, right?”

She bites the back of her hand. Like she’s trying not to scream.

“What?”

“The three of you and her.” Beth leans back in her chair. “I think I need a cigarette.”

I laugh. “Well, what kind of sex life have you had?” But then I immediately regret the question. “Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

We’re both silent for a moment. And I’m just about to start apologizing again when she interrupts. “I don’t have a sex life, Maart.”

There’s nothing to say to that. So I just nod as I stare out at the ocean.

“I just...” She pauses.

I look at her. “You don’t have to tell me this, Macks. It’s none of my business.”

“And you don’t have to call me Macks. Beth is just fine.”

I huff a little, but I’m also smiling. She’s so... in control. But I saw a crack there, didn’t I? And that’s what she wants from me. A crack. “Anyway,” I say. “Back to Cort and me. I love him, he’s my best friend, we’ve done things—sexual stuff. But it was never about... I dunno. It was just...” I just stop, because I don’t know what it was. “But with Anya, that was just the prize, ya know?” I look at her now.

“Go on.”

“You know they breed them, right? The fighters? They’re like stallions. Studs. So every fight came with a girl for a prize so the owner could preserve the...” I sigh. “The bloodline. It was just a pedigree in the end. That’s all.”

“OK. But... obviously, that’s not what it was.”

“Well, that was all Cort’s doing. He took Anya out to the Rock and...” I shrug. “We all spent time together. And... life was just different.”

“And now?”

“And now? Now they’re in love. Like real love.”

“Not the kind of love you have for them.”

“Yeah, a different love. I love them, but I’m not interested in being part of some poly thing that’s just gonna fall apart. Cort’s tired of the world. She’s tired of the world. They like it out there in the jungle because they just want to be left alone now.”

“And you’re not tired of the world?”

“Sometimes. But generally, no. I’m still playing the game, Beth.” I look at her, stare into those brown eyes of hers, and

smile. “I feel like I’m just getting started. In fact, I said those very words to Cort just last week.”

“And what about me?”

Ohhhh. She’s gone there. I really wasn’t expecting that. I could play it off, make it a joke. A part of me still thinks I’m playing her to get help with Irina.

But, honestly. I like her. So that’s what I say. “Beth, I like you.”

She smiles, chuckling. “I like you too, Lance.”

So I smile back at her, feeling like we’re on better footing now. “Tell me something.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you really want to write a novel? Or were you just trying to figure out where I stand with Cort and Anya?”

“Both.”

“Have you written a novel before?”

She sighs. Loudly. Like she’s frustrated. “About ten of them.”

“Really? Did you publish?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Lance, they’re personal.”

“Oooooohhh.” I see. People work through their shit in different ways. Some train, some go to school, some get therapy. Some make music or art. And Beth... Beth writes books. “Can I read them?”

“Hell, no.”

“Why not?”

“They’re awful.”

“Come on, now. They can’t be. You’re... you. And your writing is so brilliant even Paulo was transfixed by it.”

“Let’s move on.”

“Oh. I found something real, didn’t I?”

“I’m not dating anyone else.”

“Anyone else?” She’s frustrated and I like it. I’ve never seen her vulnerable side. I find the fact that she even has one refreshing.

“Should we date, Maart?”

“I think we should. I have a question for you, though.”

She makes a face.

“Don’t worry. It’s not about the novel.”

“OK. Then what is it?”

“Do you have a bed in that empty penthouse of yours?”

“Do I have a *bed*?”

“I’m only wondering because it looked pretty empty to me. And if we’re dating, and I think we just decided we were, and you don’t have a bed in that penthouse, then I will have to take exception to that and you should just stay here.”

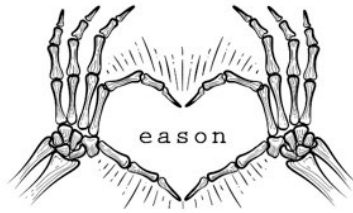
“Did you just invite me to move in?”

“Yeah.”

She laughs. “Oh, Lance. I think you might be the man I was never looking for.”

I look out at the sea, gaze wandering, then exhale out my words. “Seems about right.”

CHAPTER 13



*I*rina thinks this is the worst part. She thinks that Benny's death—and, by extension, the fact that she was part of it—is the worst part for me.

She thinks maybe I had a little flash of Stockholm Syndrome. That I loved Benny. I did. In a way. I liked him, at least. He didn't ever try to beat me, or talk down to me, or anything like that.

But this is not about Benny.

It's got nothing to do with fuckin' Benny.

It's about Eoin.

Irina just looks at me for several seconds. Then she blinks. "What?"

"That day, Irina, when you all decided that you'd had enough. Benny was one of those men who was there, in your camp, to watch Cort and Maart fight."

I watch her process this new information. I don't know her well enough to track her thoughts, so it could be going one of a few ways.

Perhaps she's working through her feelings of pity. I mean, I did have it decidedly worse than she could ever dream of. Ya think, well, I'm in a fight club. Winning is life and losing is

death. I understand evil, maybe she's thinking that. Maybe she's feeling sorry for me.

But, oh, we're just getting started with the evil, dear Irina. You've got no idea what's coming.

Or she could be thinking about that day and how it went down.

I don't actually know how it went down. I was on a fuckin' beach in San Tropez when word of Benny's death came in and my world got upended for the tenth or eleventh time. I was getting drunk with Davis. I had my eye on a girl just a few umbrellas down from us, and I was gonna make a move on her. Take her up to my suite and fuck her brains out because my fight was coming up. It was days away and even though I was sure I would win—fuckin' Sick Heart's time was over, everyone knew it—deep down I couldn't ever really know for sure. So I was making the most of things.

Then Davis's phone went off. Minutes later he was tugging me up to the suite, telling me to pack my shit, Wade was gonna meet us at the airport in Dubai.

Or perhaps dear Irina is thinking more critically. Perhaps she's now wondering why, exactly, she's here. And what, precisely, I want with her.

“What's wrong, Irina?”

She swallows hard, but doesn't say anything.

“Another trick question?”

Her jaw clenches, fists tightening. She's readying herself for a fight. “Why am I here?”

“Mmm. Number three then, eh? I knew you were smart.”

“What are you doing and why the fuck am I here? Is this revenge? Is that what this is? You want to punish me for killing your... your meal ticket?”

I lean back further into the cushions of the couch, suddenly relaxed. Then I blow out a breath and shrug. “It had crossed my mind at one point.”

“Really. That’s why you brought me here? To kill me?”

I scoff. “Please. If I wanted to kill ya, Irina, you’d be dead.”

“So what are you doing? What is this?”

I don’t really want to talk about it. But I have to say something. I am the one who started this conversation. And none of it matters now, anyway. Everything has changed.

Still, I can’t seem to find the words. And time is tickin’ off, because that’s what time does, and I just let the moments ride downstream, one after the other, and close my eyes.

“Eason.”

“Hmm?”

“What’s going on?”

I don’t open my eyes. Just shake my head a little. I want her to just go away now. Just leave me here so I can go back to bed, or maybe slit my wrists or something.

But then an idea occurs to me. And a bit of conversation comes back in this moment. I sit up. She takes a step back, like I scared her. “I’m not gonna hurt you. I don’t have a reason to, Irina. Ya see, it’s not your fault. It’s not even Cort’s fault. Or Maart’s fault. It’s... maybe... my fault.”

“What are you talking about?”

In that bit of conversation that just came to mind, I was telling her about the kids of these families who own fighters. Or house slaves. And I started that conversation telling her how they raise up their children to see us as things. Things to use any way they see fit. Because evil has to be bred into humans. It's not inherent. It's not. It's made.

And Irina replied, *I'm not following.*

She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand how they got all this power. She has no idea how it works.

I stare at Irina, leaning forward now, elbows on knees, chin propped up on my fists. And I think... *I should just kick her out. Pack my shit. Go somewhere. Sell everything. Kill myself. End this fuckin' game once and for all.*

But she's looking at me weird. Like maybe I've been thinking too loud and she heard some of my vile whispers. Like she sees my hate. Like she smells my self-loathing.

Irina sits down in that same chair she fell asleep in last night and she pulls her legs up to her chest, hugging them, looking me right in the eyes. "Start over. OK? Just... start over and fill in all the things you left out."

I shake my head.

"Why? I'm listening. I'm not leaving. Not like this."

I scrub my hands down my face and look down at my feet. "You don't want to know this shit, Irina. You don't have any idea how bad it is." I force myself to look up at her, to lock eyes with her. "My story will ruin you. Just like it ruined me. You will never be able to unknow what I tell you. Ten minutes. I could maybe tell it in ten minutes. And at the end of these ten minutes, you will be someone else."

“What happened?” She gets up, crosses the space between us, sits down next to me—so close her body is pressing into mine—and takes my face in her hands, forcing me to focus. “Tell me what happened.”

“They kill it all, Irina. They kill anything you love. They look for it. They find it. And then they use it to control you.”

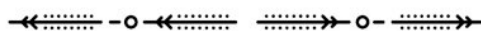
She takes a deep breath. “Who did they kill?”

I lean back in the cushions, making her let go of my face. “I wasn’t even worried about it. Benny said, ‘I’ll take care of it. It’s not a big deal. It means they respect you now, Eason. It means you’re big time. This is just how it works. I’ll take care of it. It’ll be fine.’ That’s what he kept saying. And I believed him. I mean, I was on a fuckin’ beach, Irina. I was thinking about fucking girls, and drinking, and how I was gonna win that next fight and just... not caring. I didn’t know. And maybe... maybe I didn’t even care. But they know how to make you care.” I pause to nod my head at her. “They found a way to make me care.”

She blows out a breath. “OK. Tell me how they made you care.”

She thinks she wants to know this shit. She doesn’t. But I’m too tired to make her leave and if she stays, she needs to know.

So I start talking.



THE GENERAL POPULATION of this world has no idea the price you have to pay to rise up. I’m not talking about a little bit of

success. I'm not talking about a university education, a nice house with a sports car in the driveway, and a yearly vacation to Bali.

I'm talking elite success.

If a child of an elite goes to university, they fuck off the whole time. They make friends. Connections. They start up companies and graduate with a degree or two they didn't need, let alone earn. I'm talking about mansions with ten-car garages filled with sports cars, situated on estates with a stable of polo ponies out back, and yachts that sail you to Bali under the expert hand of a well-paid crew.

It's a game to them. And we're all nothing but bit players.

I had a taste of that life with Benny. He had all those things and he shared them with me. He made me train and he had expectations of me. I was expected to win. But I had expectations of winning too. It was, after all, the only way to save my life. But once you get a taste of what these people have—once you realize that life is a video game for them—it takes a much stronger man than I ever was to chuck it all away and leave with nothing.

I'm not alluding to Cort here, either. Though he probably is a much better man than I'll ever be.

“You want in the Ring, Eason?” Benny asked me, his British accent strong, even though he wasn't the least bit British. This was right after he had managed to schedule my next Ring of Fire fight with Sick Heart. Then he laughed. “Do you know... that there are other options?”

I was confused. I had options?

“You could be like me, Eason. Well, not exactly like me, of course. I'm a literal prince. But you could change the path of

all your descendants. You could start a dynasty. What do you think of that?”

What *did* I think of that?

“You think *this* is a prize?” He panned his arms wide to indicate Bora Bora, which is where we were at the time. “You have no idea the kind of prizes you could have. And you don’t even have to fight.”

“What?”

“That’s right. Of course, you will have that fight with the Sick Heart. Don’t worry about that. I’ve arranged it. You will win, I will get his camp, and then we will have lots of fighters, Eason. More than we know what to do with. And the minute that happens, the moment you win—while you’re still standing on that *Bull of Light* platform, I will make that call, and have that talk, and everything will be... *just... fine*. They already have what they need to keep you in line. So I will make sure that they take your application seriously. What do you think of that?”

“All I have to do is one fight?”

“More than one. But not many more. Just a few. We need to...” He paused here. Like he needed to choose his words carefully. “We need to make them *worth* it, right? You understand, right?”

I had no idea what he meant. So no, I didn’t really understand. He was talking about one thing, then he was talking about something else. And I couldn’t parse it at the time. I was having a hard time following. I think he was confusing me on purpose. To give me time to come to terms with the two separate atrocities? I don’t know. I’m still not sure.

It's entirely possible he was just sick and evil and trying to fuck with me because he smiled at my confusion. A really gross, all-teeth smile. Which was a lie. Like everything else he ever told me. "You want this life, well, it comes with a price." He was always in command of everything. Not full of himself or boastful, just extremely confident. "They need to feel like you are controllable, Eason. That you will respect the institution. And they do that by using things you love to keep you in line."

He said all this like he was ticking off things on his grocery list. Like being controlled was nothing special. And maybe it wasn't? Maybe he had just grown up this way. Maybe Benny saw how his father was controlled—all his brothers, and uncles, and cousins—and had come to terms with it sometime back in childhood.

It's just... the way it is. Like a rite of passage.

I imagine the conversation Benny had with his father. Picture in my head what it might've been like...

You want to be a man, Benazir? You want a palace in Riyadh? You want a château in France? You want wives, and children, and power? We want you to have all these things too. But a man, even a wealthy one from a royal family such as yourself, needs to understand his place. And should a day come where his understanding is blurry, we need a way to sharpen that image and bring back the clarity he needs.

So I asked him, "How do they keep *you* in line, Benny?"

He pointed at me. "See, this isn't a proper response, Eason. I don't care if you ask me that question, but you can't go around asking that fuckin' question. It's none of your business how they keep me in line. I'm your owner. But like I said, I don't care. And besides, you're like me, right? You're like me.

That's why I'm having this conversation with you. I want you to rise up, Eason. So I will tell you, so you understand what you're signing up for. They keep me in line using my first wife."

"What?" I didn't even know he had one wife, let alone a second. But some of the puzzle pieces were starting to fall into place, so I kept it going with another question. "How many wives do you have?"

"Four, so far. They are all arranged, of course. And I don't live with them, obviously. But Juri was my first. We were promised to each other at birth. We grew up together. We were friends as children. I love her, in my own way. I would not want her hurt, and that's all that matters. So they use her to keep me obedient."

"Who does? Your father?"

"No." He paused to laugh here. "No, Eason. See, the world is not run by one man. Not even my father is that powerful. It is run by committee. It's a... board of directors, so to speak. And people like me, and my family, we're beholden to them. We have tasks to perform."

"What kind of tasks?"

"Again, not a proper question! But important things, Eason. So they can maintain power. But I already know what you will ask me next, and I can't tell you my task. It's between me and them. All you need to know is that when they tell me to do something, I do as I'm told. And if I do that, we get to live this life."

We were sitting in a Bora Bora hut with a view of the sandy ocean floor on the other side of the glass beneath our feet. Benny liked the finer things in life. He had a whole

drawer of Rolexes in the closet of his London apartment. He owned six mansions—four on proper estates—a couple of jets, half a dozen helicopters, and too many cars to count. All of this was family money. But with me, he could make his own fortune. I was... a hobby, I think. A pet. A racehorse. Something to keep him busy.

“I like this life,” he said. “It’s nice, right?”

It was. I mean, he pretty much took me everywhere with him. Like I really was his little brother and we were just bouncing around the world like a pair of asshole rich kids.

“So... after you win”—he pointed at me—“and you *will* win—things will change for you. You will be given things, Eason. All the prizes. And some freedom too. And I know what you’re thinking. You have a lot already. But you will get more. You will get a woman, and you will give me a child, and we will get the loser’s camp.” He gave me a little playful punch at this point. “All those talented boys—and maybe even a girl or two—and we will build up your camp. Dead Eyes. This name will be on the tongues of the world’s most powerful men. You will win. Over and over again. You, Eason, are the new Sick Heart. And when you kill him, you will be the most powerful, most influential fighter in all the Ring camps. We can sell those babies, Eason. Dead Eyes babies. Your babies. The price we could get...”

I just watched his mouth, stunned, as these words started spilling out past his lips.

Because he had no idea that what he was saying was so repulsive, I wanted to throw up. It was just... life to him. It was all he knew.

That’s when I figured out how they kept the evil going.

The children were groomed to be immune to it.

He had no idea how sick he was.

Owning teenage boys and putting them in death fights was one thing. Something I could, at least, wrap my head around.

But selling my babies to other owners so they could have fighters with my bloodline was much, much too close to being an actual racehorse.

And now I understood what he was telling me. Both parts. One. I will fight. More than once. I will win and his holdings in the Ring of Fire will grow. I will make babies for him and these babies will be sold to other Ring camp owners.

“It’s bloodline that’s important,” he said. It took him whole minutes to get to the point of this conversation, which was Eoin. My baby brother. “He’s your blood too, Eason. Do ya see?”

And this was the other thing he was trying to explain. At first I thought Eoin and the baby selling were connected, but no. They weren’t.

“He comes from the same family,” Benny said. Continuing to clarify for me. “He had the same early training. He’s won some fights already.”

“What?” I hadn’t even thought about Eoin since Morocco. I counted up the years as Benny went on. Six. He would be six. “What kind of fights?”

I had interrupted Benny. He looked annoyed for a moment, but then he softened. “What?”

“What kind of fights? For Eoin? Death fights?”

“Of course.” And Benny laughed. “Your father... he bought his way into the lower rings using you. Didn’t you

know that?”

I couldn't even speak. I just shook my head. My mind was spinning with where all this was leading. *They need to control you, Eason. I need your babies, Eason.*

“Oh.” Benny was surprised. And he chuckled at it. Not my shock, but his surprise. “I thought... well... OK. Maybe I should start there? Your brother Declan is dead. He was your father's first try after you were sold. He didn't even make it one fight. But there was a back-up, wasn't there? Conor, I think?”

I nodded. Still too stunned for speech. But again, I was figuring it out. It wasn't lining up exactly just yet, but I could see the full evil of what he was saying coming towards me from a distance.

“Conor. He made it two fights.”

“When? When did these fights take place?”

“Oh, years ago. Before I bought you, of course. Which was a good thing, because I got a deal on you. Your older brothers didn't amount to much. My father had put a strict budget on my first purchase. It was twenty-five million. You ran over, just a little bit, but I put in my own money for the rest. After your wins, though, Eason, after that Eoin was very valuable ___”

I put up a hand to shut him up. “Are you telling me that my da sold *all* his children into fight-club slavery, so he could... what? Win prizes?”

“I'm sorry.” And maybe Benny was sorry. He made a face that mimicked regret. “It's a terrible thought. But look at you, Eason.” He beamed a smile at me. “You're gonna make it, brother. You're gonna make it.”

And this, right here, was the whole point of that twisted, fucked-up conversation. Everyone knew I was gonna make it. I had won three Ring fights. Not many made it to three. But I knew I could win more. And they knew it too.

Knowing what I know now—that Cort was buying his freedom, that this was even an option, that these men—these controllers—were never going to let Cort walk away—now I kinda see it.

It's not clear. Not even close. But it's starting to make sense.

They thought they had control of Cort van Breda, but they were wrong.

And if I was the next great Ring fighter, they would not make that mistake again.

I hadn't been brought up in their world. I didn't understand the traditions. I wasn't taught to be evil.

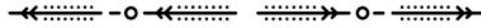
Whoever these people were, they needed two things from me. Blood and control. And they would get both of them from the same tiny package.

Eoin was all they had. Because I wasn't married to my best friend, and I hadn't been in the world long enough to commit sins so great, they could be filmed and used as bribery.

In my mind, I still had a family. But to this powerful committee in charge of things, they were mostly gone. Older brothers dead, so they couldn't use them. Father was a sick pig who'd sold me, so they couldn't use him. I suppose they could've used my mam, but they must've had doubts. Maybe she objected to what my father was doing, but then again, maybe she didn't.

Eoin, though. Eoin was just a baby when I was sold. He took no part in it at all.

Just an innocent boy with my blood.



“WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?” Irina has turned her body sideways into mine, listening to my story. She’s on her knees, perched on the couch cushion, holding my upper arm with both her hands, clutching onto me like we’re walking through a horror house and she doesn’t want to know what’s around the next corner. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

I reach around, pry her hands off my arm, then turn my head to look at her and nod. “He’s dead.”

“Sorry.” She pulls her hands back as she lets out a breath, then sinks back into the couch. Immediately her legs come up to her chest and she rests her chin on her knees. All folded up like a little paper doll.

She doesn’t say anything. Not for a long while. And I don’t either. Because this is the part where it all comes full circle and I think she knows this.

I get up.

“Where are you going?”

I don’t answer her. Just go into my room, pull open the drawer, grab the tattered yellow envelope, and then go back out to the living room and plop it down on the couch next to her.

Then I take the chair and we have switched places.

Irina studies the envelope for a moment. It's about an inch thick and held together by a string tie. Then she looks over at me. "What is it?"

"You wanted names? These are your names."

She picks up the envelope, undoes the tie, and peeks inside. She removes a stack of photos, puts the envelope down, and starts shuffling through them. One by one. I can't see them from here, but I don't need to see them. I know them. I've stared at those fuckin' faces for seven years now. I know those photos intimately.

When she gets to the bottom of the stack, she looks up. "I recognized Udulf and Lazar, but who are the rest?"

"The Devil, Irina. These men are the Devil."

"They're owners."

"So much more than that."

"Kidnappers."

"Torturers. Addicts. Soulless fuckin' killers. Take your pick. They are the things that reside in Hell, Irina. And even though I liked Benny, I'm not mad at Benny. He couldn't help it. He didn't know any better. They don't, Irina. They don't understand that they're fuckin' monsters."

She lets out a long exhale, sets the pictures down, and reaches back into the envelope, removing a little plastic case that contains one of those old tapes used in camcorders. There's no label on it, so she holds it up. "What's on here?"

I pause for a moment, searching for a good one-word description. "Insurance."

"Insurance for what?"

“For me.” I grin now and it makes Irina recoil. “Why do you think I’m still alive?”

“I don’t know. You didn’t finish your story.”

“You want more?”

“What happened when you got to Dubai?”

“I didn’t go to Dubai.”

“Where did you go?”

“I went to Dublin.” Another grin.

This time she narrows her eyes at me.

“What do you think happened next, Irina?” I say these words softly. Slowly.

“You killed your father.”

“I killed my father. Take a guess why.”

She holds up the tape. “Because of this.”

“You’re a lot smarter than you let on. But no, that’s just someone else’s business that I’ve been holding on to since Benny couldn’t take care of it anymore. I went to Dublin and killed my Da because there was a hold on what came next for Eoin.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of hold?”

“If I did what I was told by Benny, which was win that next fight with Sick Heart, then he would make sure that Eoin was safe. It was the first step of me...” I let out a long exhale. “It was the first step in becoming one of them.”

“Oh.” This little word comes out of her mouth as the smallest of whispers.

“He would take care of it? Remember when I told you that part? It was all gonna be fine. He was gonna take care of it. Remember that part?”

Irina nods, but says nothing now.

“I thought...” I stop here to sigh. “And this was why you telling me that Cort was buying his freedom matters so much. Because I thought Benny was telling me the truth. That Eoin was safe. And if I did the fight, did everything they said—let them control me as I became one of them—that he would be OK.”

“But it was a lie, wasn’t it?”

Poor Irina. I feel sorry for her right now. Because her mind isn’t sick like the rest of us. Her mind is so sweet. “It was a lie. The whole thing was a lie. They were never going to let Eoin live. He was probably already dead when Benny was doing his best to explain how things were going to work out for me. In fact—”

I can’t even finish. It’s so gross. Because I’m pretty sure that Benny was probably the one who killed Eoin and they were gonna use that against him when I joined his little club—his elite little club—and rose in the ranks.

You don’t get to cancel your debts. But you can rearrange them. And that’s the whole point of the Ring fights. Rearranging debt so one could rearrange their power. Shuffling positions within the organization. Seeing who could hold the most debt over everyone else. So they could get more, or keep certain people safe, or *whatever*.

It’s a *game*. It’s nothing but a game.

“What’s on this tape here, Eason?” Irina holds up the tape from the envelope.

“People being tortured. By men who are not in that stack.”
I nod my head at the photos on the couch next to her.

“How did you get this tape?”

“When I didn’t show up in Dubai, Wade came to get us and he brought that envelope with him. Davis and I left the hotel immediately. And believe it or not, it was Davis’s idea to run. He’s a complete piece of shit for being on the payroll, but he did save my life that day. And maybe he’s even spying on me now, I dunno. But I’m still alive. And if you only knew how much I’d rather be dead, then maybe you could understand why I actually trust him for not letting that happen.”

Irina closes her eyes and shakes her head. “I don’t understand.” She opens them again. “I’m really not smarter than I look. I barely have any education at all. I can’t follow your fuckin’ mysteries, Eason. I know we come from the same world, but I don’t really know what it looks like—I just know it’s evil. I’ve been in the jungle, remember? So can you just spell it out for me?”

I feel sad for her in this moment. On the outside Irina van Breda is everything a girl her age wants to be. Athletic body, blonde hair, blue eyes, nice curves. Taking care of herself and living in Miami, thousands of miles away from where she started.

But then I think about her condo. That one little room. That rice mat. Her clothes stacked neatly against the wall, not even a dresser to put them in. And she has money. She just doesn’t know what to do with it beyond very simple things like shelter, and clothing, and food.

I wish I was her. I wish I knew nothing. I wish someone had taken me to the jungle to live in Cort’s camp. I wish I had

been saved the way she was.

Or at the very least, I wish I could've been someone's savior.

But it's way too late for that. And if she wants an answer, then fuck it. I'll spell it out.

“The only way to control a monster is to hold monstrous things over him. We'll get to me in a moment, but let's start with them.” I nod my head at the stack of photos again. “In fact, let's start with Benny. Good ol' Benny. My friend. My big brother. My benefactor. My biggest supporter. There are more pictures in there. But trust me, darlin', they're in a separate envelope for a reason. You don't want to open that one. You don't want to see those pictures.”

She glances down at the envelope in her hands, studying it for a moment. Then she looks back up at me. But she doesn't say anything. I don't know what kind of sick imagination she's got, but I highly doubt it's sophisticated enough to deduce what's actually being done to the people on that tape.

Still, she's smarter than she thinks. And she's seen more than most. So whatever she's guessing, it's close enough.

“Benny told me a critical part of his whole story one afternoon. I didn't understand it at the time. Not fully, anyway. This was after he had that first chat with me about Eoin. My fight was a couple weeks away. We left Bora Bora and were in the Maldives. Soaking up the sun. Drinking stupid drinks. Eating too much. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I wasn't getting drunk. I don't actually like to drink. I don't like to lose control like that. Especially after what he told me that day. He was pining over a woman, an older woman who didn't see much potential in him, I suppose. And he said something like... ‘Does she even know who I am? Does she have any idea what

I did to get where I am? Does she have any idea how far I'd go to get more?'

"It gave me chills at the time. Because up until that point I hadn't seen this side of him. He was a happy man, always lookin' for a party. But this rejection, it triggered something." I pause here to laugh. Because it just now occurs to me that the woman he was pining over was the very one who started me on this path to find Irina.

Macks. The *Ring of Fire* reporter.

"Anyway. He told me what he did to give the Board of Directors control should he ever stray from his path."

I stop here to look at Irina. She's staring at me, not even blinking. Her voice is just a whisper when she finally finds her words. "What did he do?"

"It's all in there, darlin'. You see, that envelope you're holding contains Benny's initiation package. It's filled with the faces of the men in the group he belonged to."

She looks down at the envelope again. Like this is enough to make her open it back up and take another peek.

I wait to see if she does that, but instead, she sucks in a breath and returns her attention to me.

So I continue. "Udulf, Lazar, and Benny were in the same ward. That's what they called their groups. Wards. They had control of certain things. Pharmaceutical companies, oil refineries, cargo ships. Chemical plants. Entire industries. It's all parceled out, little by little, to the men in these untouchable families. Like royal families. Old bloodlines.

"And when you get initiated in, they take you somewhere. Somewhere where no one looks twice when little girls are prancing around with barely anything on, handing out towels

in a bathhouse. A place where no one looks twice when the screams echo down the misty hallways. And they make you do things there. Well, make them? I'm not really sure they make them. I'm not quite convinced that Benny didn't enjoy it. Or, at the very least, look forward to it."

"Oh, my God. They..." She doesn't finish.

"Yeah. It's as bad as you think. It's worse than you think, Irina. There's no way that little mind of yours can possibly imagine the evil happening on that tape. The whole thing is meticulously documented. Copies are made. The Board keeps a copy, obviously. And then everyone in the ward is given a copy too. And evidence of their evil deeds are given to you as well. Mutually assured destruction. You take these secrets to the grave, no matter what. Because if you don't, God help you—you will be begging the Devil to take you to Hell instead. And they will not let you die, no. It's not as easy as dying."

Irina picks up the photos on the couch and slides them back inside the envelope. Then puts the tape case back inside too, setting it all on the coffee table.

"Do you have any idea why these men send us to the Ring, Irina?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think it's for prizes?"

"Isn't it?"

"Well, some of it, of course. But they own everything already. All they do is shuffle around the percentages that each man gets to control. They do that in the fights. What billionaire needs another fuckin' yacht, ya know? They make us fight for sport. For fun. And to win back their evidence from the members of their ward. That's what was happening

when Cort had his last fight with Pavo. Udulf and Lazar were cancelling their evidence. They were going to combine their holdings and be partners. If Cort lost, that is. But Cort won and everything changed. The power distribution was suddenly very uneven.”

“That’s why Lazar tried to take Ainsey.”

“The daughter?”

“Yeah. Cort killed Pavo and then... Udulf owed him or something. And Lazar wanted Ainsey as payment because he must’ve known that she was Cort’s daughter and it would hurt Cort to know...” She glances at the envelope on the coffee table. Then she looks up at me. “They were gonna do that kind of stuff to Ainsey, weren’t they? To keep Cort in line.”

“Well, I don’t think they thought that far ahead, to be honest. I wasn’t there, obviously, but I’ve heard that there was a fight scheduled that day between Maart and Cort. I think they assumed he would die.”

Irina nods. “Yeah. I think they did too.”

“But they never saw you comin’. Did they? They never thought those kids would rise up and kill them. I doubt they’ll make that mistake again. So as far as your Ainsey goes, I don’t know. But no matter. They were gonna do something evil to her, that’s for sure.”

Irina begins shaking her head, hugging her knees tightly. “Why? Why would anyone want to do that to a little kid?”

“Because they’re not like us, Irina. They’re the Devil. And like I said, they don’t even know it. It’s just... part of them.”

“Why are you even telling me all this?”

“You wanted to know.”

“I wanted to know about you. You didn’t tell me anything about you!”

“I was getting there.”

“Well, here we are. Tell me. You went to Dublin to kill your father because—” Her eyes get a little glassy. “Is... is your little brother on that tape?”

“No.” She lets out a quick breath of relief. And I hate to do this to her, I really do. But she asked. “I burned that tape. The one with Eoin on it? I burned it.”

“What?” She gets up. Begins to pace the room. “What the fuck?” She whirls around and looks at me. “Why! Why would they do that?”

“Because I didn’t have an owner. And the entire ward was dead. And all the other fighters in all the other camps weren’t just out in the world like I was. They were in the jungle like you. Tucked away in camps, sold off before the blood even stopped flowing. And Wade took the envelope. We had the envelope. And yeah, everyone was dead. So you think... *Well, it doesn’t matter anymore. The men who did those things are dead.* But if there’s one group of men doing these things, might there be more?”

“And there are, Irina. Men who look people in the eye every day and proclaim themselves to be honest and trustworthy. Benny acted like a stupid player, but he wasn’t stupid. He was rather cunning, actually. Because there are more men inside that envelope than should be in there. There’s more insurance than he should’ve had. And now Wade, Davis and I have...” I shrug. “Our own insurance. You asked why they let me live. Why I’m not dead. Well, now you know.”

She's got her back to me at this moment, and she's looking out the window towards the sea. She drops her head and sighs. "And you killed your father because he's one of them now."

"Well, not anymore."

She scoffs. Then turns to face me. "How do you wake up in the mornings?"

"As you now know, it's not easy."

"Why am I here, Eason?"

"I already told ya. Because I didn't know that Cort was buying his way out. I thought... I was told, by Benny, that Cort was going to be the start of my initiation. And if I did it just the way they told me, then Eoin would be just fine. But there was never going to be another Sick Heart fight. Benny lied to me. Eoin was already dead. And once he was gone, there was no other way to control me."

She points to the envelope. "Were they gonna make you do stuff like that to Cort?"

It's a question that doesn't need an answer. So I take a new direction. "Did you know that Cort won that last fight with Pavo's own knife?"

Irina nods. "I heard."

"Do you think that knife was put on the platform by accident?"

She shakes her head no.

"Pavo was gonna torture him if he got the chance. He was gonna put on a big show on that platform. And then he was gonna be the big winner. He would have to keep fighting, of course, but he was gonna live with a lot of freedom, and money, and everything he desired. He and I probably had the

same offer. Just kill the fuckin' Sick Heart and everything gets better from there."

She sits back down on the couch and just stares at me. "What were they holding over Pavo?"

"Who knows. Who cares? The point is, Benny died that day in your village and I was out of control. They knew we had the envelope, so that helped us all stay alive. We took his money too." I pause here to smile. Not because of the money. Just the thought of some royal prince, or King or whatever the fuck Benny's father was—just the thought of him being told we took all that money kept me going for months after it all went down.

"You were never gonna be able to save Eoin, were you?"

I shake my head. "No. It was a lie. They weren't gonna use him to keep me in line, Irina. Not alive, anyway. They were gonna use him as a cautionary tale. 'This could happen to anyone, Eason. Anyone at all.' That's what they wanted me to think. But there's no one left that I give any fucks about, so it hasn't worked out the way they planned."

"What about Davis and Wade? Couldn't they use them?"

"Nah. They aren't a threat."

"Because they were employees."

"See? Ya *are* smarter than ya look."

She turns away from me. Turns her whole body away from me. Laying her head on the couch cushion and staring out at the sea beyond the terrace.

I sink into the cushions a little more myself, worn out from the telling of this story.

After a few minutes Irina has one more question. “I don’t understand why you’re still here.” She turns to look at me. “Why didn’t they just kill you and take the envelope back?”

“We’ve made copies. And besides, as far as I know, I haven’t given them any children yet.”

Irina scoffs. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead fuckin’ serious. Ring of Fire-level fighters are a rare thing. They truly do see me as a racehorse. A stud. Genetics. And they don’t really think they’re in any danger from me. I could show people those tapes”—I nod to the envelope—“but other tapes have gotten out before. People can’t wrap their head around this shit, Irina. They find excuses to call it fake. It’s not fake. It’s real. But they’re never gonna accept that evil like this exists unless the fucking TV tells them to. And guess who controls the TV?”

“They do.”

“They do. If they want someone to go down, they make sure they go down. They let people see it. They validate it. But if they want to protect someone, suddenly this footage is fake. A scene from a movie. They hire people to play parts. To say, ‘Yes, that’s my... film-school final project,’ or whatever. They twist it up and write a new story. It’s really as simple as that. A story. One true, one not. One is fake news, one is verified. That’s how it works. So they’re not actually afraid of me. And they think I’m still worth something.”

Her blue eyes are locked on mine for a few seconds. Then she turns away, staring out at the sea again. That must be her safe place. The sea is what keeps her sane.

“I feel done here,” I tell her. “I feel over. I just want it all to go away now. I’m so tired of the lies I just want to crawl

into bed and die of thirst.”

She doesn't look at me, just gazes out to sea, and we spend another ten minutes chewing on these words. This truth. With just the sound of the AC to keep us company.

Suddenly, she says, “I know that feeling.”

“What feeling?”

“You, when you don't want to get out of bed. I mean, I haven't ever wanted to kill myself. I...” She sighs. “I don't want to live, but I don't feel like there's a choice. I can't give up. I don't know how.”

I let out a defeated laugh. “Well, I find it pretty easy to give up, actually. You just... go to bed and stay there. That's what I did after I saw what they did to Eoin. I really don't know why Davis and Wade stuck around. They didn't have to, so... maybe we're actually friends?”

“You got better though. I mean, you came and tracked me down.”

I smile, just a little bit. “Yeah. I did do that. But I was gonna use you. For revenge on Cort for fuckin' up my life and killing my little brother—” I stop and blow out a long breath of air. “I do understand that none of this has anything to do with Cort. Or you. So you don't have to explain it to me.” I look at Irina and shrug. “You were just a bit of revenge, darlin'. That's all. Just a bit of revenge.”

CHAPTER 14



*H*e says that so easily. Casually. And if I hadn't heard the story he just told, I might even believe him.

But I did hear that story, so I know this is a lie.

Before I can question him about this, he gets up and walks off.

“Where are you going?”

“To bed, Irina.” Then he disappears inside his bedroom.

I just sit there on the couch trying to wrap my head around what's happening. I've been dismissed, that's for certain. He wants to fall back into his depression. He wants to go to bed and die of thirst.

And it might work this time. Because Davis and Wade are thousands of miles away, so there won't be an intervention.

I get up and follow him into the bedroom. He's face down on the bed, head under the pillow, arms over his head. The sight of him catches me off guard for a moment and makes me want to stare. His body isn't much different than any other man I've seen shirtless. And I've seen a lot of shirtless men in my life.

I don't think a single boy in camp ever put on a shirt, now that I think about it. It was too fuckin' hot in that jungle. I'd

have gone shirtless too, if Maart had allowed it. But he didn't. And it didn't take long for me to stop wanting that. I hated being female when I was younger. I hated it. I wanted to be a boy so bad because they had such a better chance at living.

But then, after that last death fight, I realized that it was OK to be a girl. Because I could do it. Even smaller, lighter, weaker—I could still kill the boys when I had to. My last opponent was two years older than me. I was twelve and he was nearly fifteen. When I first saw him, I thought he was huge and I started to have doubts. But then Cort was there, whisperin' in my ear, "He's slow, Irina. You're not slow. Snap his fuckin' neck and let's get the hell out of here."

That's what he said to me. And that's how I won, too. It wasn't quick. Took eight minutes, actually. But when Cort pulled me out of the ring when it was over—we never stayed for the ceremony—he winked at me and said, "That's my girl."

Maart wasn't there. They didn't let Maart come. Just the camp owner, which was Cort.

But he was waiting down the street with the makeshift ambulance, just in case I got seriously hurt, and he already knew I won. Cort had called him. Maart hugged me for nearly a minute straight. And he said, "That's my girl."

And I was like... *Yeah, I'm a girl. And I can still kill these boys if I have to.*

I never much thought about that again.

But now, here in Eason's room, I'm thinking about how I am a girl again. Because I can't stop looking at his fuckin' body.

His head turns to the side and I can just barely see one eye open, staring at me. “What do you want?”

What do I want?

I’m not sure.

“I don’t want to go.” That’s not what he asked, but that’s the only answer I have at the moment.

He turns his head away from me again. No opinion, I guess.

And if he’s got no opinion one way or the other, then I guess I get to stay. So I walk over to his bed, climb in next to him, and this time he just scoots over a little to give me room.

I am lying face down too when his first question comes. “Are we gonna die of thirst together, Irina?”

“No. We’re just gonna sleep. Then we’re gonna get up and get that revenge.”

He chuckles just a little. But then he turns, grabs me, and pulls me up close to him. I lie still, unsure what to do.

“Don’t worry.” He says this right into my ear. “You’re just a pillow. I’m not gonna make ya have sex with me.” Then he laughs and settles. Like I really am just a pillow. Something to hold on to, to comfort him.

I don’t laugh. But I do smile. “I’m not... afraid of it, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Irina, I don’t care what your sexual goals are. I really, really don’t.”

“Why not?”

He scoffs now. “You’re...”

“I’m what?”

“Just sleep.”

“No. I’m what?”

“You’re... you.”

“I don’t understand. I’m not attractive?”

“Come on. You’re... a kid.”

“I’m not a kid. I’m at least twenty. I get offers of sex all the time.”

“All the time?”

“Enough of the time for it to be a choice. And I have never been a kid. Not even when I *was* a kid.”

“Yeah.” He huffs a little air in what might be a laugh. “That I agree with.”

“So don’t call me a kid.”

“Sorry. You’re not a kid. But it doesn’t change anything.”

I hold my breath for a moment. I don’t understand this. I wish Nandy was here so I could ask her questions about what he’s saying, or rather, what he’s not saying.

Also, I’m confused at my confusion. Because I didn’t get into bed with him to have sex. I just got in so we could commiserate as we slept this whole sense-of-foreboding thing off.

“Irina?”

“Hmm?”

“Stop thinking so hard.”

“I’m confused.”

He turns a little, lifting his head up, which makes me turn too, to see what he’s doing. “Confused about what?”

“I’m not sure.”

We’re looking straight at each other. And his eyes narrow down a little. “Are you a virgin?”

I could lie, but why bother? So I nod.

He smiles. “Are you serious?”

I nod again.

Then he pushes me off him and rolls all the way over to the other side of the bed.

Which confuses me further. “What was that for?”

“I just want to go to sleep.”

I huff. “My God, how many times do I have to tell you? I’m not trying to have sex with you.”

“Yet you keep climbing into bed with me. How’s that work?”

I have no answer for this. He’s taking all my actions out of context.

Eason turns in bed to look at me and instantly lets out a true laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

He shakes his head. “Teenagers.” Then he turns back over.

“I’m not a teenager.”

“Ya sure do act like one.”

*Do I act like one? I’m not sure. I don’t really understand what a teenager is. I get the formal definition, and I’ve seen movies. *Pretty in Pink*, and *The Breakfast Club*, and *Sixteen Candles*. High school. So interesting. I think being a normal*

sixteen-year-old girl in America would be the coolest thing ever.

I considered modeling myself after all of these Molly Ringwald characters when I first got to America. But Miami didn't look anything like the neighborhoods where these films took place, so I had a hard time pulling it all together.

In the end, I just decided to be me. A very lazy version who didn't do much but walk the beach and feed the birds and soak America up like I was sponge. I concentrated on my accent—losing it, actually—for a long time. I was obsessed with English while Nandy was teaching me to make my mouth form the letters properly. I would read the dictionary, and say the words out loud, and I practiced them relentlessly. Learned a lot of new ones too. I guess I sorta fell in love with words for that year Nandy was coaxing the Russian out of my speech patterns.

But I never had the life of a teenager. I went from baby, to killer, to... whatever I was after we got our freedom, and then I landed in America and I was an adult.

“Did I finally stump you?”

“Oh, you're still awake, are you? I thought you were busy dying of thirst.”

“You got very quiet after I called you a teenager. What is going through that head of yours?”

Is this a serious question? I can't tell. I decide to answer anyway, because maybe he has some insight. “I'm trying to figure out what a teenager is.”

He laughs again, then turns all the way back towards me, so we're facing each other. “You're *so* weird.”

I make a face. I don't like being weird. I know I am weird, but I don't like it.

"Have you ever been kissed?"

"What? Of course."

"Who?" He says this with disbelief.

I tip my chin up, even though I'm lying down with my cheek on the mattress. He has all the pillows. "Paulo."

"Paulo, the MMA fighter who has his own pay-per-view?"

"We were like... best friends growing up. In the same fighting group."

"Did you date him, then?"

"Date him?" I scoff, it's so absurd. "No."

"Then when did he kiss you?"

"When he left. For Maart's gym in Copacabana. He got to move in there." I try to say this without resentment, but it still comes out resentful. I'm really not over the fact that I didn't get to go.

"He kissed you goodbye."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Did he slip you some tongue, Irina?"

"What?"

Eason is laughing at me now. "That's not what I meant by 'kiss.' Not a kiss goodbye. A *kiss*, Irina. From a boy you like."

The answer is obviously no. But I can't seem to get any words out.

He blinks at me. "Never been kissed. I'm... kinda floored."

“Then turn back around and die of thirst.”

Which just makes him laugh at me more. This is when I notice how much different he looks when he’s laughing. His eyes go bright and there’s a dimple in his cheek. I stare at it for a moment, then slide my eyes up to meet his gaze.

“Do you want one?”

“Do I want what?”

“A kiss, Irina.”

“From you?” I have to admit, my heart thumps so hard when I ask him this, I think he hears it.

“Take your time. You don’t need to answer now.” Then he turns over, putting his back to me again.

What do I say? I mean, I kinda would like a kiss from him. I’m not sure I’d want anything other than that, but kissing Eason feels safe. And... like maybe he wouldn’t mind if I went all introverted so I could decipher everything he was doing. Kinda pick it apart and put it back together so I understood it.

That way, the next time I got a kiss, I’d be better prepared.

Paulo kissed me on the cheek. So Eason is right. That one doesn’t count. Plus, he kissed Zoya, Cintia, Ling, and Sissy on the cheek that day too. I do remember that he kissed Anya on the lips. But no one made a big deal about it. I mean, she is Anya. She’s supermodel pretty. Every boy in camp wanted to kiss Anya.

I bet Eason would die for a kiss from Anya.

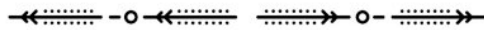
Die for one. That phrase catches me for a moment. He wants to die. He wants to go. Why does he linger?

Why do any of us?

Because we're survivors and we can't seem to shake the idea that life is the prize.

And with this bit of truth, I settle. And forget about kissing and the man sleeping next to me.

I just close my eyes and drift...



WHEN I WAKE, the sun is going down.

I've never thought much about sleep. It's something you do at the end of the day so you can get up again in the morning. But I dunno... I might have to change my opinion about sleep. Because waking up in Eason's bed—alone, he's not here—I feel... like maybe... maybe there's more to than what I've experienced.

I've never been hard to wake. There is no lingering in bed in the camp. And once I got here, I didn't see the difference in sleeping out on the Rock, or in the jungle, or in the condo.

But a bed... this bed, in particular... yeah. I get it.

I moan a little and turn over, ready to keep my sleep marathon going.

But then I hear Eason's voice coming from somewhere else in the condo. And this jolts me out of the dream world of forever sleep.

I open my eyes and squint a little, like this will help me hear him better.

He's on the phone, obviously. But I can't make out much else. So I get out of bed, tiptoe through the condo, and realize he's out on the terrace and he's left the door open, so that's why I can hear him.

I step carefully as I move closer.

Eason lets out a sigh. But he's as careful about it as I was stepping across his floor. "Yeah. OK. No. It's good. I'm fine." There's a pause here. "Yeah. She's here." He scoffs. "Fuck off." Another pause. "But listen, in all seriousness—" This is when he turns and sees me. His smile feels genuine. And he doesn't act like he was just caught doing something wrong. Just keeps going with the conversation he's having. "I'm fine. It's all fine." But here he lets out a long breath, and this time it's loud.

I've been around silent people most of my life. I speak the language written between the lines fluently. And I hear everything in this one exhale. All of his struggle is in that breath.

"Right. We'll talk more later." He ends the call and walks back inside, closing the terrace doors to keep the AC in. "So, listen. I think you should just move in."

"I did move in. Didn't I?"

"No, I mean everything. You're living in a closet, Irina. Just stay here with me. It's huge, right? I got lots of extra room."

This tells me everything about the conversation he just ended. He asked them to come home. For whatever reason, they said no. Or they can't. And then whoever that was—Wade or Davis—asked if I was still here. Not because they

care about where I am, but because they don't want him to be *alone*.

He's that precarious right now. That much on the edge.

"OK."

"Really? No argument or nothing?" It's not another breath. It's not that obvious. But he does something here with his eyes, and the line of his mouth, and the way the muscles in his shoulders relax.

"My place is..." I love my little South Beach closet. I really do. But I make myself say the next few words. "It's... awful and this is... lovely." Which is not a lie. But I'm just not into luxury. I really am OK with a rice-mat bed and clothes folded neatly and stacked against the wall.

But I feel like he's about to give up and I don't want him to give up. We're just getting to know each other. He's offered to be my first kiss. A kind of tester boyfriend. Which, I'm not gonna lie, feels like a fair trade. Because I am twenty years old and I don't understand any of it. How to be an adult in this world. How to plan a future that is more than me. I don't get it. And maybe Eason is not the most together guy when it comes to mental health, but he's got a good handle on the outside world. Just like I've got a good grasp of the inside one.

"Do you have a car?"

He blinks at me, not sure about the change in subject. "Yeah. Why?"

"Well, I was thinking we could drive over to my place. You know, so we don't have to carry boxes back."

"We could probably fit all your clothes in two backpacks, Irina. We're not driving. You're still in training, aren't ya?"

Still? I don't think one marathon counts as training, but maybe this is what he needs? An excuse? Maybe I'm his excuse. So I say, "Sure. I'm up for killing worthless billionaires. Why not."

He stares at me for a long moment. Like he can't tell if I'm serious.

I'm not even sure I'm serious.

Actually, that's not true. I *am* serious. I *would* like to kill those worthless billionaires. So I lean into it. "I might never get a chance like this again. So... yeah. I'm in for that."

His eyes drift past me. To something over my shoulder. Like he's thinking things through. Then he meets my gaze again. "I'll give you the night off, but tomorrow we're back in training. We'll pick up your stuff after our run."

He's really good at this deflection stuff. But I don't really care if he bosses me around like he's Maart. It's not like what he's asking is hard. It's just training.

"Would you like to go to dinner?"

I point at myself. "You want to take me to dinner?"

"We should eat."

"Is this..." I tilt my head at him. "Is this part of the kiss offer?"

"What kiss?"

I scoff at him.

"Oh." He laughs. That smile, wow. It's nice. And such a contradiction to the face he was just making moments ago. It changes everything about him. I wonder if he can feel that on the inside the way I can see it on the outside. "Shit, I forgot

about that. Mmmm..." He doesn't know what to say. "Whatever. If you want a kiss, I'll kiss you."

"Well, I don't want to *make* you kiss me. But you offered, you know."

"I did. But I was joking. I wasn't serious." I must make a face at him, because he backpedals. "But, yeah. Sure. Fine. We'll go to dinner, have ourselves a little date, and I'll kiss you goodnight. It's much different than a kiss goodbye from your bestie."

I nod at this. "OK. Practice boyfriend."

"What?" He laughs his word out. And again, I am struck at just how handsome he is when he's happy.

"That's what you are. My practice boyfriend. So when the real thing comes along I'll be ready. And this is my first date."

He stares at me for a moment, his smile falling a little. "You've been on dates. I saw you that night with that guy, remember?"

"I didn't agree to that. Nandy just... well, she's always trying to set me up. But I'm..." I let out a breath because I don't have a word ready.

"Scared?"

"*No.*" I say this with too much emphasis.

"I don't get you, Irina. I really don't understand your life. I mean, I know I wasn't really a part of the camps the way you were, and there weren't many girls in the camps I was in. Maybe half a dozen across all of them. But I do know for sure that none of them were virgins. How did you get this far, in this sick world you were born into, without..."

Without being raped? But he doesn't say that. I just shrug.
"Not pretty enough?"

"Pretty's got nothing to do with it."

I shake my head now. "Just lucky, I guess. Cort. And Maart. And Rainer."

"But the boys in your camp? They didn't..."

Now I actually laugh. "No. And not just because they would've been killed if they had touched me that way. They just... that's just not how it was where I grew up. No one wanted to have sex with me, Eason. I was one of them."

"A little sister."

"Yeah. It was... a family. Sort of. Where your brothers and sisters just kinda disappeared every few months."

He lets out a long breath, probably visualizing that last sentence with a little too much clarity. Then he nods. "OK." Seemingly satisfied, he changes the subject. "You can pick the restaurant. Where should we go?"

Without thinking, I say, "LMR Eats." But once it's out, I realize it's perfect. If he's gonna be my practice boyfriend I might as well go all in.

CHAPTER 15



I don't really care where we eat. I'm just trying to make the day end so I can go back to bed. I don't know what I was thinking, but the whole prospect of using Irina to get revenge on Cort van Breda lifted my spirits. It gave me a goal. Something to hold on to.

I realize now that Wade and Davis—Davis mostly—encouraged this to keep me going. And it's... embarrassing. That I'm so affected by the circumstances of my life. That it gets to me the way it does. I feel like I should be above it all. Just... let it go. Move on.

But I can't.

I'm just uninterested in everything. Uninterested in living.

Until this girl came along, that is. She's... nice. Such a dumb word. So generic. But it fits her. And it's surprising because of who she is and where she came from. I think about that little condo of hers and it's bothers me so much, I can't wrap my head around it.

The bareness of it. The emptiness. That rice-mat bed. And the clothes.

Which is what I'm looking at as I'm thinking this through. Her in those training clothes.

“Is that what you’re wearing, Irina?”

Irina looks down at herself—“What?”—then back up at me. “Why? What’s wrong with what I’m wearing.”

She has no idea how to be anything else other than Maart’s little fighter.

And it kinda pisses me off that he’s got such a hold on her.

“We’re going to dinner. Don’t you wanna change out of your gym clothes?” It comes out before I realize that’s all she brought with her. And now she’s got a look on her face—which is slightly flushed—and I can almost hear the questions running through her head.

But she, unlike me, can toss self-doubt aside almost on instinct. “I’m fine. This is fine. It’s LMR Eats. I kinda work there. And no one dresses up.”

“Do you own anything else?” I nod my head to indicate her outfit. “At home, I mean. Do you own any dresses?”

“I do. Two of them.”

“Should we go get one?”

She huffs. “There’s nothing wrong with what I’m wearing.”

“If we’re going on a date, ya need to wear a dress.”

“No, I don’t.”

She snarls these words at me and I almost laugh. “Irina. I’m not asking you to sell me your firstborn son. Why are you making a big deal about changing your clothes? Just put on something nicer.”

“There’s nothing wrong with training shorts and a tank top. I don’t want to go all the way home to change my clothes. It’s

dumb.”

“Well, I’m gonna change. Be right back.”

She is still protesting as I go into my bedroom and choose a pair of tan chinos, a white button-down, and a pair of old-school Vans. When I come back out, I think Irina is standing in the exact same spot where I left her.

Her gaze lands on me, lingers for a moment, then she tips her chin up. Like my new look is some kind of challenge. “You look nice.”

I just shove my wallet in my pocket and point to the door. “Let’s go.”

“I thought you wanted me to change?”

“Did you bring a dress with you?”

“You already know I didn’t.”

“Can you magically pull one out of your ass?”

She laughs. “No.”

“Then we have to buy one, don’t we? There’s a shop downstairs. Hurry up. I’m getting hungry.”

I am starting to get a sense of her now. Her patterns and mannerisms. And I know that she would like nothing more than to spend the next five minutes ruminating over what I just said. So I open the door, step aside, and invite her to walk through it.

She lets out a breath, but does as she’s told.

We take the stairs down to the main lobby, then out to the little shops that line the lowest level of the building on the street side. Irina follows me into a small boutique tucked

between Starbucks and a bagel place and I point. “Pick something.”

She makes a face. “This isn’t really my kind of place.”

“Why not?”

“It’s... fancy.”

“You’re buying a dress, Irina. This place has dresses. Pick one out, put it on, and let’s go eat.”

She sighs, but looks around, then wanders off without continuing the argument.

I will admit this store does not have a lot of choices. Which means it’s high-end and snobby. I check the tag on the nearest dress and it’s nearly five hundred dollars.

I almost reconsider and give in to the idea that eating dinner out in gym clothes is fine, but fuck it. I paid that much for the fuckin’ poster of her.

I lean against the door, arms folded, just watching her shop. The girl who runs the cash register has come over and they are chattin’ now. A dress is chosen, then another, then another. Irina disappears into a dressing room at the back and comes out wearing a dress that goes all the way down to her fuckin’ feet.

I walk over there, shaking my head. “Not that one.”

“Why not?”

“Irina, it’s summer in South Beach. Above the knee at least.”

The cash register girl is smirking at me, eyes lingering on my body a lot longer than Irina’s did. But I ignore her. “Try the other one.”

Irina huffs, but turns and goes back into the little room, pulling the curtain closed behind her. A few minutes later, she reappears.

“What the hell is that?” I ask.

She looks down. “What’s wrong with this one?”

It’s shorter than the last one. I can *almost* see her knees. But it’s asymmetrical. And I don’t like it. “Next.”

She goes back in and a few minutes later she appears in a plain white minidress with thin straps and a ruffle on the hem. “How about this, Your Highness?”

I smile—“Better”—then turn to the waiting clerk. “We’ll take it. She’s wearing it out. Pack up her other clothes and send them to the lobby. Have the desk hold them for 990.”

“Yes, sir.” The clerk almost bows at me. Then she takes the tags off Irina’s dress and while she’s doing this, Irina tries to put her trainers back on.

“No. You need shoes. Pick a pair.”

Irina has given up her opinions about the shopping because she doesn’t even argue. Just walks over to the nearest shoes and points. “These. Size six and a half.”

A few minutes later everything has been sorted and we’re heading south on Ocean towards Sixth. I didn’t recognize the name, but I do know the restaurant because I followed Irina here while I was stalking her that week.

She looks good in her dress. Even though she’s small—almost a whole foot shorter than me—her legs go on forever, again giving off a ballerina vibe. And she’s very tan, so the white dress is a pleasing contrast against her darker skin.

Especially her face. Because this extra darkness to her skin tone makes those blue eyes pop.

When we get to the restaurant it's packed with people. But Irina smiles up at me and grabs my arm. "Come on, we don't have to wait." She pulls me through the crowd at the door.

Inside there is a mob of people near the cash register. It's not a fancy place. But it's not a diner, either. It's certainly not serving diner food. Platters filled with rice bowls and steaks go by as I wait behind Irina as she talks to an older woman near the bar, which divides the restaurant in half. The older woman looks up and meet my eyes with a scowl. But then her attention is drawn back down to Irina and she nods at her.

Irina turns, takes my hand, and leads me past the bar and into a whole separate section in the back of the restaurant. It's on the side that faces the alley, and it's open on all sides, like a patio, with just a little fence and a whole lot of potted palm trees to segregate it from the outside world. The floor is just wooden deck planks and the roof is pitched like a tent.

It's quieter here. Only half of the tables are filled. And when all the diners start saying hello to Irina, I realize this is probably some kind of 'friends and family' section, reserved for special guests only.

Irina and I end up at a two-seater table, facing each other. She's smiling, and when another older woman comes up to us, she points to me. "This is my boyfriend, Eason. Eason, this is Estafania. She's Romero's wife. Oh, Romero is part-owner."

"And the cook," the woman says. Everything about her is Cuban except her accent. Which... doesn't exist. It's just perfect American English. She's scowling at me in exactly the same way the other woman did. "Boyfriend, huh?"

I plead guilty with my hands, but decide to say nothing.

“Hmm.” Estafania looks me up and down, her scowl deepening with each passing second. And then she breathes out a sigh of resignation, adjusts her attitude, and smiles at Irina. “What would you like tonight, honey?”

“Oh, we’re gonna need a menu, Estafania.”

I get another disapproving look from Estafania. Obviously, Irina does not need a menu, so this menu-reading stuff is only for my benefit. For some reason, I think this offends her.

She forces a smile, grabs two menus off a nearby table, and hands them to us. “I’ll be back in five.” She says this sweetly, but she’s not looking at me, she’s looking at Irina.

Once she’s gone, I let out a breath. “I don’t think she likes me.”

Irina snickers. “Oh, she *hates* you. They all hate you.”

“Why? That doesn’t even make sense. They don’t even know me.”

“They don’t need to know you. You’re my boyfriend and you have a neck tattoo!” She’s full-on laughing now. “You never had a chance, Eason. They will never approve. Their new mission in life is to break us up.”

“What? Then why the hell did you bring me here?”

“Because it’s practice, remember? I’ve never brought a boyfriend in to meet them. Ever. And then I come in here with you!” She covers her whole face and laughs into her hands, like she just made the most spectacular joke.

I’m ready to get pissed off about this, but when she pulls her hands down and reveals her face again, she’s so happy—so delighted that she’s having fun with these people who so

obviously love her—that I smile too. I’ve never seen happy Irina. Everything about her is different right now. She looks so much softer than she usually does. The dress, the smile, the laughter. It almost turns her into a whole different person.

“You had better read that menu quick. Because Estafania is not messing around.” Irina is still chuckling. The joy she’s getting out of this seems disproportionate, but whatever. “If you make her come back a second time, she’ll just never come back at all.”

I put my menu down and lean back in my chair, relaxing. “I think I can take Estafania.”

Irina giggles again. “But she comes with a team. Floramaria and Lisandra will be here next. Oh, my God, I bet Nandy is already on her way. She’s probably blowing up my phone right now, but I left it at your place.” Irina finds this so funny, she almost snorts.

I have an urge to chastise her. Tell her to stop being so childish. She really does act like a teenager, but who am I to tell her to grow up? Her childhood was so much worse than mine, and my father sold me. She’s never had a chance to act like a silly girl. She’s never been on a real date. Never brought a boyfriend ‘home,’ and this place—at least in this period of her life—is the closest thing she’s got to home. She’s having fun with her family members, making them stress over her bad choice—i.e. me—and laughing about it, because it’s a joke. I’m just... part of her joke.

I smile at her instead. It would be criminal to take this away from her. “Should I make them crazy, Irina? Tell them about... my motorcycle?”

She nods, still laughing. “Oh, and your prison time!”

“Motorcycle. Prison time. What else?”

“Mmmm... ex-wife.”

“You’re insane.”

“*Two* ex-wives.”

“I’m twenty-four. I haven’t even had time to make that mistake twice.”

“And kids. You’ve got three kids from two women.”

“Stop it. No ex-wives, no kids.”

She calms down a little and leans back in her chair. “Have you ever dated anyone serious, Eason?”

“Of course not. When would I have had the chance?”

“You’ve been free for seven years.”

“So have you. And you’ve never dated anyone serious either.”

“Yeah, but I was on a supply ship for two of those years and in the jungle for a third.”

“And here for the last four.”

She shrugs. “You seem a lot more confident than me, so it’s just surprising that you didn’t go looking for a new family the first chance you got.”

“Is that what you did? Is that what this is?” I pan my hands to indicate the restaurant.

“They are. Yeah. But I didn’t go looking for it. It just happened.”

“Well, I’m not looking for it and it hasn’t happened for me yet.”

“You have Wade and Davis.”

“I do. And they are family at this point. But I get the feeling—sometimes, at least—that they keep me around because they feel responsible for me. But then, other times, I feel like they’re just hanging about until something better comes along.”

“I bet that’s not true.”

“You wouldn’t know though, would you?”

“Sometimes people see things better from the outside. I think they really care. But you asked them to come home earlier, didn’t you? When you were on the phone and I came out of the bedroom.”

I nod. “I did. But they’re in LA right now. They’re looking into opening a gym there.”

“Leaving Miami?”

“Maybe.”

“Will you miss them? Or will you follow?”

“I don’t think they want me to follow. I think they’re tired of me and my moods. I’m maybe, possibly... high-maintenance.”

She holds in her laugh. “No. You? But you’re so easy-going.”

I smile at her. “You, Irina, are pretty easy-going yourself.”

But Irina isn’t looking at me. Her eyes have darted to the door leading back into the restaurant. I turn, looking over my shoulder, and see a woman’s silhouette backlit by the bar lights inside.

Irina leans forward towards me, whispering, “There’s Nandy. Be nice to her. And don’t say anything about our

pasts.” Then she straightens and smiles at her approaching friend. “Hi, Nandy! Come meet my boyfriend!”

She’s still playing her little game. But I pause here. Do I want to be the ex-con boyfriend? It’s very cliché. And if I have to play this game, wouldn’t it be better to be something unexpected?

I stand up, smile, extend my hand, and formally introduce myself to Nandy Jardinez. “Hi. I’m Eason. Nice to meet you.”

Nandy is taken aback a little, and so is Irina, because she has gone quiet across the table from me. I step away from my chair and pan my hand towards it. “Here, sit. I’ll grab another.”

Both girls are still speechless, but Nandy sits. I can hear them frantically whispering as I grab an empty chair from a nearby table, but they quickly stop once I turn back around.

Smiles appear. They are pretending. Nandy has a lot of questions, but I’m not gonna give her the chance to ask them.

I set my chair down between them at the side of the table, then turn to Nandy. “You’re the best friend. Irina talks about you non-stop.”

“Funny.” Nandy shoots Irina a look. “She’s never mentioned you. And what is that accent? Dublin?” She squints her eyes at me. “No.” I’m about to correct her—I really am from Dublin—but she’s still talking. “It *was* Dublin, but... say it again.”

“Say what again?”

“Yep. I can hear it. It’s... North Africa. Morocco... Marrakesh.”

I look over at Irina. She's got her eyebrows up in a little bit of a panic. "Did I forget to mention that Nandy is a linguist?"

"Oh." I look back at Nandy and reassess. Well, shit. Two minutes in and I've presented her with a spectacular question—which comes popping right out of her mouth.

"How did that happen?" She's talking to me, but here's what's weird. She's looking at Irina when she asks that question.

Irina is not good at this. Her slight panic of raised eyebrows morphs into open-mouth shock. Forcing me to jump in with a lie. "My father was a sailor. On the Mediterranean. So we spent a lot of time in Morocco."

Which doesn't really add up, or answer her question, because Marrakesh isn't on the fuckin' sea.

"Hmm." Nandy is looking at me with a very critical eye. "Yes. I can hear the Casablanca too. So what took you to Marrakesh? Shopping?"

It's a half-serious question. The 'shopping' part was sarcasm. "You've got a good ear there."

"That's not an answer. But yes, I do." Nandy is tipping her chin up as she speaks, kinda challenging me. "There are many different types of geniuses in this world. Some are fluent in equations. Some paint heavenly pictures or compose music that can make you cry. I decipher speech. I can detect a hundred and twenty-one different regional dialects in English, plus ten in Spanish, twelve in Portuguese, three in Russian, nine in French, and nineteen in Arabic. I'm working on a few others, and for my Master's thesis I'm using a combination of several English dialects to create a whole new one. Once I'm done with that, I'll be going into voice biometrics for my PhD.

And you, friend, have a very interesting accent. Very unique. Did you know that an accent is like a fingerprint and it can be forensically traced?”

I don't know what to say, but Irina jumps in so I don't have to answer. “Come on, Nandy. You don't have to be so confrontational.”

Nandy smiles at me. Fake. Then turns her real smile towards Irina. “I'm not being confrontational. I'm just curious. You know how my mind works.” Then she looks back at me. “You're the guy who ruined Irina's date last week.”

I shrug with my hands. “Guilty. That guy wasn't her type.”

“And you are?”

“Nandy!” Irina is getting mad for real now. “Stop it. We just came in for some dinner.”

Nandy lets out a breath and forces herself to relax. Then she, once again, directs her attention to Irina. “Argentine rice bowl?”

Irina nods and smiles, placated. “Two, please.”

Nandy slaps her hands on the table and stands up. “I'll be right back.” Then she disappears the way she came.

I switch chairs and look at Irina. “Did you know she could do that?”

“No. I mean, I know she's good with languages. And she's the one who helped me lose the Russian accent. But I had no idea she could tune it in like that.”

“She knows you're not Russian, Irina. She has to. She picked out two different cities in Morocco. I was only in that country for six months and I was *nine*.”

“Well... so what? Does it matter?”

“She’s gonna figure out your past. And mine. Do you really want to have that conversation with her?”

Irina considers this, her attention drawn off to the left a little as she tries to imagine what telling her friend the truth might entail. Then she sighs. “No. I guess not. But it’s too late now. And if she figured you out so quick, then she’s known all along that I’m not really Russian. She has to have picked up on the Portuguese. I’m pretty fluent in that one. You can’t live in Brazil for ten years and not pick up on the language. But she never asked me any questions about it.”

“She probably didn’t want to pry.”

“Yeah. Maybe. We didn’t start as friends. She was my language teacher.”

“So you were a client. She wouldn’t ask a client questions like that. And probably, after a while, she just let it go, or maybe even forgot about it. But then I show up talking like a Dubliner from Marrakesh and now she’s probably remembering, right in this moment, that you’ve got the same pattern.”

Irina exhales in frustration. “It probably wouldn’t be such a big deal if you hadn’t burst in on my not-date last weekend acting like a jealous asshole.”

“Where the hell do you get ‘jealous asshole’ from? He wasn’t your type. I was giving you an out.”

Irina scoffs. “Right.”

“We were gonna train the next morning and I wanted you fresh. How was I supposed to know that your best friend was a language genius who would use my accent to track down my past?”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it. She knows what she knows.”

“Don’t tell her any more.”

“Why would I?”

“She’s gonna pressure you. And I know I told ya that your little escape didn’t change much in the bigger picture, Irina, but you need to understand what will happen to these people if they start asking the wrong questions.”

“What do you mean? What will happen to them?”

“Nosy people get taken care of. And maybe I’ve read them wrong, but tell me that those women back there won’t want to knock the ever-loving shit out of someone once they find out where we came from and what they did to us.”

Irina doesn’t say anything for a few moments, just looks off into the distance again. But then she directs her attention back to me. “Maybe, if enough people knew—”

“No, Irina. *No.*”

“Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t work that way, darlin’. You know this. Weren’t ya listening to me earlier? The people don’t have the power. No matter how many of them there are. They make pacts with these fuckers. Remember that part of the story? Trust me on this. Pretty much everyone in high positions—in any town, any county, any country—pretty much all of them are on the take. And if they’re not, they don’t stay at the top for long.”

“So you want me to lie to her?”

“I didn’t say that. I’m not tellin’ ya what to do. I’m just saying, these people don’t seem like the type to learn about a

whole underground child-trafficking ring and just let it ride. They seem to care about you. So you tell me—will they listen to your story and let it go? Or will they start thinkin’ they can change things?”

Irina knows the answer. We both know the answer. I don’t have to tell her friend anything. I’m not Irina’s boyfriend. I don’t have to like these people and I couldn’t give two fucks if they approve of me. But Irina’s not gonna get away that easy. She will have to lie to her friend to smooth this over.

Irina’s eyes dart over my shoulder as someone approaches, and then there she is. Nandy is setting down two bowls of rice and meat in front of us.

“Do you want to join us?” Irina is just being polite.

“Nope.” Nandy’s smile is fake. “I just popped in because everyone was texting me about *him*.” She hates me. She’s not even trying to hide it.

And this kinda pisses me off. Because just twenty minutes ago Irina was laughing and giggling about bringing me here. Having fun with her little joke. It was the first time I’ve seen her act like that and Nandy is the one who soured her mood. She ruined it.

I stand up and extend my hand again. “It was very nice to meet you, Nandy. You should come over to my place for dinner this week. I’ll cook us something good.”

She tilts her hip to one side and raises an eyebrow. “You cook?”

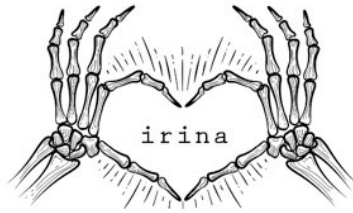
“I do. I’m sure it’s nothing compared to this.” I pan my hand at the rice bowl, which I’m going to scarf down in a matter of minutes once she leaves, it smells so good. “But I’m not bad. Ask Irina. I cook for her.”

Nandy doesn't know what to do with this revelation. She looks at Irina, bewildered, wondering how her friend got tangled up with a man like me, a man who has cooked for her, and she didn't know about it until now.

“Maybe I will.” Nandy says this to me, making it sound like a threat.

“Great. It's a date.”

CHAPTER 16



*N*andy leaves after that and Eason puts the whole thing out of his mind as he redirects his attention to his rice bowl.

But I'm still catching up. "Why would you invite her to dinner? That's gonna make everything worse."

Eason looks over at me with half-interested eyes. "She hates me. She has no reason to hate me. I'm a good catch as far as boyfriends go. Who the hell is she to look down her nose at me?"

"Wait. You're mad because she doesn't approve of you?" I cannot stop the laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Eason. Look at you. You've got a neck tattoo. The only thing worse than a neck tattoo is a face tattoo."

"Who told you that? And what do you know about tattoos anyway?"

"It's just a fact. And I know a lot about tattoos."

"You don't even have any."

"How would you know?"

"Because you wear nothing but those tight-ass gym shorts and tank tops. Plus, I saw your whole naked backside that one

day at your house after you took a shower.”

I’d forgotten about that.

“She has no right to judge me. So I’m gonna show off and make her regret it.” Then he redirects his attention back to his food.

“Well, you’re the one who said we can’t make her suspicious. And now you’re just gonna make her suspicious. She’ll want to know how you made all your money.”

He stops eating, annoyed again. “So what? I won a fight. It paid a lot of money. That’s not unusual.”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s there to know?”

“This was supposed to be one practice date. And now it’s two.”

He grins at me. “You don’t want a second date with me?”

“Not with Nandy around.”

“Well, we’ll go out tomorrow too. Then Nandy can be the third date.”

“Whoa, there buddy.” Eason grins at me. Even chuckles a little. “Three dates, Eason? You’re getting way ahead of yourself.”

“You say that now. But I haven’t even kissed ya goodnight yet.” Then he winks at me and flashes that dimple when he grins.

I must blush bright pink because he laughs, and shakes his head, and then resumes eating.

I eat too. The Argentine rice bowl is my favorite. So we both go quiet. I don’t know what he’s thinking about, but I’m

starting to picture this goodnight kiss. It's gotten a lot of build-up and I'm starting to feel nervous about the whole thing.

Will it just be something innocent? Not a cheek kiss, he made that clear. But will it be quick? Or lingering? With tongue? I've never done that before. Not properly. I lied earlier. I did kiss a guy once and it wasn't Paulo. It was a boy I met when I first got here. I was staying in the hostel and I joined in on a card game. Drank a little bit so I was more relaxed than usual. And I ended up kissing one of the other players outside in the alley. But he scared me a little when he opened his mouth and tried to slip his tongue into mine. I pushed him away and that's where it ended. I didn't stay there that night.

"Maybe we should just call off the kiss," I say.

Eason looks up from his food, surprised. "Why? What's going through that head of yours now?"

"Nothing. It's just..." I shrug. "It's not real. So why bother?"

"I thought it was practice?"

"You don't have to. It's OK. I'm sure I'll figure it all out eventually."

He puts his fork down and leans back in his chair. He ate so fast, most of his meal is already gone. "Irina, ya have to grow up sometime. I'm safe. I'm not gonna attack ya. Get it over with so you can, you know, be normal and shit. Date. Like girls your age do."

I'm still unsure, so I don't agree. I just go back to eating. But it only takes a few seconds to realize he's staring at me. "What?" It comes out snappish.

"You're pretty, ya know."

“Just stop.” I don’t look up at him. My eyes are studying the details of the red beans in my rice and my mouth is too busy chewing.

“Ya are. I’m not just saying that. You’ve got a very unusual look.”

This makes me look up. “Unusual? That’s special, isn’t it?”

“Unusual isn’t bad. It’s unique.”

I just roll my eyes and continue eating.

“What made you change your mind about the kiss?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m just calling it off.”

“Because you really are scared.” He pauses here for too long. So then I get curious and look up at him. “Why is it so scary?”

“It’s not. I’m fine. I just... you’re not... real. So I don’t wanna do it.”

“Fine. I’m not gonna talk you into a kiss. I’m a great kisser. Women line up to kiss me. I once won a kissing contest.”

“Shut up.”

“I got a rosette ribbon and everything. Blue. It said ‘World’s Best Kisser’ on it.”

“Shut up.”

“Do you require references? Is that the problem? I haven’t updated my kissing CV lately, but I can get ya references.” He actually pulls out his phone and starts scrolling.

“Just stop, OK?”

He pauses his scrolling to look at me. “I just want to make sure ya understand what you’ll be missing out on.” Then he pushes back from the table and stands up, pocketing his phone. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch him walk away. In fact, I’m pretty sure everyone on this patio is watching him walk away. He looks nice. Different tonight. He’s wearing a long-sleeved button down and a pair of tan-colored chinos and this makes me think of Maart.

Maart slipped into the city life easily, in my opinion. He took to it. I never saw him wear pants at home. It was always shorts. Cargo shorts, sweat shorts, every kind of shorts. Because, of course, it was the jungle. Clothes were a required annoyance where we came from.

But in the city, Maart dressed the way Eason is tonight. Casual, but a little bit fancy.

For a moment I let myself wonder what he’s up to. Is he in Brazil right now? Or is he somewhere else with one of the boys, getting ready for a fight? Does he miss me?

Maybe he did at first, but it’s been years now. I understand that Eason said he’s looking for me, but... what does that mean? Why is Maart looking for me? And what has he been doing all this time? Is he married? Does he have kids?

I try to picture Maart with kids and realize it’s pretty easy to do. He loves kids. He loved all of us kids. And then I went and had that stupid argument with him. *I don’t love you that way, Irina.* That’s what he said to me. Because I told him I *did* love him that way. I had this whole stupid fantasy in my head about the two of us living out some kind of happily ever after.

What the hell was I thinking?

I'm not sorry I left. I think I'm doing pretty good. I'm doing better than most. But I am sorry I walked out the way I did because I didn't have to ruin it. I could've kept him forever. I could've acted like an adult and had a conversation with him instead of reacting like a stupid teenager.

Eason was right. I do act like a teenager. At least when it comes to love. It's so weird too. Because I am on my own, living my life, taking care of myself with almost no help from anyone else. All these things are easy because this is survival. And I'm very good at surviving.

Love, though. It's something else entirely. And even though I did love every kid I ever met at Cort's camp, I didn't... *think* about them. I didn't place them in my future anywhere. Because I never knew when Cort might take them to a fight and they might never come home.

I couldn't afford to attach my heart to every wayward stray. They just end up as ghosts.

But there are no more strays in my life anymore. No one is gonna die in a death fight. They're all coming home.

Four years ago, though, I didn't know that. It was something I learned since I've been in Miami. So when Maart rejected me it felt like the end of the world. It felt like... like I gave my heart to a wayward stray and then... he never came home.

It's not literal, of course. I was the one who walked away. But I guess I couldn't wrap my head around rejection, or a path forward with Maart after that. If I had only stopped for a moment, gone home to the village and talked it over with Anya, none of this would've happened.

Maart and I could've been in touch this whole time. Maybe we'd be talking on the phone once a week? Or maybe I'd make a trip to one of the fights and I would stand there, next to the cage, and cheer for my friends. Maybe Paulo and Maeko and I would still be close. Maybe they would want me around.

There are so many other ways this could've gone. So many forks in the road, so to speak.

But... this is the path I chose.

Still, I do sometimes wonder what Anya is doing. And Cort. Did they ever have a baby? And where is Budi? He would be seventeen now. I bet he's living in the penthouse with Maart getting ready for his first fight.

And what about Ainsey? Is she healthy? Does her heart work right? Was it fixed for good after the surgery?

Did Zoya ever take over the world? I smile at this, but it's a sad one. Zoya and I lived together since she got to camp when she was four years old. She would be almost sixteen now. Did she walk out the way I did? Or is she still there? Still living in her same hut in the village?

She would have it all to herself because she was the youngest girl. Not including Ainsey. She lived with Cort and Anya.

And what about the birds on the Rock? Do they miss us? Anya and Cort went back to the Rock that one time and Anya said they were all still there. But that was years and years ago. Would they even know me if I went back there? Or have they forgotten about us?

A tear spills out of my eye and rolls down my cheek. I shake my head and put my fork down, suddenly done. I didn't even know I was crying.

“What’s that tall one’s name? She cornered me when I paid the check.” I look up at Eason because he’s back now. “She was giving me the third—are you crying?” I let out a long breath and he sits back down in his chair. “What’s wrong?”

I don’t look at him. Just wipe my face with the back of my hand. “I was thinking about home.”

“Why?”

“Because I was thinking about your kiss. And how you think I act like a teenager. And then I was thinking about Maart and how I walked out because I do act like a teenager. I ruined everything, Eason. I ruined everything.” I look up at him. I want to say so much more, but there are too many words to choose from and I can’t make a decision. So I just shrug.

“What did ya do?”

Do I tell him? I want to tell him. Not really, specifically, him. Just... someone. I want one person on this fucking planet to understand me. And Eason ‘Dead Eyes’ Malone is all I’ve got because I can’t tell Nandy any of this shit. She will not understand. But mostly, I don’t want her to understand. I don’t want her to fall asleep at night knowing that the evil is real.

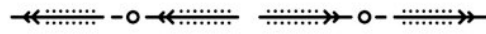
My truth will change her and I don’t want to do that.

“How about this?” Eason stands up. “Let’s go for a walk.” He comes around the table to me and pulls my chair back, and when I stand up, he takes my hand, leading me out the back entrance.

I’m still wiping my cheeks, looking over my shoulder at the restaurant. “Shouldn’t I say goodbye?”

Eason doesn’t answer me. Just sighs, tugging me so I have to catch up with him, and then he drops my hand as I fall in

step.



WE END up at the beach and just the sound and smell of it makes me feel both sad and relieved at the same time. We don't go to the pier. Eason just picks a spot of sand about twenty feet from the surf and we sit. He takes off his shirt, wads it up into a ball, and then lies back and uses it for a pillow.

He even closes his eyes.

I study him for a moment. All those tattoos. I might not have any, but I've seen my share of tattooed men. I've seen them done too. Sergey, Lilith, Ivano, and Kioshi all had tattoos. They were the oldest of us in the camp, the only adult fighters Cort had left after two decades of kids.

Rainer started tattooing them after they turned sixteen. They were all getting ready to enter the Ring of Fire. Four fighters from the same camp. This would've been an incredible feat for both Cort and Udulf.

Udulf would've lost Cort after he bought his freedom, but Cort didn't have the money to pay for all of us. Lilith, Ivano, Kioshi, and Sergey would've stayed. They each had one more fight—just one more—and then they would've been allowed in the Ring and Udulf would've been so much richer, not to mention alive, if he had just let Cort, Maart, Rainer, and Evard leave and been satisfied with what he had left.

Lilith would've been the first girl ever to make it to the Ring. She was so close. She did a few professional fights for

Cort after the great escape, but only to help pay for things like food, and supplies, and Ainsey's healthcare. She's married now. Three kids. I hadn't seen Lilith for years, even before I left, but the last time was right after her first baby girl was born. Lilith came to the village to show her off and I couldn't help thinking how lucky that girl was. Her mom would kill anyone who tried to hurt her. Not everyone gets a mom like that. And she would never know what it's like to fight for her life right out of pre-school.

“Like what you see?”

I realize I've been staring at Eason while all these thoughts were running through my head. He's still lying back on the sand, but he's got one eye open, looking at me.

I just sigh and lie back next to him, putting my hands behind my head the same way he did. It's not yet dark, but it's getting there. We're on the wrong side of the island to see the real sunset, but there is a residual one—a reflection on the clouds, turning them a deep red—which is almost as nice. This is always how it's been for me growing up on the Atlantic. So I like it.

I turn my head and find Eason still looking at me with that one eye. “What?”

“Ya didn't answer my question.”

I take in his body from this angle now, all those cut muscles along his ribs. Then I look him straight on. “You're handsome. No one is gonna say otherwise. But I've been this close to a hundred bodies just like yours.”

He laughs, and it reaches all the way up to his eyes. “I bet you have. So why are you so scared of us?”

“I'm not.”

“Then what is it? Intimacy?”

I sigh and shake my head. Then resume looking at the sky.

“It’s Maart. You liked him. More than you should’ve. He blew ya off, ya took it personal, and ya left. How close am I?”

“Well.” That word comes out on a long breath. “Nailed it.”

He laughs.

And so do I. I even turn my head to look at him again. “It was stupid. I did act like a child. And then I just took off. I mean—” I turn on my side and prop myself up with my elbow, staring at him for a moment before continuing. “I had been planning it.”

“Leaving?”

“Yeah. I was fighting in the favelas trying to earn money in the underground tournaments.”

“What did Cort and Maart think about that?”

“They didn’t know. And... I dunno. Cort is the closest thing I have to a father. But he wasn’t my father, ya know? We spent the first couple years on the supply ship, working. And the oldest kids would do real fights in different cities to help save up for the village that we bought.”

“He bought a whole village?”

I nod. “Yeah. It wasn’t nothing super nice, or anything. Just huts, mostly. It was kind of a wreck, actually.” He’s staring at me with a weird look on his face. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s just hard for me to picture. Him living like that.”

“Who?”

“Cort. Thirty-six fucking wins. All that money. All those prizes—”

“I told you, he didn’t take the prizes.”

“I know. That’s what I’m having trouble picturing. That he did all that... for you.”

“He wasn’t buying *my* freedom, Eason.”

“Ya missed the point, Irina. It literally just flew over your head.”

“What do you mean?”

“He did it for all of you. He could’ve had a yacht. He could’ve been living on it. Swimming every day, drinking every night, fucking girls... all of it.”

“But... that doesn’t even make sense. How could he live on a yacht and be training us in camp at the same time?”

Eason scoffs. “None of the Ring fighters trained their fucking camp kids, Irina. They partied. They did drugs. Whores. Jets, and cars, and boats, and whatever they wanted to do. You were put in a camp where the fighter never lost. And the reason he never lost is because he didn’t do any of those things, did he?”

I shake my head. “No. He was with us every day. Training us.”

“So you’d all live.”

“We didn’t all live.”

Eason just smiles. Then he looks back up at the sky. “He did it all right. Every single step. He figured out the rules, played the game perfectly, and now he’s free. And all his kids are free too.”

I guess I am lucky. Very lucky. Especially when I see it through Eason's eyes. "What was it like for you?"

He turns his head, opening that one eye again. "I'm not really sure."

I chuckle a little. "What do you mean?"

"I don't really understand what happened to me. The camps were... terrible, of course. They treated us like shit. Made us train to exhaustion. No one gave a single fuck if we won our fights. And, unlike you, I had a good-enough sample size. Seven camps total. Not a single one of them looked anything like the camp you've described. But I never minded the fights. I always went in knowing I'd win."

I haven't known him that long, but I believe this. He's much different than Cort. Cort was all about being prepared. Eason feels more like a guy who just... goes with the flow.

Not luck. But not preparation, either.

When I left Brazil, I had prepared for it. Because that's how I grew up. That was my example.

Eason was thrown away and he just... rode life like a horse or something. It bucked and twisted, but he was holding on, and laughing, and when it threw him—as it occasionally must—I get the feeling that he just got back up and did it again.

"You're a natural," I say.

"What?"

"Fighter. It's just... something... it's a part of you."

"My da was a fighter, that's why."

I smile. Because I had forgotten that.

Eason turns over on his stomach, his cheek resting on his shirt, his arms folded up over his head. And I know I've seen my share of men's bodies, but I can't help but glance at his back and shoulders. I study the tattoos that run down his arms. They are not all those scary smiley faces. Some of them are flowers. Roses, actually. Nicely colored, too. Much nicer than anything Rainer could do.

When I find his eyes again, he's smiling at me. "You should call Maart."

I turn over on my stomach too, one hand under my cheek, pressed against the still-hot sand. "Maybe."

"He's lookin' for ya, Irina. Put the poor man out of his misery."

I just scoff. "If he's miserable, it's not because of me."

"Would ya like me to call him? Tell him to fuck off and all that? Tell him I'm your boyfriend? It's part of the pretend boyfriend package, so there's no extra charge."

He's teasing me. "I'm not really sure you're up to it."

Eason chuckles. "What's that mean?"

"Nothing. Forget it. Just a throwaway comment."

And then, before I even know it's happening, he's scooting over in the sand, erasing the few inches separating us. He pushes me a little, turning me, the sand on my bare back and shoulders warm and familiar. His face is right over the top of mine, his eyes open, looking at me. Waiting for an objection. Giving me a moment to say no.

But when I don't, he lowers his mouth down to mine and the moment our lips touch, a feeling shoots through my body

that I've never felt before. It's like a chill, or a spark, or maybe just... a warmth.

He doesn't open his mouth, just makes his lips soft. His body—his bare chest—is warm against my chest, his cheek a little scratchy. We stay like that until the world ends. Then he pulls back, smiling.

The next thing I know, he's lying on the sand. On his back, hands behind his head, like maybe the kiss never happened.

I am too stunned to move. It was more than I ever expected. And it was so small of a moment. Just a teeny-tiny moment of time that I replay on repeat.

After several seconds, he says, "Well?"

I press my lips together. Then nod. "Yeah. I think... maybe... you actually did win that rosette ribbon."

Which makes him laugh. But then he goes quiet for a moment, turning his body towards me. Our eyes are locked. His are dark green right now. He reaches for me and I flinch away for some reason, but he's just swiping a piece of hair out of my eyes, like maybe it was interfering with his view.

And I suddenly feel stupid. And young. And inexperienced.

Eason stands up, grabs his shirt, and then offers me his hand.

I take it and he pulls me to my feet. But he holds onto my hand for a moment, making me look up at him with questioning eyes. "We're not all scary, Irina. Even the ones who kill."

Then he lets go of my hand and points me in the direction of home.

Does he see me better than I see myself?

I've never really questioned my self-image before. I never thought about it much. In fact, the first time I ever took notice of my outward presentation to the world was when that law office fired me because I didn't sound right.

But I would've never changed my accent if I hadn't seen Nandy's flyer on the register counter at the restaurant. It didn't even occur to me that I had a choice about how I talked.

I'm having a similar revelation right now with Eason.

Am I afraid of men?

Is that why I don't want to date?

Several minutes have passed since we got up from the beach. We're heading north towards his building, but we're still on the sand. And we've both been quiet. "What are you thinking about, Eason?"

"You."

"What about me?"

"I'm thinking... we were part of the same world but we had it so different. Why, what are you thinking about?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

He chuckles. "I would hope not. I've never given you a reason to be."

"No. I mean, I'm not afraid of you as a man."

He side-eyes me a little as we walk. "So ya are afraid of men?"

"I don't think so. But I'm starting to wonder what my freakin' problem is."

“Ya don’t want to date. That’s what ya said. Is it a lie?”

“I’m not sure. I think about the future, where I’m married or just have a kid, maybe. But I don’t see a way to get there.”

“Dates are a good start. What was wrong with that last guy?”

“You said yourself. He wasn’t my type.”

“I did, but I don’t know *why* he’s not your type. I could just tell you weren’t interested. But why weren’t you interested? Maybe start there.”

“He looked so... normal.”

Eason laughs. “Something wrong with normal?”

“There is, actually.” I look up at him as we continue walking. “I would never be able to be myself with that guy.”

“But why’s that matter? I mean, you’re not yourself with anyone. Why was it different with him?”

Am I really not myself with anyone? I hadn’t even considered that before.

“Why was it different, Irina?”

“I dunno. He was too perfect for me.”

“Ah. You want a damaged one. Something from the sale rack.”

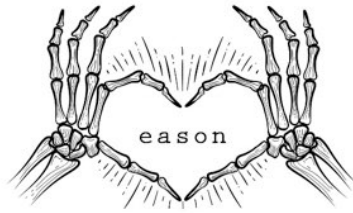
I smile. “No. I just want someone who...”

“Grew up like you? Someone like me, then.”

I sigh. Because he’s right. I bet Eason *would* be a good boyfriend. A good catch, as he put it. “But wouldn’t that just be some kind of default decision? That we would be together just because we came from the same place?”

He blows out a breath. “Maybe. I guess you could look at it like that. But most people would call that fate.”

CHAPTER 17



Irina and I stay quiet after that. I'm sure she's in the middle of some kind of existential moment. Thinking about, and maybe questioning, all the choices she's made up to this point. She shouldn't, really. Who am I to question the way she is? And I have to admit, running away from Brazil to come to America all by yourself takes some balls.

She's so unaffected, though. This is the part that bothers me so much.

She's not cold. Not at all cold, actually. But she's borderline apathetic. Like, if she had grown up in the regular world someone would've diagnosed her with something for being so introspective.

She wasn't diagnosed. Nobody noticed this about her—not even Irina noticed this about herself—because turning off your feelings was just part of growing up in our world. Feelings got you in trouble. Cold indifference kept you alive in spirit and that's just as important as being physically alive, if you ask me.

I'm the reason she's thinking about it now because I'm the one who pointed it out. Ever since she got in my bed declaring that not only did she not want to have sex with me, she didn't want to have sex with anyone, it's been bugging me.

Is she afraid of men? I'm not convinced. She doesn't need to be, not really. She can take care of herself. She took me down in the alley outside the gym and I'm no fuckin' slouch as far as fighters go. Granted, I was surprised at her sudden attack and I would've beaten her easily if she hadn't run off. But that kinda just proves my point. She knew better than to stay and fight. She knew she needed to run.

She was never in any danger. I was never gonna hurt her, but if I tried, she would've been OK because she could've gotten away. Clean away, not letting me follow her home the way she did.

So she was right and I was wrong. It's not men she's afraid of, it's having feelings for them. It's giving her heart away to someone who might not be here next week.

And then, if she did declare her love for Maart in some way, and he rejected her, well... it kind of explains a lot. "Do you still love him?"

Irina looks up at me. She wants to ask who I'm talking about, but she knows. So she doesn't. "I can't love him, Eason."

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't—"

I put up a hand to stop her. "You can lie to yourself all ya want, but don't lie to me. There's no way that Maart doesn't love you. Still, even after all these years. So why can't you love him?"

"I was gonna say he doesn't love me the same way."

"Hmm." This rings true. "Ya didn't really answer my question, though. Do you still love him in the same way?"

She just gives me a noncommittal shrug. “If you’re asking me would I put my life on the line for him, then yes. I would. I love him in that way now.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“What do you mean?” She looks up at me again. This time she really is confused.

“That’s how he loves you, Irina. You don’t think Maart would kill for you? Would give up his life for you?”

“Why would he?”

“What do you mean?” It comes out louder than it should. It’s just... she’s so fuckin’ clueless. “He raised you from a little girl, Irina. He taught you everything he knows trying to keep you alive.”

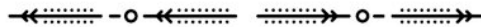
“But he didn’t do that for me, he did that for everybody.”

“You do know that you can love more than one person, right? You do know that you can love people in different ways as well, right?”

She doesn’t say anything.

So neither do I.

But I have made a decision.



WHEN WE GET BACK to my place she immediately starts heading for the stairs, but I grab her hand real quick before she can slip past me. She looks down at it, then up at me. “What are you doing?”

I walk over to the stairs, but unlike the way she planned it, we do this together. When I get to the bottom step, I face her and smile. “This is you.” I nod my head up the stairs. “That’s what people say at the end of a date when you get to their hotel room door, or the car ride is over, or whatever. They say, ‘This is me.’”

She smiles. All the way up to her eyes. “OK.”

“Say it.”

“This... is me.”

“Then the guy—which is me—does something romantic.”

“Oh, God. We really don’t have to, Eason. I’m serious.”

“I’m serious too. The guy”—I reach up and put my hands on her face, palms flat on each cheek—“which is me—does something romantic.” Then I lean in and touch my mouth to hers.

We’ve already kissed once, but I was just testing the waters. I wanted to see how she’d react. It was predictable. She barely moved. Held her breath. And then, when it was over, she wanted to think about it endlessly.

I pull back just a little, just enough to whisper, “When she says, ‘This is me,’ that’s the cue for the guy—which is me—to do something romantic. That’s how dates end, Irina. Good ones, anyway. Remember that.”

And then I take a step forward, erasing all space between us. And I hold her face while I kiss her properly. The way I would kiss any girl. Open mouth and with tongue. Promising something more to come.

Irina hesitates for a moment, her body going rigid, her mouth unwilling to open for me. But when I end that kiss and

start a new one, she gives in, just a tiny bit, and drops her tight shoulders, relaxing.

Now I kiss her the way I would kiss Irina. Which is not how I would kiss any other girl because I am not going upstairs with her and there is nothing coming after this but sleep.

A goodnight kiss. Just like I promised. I don't slip my tongue into her mouth. That's a proper way to kiss if you're gonna fuck that girl in the next three minutes. But a better way to kiss, if you're just sending a nice girl on her way upstairs, is to slip your fingertips into her hair, and pull her a little closer, and then slide one hand down to her waist.

This simple move, one every American boy probably learns by the time he's fourteen—a move Davis himself bragged about, thereby passing it on to me when I was fourteen myself—wakes her up out of her rigid stupor.

She gasps and takes a step back.

I don't stop her. My hand slips from her waist and we just stare at each other. I give her a few moments to sort things out, then ask, "Too much? Or too fast?"

She blinks at me. "I'm not sure."

I nod. "OK. Well, you should probably think that over. Thank you for going to dinner with me. And"—I point to the open door to my bedroom—"that's me over there. So... I'll see ya tomorrow."

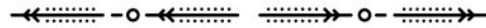
Then I turn and walk away.

When I get to my bedroom, I don't close the door. Not because I think she's gonna follow me—I don't think that, and she doesn't—I just want to know how long she stands there at

the bottom of the steps, thinking things through, before retreating to her room.

Six seconds.

And then I hear footsteps.



A CRASH HAS me sitting up in bed. An instant later, I'm crossing the floor and grabbing a bat that I keep next to my bedroom door. I wind it up over my shoulder as I come out of the bedroom and look around.

Irina is standing in the middle of the kitchen looking down at her feet. "Shit."

I lower the bat and place it against the wall. "What are you doing? What's going on?" There is just one small light on in the living room, so it takes me a moment to realize that she's dropped something and glass has shattered everywhere. Thick, pink liquid is spreading out under her feet and bright red maraschino cherries dot the concrete floor.

That's when I notice a large piece of glass is wedged into the fleshy instep of her right foot.

Irina looks up at me with wide eyes. "I jumped. It scared me and I jumped. I couldn't sleep, so I came down and..." She sighs. "I just wanted some cherries."

"Don't move." I go into my room, put on a pair of shoes, and walk back into the kitchen, flipping on the light. "Fuck, Irina." Her foot is bleeding good. I walk over to her, the glass crunching under my trainers. Then I pick her up, swing her over, and set her ass down on the counter.

“Hold still. I’m gonna pull out the glass.” I expect an objection or, at the very least, a wince, but she does as she’s told and doesn’t move when I pull the glass straight out of her foot. Blood comes pouring out, streaming all down my hand and dripping on the floor.

I grab a dish towel and wrap it around the wounded foot, holding it tight for a few moments. Then I point at her. “Hold this in place and stay right here. I’ll be back.”

A few moments later I’ve got my first-aid kit, a bowl of hot water, and washcloth. I dip her foot in the water and wash it. Irina says absolutely nothing as I do this. She doesn’t hiss, or wince, or complain. She just sits and watches me with a kind of blank look on her face as I wrap her foot in gauze.

“How many times, Irina?”

“What?” Her eyes snap to mine, like I just pulled her out of a dream.

“Fights. How many times did you kill people in those fights?”

“Nine.”

Nine. I say it my head. It explains a lot. She’s used to bleeding a lot worse than this. So no, she’s not gonna make a big deal about a cut. Or me touching her as I patch her up.

That should be the end of it. It’s a simple equation to solve. But I’ve got one more question. “Who fixed you up after you won?”

“Cort. Well, if I was hurt bad—and I was, six times—Cort would do his best before we left the fight, but Maart was our medic so we’d rush to where he was waiting. No matter where that fight was, Maart always had a makeshift ambulance waiting somewhere close to fix me up. He could fix almost

everything. He was like a real doctor. Not just stitches, either. He could set bones, and pop your shoulder back in place, and give you blood transfusions, and—”

“Stop.” I put up a hand as I shake my head. “I don’t want to hear anymore.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It just pisses me off when I think about how they made you fight like that.”

“Cort?”

“Not Cort. *Them*, Irina. *Them*.”

It’s dumb. But it’s what everyone says, isn’t it? *Them*. We don’t know who ‘them’ is, we’re just very, very fuckin’ sure there is a ‘them.’ Because there has to be someone to blame for all this fuckin’ evil. There has to be.

“It’s gonna need stitches. But let me clean up the kitchen first. Just sit tight.”

She watches me as I get out a broom and dust bin to sweep up the glass. “Why do you keep maraschino cherries in your fridge?”

I stop sweeping to look at her. “Why did you want to eat them in the middle of the night?”

“I asked my question first.”

Do I answer her? Or blow her off? It’s a stupid thing to worry about in the grand scheme of things. So I sigh. “I like them. I’m not really into sweets, but the cherries remind me of home. Of my mother, specifically. Because before all this child trafficking shit became a family tradition, I think my parents actually loved me. I felt loved, at least. We always had a jar of cherries in the fridge when I was a kid because my father liked

to have an ice cream sundae after dinner. Wow.” I pause and shake my head. “That feels like another reality ago.”

Irina is staring at me, still holding the dishtowel tight around her foot, that one knee pulled up to her chest. She softens. “I don’t think I’ve ever had an ice cream sundae. I know what they are, and I’ve had ice cream, of course. But what a weird thing.”

“What’s so weird about it?”

“It just never occurred to me that mothers might make ice cream sundaes at home for dessert.” Then she laughs. “I didn’t even know what dessert was until I came to Miami. I’m sure there’s a word in Portuguese for it, and in Russian too, but I don’t know what they are.” She lets out a breath. “I come from another reality too, I guess.”

“Did you just suddenly have a craving for them in the middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t sleep. I was thinking about you and my head was kinda spinning, so I came down for a drink, but then I saw that jar and I had this burning need to taste one of those cherries. They look so fake.”

I smile and lean on the broom, concentrating on the first part of her confession and not the second. “My kiss distracted you, didn’t it?”

“All of them, yes. Three different kinds of kisses in one night.” She pauses here, her smile falling a little. “It was a little confusing.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.” But that’s not really true, is it? “Well, maybe it was. Wasn’t the whole point of kissing you last night so you’d have a point of reference?”

“Was that the point?” She’s looking at me with earnest eyes. So young. So innocent. Which such a contradiction because she’s never been a child and she’s killed nine people in death fights.

“I dunno. Was it?”

She doesn’t answer me, just looks down at her foot. The blood is seeping through the towel now, so I finish sweeping and get the vacuum to make double sure I got all the glass.

When I’m done with that, I pull out a hemostat and a suture packet from my little kit and position her on the counter so I have a good view of the bottom of her foot.

I peel the gauze away, eyeballing the cut. “It’s gonna be twenty or thirty stitches at least, Irina. It’s a slice, not just a cut.” In fact, it’s almost a perfect half-moon, starting at the highest point of her arch and coming up the side of her instep.

She’s been silent since that last comment I made, but when I pull the suture out of the sterile package with my hemostat she sucks in a breath. “I hate stitches.”

“Do ya wanna go to the hospital?” She looks at me like I’m crazy and I just laugh. “What?”

“You can’t stitch it yourself?”

“Of course I can. I’m just asking if you’d like a professional. It’s kinda serious.”

“Please.” She huffs. “This little cut is nothing. Just do it. I trust you.”

“Would you like a drink then? I’ve got vodka. I’ve heard Russian girls are into that.”

She’s smiling as she shakes her head. “No. Maybe some painkillers instead?”

“I don’t have anything good, Irina. Just ibuprofen.”

“I’ll have some. Four, please.”

“It’s not gonna help much.”

“It will later.”

I open a cupboard to my left and shake out a few pills from the bottle. She takes them from me and swallows them without water.

I take a small bottle of ninety-nine-percent alcohol out of my first-aid pouch and pour half of it over her wound. Then I take a breath and start stitching. She doesn’t make any noise, but her body is tense when I slide the curved needle under her skin and pull the suture tight, so I start talking to distract her. “Davis gave me this kit.” I nod to the black leather pouch sitting next to her on the counter. “Up until then, no one patched me up. The guy who dropped me off at the fights wasn’t even the same guy who picked me up. It was just random people. And none of them gave a single fuck about how bad I was bleeding when it was over. They just took me back to camp and left me there.”

“That sucks.” When I look up from my stitching, Irina has a sad look on her face. “I always had Cort and Maart and they gave a whole lot of fucks about what I looked like when it was over. One time—”

“No.” I shake my head. “I can’t listen to it, Irina. I don’t want to know how bad you were hurt. It’s a cowardly thing, I get it. But it just makes me so angry. And I’m tired of being angry.”

She wilts a little, which makes me feel bad. But she doesn’t complain. “It’s fine. I get it. You were saying? About the kit?”

“Right. Davis gave it to me after my first fight for Benny.”

“So you could stitch yourself up?”

I look up at her. “Yeah. And I did.”

“But didn’t you ever have a broken arm or anything? How could you set that by yourself?”

“I never broke any bones, so I never had to.”

“Oh.” She says this word thoughtfully as she stares at me. Like it never occurred to her that boys might come out of those fights without broken bones. Then she looks away, probably thinking about all the times she did have broken bones.

And of course she did. She’s a girl. I don’t give a fuck how good a fighter she is, she’s no match for someone like me. Obviously she killed nine boys on her way up. But that’s just it, they were *boys*. Not men.

Irina is small. She’s mostly muscle, but she’s skinny. And I’ve seen my share of talented girls—hell, the women’s MMA circuit these days is pretty fuckin’ hardcore. But against me? Against Maart? Against Cort? I’m a hundred percent sure Davis would beat the ever-loving fuck out of Irina in a fight. And he wasn’t in the Ring or even in a camp. He’s just a trainer.

The fact that she killed Udulf sounds impressive, but let’s face it. Udulf was a soft fucker. A rich fucker. He didn’t know his head from his ass when it came to fighting.

Irina’s got no chance at all. She needs to run if she comes up against a man who’s been trained just as well, or better, than she has. That’s the only way she comes out the winner.

I want to say this to her. I want to make her promise to run. But I can't. And I don't think she would listen anyway. She would fight if someone was threatening her. She would stay and fight. The only reason she ran from me the other day was because she was upset and needed to scream into that pillow to make her world right side up again.

I do a continuous stitch, unconcerned about the scarring. That's how I've always done it because it's faster than doing single stitches and tying them off each time.

Which must be how Maart, the perfectionist, did it. Because Irina says, "Where did you learn to stitch like that?"

I pause my stitching so I can pull a little pamphlet out of the black pouch. It's stained with dirt and blood and only nine pages long. I hold it up and smile. "I just followed the diagrams."

She smiles too, then laughs and takes the pamphlet from me. "Your first-aid education came from a picture book?"

I've gone back to stitching now, so I don't look up. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Maart really was like a doctor. He taught himself too. He had all kinds of books in his room, a whole wall of books on anatomy and first aid and stuff like that. We never had a lot of money at the camp because Cort used most of it to pay Udulf for his future freedom and the rest went to food. But we always had a proper clinic, even on the Rock—that was our training camp on the ocean, an abandoned oil rig. But even there our clinic was as good as any clinic could be. In Brazil, at least. I'm sure it's much better here, but for where we were, and who we were, it was very, very good. I always felt safe with Maart."

I look up, staring at her for a moment. “Is that why you thought you loved him? Because he fixed you up when you were hurt and made you feel safe?” I don’t expect an answer. Haven’t really earned the right to ask this question. But I take the chance anyway.

Irina surprises me, as she so often does, and gives me the truth. “Yep. Obviously, I didn’t think of it like that back then. But... it makes sense now.” She shrugs. “I was such a fuckin’ child that day I walked out. I’m embarrassed at how I acted.”

“Then call him up, Irina. Talk to him. He’s looking for you. He wants to see you. Have one conversation with him so you can put his mind at ease and tell him you’re OK.”

She looks away again, sighing, signaling that she’s done with this conversation. “I dunno. I’ll think about it.”

I work in silence after that, finishing up just a few minutes later. It’s a lot of stitches. But I just pour the other half of the alcohol over them and wrap it all back up in clean gauze, fastening it with a bit of wrap tape.

“Thank you.” Irina is smiling the next time I look her in the face. “Do you think I can walk on it?”

“Not tonight. We don’t want to risk ripping the stitches or stretching them out. So I’ll just carry you to bed.” Before she can object, because of course she’s gonna object, I slide my hands under her knees and back and pick her up off the counter. Then I take her into my room and set her on the bed. “You can sleep here. I’ll take the couch.”

“Stop. The couch? I’m not kicking you out of your own bed. I’m like a hundred percent positive you’re not interested in having sex with me, Eason. So just get in.”

“A hundred percent?” I shoot her a lopsided smile.

“Shut up.” And she turns over.

I chuckle a little. She’s wrong though. Maybe yesterday she might’ve been right. And I might’ve agreed. But I like Irina. And even though she didn’t really kiss me back last night, I like the way it felt to be that close to her.

I get in on the other side of the bed, press my face into the pillow, and let out a long sigh.

But the weird thing is... I feel kinda happy. And it’s been a really long time since I felt happy.

Irina’s back is to me, but now she turns, kinda looking over her shoulder. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” I’m looking at her through one eye the way I was on the beach.

“Which is worse, in your mind—what happened to Eoin, or what happened to you?”

I let out a breath, ready to say ‘Eoin’ on instinct because he was just a little boy.

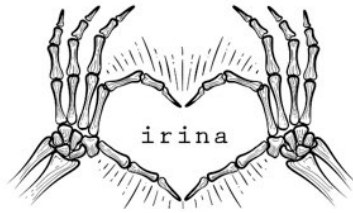
But then I realize I was just a little boy too.

I don’t say anything.

But she wasn’t expecting me to.

She just wanted me to think about it.

CHAPTER 18



*T*he sound of a buzzing cell phone wakes me and I catch Eason with the phone to his ear as he leaves the bedroom, probably trying to be quiet. The clock says six-fifteen a.m., which is not early if you're up training, but is very early for a casual phone call for most people. I strain to hear him talking, but all I catch is the closing of the terrace door.

Hmm. So whoever it is, he wants his privacy.

My foot is throbbing like a heartbeat and suddenly everything that happened yesterday flashes back to me. The dress—that was nice of him. The dinner—kind of a disaster since Nandy is going to be very suspicious. The invitation to cook for her—another disaster waiting in the wings, if you ask me. The beach and the first kiss—which was super nice, and just thinking about it now makes me smile.

But the next kiss was confusing. It was a little more forceful. And then he surprised me when he started touching my hair and his hand slipped down to my hip.

He said he did it to make me think. So it was some kind of test.

Too much or too fast? That's what he asked me.

It was a little bit of both. But it was too slow and not enough at the same time.

He said something interesting while we were talking on the beach last. That part about us being together not being some careless default decision, but something more aligned with fate.

Maybe I could see us together. Maybe it's not a cliché to want the person who understands you best just because they had a similar experience.

I think he's handsome, that's for sure. But that's not enough for me. Paulo was a handsome boy too. And Maeko. And Peng. Even though he was only twelve when he died, I remember thinking he was nice to look at when we were kids.

But I didn't want to kiss them or date them.

I think the best thing about Eason is the way he thinks. And I like talking to him. I like his accent and his voice.

I find myself wanting more of him, which is kind of a new feeling for me. The other men in my life—Maart, Cort, Paulo—I didn't need to know more. I already had their stories. And anyway, our stories were connected.

So this experience with Eason is all brand new. I've never taken the time to get to know someone the way I'm getting to know him. Not even Nandy, because we started our friendship as professional acquaintances and it grew more personal over a series of months. I found things out about her in a casual, disconnected way. *Oh, you're in university. Oh, you drink mojitos.* It was all very... stepwise and prolonged.

Eason feels more like a crash course. One day he enters my life. The next day we're sharing personal secrets that we don't tell anyone else.

It's the default setting. That's how I see it because I'm kind of logical like that.

But he's kind of a romantic, isn't he? Because he says it's fate.

I'm not sure I believe it's fate, but I'm willing to take another look at that. There's nothing wrong with a new perspective. Eason is smart, worldly, and pays more attention to details when most of the time I'm just lost in my head trying to figure out the big picture.

He's definitely been paying more attention to me than I have to him. He's able to see through my facade, and even though I usually hate it when other people try to peel back my layers, I like the way Eason does it. Probably because he's not looking for a secret. He's not looking for the truth, either. Not really. I think he's looking for understanding. I think he wants to compare our experiences. I think he's trying to make sense of himself, not me.

He comes back into the room, trying to be quiet as he walks around to the other side of the bed and sets his phone down on the nightstand.

"I'm awake."

"Sorry about that."

"Who was on the phone?"

"Davis. Macks, the Ring reporter? She called him again."

"What did he tell her?"

"He didn't answer the phone. That's why he called me. He wanted to know if he should call her back and let her know we found ya. I told him yes."

I let out a long sigh. "You should've asked me first."

“If you’re here, with me, then I owe Maart this much. He has the right to know where you are. Doesn’t mean you have to talk to him. How’s the foot feel?”

“Horrible. It’s thumping like crazy.”

“Should I pour you a few shots of vodka?”

I turn my head so I can see him, then smile. “No. The ibuprofen is just wearing off.”

He gets up, leaves the bedroom, and comes back a minute later with four little pills and a small glass of water. “Don’t drop it. You’ve got too many stitches already.”

I sit up, swallow the pills, and hand him back the glass. He sets it down on my nightstand, then comes around the bed and gets back in.

We both lie back and then turn over so we’re facing each other. He offers up a smile. “It’s better to just get it over with, Irina. Then it won’t be something you have to think about.”

“What am I gonna say to him?”

“What do ya want to say to him?”

““Sorry?””

Eason shrugs. “So say that. But I would like to go on record that I don’t think you owe him an apology. He made his choice, you made your choice, and that’s the end of it. If it were me, I’d be happy to see him, but I would not apologize. You’re an adult, Irina. You’re allowed to do whatever you want and you don’t need anyone’s permission to do anything.”

“I know. It’s just... the way I left it. It’s so cringe. I was such a stupid child.”

“So? Nothing wrong with that. You’re not a stupid child now.”

“That’s a lie. You said I act like a teenager.”

He studies me for a moment. “That’s been on your mind, hasn’t it?” I nod. “It just... surprised me. How innocent you are.”

I nearly snort. “Innocent? I’m not innocent.”

“I’m not talking about the killing. I’m talking about...”

“The boyfriend thing?”

“That. But also... you’re just...” He blows out a breath. “Immune to it all. You’re very well-adjusted. I mean, for a person who grew up killing people in death fights until she was thirteen. How do you do that?”

I’m not sure what he’s asking. “How do I do what?”

“Live?”

“I’m... not sure I have a choice.”

“Of course ya do.”

I realize he’s talking about his depression. He struggles with the will to live. Like Rasha did. And I know he blames himself for his little brother’s horrible death—maybe he even blames me for that. Because I was part of it, in a way.

Maybe he still feels like that. Maybe he doesn’t. But I suddenly feel the need to set him straight just in case. “You do realize that even if Eoin wasn’t killed, it would still eventually have turned out the same way. You know that, right? They were going to hold him over your head. Probably for years. Maybe decades. There was never going to be a happy ending for Eoin.”

And because he's smart, he understands why I'm saying this. "I don't blame you."

"Then you blame yourself. And the reason I asked you that question last night—"

"I heard you. I was just a boy too."

"So..." I pause. "And I'm not being an asshole here, OK? I'm just asking a question."

"OK."

"You asked how do I live? And that's why I'm saying this."

"I get it, just get on with it."

"Well, I decided very young that I was gonna survive. That's all it is. It's just survival."

"But you're good at it, Irina. Like... professional-level good at it."

"So are you. I mean, you're still here, right?"

"Barely."

"I'm gonna die one day. I know this. Have always accepted it. I don't have anything for them to hold over me. No family, no real friends, no boy, no child, no brother or sister. I don't need things, either. I'm happy with nothing. It's a game, like you said that one day. I never put it in those terms the way you did, but I decided, very young, that I'm going to survive. Still, we all die. And when the time comes, when I'm about to die, then I will go out in a blaze of glory. I don't really think about revenge. I don't know if I want to kill them. But if they're there? And I see them? And I have a chance? Then yeah. I would not mind dying that way."

His smile is slow. Just like the way he moves across the bed in my direction. Suddenly, all the space between us has been erased and his hand is on the side of my face, the way it was last night when I pulled away and chickened out.

This time I don't pull away. I let him get closer. I close my eyes and wait for the kiss. And when his mouth touches mine, I smile into it, opening up a little, enough for his tongue to slowly slip inside my mouth. Then we're kissing. Really kissing, the way I've seen people do it in the movies.

I don't overthink it. I don't analyze it. I just let him show me what to do.

When he pulls away, he's grinning at me. A fingertip lazily pushes a piece of hair out of my eyes and then he settles back, pulling me with him. Opening his arms for me.

I slide closer, turning my body a little, angling into his chest. And then those arms are around me and I can't for the life of me ever remember feeling so cared for and safe.

“Irina?”

“Hmm.”

“I think I love you right now.”

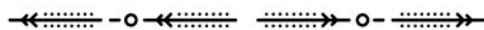
I almost turn, try to actually, but he doesn't let me. His arms don't loosen. “What?”

“That little speech you just gave? The ‘blaze of glory’ one?”

“It's... stupid?”

“No.” He chuckles. “It's just... I gave myself the same pep talk the very day I met you.”

I smile. “Fate.” I let out an exhale of relief and then... sleep.



THE NEXT TIME I wake up another phone is buzzing, but this time it's coming from somewhere else in the condo.

“Shit. That must be you.” Eason unwraps himself from me and gets up, leaving the bedroom to go searching for my phone. He comes back a minute later holding it, but it's no longer buzzing. “How do you not have a lock screen?” He gets back in bed, his fingertips scrolling.

I reach for the phone, but he holds it out of my reach, smiling. “It's the rule, ya know.”

“What's the rule?”

“No lock screen, no privacy.” He's still grinning, but slowly it fades. Then he looks at me. “You only have four contacts? Nandy, Dog, that restaurant, and me.” He turns his head to see me properly. “You've got nothing to hide, I guess. Why bother with a lock screen?”

“I told you. Unattached, unaffected.”

“You do realize that they could go after Nandy? So your little ‘blaze of glory’ plan has a hole in it.”

“Shit.” I practically guffaw. “Let them try. Nandy Jardinez comes from a Cuban crime family.”

“Shut up.”

“Swear to God. Why do you think I like them so much? I'm no American Mafia expert or anything, but trust me when

I say this, Brazil is as corrupt as they come. All of it. And the favelas are run by families just like hers.”

“Hmm.”

“Hedging your bets on that dinner?”

“You’re like a prophet or something. The text was from her. She wants to come to dinner tonight.”

“We should cancel.”

“Fuck that.” He hands me the phone.

I take it, but I don’t look at the text. I’m looking at him. In a new way, actually.

He looks right back at me, not at all shy about anything. “I’m not sure I believe you about her family, but if that’s true, then who the fuck is she to judge me?”

“What?” I sit up a little.

He takes the phone back and his fingers start tapping. “I’ll show her. Eight. I’m telling her to come at eight. And there. She now has my address. She’s looking it up right now, realizing what building I live in and—” My phone buzzes. He grins. “That’s her now being properly impressed.”

I take the phone from him and read the text out loud. “‘Are you dating a gangster?’” Then I snicker at him as I text back and talk at the same time. “‘No, he’s a cage fighter.’”

Eason grabs the phone and smiles. I didn’t text that. I texted, ‘No, he’s a good guy.’

“Anyway,” I say. “What are the chances I can walk on this foot now?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

“I want to take a shower.”

He gets out of bed and comes around to my side. “Come on, I’ll help you into the bathroom.”

I’m pretty confident I can do this on my own, but when I step on the foot, a sick pain slides up my leg and I quickly realize that’s not the case.

Eason picks me up and takes me into the bathroom, setting me down on a long polished concrete countertop. “Bath?”

I look over at the bathtub. It’s a free-standing one positioned right in front of the window with a view of the sea where it meets the sky. There isn’t a single cloud. Nothing but sunshine.

He doesn’t wait for me to answer, just starts the water and then turns to look at me. His face is filled with mischief and I definitely get the impression that he’s thinking about taking my clothes off.

I like him. I don’t think he’s just some default choice. I think we’re already friends and we’re gonna stay that way. Weeks. Months. Maybe forever. And after the way he took care of my foot last night, I can definitely see the boyfriend lurking behind those tattoos.

But I’m not ready for anything else. Not yet.

He grabs a towel from the cupboard and places it on the counter next to me, then takes my foot in his hand, braces my toes against his bare stomach, and begins unwrapping the gauze.

When he’s got it all unwound he throws the bandage in the trash and holds my foot up, studying his work. “I think it’s good.”

It is good. His stitching is straight and neat and the skin is not too red at the edges, so it’s not infected.

“Clean it gently with soap and then I’ll wrap it back up when you’re done.” We both pause here, saying nothing. It gets awkward pretty quick. “Do you need help getting in?”

I probably do, but... not from him. So I just shake my head, feeling kinda dumb and childish again.

“It’s OK, Irina.”

I’m not sure what he thinks my problem is, but I nod anyway.

He gives me one last smile and then leaves me alone in the bathroom.

I sit there on the counter for a few moments, just listening to the tub fill up with water and gazing out at the ocean.

When I was a kid I used to sit out on the Rock and look out at the ocean as I was eating my rice and chicken. And I would imagine all the worlds that were out there that I had never seen except in picture books in Cintia’s library.

I don’t remember feeling sad about that.

I don’t remember feeling anything about that. Just... maybe... curious, I guess. That the world could be so big that I would never be able to see it all.

But I suddenly find that I do have feelings about the world beyond me. Always have. It’s just I couldn’t pin it down until now.

And it’s fear. It’s just plain fear.

I’m afraid of everything. And I get that it doesn’t make much sense—that’s why I couldn’t figure it out. Look at me. I’m here, alone, and I’ve done all these things. And it’s good. I’m fine. I survived.

But I keep life at a distance. I'm living it. I'm playing through to the end, but I never let anything get too close, do I? I don't want to be invested in things, or people, or places if it's all gonna disappear like a losing child on fight day.

Does it have to be this way though?

Couldn't I, for once, just... love it? And not worry about the future?

I get down off the counter, careful to only put weight on the toes of my wounded foot, and then I strip naked in front of that window, thinking about the Rock, and Maart, and how I can feel him getting closer.

He's coming. I already know he's coming. And when he gets here, I'm going to burst into tears the moment we lock eyes. Not because I miss him, though I do. And not because I was stupid, though I was.

It's because he knows me. He sees through me.

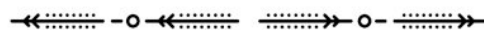
He has always known that I was afraid and me choosing him was the real default choice.

Not Eason.

It was Maart.

And he was wise enough to understand that.

That's why he made me walk away.



WHEN I GET out of the tub I wrap myself up in the towel and go out into Eason's bedroom. He brought my backpack down from upstairs, but there's a bag on the bed too, a fancy bag

from the boutique downstairs. It's pink, and glossy, and the handles are made out of pale-green satin ribbons.

I walk over to it, glancing at the living room through the open door, checking for Eason as I pass. But I can't see him, so I'm not sure where he is.

Then I open the bag and find a pair of cream-colored denim shorts with scraggly threads hanging off the legs. There's a top that is not a tank top, but it's cotton, and cream-colored—like the shorts—and nearly sleeveless with just a bit of ruffle at the shoulders.

There's a single flip-flop—I chuckle to myself—and a bathing suit too. I pull the bikini bottoms out and hold them up. They're pale blue with yellow flowers. And there's a matching strapless top. I hold it up, picturing myself wearing this today.

“Is it gonna fit?”

His voice scares the shit out of me so I have to stifle a scream as I turn around, hiding the top behind my back like I'm thirteen years old.

Eason is standing in the doorway, grinning, holding my other flip-flop. He points it at me. “You don't really need two shoes at the moment, but they come as a set.” His eyes are bright and mischievous, like he finds me entertaining.

But honestly, I find him entertaining as well.

“That girl who took care of you last night in the shop?”

I nod, because I get the feeling he's looking for some kind of participation in this conversation and my words are all a jumbled mess right now.

“I went down there looking for clothes for you and she was working. She picked all this out. It wasn’t me.”

I let out my breath, because for some stupid reason I was holding it in.

“I just figured you’d like something else to wear today besides gym clothes.”

“Are we going somewhere?” Finally, I find my voice. “I don’t know if I can walk.”

“You don’t have to walk, darlin’. We’ve got a boat, remember?”

Did he just say *we* have a boat? Because *we* do not have a boat. *He* has a boat.

“I guess you’ll get your way after all.”

“What?”

“A car ride over to your place to pick up the rest of your stuff.”

“Oh.” I look away, confused. Then I look back at him, still confused. “Wasn’t I moving in so we could train and kill people?” I point to my foot. “Because I think we’ll need to put that plan on hold for about three weeks.”

“Three fun weeks. We can boat, and swim, and dive. Do ya dive?”

“Do I... dive? Like... into water?” This feels like a really dumb question. I mean, I grew up on the ocean. I know how to swim.

But Eason is reading my mind. “Do you snorkel, Irina? Do you know how to breathe using a mask and a tank?”

“Do you?”

“Benny got me certified in Dubai. It’s fun. I’ll teach you how. Not today, but soon.”

I just stare at him, trying to work out everything he just said and put it all in some kind of order. Several things are floating to the surface of my mind. One, his life is fucking strange. His owner taught him how to scuba-dive? Two, he bought me more clothes even though I have some perfectly good tanks and shorts in my backpack. Three, I’m living with him? Like, this is a real thing. I’m moving in? For good?

Eason’s grin grows. “It’s not getting any clearer, is it?”

I shake my head.

“Should I explain it to you?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“We’re gonna give it a try, Irina.”

“Give what a try?”

“Us.” He leans against the doorjamb, crossing his arms like we’re just shootin’ the shit about nothing in particular. “I feel like Maart missed his chance.” My eyebrows go up. “He’s coming, by the way. Davis called while I was downstairs shopping for your girly things. He’ll be here Tuesday.”

“Oh.” I kind of want to object here, but Eason already told me that he was gonna tell Maart where I was. And that’s not my decision. And what Maart decides to do with that information isn’t my decision either. So this small ‘oh’ is all I can manage.

“Yeah. So we’ve got a couple days to sort it out.”

“This is where my confusion starts. We have a couple days to sort what out?”

“Our relationship. Without him clouding your judgment and gettin’ ya all angsty. So when he gets here, he understands. We’re a team and he missed his chance.”

Eason starts to turn, like he’s gonna walk away, but I stop him. “Hey.”

He looks over his shoulder at me. “What?”

“Why are you being like this?”

He turns all the way back to me now. “Why am I being nice to you?”

It sounds dumb when he puts it that way. But he’s not wrong. “Why are you so interested?”

“Haven’t you been listening?”

“What?”

He just smiles at me. “Think about it. And get back to me in a day or two if you’re still confused.”

“But wait.” I stop him from leaving again. “You do realize I’m not gonna...”

“You’re not gonna have sex with me?”

I shake my head. “I’m not, Eason. I’m really, really not.”

“You’re not gonna have sex with anyone? Ever?”

I don’t say anything to that. I want to agree, but it’s so dumb. Of course one day I will.

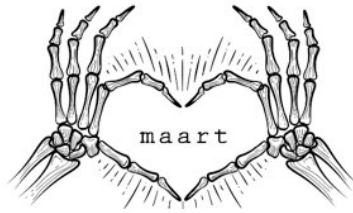
I understand this.

But whatever he’s doing here—it’s not gonna be enough to bring that day closer.

Eason looks at me with an expression I can’t quite decipher. “There’s no rulebook, ya know. There are a million

ways to love someone, Irina.” Then he nods his head at the clothes on the bed. “Get dressed. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 19



*T*he sound of a sliding door wakes me and when I turn over in bed, I catch just a glimpse of Beth retreating to the terrace, phone pressed to her ear. She's wearing nothing but a silky teal-blue slip just barely long enough to cover her hips, so I get a good look at her underwear too.

She's been staying here for a week now. She does have a bed at the other penthouse. And it's new. Nice. But she came anyway.

Am I dating this woman?

Probably.

Have we cemented that into anything?

No. This thing is just... kind of happening.

The boys like her though. Especially Paulo. He's always drilling her about other fighters she's known.

We haven't had sex yet. I'm trying to figure out if this is unusual or not. I've had my share of women since I left the jungle camp behind, but I would not call them girlfriends. We'd meet up, have some food, some drinks, then get a hotel or go back to her place. They didn't come here, that's for sure. And then we might do that one or two more times, but mostly we didn't.

One night. That's pretty much what I'm up for in the dating department.

Everything about Beth is different.

The terrace door whooshes open and she steps through. "Oh, you're awake. Sorry. I thought I was being quiet."

"I'm just a light sleeper." I let my eyes drift down her body, then back up.

She tilts her head and smiles. "Anyway. Guess who that was?"

"I could care less."

"Irina's boyfriend's trainer."

I sit up, frowning. "What boyfriend? She's sleeping with that what's-his-face fucker?"

"Well, I don't know about that. I wasn't pressing for personal information, Lance." Beth goes into the closet and just takes that slip off with her back turned to me. Just right over her head without a moment's thought. She's bare up top, but she's wearing those teeny-tiny shorts that she calls underwear. She turns, flashing her tits at me, but pulling on a sports bra at the same time. She looks down, tucking them in properly, which delights me. Then a moment later she's wearing a tank top. "Get up."

"Why?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"I was a little bit distracted, to be honest."

This makes her smile. Even though we haven't had sex, I'm like two hundred percent sure it's gonna happen. She's not shy, that's for sure. I think she's just careful. Which is fine

with me. She's fun pretty much all of the time. "He said we could go."

"What are we talking about again?"

"Lance."

I chuckle. "The trainer. And what now?"

"Miami. We're going there."

"Irina wants to see me?"

"No. Well, I'm not sure. He didn't say. He just said he talked to Dead Eyes—"

"Can we just call that man by his name? I don't like Dead Eyes."

"Fine. Eason. Eason told Davis—his trainer—that you should come to Miami and work this out."

"He said that? 'Work this out?'"

"That's what I was told."

"So Irina has told him about me?"

"Apparently."

"Hmm." Beth's got a little pair of training shorts on now. She walks over to the bed, drops onto it, and starts crawling up to me.

I'm like... instantly transfixed. Smiling like an idiot as she straddles my lap, just the thin cotton sheet between us, then gets close enough to kiss me. But she doesn't, just looks me in the eyes. "Let go."

"Let go of what?"

"You know what. If we go to Miami, you will hug her, smooch her on the cheek, pat her head, and release her. You do

not ask questions about Eason. You do not ask her why she left, or never called, or anything. It's a gift, Lance. Accept it with grace."

Then Beth leans in, touches her mouth to mine, and kisses me.

I'm about to attack her when she slips away and goes looking for her shoes. "I'm going for a run. You should pack. I've called the pilot. We can leave tonight but I told the trainer we won't be there until Tuesday."

"Then why are we leaving tonight? It's Sunday. And what pilot? You've got a private plane?"

Beth shoots me a look that says, *Doesn't everyone have a private plane?* then starts hopping on one foot as she puts on her shoe. "We're leaving tonight because we can't just go in blind, Lance. We need to get the lie of the land."

"What are you? A detective?"

"No. Better. I'm a reporter."

"I thought you were retired."

"Well, I got handed—literally handed—a story. And I can't say no." She shrugs. Like this is fate, cannot be helped, and she's got no say in it at all.

I just shake my head. "I'll run with you, if you wait."

"I don't want you to run with me."

"Why not?"

"Because to you, running is a form of torture."

"Stop."

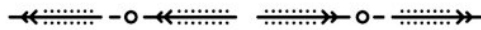
"And for me, running is just how I get to that little shop in Ipanema where my coffee is waiting."

She's got both shoes on now, so she wiggles her fingers at me and leaves.

I lie back in bed, smiling.

I've got no idea what I'm doing with this woman.

But I'm gonna keep doing it.



BUDI IS MAKING protein shakes for breakfast. I pause and watch him as he drops large chunks of mango into the blender filled with coconut milk. “Are you making one for me?”

Budi smiles over his shoulder, but Evard is the one who answers. “He made one for Beth.”

I find it so funny that they're all calling her Beth now.

Evard is still talking. “She took it with her on her run. She told us to pack. Where are we going?”

Shit. Evard isn't going anywhere. There's no way Cort will let him go to America. It's out of the question. So I don't answer.

But then Paulo is behind me. “Miami. She told me. I was coming up from my run and I bumped into her in the hallway.”

“Miami?” Evard says it like he's trying to work out where that is.

I try to play it off. “I don't recall inviting any of you fucks to come along.”

“She found Irina,” Paulo deadpans. *Goddammit, Beth. What the hell? A little discretion.* “So...” Paulo is looking me

straight in the eyes. He might even narrow them down a little.
“We’re going.”

“Going where?” Maeko asks, coming out from his bedroom, dark hair still wet from a shower.

I let out a long breath as that whole conversation plays on repeat. “Evard.” I walk over to him and place a hand on his shoulder.

“No. Fuck that, Maart. I’m going too. You guys can’t just leave me behind.”

“Cort is not gonna allow it. He’s not, Evard.”

“Fuck him. He doesn’t get a say.”

“It’s not happening, and he does get a say. You’re the only lucky little fucker in this room who has a real father.”

“I’ll ask Anya.” Evard tips up his head. Like he just played his trump card.

“It’s not gonna work.”

“Why not?” He’s pissed. But I’m right and he’s wrong.

“Because it’s America, Evard.”

“So?”

Paulo walks by him and flicks him on the head as he passes. “Where do you think most of us come from, Evard?”

Evard winces. It was a hard flick meant to shut him up. And it worked—the words, at least. Maybe not the flick. His silver-gray eyes find mine. “Did I come from America?”

“No. You came from a breeding camp.”

“Then who came from America? Because it wasn’t any of us. Paulo is from Brazil. You don’t even speak American. I

sound more American than you. Maeko came from Japan and Budi came from... somewhere over there.” He flings his hand off in a random direction to mean Indonesia. “This is all a lie.”

He’s right. About half of it. None of us in this room came from America. But we’ve had dozens of kids in the camp who did. Stolen right out from under their mommies and daddies. And Miami is the flagship American city for human trafficking. He’s not going.

I shrug. “Call him up, then. Ask him, Evard. But you already know what he’s gonna say.”

“I’m practically eighteen. In fact, I probably am eighteen. He doesn’t get a say.”

“You are free to tell him that.”

“Fuck this.” Evard retreats from the room, angry.

And I feel like I’m having this argument on repeat. First Irina, now Evard.

Budi hands me a protein shake in a frosted, stainless-steel cup. I take it back into my bedroom, close the door, and call Cort.

“Yep.” He’s out of breath.

“Am I interrupting something?”

“No. I was jumping rope. What’s up?”

“The reporter.” I still call her that with Cort. He doesn’t know we’re on a make-believe-name basis now. “She found Irina.”

“Really? Where?”

“Miami.”

“She’s still there?”

“Yeah, I guess. So listen, we’re going to see her, and Evard
—”

“No way.”

“I told him that. But he’s pissed. Ya better come pick him up. We’re leaving tonight.”

“Is everyone going but him?”

“Paulo and Maeko for sure. I didn’t ask Budi, but he didn’t say he wasn’t going, so I’m gonna say yes. Everyone is going but Evard.”

Cort blows out a breath. “Well, yeah. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“That’s an understatement, brother.”

“But he’s not going. Do you agree?”

“I do. He should stay.”

Cort pauses for a moment, then adds, “Are we making a mistake?”

“You mean, are we pushing him away the way I did Irina?”

“No. That’s not what I meant. But now that you say that
—”

“It’s dangerous, Cort. He’s your son. If there was any kid in this camp they’d try to snatch, it would be him or Ainsey. He knows that.”

“Just because he knows it doesn’t mean he understands what it means. And you know what we were like at his age. Very, very sure that outside of that Ring, no one could touch us.”

“Still can’t.” Which makes him smile, I can hear it. “But it’s for the best. Can you come get him now?”

“Anya and Zoya have the Jeep—they went grocery-shopping at the farmers’ market in Juparanã—but they should be back in a couple of hours. As soon as they get here, I’ll get on the road.”

“OK. We should still be here, but if we’re not, I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Later.” He ends the call and I go out onto the terrace and lean against the railing, sipping my protein shake and staring down at all the stupid people on the beach below.

They have no idea. No idea at all what’s happening right under their noses.

Normally I feel disdain at their ignorance.

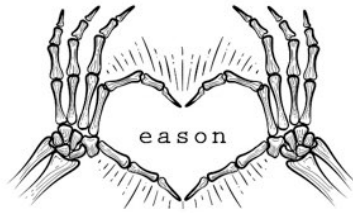
But today... I feel a little jealous.

It sucks that Evard needs to be reminded of the sick world that exists just below the surface.

But it’s better to be safe than sorry. And even though Irina is still alive—and probably fine—it’s just luck that it turned out that way.

And we all know this.

CHAPTER 20



*J*rina comes out of my bedroom wearing the new clothes. I try not to stare because it makes her uncomfortable, but she looks very pretty this morning. So different than the girl I saw in that shop poster. But to be fair, everything I do seems to make her uncomfortable, so I just give in and look at her all I want.

“God, Eason. It’s like you’ve never seen a woman in shorts before. Get out more. You live in South Beach, for fuck’s sake.”

I just smile at her.

She hobbles over to the counter that separates the living room from the kitchen and takes a seat on a stool. “There’s a hole in your plan today.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“My stitches.”

“What about them?”

“I can’t swim with stitches.”

“Says who?”

“Says Maart.”

“You called him for advice?”

“No. That’s just the rule.”

“Well, Irina, my stitches are silk, not gut. The water won’t bother them.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Then you don’t need to worry about it. And anyway”—I lift up a small white aerosol can—“I’ve got liquid bandage. You just spray it on and it’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

“Maart would not approve.”

I take a few steps, closing the space between us, and lean into her, my lips touching hers for a moment, my eyes open, hers as well. “Maart wouldn’t approve of this, either.” Then I kiss her.

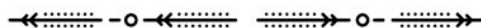
And this is yet another new kind of kiss for Irina to wonder about. Something small. Easy. Quick. I pull away again, grabbing some keys out of a small metal bowl on the counter. I jingle them, glancing at her, then shove them into my pocket, pick up the can of spray, offer it to her—she takes it—and turn my back and crouch down a little. “Hop on, Irina. It’s a piggyback.”

After a small hesitation, she places her hands on my shoulders and I grab her under the knees and hike her up onto my back, walking towards the door.

“I’m missing a flip-flop. What if I need it?”

I walk back to the counter and lean over. “Grab it.”

She lets out a breath, then a laugh, and relaxes a little as she picks it up.



THE RIDE over to the marina is short, just a few minutes, even in traffic. I piggyback Irina to the boat and set her down in the cockpit while I get us ready to shove off.

When I come back inside, she's standing at the entrance to below deck. But she turns when she hears me. "It's nice."

"Did you go down there?"

"No. The stairs are steep and I'd have to hop it."

"It's just one cabin and a little living space. I've had nicer boats than this, but this one is nearly new and all the others were used up." I take the helm, flipping the seat down and pointing to the space next to me so she can sit.

There are other places she could settle, but she accepts my invitation and sits next to me, our shoulders bumping as I start the engine and ease us out of the slip.

It's a nice slow ride out to open water and we're quiet. Just looking at the beauty of this place.

When we get to the ocean, I speed up and head south. It's windy and a little bit loud, so we don't talk. About thirty minutes later I spot a sandbar with lots of boats all around it.

Irina stands up to get a better look, holding on to the railing to brace herself. I glance over, side-eyeing her reaction as we ease into an open spot along the sand. Then I kill the engine and we float forward.

"What is this?"

"It's a sandbar. This one's temporary. The sand shifts with the water. But it's a nice place to spend the day." I push past her, placing my hands on her hips for a moment. She looks

over her shoulder at me, but I'm just getting by so I can drop the anchor.

She follows me out, hopping on her foot, and stops on the back deck, shielding her eyes as she looks around. There are about fifty or so boats already here. "This is why I wanted a smaller boat," I tell her. "The last yacht was too big to just ease into a place like this. We still have to stay on the edge, but at least we can get out of the channel."

She's just lookin' around like this might be the best moment of her life. I want to ask her a million questions about the last four years—about her life here in Florida, and what she's done, but mostly what she hasn't done. So then I could do it with her and it could be a first.

But I already know that it wasn't a life. It was just an existence. And it's fair to say that I've been living mine in a similar way. But I went out, mostly because Davis and Wade would invite me places and it was just easier to say yes than no.

Irina didn't have a Wade and a Davis to take her out. She calls Nandy her best friend, but it came with conditions. Nandy is in school. She's on some kind of academic path and that's her life. They meet up occasionally. They go to bars, or dinner, or whatever. Irina has no path. She just... exists. Like she's waiting for something to happen *to* her instead of making things happen *for* her.

Once the anchor is down, she turns to me. "What do we do here?"

"Swim. We can snorkel. Not much to see down there. But I'm sure there'll be some fish brave enough to join the party. I've got breakfast too. Or we can join someone else's party." I nod my head to all the people.

Her eyes track that direction, taking it all in. There's music playing. People laughing. Swimming, splashing. Kids. Men comin' in on jet skis. Women dancing on the decks.

Irina just shakes her head. Like she's never seen anything like it. "It's a party. Where anyone can come and no one knows who you are."

I smile at the way her mind works. "That's one way to look at it. Do you wanna go join them?"

She shakes her head again, but this time not in wonderment. She just wants to watch.

That's fine with me. I didn't bring her here to spend time with strangers. "Hungry?"

"Sure." She sits down at the dining table, still distracted by what's going on around us. But she pops out of it when I set a bowl of fruit down in front of her. She looks at it for a moment, then up at me. "Where did you get this?"

"I have a concierge at the marina. Ya just call ahead and they stock your boat for ya."

"Hmm." She eats a strawberry.

"What are you thinking right now?"

Irina lets out a long breath. "I think I've been missing out."

"Ya like it here?"

She nods. "I do. This looks fun. I've seen these parties before. They have them all up and down the coastline of Brazil. But we never got close. It was a supply ship, ya know? Huge and... there would be no way to join in on something like this. You have to stay in the shipping channel or in the designated areas around the ports."

I grab the little can of liquid bandage and bend down to her injured foot, picking it up in my hand so I can spray it. She jolts a little—it's a cold spray, I know from experience. But she relaxes after a moment.

I blow on it, to help it dry quicker, and this makes her squirm. "There you go." I let her foot go and stand back up. "It should last all day. Do you wanna swim?"

She thinks about this the way she thinks about everything. Carefully. Like it's a big decision. I want to prod her, but I force myself to wait it out.

Finally, she looks up at me. "Where do they get those fun rafts?" She's pointing at a kid trying his best to mount a blow-up floaty horse.

"The store. But I have rafts, if you want to float."

"You do?" Her eyes are bright and wide.

"Sure. I don't have one of those"—I point at the horse—"but I can go steal it if ya want."

Irina laughs.

"You think I'm kidding?"

She tsks her tongue at me. "You're not gonna steal a floaty from a child."

"Watch, grasshopper. And learn."

Then I pull my shirt off, kick off my deck shoes, and walk out, diving head-first into the water.

When I come up and look back, she's at the edge of the boat, calling my name. I ignore her and swim over to the boat with the kid on the horse.

It's a family. Four kids of various ages, a mother and a father who both appear to be in their thirties. They have more floating animals than they do family members and their boat is one of the bigger ones, like mine. So they have to stay farther out from the sandbar, like us.

I hit up the dad. "Hi there," I call, still swimming.

He waves and starts splashing over to me. "Hi. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Eason. Your temporary neighbor." I point at my boat, where Irina is practically hanging over the railing, watching me. "That's my girl right there. She's in love with your boy's floating horse and I came unprepared for this want of hers. Could we make some kind of trade so we could borrow it for an hour or two?"

The man's name is Lawrence, his wife is Patty, and his kids... whatever. I spend ten minutes chatting, being friendly, and sorting out details. Then I'm towing the horse back to a waiting Irina, who greets me with the biggest smile I've ever seen on her face.

"Your steed," I joke.

"I cannot believe you just did that. You took their horse!"

"It's just borrowed. And they didn't mind. They got a whole fuckin' zoo of floating animals over there. Besides, the boy hates the horse because he keeps falling off. Jump on. I'll hold it steady for ya."

"Oh, my God. I'm being a teenager again, aren't I?"

"Irina, that's the whole point of this, isn't it? To have fun like a teenager. Now jump on."

She hesitates, but just for a moment. Then she's slipping her shorts down her legs. I should turn away so she doesn't feel self-conscious, but I can't. I want to watch this. I don't want to miss a moment of it.

For such a tiny girl, she's got very long legs. And they are tan—setting off the yellow flowers on her bathing suit bottoms. Then her shirt comes off. She doesn't usually wear a strapless top. I can tell, because she's got tan lines where the strings usually are. And once again, I'm reminded at just how perfect her body is. How round her breasts are. And how her curvy hips really set off her waist.

She jumps in the water right in front of me, splashing me in the face.

But I deserved that, I guess. Because I was staring at her pretty hard.

She comes up out of the water wiping her eyes, her lashes glistening with little droplets. "How do I get on without tipping it?"

"A leg up?" I offer her a flat palm, trying to hold on to the horse at the same time.

She puts her foot on my hand, lifts up, almost gets a leg over, and then goes tumbling sideways as the horse tips.

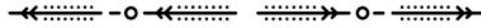
It takes a dozen more tries before she's finally astride and the entire family in the next boat is clapping. None louder than the boy, who never managed to get this far.

Irina's face goes bright red with embarrassment. But I squeeze her leg, making her squeal. "They're happy for you. No need to blush about it."

She's happy. Very happy. And it makes me happy too.

I pull on the horse, upsetting her balance, and she tumbles over the side.

And we have to start all over again.



WE PLAY with that damn horse until we finally decide it's the worst floaty ever and hand it back to the family with much appreciation. Then we go back to the boat and sit up front, lounging on the sunbathing deck in front of the helm.

Irina lies back, using my leg as a pillow, and I stroke her shoulder, unable to remember the last time I had a day like this.

Maybe I've never had a day like this?

Irina must be thinking the same thing, because she starts asking questions. "Do you have dates like this all the time?"

"The boat's brand-new, Irina."

She turns over, looking up at me. "That's not an answer. And you had other boats, you already said so."

"If you're asking if I've ever had a day like this, then no. But yeah. I've had girls on boats before."

"How come this one is different?"

"Because it's you."

She sits up, scooting away a little so she can tuck her knees up to her chest. We're mostly dry now. The wind is warm and the sun is hot. But her hair is still a little bit wet as it blows across her cheek. "Why do you like me so much?"

“What’s not to like?”

She guffaws. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m socially awkward, and pensive, and never gonna have sex with you. So... yeah. I’m pretty much not that fun.”

I let out a breath. I don’t really understand it myself, so maybe I should take a closer look at it. “I think you’re pretty. I love your body. I like the way you fight. I like the fact that you’re never gonna have sex with me—”

She reaches over to slap my shoulder. “You do not.”

“Irina, it’s like a dream come true.”

She guffaws again.

“There’s no pressure. You’re easy to please. Your laugh is big and your smile is contagious. You’re also... honest. And the best part about that is that you’re not even trying. It’s just not in your nature to lie. You might not want to talk about certain things, but when ya do, it’s always the truth. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but the world is full of liars. So when you find an honest person, you don’t dismiss them easily.”

“Hmm.”

“Your turn.”

“Why do I like you?”

“Do you like me?”

“What’s not to like? You’ve got neck tattoos.”

I smile and look out to sea.

“For real though. I think you’re handsome.”

“Thank you.”

“Your confidence is off the charts.”

“Is it?”

“Eason, please. Nothing bothers you.”

“Girl, I’ve been trying to die for years now. It *all* bothers me.” Her smile falls and I’m instantly sorry for reminding her of this little bit of truth.

“It’s not that hard to die when you put yourself in death fights. And you’re still here. So. I’m calling bullshit on that part.”

“Hmm. You might be right. Or perhaps I just like to win.”

“There’s no difference.”

“Because we’re all playing the game.”

She stretches her legs out, her feet coming to rest on my knees.

I pick up her wounded foot and look it over. The liquid bandage is still there, all shiny and clear. “How’s it feeling?”

“Throbbing again. But not bad enough to need anything.”

“We should wrap it up and call it a day. Nandy’s coming for dinner, remember?”

But just as these words come out of my mouth, she’s leaning forward. Grabbing my shoulders as she slides herself into my lap.

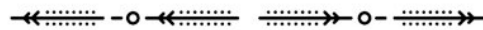
It’s... delightful, but unexpected, so I’m not sure what to do. I just kind of stare at her. And then, before I can have any more thoughts at all, her lips touch mine.

It’s a soft kiss. A little bit lingering. And I have a desire to kiss her back, hard.

But I don’t. I let her do it all. Because this is the very first time she has ever kissed someone on her own.

When she pulls back, her eyes are open, staring into mine. She shrugs and smiles. “I just really wanted to know what that felt like.” Then she gets up out of my lap, stepping around the helm, and disappears aft.

I just sit there, dumbstruck, playing that kiss over and over in my head like a teenage boy.



WE'RE quiet as we boat back. She sits next to me at the helm the whole time, relaxed, smelling like sun and salt, her face a little flushed from being outside. And tired, I think. She's got her legs all crossed and folded up, kinda leaning against me. I think she even falls asleep at one point. But she's awake by the time I'm sliding the boat into the slip.

And then I cut the engine and it's quiet. Just the dim sound of people laughing and talking down the dock, and gulls calling out, begging for food from the customers at the little sandwich shop nearby.

She gets up, holding her foot above the floor and bracing herself on the galley railing while I put everything away and tie up. Then I crouch a little and point to my back.

She doesn't even hesitate, just grabs my shoulders and hops up. I carry her down the dock, into the parking lot, and deposit her into the car. She settles and I close her door, then get in on the other side.

The AC blasts us when I turn it on and she sinks back into her seat. “This was fun. I like your boat.”

“I like you.” And I wink at her.

I'm still thinking about that fuckin' kiss. It's kinda driving me nuts. I was a hundred-percent honest when I said I wasn't looking for sex. I'm really not.

But... a guy can dream, right?

"Oh, my God. What are you thinking right now?"

"Who? Me?"

"You look... devious."

I just chuckle.

"I know what you're thinking about."

She probably does, so I don't say anything back. Besides, we're already at her apartment. I pull up in front of the turquoise-blue gate and turn the car off.

"Oh." She stares at the gate. Then her eyes wander to her front door. "I had forgotten about this."

"Moving out."

"I'm not really. I'm just... moving in. That's all. And anyway, I can't take that much. We don't even have boxes."

I reach into the backseat and pull out a pop-up grocery bag I keep in here for domestic reasons.

Irina is laughing at me. "You're really determined to get me out of this condo, aren't you?"

"I just think..." Well, what I think is that... the place is sad. The rice mat. The tiny room. The stand-up shower with no bathtub. That six feet of space with a hotplate that's supposed to be a kitchen. "I think it's amazing. If you're a young girl who came to America by herself and beat the shit out of people to earn enough money to buy it for cash." She giggles. "In this respect, and only in this respect, it's fuckin'

amazing. But I don't like the thought of you sleeping on that mat."

"I spent my whole life sleeping on rice mats. It's kind of comfortable to me."

"You can bring it with you. Put it on top of the bed if it makes you feel more at home."

I actually think she considers this.

"How about this?" I start the car again. "We just buy all new clothes. You've got nothing in there but training things anyway."

"It's a waste."

"Live a little, Irina. We've got more money than we need. There's no point in *not* wasting it."

"That's very one-percent of you."

"So? Trust me when I say this, no one wants to be poor. No one wants austerity. No one wants hardships. Money doesn't buy everything, but it sure does make life a lot more comfortable. That condo feels like self-induced punishment."

"It's not *that* bad."

"It's not bad, it's just... sad." I didn't want to use that word, but it's the only one I've got left.

And anyway, it fits.

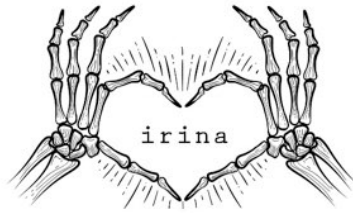
"It feels like the past, Irina. And the past is shit. I don't care how many good memories you have of the fuckin' fight-club slave camp you were in, it was shit. Udulf was trying to kill you. The only reason you existed to him was so he could place bets on you. And then, after you were dead, he was never gonna think about you again. Let it go. It wasn't good. It

was just... better than some. That's all. Not better than most—this life you've made for yourself here in Miami is better than most. That life you left behind was just barely better than some. Don't get lost in the memory of the people who made it tolerable. Think about how you felt the night before the fight. Remember that with vivid clarity, because that was your reality. Not Maart fixing you up. Not Cort feeding you. Not Paulo kissing you on the cheek to say goodbye. The night before the fight was nothing but terror and you know it.”

She's looking at her turquoise-blue front door as I say all this and for a moment, I think she's gonna protest. Try and justify these romantic feelings she has for where she came from. But then she lets out a breath and looks at me. “OK. Let's go. I'll buy new stuff. It'll still be there for me if I need it. But I don't need it right now.”

I nod, then give her knee a squeeze, making her jump as I start the car and pull away, taking us home.

CHAPTER 21



*E*ason parks the car in the underground garage and piggy-backs me to the elevator, but we don't go up to his condo. He takes me to the boutique, and while he's still holding me, he asks the shop girl to help me pick out a new wardrobe. "Bill it to 990." He points up with one finger.

"I don't need you to pay, Eason," I say. "I have money."

He points again, still looking at the young woman. "990."

She nods, smiling. It's not the same woman who helped me last night, but she's just as young, just as pretty, and just as polite.

Eason sets me down on a long, slender bench covered in silver-gray velvet. "Where are you gonna go?" I ask.

"I'm gonna take care of dinner while you shop."

"What are we having?"

"Something good. Something that restaurant doesn't serve."

"Don't make Nandy your enemy. She's good. And I love her."

"I have no intention of antagonizing your best friend. Be back in a bit." Then he actually leans down and kisses me on

the cheek. And when he pulls away, he's smiling mischievously.

After he's gone, the shop girl looks at me and folds her hands. "I'm Kandace."

"Hi. Irina."

"What should we start with, Irina?"

I look around, trying to see myself wearing these pretty things every day. They're nice. And not *too* fancy. Casual, but quality. Like the shirt and shorts I'm wearing right now.

I point to the outfit. "More like this."

Kandace nods and walks off, collecting things off racks. She comes back pulling a wooden rack on wheels behind her filled with many outfits.

Another shop girl appears, offering me a glass of champagne, and yet another sets out cheese and meat artfully arranged on a wooden board.

I don't know what to think about this, but it's nice. I know they earn a commission off what they sell to me, but it's still nice.

Kandace begins holding up combinations of outfits, asking for my opinion. I study them all, picturing myself wearing the clothes. Then she sorts them into 'yes' and 'no.'

Once I have a nice little collection of 'yesses,' she helps me to the dressing room and I try them on.

I have chosen three dresses, a half-dozen pairs of cut-off shorts like the ones I'm wearing, but in different colors, and an equal number of flirty, loose tops and tighter t-shirts.

Underwear has never been a thing for me. I skip it when I can, only wearing it when I have to, like with skirts and dresses. And when I'm training, of course, I wear sports bras. But the underwear they sell here in this boutique isn't like any underwear I've ever owned before.

Last night the shop girl picked a pair out for me because I needed them for the dress. But after I've made all my big choices, I shuffle through the lingerie section and pick some out myself. Silky ones, lacy ones, plain ones. One pair for each day, plus a matching bra and two new sports bras of much higher quality than the ones I've been wearing.

Finally, I find two new bathing suits—another bikini, this one more sporty than sexy with chunky zippers, and a one-piece with long sleeves because I can't go too many days in a row with my shoulders in the sun without burning. It only makes sense that Eason and I will be on the beach or the boat for the next three weeks while my foot heals. What else are we gonna do? So that long-sleeved bathing suit will definitely get used.

The shop girls are just packing up the pretty glossy bag with my new purchases wrapped in tissue paper when Eason returns. The total came to almost three thousand dollars and even though I really do have that money, I would never waste this much money on clothes. I get what Eason was trying to say earlier, that we have enough to waste it. But I'm a saver. I like to collect money, not spend it. So when Eason checks to make sure it's all on his bill, I let out a small breath of relief that it's not gonna make the numbers in my bank account change.

Do I want to be poor? No. I understand as much as anyone how much it sucks to never have enough. But I have no desire

to be rich, either. I just want to have enough. That's all. I want enough to have a safe place to sleep, and enough food that I don't have to go to bed hungry, and clothes that help me stay cool, or warm, or dry. I don't need much else. One or two nice things—a dress, sandals, a new bathing suit—that's my version of luxury.

At least it was. Now, as Eason points to his back and hikes me up to carry me upstairs, I find myself a little bit excited that I will be wearing these nice things in front of him. That he will appreciate them. And want me.

I didn't really mean to kiss him this afternoon. I just got this sudden urge to do it. To get it over with so that I wasn't constantly thinking about all these new things that are happening to me. So I could settle into the idea that... I have a boyfriend.

Maybe it's still pretend? Maybe Eason is just trying to crack open my shell or something. Get me to bloom. It's possible. And I'm ready for that. If this turns out to be just another misunderstanding on my part, I won't run away the way I did with Maart. I will just accept what we have with grace. Like an adult and not a teenager.

"Ready?" Eason is looking over his shoulder at me, his cheek right against mine. It's a little bit scratchy and he smells like an afternoon on the beach.

I nod and lean into him. Like we do this all the time. Like this is just our life. Boating, and shopping, and piggy-back rides. And then I take the glossy bag filled with my pretty things and smile all the way up to the ninth floor.

WHEN WE GET INSIDE, Eason doesn't set me down on the couch. He takes me into his bedroom and sets me down on the bed. I'm still trying to work out what this might mean when he walks off, slides a metal door open, and flicks on the light of his closet. He stands in there, kinda studying it, then turns to me. "You can have this side."

I smile like an idiot when he says this.

"Why are you looking at me that way?"

But all I can do is shake my head because I don't know. It just... makes me happy for some stupid reason.

"Do you want me to hang it all up for you?"

"No. I got it." I stand up and start hobbling over to him. He comes towards me and steadies me with an arm. It was easy to get around the boat. There are railings everywhere just for that purpose. And in the water, it didn't matter. But the foot still hurts, so this is how I justify the fact that I'm clinging to him.

His closet is something out of a movie. It's massive. There's even a bench in the center, a square gray bench upholstered in soft, tufted leather. There are about a thousand drawers and lots of places to hang things. In fact, it's like a mirror. Each side of the closet is identical.

For a guy who made a big deal about me getting new clothes, he doesn't have much in here. Mostly t-shirts and shorts and a few long pants and jeans. But his hangers—my God. I had no idea that rich-people closets came with fancy satin clothes hangers.

He must notice me noticing them, because he intercepts my question. "Those came with the place."

"Sure, they did." I side-eye him. He just shakes his head at me, but I keep going. "I'm starting to get the feeling that you

take this overindulgence stuff seriously.”

“As you should too.” He grins, then grabs the glossy bag and sets it down on the bench next to me. “It’s nearly six now. I should start dinner.”

“Hey.” I say this as he’s turning away, which makes him pause and turn back. “Thank you. For the whole day. And last night. And...”

He comes over to me, bends down, put his hands on my face, looks me straight in the eyes, and kisses me.

My whole body suddenly goes soft. And then, when he pulls away, a chill runs down my arms.

He’s still staring at me, close enough that I can see the thin circles of light green that surround his pupils. “Thank you, Irina. I cannot remember the last time I just... had such a nice time.”

Then he stands back up, turns away, and walks out.

I just sit there on that bench, listening as he does things in the kitchen.

I’m dating a man. I’m living with a man. And we’re having someone over for dinner.

I just laugh. Right out loud. Because I have no idea how this happened.

The only thing I do know is that I don’t want it to end.

CHAPTER 22



*A*t ten minutes to eight the doorman buzzes my phone, letting me know that Nandy is here. I text him permission to let her up, and then turn back to the kitchen, only to stop again.

Irina is standing in the open doorway of my bedroom glowing like the sun, smiling self-consciously—which turns me on a little, not gonna lie—and shrugging. Like her beauty can't be helped.

The first time I saw her in that photograph she stood out because she was striking. The black eye had something to do with that. But she was such a contrast to the beauty of the other girls—and even the boy—that it was hard to look away.

That's how I feel right now too. Like I can't look away.

Except she's not just striking, she's gorgeous.

Her hair has been chaotically plaited into two braids on either side of her head. They fall down her front, straight and golden, and end in pale-green satin ribbons that I'm a hundred-percent sure came off the glossy bag from the boutique.

Her skin in that photo was pale and her cheekbones sharp. But everything about her now looks soft. The dress is short and flirty, ruffles at the shoulders and on the hem, a color that

is something between orange and pink. She's bracing herself against the doorjamb because of her foot, but it comes off as alluring.

She lifts a hand, fingers up. "Hi."

"Hello."

She looks down and sighs, then back up at me. "Do you like it?"

I nod. Very slowly. Unable to take my eyes off her. "I do, Irina. Very, very much." And my God, that shy smile she gives me makes me want to attack her. "So much that right now all I want to do is—"

But there's a hard knock at the door behind me and I remember that Nandy is here. I point at Irina. "We will discuss this further after the pesky dinner guest is gone." Which makes her giggle.

I turn, open the door, and then take a step back because there is a giant man staring me in the face. "Hello, Eason."

I look down to find Nandy smirking up at me. "I just assumed the invitation included a plus-one? This is my brother, Alvaro."

Oh, for fuck's sake. Threatening me with the big brother? Come on. I want to laugh, that's how fuckin' stupid this is. But I take a deep breath and shove my hand at him while maintaining eye contact. "Nice to meet you, Alvaro. I'm Eason."

Then I open my arms wide and invite them in.

Nandy goes first, heading straight to Irina. They immediately begin whispering. This gives Alvaro a chance to

lean into my personal space and growl at me. “We consider Irina a family member.”

“Nice.”

“It’s not nice,” Alvaro sneers. “It’s a warning.”

Then he walks off, also greeting Irina, as I roll my eyes and shut the door.

Just as I turn towards them my phone buzzes again. When I check it, it’s the doorman with another announcement. I look over at Nandy and she smiles, waving fingers at me.

I call the doorman and he picks up on the first ring. “Sorry to bother you, Mr. Malone. You have more guests.”

“I’m not expecting more guests.” But then I hear her. The bossy woman running the cash register from the restaurant.

“She says her name is—”

“Yoo-hoo! It’s Flora-mareeeeeaaahhhh! Irina’s favorite aunt-tee-tee! Nandy was supposed to bring dessert, but she forgot. So I am here to save the day.”

I look over my shoulder at Nandy and she’s looking at me with the very same expression. She gives me another finger wave.

“Fine,” I bark into the phone. “Let her up.” I end the call and walk over to Nandy. “Your... aunt is here? Floramaria?”

“Oh, shit!” She places a hand over her heart, feigning shock. “I forgot dessert. Did she bring it?”

I narrow my eyes at this little liar. “Yes. She’s got your dessert. She’s on her way up.”

“Oh, good.”

“Nandy would forget her head if it wasn’t attached,” the brother jokes.

But Alvaro is a liar too. Nandy doesn’t come across as a woman who forgets anything, let alone her head.

When the hard knock comes, I leave the little group and open it. There she is. The pushy woman who cornered me at the cash register. She’s holding one half of a large platter, the other half being held by another, much older, woman.

“Eason!” Floramaria says, her face bright and eyes sparkling. “Lovely place you have. Can we come in?”

“What the hell kind of dessert requires a giant platter held up by two people? And how the hell could Nandy forget that?”

Floramaria doesn’t answer me. Just walks forward, daring me to stop her.

Then Nandy calls out, “Auntie! Granny! Let me help you.”

I close the door, turn my back, once again readying myself for what’s coming, but my phone buzzes for a third time.

When I look over at Irina, she’s trying not to laugh.

I call down again. “What now?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Malone. It’s just—”

“Just let them all up at once so we can get this over with.” I’m staring at Alvaro when I say this. Then I end the call. “What is going on?”

Every one of them becomes defensive.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re not up to anything.”

“You can’t have dinner without dessert, Eason.”

Outside my door I can hear a commotion, so I just walk over there and pull it open.

I have to admit, they got me. I am taken aback at the crowd in the hallway. A dozen people, at least. “How big *is* this family?”

There are three older men wearing very nice loose-fitting collared shirts and trousers directly in front of me. Behind them are a couple middle-aged women, all fancy and dressed for a party. And behind them are, I assume, the children. All grown. Somewhere between the ages of twenty and thirty and looking like they just stepped out of a fashion magazine.

“Is this it then? Is this all of ya?”

The man in the middle extends a hand, narrowing his eyes at me. This is when I remember Irina telling me about their connections. Crime family? Cuban mafia? I’m not sure. But seeing them all in a group like this, outside of their busy family restaurant, I can suddenly picture it.

“I’m Romero. Nandy’s father and Irina’s uncle.” There isn’t even a hint of Cuban accent. It’s perfect American English. And it makes sense with a daughter like Nandy.

I shake his hand and dial down my annoyance. There’s no point in objecting to any of this. I started it, anyway. I’m the one who invited Nandy to dinner to prove myself worthy. Might as well just lean in to it at this point.

“These are my brothers Luis and Manuel. And this is my wife, Estafania. And Manuel’s wife, Lisandra.”

There is a pause here. He doesn’t introduce the children. So I just nod my head at the group and open the door, inviting them in.

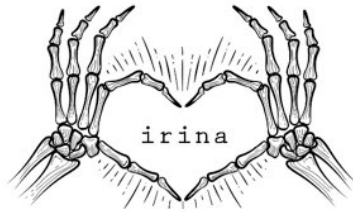
What else can I do?

As soon as they're all inside, they rush over to Irina. Surrounding her. Touching her. Questioning her. Begging her to explain.

And this is when I realize, they're not here for a dinner.

It's an intervention.

CHAPTER 23



*T*hey are all talking at once. I catch the word ‘afraid.’ Then Nandy is questioning me about my accent, and Eason’s accent, and demanding to know how this man can appear out of nowhere and suddenly I’ve moved in with him.

“How?” Nandy asks me, staring me in the eyes. “How does that happen, Irina? You won’t so much as look at a man when I beg you to meet someone, but this freak shows up and suddenly, you’re living with him? And don’t lie to me!” She’s angry, I can tell, but hurt, as well. Tears welling up in her eyes. “You show up on a billboard in the design district with a black eye, looking all heroin chic and—”

This is when I stop listening.

They know. I’m not sure how much they’ve found or when they figured it out, but they know. Probably have known for a long time. Maybe even since that picture of me started popping up all over the world.

And then what? That famous face walks into their restaurant, looking for food. And they take notice, but say nothing. Because they are the Jardinez crime family. They know when to speak up and when not to.

So they... play it cool. Just smile at the sad, lost girl who likes to order Argentine rice bowls and talks with a Russian

accent laced with Portuguese and God knows what else.

And then, one day, as this lost girl is paying for her takeaway, sad about being fired from a nice job—a good job, a respectable job—she glances down and sees an answer to her most pressing problem.

Ditch the accent. I can teach you to speak perfect English.
Nandy Jardinez, Romero's daughter. [Inquire here.](#)

And, maybe for the first time ever, this lost girl sees a new way forward. She can forget who she is and where she came from simply by changing the way she talks.

Her teacher—the brilliant Nandy Jardinez, first in her family to go to college, majoring in linguistics—befriends her. Not in a pushy way. Just gets close enough to take a peek under this girl's shadows.

She finds nothing. There's nothing there. Because this girl knows better than to think about them. She never, *ever* thinks about them.

She goes about her day. She swims, or walks the beach, or does laundry in her stackable washer and dryer.

She does not drink, or party, or date anyone. She eats, and sleeps, and exists. And the only time she remembers who she is and where she came from is when she's screaming into a pillow, which she only does when she's alone, on the floor of her bought-and-paid-for self-imposed prison.

So there is nothing to see.

The shadow fades. Her accent too. She is not quite American, but she's not quite anything else, either.

Nandy Jardinez forgets why she started being friends with this girl and just... falls into something natural. Pushing aside

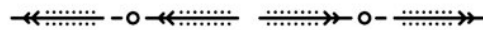
all her questions.

And then Eason ‘Dead Eyes’ Malone shows up during a blind date, capturing the attention of the entire club—but, most importantly, the attention of Nandy.

Maybe she shrugged it off. Tried to, at least. But even over the din of music and people in that bar, she heard something in the stranger’s voice that caught her attention.

Something that didn’t make sense.

And then she remembered why she befriended this strange girl in the first place.



I NEVER THINK ABOUT THEM, ever.

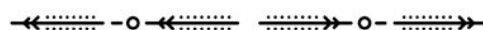
But they follow me around like little reminders.

The nine ghosts of my opponents are lined up across the room, right in front of Eason’s terrace window. In all their glorious tattered clothes, and their bloody faces, and utter hopelessness.

And when my eyes meet theirs, when I see myself in them, that’s when it all goes blank.

I used to wonder what it felt like to go blank like that. To just... be nothing.

But now I know it feels like this.



INSIDE EASON'S penthouse the Jardinez family is yelling.

But I'm somewhere else. Some place dark and filled with noise. A place where there are no ghosts yet. No one haunting me.

Cort is by my side, bending down practically to his knees to look me in the eyes because I am so small. He grabs my shoulders, firm but gentle. "You're gonna kick this boy's ass, you hear me, Irina? And after you do that, we're out of here. Don't think about it, and don't hesitate. Because he's not thinking about you and this boy's only mission in life is for him to come out of this alive and for you to be dead on the mats. Do you understand me?"

I nod, trying my best not to cry.

That first one is younger than me. Maybe... five?

I can see him now. Not looking like a ghost, but a real boy. Standing with a blank face on the other side of the fight room. We are nearly the same height but even as thin as I am, he is thinner. All his bones are showing. Like he's never been fed properly in his whole, short life.

Maart taught me how to choke someone just two weeks earlier. We practiced all these choking moves over and over for hours and hours every day.

Cort is still holding on to my bony shoulders, staring at me intently. "Walk onto the mat, look your opponent in the eye. Bare your teeth. Scare him. Then rush him before the fight starts. No one will stop it. No one cares if you cheat, Irina. There's no such thing as cheating in our world because there's no such thing as fair. And ya can't have one without the other. Just find a way to get your hands around his throat and don't

let go. Do you hear me? Do you fuckin' hear me? Do not. Let. Go.”

So that's how I did it.

That's how I lived.

I choked the life right out of that little boy. It was so easy, too. I don't think anyone spent a single minute training that boy.

He wasn't an opponent.

He was a sacrifice.

And when it was over Cort reached out his arms, pulling me up, carrying me out—and I was someone else then.

But that little boy came with me. He haunted me. Through the days after. Through the weeks. Months. Years. And then, one by one, other little kids haunted me too. The little blonde girl with the perfectly plaited hair came next, her matching outfit still in perfect condition because she didn't even last long enough to get it dirty.

Then another boy. He broke my arm in that fight. I couldn't use it for months. But I gouged out an eye. So he haunts me with one eye and one bloody hole where the other used to be.

The next boy tried to piledrive me into the floor. There wasn't even a mat for that fight, just concrete. The only reason he didn't bash me into it face first is because I was smaller, and quicker, and got my legs up around his neck. I held him there, between my thighs, hanging upside down along his front, looking up at him. And then I just snapped his neck with my knees.

And each time I killed one, they joined in with the ones who came before them. A little parade of dead children trailing along behind me everywhere I went.

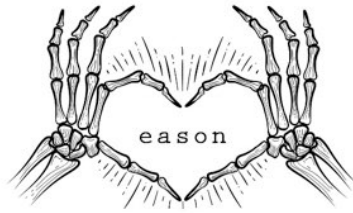
All nine of those faces haunted me for years. Even after we escaped and no one else got added to the end of the line.

And this is why I never, *ever* think about them.

Because if I think about them, I will have to face the reality of what I did to them.

The next thing I know I am on the floor of Eason's bedroom, my face stuffed into a pillow, and I am *screaming*.

CHAPTER 24



*T*he whole place goes silent as Irina's wail echoes off the high ceilings.

I look at them and they are horrified. Then they look at me with blame.

“Fuck you.” I snarl it out, blocking the door to the bedroom so they can't get to Irina. Daring them to take one more step. “Fuck all of you.”

Then I slam the doors closed and lock them out.

I go over to screaming Irina, pick her up in my arms, take her into the bathroom, and lock that door too.

I need space. We need space. I want all of those fuckin' people in my living room to disappear, but I can't let go of Irina and I don't want to leave her in here alone while I kick them out.

So I just step into the giant bathtub, holding the poor, sobbing girl against me, and sit down so she can scream into my chest.

She does this for a little bit, but my embrace seems to calm her. So after about a minute or so, the screams stop and she's just doing her best to breathe.

“It's OK.” I pet her hair. “It's OK.”

But we both know it's not.

Not of this is OK. Nothing about this life is OK. The world is fucked up. And there's nothing we can do about it.

"I want to kill them." She sobs these words out. "I want to kill them *all*."

Last time she said this I didn't really believe her. But I do now. "I know, Irina. Trust me, I know."

She sits up a little, sniffing, looking me in the eyes. "But you *did* kill him. You did."

She's talkin' about my da.

"You killed him and..." Her eyes are searching mine. She wipes her nose. "And..."

There is no 'and' here. I shake my head at her. There's no 'and.'

Nothing comes after killing your father for killing your brothers and selling you to traffickers. There's *nothing* after that. And she has to know this. She *knows* this.

"I don't care, Eason. I don't fucking care if they kill me trying. I. Want. Them. *Dead*."

"It's a sick hate, Irina. Nothing good will come from it."

"I don't care!" She screams this. And then she's sobbing all over again. "I don't care! I don't fucking care! They made me choke him, Eason! They made me choke that little boy so I could live. Fuck them! Fuck! *Them!*"

Holy shit. She's thinkin' about the dead ones.

I let out a breath, suddenly reliving the day I got my fight name. Dead Eyes. I don't even remember the name of the bastard who started calling me that. Joaquin? Juan? Walt? I

can't remember. My first camp was run by a fighter called X-Eyes. He's the one who tattooed me first. The evil smiley face with x's for eyes. I only won two fights with him, but that insane asshole tattooed me seven times with his stupid fuckin' faces.

Everyone after that first camp assumed Dead Eyes came from X-Eyes. Like I was his prodigy, or something. But that's not where the name comes from.

Dead Eyes. That was the look I wore after I came out alive. Dead. Eyes.

Because I don't think about the dead ones. *Ever.*

But also because I didn't stop fighting, never assumed it was over, until I could see the deadness in their eyes. The blank blackness in there.

The x's where their souls used to be.

"Irina—"

"No." Tears are still running down her face, and her nose is running, and her eyes are fuckin' bloodshot red. But she's calm now. "No. I can't live with it, Eason. I've tried. I have. I've tried. I don't think about them. *Ever.* Ever! But they are there. Inside my head. Following me around, haunting me. I killed eight boys and a little girl to be here today and I need to make this right."

"There's no way to make it right, Irina."

"Yes, there is." Her crying has stopped and she's growling now. "Yes, there is. You have names. I want the names. I want them dead."

"That's not what you want. You don't want them dead. You want to kill them yourself."

She sniffs, but doesn't deny it. Just lets out a long breath.

Someone is pounding on my bedroom door, and I'm so tired I just want to crawl into bed and never get back up. Why am I even here? Why?

"I'm gonna go explain it to them," Irina says. "I'm gonna ask them for help."

I shake my head. "No, Irina. You're not."

"If you won't help me kill them, then I'll get someone else to do it. Nandy's family—"

"Nandy's family is *no one*." I say this much sharper than I should, then take a breath and try again. "No one, Irina. Not in the world we come from. They are nothing but a bunch of scrappy fuckin' immigrants. They worked a little harder than most, they got a little farther than most. But they are in no way anything like the people who ruined our lives. So you will not tell them anything."

They are persistent though. I'll give 'em that. Because they are still pounding on my door.

Irina snuffles and squirms, trying to get up. "I need to talk to Nandy. I need to tell her—"

"*No.*"

She keeps wriggling, but I hold her tight. Then she's trying to fight me, but I've got her arms pinned. And let's face it, I've got sixty pounds on this girl. She's not getting away.

She tries, though. She spits insults at me. She digs her fingernails into my skin. She screams.

But I don't let go.

I don't know how long this goes on for. But finally, her ugly sobbing and sniffing stops and she goes limp in my arms. Exhausted.

I wait. Just to see if this is a trick. But it's not. She's passed out from all the effort of this day.

I hold onto her as I stand up, get out of the tub, and carry her over to the bed. I place her on the top cover and smooth her sweaty hair away from her eyes.

The living room has gone quiet. Everyone gone, I guess. So I unlock the door, open it up so I can get a drink of water, and come face to face with one of the Jardinez men sitting in chair, facing my bedroom door, holding the yellow envelope in his lap.

I stare at him for a moment, then look over my shoulder to make sure Irina is still asleep. I leave her there, closing the door behind me.

“What do you want?” My question is not friendly. Obviously, Romero looked through the envelope. It's been sittin' there on my fuckin' coffee table for days. Like a dull knife in my back, waiting to be twisted.

Heh. So much for keeping the secret.

“People are trafficked out of Cuba all the time,” he says in his perfect American English. “Coming to America for a brand-new life. Every now and then, some go missing. Die, maybe?” He stares at me for a moment. “Or maybe not.”

“What's your point?”

“The Jardinez family, my family, we are part of things. Some good, some not so good. People around Miami think we're some kind of mafia. But we're not. Not really. Not in the traditional sense. We traffic people out of Cuba three or four

times a year. We bring them here with the help of other kind and courageous people in the area. And we help them erase the old life and start a new one.”

“That’s all very nice. But none of your dots are connecting for me.”

He holds up the envelope. “What is this?”

“What is it? It’s the fuckin’ truth, that’s what it is. The world doesn’t run on money. It doesn’t run on oil, either. It runs on pain. And sex. And violence. And *children*.”

Romero nods, his expression unchanged. “I see. What does this have to do with Irina?”

I exhale loudly, so tired of this fuckin’ life. “Your daughter, Nandy? She’s yours, right?” Romero nods. “She asked Irina how I, a complete stranger, had captivated her. Moved her in. Et cetera. It’s because we come from the same place.” I nod to the envelope. “I’m not sure where Irina started out in the beginning. I don’t know who made her. I don’t think she ever had parents. She was probably bred for it. So in that respect, we’re different. But we both ended up in the fight camps as children.”

“Fight camps?” He has no fuckin’ clue what I’m talking about.

“Training camps. Owned, like slaves. Trained to fight like fuckin’ roosters. Death fights. We come from death fight camps, Romero.”

“Where are these camps?”

“Everywhere. But mine were mostly in the Middle East. Irina got lucky—she was only ever in Brazil.”

Romero looks at the envelope, his brow nothing but deep furrows. Then he looks up at me. “There is nothing about death fights in here.”

“No. There’s not. Because that’s just a bit of insurance that the slave owners kept on each other.”

Romero swallows hard, his jaw set so tight, there are veins popping out of his neck.

“I’m gonna stop you there, Romero.” I shake my head at him. “There is no point in getting angry. Because there is nothing you can do about it.”

“Says who? You?”

I shrug with my hands. “Everyone wants to be a hero. But trust me”—I point to the envelope—“that’s just where it starts. There are thousands of them. Tens of thousands of them. They run everything. Every fuckin’ country. Every fuckin’ army. Every fuckin’ corporation. They. Are. Everywhere.”

I walk over to him and put out my hand. He stares at it for a moment, then gives me the envelope. I turn and place it back on the coffee table like it was never disturbed.

Then I face him again. “I’m gonna tell you something now, and I hope to God ya hear me. You can’t do anything about this. And if you start talking, Romero? One night you’re gonna get a phone call and the news is gonna be bad. Very, very bad.”

“Is that a threat?”

I laugh. “From me? Come on. I’m no one. I’m Dead Eyes. Some washed-up fuckin’ Ring fighter who can hardly get out of bed most days. It’s not me ya gotta worry about, it’s the rest of them.” I let out a breath. “Please. Just hear me, please. Do

not tell anyone about what you saw in that envelope. Those men are all dead, anyway. Irina killed one of them herself.”

His eyes go big.

“She doesn’t need protecting. At least, not from you. I’m doing my best here. I am. But if you go blabbing about what ya saw, you’re gonna make everything so much worse. And you’re not gonna win, Romero. You’re not. They’ll pick off your family one by one. They’ll frame you. Slip some CP onto your computer and turn you into a sexual deviant. You’ll lose everything. Do ya really wanna lose everything and then leave this world with them writin’ your story? Changing it all up? Erasing all the good things you did and replacing them with the most heinous of crimes?”

He slumps a little, feeling defeated, probably. “I can’t unsee that shit. I won’t be able to sleep.”

“No. I’m sorry ya had to see it in the first place. But you need to let us handle this. Make me a promise, Romero. Please. Don’t start talking. Don’t start plotting. It’s not gonna work.”

We stare at each other for a few more moments. I’m wound so tight, I nearly spring apart when he finally nods. “OK. I won’t say anything.”

I exhale slowly, trying not to show my relief.

“How is Irina?”

I glance at the bedroom door, then meet Romero’s gaze. “She’s not in a good place. But her people are coming.”

“What people?”

“Her old trainer. Maybe a few others. From Brazil.”

“Are they going to take her away?”

I shrug. "I dunno."

"If they do, can you please ask her to come see us before she leaves?" His face is so sad. I really do believe he's one of the good ones. But that's just all the more reason for him to keep his family out of this.

The good guys don't win. Because the good guys play fair and that word doesn't even exist in the vocabulary of these monsters who run the world. The good guys have limits. And in the war between good and evil, there are no rules.

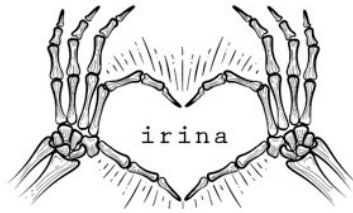
The good are chewed up and spit out. And I don't want that to happen to the Jardinez family.

Romero gets up, smooths out a few wrinkles in his perfectly pressed chinos, and then offers me his hand. I shake it and he says, "It was nice to meet you, Eason. Please come by the restaurant any time you want."

Then he lets go of my hand, turns away, and leaves.

Closing the door quietly behind him.

CHAPTER 25



I'm not asleep when Eason places me on the bed, just too exhausted to open my eyes. When he doesn't get in with me, just walks to the door, leaving me, I want to call him back.

But that's pathetic, so I don't.

Once the door is closed behind him, I get out of bed and go outside on the terrace. It's dark, no moon, and my fingers automatically point up to the sky and I say, "One."

Day one. The moon was how we counted days on the Rock. And the new moon was when all the big Ring fights happened, so it was day one. Actually, by the time we got to the Rock Cort had always been there for a month already. All alone, by himself. He likes silence and solitude.

I've never been to a top-level Ring of Fire fight, but Anya told me what that last one was like. How dark it was, and the paint they all wore on their bodies, and how she glowed an iridescent white under the black spotlights.

I picture it. The ship—the *Bull of Light*—and the helicopter pad that doubled as a fight platform. I picture myself there instead of Anya. Fighting with someone like Pavo. Desperate to kill him as the drums pound out a deafening death beat and the people shout from the topside, betting against me the same way they did Cort.

It doesn't scare me.

When Eason said to think about the night before the fights—the terror—and not to think about the all the good things we had in Cort's little village camp, he was assuming a lot.

One, that I was ever afraid of fighting.

Two, that I ever cared if I died.

I don't get depressed the way he does, or the way Rasha did. Mostly because I don't really see the point of life. I mean, it's got no meaning at all. Existing seems to be the only purpose.

And in this respect, I can sort of understand why people do crazy shit like sell children and put them in death fights.

They're bored. They're trying to give life meaning. And I guess, if you're one of those people who has everything, you gotta think outside the box.

It's a pretty sick way to look at things. But then I think of myself here in Miami. The condo, the stackable washer and dryer. Enough money to get by without much effort. A couple of friends, a good rice bowl, and the beach.

I get the boredom. It kinda makes sense. Because there is absolutely no point to life. None.

It's meaningless until you give it meaning.

Nandy gives it meaning by studying words and speech. Her family gives it meaning by running that restaurant. Eason's trying to give it meaning. I'm not sure what he needs though. A fight? On a ship? With black lights and glowing paint? The death beat, and the cheering, and the prizes?

I don't think that's it.

So I don't know what will give Eason's life meaning.

I know I don't want that. I mean, if, by some chance, I ended up in a fight on the *Bull of Light*, then fuck it. I'd fight.

But really, I just want to kill people. I want to kill all those bored people who think fight camp for stolen kids and death fights for empty teenagers is what gives their life meaning.

I want to come up on them by surprise and slit their throats, just like I did it with Udulf that day at the jungle camp.

Or maybe I'd like to toy with them? The way a cat might paw at a half-dead mouse.

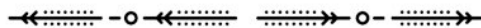
There's a word for that, but I don't like to say it out loud.

"Torture." I say it anyway.

It's a very harsh word. Something evil. But it feels so right.

Eason called it a sick hate, but I'm not sure I agree.

It's just... one option in a whole sea of life choices.



I'M BACK in bed when Eason returns. He slips in next to me, puts his arm around me, pulls me tight right up to his chest. He's warm. "You're awake?"

He knows I'm awake. But I don't say anything.

"Did you sleep at all?"

I shake my head.

"Are you OK?"

Now I turn so I'm facing him. There's almost no light in here, so I can't even make out the color of his eyes. Just the contours of his face from the hazy glow that drifts up through the terrace doors from the busy beach town below.

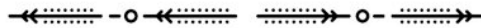
I place my hands on his face. "I'm as OK as ever, I guess." I can feel him smile.

His hands slide down, grab my ass, and pull me even closer. Wrapping around me like he wants to crawl inside my heart.

I don't know what this is about, so I just stay still.

But then I can hear him. The beat of him. His heart, right up against my cheek. This is what makes me close my eyes. This beat, like the drums on the ship.

And finally, I fall asleep dreaming about what happens on the new moon.



WHEN I WAKE up the sun is just barely thinking about rising, but there's enough light to see him now. We're sprawled out on the bed, Eason flat on his back, me practically on top of him. My head on his chest, one leg thrown over his. He's got one arm still around me, and the other is flopped out at his side.

I'm face to face with one of the x-eyed tattoos going down his ribs. This one is sideways, like it's laughing, the crisscrossed teeth jagged and menacing.

I reach up and trace the smile. And then I think about how he got these. What kind of man was that X-Eyes guy?

X-Eyes. Sounds like ‘excise.’ Which means to cut out. That’s what the x’s mean too. No eyes. Excised.

It’s kinda gross.

Dead Eyes isn’t much better. But Eason doesn’t have dead eyes. I’ve looked at them enough to know he never had dead eyes. Maybe they just wished he had dead eyes.

Maybe they just wished he was dead.

I let my fingertips slip down to the waistband of his sweat shorts. One finger makes its way underneath the fabric and then, before I can even blink, Eason is gripping my wrist so hard, I scream out.

“Oh, fuck.” He lets go of me, sits up, blinking down at me, trying to understand what just happened. He lets out a breath. Relaxes. “Sorry. Did I scare you? Was I dreaming? What happened?”

No. You weren’t dreaming. I was going to touch you and you tried to break my wrist.

Of course, I don’t say that. I lie and redirect. “What was that? I think I heard a noise.”

He’s out of bed, at the door, baseball bat in high-ready position, and then out of the bedroom before I can even blink.

What the hell was that?

You know what that was, Irina. It was an instinct.

He comes back in the room and props the bat up near the door. “What kind of noise was it?”

“Um. A... banging? Probably someone in the outside hallway?”

“Yeah.” He relaxes. “Fuck.” Runs his fingers through his hair. “What time is it?” Blows out a breath.

And now I’m wondering—should have been wondering all along—just how many people have tried to touch him like that for it to be an instinct.

“Should we get up?”

I sigh. And how ironic is it that I’m the one who wants to stay in bed and he’s the one who wants to get up?

He must just guess that I’m not getting up because he comes back to bed, getting in on my side—which, now that I think about it, was probably his side before I got here. He pushes me over. Turns me over. Then grabs me and tugs my back up against his chest, wrapping his arms around me like I’m a pillow.

I have to admit, it’s kinda nice.

Then his mouth is right there on my ear. “Irina.”

“What?”

“Do you wanna live with me?”

I roll my eyes, even though he can’t see me. “I already live with you.”

“It’s not real until you sell that stupid closet. Or rent it out, at the very least.”

I turn to face him, his arms loosening so I can do this.

He smiles at me. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I say back. “You want me to sell my condo?”

“It’s a Plan B, right? If you keep the condo empty then you can just walk out whenever you want and go home.”

I could do that even if I didn't own a condo. But I don't point it out. "Why are you suddenly worried about me walking out?" But as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know why. "It's because Maart's coming, isn't it?"

"What if he arrives professing his undying love for you?"

I practically snort. "I don't even have enough imagination to dream that scenario up. Trust me." I scoff. "It's not gonna happen. He's gonna be nice at first, and then he's gonna yell at me."

"No, he's not."

"Let's make a bet."

"He's gonna drop to his knees at your feet and kiss your cute little toes."

"That's never gonna happen."

"He's gonna... kidnap you and take you home."

"What home? I have no home in Rio. I'm not going back to Cort and Anya's village in the jungle. That's nothing but a temporary waystation. A fuckin' foster home for orphan death fighters who are too young to move on. And trust me on this—Maart is not gonna let me live at the penthouse because then I would train with them, and he's dead set on me never training again. Home was Udulf's fight camp or the Rock. That's the only home I ever had before I came to Miami. And I'm not going back to either of those places. It's all over. The whole thing is over."

"You're sad it's over."

"I don't know what I'm doing, Eason. At least when I was in fight camp, I was a fighter. A good one, too. One of the best. And not just in our camp. I made it to thirteen. All the

way to thirteen. Do you know how many girls get that far where I come from?”

He presses his lips together and nods. “Not many.”

“Not many. Most of them die first fight out, around age five or six. A few, like Rasha, make it to age nine. But she was never gonna make it to thirteen. She was gonna die in her very next fight. She was literally weeks away from death when we broke free. Zoya would’ve made it. But she’s... she’s... fucking psycho. She’s fucking psycho. And sometimes...”

But I stop. Because I’m saying way too much.

“Sometimes what?”

Fuck it. I let out a breath. “Sometimes I think I’m psycho too. And that’s the only reason I’m still alive.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, Irina, but you’re not unique in that respect.”

He looks at me for a few moments, the sunlight pouring into the bedroom now, making his green eyes the exact shade of Rainer’s. And I suddenly have a pang of homesickness. For the Rock, and the village, and Cort before Anya. And Maart before Anya. And all the things that were in my life before Anya came and everything changed.

It’s not her fault. I don’t blame her. But she was the one who ruined my death. She’s the only reason I’m still here.

“I’d be dead now, ya know. If we didn’t kill all those men that day, I’d be dead by now. And I find myself wishing it had turned out that way.” I’m staring straight into those green eyes of his when I say this and his reaction to my words is enough to make me look away and sigh. “Sorry. I’ll move in with you. Your cathedral ceilings are a little drafty, there are way too

many luxury bathrooms, and your ocean view in the morning is blindingly sunny, but sure. We can live together.”

When I look back, he’s just staring at me. I don’t wish I could read his mind. Because he’s thinking... *I was going to touch you and you tried to break my wrist.*

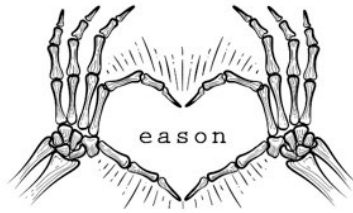
Only that’s what I was thinking about him, not the other way around.

He’s thinking... some other version of that. *She’s damaged. Broken into millions of microscopic pieces. And there’s no way to put any of this shit back together again.*

But then he leans down and kisses me.

And just for a moment, all my pieces are put back together again.

CHAPTER 26



*T*his kiss lasts longer than the others. It's sweeter too. And when I pull back, she puts her hands around my neck, keeping me close.

So I kiss her again. And again. And she kisses back.

But then she takes my hand and places it on her stomach, sliding my fingertips underneath her shirt just an inch or two.

“We don't have to keep going, Irina.”

“Don't you want to, though?”

“Do I *want* to?” I shoot her a look. “I'll always want more. But it doesn't mean we have to do more.” She just stares at me, our faces very close together, almost kissing, but not quite. “What? What are you thinking about?”

“I just don't get it.”

“Don't get what?”

“What the big deal is.”

I crack a slow smile. “You don't understand what the big deal is about sex?” I almost laugh. It takes a real effort not to, but I make this effort because she's so fuckin' serious.

“Yeah, I don't get it.” Her eyes are cast down when she says this, but then she looks up. They are the blue of a summer

sky. So pure. Like they've only seen good things.

Which is a lie. Irina has witnessed atrocities. And it's really not fair that such a nice girl should be hiding that truth behind those eyes.

I lean in and kiss her neck. Immediately her shoulder shrugs up. I bite her earlobe and then whisper into her ear. "Are you ticklish?"

Her shoulders are still shrugging, but now she's squirming underneath me too. So I don't need her answer. It's just a 'yes.'

I don't let her get far. But I stop purposely making her squirm. "It feels like that, Irina. Like... something really good that gives you goosebumps. And makes you happy, but it's intense too. So you almost can't stand it."

She blows out a breath, her head turning so she can see me. "Every time? It feels like that every time?"

"No. But with us it would."

"How do you know?"

"Because we like each other. And... I would be careful."

She looks away, staring off at something.

"I'm not trying to talk you into anything, so don't get the wrong idea. I'm just answering your questions."

"I know." She exhales again. "I want to..." She stops and tries again, looking at me this time. "I don't want to. Because..."

"You don't have to explain yourself. I didn't invite you here to have sex with me."

"No. You invited me here so we could train to kill people."

“Plans change.”

She stares up at the ceiling and makes a face. “I hate when plans change. I want things to be the same all the time. And never change.”

“That would be boring.”

“I don’t think it would. Not if you stopped time at just the right place.”

I roll over on my back so I’m looking at the ceiling too. “I’d stop time right here.”

She scoffs. “Well, I don’t know if I would want to stay right here.”

“Why not?”

“Because we haven’t done anything good yet.”

“Irina, if you wanna have sex, I’m up for it.”

“I do.” She turns her head to look at me, so I turn mine to look at her. “I do. I’m just... scared. Because I don’t know anything about it. Our teachers didn’t talk about sex. Anya never talked about sex. The boys didn’t talk about sex—maybe to each other, but never with me. Rasha and Zoya were years younger. And Nandy just assumes I already know everything. And I don’t know anything. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

It’s so weird how this girl can be so innocent and so deadly at the same time. I have to take my hat off to Cort and Maart because they did everything right with her. They didn’t make a single mistake. She’s fuckin’ perfect.

“I can show you what it feels like without actually doing it.”

She's squinting her eyes at me. "How?"

I turn over on my side so I'm lookin' at her. Then I lean down and kiss her again. Same way. Slow and soft. She kisses me back and the moment she does that, I slip my hand back onto her stomach and slide it down into her shorts. They're loose enough to get my whole hand inside. And then I just... slip my fingers between her legs.

I'm still kissing her when I do this. But when she gasps in surprise, I pause. "You can tell me to stop and I will. This is all you, Irina. But if ya let me keep going, you're gonna know what all the fuss is about pretty quick."

She inhales, nodding a little, and resumes kissing me, her hands reaching up so she can thread her fingertips into my hair just as I begin moving mine back and forth between her legs.

She gasps again, this time biting her lip and squeezing her eyes closed.

I'm glad her eyes are closed because I'm smiling and I don't want her to see that.

I wriggle one fingertip a little bit deeper. Until I'm right at her opening. And then I push up a little.

She arches her back. Still biting that lip. Groaning a little.

I had doubts that she was really a virgin. I thought maybe she was embarrassed about who it was with or how it happened. Or lying. Or maybe she just didn't remember because it would've been something done to her as a small child.

But she is a virgin and I'm so relieved that there's not some atrocious rape hiding inside her brain somewhere, waiting to be remembered, I let out a breath.

And in that same moment, she comes for the very first time. Her back arching, her knees closing, and her mouth open. Just the tiniest moan comes out. She's squeezing her eyes tight and almost wincing.

I lean in to her neck and kiss her, making her shrug up that shoulder all over again. "Ya all right?"

She scoffs. "I'm... yeah." One eye opens. She blushes and grins. "OK. I get it now."

I can't stop the laugh. "That's just the beginning, Irina. Just a little bit of what all the fuss is about."

Her breath comes out in a long, slow exhale. Then she directs her gaze to me. "What comes next?"

I shrug. "Whatever you want to come next, I guess."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You don't want..."

"To fuck you? Yeah, Irina. I do." She and I both laugh. "Hey, you asked. But... it's not the same. It's probably gonna hurt. I mean, there's no way around it, it's gonna hurt."

"Have you done this before?"

"Deflowered a virgin?" She slaps me on the shoulder and my smile grows wide. "Once or twice."

She practically sits up. "Once or twice? That means three times. Where did you find all these virgins?"

"Irina."

"What?"

"I was a fighter."

“Ohhhhhh.” She finally gets it. “The prize.”

“The prize.”

“They were all virgins?”

“The ones I got were.”

“Why do they make you do that?”

“Every owner needs a camp and there are two ways to get them. One. You, the vile billionaire with too much money and a sick sense of self-importance, get a bunch of girls pregnant and make them have babies who will be raised up in a fight camp from birth. Or two. You use your fighter slave to do it for you, hoping for a better set of genetic outcomes. Because let’s face it, billionaires aren’t known for their fighting ability, now are they?”

“Hmm.” She’s narrowing her eyes at me.

“Has your opinion of Dead Eyes changed?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m not a good liar and I don’t want to lie to you anyway. So don’t ask questions if you’re not prepared for the answers. You know where I come from. I know where you come from. So. We should probably just leave it there.”

She turns over on her side and props her head on her hand, looking at me. Studying me. “I don’t really understand where you come from. We had it very different.”

“Yeah. We did.”

She flops back and looks up at the ceiling. “So fair enough. I will be careful about what I ask from now on.”

“Do you wanna take a shower?”

Her head turns to me again. “Is this a sex thing? Or is it just a shower?”

“Do you take showers with people often?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Eason, I have been showering with boys since I was six. We had three minutes to get clean or we’d have to swim the grime off in the salty ocean below the Rock. And everyone was under the age of thirteen. None of us were thinking about sex. It was a shower. So let me rephrase my question. Are you asking me to do sexy things with you in the shower? Or are we just gonna wash the grime off?”

I reach over and touch her face, then sit up a little and lean down, kissing her on the lips. “Sexy things, Irina.”

She smiles against my mouth. “OK. I’ll take a shower with you.”

I get up, take her hand, pull her out of bed, and lead her into the bathroom. I stand her in front of the shower and let go of her hand. Her blue eyes find mine and she sucks in a breath. I’m only wearing sweat shorts, but she’s got on all her clothes from yesterday. Which isn’t a lot of clothes, but too many for a shower.

I reach down, grab the hem of her shirt—still looking her in the eyes—and start slowly pulling it up. It gives her time to object, but she doesn’t object. So I pull it right over her head.

She’s wearing a really pretty bra—pink and lacy, and it clasps together in the front. I reach between her breasts and she loses eye contact with me, distracted by what my fingers are doing.

I pop the clasp and push the bra back, revealing her firm, round breasts. She looks down at them, then up at me, shrugging.

“What’s that look for?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“It’s OK, Irina. None of us really do.”

She makes a face at me, then slips the bra off her shoulders and starts tugging her shorts down her legs. They fall to the floor at her feet. She hooks her toe into them and flings them aside, smirking at me.

Now she’s just wearing a tiny set of pink panties that match her bra.

I turn to the shower, start the water, and when I turn back, she’s naked. Just standing there, her eyes locked on mine. Her mouth a flat line.

I’ve seen her body from the back. That one time I was at her condo and she took a shower. She was curvy and beautiful from that angle, but the front view... “Wow. Irina. You’re killing me.”

She shrugs up one shoulder, not at all embarrassed about being naked.

I pull my shorts down too. And she watches, biting her lip. She takes a good long look. I’m a little bit hard. Not all the way, but enough for her to take notice.

Then she looks up at me and nods. “You’re nice too.”

The laugh comes out before I can stop it. “You’ve seen many a dick in your day, huh?”

“Seen one, seen them all. Well”—she tilts her head a little—“actually, that’s not true.”

“No.” I laugh. “I imagine it’s not.”

I wave my hand, inviting her into the shower, and when she walks past me, she brushes her shoulder against my chest. Just enough to drive me crazy.

I follow her in and then we're surrounded by a mist of steam. She steps under the water, getting herself all wet. Which gives me a nice opportunity to take my own good, long look at her while she's got her eyes closed.

Then she opens them and steps aside.

I duck under the water, facing her, eyes open—like seriously. I can't imagine ever wanting to close my eyes with a naked Irina standing in front of me—and watch her watch me.

She smiles and I take a seat on the marble bench just to the right of the water. Without me even inviting her, she straddles my lap, placing her hands on my shoulders, and presses her forehead against mine. "You're not what I expected."

"Shit." I huff. "You're not exactly what I expected either."

"I want to do more. Tell me what to do."

I suck in a breath, then nod. "OK. Let's start with something easy." I want to be inside her, but it's not gonna feel good. I'd rather we both feel good. So I take one of her hands and push it down, directing her where to place it. She's holding her breath, I can tell. But when she grips me, she lets it out.

I lean my head back against the tiled wall and let my eyelids droop a little. Relaxing.

Then I show her how to get me off.

She watches the whole thing. My hand, over her hand, just jerking me off. And I watch her back, fascinated. Unable to

recall another time where I was so fuckin' enthralled with a woman.

I take my hand away and she keeps going, increasing the rhythm and the tightness of her grip. I fight to keep my eyes open and only just barely manage it when I come, gritting my teeth and instantly wanting more.

She's still looking down, watching with interest as the come spills out over her hand. Then she looks up at me, smiling. "Now what?"

"Well... you got off. I got off. Most people would call it good." Her face makes me laugh. "What?"

"That's it? That can't be it."

"Oh, Irina. That's not it. Do you want to come again? I'm sure I can make it happen."

"I want the whole thing."

"It's... not gonna feel that good."

"All right. But I want to do it anyway." She's still holding on to me. I'm not quite as hard, but the moment she starts moving her hand up and down again, I feel the rush of blood.

I slip a finger between her open legs and play with her a little, making her close her eyes and moan. Without letting go of me, she puts her other hand on mine, stilling it. "Hold on."

I let her calm down. Then, when she opens her eyes again, I tell her what to do next. "Sit up a little. And put me right at your opening."

She bites her lip—which is kinda driving me wild—and then tries it, wincing the moment the tip of my cock touches her.

“It’s up to you, Irina. If you want to do it, you should just go fast. Put it there and sit down without stopping.”

She takes a deep breath and holds it, looking me straight in the eye. Then she sits a little, hisses and stops, then shakes her head and sits down all the way, moaning with clenched teeth.

But I’m inside her now. And my God, she feels so good. “Just stay there for a minute. Relax.”

“This is weird.”

“It gets better.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t. It’s just something you say.”

She laughs a little, then winces, because this makes me go deeper inside her. But she stays still. And then, after a little while of this, she relaxes.

“Now just stay right there.” I grip her legs and ease back a little. Starting to move underneath her. She’s got her palms flat on my shoulders, but the moment I start, she digs her nails into my skin.

She’s not gonna come like this. It cannot feel good. But there’s always a way to tease one out.

I slip my hand back between her legs and use my thumb to stimulate her. She immediately starts gasping, her head falling backwards and her back arching as I increase the pressure and rhythm.

I hold her in my lap with one hand around her hip. And then I move a little faster, pushing up inside her until she gasps. For a moment I can’t tell if it’s pain, or pleasure, or both.

But she goes stiff and then I know.

I wait until she's done and then I lift her up, pull out, and put her hand back around my cock. She jerks just a few times and then I'm coming too.

She drops her head to my shoulder and we just sit there, breathing hard and replaying it all back in our heads. But after a little while I reach for the shower gel, squirt some into my hand, and push her back a little so I can wash her.

She watches me do this like it's the most interesting thing in the world. Then she starts soaping me up too. We get up after that, rinse off, and then we get out and wrap up in towels.

She stands in my closet looking at her clothes, thinking very hard about what she wants to wear. But then she turns to my side of the closet and pulls an old t-shirt off the hanger. "Can I?"

"It's yours, Irina. It's all yours."

She smiles at that, maybe thinking I'm joking. But I'm not.

It has finally hit me. The whole purpose of this stupid fucking life. It's... to share it with someone.

And I want to share it with her. All of it. Even the stupid thing like t-shirts.

She tugs the shirt on without a bra, and then pulls a pair of denim cut-offs up her legs. I pull on a pair of cargo shorts and we leave the bedroom. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

When I glance at the clock, I realize it's already noon. I never ended up cooking the food from last night. Kabobs. They're already skewered, covered in marinade inside a pan in the fridge. So I start the grill and put them on.

Irina sits in a lounge chair, eyes closed, just a few feet away. And I start thinking about what she was telling me earlier.

How she was sad that it was over. Her fights. And that's something I feel as well.

I don't know what to do with this life. I don't know how to fill it up. I think I need an anchor because I'm drifting. I was gonna use Irina, and maybe she was gonna use me, but I doubt it because she's Irina. And she's perfect, and singular, and has no expectations.

I was gonna use her to keep me from floating away.

But she's drifting too. And I can't help but think back to Dog and how he described meeting her out there in the ocean.

Drifting. Like she was dead.

And how can you anchor yourself to another drifting person?

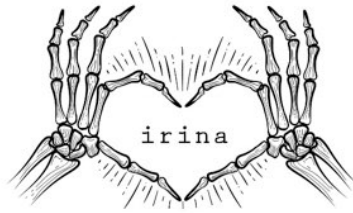
Just... drift with them? Drift together? How does it work?

I don't know.

But here is what I do know—I will go anywhere she goes.

Anywhere.

CHAPTER 27



I was supposed to die nine times already, at least.

The nine ghosts of my opponents follow me around like reminders. Their gaunt faces, their expressions of pain, the fear in their eyes when they realize death has come for them. They have stuck with me all this time.

I'm not supposed to be here, living a brand-new life with a man I could fall in love with in a blink. I was supposed to go out fighting.

I was supposed to die in that tenth fight. Everyone knew it.

Sure, I made it farther than most. But everyone's luck runs out eventually.

And that was the plan. It really was. I wanted to kill people that day I ran out of the gym. I wanted to make the world better. I wanted to get rid of all the evil. I wanted to *fix* it.

But this desire, this fantasy—this, more than anything else, is what made me pathetically naïve.

The dreams of dreamers. That's all it was.

After I came back inside from the terrace last night I heard a little bit of what Eason was telling Romero in the living room. How the machine that runs the evil is just too big and powerful. There are thousands of them. Tens of thousands of

them. They run everything. Every fuckin' country. Every fuckin' army. Every fuckin' corporation. They. Are. Everywhere.

And the thing is, I knew this. *I knew this.*

All growing up I knew this. I knew better than to fight back. Which is ironic, of course, because all we did was fight.

But we weren't fighting them, we were fighting each other.

We were convinced that if we just played by their rules, and did what we were told, and held on to the idea that we could be bought and sold, and therefore we could buy our way out—that it was... what? Fair?

It's not fair. There's no fair here.

This is sick. That's it. It's just fuckin' sick.

I can't change anything. What happened that day in the village was a one-off chance. It didn't change anything. The machine didn't break. It didn't burn. The power went out in one small part of the whole and there was a... flicker.

What we did that day—those men we killed—was but a flicker.

The lights are still very much on.

The monster is very much alive.

And I will spend the rest of my days fully understanding that there is nothing I can do about it.

This is why Eason can't get out of bed some days. Sure, it's the little brother. Everything that happened to him and his family is part of his depression. But mostly—I think, anyway—it's because he knows. He knows there's nothing we can do.

There is no way to tell anyone who can make it matter because like Eason said, they're all on the take.

So there are two choices. One. Fall into that dark abyss of self-loathing. Unable to get out of bed. Unwilling to make a new future because I'm stuck in the past.

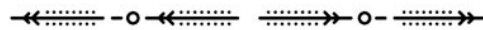
Or. Two. Pretend like it never happened.

I'm living a brand-new life with a man I could fall in love with in a blink.

I stop and really think about that for a moment.

Really understand it.

And then I blink.



THE NEXT MORNING I wake up before the sun with Eason's arm wrapped around my waist, holding me tight against his chest. The AC is humming, but other than that, it's eerily quiet.

I wriggle out from underneath his grip and he turns over, burying his face in the pillow, his hands underneath it. Showing off his biceps, maybe?

I grin, study them a little—because why not, they're quite beautiful—but he's not awake. So he's not showing off. He's just tired, I think.

I use the bathroom and when I come out... there they are. My nine ghosts, all lined up against the bedroom window.

They do something unusual this time, though. They walk out. Single file. They just walk out of the room.

I don't go back to bed. I couldn't sleep now anyway. I just pull on a new pair of scraggly denim shorts. I want to go for a run, which is ironic. Until Eason showed up, I hadn't thought about running in years. But I can't run yet. My foot is still too sore for shoes. I can walk, though. It barely hurts at all now. The beach is calling me and the breaking dawn is the only reason it's so quiet. I like walking the beach when it's nearly empty like this.

My ghosts are waiting for me in front of the door. Dead eyes all around. I slip past them, out the door, barefoot, and go down the steps to the ground level. They follow me, but whatever. I just ignore them. I refuse to let them control my emotions.

The doorman sitting behind the small desk smiles at me. "Good morning, Mrs. Malone."

I don't correct him, but I do smile. "Good morning. I'm just going for a walk."

He smiles back at me, then looks down at his computer screens.

I slip out the side entrance to Eason's building and take a direct path that leads right to the sand. I always thought my condo was really close to the beach. Just eight blocks away. But this is *on* the beach.

Steps away.

And that's something else entirely. Something you get used to quickly, I imagine. Like the money.

I don't need money. I have enough. But Eason's money is also something else entirely. I don't spend much because I don't really dream big, other than my escape from Maart—because that's what it really was. It wasn't me trying to start a

new life, it was me running away—but other than that, I haven't done anything daring since I left the fights behind seven years ago.

There were no big plans or fancy desires, even though I have the money now to have both of those things. I haven't allowed myself the option of fully creating a new life. I've just been stuck in the wake of the old one. Waiting for it to catch up with me.

And that's gonna happen today.

Maart is coming today.

Everything is going to change. Not because of Maart, but because Eason and I are partners now. We can make plans together. We can go places, and use that money we have, and we wouldn't have to do those things alone.

When my feet touch the sand, I'm picturing day trips on the boat.

When my feet touch the surf, I'm picturing trips to other places. What's close? The Bahamas? Mexico? Maybe even all the way down the coast to Rio? We could stop at the Rock. Spend a night there. Play table games and read books.

Wouldn't that be something?

I could show Eason where I grew up. We could even, if we wanted to, go look at the camp on the coast. I could show him my hut. And all the little secret places in the jungle where I would steal away when I had a chance. Where I used to sit on a fallen palm-tree trunk, lying back, eyes closed, dappled sunlight coming through the canopy above, making everything yellow as I listened to the birds, and the monkeys, and the insects, and pictured a life of winning.

And look—it happened.

I won.

It's nothing like how I pictured it, and it's taken me all these seven years between that day and this one to even come close to understanding things, but it's still winning.

I stop on the wet sand and look out at the ocean. It's another calm day and everything in front of me looks like glass. There is an overpowering urge inside me to walk into the water. So I do. I walk right out into the waves, just like I did that night I learned that Maart was looking for me.

Only this time, when I tip onto my back, let out a breath, and look up at the sky, it's not dark. It's light and getting lighter. And not only that, I'm not crying, I'm smiling.

I'm thinking... *It's over.*

Everything that came before this day is over.

And everything that comes after is new.

I float like that for a little while, letting the sea wash the past away.

When I sit up again, I've drifted south, the sun is bright and hot, and there are a lot more people on the beach. Even my nine ghosts.

So I swim back and start walking out of the ocean. But suddenly there's a sharp pain in my foot. I limp out onto the sand and when I look down, I realize that I have broken a stitch and a little bit of blood starts seeping out and pooling into the gently rolling water.

"Shit." I look up, trying to figure out how far down the beach I've gone, and realize I'm near the 6th Street restrooms. This is where I would usually come in if I were walking here from my own condo.

I look back at Eason's building. It's not far. I'm maybe six blocks away. I take a few steps in that direction, but each time I put my foot down, I can feel the wound opening up.

Continuous stitching. I thought it was so clever when Eason finished sewing me up the other night. But this is a serious drawback. If you break one stitch, you could break them all because they are connected and not tied off individually.

In my mind I can actually hear Maart saying, *I told ya so*.

The blood is flowing a little bit faster now, so instead of going back, I head off the sand towards the restrooms. The minute I step onto the concrete I'm leaving scarlet footprints.

"Fuck." I say this in my head in English, but for some reason, it comes out of my mouth in Russian. A very colorful version at that. I haven't spoken Russian in years and the way my mouth has to form the sounds feels foreign to me now.

I look down at my foot, then up at the restrooms.

"Please tell me you're not going in there to clean that cut."

I look over to my right and find a young woman with long, wavy, perfect blonde hair and bright smiling blue eyes. She's wearing all white—white shorts, white shirt, white sandals—and more than a little bit of gold jewelry. Bangle bracelets, a choker around her neck, and drooping earrings.

I have a flashback to that morning on the beach when the girl in white came up to me asking if I wanted to be a model. I don't remember her face, exactly, but she could be this woman right here.

She could literally be this woman.

And here's where everything starts coming full circle. A lost girl on a beach. The beginning of a new day. An invitation from a girl in white.

I look down at myself—dripping wet like I just walked out of the ocean and wearing a t-shirt that is clearly much too big for me. It clings to my body and gives off the impression that I'm homeless or have been out all night.

The woman points to my foot when I don't answer her. "That looks bad. What happened?"

I keep quiet and start hobbling my way towards the restrooms.

"No." The woman kinda grabs my arm. Not hard, or anything, and I pull away before she can wrap her fingers around me, but I do stop. "Seriously," she says. "You can't walk into the public restrooms with a cut on your foot. That's... gross."

I look down the beach towards Eason's building one more time, then down 6th Street where my condo is. But both places are too far. I'm not bleeding like a stuck pig or anything, but with each step I can feel the stitches loosening. A six-block walk in any direction will undo them all.

I look at the public restrooms again. If I could just get some toilet paper, I could wrap my foot—

"Do you need help?"

I look over at the woman, ready to say no. Because she's too much—this whole encounter with her is just too much.

But... I actually do need help. I didn't even bring my phone, so I can't even call a car.

“I can get you some gauze or... a Band-Aid.” The woman points to a building on the other side of Ocean Drive. “I work right over there across the street.”

I squint my eyes in that direction and they land on a motel that I’ve walked by a million times. I even considered staying there once, back before all my lucky breaks. It’s not a great hotel—it’s actually kinda ugly and if my memory serves, it had a two-star rating—but it is oceanfront.

“We have a good first-aid kit. Well, good enough to get you where you’re going.” She pauses, smiles. “Where *are* you going?”

Like I’d tell her.

“You don’t speak English, do you? I heard you. Was that... Russian?”

I narrow my eyes at her. What the hell? She was *watching* me?

If she notices the face I’m pulling, she blows it off because she laughs. “I don’t speak Russian. But I’m pretty sure you were swearing up a storm. Come on. I’ll fix you up.” She starts walking towards the motel, but I hesitate.

I can’t make up my mind about this moment. Who is she? Why is she here? What does she want?

“Are you OK?” She has stopped and turned back to look at me.

Am I OK?

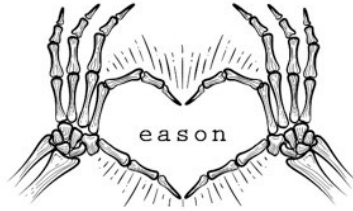
I look over my shoulder and see my nine ghosts. Just standing there in chronological order with their dead eyes and dirty, tear-stained faces.

It's a laughable question. But before I manage to bark that laugh out, the oldest boy—the one I killed last—he walks over to the woman in white. And one by one, all the others follow him.

“Ready?” she asks. Then she just turns and starts walking away. Not waiting for an answer.

And each one of my ghosts steps in line behind her. Like they're gonna leave me. So what else can I do? I step in line too, trailing bloody footprints behind me.

CHAPTER 28



A *buzzing phone wakes me.* I have to squint and paw for it on the bedside table because the sun is shining right in my fuckin’ eyes. I turn away, look at the screen—unknown number—and tap ‘accept.’ “Yeah.”

“Is this Eason?”

It’s a woman’s voice. “Yeah. Who’s this?”

“Macks.”

I sit up. “Oh. Fuck. Sorry. What time is it?”

“Almost eleven. Were you sleeping?”

Eleven? Fuck’s sake. Why didn’t Irina wake me up? “Yeah. It’s been a...” I sigh. “Forget it. What’s up? You guys are here?”

“We are. Can we come by? Is that OK with Irina?”

I look around. No Irina. “Hold on, let me find her.”

I tap the ‘mute’ button and get up, a sudden pain in my left foot making me wince. “Irina.” I say her name as I walk out into the living room. But she’s not there. “Irina?” I call up the stairs. “Are you up there?”

She’s not. I can tell. The silence in here is screaming ‘no one home.’

“Shit.” I unmute the call. “She’s stepped out. Can I call you back?”

“Can you give us the address? So we can head over?”

I don’t want them coming without telling Irina first, but there’s no real reason to tell her no. “Yeah. Sure. I’ll text it. The doorman will call me when you get here.”

“Good. We’ll see you soon.”

The call ends, I send the text, and then I set my phone down on the kitchen counter, trying to get my head together after waking up confused.

Where did she go? To her condo to pick something up? To get coffee for us?

I grab my phone and call her. But her phone rings in my bedroom.

She didn’t take her phone. *What the fuck, Irina?*

Did she run? Because of Maart? Because of me?

What the hell is going on? And when did she leave? How long has she been gone?

I go back into the bedroom, pull on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, slip my feet into some trainers, and leave, taking the elevator down.

When the doors open, I walk to the doorman. “Did you see my guest leave? Small, blonde, looks like she can take you.”

The doorman smiles. “Irina.”

“Yeah, her.” I smile too. It was a pretty good description.

“No. I haven’t seen her.”

“What time did you come on shift?”

“Four-thirty. So I’ve been here all morning. But if you want, I can call the other doormen and see if they’ve seen her.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I pace the lobby as he makes his calls. But after each one, he shakes his head at me.

“OK. If she comes back, can you call me?”

“Sure, Mr. Malone. I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.” I head out at a run and go up Ocean towards 6th Street. When I get to her condo, I jump the gate and press all the right numbers for her digital door lock. But as soon as I open the door, I know she’s not in there.

I go inside anyway, checking. Trying to figure out if she came here and then left.

But it all looks the same, just like the last time I was here. Nothing seems out of place. No dishes or signs of life. In fact, the place is stuffy and a little bit warm, like the AC hasn’t been kicking on. When I check it, I realize there’s a little motion detector on it. So it cycles on only if someone’s home.

She wasn’t here.

I leave and since the restaurant is only a couple blocks away, I go there next.

It’s busy. Nearly lunchtime now. But right away I see Estefania at the hostess station. She shoots me a dirty look. I hold up a finger, asking for a minute of her time.

She makes a face, excuses herself from a customer, and comes outside. “Well, well, well. I have to admit, I wasn’t expecting to see your face around here again.”

“Have you seen Irina?”

Immediately her expression changes from contempt to concern. “What? No. She hasn’t been by. Is she missing?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Either you know where she is, or you don’t.”

I let out a breath. “I don’t. I woke up and she was gone. She’s not at her condo, so I came here hoping...”

Estefania shakes her head. “She hasn’t been here. Let me get Romero.”

She disappears back inside, but I don’t hang around to talk to Romero. I start running back to my condo.

Ten minutes later I’m walking up the steps to the main lobby, huffing and out of breath. The doors open for me, letting a rush of AC splash against my face.

“Mr. Malone!” I look over at the doorman. “I’m sorry. I gave you the wrong information. The doorman on the south side of the building went home early because he had a family emergency.”

I’m just standing there in the middle of the lobby, trying to catch my breath and follow along with what he’s telling me. “OK.”

“So I called the doorman on duty earlier and he did see your friend leave this morning around five a.m.”

“He did? Did he see where she went?”

“He only said she went down the beach path, but we pulled the outside cameras and she went south once she made it to the beach. She was barefoot. He noticed that.”

“She cut her foot. She can’t wear shoes.”

“What happened to her fuckin’ foot?”

I turn towards the growling voice and find myself staring straight in the face of Maart. Former death-camp kid trainer.

I’d forgotten they were coming.

I look around and recognize Macks, the Ring reporter, and three of Maart’s fighters. I know two of them—Paulo and Maeko, but there’s a third there too, and him I have no clue about.

“And,” Maart adds, “why are you lookin’ for her? Did she run away or something?”

I look at the doorman. “Was she... running?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “He said she didn’t look distressed. Just said she was going for a walk.”

I run my fingers through my hair, trying to find a way forward, then decide there’s only one way forward and take off towards the side entrance.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

I ignore Maart. Just skip down a couple of stairs that take me to a hallway, follow that to the doorman, and go right past him to the outside.

Once there, I pause for a moment, looking around. Maybe she’s just... hanging out on the beach.

The door behind me comes crashing open and Maart is already yelling. “What the hell is going on? Where is Irina?”

I turn around, find him right behind me, and lean into his face. “Are you stupid or something? Obviously, I’m lookin’ for her. You heard what the man said. She went for a walk at five a.m. It’s noon. I’m getting’ a little worried, *Maart.*” I

sneer his name. “So why don’t you fuck off and let me do my thing.”

“OK.” Macks’s calm voice butts right in between us, and there’s an arm there too. “Let’s take a breath and figure this out.” She looks at me, smiles. “Nice to see you again, Eason. Do you remember me?”

“You interviewed me for *Ring of Fire*. Of course I fuckin’ remember you.”

“I thought we had decided to calm down.” I turn to the voice and find Paulo staring at me. “If she’s missing, we’ll find her.”

“Ya didn’t find her the last time she went missing.” That’s a burn right there. Because all of them, even Macks, wince in unison. “So you’ll forgive me for not bein’ a believer.”

“Eason.”

“What?” I snap at the reporter.

“Should we split up? Is there somewhere she might go?”

“I only know of three places. Her condo. Not there. And the restaurant. Not there, either.”

“What’s the third place?” Maart has calmed down. His tone is even, at least.

“The beach.” I look at it now. “And we know she went there. It’s been nearly seven hours now. I can’t see her spending seven hours on the beach. And she’s not running. She can’t run. She hurt her foot, cut it on some glass two night ago. I put a bunch of stitches in. She can walk on it a little, but not for this long. And she left her phone upstairs. She doesn’t have it on her.”

“OK.” Macks let out a breath. “There’s six of us. We can split up. Do you have a picture of her?”

I shake my head, but then remember I do. I find the picture Davis sent me weeks ago. The one where she has a black eye. I hold it up and Maart shakes his head.

“Well, do *you* have a picture of her?” I snarl. “Because if not, then shut the fuck up.”

“Well, *he* seems nice.” That comes from Maeko. He sneers back at me when I narrow my eyes.

I glance at the third kid, a little bit younger than Paulo and Maeko. He’s massive. Tall and broad and in a much higher weight division than I am.

I text the photo to Mack’s number and then look at Maart. “Let’s split up then, and make our way down the beach. If we get to the pier and we haven’t found her, I could try one more place—a friend’s gym. But I’m a hundred percent certain she’s not there.”

“Which gym?” Macks asks.

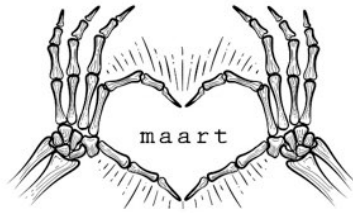
“Dog’s gym. It’s over on Alton and Fourth. Down the street from the marina. I have a boat in that marina, but I can’t see a reason for her to go to the boat. Why would she go to the boat?”

Maart looks pissed for a moment. But then Macks leans in and whispers something into his ear and his expression changes as he blows out a breath. “Fine. You take the beach.” Maart barks this like he’s in charge here. “You go with him.” He sweeps a gesture at all three fighters. “Macks will stay with me and we’ll try to pull up some security footage. Text or call if anything changes. I’ll see if we can pull up a good enough

picture of her from the footage so we don't have to flash that fuckin' billboard pic around."

I roll my eyes and head for the beach, Irina's fight brothers coming up behind me.

CHAPTER 29



*W*e watch them leave and spread out on the beach. Then Beth turns to me. “You’re jumping to conclusions, Lance.”

“I don’t think I am, Beth. She ran. She doesn’t want to see me. Or something worse happened. Someone took her.” I look at Beth, straight in the eyes, wanting her to look at me like I’m crazy.

But that’s not how she’s looking at me. She’s twirling these two scenarios around in her head. Trying them on for size. Maybe even attempting to pick them apart and dismiss them.

But they’re not dismissible. Both are entirely possible.

“She already ran once,” I tell Beth. “And three days ago, I was insisting that Evard stay home because someone might try and snatch him to get revenge on Cort. How far-fetched is it to project that same concern onto Irina?”

“OK.” Beth lets out a breath. Then she starts tapping her phone.

“What are ya doing?”

“I’m going to coordinate a search party.” She looks up at me. “How many helicopters do you think we’ll need? Will we

need boats? Local vessels or something that can go out into international waters? Should I get the Coast Guard involved?”

I just... blink at her. “What?”

“How big of a deal would you like to make this, Maart? Just tell me what we need and I’ll make it happen.”

“Who *are* you?”

She said all those words before with a stoic, serious face, but now she breaks into a laugh. “Hello.” She thrusts her hand at me. “Mackenzie Scott. We’ve already met, but I don’t think you took me seriously.”

I grin at her, then shake her hand. “You’re crazy. And I totally take you seriously. I just... Coast Guard?”

“I’m just giving you options, Maart. Don’t read between the lines.”

I take a deep breath and pull out my phone. “Let me call Cort. Can you go see if they can find us some footage?”

“Consider it done.” Beth leans in and kisses me on the cheek, then offers me one more smile over her shoulder as she disappears back inside the building.

I hate the way phones ring when you’re calling someone very far away. I just don’t like how you can hear the distance. And I hate the way the people you’re calling sound far away too.

Cort picks up third ring. “What’s up? Did you see her yet?”

“Cort...” But then I pause.

“What? What’s happening?”

“She’s not here. She was here, and then she left for a walk or something. She’s been missing for seven hours.” He’s silent on the other side of the phone. “I need you to tell me that this isn’t what I think it is.”

He takes a few more seconds to let it all sink in and then he says, in his most condescending asshole voice, “You’re dumb. She’s fine. She went for a walk. She’s gonna be back any minute. And then she’s gonna run at you, and jump up and hug you, and tell you all about her new life in America, and piss you off because she’s dating a fighter and...” He falters here. “And... and probably never let go of you again.”

Does he believe it? I sure don’t. But I change the subject anyway. “Is Evard OK?”

“He’s pissed at me. Refuses to talk. Not even sign language.”

Some of the tension breaks as I picture Evard’s version of a tantrum. “Sounds just like someone else I know.”

I can hear Cort smiling down in the jungles of Brazil. Then he blows out a breath. “She didn’t run. No one took her. I can’t make you believe this, or prove it, or even explain how I know. But I just know. She can’t wait to see you, Maart. Whatever’s happening right now, it’s got nothing to do with you.”

We stay on the line, silent, for almost a minute, rolling his words around in our heads. And it’s not even awkward. I’ve gone months at a time living with this man—sleeping next to him sometimes—without him ever saying a single word to me.

A minute on the phone is nothing.

But there’s no reason to keep him on the line. So I let him go. “I’ll call you when she gets here.”

“Good. I have things to say to that girl.”

CHAPTER 30



*W*e spread out across the beach. Paulo takes the surf, I take the beachwalk and Maeko and the other kid, Budi, take the sand.

We walk all the way to South Pointe Pier and there is no sign of her. So we just stand there, lookin' around, hoping. But she's not here.

"We should go back," Paulo says. "This time, let's walk the street."

Can't hurt, so we all just fall in and do that without speaking. Budi takes the lead, walking faster than the rest of us, still looking towards the beach. Maeko trails behind, taking up the rear, looking left and right. And Paulo stays right next to me, scouring the street.

"Did you know," I say to him, "that you were her first kiss?"

Paulo looks at me, frowning. "That's bullshit. I never kissed Irina."

"She said you kissed her when you left for the penthouse."

He laughs, smiling all the way up to his eyes. Then he tries to explain, but just laughs again. Finally, he gets his words out on the third try. "I kissed her on the cheek. It was a kiss

goodbye. I kissed everyone goodbye. Even Cort.” Then he’s laughing again. “Fuckin’ Irina. She’s so tough, ya know? But so clueless.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh.

“But,” Paulo continues, “that’s what made her so special to us.”

“Her innocence?”

“Yeah.” Paulo’s smile drops a little. Then he sighs. “Despite the fact that she has killed nine kids to save her own life, she’s not a mean person. Hasn’t got a mean bone in her tiny body. And she mothered us like crazy.” Then he points to himself. “I’m a year older than her. She’s never been taller than me. Yet she would ride me about everything. ‘Brush your teeth, Paulo.’ I laugh out loud, and so does he. “‘Don’t waste food, Paulo.’ ‘Go take a bath, Paulo. You smell.’” Then he goes serious again, looking right at me. “I would like to go on record that I did look for her. She was fighting in the favelas for months. I knew she was doing that. I just didn’t know why. And I didn’t want anyone to see me there because my fights were getting serious and...” He shakes his head. “I should’ve...” Then he looks at me and shrugs, unable to figure out what he should’ve done.

“That’s how she earned her money to leave,” I tell him.

“Yeah. I heard all about it. And I was pissed at Maart because I knew she ran away because of him.”

“She thought she was in love with him. Did ya know that?”

“Yeah.” Paulo nods, looking out towards the beach. “But... I think we were all in love with Maart at one point.”

I laugh, but he’s serious.

“He trained us,” Paulo explains, “and patched us back up when we were all half-dead. And... fuck. I owe everything to that guy. Obviously, we got over it. Feelings are confusing in the camps, ya know? She would’ve gotten over it, but he pushed her away. I didn’t push her away. If Irina came to me and said, ‘I love you, Paulo,’ I’d have fuckin’ snatched her up in a second. But she didn’t love me that way. And Maart didn’t love her that way. And...” He exhales loudly again. “Like I said, love in the camps is confusing.”

“Fuck, brother. Love anywhere is confusing.”

He nods, grinning. “Truth.” Then he side-eyes me. “Do you love her?”

Now it’s my turn to exhale. “I’ve known her about three weeks, so I should probably say ‘no.’ Or, at the very least, ‘I don’t know.’ But I do know. I do love her. And if something has happened—”

But that’s as far as I get because a shrill whistle draws my attention to Budi, who is bent down on the ground, looking at something on the sidewalk. Maeko comes up next to him, then Paulo and I are there too.

“What’s that?” Paulo asks.

And then Budi stands up, pointing at the ground.

It’s a bloody footprint.

“Shit,” Maeko says, looking at me. “Didn’t you say her foot was cut?”

But before I can answer, Budi is pointing towards the street. “Look. There’s more.”

We all look. And sure enough, there’s a trail of bloody footprints leading across the street.

CHAPTER 31



*W*e were never going to that motel.

The woman was leading me to another building just behind it. When we stepped out of the sunshine and into the shadows of the alleyway, I almost turned and ran. Fuck the foot, it could bleed if it wanted, I was going to run. I was gonna get the fuck out of there.

But my ghosts didn't stop. They just kept going, following that woman into the alleyway.

So I had to keep going too. Because it was them. My ghosts were taking me somewhere. Not the woman in white.

We stopped at a storefront made of glass windows. They were covered, though, in streaked white paint or something. So people outside couldn't see in.

My heart skipped, thumping inside my chest, as the woman opened the door and the ghosts walked in.

But I followed them.

I had to. It wasn't even a choice.

And then I just stood there, looking around, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

Children everywhere. And the place was so silent, it made my skin crawl.

The woman turned to me, touching me on the arm. “Over here. Come on.”

But I didn’t follow her because the ghosts weren’t following her anymore. They were walking around the room, inserting themselves into the groups of silent children.

“We need to fix your foot. It’s bleeding all over the floor.”

I looked down when she said that, and sure enough, I was leaving a little puddle of blood on the old tile floor. So I followed her over to a counter, where she started going through drawers. “Sit up here,” she said, patting the counter, “so I can get a better look at it.”

I slid up onto the counter, drawing up my wounded foot so she could see it. But my attention wasn’t on her or the blood, but the kids and my ghosts.

There were a few adults in the room too, sitting at tables with the kids, or on the floor. Along the perimeter there were shelves filled with books, and table games, and puzzles.

And then my eyes went to the little emaciated boy I choked the life out of all those years ago when I was six. He was looking right at me. He raised his hand and then he pointed—but not at me.

He pointed to a little girl who was sitting on the floor with her thumb in her mouth, separate from everyone else.

She had long black hair and for a moment, all I saw was Ainsey back on the Rock, seven years ago, trying to fit in. Trying to be a four-year-old fighter. It was obvious this girl had been crying, maybe still was crying. But she wasn’t making any noise.

The woman was cleaning my foot and talking to me, but I wasn't listening. I was looking at that little girl. Trying to figure her out. Trying to figure *everything* out.

And then the little girl looked at me. This broke the spell. The ghostly boy standing next to her disappeared. And when I checked the room, all the ghosts had disappeared.

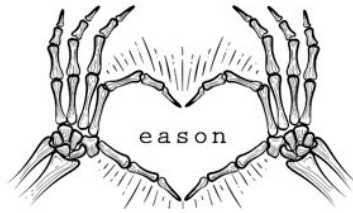
I looked back at the little girl and she raised her fingers to me and... signed. *Help me.*

I jumped off the counter, ignoring the objections of the woman in white, and walked right over to that little girl. I bent down and made my fingers say, *What do you need?*

The next thing I knew, she had her arms around my neck and she was sobbing.

And then so was I.

CHAPTER 32



The bloody footprints lead us into an alleyway and end at the closed door of a storefront that has had all its windows painted over in white.

“What the fuck?” Maeko says.

We look up and Paulo reads the sign out loud. “School for the Deaf.” He looks at me, confused, but I don’t know what the fuck is going on.

Budi pulls the door open and a wave of AC hits us in the face. We go in and just stand there for a moment, taking it all in.

“Holy shit,” Paulo whispers. “It looks like the fuckin’ game room on the Rock.”

I don’t know what that means, but Budi and Maeko seem to agree.

And then we see her. Irina. Sitting on the floor at the far end of the room, hunched over a table sized for a pre-schooler, pushing puzzle pieces around. She’s got her back to us, but there’s a little girl across from her who is laughing and smiling.

“Do you know her?” The four of us look at a young blonde woman off to our right. “That woman?” She’s pointing to

Irina. “She hurt her foot. I brought her here to patch it up and then...” She looks over at the table, bewildered. “Then she... started *talking* to her.” The woman quickly looks at us, her eyes finding mine. “She wouldn’t talk to us. The little girl. And then this woman shows up and they’re speaking...” She looks over at Irina again. “I don’t know what they’re speaking. It’s not American Sign Language. I mean, there are some similarities, but—”

“No,” Paulo interrupts her. “It’s not ASL because we’re from Brazil.” And then he’s crossing the room, Maeko and Budi following. And when he reaches the table, he bends down and whispers something in Irina’s ear.

Irina turns, surprised. Then smiles. Then cries.

Maeko and Budi bend down as well and they are hugging like long-lost family members.

“Who are they?” the woman asks.

I watch them. Paulo, with his brown skin and dark hair. Maeko, fair and Asian. And Budi, something in between. All contrasting with Irina’s glaring European features. I look back at the woman. “They’re her brothers.”

“I thought she was Russian, or something like that. She spoke some language. But then she didn’t talk again. Just... came in here and started signing using signs I’ve never seen before. I know Brazilian Sign Language.” The blonde woman looks at me, like she can’t make sense of things, and she desperately wants me to help her make sense of things. “That’s *not* Brazilian Sign Language.”

No. I doubt very much these signs have ever been recorded anywhere. And the little girl understood them. “Where did that little girl come from?”

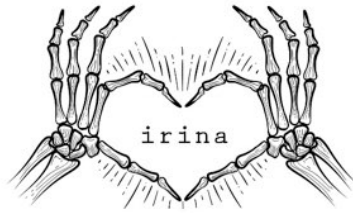
“She was found in a warehouse down by the cruise ships about three weeks ago, huddling in a corner, cold and barely wearing anything. She was dehydrated and hadn’t eaten in days. But she refused to talk and didn’t respond to anyone. Not even the doctors. We tried to test her hearing, but she wouldn’t respond to that either. The school fosters all deaf children in Miami-Dade County, so she came here to live with us. This is the first time she’s acknowledged anyone, let alone spoken in signs. What language is that?”

The blonde woman looks at me, but I don’t answer. Not out loud, anyway.

Because it’s a camp language.

That little girl came from a camp.

CHAPTER 33



I understood that *I couldn't stay* in the school. I did. I got it. But once I sat down in front of the little girl there was no way I was getting back up again.

She signed to me. She asked me for help. There was no way I was leaving her there.

So I just... pretended to be deaf. It was, after all, a school for the deaf. And I pretended not to understand the signs of the woman in white who brought me here. That wasn't entirely a lie. I don't understand all her signs. I understand some of them, but... it's like we're not really speaking the same language.

Then I start to wonder if it's even a real language at all. The one I use, that is. The one this little girl uses. I never thought much about the sign language, to be honest. I haven't made signs in years. It was just how we communicated with each other during the silent times on the Rock.

But she's one of us, this little girl. She's one of us. And her name is Jilly.

I didn't ask her for her name. She offered it. She started signing to me with frantic fingers, like she had been starved of conversation. The woman in white, who introduced herself as

Priscilla, kept bothering us, asking us questions. But Jilly really is deaf, she told me.

Priscilla did spill a lot of information about Jilly though. How she was found in a warehouse three weeks ago, dirty, and starving, and thirsty. Wearing tattered rags for clothes and unable, or unwilling, to communicate.

As Jilly continued to talk to me, and Priscilla got tired of trying, I started pulling out board games. This room reminded me so much of the game room on the Rock that I immediately knew what to do.

Play.

That's what the game room on the Rock was meant for. And that's what this room is meant for too.

I didn't ask Jilly about her parents, just set up Hungry, Hungry Hippos and gave her the pink one. It's an easy game to master. All you gotta do is flip the lever. Immediately she was laughing and smiling. It was like a cure.

When we got done with that, we played Trouble, which was a little harder for her because she can't count. But she's smart, and when I explained that the dots on the dice are how many spaces you get to move, she immediately understood.

This is exactly how Sergey explained it to me back when I first got to camp.

We tried a few more board games, but eventually we switched to books. I pulled some out, and put her in my lap, and I read them to her in signs.

When we got tired of books, we switched to puzzles. And that's what we were working on when Paulo, Maeko, and Budi came up behind me.

I didn't forget about them. I knew they were coming and I didn't forget.

I just couldn't leave the little girl behind.

"Irina." Paulo bent down to whisper in my ear.

I closed my eyes, smiled, and then turned and hugged him. Then Maeko was there. And Budi. And we just hugged.

They didn't cry, but I did. I feel like I've been doing a lot of that lately. But then I remembered Jilly and wiped my tears away as I introduced her. She was so surprised that we could all talk to her, she started crying too. And then Paulo picked her up, and patted her on the back, and whispered things into her ear that she couldn't even hear, but that's not even the point.

The point was that he cared.

Eason came over then and I stood up, shrugging. "Sorry."

Priscilla was there too, standing next to Eason. "You can talk?"

I let out a breath. "Yeah. I can talk. And so can she." Then I looked at Eason. "I think... I think we need some help here."

"Do you know this girl?" Priscilla asked.

And I nodded. Without hesitation. "I do. She... she's my little sister."

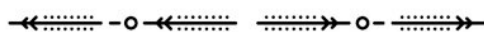
Of course, Priscilla was confused, because this little girl and I look nothing alike. But then she looked at Maeko, and Paulo, and Budi, and said, "Oh! You're all adopted! These are your brothers." Then she pointed at Eason. "He told me they are your brothers."

“They are,” I said with a very serious face. “And this is my little sister.” I looked at Eason then. “We need to call Nandy. Romero will know what to do.”

Eason nodded, pulling out his phone. Then he walked away, going outside to talk.

He stayed out there for a long time. When he came back in, there was a woman with him and she had papers. Something from a judge. I don’t know how Romero did it, or what he had to promise to make it happen, but he did make it happen.

And by six o’clock that evening, we were walking home and taking Jilly with us.



I DIDN'T FORGET about Maart. I just couldn't think about him yet. But when Eason opens the door and Maart is standing there, right in front of those gorgeous terrace windows, I am surprised.

And then I am handing Jilly over to Eason, and walking across the floor, and then the next thing I know, Maart's got his arms around me.

We stay like that for hours, I think.

But the sun doesn't set, and no one moves, and there is no time, I guess. It's just an eternal moment that ends with sick hearts being made well again.

He pulls away from me before I let go of him. And I guess it has to be this way. So I take a step back and it's only now,

looking up at him, straight in the eye, that I realize I'm not crying. And neither is he.

Because this was always how it was gonna end between us.

Me here. Him there.

And where we are, and who we're with, has nothing to do with how much we love each other.

I think that whole thing only took a few seconds, actually. Or time caught up, or something. Because then, suddenly, the room is filled with words, and smiles, and long sighs of relief.

Jilly is back in my arms and we all sign to her like she's the newest kid in camp and no matter what happens next, we're on her side.

The ghosts came back so I could find her. They took me to her.

And it hits me now that all this self-reflection with Eason was leading up to this day right here. Leading up to it like it was fate.

Eason called my desire to kill people and to make them pay a sick hate. And he was right.

There is only one way to cure the evil and that's with kindness.

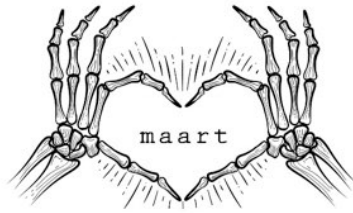
I can't change the world. I can't make any of those sick, powerful people pay.

But I can rescue one little girl.

I can rescue one little kid at a time.

So that's what I'm gonna do.

CHAPTER 34



I should've hugged her more.

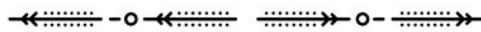
I should've loved her more.

But the truth is, I couldn't.

Even after we were free, I couldn't love them like that. Because I could never shake the feeling that each time they walked away from me, it would be the last time I saw them.

The only way I knew how to show them I cared was to train them. And once I forced Irina to stop training, I didn't have another way to love her.

I just... didn't know how.



PAULO, Maeko, and Irina are standing out on the terrace looking out at the sea, talking and laughing and smiling. Irina is standing between them. She's stepped up onto the lowest railing, gripping the top railing tight, to make herself taller so she can try and look them in the eyes.

Beth is holding a sleeping Jilly, rocking back and forth on her feet as she talks to Budi, who has commandeered Eason's

grill and is making us shark steaks for dinner.

And Eason, having been relegated to the sidelines, stands next to me. Just watching Irina with her former fight mates.

“Can you believe,” I say, turning to him, “that the three of them used to be the same size at one time?” The corner of Eason’s mouth lifts up, but that’s all the reaction I get from him. “Paulo will probably never admit it now, but Irina took him out quite a few times. Maeko too. But...” I pause here, waiting for Eason to look at me. Which he does after several seconds of silence. “But she can’t see it, Eason. Look at them. She can’t see that they’re not children anymore.”

He lets out a breath. “I see it.”

“Do you?”

He nods.

“Good. Because I wasn’t trying to hurt her when I told her she couldn’t train. I knew she was gonna run. I did. And I knew it was to punish me, because she thinks I stopped seeing her. But that’s not what it was. She didn’t grow up right.” I sigh, because I feel like this is coming out all wrong. “One day she was six, and the next she was sixteen. And somewhere in between things got very confusing. For her, for me. She is... I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

“She is... unbelievably sweet, Maart.”

I look at him and nod. “Yeah. I don’t understand it, actually. Not even Ainsey is as sweet as Irina. But she will fight, Eason. Until her dying breath. The girl does not know the meaning of the word ‘quit.’” I stare at him. I lock eyes with him. “She cannot win against a fighter like Paulo. And I know that’s not how it works in UFC. She would only fight

women in her same division. But I don't want her going professional. So—”

Eason puts up a hand to stop me. “She’s not going to fight again, Maart. She’s probably not even gonna train again.”

“I understand you think you know her, but she holds things in. There is a rage inside her and I know it’s justifiable, but—”

“Maart.” Eason stops me again. “You don’t get it. What happened today...” He lets out a breath. “What happened today changes everything.”

“How do you figure?”

But Eason just shrugs, folding his arms across his chest as he watches Irina laugh and joke, sandwiched between Maeko and Paulo, who are both easily twice her size.

“You’ll see.” That’s what Eason tells me. “You’ll see.”

CHAPTER 35



*E*ach morning for the last six months, Monday through Friday, the three of us get up and eat breakfast like a family. I make pancakes, or waffles, or eggs and toast. We eat, we check Jilly's backpack, and then we leave, taking the stairs down to the side entrance where we take the path to the beach.

We walk south until we get to the 6th Street restrooms, and then we cross the street and I drop Jilly and Irina off at the School for the Deaf.

Jilly is learning proper sign language, as am I, but Irina has already mastered it, so she volunteers. I know she's there for Jilly, to make the whole thing as easy as possible, but she's looking for more kids to save too.

She, and Nandy, and Priscilla—who not only knows Nandy from some language class they took together a few years back, but dated her older brother once upon a time—have something of a crusade going.

Miami is a nice place. South Beach even nicer. But even nice places have dark underbellies.

Irina, Nandy, and Priscilla have made it their mission to find those underbellies.

I do worry about this, but not too much.

I don't think they're gonna find any more kids. I don't think Jilly was left behind by mistake. I think they threw her out. Or maybe it was divine intervention. I do find it curious that Irina turned up in my life at pretty much the exact same moment that Jilly was found in that warehouse.

So... who knows.

Still, I don't worry.

After I drop them off, I walk over to LMR Eats where I have a standing date with my... father-in-law? I'm not really sure what Romero is to me now, but that's a good enough term as any. When I called him that day we found Jilly, he agreed to bribe a judge to make this adoption run smooth. But in return he wanted to have breakfast with me every weekday morning.

Did he do that because he guessed that I have days when I don't want to get out of bed?

Did he do this because he just wants to get to know me?

Did he do this to keep his eye on me?

I don't know. It doesn't matter. And anyway, I like coming to breakfast every morning. Davis and Wade did move to LA to start over. So what else was I gonna do?

Estefania serves us strong coffee and guava pastries and we play checkers.

Romero started with chess, trying to teach me how to play, but I'm hopeless at chess. We play half a dozen checkers games each morning. And then, right around ten o'clock, I leave, making sure to say a proper goodbye to everyone first, and walk over to Dog's gym near the marina.

I would not call what I'm doing 'training,' but I do work out every morning while Irina and Jilly are busy.

Part of healing, I've discovered, is moving on.

That's why Maart and his boys had to go back to Brazil. That's why Wade and Davis had to move to LA. And that's why Irina goes to that school.

But I'm having a little trouble in this respect.

I do like Dog and all the other guys. Especially Carwash, because he's quiet and when we spar, he doesn't dance around and shout insults at me the way Kill Bill does. But these guys, I dunno. They're not much like me. I have them over for parties every now and then, and they invite me over in the same way. They feel more like acquaintances than friends.

But this morning, when I get there, I finally put my finger on what felt wrong when I first started spending time here. "Hey," I say, looking at Dog. "Whatever happened to that other guy?"

"What other guy?"

"The rude one. Remember? He was talking shit to me that first night we met."

"Oh, Snake Eyes?" Dog laughs.

"Yeah. Him. Whatever happened to him?"

"He took off. He was an asshole anyway. Always puffed up and trying to prove something. We got tired of him and he didn't come back after that night."

"Huh." I don't say any more. Just do my leg reps.

But I leave the gym a couple hours early and start walking north until I get to Sixteenth and Lenox. There is no gym on that corner when I get there, but then I remember that Dog was teasing Snake Eyes about the gym being in the back of an

upholstery shop. And sure enough, right in front of me, there's an upholstery shop.

I walk over to it, pull the door open, and stop at the counter. It's empty. But there's a doorbell taped to the counter that says 'Ring for Service,' so I ring.

It takes about a minute, but a man appears. Older, wearing a white muscle shirt, and dabbing his forehead with a black handkerchief because it's hot as fucking hell in this place. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah... I'm lookin' for... Miguel. Is he around?"

The old dude narrows his eyes at me. "Who's asking?"

"Dead Eyes." I figure he probably doesn't know me as Eason.

The guy—the uncle, I think—he tips his chin up and then goes in the back without a word.

I catch a bit of conversation in Spanish and then there he is. Snake Eyes. All frowny and that chip still firmly on his shoulder. He sneers at me as he comes out from behind the counter. "What the hell do you want?"

"Well, I've been thinking that you and I are probably related."

"What?" He's not amused. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You know. Since we have the same last name and all."

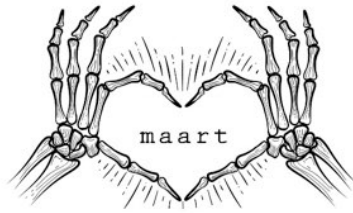
"What?" And then... then he gets it. His face changes. A small smile turns into a chuckle, and then he's laughing and slapping me on the back. "Pendejo." But he's still laughing. "You're dumb."

“I probably am. Probably not worth your time, cousin.”
This makes Miguel shake his head. “But family is family, ya know? We should probably stick together.”

I don't know Miguel's story, but I don't need to know Miguel's story. When you carry a chip like that into adulthood, there's a reason for it.

And I think he's my people.

EPILOGUE



Maart - One Year Later

*I*t's easy to forget how humid it is in Rio. Easy to fall into the dryness of the Las Vegas desert. But as soon as I get off the plane, it hits me. The air is heavy here, thick with water. And I find that, even though I probably don't come from Brazil originally, it's home. And I love it.

The boys and I went our separate ways back in America. Even Evard this time. He's eighteen now, so there's nothing left for Cort and I to do but set him loose. He and Budi are taking a road trip across the country. Probably gonna stop in and see Irina and her little family before they're done. And then, hopefully, they'll come home.

But I have my doubts.

Paulo and Maeko are already going their separate ways. Paulo has a girl in LA now. He's gonna be training with Eason's old partners for a few months before making up his mind what he wants to do.

Does he want to be a fighter for the rest of his life?

I don't think so. What more does he need to prove? He's twenty-two years old and just successfully defended his belt. He's got it made. He should take that money and run. He

should shake his whole identity and be something else. See the world. Meet people. Fall in love. Have a family. The ring—even this legitimate one he fights in now—is not much of a life.

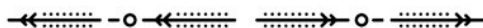
Maeko seems to be going cold on fighting as well. He lost his fight, and his title, this time around. But I saw it coming. He just wasn't serious enough. If you're not hungry for it, someone else is. That's just how this sport goes. He was at the airport with me when I left Vegas, getting on a plane, but not the one coming home. He was on his way to Japan. What he's looking for there, I've got no idea. But I hope he finds it.

And... well, that's it, I guess. Budi and Evard might come home. And if they do, and they want to fight, I'll be around. But Cort informed me months ago that none of the kids left at home in the village have any desire to be fighters. They were all very young when they were pulled out of the camp, most of them under the age of seven. Now they are fifteen or sixteen and they cannot even imagine a life in the ring. They are thinking about cities, and cars, and love, and living.

It's over.

And I'm glad it's over.

So I guess... I'm retired.



BETH DIDN'T COME with us to Vegas. She said she needed time to finish her novel. Her and those damn novels. That's all she's done for the past year. Write, write, write. Just writing

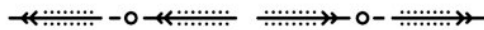
like a manic. She doesn't let me read any of them. Not a single fuckin' sentence. But I'm not much of a reader anyway.

Sometimes it blows my mind that we've been together so long.

Sometimes I feel like we've never been apart.

I do know one thing, though. We're good together. It's a weird situation, but we laugh a lot. And have fun. And take walks and stupid shit like that.

I almost feel normal.



SHE DIDN'T MEET me at the airport. I told her I'd just take a car. So when I open the front door and see her, pacing back and forth on the terrace with a background of blue sky and sea behind her, I have to stop so I can let that feeling wash over me and memorize it.

I love her.

And it's a completely different kind of love than anyone else I've ever loved in my life.

I close the front door and she turns to look at me, her mahogany hair blowing past her face. And then she smiles. "Lance. Good. You're home." She walks towards me, her long dress flaring out behind her. "You're just in time."

"Just in time for what?"

She comes up to me and gives me a kiss, then smiles and looks me straight in the eyes. "I've got news."

She's wearing that look on her face. A look that says she's up to something. I stopped trying to predict her antics a long time ago. She's always up to something, but I don't much care because Beth is a dreamer. She dreams big, and they are dramatic, and always filled with a bunch of 'what the fuck?' moments. And I love it.

She slides my bag off my shoulder, letting it fall to the floor, and then she takes my hand. "Come with me."

I don't even bother resisting. Not that I'd even want to.

She leads me out to the terrace and over to a fire pit in the far corner. It's piled high with... "What is all that?" I point to the pile inside the fire pit.

"My books!" She beams this at me with the brightest smile.

"Should I ask?"

She laughs and shrugs up one shoulder. "You probably should."

"OK. Why are your books in the fire pit, Beth?"

"Because we're going to burn them."

"You've been working on those books for years. Why the hell are we burning them?"

And now she sighs, and kinda deflates a little. "Because... because that's my story, Lance. Well, that's Mackenzie Scott's story. All her stories are in those books. All those letters, and words, and paragraphs, and pages belong to her. And do you know what?"

I'm smiling even bigger now. "What, Beth?"

“I don’t want to be Mackenzie Scott anymore. She’s not me. I’m Beth... what’s that stupid last name of yours again?”

Now I’m chuckling. “Carvalho.”

“Right.” She points at me. “That one.” Then she kinda wobbles her head a little, feigning uncertainty. “Beth Carvalho. It’s not good, Lance.”

“No?” My smile could not get any bigger.

“Not good, not really. But... you know, that’s kind of part of falling in love with a man. You might not like his name, but you take it anyway. So. From now on we are Lance and Beth Carvalho.”

“This is a big step for you, Beth. Settling on something that doesn’t tickle your heart.”

She sighs. “Agreed. I’ve grown. But it’s just a name. And if we want, we can change it. You, Maart. You’re what matters now. And that’s why Mackenzie Scott, and all her stupid, *stupid* stories, need to go up in smoke.”

Then she grabs one of those long fire pit lighters, flares it up, and reaches down to touch the flame to the pages in the pit. It starts slow, but soon her past is burning and crackling.

We stand there, watching her story go up in flames. Holding hands and being pensive.

When she turns to me, she’s serious. Dead serious. “On those pages was every bad thing that ever happened to me. And you know what? It felt good to write it all down. But now...” She looks back at the fire. “I don’t know who Mackenzie Scott even is anymore. In fact”—she smiles—“I’m not even sure she ever existed.”

I look at the fire and nod.

Some people want to hold on to it.

Keep all the hurt and fear in the past close to their hearts.

And that's fine, I guess.

But we're not some people.

So we're gonna let it go.

* * *

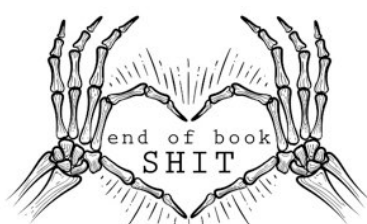
FEEL the Need to Talk about this story with others who loved it? Leave a comment in the JA Huss Facebook Group, [Shrike Bikes](#). It's a really nice place to hang out and I'm always in there answering questions.

If you ask me something, I WILL answer.

If you're not a member already just ask to join and someone will add you as soon as they see your request.

You can also follow my [daily stories on Instagram HERE](#).

END OF BOOK SHIT



Welcome to the End of Book Shit. This is the part of the book where I get to say anything I want about the book and my process. It's never edited so you get unfiltered Julie.

Well, let me start here: Irina is now my most favorite female character ever. Well, right up there in a tie for first place with Sasha Cherlin and Junco. I love her so much because she is so strong, but also so very, very vulnerable.

On the one hand, she has no idea how the real world works. She has no idea how to 'people' as we say. She has no idea how to date a man, or kiss a man, or have a best friend, or decorate an apartment, or shop for food. Nor does she understand why any of this stuff is necessary.

Irina knows how to survive.

That's it.

That's been her whole life, even after she was 'rescued'.

I love the contrast of how she sees her little apartment and how Eason sees her little apartment. Irina is obsessed with the

fact that she has a washer and dryer. That she has a space all her own, even though it is the size of a closet. This condo is the pinnacle of her success. In her eyes, at least, she's won the game. And when the reader is introduced to it, we see it from her eyes too. Because it's got everything she needs. She makes us believe, just like she makes herself believe, that her life is perfect.

Eason, on the other hand, sees her apartment the way it really is. Sad, small, and filled with emptiness. She has food, but not *good* food. She has clothes, but not anything nice. And not even a dresser to put them in. She sleeps on the rice mat because sleep for her just happens on a rice mat.

Eason can't see the parallel of her apartment and the Rock, but we can. Irina's safe place was the Rock. And that's what she recreates in South Beach. She makes the big world very small. Just a few blocks wide. She has the ocean, the sun, a rice mat to sleep on, and the same food she ate all growing up. She even replaces the birds on the Rock with the gulls on the beach.

She doesn't put up a wall, but did put herself behind one. Both literally and figuratively. She has a best friend, but Irina knows that Nandy's life is big and complicated. So while Nandy does urge her to get out more and date, she doesn't have time to look too close at what Irina's doing. And Irina doesn't even really have a job. She's just a fill-in.

There is the appearance of a best friend.

There is the appearance of a job at the restaurant.

There is the appearance of freedom.

But really, Irina just went from one prison to another. She's living in this new world, but not participating in it.

When she first took off from Brazil, she was in survival mode. She did everything it took to survive and it wasn't even that hard for her. Some people might say that she had too many 'lucky breaks'. But it's not about lucky breaks. Nothing that happened to Irina in Miami was luck. She was just raised up to *win*. At all costs. Irina's luck is nothing more than her taking advantage of every opportunity to win.

And as far as that photoshoot goes, Eason started a conversation about it but didn't finish it. And that was on purpose. There is a lot more going on with that 'lucky break' than I put in this book.

Eason is the opposite of Irina. He has taken advantage of all the opportunities. He never had the close-knit friendships and family that Irina had, but he had money, and travel, and the fights to him were exciting. He was going to join 'them'. He was going to be one of them.

He was invited into the world of sick elites and he was going to do it and the only reason he didn't was because Benny was killed that day in the Sick Heart camp.

It was purely circumstances beyond his control that stopped him from turning into just another Lazar, or Udulf, or Benny.

He hated himself for this and when we meet Eason he is done with life. He is clinically depressed and suicidal. He doesn't have a reason to live except for training, but his old injury is a reminder that his freedom and his money all came at a price. Not only that, he killed his father and even though it was revenge for what his father did to him and his brothers, he can't quite get over the fact that everything he started this life with is gone forever.

Or maybe, the better way to put it is that everything he thought he started this life with was bullshit.

But the ‘Sick Hate’ in this book belongs to Irina, not Eason. Because Eason doesn’t even have the capacity to hate at this point in his life.

He is Dead Eyes.

Irina is nothing but hate. She has no love in her life and screaming into her pillow is the only way she knows how to cope with her hate.

She wants to kill everyone. The whole world is guilty in her eyes. She hates everyone.

But at the same time, she sees the world the way a small child would. Taking symbolic things literal and internalizing everything down to the smallest detail.

Eason and Irina collide at just the right time. They are exactly what the other needs. Irina is a reminder of Eason’s innocence and Eason is an invitation for Irina to finally grow up.

BUT Lance and Beth are really the theme of this whole book though. Because the question I asked myself when I sat down to write this story is: What happens after the rescue?

What happens when there are no more kids to save?

What happens when there are no more fights to win?

What happens when there are no more stories to tell?

What happens after your enemies are all dead?

What happens when there’s nothing left but the realization that this world is *fucked up* and you still have to *live in it*.

Everyone in this book is trying to make sense of what happened to them.

And that's really all this story is.

The question of a lifetime... *what happened to us?*

And how can we possibly go on when evil lives all around us?

There is a lot of set up in this book for book three. Irina's story was a nice little reprieve. After Anya's story, I think it was the right move. A little calm before the storm. Because the next book won't be so sweet.

I think the major theme in this book is that everyone is allowed to change their mind about things. You can feel one thing one day—even be fully committed to this thing—and then have a different view a day later. Even moments later.

When new information comes to light it is one's duty, I think, anyway, to take another look at things. To reevaluate. There was a lot of reevaluating in this book. Minds changing left and right almost. But that's real life if you ask me.

It's easy to be a reader of a book or a watcher of a movie and have expectations. If you turn on a horror movie and someone says, "It's midnight, we're looking for ghosts, but I forgot something in the car so I'm just gonna go out there all alone and get it—be right back" we cringe.

We want to scream at them. No! Have you never seen a horror movie! You're the first death!

Because books and movies are about tropes. And the characters are archetypes—very typical examples of people and not actually 'real' people. Because the truth is, in real life, it's almost always gonna be just fine if you go out to the car at

midnight and grab your flashlight. Even if you are looking for ghosts.

It's only in the archetypical sense that this is cliché.

And because we, as a society, have grown up with this technology called television, and the internet, and movies—we sometimes align ourselves with the 'typical' and forget that we're real. That we make mistakes. And that it sometimes takes, not hours, or days, or weeks to figure life out—but years and maybe even decades.

We forget that we are allowed to change our minds.

About any of it.

About all of it.

I hope you never forget that.

When I first started this book I really thought it was gonna be a thriller. I had a bunch of things planned and I was very sure, almost up until the end, that all those things would still be in this book. In fact, I set it up like all those things actually *are* in the book. Nearly everything in book three is in this one too. They are just little, teeny-tiny hints though, and not fleshed out.

But once I got to the scene where Lance and Beth were on their way to America, I realized I had already had my crisis. That was the intervention from Nandy's family. And the book was plenty long at that point. I could've added this other story to the end and it would've been pretty great. But it would've added at least 30,000 words to the story line.

And I was on a deadline with my editor because I was on a deadline with narrators so I figured I would pick that little thread up in the next book.

I think it will be an even bigger audiobook production than this one. And this one was kind of a huge undertaking. At first it was just three narrators—Eric Nolan as Eason, Samantha Summers as Irina, and Rupert Channing as Maart. But then I realized I need a separate voice for Beth, so we cast Samantha Cook for that part. And then I figured, if I'm gonna have four narrators, why not bring Troy back for Cort?

So that's everyone on the audiobook production side. They exceeded my expectations for this book a thousand times over. Eric Nolan performed Eason to perfection and I was blown away with Samantha Summers as Irina. The effort all these voice actors put into this production is incredible. And, of course, One Night Stand Studios produced it. They do such great work. Sick Hate is probably my favorite audiobook ever. It's a close tie with Junco.

So, there will be another book. I've got it all planned out because it's the missing story in this one. And while ALL the characters will be back for book 3—including Anya. I haven't released this yet so I don't know how people feel about me pretty much leaving Anya out of the story—there will be several new points of view from characters you already know.

There are many more twists in this story so don't get comfortable just yet. ;)

Thank you for reading, thank you for reviewing, and I'll see you in the next book!

Julie

JA Huss

June 10, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JA Huss is a New York Times Bestselling author and has been on the USA Today Bestseller's list 21 times. She writes characters with heart, plots with twists, and perfect endings.

Her books have sold millions of copies all over the world. Her book, *Eighteen*, was nominated for a Voice Arts Award and an Audie Award in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Her audiobook, *Mr. Perfect*, was nominated for a Voice Arts Award in 2017. Her audiobook, *Taking Turns*, was nominated for an Audie Award in 2018. Her book, *Total Exposure*, was nominated for a RITA Award in 2019.

She lives on a farm in central Colorado with her family, horses, donkeys, dogs, goats, and chickens.

Find her Here:

@jahuss

www.jahuss.com